

Policy Dialogue: Women's Agency and Mediation in Rural South Africa



11 May 2026



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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About the CMA

The goal of the CMA is to help make mediation efforts throughout Africa more effective. We do so by offering academic and practical courses in mediation, researching new and current best practices, and supporting organisations and governments involved in mediation processes.

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Event Report – Securing the Fruits of Freedom: A policy review of Rural Governance, Peacebuilding and the Role of Women Traditional Leaders

Topic: This event marked the closure of the Centre for Mediation in Africa's two-year Ukuthula: Women building peace project which was supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Date: 11 May 2026

Venue: Official Residence of the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Attendees: The event was well attended by 40 people in total, including members and representatives of the diplomatic community in Pretoria, governmental departments, members of civil society, academia and traditional leaders. Representation included the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Embassy of Kingdom of Sweden, the Embassy of the Republic of Ireland, the chairperson of the South African Queen's Council Queen Ndamase, two of our women traditional leaders Nkosi Jumba and Nkosi Ngonyama, the DDG of COGTA, Mr Bongani Kupe from the Thabo Mbeki Foundation, Mr Buyelekhaya Boyce from SONGE Social Change, Prof Kevin Thomas (Dean of the Faculty of Humanities), representatives from the United Nations Women South Africa, the Department of Sports, Art and Culture, the WPS desk of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation and the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities.

Rapporteur: Tshenolo Matlala for the CMA

Introduction

The Centre for Mediation in Africa, in partnership with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands hosted an event celebrating the conclusion of the Ukuthula Project, a four-year project that focuses on women traditional leaders and the unique challenges they face which includes the disconnect between them and key stakeholders at the provincial and national government levels. The project also examined how women traditional leaders contribute to conflict prevention and mediation, and how they promote social cohesion at community level. This event was held on 11 May 2026 at the official residence of the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The event sought to provide the findings, guiding principles, and main activities from the Ukuthula project. As well as to provide recommendations to improve the relationship between women traditional leaders and stakeholders to improve governance at the municipal level. The event also sought to provide reflections from key stakeholders and launch the CMA's groundbreaking book that has recently been published which uniquely focuses on how women traditional leaders resolve conflict. The event allowed for reflection on the transformative impact of the CMA training program as well as remarks from COGTA and the Dean of Faculty of Humanities from the University of Pretoria on the ways in which this project speaks to the purpose of a University to have impact in communities.

Findings from the Ukuthula Project

Ambassador Joanne Doornewald asserted that the project has shown that women bring a different architecture to peacebuilding that is rooted in dialogue, mediation at a household level and the ability to hold fractious communities together when formal institutions are stretched. She described how women traditional leaders constitute an essential component of South Africa's peace and security architecture. She further mentioned that women can serve as the bridge between traditional authority and modern security frameworks.

She emphasised that the project serves as both a record of existing practice and a call for deliberate policy and legislative alignment to ensure that women traditional leaders are recognised, supported, and resourced as key actors in the country's peace and security agenda.



In her opening address, Director of the CMA, Professor Cori Wielenga gave attention to the fact that there is a disconnect between different levels and forms of government. There are resources, capacity, and skills that are available in different levels and forms of government but the disconnect is continuously undermining peace, security, and development which leads to mistrust and misunderstanding and misconceptions between people. In the context of the

Eastern Cape, local people have reached a level of learned helplessness due to lawlessness and levels of violence, especially gender-based violence. Traditional leaders are committed to resolve various issues for constituents including matters pertaining to citizenship and the obtainment of legal documentation.

Dr Sokfa John, who led much of the work on the ground, described how the policy relevant findings that emerged from the project. There is a paradox in South Africa's local governance. The South African Constitution and settlement legislation, the Municipal Systems Act, and the White Paper on Traditional Leadership all mandate cooperation but the mandate is not reflected. There is a weakening of structures and resources that support crime prevention, conflict resolution and community safety. There are also interfaces and friction between traditional and modern local governance in South Africa. Traditional leaders and local government are shaped by convergence on the one hand, which serves as an opportunity. Whereas, relational divergence, which is driven by competition logic of legitimacy, creates friction.

In terms of the opportunities provided by convergence, they are rooted in the fact that both traditional leaders and municipal councils are the same citizens. Their interests overlap in several ways, and some of those key areas of overlap include the use of land where both traditional leaders and municipalities are vital to special planning and rural development, and service delivery. Both serve as channels for community needs. Social confusion, found in school governing bodies, health forums, and community policing forums, results in an adversarial relationship because of several recurring tensions that have been discussed in some of the dialogues that facilitated during the Ukuthula project.

Examples of social confusion also include traditional leaders deriving their authority from heritage, and counsellors from the ballot box. This sometimes creates a supremacy contest. The participation of traditional leaders in municipal councils is capped at 10% and they lack voting rights in those councils. This leaves traditional leaders feeling like marginal observers, rather than partners and despite the work that they do every day in communities. And while laws like the Municipal Structures Act mandate consultation input, they fail to define the extent of power. It creates an ambiguity that can be a source of conflict and corruption. The Ukuthula project has offered a practical methodology for addressing this structural divergence, through localised, process-oriented, and multi-stakeholder approach. With a

particular focus on working alongside traditional leaders, especially women traditional leaders.

Guiding Principles and activities of the Ukuthula Project

Dr Sokfa John described how the Ukuthula project was guided by four core principles:

1. Transformation: Challenges are treated as opportunities for sustainable change. Recognising that change takes time and cannot be achieved through quick fixes. The aim was to turn adversarial relationships into cooperation.
2. Localisation: The support of local agency and ownership, partly by ensuring that stakeholders all led the design and implementation of all activities.
3. Continuity: A focus on building and maintaining trust over time, rather than relying on one-off events.
4. Openness to Learn: To remain curious and responsive to the environment, calling stakeholders sometimes through formal or learning exchanges, and other times, just from the everyday interaction with the community members and actors.

He outlined the four main activities of the project. These were:

1. Mapping: The mapping of stakeholder relationships and power flows using digital tools. And grounded in in-person visits to stakeholders and community leaders in their homes, schools, churches, offices, farms, and other community spaces.
2. Dialogues: A series of dialogues were facilitated. First, around the mapping process of the project but also broader structured engagements with stakeholders in Mthatha, and sometimes here in Pretoria. And sometimes smaller conversations with key actors. At times, this meant shuttling between stakeholders, such as the South African police traditional leaders and counsellors to address specific issues.
3. Training: Working with communities in Mthatha to co-develop mediation and conflict transformation training based on their needs, including input on both content and logistics through in-person visits to stakeholders. Trainings in Pretoria were also held for women, traditional leaders and COGTA staff on mediation and peace leadership.
4. Local Peace Forums: The first phase of the data was completed with the establishment of local peace forums to help institutionalise these relationships in direct response to repeated stakeholder calls for such a forum. Over the past year and a half, the project has increasingly focused on building multi-track linkages and dialogue. Especially by

collecting community initiatives to provincial and national governance. This included facilitated exchanges with COGTA and community leaders supporting the establishment of the Queens Forum, as well as linking the project to the National Dialogue, as Cori mentioned, including a first-of-its-kind provincial dialogue in the Eastern Europe, involving traditional leaders, COGTA a national dialogue official, and others.

Lessons learnt from the Ukuthula Project

He highlighted the important lessons learnt from the project:

1. Existing structures are assets: Entirely new structures are not necessarily needed to address local governance challenges. And the friction that I mentioned earlier, strengthening existing ones, including the administrative class, for example, so they can function as coordination hubs can resolve the friction between traditional and modern local governance in South Africa.
2. The right environment can transform relationships: Carefully facilitated spaces for dialogue can rebuild trust, shift perceptions and make cooperation possible among actors with difficult histories.
3. Sustainability requires structural foundations: Local trust remains fragile unless it is recognised and supported by the state. That is why it was important to link local forums to provincial and national structures and resources.
4. Transformation matters more than quick fixes: Peace building is a process; it is not an event. Sustained presence through home visits, follow-up meetings, and continued engagement is what creates the depth needed for genuine cooperation. These efforts are both worthwhile and scalable.

Recommendations to improve the Relationship between Women Traditional Leaders and Stakeholders to Improve Governance at the Municipal Level

The event provided the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen early warning and improve coordination: This can be done by provincial and municipal governance adopting digital mapping tools to visualise stakeholder relationships, identify service delivery gaps, and detect emerging conflict risks. Also,

municipalities, we believe, can support this by building a dedicated conflict analysis capacity within the municipality.

2. Training: Community collaborative training curricula should be formalised within continuous professional development programs for what counsellors, the police sector policing teams, and traditional council members. Municipal Integrated Development Plans, or IDPs, could also allocate budgets for annual training cohorts and support partnership-based delivery.
3. The Creation of Multi-Stakeholder Peace Forums: National and provincial rural safety strategies should mandate the creation of multi-stakeholder peace forums at district, municipal, and world levels. These forums should be jointly led by the local authorities and civil society, with dedicated municipal grants funding for logistics and small community-led peace initiatives, and this directly responds to some of the challenges identified after the establishment of the peace forums in Mthatha.
4. Explicit Recognition of Conflict Resolution Roles of Traditional Leaders and other Stakeholders in Policy Frameworks: Policy frameworks should explicitly recognise the conflict resolution roles of traditional leaders especially women traditional leaders and other stakeholders, such as administrative partners. This should include stronger liaison capacity within provincial COGTA departments, support for administrative clerks as coordination centres, and memoranda of understanding between municipalities and traditional councils that clearly define the roles in conflict resolution and service delivery oversight.
5. Multi-Year Community Commitments: Governance and donor agencies should aim for multi-year community commitments that support process-oriented adaptive programs, rather than short-term, single-event-driven models. Provincial safety clusters should include process evaluation capacity that provides real-time feedback and support continuous learning, while funding cycles should make explicit provision for community-led monitoring.

These recommendations must continue to be included in the conversations going forward. The Centre for Mediation in Africa asserted its dream to work with the National Dialogue Secretariat and the Women's Peace and Security Agenda, and other members of the government and diplomatic community to build peace committees, and to support and facilitate dialogue, across South Africa.

Reflections from Key Stakeholders: Nkosi Jumba, Nkosi Ngonyama, Mr Bongani Kupe, and Mr Buyelekhaya Boyce

Women traditional leaders described how the Ukuthula project has boosted the confidence of many women traditional leaders. The training that the Centre for Mediation in Africa has provided has significantly assisted the women traditional leaders in reconnecting loosened ties. Nkosi Jumba provided an example of this which concerns the building of a police station in her community that had been stalled by tensions between stakeholders involved but has now been resolved. Communities have become more engaged with the counsel they receive from women traditional leaders. The training has also empowered and equipped women traditional leaders with the tools necessary to resolve conflicts in their communities. Nkosi Jumba remarked that “the sense of recognition that people outside my community are giving at my work, at the way that I'm doing things. It's appreciated.” Nkosi Ngonyama noted that women traditional leaders are “mothers in all respects” and that enables them to become more approachable. This role that they inhabit increases legitimacy amongst them in their communities regardless of whether the citizens are male or female. The stakeholders encouraged other stakeholders to join them in their continuation of engaging with local communities.



Nkosi Ngonyama (left) and Nkosi Jumba (right)

Mr Bongani Kupe of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation stated that there is an absence of women in written history and the Thabo Mbeki Foundation's flagship project, the construction of a presidential library with eight domes, aims to address this. One dome will be dedicated to women and their contributions to history. The National Dialogue, a creation of the legacy foundations, is committed to facilitating conversations between South Africans with the aim to resolve conflict. The Ukuthula project's role as a catalyst to the facilitation of dialogue at the community level is significant. The project has provided stakeholders with a platform to reassess and engage on processes and systems from a new perspective. Mr Buyelekhaya Boyce of SONGE Social Change stated that there is ongoing need for programs to educate the youth on various South African royal houses and how they differ in terms of protocols

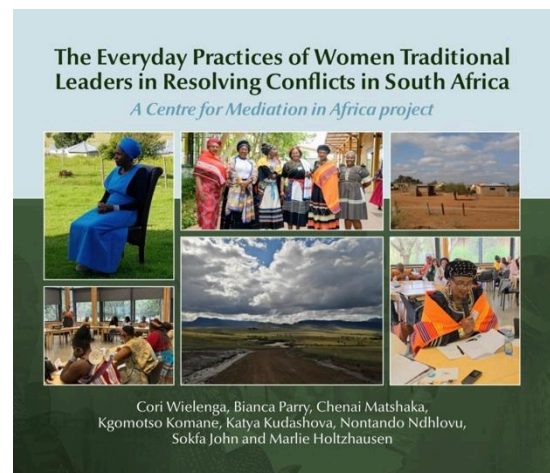
and the relationship between the local governance and traditional leadership. The importance of the inclusion of the women in leadership in terms of the education, equity and equality as well as the education of young men regarding the role that women play in leadership and in society, cannot be understated.

Launch of the Book published by the CMA on Women Traditional Leaders by Thandaza Shandu, DDG of COGTA

Following the reflections from key stakeholders, the book by the CMA published by ESI Press on 4 March 2026, titled: *The Everyday Practices of Women Traditional Leaders in Resolving Conflicts in South Africa: A Centre for Mediation in Africa project* was launched. Government efforts to support traditional leadership, particularly women traditional leaders, were discussed and several key points were highlighted. These key points include:

1. Legislative Framework:

- The Traditional Leadership Khoisan bill is in progress and outlines the role of traditional leaders in promoting socio-economic development, service delivery, peace, and stability.
- Legislation mandates that at least one-third of traditional leadership structures must include women.



2. Challenges for Women Traditional Leaders:

- Women still face significant challenges navigating leadership in a male-dominated space.
- Inequality persists despite legislative efforts.
- Succession and land disputes are common and require capacity-building and mediation skills.

3. South African Queens Council:

- Established in response to the Majesties Forum's request.
- Actively promotes women's participation in development and advises the government on policy.
- Submitted inputs to the legislative review process currently in Parliament.
- Works collaboratively (not in opposition) with kings and traditional councils.

4. Government Support Initiatives:

- Expanding the CMA training program (piloted in the Eastern Cape) to other provinces.
- Engaging provincial MECs to allocate roles and resources to the Queens Council.
- Partnering with the Department of Social Development to address gender-based violence and provide referral pathways.
- Emphasising continuous training and capacity-building for women traditional leaders.

The core message that was highlighted was that women traditional leaders play a critical role in governance, conflict resolution, and service delivery, and the government is committed to providing legislative support, resources, and training to empower them.

Reflection on the Transformative Impact of the CMA Training Program by Queen Ndamase

Following the book launch, a reflection on the transformative impact of the CMA training program was provided. Several key takeaways were highlighted. These include:

1. Conflict Resolution Skills:

- Learned modern, context-sensitive conflict resolution methods beyond traditional approaches.
- Gained tools to address complex, layered issues in their communities.

2. Mental Health Awareness:

- The program helped participants recognize and address mental illness among themselves and their communities.
- Acknowledged mental health as a widespread, pandemic-level challenge.

3. Openness and Communication:

- Women traditional leaders learned to create safe, private spaces for consultation.
- Developed skills to encourage community members to open up and share their concerns.

4. Personal Empowerment:



- The process provided assurance in their identity and leadership roles.
- Equipped them with practical tools to handle daily challenges in the traditional leadership sphere.

5. Community Engagement Challenges:

- Noted the difficulty of mobilizing traditional councils and communities.
- Emphasised the need to provide assurance and demonstrate tangible benefits to gain trust and participation.

The overall message was that the project was not just about research; it was a deeply empowering process that resolved challenges, built capacity, and strengthened the role of women traditional leaders in their communities. Personal thanks were extended to Chief Joyi (in absentia) for recruiting participants, and to Nkosi Jumba for her active participation and leadership. COGTA emphasised the importance of the collaboration between traditional leaders and government.

Closing Remarks from Professor Kevin Thomas, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria

The Dean describes how the Ukuthula project aligns with the University of Pretoria's strategic priorities and the faculty's core values. This alignment is in terms of impact and partnership. The project demonstrates the impact on communities by improving the lives of vulnerable people. A tangible example of community impact is how the project integrated and equipped women traditional leaders in governance processes. The project highlights the significance of women helping women. The Centre for Mediation in Africa is directed by a woman, and the CMA team is largely comprised of women who empower women traditional leaders, who in turn support women in their communities. In terms of partnership, the project exemplifies successful collaboration across sectors: government, private sector, community, academia, and international partners. It also demonstrates unity around a shared goal regardless of stakeholder origin. The Ukuthula project aligns with the three pillars of the Faculty of Humanities. These include:

1. Courage:

- Taking on difficult problems and operating in challenging circumstances.
- Acknowledging the courage of traditional leaders working within complex systems.

2. Compassion:

- Recognising when people are struggling and offering help.
- Engaging with real-world concerns of fellow citizens, not remaining isolated in academia.

3. Conviviality (rooted in African philosophy):

- Approaching partnerships with curiosity, openness, humility, and responsiveness.
- Listening and learning from external stakeholders rather than positioning as experts.
- Acknowledging gaps in knowledge and working collaboratively to fill them.

The concluding message was to express gratitude to all participants, stakeholders, and partners and the reassertion of the belief that there are enough good people globally to create positive change and emphasised that the event is not an ending, but a milestone in an ongoing, fruitful journey. The closure of the Ukuthula project is not an ending but a recognition of what has already shifted on the ground, and a commitment to make sure the voices on the ground are treated as central to how the country defines security at the local level.

Final Thanks

The event concluded with a final thanks to all that were present including the CMA team, particularly those who had been working on the ground, logistically and behind the scenes. Gifts were then provided to the Dutch ambassador, Charity (part of the team of the Dutch embassy), Nkosi Jumba, Nkosi Ngonyama, and Queen Ndamase. A notable gift was the gift provided to the Dutch ambassador, which was handmade Xhosa traditional female attire, personally gifted by Nkosi Jumba accompanied by handmade beadwork.

