



Mapping and Strengthening Co-operative Governance Between Traditional Leaders and Local Authorities in South Africa

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Executive Summary

Despite South Africa's constitutional commitment to cooperative governance, rural development remains hampered by fractured relations between traditional leaders and local government authorities. The relationship between these two governance structures is often fraught with power struggles, unclear roles, and mutual mistrust.

This policy brief synthesises key findings from the Centre for Mediation in Africa's working paper titled; *Reimagining Relational Co-Governance: Mapping Institutional Interfaces to Strengthen Collaboration Between Traditional Leaders and Local Government Authorities*. It maps institutional interfaces, policy frameworks and relationship dynamics to identify structural, policy, and practice gaps that leave traditional leaders feeling peripheral to decision-making, especially compared to elected officials.

The brief highlights areas of convergence (shared service delivery goals, constitutional alignment) and divergence (competing legitimacy, jurisdictional overlaps, exclusion from decisions).

It then offers actionable recommendations such as establishing sustained dialogue platforms, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and promoting joint resource stewardship.

These actions are essential to fulfilling the constitutional vision of cooperative governance and improving outcomes for rural service communities – which directly support South Africa's emerging National Dialogue on social cohesion and governance reform.

Cooperative Governance Problem and Context

A strong collaborative partnership between traditional leaders and municipalities is essential for coordinated rural development. This is critical because such a relationship directly influences not only the fulfilment of citizens' fundamental needs, but also the preservation and continuity of their cultural and social practices within rural communities.

However, in practice, this relationship is often adversarial. The confinement of traditional leaders' roles mainly to land administration and cultural matters has undermined their influence on broader governance issues, which are predominantly handled by elected officials (Matsiliza, 2024).

Competition over power and resources fosters tension, with councillors often viewing hereditary traditional leaders as less legitimate in a democratic state. This conflict directly hinders service delivery, destabilizes municipalities through protests and corruption, and it creates a gap between what communities expect from their leaders and what those leaders can deliver alone (Mhlanga 2012: iv).

The core problem is a lack of clear, functional, and trusted mechanisms for co-governance, despite overlapping policy mandates (Khan et al, 2006:181). Political co-optation of traditional leaders further undermine their customary roles, creating friction with elected officials and citizens. This co-governance challenge underscores the urgent need for trust-building and structured dialogue between traditional leaders and local government authorities to ensure collaborative, efficient, and effective service to communities.

The Current Governance Framework

The South African governance system formally recognises both local municipalities and traditional leadership. They fall under the same national ministry, the Ministry of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), which houses the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCG) and the Department of Traditional Affairs (DTA).

This structural arrangement presupposes a symbiotic relationship, yet a disconnect exists between policy intent and practice. The following Figure 1 maps the legislative, policy, and collaborative frameworks intended to govern this relationship.

Despite this extensive framework, significant inadequacies persist between the two cooperative governance institutions. This is because legislation often fails to define the extent of traditional leaders' powers when interacting with elected officials (Ramabole, 2023). For instance, while the Municipal Systems Act requires consultation on integrated development plans (IDPs), traditional leaders lack formal decision-making power.

The National House of Traditional Leaders Act (No. 10 of 1997), the White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance of 2003 and the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 acknowledge the role of traditional leadership, but they all fail to define the extent of their powers when interacting with elected officials.

This ambiguity creates a permissive environment for conflict, corruption, and political interference, thereby undermining the credibility of both institutions. The conflictual relationship between local authorities and traditional leaders arises partly from the misuse of their respective offices, including corruption, nepotism, and patronage politics, which adversely affect service delivery.

For example, political interference by government ministers and municipal executive committees in traditional leadership and community resource management "has opened up the decision-making process to corruption and maladministration" (Pikirayi 2022:107). With appropriate legislative reforms and institutional alignments that enable sustained dialogue, these challenges can be addressed.

Relationship Convergences and Divergences

In order to design impactful interventions that promote symbiotic relations between local government authorities and traditional leaders, it is essential to establish specific points where their interests align (convergences) and where they clash (divergences). Convergence refers to points where both local authorities and traditional leaders have aligned goals and mutual concerns.

This alignment is critical as it promotes inclusive governance by bridging the gap between formal and informal institutions across different levels of government. Intrinsically, both institutions inherently share common interests because they serve the same communities and ultimately seek social cohesion, peace, and development

This is precisely why their roles in service delivery and conflict resolution naturally overlap. Relational divergence, on the contrary, refers to a disconnection, misalignment or fragmentation of relationship between two or more entities or actors. In this context, relational divergence refers to strained relations between local authorities and traditional leaders. It signifies the institutional and normative separation that occurs when these two governance actors operate from competing logics, mandates or sources of legitimacy, rather than from a shared framework of cooperative governance. Divergences must be addressed decisively to prevent misalignment, inefficiencies and conflicts.

Key Recommendations for Strengthening Co-Governance

Based on the mapping and analysis above, it is essential for traditional leaders and local authorities to identify and leverage opportunities for building robust working relationships regardless of existing policy gaps, lingering mistrust, and overlapping jurisdictional responsibilities. To achieve this, the following recommendations are proposed to transform the two institutions' relationship from adversarial to collaborative relations:

- **Establish sustained dialogue platforms** – it is essential to create structured, inclusive, and ongoing dialogue platforms beyond statutory meetings. These platforms must serve as safe spaces for trust-building, tension mitigation, and joint problem-solving.
- **Seek clarity on roles and responsibilities** – through the (above) proposed dialogue platforms, there is a need to develop mutually agreed local protocols that clearly define the respective and joint roles of traditional leaders and councillors in municipal development planning, land management, and service delivery. This will manage expectations and promote mutual accountability.
- **Promote collaborative resource stewardship** – the cooperative governance structures must develop joint stewardship mechanisms that allow both authorities to collaboratively manage development priorities and resource distribution at the local level. This could include joint budgeting committees for specific rural development funds, moving beyond the current model where municipalities control resources unilaterally.
- **Build capacity through joint training** - implement joint training programmes for both traditional leaders and municipal officials. The trainings should cover cooperative governance principles, conflict resolution, financial management, and the legal mandates of each structure to foster mutual understanding and reduce misaligned expectations.
- **Cultivate transformative political will** – while traditional leaders must acknowledge the inevitable expansion of municipal jurisdictions, local authorities must also respect traditional leadership by ensuring full, respectful consultation during land expansion and rural development initiatives. Political champions at the provincial level are needed to drive this mindset shift.
- **Establish relationship monitoring mechanisms** – both institutions must develop joint monitoring mechanisms to track their relationships health, promote transparency and facilitate dispute resolution. These mechanisms should include clear escalation channels for grievances related to governance collaboration.
- **Pursue inclusive policy reform** – there must be ongoing legislative reforms (including the suspended Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act) to meaningfully involve traditional leaders. The reforms must include clear legal provisions defining the interface between traditional and local government authorities, to resolve jurisdictional ambiguities permanently.

Figure 1. Legislative, Policy and Collaborative Frameworks Linking Traditional and Local Government Authorities

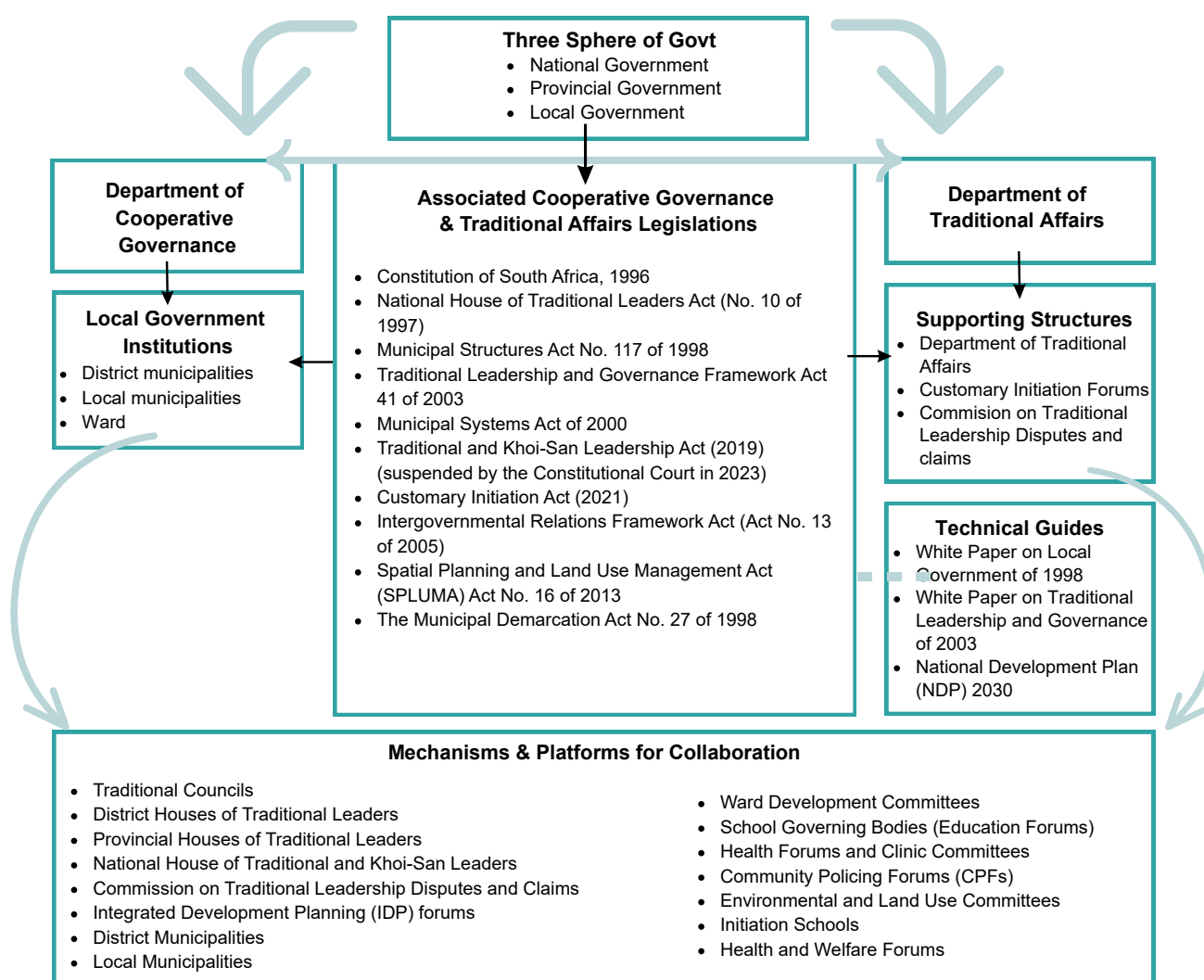


Table 1: Reflections on relationship convergence and divergence among traditional leaders and local government authorities

Areas of Convergence	Areas of Divergence
Institutional collaboration - shared interest in land use planning and service delivery.	Authority and legitimacy – traditional leaders are hereditary and local authorities are elected. This creates rivalry over whose mandate is superior.
Dual representation – both serve as representatives of the people for development needs.	Jurisdictional overlaps – both institutions operate in the same geographical spaces, leading to disputes over land management, natural resource distribution and service delivery responsibilities.
Constitutional alignment – the Constitution affirms traditional leadership within the democratic dispensation, requiring it to uphold constitutional values.	Legislative ambiguities – existing laws inadequately define the functions, powers, and interaction protocols between the two bodies.
Cooperative governance principles - Chapter 3 of the Constitution mandates mutual consultation, coordination, and shared responsibility.	Decision-making exclusion – traditional leaders are often non-voting members in municipal councils, with representation capped at under 10%, limiting their influence.
Participation in local processes - traditional leaders contribute to policy making through Houses of Traditional Leaders and integrated development planning (IDP) forums.	Financial constraints and strategic control of enabling resources – municipalities control budgets and resources, eroding the strategic influence of traditional leaders.
Shared local structures – both participate in school boards, ward committees, and Community Policing Forums (CPFs).	Mistrust and identity threats – historical legacies of co-option and perceptions that democracy seeks to displace traditional authority often fuel mutual suspicion and mistrust.
Shared policy intentions – both structures intend to promote local development to the same communities. So why fight?	Political alignments – Councillors may follow party directives, while traditional leaders focus on customary community needs, leading to clashes in priorities.

Conclusion

A collaborative relationship between traditional leaders and local municipalities is not optional but critical for inclusive, democratic, and sustainable governance in non-metropolitan South Africa. While the relationship between the two institutions is currently characterised by mistrust, power contests, and legislative gaps, significant opportunities for convergence exist.

Traditional leaders and local authorities must move beyond adversarial positioning towards implementing practical, dialogue-driven solutions such as role clarification, joint training, and collaborative resource stewardship. Through these actions, both institutions can fulfil their shared constitutional obligations. The Centre for Mediation in Africa stands ready to support stakeholders in piloting these recommendations to improve service delivery, social cohesion, and community development.

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The Centre for Mediation in Africa, in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria aims to embrace a responsive, transformative, and inclusive understanding of mediation that actively embraces complexity, builds constructive relationships, and leads to a sustainable peace that is owned and lived by all members of society. This policy brief and the Centre for Mediation in Africa's ongoing work with women traditional leaders have been made possible by the funding of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.



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