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INTEGRATING COUNSELLING PRACTICES INTO COMMUNITY-BASED DISPUTE RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

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Abstract

Community-Based Dispute Resolution (CBDR) mechanisms have long played a vital role in resolving conflicts at the grassroots level, particularly in contexts where formal justice systems are either inaccessible, inefficient, or culturally misaligned. The study uses qualitative design using secondary data as review in the paper. However, despite their cultural relevance and accessibility, CBDR processes often overlook the emotional and psychological dimensions that underpin many interpersonal and communal conflicts. Unaddressed trauma, grief, and mistrust can persist even after formal agreements are reached, undermining the long-term effectiveness of such resolutions. This theoretical paper argues for a more holistic approach to CBDR by integrating counselling practices grounded in conflict transformation theory and psychosocial support frameworks. Counselling-informed methods can help uncover underlying relational wounds, facilitate emotional expression, and promote individual and collective healing. Such integration does not replace traditional practices but rather complements them, enriching the resolution process by acknowledging and working through the psychological scars that fuel

ongoing tensions. The paper suggested that CBDR should evolve into a more transformative model that not only resolves immediate disputes but also fosters resilience, emotional well-being, and a stronger social fabric in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Community-Based Dispute Resolution (CBDR), Conflict Transformation, Counselling, Integration, Psychosocial Support, Indigenous Conflict Resolution, Trauma-Informed Mediation, Community Peacebuilding.

Introduction

Community-Based Dispute Resolution (CBDR) mechanisms have long served as vital tools for addressing interpersonal and communal conflicts, especially in societies where access to formal judicial systems may be limited (Zartman, 2000). They are often grounded in local customs, cultural values, and communal norms, offering approaches that are accessible, cost-effective, and culturally sensitive (Moore, 2014). However, despite their strengths, CBDR processes frequently focus on achieving settlements without adequately addressing the deep psychological and emotional wounds that conflicts can inflict on individuals and communities (Lambourne, 2014).

Conflicts, whether familial, communal, or resource-based, rarely exist solely in the material realm; they often carry profound emotional and relational consequences. Scholars such as Lederach (2003) have emphasized that genuine peacebuilding requires attending not only to the structural aspects of disputes but also to the relational and emotional dimensions that sustain or transform conflict. Without systematic mechanisms for healing emotional harm, settlements reached through CBDR may remain fragile, with unresolved grievances resurfacing over time (Lederach, 1995).

Integrating counselling practices into CBDR frameworks can help fill this critical gap. Counselling, as a professional and empathetic process, can assist disputants in processing trauma, expressing emotions constructively, and rebuilding trust (McCold, 2000). In contexts where community relationships are tightly interwoven and interdependence is high, neglecting the psychological dimensions of disputes can perpetuate cycles of conflict and mistrust (Johnstone, 2011).

This paper argues that incorporating counselling principles—such as active listening, emotional validation, and trauma-informed care—into CBDR mechanisms can lead to more holistic, durable resolutions. It draws on conflict transformation theory, which shifts the focus from mere resolution to transforming relationships and social structures that underlie conflict (Lederach, 2003). By grounding CBDR in both restorative justice and psychosocial support frameworks, communities can better address the full spectrum of needs that arise during conflict resolution (Zehr, 2002).

While the idea of integrating counselling may seem novel or even challenging in some

cultural contexts, emerging evidence from post-conflict societies and community peacebuilding initiatives indicates that holistic approaches yield more sustainable outcomes (Lambourne, 2014; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative to consider not only how disputes are

settled but also how healing, reconciliation, and community well-being are fostered in the aftermath.

In sum, this paper contends that to move beyond superficial settlements, communities must embrace an integrated approach that combines the strengths of traditional dispute resolution with the psychosocial insights of counselling practice. This theoretical exploration sets the stage for envisioning practical, culturally adaptable models that acknowledge the centrality of human emotions in conflict and peacebuilding.

Conceptual Clarifications

Community-Based Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

Addressing Root Causes and Building Resilience

The ultimate goal of integrating counselling into CBDR is not merely to resolve disputes but to address their root causes and prevent recurrence. Many community conflicts are symptoms of deeper wounds—intergenerational trauma, displacement, gender-based violence, or economic insecurity. Counselling-informed mediation helps to uncover and address these layers, providing a path toward more durable and meaningful peace.

By fostering emotional resilience, self-awareness, and interpersonal trust, integrated approaches empower individuals and communities to better navigate future tensions. As Lederach (2003) notes, true reconciliation involves building relationships capable of absorbing future shocks and disagreements. This requires more than procedural settlements; it requires spaces for emotional transformation, forgiveness, and healing.

Integrating counselling practices into Community-Based Dispute Resolution represents a vital evolution in how communities manage conflict and foster healing. By equipping mediators with trauma-informed skills, addressing mental health stigma, and respecting cultural practices, this approach provides a holistic framework for justice that is not only restorative but also transformative. As societies grapple with increasingly complex and emotionally charged conflicts, such integration offers a path forward that honors both the emotional and communal dimensions of peacebuilding.

Theoretical Framework

Rooted in conflict transformation theory (Lederach, 1995) and psychosocial support frameworks, this paper argues that addressing relational and emotional wounds is vital for genuine reconciliation and lasting peace. Conflict transformation theory, pioneered by Lederach (2003), proposes that conflicts are not isolated events but embedded in relationships, structures, and cultural contexts. It emphasizes transforming relationships, fostering constructive change, and

rebuilding trust. This perspective contrasts with traditional conflict resolution approaches that aim merely for short-term settlements (Lederach, 2003).

Psychosocial support theory complements this by focusing on the psychological and social

factors that shape how individuals and communities experience and recover from conflict and trauma (Lambourne, 2014). Counselling principles—such as empathetic listening, emotional validation, and trauma-informed care—draw directly from psychosocial models, offering practical methods to address invisible wounds (Herman, 1997).

Restorative justice theory also informs this framework. Scholars like Zehr (2002) argue that true justice must address harm, restore relationships, and reintegrate affected parties into the community. Integrating counselling into CBDR aligns with restorative principles, encouraging dialogue that acknowledges harm and promotes healing (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007).

Together, these theories present a holistic lens for understanding why emotional and relational dimensions are essential in community-based mechanisms. They highlight that without addressing underlying trauma, communities risk reproducing cycles of conflict, alienation, and mistrust. Therefore, this paper proposes an integrated theoretical framework that combines conflict transformation, psychosocial support, and restorative justice to guide how counselling practices can be meaningfully embedded into CBDR.

Integrating Counselling Practices into Community-Based Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

Community-Based Dispute Resolution (CBDR) mechanisms are essential tools in fostering peace, social harmony, and justice, particularly in settings where formal judicial systems may be inaccessible or distrusted. CBDR often draws on traditional conflict resolution methods led by elders, religious leaders, or community mediators. However, as disputes increasingly carry layers of personal trauma, historical grievances, and psychological distress, these systems require an expanded skill set. This paper proposes a conceptual roadmap for embedding counselling principles within CBDR practices, arguing that such integration not only enhances the effectiveness of conflict resolution but also contributes to personal and communal healing.

Building on the theoretical foundations of restorative justice and trauma-informed care, the integration of counselling practices into CBDR mechanisms introduces critical tools such as active listening, empathy, non-judgmental communication, and trauma awareness. These skills allow mediators to move beyond the surface of a conflict and understand the underlying emotional dynamics that drive it. According to Herman (1997), trauma often shapes individuals' perceptions of justice and fairness, and without addressing these internal experiences, resolutions may feel incomplete or even re-traumatizing.

For instance, active listening enables mediators to not only hear but *feel* what a disputant is expressing, making space for emotional validation. Empathy ensures that parties feel seen and acknowledged, which can de-escalate tension and encourage openness. Trauma awareness equips mediators with the capacity to recognize signs of psychological distress, avoid triggering

responses, and provide support that prioritizes emotional safety. These elements form the bedrock of a more humane and holistic approach to community conflict resolution.

While some community leaders may already possess intuitive counselling traits, relying

solely on ad hoc practices is insufficient Herman (1997). Systematic capacity-building initiatives are necessary to embed counselling into CBDR in a sustainable and scalable way. Training programmes should include modules on psychological first aid, trauma-informed approaches, emotional intelligence, and conflict-sensitive counselling techniques.

Such programmes can be delivered through local NGOs, faith-based organizations, or university partnerships. McCold (2000) emphasizes the importance of training that is contextually relevant and experiential, using role-plays and simulations to model real-life mediation scenarios. When mediators are equipped with these tools, they become more adept at managing sensitive disclosures, identifying signs of unresolved trauma, and making appropriate referrals to mental health professionals when needed.

Importantly, training must also address the well-being of the mediators themselves. Many community leaders are exposed to repeated emotional stress, which can lead to burnout or secondary trauma. Providing spaces for supervision, peer support, and self-care practices ensures that those facilitating peace are also cared for and supported.

Beyond the mediators, there is a pressing need to shift community perceptions around counselling and mental health. In many cultural contexts, counselling is associated with personal weakness, shame, or even spiritual failing. These stigmas hinder individuals from seeking help or fully engaging in emotionally vulnerable dialogues during dispute resolution.

To address this, public education and community sensitization campaigns are essential. These campaigns can take various forms—radio dramas, storytelling sessions, school-based programmes, or religious sermons—depending on the cultural and communication norms of the community. The messaging should aim to normalize emotional expression and frame counselling as a culturally relevant, non-threatening form of communal support.

Zehr (2002) underscores the value of reframing counselling within local traditions of care and reciprocity. For example, if a community values collective healing rituals or elder-led storytelling, counselling practices can be introduced as an extension or enhancement of those traditions, rather than a foreign intervention. Such reframing helps reduce resistance and encourages broader acceptance.

Another pillar of effective integration is cultural flexibility. Counselling, especially when introduced from outside the community, must not override or invalidate local customs. Instead, it should adapt to existing cultural frameworks and enhance indigenous practices. This may involve working with traditional healers, spiritual leaders, or elders to co-create trauma-informed rituals or storytelling methods that align with both psychological and cultural understandings of healing.

For example, in some indigenous settings, healing circles or community dialogues already

serve a therapeutic function. By embedding counselling principles—such as confidentiality, emotional validation, and safety protocols—into these existing practices, communities can deepen their impact without compromising cultural authenticity. Lambourne (2014) suggests that such

hybrid approaches can strengthen both local ownership and the psychological effectiveness of reconciliation efforts.

Additionally, the inclusion of women, youth, and other often-marginalized groups in these integrated practices is crucial. Their perspectives and emotional experiences may differ significantly from those of traditional power holders, and counselling-informed approaches can create safer spaces for their participation.

Proposed Integration Model

This paper proposes a theoretical model that outlines practical pathways for embedding counselling practices into CBDR structures:

1. Training community mediators in counselling principles: Equipping mediators with foundational skills in active listening, empathy, and trauma-informed care enables them to respond more holistically to disputants' emotional needs (McCold, 2000; Herman, 1997).
2. Building informal support networks: Communities can establish peer support groups, trusted elders, or volunteer counsellors who provide basic psychosocial support and create safe spaces for dialogue. This aligns with restorative justice ideas that healing must occur within the community (Zehr, 2002).
3. Encouraging supportive policies: Local and national policies should acknowledge the emotional dimensions of disputes. Frameworks that integrate mental health support, capacity-building funds, and partnerships with professional counsellors can strengthen CBDR outcomes (Lambourne, 2014; Lederach, 2003). By combining training, informal support, and policy recognition, communities can develop a robust, adaptable model that fosters deeper reconciliation and social cohesion.

Suggestions

- i. Community mediators, traditional leaders, and dispute resolution practitioners should receive training in basic counselling skills such as active listening, empathy, emotional validation, and trauma-informed communication.
- ii. Community-Based Dispute Resolution mechanisms should incorporate psychosocial support services to address emotional trauma and stress associated with conflicts.
- iii. Community education programmes should be implemented to reduce stigma associated with counselling and mental health support.
- iv. Counselling practices integrated into CBDR should be culturally adaptable and respectful of indigenous conflict resolution traditions.
- v. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community development institutions should develop policies that recognize and support the integration of counselling into community dispute resolution mechanisms.

Conclusion

Combining counselling practices with Community-Based Dispute Resolution (CBDR) can

transform how communities address conflict, moving beyond surface-level settlements to genuine healing and restoration. By grounding CBDR in conflict transformation, restorative justice, and psychosocial support theories, this paper has argued that emotional and relational aspects of disputes are not peripheral but central to sustainable peace.

A theoretical integration of counselling offers communities practical tools for processing trauma, rebuilding trust, and strengthening social bonds. While challenges such as stigma and resource constraints exist, these can be mitigated through culturally sensitive training, community education, and supportive policies.

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