



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MEDIATION AS MECHANISM FOR RESOLVING FARMER HERDER CONFLICTS IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF TCHAOUROU (BENIN): HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT IN PROMOTING PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE?

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ABSTRACT

The management of agro-pastoral conflicts represents a major challenge for social cohesion and the sustainable management of natural resources in West Africa. In Tchaourou, northern Benin, mediation is increasingly used as an alternative mechanism for resolving disputes between farmers and herders. This article aims to analyze the effectiveness of this mechanism in the resolution of farmer-herder conflicts in the municipality of Tchaourou. The methodological approach combined mixed methods, including field surveys with 215 direct stakeholders and focus group discussions. The main data collected pertained to the frequency of recourse to mediation, satisfaction rates following conflict resolution, perceptions of fairness, and the sustainability of agreements. Content analysis and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected. The results show that 72% of the interviewed actors resorted to mediation, with a sustainability rate of 64%. Customary mechanisms remain the most frequently used and are perceived as the fairest. However, the system's effectiveness is limited by several constraints, including a lack of coordination and the politicization of certain resolutions. The study concludes that mediation represents a relevant lever for local peacebuilding, but its long-term impact requires stronger institutionalization and better integration with pastoral policies.

INTRODUCTION

In West Africa, the resurgence of conflicts between farmers and herders occurs within a context of increasing pressure on natural resources, climate variability, and rapid socio-economic transformations. These tensions, which were once sporadic, have become increasingly complex and territorially entrenched, representing a major challenge for human security and rural governance (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Sahel and West Africa Club, 2023). In Benin, particularly in agro-pastoral transition zones such as the municipality of Tchaourou, the expansion of cultivated areas, livestock mobility, and the weakness of formal conflict-resolution mechanisms contribute to the intensification of disputes (Kotchoni & Edja, 2023). Given the limitations of formal conflict-resolution mechanisms, mediation has emerged as a preferred alternative for preventing the escalation of violence and restoring dialogue among local actors (Lafia Joseph et al., 2026). Recent studies emphasize that hybrid mechanisms, combining customary institutions with state frameworks, can improve land conflict management, provided they are socially legitimate and institutionally supported

(Thomas Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2023). However, despite the proliferation of mediation initiatives in Benin, few empirical studies have systematically assessed their actual effectiveness at the municipal level. This article aims to analyze the contribution of mediation to the resolution of conflicts between farmers and herders in the municipality of Tchaourou. Taking the results into account is expected to support more peaceful pastoral governance and make a significant contribution to conflict reduction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflicts between farmers and herders in West Africa are generally analyzed through the lens of competition for access to natural resources (Moritz et al., 2020). From this perspective, the relative scarcity of agricultural land, pastures, and water points constitutes a major source of tension between socio-professional groups that depend on the same spaces. Population pressure, agricultural expansion, and increased pastoral mobility in response to climatic hazards (such as droughts) intensify competition for natural resources, thereby multiplying conflicts. The reduction of available land, land insecurity, and the non-enforcement of legal frameworks further exacerbate these tensions (Boné et al., 2024). Recent studies indicate that such conflicts do not result solely from

resource availability but also from weak institutional regulation mechanisms and the complexity of local land tenure systems (Thomas Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021). Moreover, some scholars adopt the hybrid governance approach to conflicts, which highlights the coexistence and interaction between formal institutions (administration, police, judiciary) and local customary structures (traditional chiefs, notables, community leaders). This institutional plurality characterizes the management of rural conflicts in many African countries and fosters the emergence of regulatory mechanisms combining social norms, customary practices, and administrative measures (Lafia Joseph, 2026). Recent studies emphasize that these hybrid systems can contribute to violence prevention and the regulation of local tensions, provided that effective coordination exists among the various actors involved in land governance and natural resource management (Lund, 2020; OECD – SWAC, 2023).

Within this framework, community mediation is a key lever for managing agro-pastoral tensions, particularly between herders and farmers (Adjamonsi *et al.*, 2024). It relies on the intervention of a socially legitimate third party responsible for facilitating dialogue between the parties and promoting the search for mutually acceptable compromises. Unlike formal judicial procedures, mediation prioritizes negotiation, the restoration of social relationships, and the preservation of community cohesion. According to several authors, including United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2022), the effectiveness of this mechanism largely depends on the mediator's legitimacy, the trust placed in them by local actors, and the existence of institutional frameworks capable of ensuring follow-up and the enforcement of agreements (UN-Habitat, 2022). This article aims to complement these theoretical perspectives by evaluating the mediation mechanism in the management of conflicts between farmers and herders in the municipality of Tchaourou in northern Benin.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area: This study was conducted in the municipality of Tchaourou, located in the central-northern part of Benin. It covers an area of 7,256 km² and lies between latitudes 8°40' and 9°45' North and longitudes 1°55' and 3°11' East (INSAE, 2016; MDGL, 2020). Tchaourou is part of an agro-pastoral zone where the water network is supplied by tributaries of the Ouémé and Okpara rivers, attracting both transhumant herders and farmers. The municipality's main economic activities are agriculture and livestock farming.

Sampling

The sample size was calculated using Schwartz's formula (1994) :

$$n = z^2 p(1-p) / d^2 \quad \text{où}$$

- **n** represents the desired sample size.
- **z** is determined based on the desired level of statistical confidence. For this study, the chosen confidence level was 95%, corresponding to a z-value of 1.96.
- **p** represents the prevalence or coverage rate to be targeted. For this study, p was set at 0.5.
- **d** denotes the desired precision. In this study, d = 10%.

- Based on these calculations and proportionally distributed across the districts, a total of 215 individuals were surveyed in the districts of Kika, Tchaourou, and Tchatchou. These districts were selected due to their higher prevalence of conflicts.

Data were primarily collected from key stakeholders involved in the conflicts and their resolution, including:

- Farmers who were either victims or perpetrators of conflicts with herders;
- Transhumant herders who had experienced disputes with farmers;
- Local authorities (village chiefs, district chiefs, and municipal service agents);
- Traditional mediators (notables, elders, religious leaders) or institutional mediators (members of local conflict prevention and resolution committees, gendarmerie officers);
- Representatives of NGOs or development projects involved in the management of agro-pastoral conflicts.

Table n°1. Distribution of Farmers and Herders by District

District	Villages	Farmers	Herders	Total
Kika	3	35	29	64
Tchaourou	3	35	30	65
Tchatchou	3	41	35	76
Total	9	111	94	215

Data Collection Methods and Main Data Collected: Data were collected in two phases. The first phase, conducted in June and July 2024, focused on focus group discussions with mixed groups of farmers and herders across various districts of the municipality (Alafiarou, Kika, Tchatchou) to gather accounts of lived experiences, compare perceptions, and document the mechanisms used in conflict resolution. The second phase, conducted between December 2024 and March 2025, involved direct observations during community mediation meetings and discussions concerning pastoral disputes, allowing the capture of social dynamics, power relations, and discursive practices mobilized during the resolution processes. Secondary data from previous research, institutional surveys, and regulatory texts governing mediation mechanisms and the management of pastoral conflicts in Benin complemented the field data. The main data collected focused on the frequency of recourse to mediation, conflict resolution rates through mediation, perceptions of fairness, and the sustainability of agreements reached.

Data Analysis Methods: The collected data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics using Excel 2013 and SPSS 21. Qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts and cross-tabulations of perceptions by stakeholder category.

RESULTS

Frequency of Recourse to Mediation in Conflict Resolution: The results indicate that mediation is frequently used in the municipality of Tchaourou as a means of resolving agro-pastoral conflicts. According to the survey findings, 72% of respondents reported having used mediation at least once to resolve a conflict related to pastoral access. Among herders, the proportion was higher (78%) compared to farmers (66%).

Within customary authorities, 85% had participated at least once in the resolution of conflicts between farmers and herders. These results highlight the strategic importance that actors as a whole place on negotiation in a context characterized by mobility and vulnerability.

Table n°2 . Stakeholders and Frequency of Recourse to Mediation

Stakeholder Category	Percentage
Farmers	66%
Herders	78%
Local authorities (acting as mediators)	85%

Source: Survey data analysis results

Types of Mediation According to the Actors Involved:

Several mechanisms coexist in the municipality of Tchaourou to manage conflicts between farmers and herders. These mechanisms can be categorized according to their nature: traditional, administrative, or institutional.

Amicable Settlement: The First Line of Informal Mediation Amicable settlement constitutes the initial response in addressing conflicts between farmers and herders. It is a form of direct mediation in which the parties in conflict seek a mutually agreed solution themselves, or with the support of a trusted third party. This approach generally relies on close personal relationships, customary considerations, and the desire to avoid sanctions or damage to social ties. In the villages visited, particularly Tékparou, Alafiarou, and Kika, it was observed that this form of settlement occurs as soon as a herder realizes that their animals have damaged a field, or when a farmer accuses a herder of allowing livestock to graze in a cultivated area. A dialogue is then initiated, often in an informal setting, to assess the damages and agree on compensation, which is typically monetary or in kind. According to a farmer from Tékparou :

Table n°3. Summary of Mediation Mechanisms and Frequency of Use

Mediation Body / Mechanism	Satisfaction Rate	Perception of Fairness	Impact on Sustainable Conflict Reduction
Amicable Settlement	73%	Moderate	Quick, based on mutual trust, informal
Local Transhumance Management Committees	68%	High	Participatory approach, multi-stakeholder consultation
Traditional Chief	65%	High	High social legitimacy, generally accepted decisions, rapid intervention, knowledge of local customs, low cost, respect for commitments
Notables / Elders	60%	High	Experienced mediators, supportive or arbitration role, knowledge of local customs, low cost, respect for commitments
Local Elected Officials	58%	Moderate	Proximity to the community, first line of alert
Territorial Agricultural Development Agencies (ATDA)	55%	Moderate	Expertise, factual assessment, support for mediation
Republican Police	43%	Low	Last-resort recourse, in case of violence or non-compliance with agreements

Source :Survey data analysis results

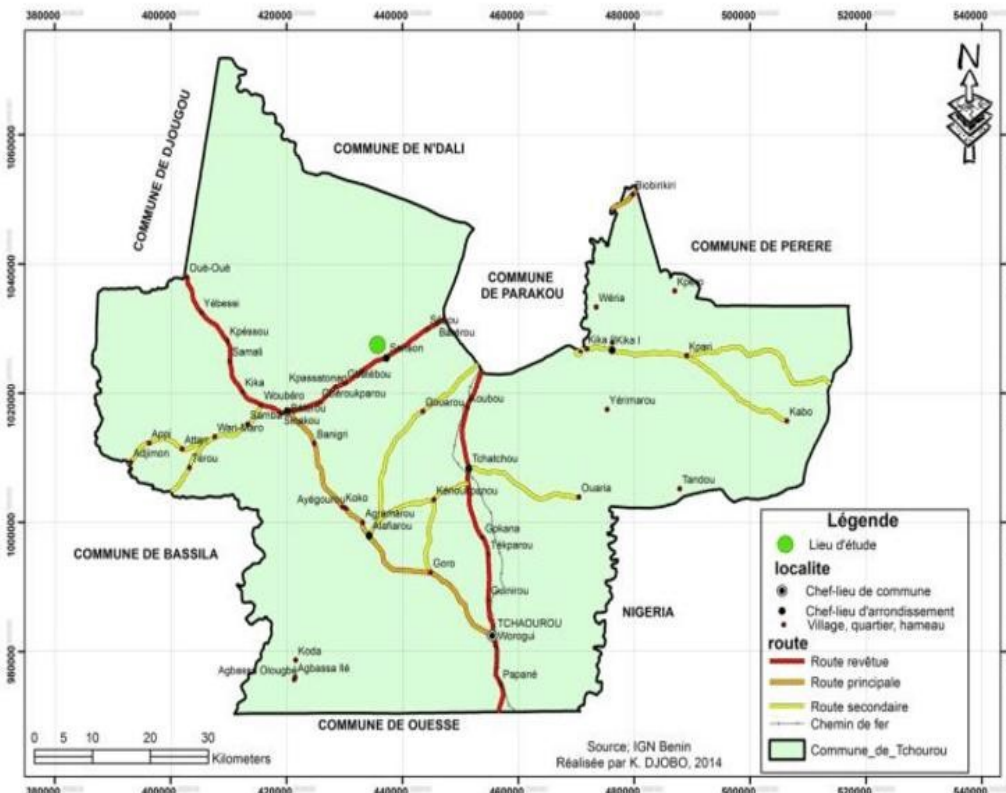


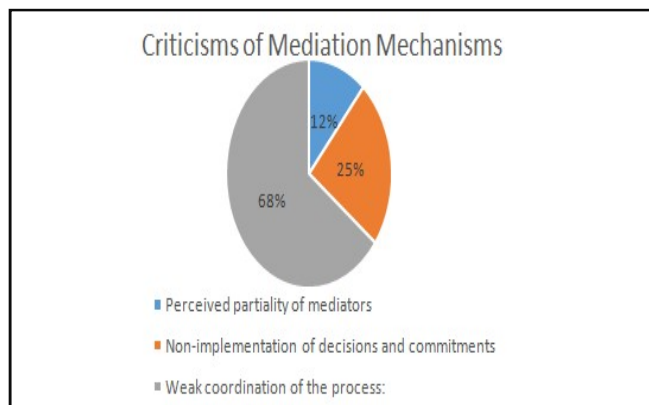
Figure 1. Geographic Location Map of the Municipality of Tchaourou

"When it comes to minor damage, we settle among ourselves. We avoid going to the chief, especially if it is not serious. We discuss and agree on an amount. This saves time." (Farmer, Tékparou, 45 years old).

Table n°4 : Observed Mediation Outcomes

Mediation Outcome	Percentage
Durable Amicable Resolution	64%
Mediation Failure	19%
Temporary or Fragile Agreement	17%

Source: Survey data analysis results



Source: Survey data analysis results

Figure 2. Criticisms of Mediation Mechanisms

This form of settlement is based on the principle of preserving social peace, but it shows its limitations when the damage is significant or when intercommunity relations are strained. According to 73% of respondents, this resolution method is considered quick, cost-effective, and helps maintain social relationships. A herder interviewed in Tchatchou stated. Selon 73 % des enquêtés, ce mode de résolution est jugé rapide, économique, et permet de préserver les relations sociales. Un éleveur interviewé à Tchatchou affirme :

«Last year, my herd damaged a maize field. I immediately offered to pay for the damages. The farmer agreed, and everything was settled there, without involving anyone else. »

However, this mechanism heavily relies on the goodwill of the parties and their ability to engage in dialogue with a spirit of compromise. When the damages are considered substantial or the relationship is already deteriorated, this mode of settlement becomes ineffective.

Recourse to Traditional Chiefs: Figures of Authority and Customary Arbitration: This category refers to customary chiefs, kings, and traditional authorities, who play a central role in mediating agro-pastoral conflicts. Their authority is based on customary power recognized by local administrative communities, and their legitimacy is reinforced by their knowledge of intercommunity social relations. These chiefs intervene either at the request of one of the parties or upon solicitation by notable community members. They organize listening sessions, conduct oral inquiries, and summon witnesses to the events. Their primary role is to restore peace and promote compromise. Settlements may result in compensation, public apologies, or formal commitments made

in the presence of witnesses. According to a herder in Alafiarou:

"The village chief does not condemn; he reconciles. His role is to bring us back to reason. That is why we respect him." (Herder, Alafiarou, 58 years old)

A village chief in Kika explained:

"We do not administer justice like in a court. We ensure that both parties regain peace. Here, it is not about punishment, but about repairing relationships and continuing to live together."

However, some traditional chiefs, although respected, may face accusations of partiality, particularly when one party is a local and the other is not. Despite these concerns, this mediation method is perceived as satisfactory by 65% of respondents, as it relies on a deep understanding of community dynamics.

Notables: Guardians of Social Peace and Community Intermediaries Notables are elderly, influential, or respected members of the community who are often called upon as mediators due to their wisdom, neutrality, and experience. They do not possess official decision-making power, but their opinions are generally considered and respected.

Their role is often complementary to that of traditional chiefs. They participate in mediations, intervene to calm tensions, or carry out preventive measures to avoid escalation.

"Even before going to the chief, one can speak to the elder who knows both families well. They know how to calm tempers." (Farmer, Kika, 38 years old)

Notables also assist in ensuring the implementation of agreements, particularly by monitoring compensation and compliance with commitments. A notable in Alafiarou explained:

"When a farmer refuses to talk to a herder, sometimes they come to me. I listen, speak to each party, and remind them of previous agreements between the families. This often helps to calm tempers."

However, their intervention remains informal, is not legally regulated, and their authority depends entirely on their social prestige.

Local Elected Officials: Administrative Intermediaries and Community Proximity Figures: Since the advent of decentralization, local elected officials, including village chiefs, neighborhood chiefs, and even district chiefs, play an important role in managing conflicts between farmers and herders in the municipality of Tchaourou. They are often the first to be informed of conflicts and act as local mediators. They summon the parties involved, draft official reports, and can propose solutions. Their administrative function reinforces their role, but their legitimacy also depends on their ability to engage in dialogue with different social groups, particularly the Fulani, who are often a minority. A herder residing in central Tchaourou explained:

"The neighborhood chief is like an older brother. We can easily approach him. He does not judge, but he tells us what needs to be done. If no agreement is reached, he writes a note so that we can go to the police."

Neighborhood chiefs play a crucial role in conflict prevention, but their influence is limited when land or financial stakes are significant. They sometimes serve as a link between traditional mechanisms and law enforcement or municipal technical services.

The Republican Police: Recourse Authorities in Case of Mediation Failure When amicable or traditional settlement attempts fail, or when conflicts escalate to violence, such as injuries, intentional destruction, or threats, security forces are called upon. The Republican Police then intervene both as law enforcers and as arbiters when facts need to be clarified. Approximately 57% of the farmers and herders interviewed believe that the police lack impartiality or favor the party with greater resources.

Their role is often perceived ambivalently, as their intervention enforces compliance with the law. However, it is seen as a departure from customary practices. Some herders fear these services due to a lack of knowledge of their rights or language barriers. Consequently, community satisfaction is often low. According to a herder in Kika:

"When it is serious, we call the Republican Police. But often, that is when the problem becomes more complicated." (Herder, Kika, 41 years old)

A farmer in Tchatchou stated:

"I filed a complaint for damages in my soybean field, but after two days, they released the herder without informing me. It seems that money speaks louder than the truth."

These complaints are further reinforced by the procedural costs and administrative delays deemed too burdensome at the level of the Republican Police. This discourages recourse to law enforcement, even among those who consider themselves in the right. For this reason, the police are generally called upon as a last resort, when necessary to ensure safety or enforce a decision.

Local Transhumance Management Committees: In localities where transhumance committees are operational, they are consulted for resolving pastoral-related conflicts. These bodies bring together representatives of farmers, herders, local authorities, and technical services. Their objective is to prevent conflicts through consultation, planning of livestock corridors, and monitoring of commitments. However, these committees often suffer from a lack of resources, irregular meetings, and weak local integration. Approximately 68% of respondents reported having resorted to the intervention of these committees in conflict resolution situations.

Territorial Agricultural Development Agencies (ATDA): Through their municipal units, the ATDAs provide technical support for resolving pastoral-related disputes, at the request of local chiefs or elected officials. Their intervention mainly aims

to technically assess damages, for example, estimating the value of a destroyed field or slaughtered livestock. They also advise the parties and assist in implementing mutually agreed solutions. Although their role is not judicial, their expertise is often recognized as valuable, particularly in ensuring a degree of objectivity in dispute management.

Perceived Outcomes of Mediations: Mediation often results in amicable agreements. Field results indicate that in 64% of recorded cases, conflicts were satisfactorily resolved following mediation. In 19% of cases, the process did not lead to a lasting agreement, and disputes continued despite mediation. More often than not, these conflicts eventually reached formal justice channels following intervention by the Republican Police. In 17% of cases, disputes resumed after a temporary pause. In most of these instances, a new mediation, sometimes with a different mediation body, allowed the conflict to be resolved.

Criticisms of Mediation Mechanisms: Despite the clear preference among respondents for traditional authorities and conciliatory solutions, some criticisms were expressed. These include the perceived partiality of certain mediators (12% of respondents), non-implementation of decisions or commitments after resolution (25%), and weak coordination between mediation bodies (68%). A mediation mechanism is considered partial when the actors involved are suspected of corruption or when they belong to the same socio-ethnic, political, or even religious group as one of the parties. Additionally, community mediators often lack the means to enforce compliance with commitments or to monitor the implementation of decisions. Finally, weak coordination leads other local bodies to intervene in a conflict that has already been addressed. For example, a dispute managed by a notable may be taken to the police station or referred to the king several months later. This situation could be avoided if mechanisms for synergy and coordination were established.

DISCUSSION

Mediation, understood here as a voluntary, peaceful, and non-coercive process, proves to be both a tool for managing immediate tensions and a lever for the long-term prevention of violence. In rural settings, the predominance of amicable settlements and the central role of customary institutions (traditional chiefs, notables, neighborhood leaders) confirm the importance of social norms in conflict management. These endogenous mechanisms, which prioritize cohesion and consensus, are often preferred over formal judicial procedures (Lund, 2020). In Tchaourou, 85% of disputes are thus handled at the community level. These observations are consistent with findings by many other authors. Their work shows that in West Africa, community-based mechanisms remain the primary recourse in managing disputes related to natural resources, due to their proximity to local populations and their ability to promote dialogue and restore social relations. They emphasize dialogue, oral agreements, and traditional mediation (IOP, 2025). Traditional chiefs appear as central figures in the mediation system. They embody a form of local justice based on listening, negotiation, and the restoration of social ties rather than formal sanctions. Recent studies, notably by International Crisis Group (2023) and OECD-SWAC (2023), confirm the

essential role of traditional authorities in preventing and managing conflicts related to land use and pastoral resources. However, as illustrated by the situation in Tchaourou, these authorities face new challenges linked to the increasing complexity of land conflicts, demographic pressure, and the growing mobility of transhumant herders.

Recourse to the Republican Police or to courts generally constitutes a later stage in conflict management, when tensions escalate or when economic losses become significant. Findings from Tchaourou confirm that rural populations primarily rely on local mediation mechanisms before turning to formal judicial institutions, in line with observations by UN-Habitat (2022) on land governance and the prevention of rural conflicts. In this context, the Consultative Commission for the Management of Agropastoral Conflicts emerges as an institutional dialogue platform that helps bridge community and administrative approaches. Its inclusive nature, incorporating representatives from various stakeholders, aligns with the recommendations of Adjamonsi *et al.* (2024) regarding participatory governance of natural resources and the prevention of rural conflicts. Nevertheless, its effectiveness largely depends on the regularity of its operations, the training of its members, and the level of trust it enjoys among local communities. The involvement of agricultural and pastoral extension officers also constitutes an important component of the mediation framework. Their technical role in assessing crop damage, delineating land boundaries, and raising awareness among stakeholders brings a more objective dimension to discussions. Recent studies, particularly by FAO (2021), show that combining technical expertise with social mediation enhances the acceptance of decisions and helps reduce tensions between farmers and herders. However, as indicated by the survey conducted in Tchaourou, their action is sometimes limited by a lack of logistical resources and institutional coordination. These findings are consistent with recent analyses emphasizing that the effectiveness of local mediation mechanisms largely depends on their credibility, impartiality, and ability to include all relevant social groups (OECD-SWAC, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2022). In the case of Tchaourou, this notably requires strengthening the capacities of community mediators, improving the transparency of settlement procedures, and ensuring better institutional recognition of local mediation structures.

Finally, mediation cannot be considered a single solution to agropastoral conflicts. Recent research highlights the need to complement these mechanisms with public policies aimed at securing land tenure, planning land use, and promoting sustainable rural development (ECOWAS, 2024). In this regard, the strong mobilization of customary authorities observed in Tchaourou (85%) confirms their central role in local conflict governance and underscores the importance of strengthening complementarity between traditional institutions and state structures.

CONCLUSION

Mediation, in its various forms, constitutes a fundamental lever for fostering peaceful relations between agricultural and pastoral communities. It is characterized by its flexibility, its ability to adapt to local contexts, and its deep roots in community traditions. Through the involvement of customary chiefs or local notables, community actors are able to create

spaces for negotiation, prevent the escalation of tensions, and restore dialogue between groups that are often in opposition.

However, mediation also presents significant limitations. Its effectiveness largely depends on the perceived legitimacy of mediators, their neutrality, access to resources to conduct conciliations, and the political will to harmonize customary approaches with formal legal systems. It is clear that while traditional mechanisms are fast, socially accepted, and culturally relevant, they sometimes lack coercive power and do not always guarantee equitable redress. Conversely, formal institutions, although legally legitimate, often remain disconnected from local realities, slow in their processes, and financially or geographically inaccessible to rural populations.

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