

**UNDERSTANDING THE MANIFESTATION OF CONFLICT
BETWEEN TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND WARD
COMMITTEES: A CASE OF GREATER GIYANI MUNICIPALITY,
LIMPOPO PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA**

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Abstract

In South Africa's municipalities, there has been an age-old coexistence between elected and traditional leaders. This coexistence has, however, been threatened by numerous multi-dimensional conflicts. These conflicts undermine the government's efforts at co-operative governance and can spiral out of control if not handled carefully. However, it appears priority has been given to violent conflicts, making it critical to understand and deal with all forms of conflicts before they escalate. This study attempts to address and reconcile this disjunction by offering informed insights on how conflicts between traditional leaders and ward committees in South Africa's Greater Giyani Municipality and elsewhere can be amicably resolved. This was done by using purposive sampling in which 33 participants were interviewed to solicit their insights and perceptions on this and other misunderstandings. The information they provided was analysed in ATLAS.ti.22 and purposefully structured to provide work-around strategies for the way forward. The findings provided in this contribution are helpful because they offer empirically informed perspectives on enhancing the assimilation of tractable conflict resolution strategies between traditional leaders and ward committees.

Introduction

Traditional leaders (TLs) and ward committees (WCs) must work together in their communities. Scholars who hold this view argue that successful rural development depends on genuine collaboration between TLs and Elected Leaders (ELs) in communities Bikam & Chakwiriza (2014). According to these researchers, several legal frameworks, such as the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003 (Republic of South Africa, 2003) and the Municipal Structures Act of 1998, have been enacted to promote co-operative governance. However, conflicts often threaten the coexistence of TLs and WCs. Instead, the government has had more success with institutional diversity than institutional hybridity (Dubazane & Nel, 2016). In other words, government initiatives to promote co-operative governments have been more effective in creating a variety of institutions than in combining existing institutions into hybrid forms (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2017). These conflicts manifest in various forms, making it challenging to resolve them using existing frameworks (Sithole & Mbele, 2008). Therefore, the intuition underlying this study is logical leverage in developing a conflict resolution framework after understanding how conflicts escalate in severity or scale over time.

Following the findings of Bramsen and Poder (2018), conflicts can either be dominant or recessive, resolvable or intractable, and violent or nonviolent. These conflicts range from minor annoyances to excessive violence (Obadire and Sinthumule, 2019). Bottazzi et al. (2016) distinguish between non-violent and violent conflicts; the latter is characterised by physical harm, destruction of property, or use of lethal weapons. Non-violent conflicts, on the other hand, are disputes that do not involve physical violence or serious threats. The literature on conflict types also suggests that non-violent disputes may be dormant while violent conflicts are always active. Wehrmann (2017) clarifies this view by asserting that the absence of direct conflict between the parties characterises dormant conflicts.

Historically, conflict resolution has focused on violent and active conflict, with little or no attention paid to other forms of conflict, such as but not limited to physical intimidation, verbal threats, and coercion (Bottazzi et al., 2016; Wehrmann, 2017; Yesufu, 2022). Unfortunately, non-violent conflicts can be as damaging and destructive as violent ones if not appropriately managed. This presupposes that if nonviolent disputes are not resolved amicably, they may reach a level of aggression (Govier, 2008). Therefore, conflict resolution should build on all types of conflict, not just violent forms and the focus should shift from simply ending conflict to achieving sustainable peace. This current study addressed fundamental questions such

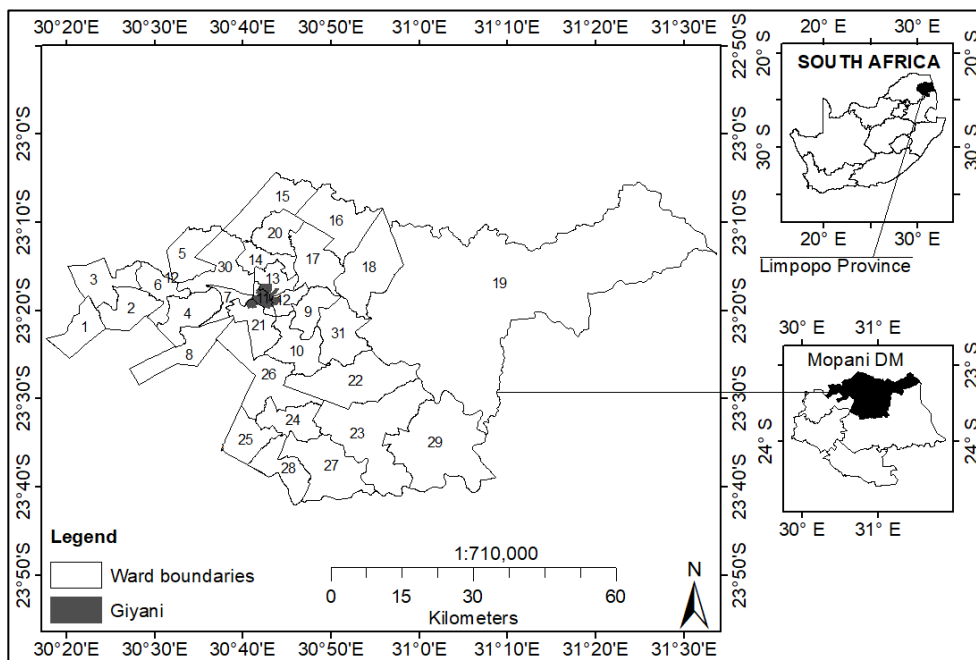
as, first, what conflicts are common between TLs and ELs? Second, is there a link between the nature of conflict and its escalation path?

Greater Giyani is one of the communities facing various leadership conflicts. However, preliminary studies in the greater Giyani community describe how conflicts between TLs and WCs manifest and how they are resolved. The presence of conflict in local communities can no longer be understood as the absence of conflict resolution frameworks but rather as the failure to contain all forms of conflict. Thus, this study fills the gap in previous studies by limiting the study to a specific community. Unlike other studies, this study also specifies the level at which these conflicts affect rural development.

Methodology

This study explores conflicts and escalation through a case study-based assessment of conflicts between traditional leaders and ward committees in Greater Giyani Local Municipality (GGLM), Mopani District Municipality, Limpopo province, South Africa (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Location of GGLM in Mopani District Municipality, South Africa



GGLM was established through the Municipality Demarcation Act of 1998 to become one of Mopani District Municipality's five local municipalities (Greater Giyani Municipality, 2018). The latest census (Stats- SA, 2016) showed a population of 256,127. The main administrative and commercial centre is Giyani. The GGLM covers a geographic area of 2,967.27 km² (GGLM - LED Strategy, 2014-16), divided into ten traditional administrative areas with 93 villages belonging to 31 wards administered by 62 councillors

(Greater Giyani Municipality, 2017). The area borders the world-famous Kruger National Park to the east. This positioning has caused problems by creating land use and resource conflicts between park authorities and local communities.

The methodology used to collect data for the case study was a purposive sampling of participants representing youth (six), women (six), ward committee chairpersons (six), prominent people (six), representatives of police (three), and chairpersons of traditional authorities (six). Respondents' years of experience in conflict resolution varied from less than one year to more than seven years to collect relevant data from all age groups (Moser and Korstjens, 2017). Twenty participants attained secondary education; only four key informants had tertiary qualifications. Nine participants did not have any formal education but could read and write. The sample was drawn from two wards of the 31 wards in the Municipality.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were designed to collect qualitative data from the participants (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). The questions were tailored to the group being interviewed, allowing the researchers to gather information about the experiences of the youth, women, ward committee chairpersons, representatives of the police, and chairpersons of traditional authorities (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). The consolidated matrix scoring was utilized to determine the typical conflicts between TLs and WCs in the Greater Giyani Municipality. Focus group discussions with the guides from the researchers constructed a scoring of what they imagined was the most common conflict in the area.

To ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of the information, each group was asked to discuss and agree on the criteria they would use to score each type of conflict (Moser and Korstjens, 2017, O'Sullivan and Jefferson, 2020). The interviewees' subsequent deliberations on evaluating each type of conflict based on the established criteria were quite enlightening. They discussed among themselves with examples of why a particular score should be assigned.

Consequently, this tool elicited deeper insights from respondents during the information-gathering process. The scoring was initially drawn on the flipcharts. Regular scores were calculated from the various FGDs, illustrating the frequency of conflicts. To gauge the degree of prevalence, respondents in groups were asked to rank each type of conflict from one to twenty, with one indicating significantly less common and twenty highly indicating prevalence. An average matrix score confirmed that non-violent conflicts were widespread.

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and loaded into ATLAS ti.22 for coding (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Using ATLAS ti.22 to code the transcripts enabled the researchers to identify key themes and patterns within the data. By coding the transcripts, the researchers could identify the most important topics of discussion and determine the most relevant findings (Sucharew and Macaluso, 2019). Network diagrams were then electronically generated to present the results (Wright, 2014).

Using network diagrams to present the data enabled the researcher to effectively communicate the consolidated findings of this current study (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). The network diagrams provided a visual representation of the data, allowing the researchers to illustrate the key findings easily (Wright, 2014). Overall, using purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, ATLAS ti.22, and network diagrams enabled the researchers to collect and present meaningful data for the case study in the Greater Giyani Municipality.

Results and discussion

Conflict resolution experiences of key informants

Conflict resolution experiences varied across the four communities and among participants. Most young people and women were unfamiliar with local dispute resolution organizations in this investigation since they were omitted from traditional conflict resolution structures. And that all key informants had experience with conflict resolution, suggesting that their conflicts were widespread. Both TLs and WCs had experience dealing with conflict because they were essential members of the traditional courts. Prominent individuals have at least one year of experience and are invited to participate in the courts to influence the decision on conflict resolution in their respective districts.

Key informants' views of the nature of clashes between TLs and WCs in Giyani

The initial interviews showed that disputes between TLs and WCs in the greater Giyani usually took a non-violent form. Those interviewed noted that the goals of TLs and WCs were often incompatible and were the primary triggers of conflict. Despite differing views on the nature of conflict, all interviewees felt that non-violent and dormant conflicts were prevalent.

Inter-coder Agreement on the Nature of Conflicts for FGDs and In-Depth Documents.

The ten themes from the literature on the manifestation of conflict were contrasted with the themes from the interviews to guarantee the

trustworthiness and dependability of the information. The intercoder agreement for the interviews and literature data was evaluated as 70%, with 7 out of 10 cases in agreement (Table 1). The benefit of intercoder agreements is that they can be used to identify data areas that need further exploration (Wright, 2014), as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Inter-coder agreement on the nature of conflicts for FDGs and In-depth documents

Document	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Code 1 literature data	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Code 2 interview data	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0

The rank of elements associated with conflict type.

Matrix scoring was designed to test whether all conflict dimensions were prioritized in conflict resolution processes. This was ideal for determining if there were significant differences in priority between active and inactive conflicts. Matrix scoring was conducted for all conflict dimensions (Table 2). The results showed a significant relationship between the type of conflict and the likelihood of it being reported. In this study, dormant (inactive) conflicts had an average score of 12 and three (3) for violent conflicts. This means that dormant conflicts are not reported to authorities, while nonviolent conflicts are reported less frequently than violent conflicts. This confirms findings suggesting that existing conflict frameworks focus more on violent than inactive and nonviolent conflicts (Leeuwen et al., 2016).

Table 2: The regular scoring, illustrating the commonness of conflicts in Greater Giyani Municipality

Conflict type	Conflict dimension	The element associated with conflict type	Likelihood score
Non-violent conflict	Boycotting	Chances to recur	4
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	2
		Widespread	4
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	4
	Issue of threats	Chances to recur	3
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	3
		Widespread	3
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	2

	Harsh-verbal exchanges	Chances to recur	3
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	2
		Widespread	2
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	-
Violent conflicts	Fist fighting-	Chances to recur	2
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	4
		Widespread	2
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	2
	Burning of property	Chances to recur	4
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	4
		Widespread	1
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	-
	Attack on human life	Chances to recur	3
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	4
		Widespread	2
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	1
Blocking access to services	Chances to recur	2	
	Likelihood of being reported to authorities	3	
	Widespread	2	
	Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	1	
Dormant conflicts	passive resistance	Chances to recur	3
		Likelihood of being reported to authorities	1
		Widespread	4
		Likelihood of occurring during a community meeting	4

The matrix scoring results on the commonness of conflicts in the Greater Giyani Municipality

The focus groups discussed various vital issues related to their judgments in gauging the degree of commonness of conflicts. Topics of discussion included the prevalence of conflict, the likelihood of conflict being reported to authorities, the possibility of conflicts occurring during meetings, and the probability of recurring conflicts. The results of the matrix scoring in Table 2 showed that out of a total score of 20, boycotting scored the highest, with 14. This indicated that boycotts were the most common conflict between the TLs and WCs in the Greater Giyani Municipality. Moreover, the score of four for chances of being reported to authorities indicates that this type of conflict was unlikely to be reported to authorities. Furthermore, the score of four for widespread and likelihood of occurring during community meetings showed that boycotts were present in most areas and were likely to occur at community meetings. Fundamentally, as evidenced by the research, active, non-violent disputes are not given precedence and yet have a higher probability of intensifying (Fashagba and Oshewolo, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2017).

Dormant conflicts were deemed to be less common than non-violent ones. The overall rating of twelve was the second highest. The probability of such conflicts being reported to the authorities was (1) General (4), the possibility

of arising in meetings (4), and prospects of happening (4). This showed that dormant conflicts are widespread but seldom reported or settled. As such, they pose a danger to sustainable peace. Violent conflicts were the least common type. However, results indicated that attacks on human lives ranked high in cases reported to authorities for intervention (4). The chances to recur were (3), widespread (2), and the likelihood to occur during meetings (1). Results generally indicated that, while they were not prevalent, they were reported to authorities to be resolved. Thus, attention was given to violent conflicts rather than non-violent conflicts.

The nonviolent conflict between traditional leaders and community committees

In the key informant interviews and focus group discussions, it was found that TLs and WCs were engaging in nonviolent conflict, which included verbal disputes, boycotting meetings, protests, and leaders refusing to engage in dialogue. A network diagram proving a comprehensive visual representation of the identified forms of nonviolent conflict can be found in the form of a network diagram (Figure 2)

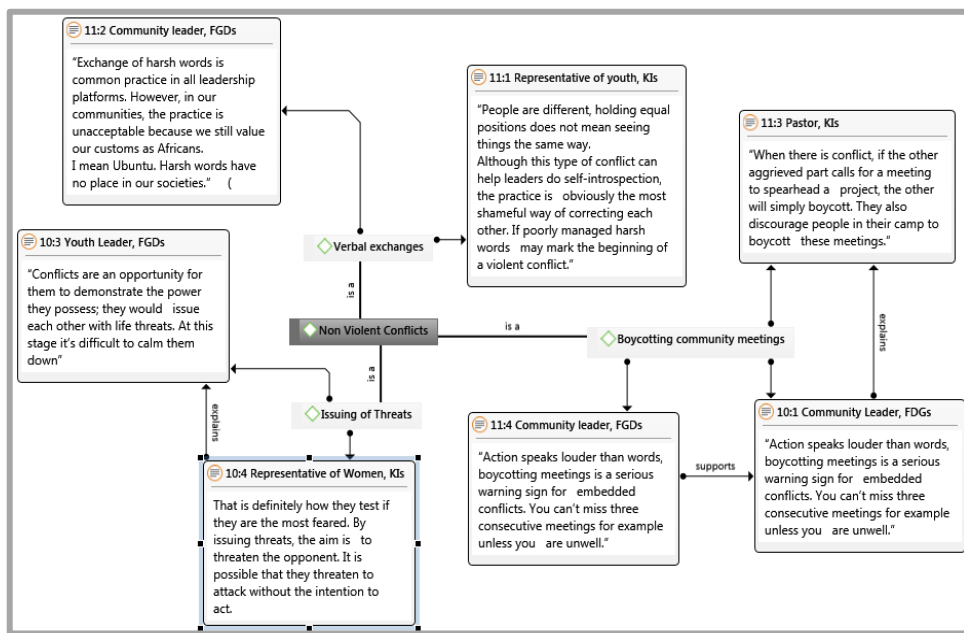


Figure 2: A comprehensive presentation on forms of nonviolent conflicts

Harsh verbal disputes

The respondents in this study perceived the exchange of harsh words as the manifestation of active but non-violent conflict. According to their definition, harsh words can be a form of expression of emotions and feelings used to express disagreement or dissatisfaction. Although participants recognise the importance of debates to develop different ideas during community meetings,

they hoped that if they were managed, they would avoid escalation and becoming more aggressive. This view is supported by scholars (Moody, 2020) who argue that a harsh exchange of words serves as an outlet for pent-up tensions and frustrations, allowing both parties to express themselves without resorting to physical aggression. Although participants acknowledged that harsh verbal exchanges help leaders reflect on their performance, they emphasised that they only serve to create a climate of distrust and hostility. This view is shared by other conflict resolution experts, who argue that aggressive debates can lead to essential decisions needing to be made on time or at all, leading to a lack of cooperation (Bottazzi et al., 2016). Whether this is effective for most traditional societies, where issues of respect are paramount, is a question that has yet to be conclusively answered.

Boycotting meetings

Refusal to attend meetings often indicates that community leaders were at odds. Responses in key informant interviews and focus group discussions were similar. Scholars Govier (2008) and Bottazzi et al. (2016) argue that boycotting meetings avoid conflict, suggesting that leaders avoid confrontation. Although this is a common strategy for resolving conflict, it is complex. Therefore, this particular issue needs to be carefully thought through. For example, conflict avoidance is seen, on the one hand, as a means of avoiding confrontation and preserving relationships and, on the other hand, as a sign of inability to address problems (Bottazzi et al., 2016; Mafunisa, 2019). As the interview results indicate, the boycotting meeting is a strategy to prevent or delay potentially essential decisions. This is often done by avoiding attending a meeting to prevent a quorum from being present (Mashau and Mutshaeni, 2014; Karamanian, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to critically examine the boycott's effectiveness as a conflict resolution strategy to determine its benefits. While this strategy may be effective in some cases, it should be noted that boycotting meetings can lead to further complications and resentment in many cases (Tieleman and Uitermark, 2019). In addition, those who boycott may be viewed as provokers and incompetent for not fulfilling their leadership roles (Mashau and Mutshaeni, 2014; Maluleke, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to understand the optimal outcomes of boycotts in dual government systems.

Issuance of threats

The issue of threat as a common type of conflict between TLs and CLs is shared by many respondents. For example, the attacker threatened to destroy crops, set cars on fire, and trash business premises. Respondents indicated that this type of conflict is generally triggered by power struggles and leaders vying for dominance. As a result, community leaders from different

institutions threaten each other. However, the results show that threats can vary depending on the 'actors' influence (Figure 2). According to the interviewees, threats can often be seen as intimidation. If the threats are not taken seriously, the aggressor may find themselves in a vulnerable position. For example, if the threatened person decides to fight back, the conflict may escalate and become violent. Moreover, the attacker could face legal consequences if the threat is reported to the authorities. Researchers such as Eck (2014) confirm this finding and point out that threats, even if successful, have legal consequences. A closer analysis of this result shows that it is essential to know that the issuance of threats is incompatible with a democratic society in which individuals have a right to security. Even though threats may cause the threatened person to make decisions under duress, the issuance of threats must never be tolerated in modern society.

Violent conflicts between traditional leaders and ward committees

This section presents the forms of violent conflict common among community leaders. The relationship between the type of conflict and its escalation path was also discussed. Violent conflict is generally defined as disputes between two or more parties using physical force. During the FGDs, it was agreed that blocking access to services, damage to property, attacks on human life, and festival fights were the most common forms of violence. A comprehensive representation of the identified forms of violent conflict can be found in the form of a network diagram (Figure 3).

their communities. Therefore, property damage should be considered a disruption to economic activity and an enemy of co-operative governance.

Blocking access to services

The case study results indicate that obstruction of access to resources was a widespread source of conflict. Other terms for this phenomenon include hindrance to services, denial of access, interference with access, and obstructionism (Kim and Conceição, 2010), which involves deliberately blocking or hindering services (Issifu, 2015). This type of conflict can manifest in various ways, such as removing road signs or destroying roads. Similar to other forms of violent conflicts, this type of aggressive behaviour can have serious consequences, as it can prevent or impede access to essential services, resources, and assistance (Fusch and Fusch, 2015). Community leaders should be encouraged to engage in dialogue with each other often to identify and address the root causes of the conflict. This engagement should include listening to the perspectives of both stakeholders and finding ways to build consensus and compromise.

Attack on human life

Several interviewees reported that attacks on human life majorly impact community members perceived as belonging to a particular grouping. There were reports of community members being killed or injured in the crossfire of fights between TLs and WCs or targeted attacks. In some cases, community members have been influenced to engage in violent attacks to support a leader in a conflict with which they are associated. Scholars such as (Osei-Hwedie, 2010; Leeuwen, 2016) argue that clashes between community leaders have devastatingly affected community members. Moreover, this conflict has displaced some people (Awedoba, 2009; Reddy, 2018). This statement is mainly consistent with the FGDs' findings, which indicate that the conflict between TLs and WCs further exacerbated the social impact of the conflict. Respondents reported that violence was also associated with increased mental health problems and loss of human life among civilians (Bukari et al., 2017; Chakma and Maitrot, 2016). In general, the potential loss of life is an essential factor when discussing the nature of the conflict. It reminds us that the conflict is about power struggles and puts people's daily lives in fear and insecurity.

Fist Fighting

In the key informant interviews, fist fights were also mentioned as one of the most common forms of conflict. Respondents indicated this type of conflict was common among youth leaders during community development meetings. The emphasis that fist fights are common among youth leaders suggests that

youth leaders have lost touch with traditional values and lack leadership skills. Thus, youth leaders were perceived as violent and people who had lost cultural values. Although festival fights between community leaders are a traditional practice in some cultures (Fusch and Fusch, 2015; Chigwata, 2016), physical competition, if not supervised by elders or other respected community members, becomes a detrimental affair. It became clear that community meetings must be well facilitated to avoid conflict.

From the key informant interviews and focus groups, it was clear that fights at festivals can quickly escalate into other forms of violent conflict. Other interviewees confirmed this view, stating that festival fights are comparable to other violent conflicts, such as attacks on human life. Moreover, the overriding desire to thwart and silence the rival parties would cause festival fights to escalate into more violent conflicts (Kim and Conceição, 2010; Fashagba and Oshewolo, 2014). Therefore, community leaders must take action to address this problem and create a more productive environment for social and economic development.

The link between the nature of conflict and its escalation path

Figure 3 illustrates the link between the type of conflict and its escalation path. The results showed a significant relationship between nonviolent conflict and violent conflict. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions indicated that precursors to violent conflict in the community include dormant (inactive) and active nonviolent conflict. When members of the two leadership institutions come into conflict, the nature of the conflict can determine how quickly and severely it escalates (Karamanian, 2017; Kaplan et al., 2017). For example, a disagreement between two individuals may begin as a verbal dispute and quickly escalate to physical violence if one party feels threatened.

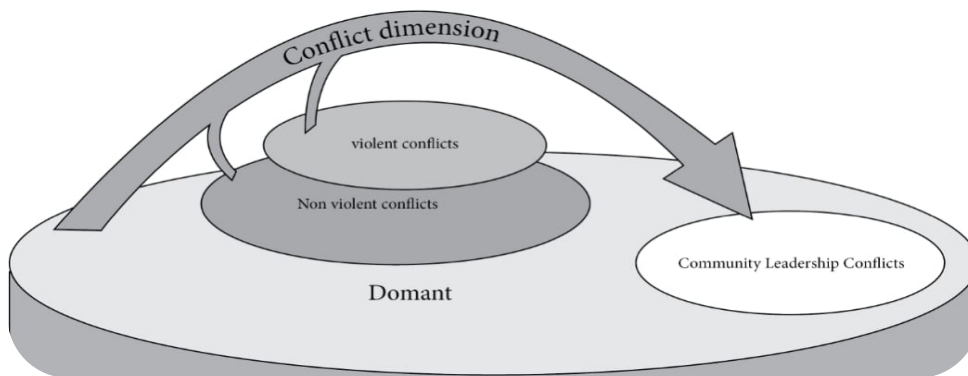
On the other hand, conflicts based on competing interests and power struggles are more likely to escalate because the parties involved often use threats and other tactics to get their way. To explain, some types of conflict are more prone to escalation or re-escalation than others. However, it is essential to note that escalation is not inevitable. Suppose the parties involved are willing to engage in dialogue, compromise, and take steps to de-escalate the conflict. Reaching a mutually beneficial resolution without further escalation is possible in that case. Thus, the longer the conflict remains unresolved, the more likely it is to become violent. This phenomenon was aptly explained by one of the interviewees during the consultations:

“When nonviolent conflicts remain unresolved, the community invites bigger, more violent conflicts. My experience tells me communities are slow to resolve conflicts, and sometimes issues get put off.”

(Youth Leader, FGDs)

The above transcript corroborates Mafunisa (2019), who points out that unresolved conflicts jeopardise the success of collaborative governance. Therefore, resolving conflicts helps promote co-operative governance and social cohesion. Regarding policy implementation, institutions in rural communities should be supported with appropriate guidance on co-operative governance and conflict resolution.

Figure 3.



Is South Africa at risk of a widespread violent conflict?

Analysis of the interview and focus group data indicates widespread violent conflict in South Africa is unlikely. Nevertheless, the overall results essentially confirm that the tension dynamic between TLs and WCs has the potential to erupt into sporadic violence. This study confirms (Eck, 2014), who stated that non-violent conflict could potentially escalate into entrenched forms of violence such as civil war. Therefore, all forms of conflict deserve immediate attention. With peace and stability in local municipalities, the effectiveness of co-operative governance in local municipalities is protected. In addition, conflict of all shapes and sizes can limit economic activity and hinder local economic development efforts (Fashagba and Oshewolo, 2014; Karamanian, 2017). Therefore, local governments must prioritize peace and security in their communities to ensure successful co-operative governance.

Contribution of the Study

Unlike previous studies, this study provides a contextual and objective view of the manifestation of conflict. The premise of this study is that understanding the nature of conflict brings one step closer to attempting to bring institutions in conflict to lasting peace. As outlined in this article, this study also assumes that tensions between TLs and WCs manifest differently. This understanding is critical because it raises awareness of existing problems and provides a basis for finding a better way forward. Previous studies have shown that peace is critical for development (Osei-Hwedie, 2010; Bikam & Chakwiriza, 2014). Similarly, ending all forms of conflict promotes rural development. It is important to emphasise that while this has been discussed in recent literature, it needs more consideration in empirical studies with context-specific data.

While previous studies have examined the conflict between elected and traditional leaders, these studies focused on violent conflict, so they did not consider all forms of conflict. Since studies on fiscal federalism have neglected nonviolent and latent conflicts, this study allows us to examine all forms of disputes between community leaders, creating an environment for developing a sustainable conflict resolution framework. Furthermore, the results of this study have shown that nonviolent conflicts, if left unaddressed, escalate into broader conflicts and become violent. Therefore, conflicts between TLs and WCs in which nonviolence is expressed require appropriate attention. This has sometimes contributed to violent conflicts between TAs and WCs. Second, these findings have shown that while these conflicts rarely receive national and international attention, their consequences devastate many community members' economies and social lives. Instead, these conflicts' consequences are enormous and often downplayed because more literature evidence is needed.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the conflicts between TLs and WCs in South African municipalities through a case study in the Greater Giyani Municipality. This study argues that the identified conflicts must be resolved before they escalate into irreconcilable confrontations. The essential contribution of this study is that dealing with all forms of conflict enables sustainable peace and cooperative governance worth pursuing for the sake of meaningful realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (SDGs) for a habitable planet.

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