



THE ROLE OF ZAUREN SULHU COMMUNITY FORUM AS A CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISM IN BAUCHI METROPOLIS, BAUCHI STATE, NIGERIA

Aminu Abdullahi Dauda	Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Sa'adu Zungur University, Bauchi State.
Hindatu Yerima Maigari	Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Sa'adu Zungur University, Bauchi State.
Naziru Mohammed Musalli, PhD	Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Sa'adu Zungur University, Bauchi State.

Abstract

This study examines the role of Zauren Sulhu Community Forum as an indigenous conflict resolution mechanism in Bauchi Metropolis, Bauchi State, Nigeria. Despite the proliferation of formal legal institutions, traditional community-based conflict resolution forums remain pivotal in managing interpersonal and communal disputes in Northern Nigeria. Employing a qualitative case study design within an interpretivist paradigm, this research utilized semi-structured interviews with nine key informants selected through purposive sampling across five administrative wards in Bauchi Metropolis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Zauren Sulhu Community Forum performs three critical functions: societal orientation through value inculcation and behavioral modification; youth counseling and rehabilitation through moral guidance and restorative justice approaches; and grievance settlement through culturally-grounded mediation processes. The study identified two major challenges undermining forum effectiveness: lack of parental cooperation and financial constraints. The research contributes to the discourse on alternative dispute resolution by demonstrating how indigenous mechanisms complement formal justice systems in managing community-level conflicts. The study recommends government financial support, community awareness campaigns, and stakeholder collaboration to strengthen these traditional institutions.

Keywords: Zauren Sulhu, Conflict Resolution, Community Forum, Indigenous Mechanisms, Bauchi State, Alternative Dispute Resolution

1. Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human existence, arising from differences in thoughts, attitudes, interests, and perceptions among individuals and groups (Emmanuel, 2018; Cohen, 2020). As social beings interact to achieve individual or collective goals, disagreements emerge that, if left unresolved, can escalate into violence and destabilize communities. In Nigerian society, conflict has been experienced for decades, manifesting through diverse factors including competition over scarce resources, usurpation of

authority, communication breakdowns, and value incompatibilities (Folarin, 2018; Albert, 2017).

The consequences of unmanaged conflict are severe: interruption of food access, restriction of agricultural land use, displacement of civilians, destruction of infrastructure, sexual violence, and breakdown of law and order (Rengasamy, 2020). Consequently, effective conflict resolution mechanisms are necessary conditions for community stability and development. While formal legal institutions exist, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms have proven effective in

addressing disputes within cultural contexts, preserving relationships, and promoting restorative rather than punitive justice (Rams & Botham, 2021; Muigua, 2019). In Northern Nigeria, particularly Bauchi State, the Zauren Sulhu Community Forum represents a significant indigenous conflict resolution institution. Established on September 6, 1999, alongside the Zauren Sulhu Shari'a Commission, this community-based forum operates at the ward level within Bauchi Metropolis to address conflicts that might otherwise escalate to formal judicial processes (Dahiru, 2002; Sulaiman, 2018). Unlike the Shari'a Commission's Zauren Sulhu, the Community Forum is an independent organization comprising concerned citizens, retired professionals, religious leaders, and community stakeholders who mediate disputes through dialogue and reconciliation.

Despite its apparent significance, empirical research on the Community Zauren Sulhu Forum remains limited. Previous studies, notably Sulaiman (2018), focused primarily on the Shari'a Commission's Zauren Sulhu, revealing gaps including lack of legal backing for criminal cases, inadequate reconciliation skills among volunteers, and absence of standardized documentation. However, the distinct Community Zauren Sulhu Forum operating independently at the community level has not received adequate scholarly attention. This study addresses this gap by investigating the roles, challenges, and potential solutions for strengthening the Community Zauren Sulhu Forum as a conflict resolution mechanism in Bauchi Metropolis.

This study aims to:

- i. Identify the roles played by the Community Zauren Sulhu Forum as a conflict resolution mechanism in Bauchi Metropolis
- ii. Examine the challenges faced by the Community Zauren Sulhu Forum in executing its mandate
- iii. Proffer solutions to enhance the effectiveness of the Community Zauren Sulhu Forum

2. Literature Review

2.1 conceptual Issues

Conflict and Resolution Mechanisms

Conflict has been conceptualized variously as "behavior intended to obstruct the achievement of some other individual's goals" (Nweke, 2022), "incompatibility of goals arising from opposing interests" (Oji & Olali, 2018), and "an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities" (Rahim, 2011). These definitions underscore that conflict emerges from perceived interference with needs, goals, or actions, and can exist at individual, group, or organizational levels.

Conflict resolution encompasses diverse approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through constructive problem-solving, distinct from mere management or transformation (Rams & Botham, 2021). Wallenstein (2002) defines conflict resolution as a situation where conflicting parties enter an agreement solving their central incompatibilities, accepting each other's continued existence, and ceasing violent action. This definition emphasizes the transformative potential of resolution processes.

Contemporary discourse distinguishes between Western Alternative Dispute Resolution (WADR) and African Traditional Dispute Resolution (ATDR). While WADR emphasizes non-violent grassroots activities through good governance, communication, and negotiation, ATDR relies on traditional leaders Chiefs, Emirs, or community elders—endowed with cultural authority to resolve disputes (Rams & Botham, 2016). These indigenous mechanisms often prioritize relationship preservation, community harmony, and restorative justice over adversarial adjudication.

Community Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Community conflict resolution mechanisms are structural processes addressing disputes arising between parties engaged in societal relationships (Wolde, 2018). These mechanisms include negotiation,

mediation, arbitration, and collaborative problem-solving. Mediation, particularly, involves an impartial third-party facilitating communication and encouraging reconciliation toward mutually satisfactory agreements (Mahr & Grimsley, 2022).

Community mediation offers distinct advantages: it builds strong relationships, maintains community morale, achieves collective goals, reduces stress among disputants, provides insight into different perspectives, and encourages unity (Herrity, 2023). These benefits align with the African philosophical emphasis on communal harmony and interdependence (ubuntu).

In Nigeria, community conflicts manifest through various forms: small claims, neighbor problems, domestic disputes, juvenile delinquencies, consumer-merchant disagreements, and property divisions. The consequences include restricted access to resources, market disruption, infrastructure destruction, and displacement (Essien, 2020). Addressing these conflicts requires mechanisms that are accessible, culturally appropriate, and relationship-preserving.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Conflict Mediation Theory

This study adopts Facilitative and Transformative Mediation Theories as its theoretical foundation. Facilitative mediation emphasizes mediator neutrality, with mediators facilitating negotiation between parties without imposing decisions (Katie, 2023). Transformative mediation, as articulated by Bush and Folger (1994), focuses on empowering disputants to recognize each other's needs and interests, aiming to transform parties and their relationships through the mediation process. These theories are particularly relevant to Zauren Sulhu Community Forum, which operates through volunteer mediators who encourage parties to reach voluntary resolutions while preserving community relationships. The mediator's role as a calm, reasonable, respectable, nonpartisan facilitator aligns with Fuller's (1970) emphasis on perfect knowledge of circumstances, ethical performance, and professional discretion.

2.3 Empirical Review

Empirical research across Africa demonstrates the continued relevance of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms. Rukuni and Machingambi (2020) examined traditional leadership in Zimbabwean rural communities, finding that traditional leaders play important roles despite occasional bias in politically-sensitive cases. Wolde (2020) investigated traditional conflict resolution in Ethiopia's Keffa society, identifying land disputes, marital conflicts, and religious tensions as major causes, with mechanisms including shingelena, tommo, and eqqo proving effective among older generations.

In Nigeria, Sulaiman (2018) studied Zauren Sulhu under Bauchi State's Shari'a Commission, finding that community branches lacked legal bases for criminal cases, staff lacked reconciliation skills, and cases were increasing rather than decreasing. Theresa and Oluwafemi (2019) examined traditional African conflict resolution patterns, concluding that techniques such as mediation, adjudication, and reconciliation offer greater prospects for peaceful coexistence than modern litigation. These studies collectively indicate that while indigenous mechanisms remain effective, they face challenges of modernization, legal recognition, resource constraints, and intergenerational value shifts. The current study extends this literature by focusing specifically on the independent Community Zauren Sulhu Forum, distinct from the Shari'a Commission structure.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design within an interpretivist philosophical paradigm. The interpretivist approach assumes that social reality is subjectively constructed, requiring methods sensitive to emerging social contexts (Creswell & Neumann, 2012). This paradigm was appropriate given the study's focus on understanding social phenomena community conflict resolution through participants' perspectives and experiences. Case study design was selected as a suitable scientific tool for obtaining in-depth

understanding of the mechanism of change within a specific context (Gummesson, 2010). The design allowed for exploration of the "how" and "why" questions regarding Zauren Sulhu Community Forum's functioning.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience and knowledge of the phenomenon under study. Heterogeneous sampling ensured representation across different wards and stakeholder categories. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), 6-12 participants are adequate for qualitative research saturation. The final sample comprised nine key informants: seven Ward/Community Informants (WKI 1-7) representing Dawaki, Hardo, Majidadi (2), Dan'Kade, and Makama wards, and two Community Stakeholders (SKI 1-2). Saturation was reached when informants began repeating information, indicating no need for additional participants.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2013) approach. The process involved: Familiarization with data through repeated reading, Initial code generation, Theme searching and reviewing, Theme definition and naming and Report production. This method allowed patterns and relationships to emerge from the data, leading to theory formation aligned with interpretivist principles.

4. Results and Discussion

Data analysis generated four main categories with associated themes, presented below with supporting evidence from participant interviews.

4.1 Roles of Zauren Sulhu Community Forum

Three primary roles emerged from the data: societal orientation, youth counseling, and grievance settlement.

4.1.1 Societal Orientation

Participants consistently identified societal orientation as a fundamental role. WKI1 explained: "*The forum contributes toward societal orientation in the community; it serves as a mechanism through which*

issues and conflicts in the community are attained and resolved." WKI2 elaborated: "*The forum addresses issues related to family disputes, neighbor incompatibility, juvenile delinquencies, marital issues... and advises parents about their children.*"

This finding aligns with transformative mediation theory, which emphasizes changing parties' orientations and relationships. The forum functions not merely as a dispute-settling body but as an institution shaping community values, promoting dialogue, patience (hakuri), mutual respect, and forgiveness orienting society away from violence toward peaceful coexistence.

SKI1 noted: "*One of the primary roles is teaching community members how to handle conflict peacefully... the forum's procedures model behaviors that community members learn to imitate.*" This observation supports Rengasamy's (2020) assertion that community conflict resolution builds strong relationships and encourages unity.

4.1.2 Youth Counseling

Youth counseling emerged as a distinctive function addressing juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and behavioral deviance. WKI1 stated: "*The forum plays a role in checkmating the activities of youth or irresponsible people... observing children abandoned by their parents and out-of-school children, calling their parents' attention.*"

WKI3 described the mediation-counseling nexus: "*Zauren Sulhu mediates conflicts such as peer misunderstandings, neighborhood clashes, gang-related issues... using each case as a teaching moment in counseling youths on peaceful behavior.*" WKI6 emphasized restorative approaches: "*Instead of punitive measures, the forum emphasizes restorative justice making youth understand consequences and guiding them to make amends.*"

This role addresses a critical gap identified in previous research. Sulaiman (2018) found increasing youth thuggery (sara-suka) and drug abuse in Bauchi State.

The Community Zauren Sulhu Forum's counseling function provides early intervention, potentially preventing escalation to criminal behavior requiring formal judicial processing.

4.1.3 Settling of Grievances

The forum's core mediation function involves settling diverse grievances. WKI3 described the process: *"The forum summons the two conflicting parties, gives them chance to express themselves, listens to their grievances, understands their bond of contention... makes them understand each other's argument and the implication of going beyond reconciliation."*

WKI4 highlighted impact on formal justice systems: *"The roles have contributed immensely to peaceful existence... and reduced the number of litigations in courts and police stations... sometimes courts and police refer cases back to the community zauren sulhu."* SKI2 confirmed: *"With the coming of community zauren sulhu, most cases are resolved within the forum with common understanding."*

This finding corroborates Theresa and Oluwafemi's (2019) conclusion that traditional resolution techniques offer greater prospects for peaceful coexistence than modern litigation. The forum's composition including retired judges, police, pastors, imams, and professionals enhances its credibility and effectiveness (WKI3).

4.2 Strategies Employed

Three strategies characterize forum operations: mediation, summons, and intervention.

Mediation involves neutral facilitation by respected elders whose *"ages, experience and moral standings enable them to calm emotions, guide discussions, and balance power"* (WKI1). This aligns with facilitative mediation theory's emphasis on mediator neutrality and party self-determination.

Summons constitutes formal invitation of disputing parties to the forum. WKI2 explained: *"The forum summons the two parties and plays a mediation role by allowing each party to present their point of*

discomfort." Intervention includes direct involvement in disputes and collaboration with formal authorities. WKI1 noted the forum assists authorities *"in apprehending or arresting a law offender who violates or breaks law where security agencies could not enter."*

4.3 Challenges Facing the Forum

Two major challenge categories emerged: lack of parental support and financial constraints.

4.3.1 Lack of Parental Support

Parental non-cooperation significantly undermines forum effectiveness. WKI1 reported: *"Some parents, friends and relatives of law offenders do not support action of community zauren sulhu especially if the judgment did not favor them... some people hide their children not to appear before the forum."*

WKI3 described personal threats resulting from this challenge: *"Sometimes youths threaten to kill our members because of their parents' support. I was threatened to be killed... they attacked my house."* SKI1 corroborated: *"Parents, especially wealthy and politically influential ones, directly attack forum members... I was sued severally in court."*

This challenge reflects broader tensions between traditional authority and modern individualism, as well as socioeconomic stratification affecting community justice. Wolde (2020) similarly found that younger generations in Ethiopia increasingly disregard traditional mechanisms due to modernity influences.

4.3.2 Financial Constraints

Resource limitations severely restrict operational capacity. WKI1 explained: *"Financial constraints sometimes hinder reconciliation... issues which involve debt between two parties while one party could not afford and the other fails to forgive."* Multiple participants cited needs for transportation, documentation, and operational funds that remain unmet.

WKI2 noted: *“Most activities requiring financial implications it is members who tax themselves out of pocket... sometimes people get tired and try to withdraw.”* CSKI2 summarized: *“The forum currently can only contribute their knowledge, time, skills and few resources... members sometimes get tired and turn off.”* This finding extends Sulaiman’s (2018) identification of resource gaps in Shari’a Commission Zauren Sulhu to the independent Community Forum, suggesting systemic underfunding of indigenous resolution mechanisms.

4.4 Proposed Solutions

Participants recommended three solution categories:

Awareness Creation: WKI1 suggested *“need for awareness to parents and community people to understand the contributions given by the community zauren sulhu.”* This addresses the parental support deficit through education and community engagement.

Government Support: Multiple participants emphasized governmental financial and institutional backing. WKI3 recommended *“government should create means of motivation both morally and financially.”* CSKI1 suggested *“government and Shari’a commission should support and strengthen the forum especially through financial support.”*

Community Donations: WKI1 noted that *“wealthy men and other interest groups... should continue to offer their support.”* CSKI2 emphasized *“wealthy men, community people, and interest groups should assist the forum both morally and financially.”*

These recommendations align with Mulekan’s (2020) finding that government strengthening of indigenous mechanisms enhances conflict resolution effectiveness.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the role of Zauren Sulhu Community Forum as a conflict resolution mechanism in Bauchi Metropolis, Bauchi State, Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that despite the existence of formal legal institutions, indigenous community forums

remain essential for managing interpersonal and communal conflicts. The Community Zauren Sulhu Forum performs three critical functions: societal orientation through value inculcation and behavioral modeling; youth counseling through moral guidance and restorative justice; and grievance settlement through culturally-grounded mediation.

The forum employs mediation, summons, and intervention strategies facilitated by community-respected elders and professionals. However, effectiveness is significantly constrained by lack of parental cooperation particularly among wealthy and politically connected families and severe financial limitations that force members to self-fund operations.

These findings contribute to conflict resolution literature by demonstrating how indigenous mechanisms complement formal justice systems, reducing court congestion and preserving community relationships. The study extends previous research by focusing on the independent Community Zauren Sulhu Forum, distinct from Shari’a Commission structures, and identifying specific operational challenges requiring intervention.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Government, civil society organizations, and formal law enforcement agencies should partner with Community Zauren Sulhu Forums to conduct community awareness campaigns. These initiatives should educate residents about forums’ positive impacts on socioeconomic wellbeing and conflict prevention.
- ii. Government should provide regular allowances and operational funding to forum members. This support would reduce member burnout, enable documentation, facilitate transportation for apprehending offenders, and allow financial interventions in debt-related disputes.
- iii. Annual or bi-annual training programs should be conducted for forum members, engaging

retired judges, lawyers, and security professionals to modernize conflict resolution skills while preserving cultural relevance.

- iv. Community leaders should develop specific strategies to engage parents, emphasizing that forum support represents partnership for community peace rather than adversarial judgment. Religious and traditional institutions

should endorse forum authority to counter parental resistance.

- v. Traditional and religious institutions should assist forums through moral endorsement and resource mobilization. Wealthy community members should establish sustainable funding mechanisms supporting long-term forum viability.

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