The Conflict Management System in Karamoja: An assessment of strengths and weaknesses

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Improving food security through good governance and conflict management

In October 2012, Mercy Corps\(^1\) launched the $55 million USAID-funded Sustainable Transformation in Agriculture and Nutrition (SUSTAIN) program. The program will be implemented in three districts of Uganda’s northeastern Karamoja region, including Abim, Kotido, and Kaabong districts, reaching approximately 540,000 individuals including 304,140 direct beneficiaries. This five-year food security program aims to improve peace and food security in Karamoja through the achievement of three inter-related strategic objectives:

- **SO1:** Livelihoods strengthened.
- **SO2:** Nutrition among children under two improved.
- **SO3:** Governance and local capacity for conflict mitigation improved.

SO3 contributes to the achievement of the first two program objectives by improving the enabling environment for economic growth and development through reduced conflict and insecurity. Rather than directly addressing the drivers of conflict in Karamoja, interventions implemented under SO3 will strengthen the capacity of both formal (government) and informal (customary) local conflict management actors at the district, sub-county, and community (village/parish) level to prevent, resolve, and respond to conflict and insecurity.

**DIAGRAM A.** SO3 aims to promote peace and stability in Karamoja by strengthening the capacity of local conflict management actors to prevent, resolve, and respond to conflict.

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\(^1\) In partnership with World Vision Inc. (WV), Pastoralism and Poverty Frontiers (PPF), Kaabong Peace for Development Agency (KAPDA), and Tufts University’s Feinstein International Center (FIC).

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In order to develop specific program activities to be implemented under SO3, Mercy Corps conducted a joint conflict and governance assessment, led by two staff members from the HQ-based Technical Support Unit, in December 2012. The assessment focused on identifying both strengths and weaknesses in the current conflict management system in Karamoja.
The conflict management system in Karamoja

Karamoja has long been characterized by poverty, underdevelopment, and pervasive insecurity. The Karamojong who inhabit the region’s marginal drylands are predominantly pastoralist, though most groups farm as well. Cattle raiding has characterized the relationship between Karamojong tribes for generations. In recent years, however, raiding has become increasingly violent, due in part to the proliferation of small arms. As traditional power structures have eroded, social norms that once moderated raiding have dissolved, and raids are increasingly carried out by young men for their own personal gain. Although security has improved over the past several years, cattle raiding continues to take lives, undermine livelihoods, and discourage both development and private sector investment in the region.

The conflict management system in Karamoja includes both formal government and customary actors. These actors play complementary roles in maintaining peace and security in Karamoja. Collaboration between actors – both vertically between customary leaders and government officials at the sub-county and district level, and horizontally between actors in neighboring districts – is crucial to the ability of these actors to effectively and appropriately respond to security incidents, resolve disputes, and facilitate the return of stolen livestock.

Customary actors. Conflict in Karamoja has traditionally been managed by elders, who comprise the customary authority in the acephalous and decentralized societies of Karamoja. Far from being a monolithic group, elders of a given community have their own internal hierarchy and are organized to varying degrees in different communities. Although the authority of elders has weakened in recent years, they continue to play a role in promoting social harmony, disseminating information, identifying criminals in the community, disciplining errant youth, mediating disputes, and negotiating peace. Generally speaking, conflict management processes

Conflict management includes a number of functions, including:

- Prevention initiatives;
- Monitoring;
- Information sharing (collection and dissemination);
- Resolving disputes and negotiating agreements;
- Enforcing compliance with agreements and laws; and
- Provision of justice.

A well-functioning conflict management system will effectively execute these functions such that conflict is reduced.

4 The assessment found the greatest degree of formality amongst elders in Abim district, who have organized a council of elders with representation from all seven Abim clans. Additionally, Jie elders appear to be more organized than Dodoth elders.
5 For a discussion of the factors contributing to the decline in elders’ authority, see: Carlson, Proctor, Stites, & Akabwai. Tradition in Transition: Customary Authority in Karamoja, Uganda. October 2012.
An important exception is that women may be increasingly dissatisfied with traditional conflict management processes, as traditional systems do not typically favor women. See Carlson et al., 2012.

E.g., Resident District Commissioner (RDC), District Internal Security Officer (DISO), Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), Local Council 5 (LC5), Brigade Commander/UPDF, District Police Commander (DPC), Chief Intelligence Officer (CIO), etc.

**Formal government actors.** Government conflict management actors include district-level officials with a mandate to promote peace and security, notably the members of the District Peace Committee and the District Security Committee; the Sub-county Peace Committee, comprised of both government officials (e.g., LC1, LC3) and community representatives; the Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF); and the police. Government involvement in conflict management emphasizes the maintenance of security (through activities such as disarmament, intelligence gathering, and patrols) and both legal and security responses to conflict incidents (including livestock recovery and arrest of perpetrators).

**DIAGRAM B.**

**The conflict management system in districts of Karamoja targeted by SUSTAIN.** This map will vary across districts and may include additional actors (e.g., Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms (CEWARN)). Developing a detailed map — including actors, their roles, and their relationships and degree of collaboration with other actors — of the conflict management system in each targeted sub-county and district, in participation with both government and customary actors, will be a critical first step in the implementation of SO3.
What is working well in the conflict management system?

There are a number of bright spots in Karamoja where conflict management processes are comparatively effective. The assessment highlighted a range of elements which contribute to this relative effectiveness, including:

**Engagement of customary leaders.** Interviewees from both the community and the government observed that conflict management processes are more effective when elders are engaged. This engagement ranged from working with formal authorities to identify criminals in the community, to facilitating the recovery of stolen animals, to carrying out rituals with deep significance for making peace and cleansing perpetrators. The relevance of the elders is related both to their intimate knowledge of their communities as well as to their perceived legitimacy as the guardians of traditional norms and values.

**Collaboration between customary leaders and government actors.** Conflict management appears to be more effective in places where formal government and customary actors collaborate. This collaboration is characterized by good personal relationships, feelings of mutual respect, understanding of the role and value each actor brings to the response to conflict incidents, and regular communication. The role of each actor in the collaboration varies according to the type of incident, depending in part on which actor is able to act most effectively and legitimately.

**Local Defense Units.** Interviewees from the community expressed satisfaction with the localization of security mechanisms through the Local Defense Units (LDUs). A history of human rights abuses has destroyed trust in the UPDF in a number of locations, leading to a preference for security provision by members of the community. For example, elders in Nakapelimoru sub-county, Kotido District reported a remarkable increase in trust and confidence in the conflict management system among community members as the LDU played an increasing role in local security provision.

**Responsive UPDF.** An accessible and responsive UPDF was cited as a key factor in effective conflict management. In spite of relationships historically characterized by mistrust, a number of community-level actors, including elders and members of sub-county peace committees, recognize the important role of the UPDF in both security provision and the recovery of stolen livestock. Interviewees cited the proximity of UPDF bases, the early involvement of UPDF in livestock recovery operations, and the willingness of UPDF officers to work closely with customary authorities as key determinants of the UPDF’s effectiveness. Collaboration between the UPDF and customary authorities is highly localized and depends on personal relationships cultivated between the elders and the UPDF officers in their district.
**Police presence.** While serious challenges still constrain the effectiveness and acceptance of the police, including the small size of the present police force and limited understanding of police procedures on the part of community members, their involvement is beginning to enhance conflict management processes in Karamoja. For instance, the sub-county peace and security committee in Nyakwae sub-county, Abim District, noted that community policing initiatives have encouraged both elders and community members to play an active role in maintaining peace, and the District Security Committee in Kaabong District reported that increased police presence has led to a decline in lawlessness throughout the district.

**Improved communication technology.** Interviewees highlighted the role of increased communications and the advent of the mobile phone in improving conflict management, due to a more rapid exchange of information and reduced response times.

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**What fosters good collaboration?**

Respondents cited a number of factors that foster good collaboration between formal and customary authorities. In Rengen Sub-county, Kotido District, elders said that their collaboration with the district authorities and the UPDF was so good because the government and the UPDF really listen to them and because the elders are well-organized and easy to contact. In Abim District, elders cited contextual factors, including the respected role of elders in the community, a historically strong government dating from colonial times, and higher levels of education, as well as proactive initiatives by the elders themselves. Other factors that support collaboration identified by the assessment include:

- Having an RDC from the community who knows and respects the local culture;
- Proximity to the district capital;
- Leadership and initiative taken by government and customary leaders; and
- Strong personal relationships between actors.

Respondents provided a range of advice on how to improve collaboration between elders and the government, including:

- Elders should organize themselves internally — including building consensus on key issues and identifying appropriate contact points — before reaching out to other stakeholders.
- Both customary and government authorities must recognize and respect the role that the other plays in managing conflict.
- Traditional structures (e.g., councils of elders) should be formalized and supported.
- Convene regular meetings between government authorities and elders, between elders in neighboring areas, and between government authorities in neighboring areas to proactively discuss security issues, share information, and discuss best practices around both collaboration and conflict management.
- Elected representatives, notably the LC5, should facilitate a relationship between elders and the government, including the UPDF.
- Government should include elders in initiatives and meetings, including holding meetings at the community level.
- Government, including UPDF and police, should be invited to participate in community events.
- Provide logistical and financial support, particularly for elders to attend district-level meetings.
- Both elders and government actors must know their role and that of others in managing local conflict.
- Develop guidelines for harmonizing formal and customary law.
- Sub-county Peace Committees and elders’ councils should keep records that can be shared with other stakeholders.
In addition to the range of strengths in the conflict management system highlighted by the assessment, interviewees faulted a number of factors that undermine effective conflict management, including:

**Poor communication between conflict management actors.** Limited communication between conflict management actors – both horizontally between counterparts across administrative boundaries and vertically between actors at the community, sub-county, and district levels – is a major weakness of the conflict management system. This is manifested in limited knowledge of who to contact\(^8\) as well as infrequent and ad hoc meetings. Poor communication has had a number of ill effects, including limited information sharing, limited knowledge of government actions on the part of the community, and poor coordination of security responses.

**Limited understanding of and respect for the role of elders.** Karamojong culture is poorly understood and often viewed as primitive by people who aren’t from the region, including many of the district-level government officials and security personnel who sit on the district peace and security committees. As a consequence, the role of elders and traditional conflict management practices are neither valued nor respected by key elements of the formal government. Elders interviewed for this assessment stated that the lack of respect displayed by government actors had both undermined their authority and led them to withdraw from government-led initiatives. Related to this, customary authorities are not formally integrated into government structures; while elders may sit on the sub-county peace and security committees, they are not a part of the district peace and security committees. The lack of knowledge among government actors about the role of elders and traditional practices in resolving disputes and negotiating peace in Karamoja, coupled with a relationship characterized by mistrust and resentment, constitute key barriers to effective collaboration between customary and formal authorities on conflict management.

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\(^8\) Interviewees indicated that it is particularly difficult to identify the appropriate elder to contact.
Unclear Roles. Conflict management actors do not always understand their own role or that of other actors in preventing and resolving conflict, making it difficult for them to either take initiative or reach out to their counterparts when an incident occurs. This may be due to lack of training, overlapping or unclear jurisdiction between customary and formal authorities, and the rapid pace of change in the role of the elders in Karamojong society. This lack of role clarity is exacerbated both by the lack of communication between actors and variations in structures\(^9\) and the composition of peace and security committees across administrative boundaries.

Prioritization of security enforcement over peacebuilding. The conflict management system remains reactive rather than proactive, with an emphasis on security response over conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Security response is typically led by actors perceived as outsiders by the Karamojong, and conflict management initiatives do not adequately involve local communities or promote local ownership over the maintenance of peace and security. Formal government authorities are predominantly focused on surveillance, information gathering, and security response, which can lead to antagonistic relationships with communities characterized by mistrust and lack of cooperation.

Non-dynamic system. Although the security situation in Karamoja has changed over the past few years, the conflict management system does not appear to have evolved to deal with current trends. For example, some of the sub-county peace and security committees noted that the system was suited for countering the large-scale conflict situation that prevailed several years ago, but not for dealing with the more localized and criminal activity of today. In addition, some of the formal government structures, notably the sub-county peace and security committees, may not include the right people to be effective. As a sub-county peace committee member from Nyakwae sub-county in Abim District stated, “the present sub-county peace committees do not have the right people as the system makes it impossible for them to participate.” Interestingly, the assessment team observed that the sub-county peace and security committees tended to be ineffective and dysfunctional in places where the elders had good working relationships with the district government authorities, suggesting that strong collaborative relationships linking formal and informal structures may limit the utility of intermediary structures at the sub-county level.

Constraints to Collaboration

A number of factors hinder collaboration between elders and government authorities, including:

- Perceptions of government as corrupt, unresponsive, and antagonistic.
- Inability of government to recover and return stolen livestock.
- Lack of knowledge of local conflict dynamics and cultural values among government officials. Perceptions of the Karamojong as primitive and backwards.
- Limited understanding of and respect for the role of elders in traditional conflict management practices among government officials. Perceptions of elders as weak. Limited initiative by government to involve elders.
- Traditional structures aren’t formalized, making it difficult to know who to contact.
- Parallel justice systems and differing perspectives about the most appropriate way to handle certain crimes.
- Lack of information sharing between customary and government authorities and across administrative borders.
- Challenges to mobilizing elders due to lack of funding for transportation and refreshments.

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\(^9\) For example, Abim District has district and sub-county security committees while Kaabong and Kotido Districts have district and sub-county peace committees. Officer (CIO), etc.
Failure to recover and return stolen livestock. Interviewees at all levels expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with the inability of the government to consistently recover and return stolen livestock. Reasons cited for this include corruption, difficulties tracking and identifying both stolen animals and culprits, and poor communication and collaboration across administrative boundaries. While recovery and return falls under the purview of the UPDF, the cooperation of elders is essential for success, and the failure to recover and return raided livestock is due in part to poor collaboration between formal and customary authorities. In addition to instigating retaliatory raids, the failure to recover and return stolen animals generates perceptions of government as corrupt and ineffective and undermines community trust in government actors. While some interviewees noted that the government-sponsored bolus tagging system has facilitated the recovery of some stolen animals, Mercy Corps’ experience suggests that the program still lacks support in some communities.

Parallel justice systems. As the presence of the formal government has grown in Karamoja, tensions between customary and formal law have risen. Both communities and customary leaders have limited knowledge of the formal legal system, including police procedures, while government actors who are not from the region rarely understand customary law and the legitimacy with which it is viewed by many community members. The existence of two parallel, often incompatible justice systems has led to role confusion, disputes over the jurisdiction of customary versus formal authorities, and inconsistencies in the provision of both security and justice. This has also perpetuated misunderstanding and lack of respect between customary and formal authorities, precluding effective collaboration.

Lack of resources. All of the conflict management actors interviewed for this assessment cited the lack of funds to support conflict management activities as a key constraint. In most cases, interviewees highlighted the need for funding for transportation, refreshments, and the sacrifice of bulls. In part, these complaints reflect the dependency of local communities and local government structures on external aid that has developed over years of humanitarian assistance, as well as a lack of imagination about how to support activities that don’t require significant resources or that were historically supported by local communities. In addition, however, this is also reflective of real resource constraints for security activities that the government is either unable or unwilling to prioritize. For example, funds for security activities are provided only to the district, and there is no budget line for conflict management activities at the sub-county level.

Culture of dependency. To date, many peacebuilding activities have been led and financially supported by the international community, leading to a culture of dependency on external aid, weakening local responsibility for the maintenance of local security, and undermining the development of sustainable conflict management structures. This mentality constitutes a key barrier that the program will need to overcome.
TABLE 1. Overview of the strengths and weaknesses in the way that conflict is managed in assessment locations.

There is great diversity in the conflict management system across the program area, necessitating a detailed understanding of each locality and a tailored set of program activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>STRENGTHS &amp; WEAKENESSES</th>
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| Kaabong District    | • While the District Security Committee meets monthly and police presence has increased in the district, district authorities have a poor understanding of local conflict dynamics, limited interaction with elders, and are viewed as unresponsive.  
                         • Sub-county Peace Committees are largely dysfunctional and inactive.  
                         • Elders are poorly organized compared with other districts.                                                                                                                                                     |
| Lodiko Sub-county   | • Elders have disengaged from conflict management, feeling undermined by a government that doesn’t respect them or value their contribution.  
                         • Uneven disarmament has weakened the ability of elders to negotiate peace.  
                         • Good relations between elders and elected representatives (e.g., LC1, LC5).  
                         • The formalization of procedure by the Sub-county Peace Committee for the movement of animals (during a business transaction) has worked well for the conflict management system.  
                         • The security apparatus (police and army) being located far from the community had an adverse effect on the conflict management system.                        |
| Kaabong West Sub-county | • Sub-county Peace Committee does not meet regularly and is often blamed by the community for the failures of the government.  
                         • Limited engagement between Sub-county Peace Committee and elders due to perceived weakness of elders, concerns about expectations of per diems, and lack of knowledge about who to contact.  
                         • The elder’s networks are not utilized for better cross-border conflict management.  
                         • There was lack of acknowledgement of the elders’ role in conflict management on the part of the government beyond the Sub-county Peace Committee.                        |
| Kotido District      | • Elders are well-organized and have strong personal networks with each other and with government.  
                         • Poor coordination between Kotido and Kaabong Districts, including limited communication between elders and limited coordination between UPDF units on recovery operations.                         |
| Rengen Sub-county   | • Elders are well-organized, are committed to maintaining peace, and have strong personal relationships with government and UPDF.  
                         • The key weakness in conflict management in Rengen is the poor relationship with Kaabong district: limited communication with elders in Kaabong, limited knowledge about who to be in touch with, and inability to recover stolen cattle taken to Kaabong.  
                         • The Sub-county Peace Committee is very well-organized and meets regularly. Effective identification of perpetrators of crime. The Sub-county Peace Committee members lack proper conflict management skills like facilitation and negotiations. |
| Nakapelimoru Sub-county | • Strengths in the conflict management system include successful youth engagement by elders, strong relationship between elders and government, incorporation of traditional ways of engaging with youth, increased deployment of UPDF, Sub-county Peace Committee support for disarmament, and ongoing dialogue with the Dodoth.  
                         • Gaps include low recovery of stolen livestock, irregular meetings of the Sub-County Peace Committee, and incomplete disarmament.                                                  |
| Abim District        | • Elders are relatively well-organized into a council including all 7 Abim clans.  
                         • Good relationships and collaboration between elders and district authorities.                                                                                                                                          |
| Abim Sub-county     | • The Sub-County Peace Committee is not very effective.                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Nyakwae Sub-county  | • Geographically isolated sub-county with limited links with Abim district authorities, the Abim council of elders, and both government and traditional authorities of neighboring districts.  
                         • The Sub-county Peace Committee is not very effective or inclusive, though there are effective elements within the committee (e.g., police) and they have put together an effective information network. |
In order to improve the capacity of local government and customary leaders to manage conflict in Karamoja, SUSTAIN SO3 will focus on strengthening collaboration between actors as well as increasing the ability of each group of actors (both customary leaders and government actors) to execute their roles. This requires that actors know their roles and the roles of other actors, trust other actors, believe other actors are effective, communicate regularly with other actors, and collaborate effectively with other actors.

In line with the “facilitation” approach\textsuperscript{10} that has shaped SUSTAIN’s overall implementation strategy, activities implemented under SO3 will be implemented as indirectly as possible. In addition, priority will be placed on addressing systemic problems in the way that conflict is managed in Karamoja. Together, this \textbf{systemic and indirect approach} will promote scalable and long-term sustainable impact.

What does it mean to indirectly implement conflict management activities? First, the program team will not directly implement peacebuilding or dispute resolution activities themselves, but rather will provide technical guidance, moral support, and ongoing mentoring to help local conflict management actors identify weaknesses in the conflict management system and develop solutions to sustainably address these weaknesses.

Second, given the emphasis of SO3 on strengthening local conflict management capacity, the \textbf{process is the program}, and the chief responsibility of the program team is to facilitate this process. The program team is responsible for guiding local conflict management actors through a participatory process of analyzing the context, identifying activities to strengthen the conflict management system, and working with other actors to implement identified solutions and improve the way conflict is managed. While the program aims to contribute toward a reduction in conflict and insecurity in Karamoja, the program team should focus on achieving intermediate outcomes indicative of increased conflict management capacity among local actors, such as number of disputes resolved, increased communication and collaboration between conflict management actors, and community awareness of and satisfaction with dispute resolution and security provision.

Third, in recognition of the importance of funding (and the lack thereof) to sustained implementation of conflict management activities by local actors, the role of the program team is emphatically not to bankroll the activities of these actors. Instead, the program team is charged to help local conflict management actors determine long-term solutions to this problem, whether that is finding a way to reduce the costs of conflict management activities or identifying local or governmental sources of funding.

Annex A:

METHODOLOGY

Objective:
- Orient SUSTAIN staff on the facilitative approach while seeking to understand the way in which the governance of the conflict management system functions.
- To provide the SUSTAIN program team with recommendations for SO3 activities.

Methodology:
The methodology for the assessment consisted of focus group discussions and selective one-on-one interviews on the governance of the conflict management structure. The guide for both was a set of questions developed by the conflict and governance TSU with inputs from the SUSTAIN team before and during the assessment. The focus group discussion was a facilitated process allowing the respondents to use their own independent thoughts and processing skills to gauge their understanding of the situation. The one-on-one interview helped us modulate the conversation and dig deeper into the respondents’ understanding of the situation and provide rich qualitative data. With the information from these two processes combined, we were able to get a better sense of the informants’ understanding of the situation and allow for broad understanding of the current conflict management system and its impact.

The focus group discussions and the one-on-one interviews were guided by the set of questions attached here with Annex B. The composition of the focus group (formal and informal group) and individuals determined the focus of the set of guiding questions. Having the questions as a standard set allowed the discussion to flow freely and hence the information captured was coherent even though they came from distinctive groups or individuals. The discussion allowed the team to explore all aspects of the conflict management system and beyond.

Since the assessment team leads represented two specialized sectors (conflict and governance) and the SUSTAIN staff were new to the approach, the de-brief sessions after every meeting and at the end of the day were very important and helped structure the progression of the entire assessment process.

The assessment team used this process to introduce SUSTAIN and the strategy behind its facilitative approach to the interviewees and the project team. It was a good opportunity for the project team to get a firsthand experience of the facilitative process.
This set of questions represents the final iteration of the SUSTAIN conflict and governance assessment questions and the recommended set of questions for future assessments seeking to understand the way in which the conflict management system functions. The assessment questions evolved over the two-week life of the assessment as the assessment team became more focused on the core issues, filled gaps in knowledge, and learned how best to phrase the questions. Additionally, the assessment questions were not standardized as this assessment was an exploratory exercise designed to identify program activities rather than to systematically collect baseline data. The questions were asked in a focus group setting targeted toward one of three conflict management actors: elders/traditional authorities, the Sub-county Peace Committee, and the District Peace/Security Committee. Depending on the evolution of the discussion, some questions were dropped and the sequence may have been different from the one presented.

Conflict management actors and roles

1. What is your role in preventing and resolving conflict in your area?

2. What happens when there is an incident in your area? Describe how you and other actors respond to the incident.

3. What is the role of elders/the government in preventing and resolving conflict in your area? NB: If the questions are targeted toward government actors, then this question should focus on the role of elders. If the questions are targeted toward elders, then this question should focus on the role of government actors.

4. What actions are taken to prevent conflict in your area? Who is responsible for this?

5. How is information about an incident in your area shared? With whom? By whom?

6. What actions are taken to resolve conflict in your area once an incident has already occurred? Who is responsible for this?

7. What should your role in preventing and resolving conflict be? What should the role of elders/the government be?

8. What is working well in the way that conflict is prevented and resolved in your area?
9. What are the biggest gaps in the way that conflict is prevented and resolved in your area?

10. Do you think you are effective in preventing and resolving conflict in your area? Why or why not?

11. What would improve your ability to effectively manage conflict in your area?

**Collaboration between formal and informal government actors on conflict management**

12. To what extent do you work with elders/the government in preventing and resolving conflict in your area? Who do you work with? How do you work together (what is the role of each actor)?

13. How well do you collaborate with elders/the government in preventing and resolving conflict in your area? Why?

14. What limits collaboration between government and traditional authorities? What challenges do you face in collaborating with elders/the government? Why is your collaboration with elders/the government so poor?

15. What fosters good collaboration between government and traditional authorities? Why is your collaboration with elders/the government so good? What advice would you have for government actors/elders who wish to work more closely with elders/the government?

16. How can your collaboration with elders/the government be improved? What is the best way to build collaboration between traditional authorities and formal government on conflict management?