Indigenous Institutions as an Option for Managing Natural Resource-Based Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, studies have shown that resource-based inter-ethnic conflict has become one of the most pertinent forms of conflict directed against humanity, threatening millions of people around the world. Access to natural resources is increasingly perceived as the security risk of the twenty-first century. The Horn of Africa, which includes Ethiopia, is well known for its persistent resource-based inter-ethnic conflict and instability. The situation in Ethiopia brings intertwined political, economic, and social crises. Currently, the transition from resource-based inter-ethnic conflict to sustainable peace is a difficult task, even though the Ethiopian government maintains the slogan 'unity in diversity' to promote ethnic federalism to secure peace and stability. Against this background, the role and potential of indigenous institutions in managing natural resource-based inter-ethnic conflict are not fully understood. This study investigates the role and potential of indigenous conflict resolution institutions in managing resource-based inter-ethnic conflicts in the Benishangul Gumuz region of Ethiopia. The study explores the multifaceted nature of conflict and the underlying relationship between natural resources and conflict. The study employed a qualitative research approach using qualitative data obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from representatives of the selected indigenous community representatives, elders, religious leaders, local community peace committee members, and police officers through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and field observations. Secondary data were used to corroborate the primary data. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by the political ecology of ethnic identity and ethnic competition theory as an analytical framework. The results suggest that politicization of ethnicity accompanied by resource scarcity and community's low level of education is found to be the main source of conflicts and those ethnic entrepreneurs, opposition political parties, and the media use and abuse ethnic identity as a means of mobilizing support, thereby exacerbating natural resource-based inter-ethnic conflicts in the region. The results show that Amhara and Gumuz ethnic groups resolve conflicts through the Council of Elders (Shimigilina). This indigenous conflict resolution mechanism is recognized, accepted, and respected by the Amhara and Gumuz ethnic groups. The results indicate that the success of indigenous institutions has been constrained by poor peace infrastructure, the involvement of activists and local government officials, inadequate protection, and limited government support. This study offers new insights into ethnic competition theory and indigenous knowledge through the promotion of cultural pluralism at regional and national levels.

Keywords: Ethiopia; ethnicity; indigenous institutions; inter-ethnic conflict; natural resources

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