

2.14 Indigenous Mechanisms for the Prevention and Resolution of Conflict: The Experience of the Oromo in Ethiopia

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The history of conflict is as old as human history. From the dawn of human history, communities have been competing for control of resources and for dominance. These competitions inevitably led individuals as well as social, political, economic, and religious groups to conflicts. It is true that conflict has devastating effects and it is unwanted. It is also true that conflict is unavoidable and it continuous to occur.

Since the causes of conflict are different, it would be better to use different mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts. By avoiding conflict, we avoid not only one of the hindrances of economic development but also foreign powers' intervention, which may exacerbate the domestic conflicts. Therefore, more than anybody else governments, whose main duty is maintenance of peace and security, are responsible for providing their respective peoples with alternative conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, popular and widely used among these are the indigenous mechanisms.

Indigenous mechanisms are time tested and effective to handle conflicts that arise in the Horn region. Had it not been for these mechanisms, things would have been exacerbated and gone out of the government's control and been developed to full scale of war between the neighbouring states. When compared with the non-indigenous ones, indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are less complex, save time, and give a chance to parties in conflict to actively participate to solve their own problems and to handle their affairs in a relatively more acceptable way to them.

The objective of this paper is to investigate how the Oromo, one of the largest ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa, deal with conflict using indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, and to examine how effective these mechanisms are and how they work.

This is a case study to show that the peoples in the Horn of Africa have time tested and effective indigenous mechanisms to prevent, mitigate, manage, and resolve conflicts, and to draw the attention of the governments of the Horn countries to streamline and use these indigenous mechanisms to make the region more stable and peaceful.

The methodology used in this research is collecting information from primary sources through interviews with different informants and from secondary sources through library research and organizing/reorganizing and analysing the information.

The findings of this research show that:

Oromo people have four developed, widely used and effective indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts. These are:

1. Ilafi Ilamee mechanism (negotiation or compromising mechanisms);

2. Jarsumma mechanism (reconciliation administered by the community elders);
3. Gada system mechanisms (judicial, administrative and political mechanisms); and
4. Waqefanna system mechanism (religious adjudication).

These indigenous mechanisms have been used for the prevention and resolution of:

1. Conflicts with the central government of Ethiopia;
2. Conflicts with the peoples living in their neighbourhood; and
3. Conflicts within themselves.

These Oromo indigenous mechanisms are popular and they are widely used in almost all Oromo Land, now called Oromia, and they have different advantages including, but not limited to, the following:

1. They quickly respond to crisis.
2. They contribute to reduce regular court caseloads.
3. They contribute to saving of public money.
4. Given the shortage of judges who work in the regular courts and budget constraints, they are complementary to the modern government structures and are not substitutes or competitors as some government officials think and worry about them.
5. They give access to many people who do not find the modern system of conflict resolution comfortable, affordable or suited to their need.
6. Disputants are satisfied with their operations and view their outcomes as fair because these mechanisms give a chance to the parties to actively participate in handling their affairs.

Therefore, these indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict will continue to operate parallel with modern government structures as they have been doing for years. Thus, it would be better if governments in the Horn of Africa officially recognize, revitalize and empower these mechanisms and use them as alternative for conflict prevention, mitigation, and resolution.

To revitalize and to make the Oromo indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts more effective, it is necessary to consider the following recommendations and/or policy implications:

1. Capacity Building. The nature and causes of conflicts are changing from time to time. To analyse the causes of these conflicts and come up with lasting solutions for recurring causes, it

is necessary to enhance the capacity of local peacemakers through training and experience sharing tours and workshops. These trainings and workshops should focus on increasing conflict management skills, enhancing capacity to analyse information related to conflicts, and narrowing down social distance among the members of different ethnic and religious groups.

2. Establishing Conflict Management Fund. At present, unlike in the past, due to different reasons the people are unable to host the local peacemakers who travel from place to place to make peace. In addition, means of transportations are changing from horse, mule and camel in favour of motor vehicles that require payment. For these purposes and other activities, the local peacemakers need money to respond to conflicts on time. Therefore, establishing conflict management fund that can be used to cover the cost of the activities of local peacemakers is very important.

3. Empowerment. The Oromo indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict have been in operation for centuries. Besides, Article 78(5) of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia gives power to the House of the Peoples' Representatives and State Councils to establish or give official recognitions to religious and customary courts to adjudicate disputes relating to personal and family laws. Nevertheless, these Oromo indigenous mechanisms have not been given this official recognition yet, save the Shari' a court. Some state officials even forget that these indigenous mechanisms will assist the regular court system to reduce court caseloads and contribute to saving of public money. Rather they look on these mechanisms as competitor, not as complimentary. This attitude has to be changed, and indigenous mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict should be given official recognition and be empowered. Policies that encourage these indigenous mechanisms should be advocated.