

Learning Lessons from Traditional Leaders in Ghana



Don Ray with Ghanaian President John Kufuor. (Photo courtesy of Don Ray)

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Don Ray's desire to gain insight into his home country of Canada took him to an unexpected place — Africa.

While in university, Ray was faced with the choice of studying either Canadian or African politics. "I thought that I would better understand my country by understanding what was happening in other parts of the world and then bringing lessons back from there to Canada."

Now a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary, Ray is still learning lessons in Africa that he hopes to share with the North.

The role of traditional leaders

Ray is also the International Coordinator of the [Traditional Authority Applied Research Network \(TAARN\)](#), an international group that brings together researchers, government and non-governmental policymakers, and traditional leaders in order to foster discussion on major policy questions such as land tenure, gender issues, and health.

Along with his Southern partners, and with the support of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ray has been examining the role of traditional leaders in Ghana in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Political communities that pre-date colonialism are a source of identity, unity, and pride for many Africans. People belonging to such communities may share customs, languages, or a common history.

Filling the role of governors of their communities since colonial times with authority over all aspects of life, traditional leaders have seen their political power fade with the development of democratic governments.

While many countries in Africa still retain a system of traditional leadership and some incorporate traditional leaders into democratic forms of government, in several others — mostly those who have only recently gained independence — the relationship between traditional leaders and government remains strained or, in some cases, outrightly adversarial.

This is not the case in Ghana, explains Christiane Owusu-Sarpong, a member of TAARN's Ghana team.

“In a country such as Ghana, where the central government has realized that it cannot do without traditional leaders at the level of local government; where traditional leaders have taken it upon themselves to modernize the institution of chieftaincy to meet the needs of their people in today's world; and where the so-called ‘modernity’ has hit hard with new social, economic, and health problems, chiefs and queen mothers are regaining a lot of authority as partners in development.”

The struggle against HIV/AIDS

In 2002, Ray and his colleagues first observed King Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, leader of Ghana's Asante people, speaking out about HIV/AIDS.

“Since that time we've seen that it has become much more common for chiefs in many parts of Ghana to become involved in the struggle against HIV/AIDS, and that really is a sea change,” observes Ray.

Much like celebrities who use their fame to convey messages and ideals (notably Angelina Jolie and U2's Bono), chiefs and queen mothers have the respect and authority within their communities to influence people's views and practices on difficult issues such as AIDS.

“When you are asking people to change their most personal behaviours, you're asking an awful lot,” admits Ray. Therefore, to be effective, the message must come from a trusted source. “People are well within their rights to question those addressing them on the issue of their sexuality.”

At their most involved, traditional leaders can be seen acting with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and the government to build the capacity of their local communities to respond to the epidemic. (See box for more on [traditional leaders' involvement in the fight against AIDS](#).)

Public education plays a big role, but there is also the issue of helping local communities deal with the consequences of AIDS — how to live with HIV, develop anti-stigmatization programs, and find strategies to feed, clothe, and educate AIDS orphans — lessons many other parts of the world may increasingly face in coming decades.

The value of a local approach

“In Canada and the United States we tend to be rather complacent towards AIDS and think that it's never going to greatly affect us, when in fact it's growing,” warns Ray. “It's already affecting Asia from Kabul to Colombo, from Nanking to Beijing, it's affecting Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, and it's affecting a number of different populations within North America.”

“It's not a case of us going to countries in Africa and saying ‘if you want to develop this is what you have to do,’” he says, adding that it is important to learn from local people the best approaches to take. What cannot be dismissed when dealing with a problem as widespread as AIDS, says Ray,

is people's cultures. "It's important to try and understand what matters to people, to respect people, wherever they are."

As the first phase of the project winds down, Ray and his colleagues are looking to continue their work in Ghana as well as expanding their research in Botswana and South Africa, where they have already seen similar, though less pronounced, involvement among traditional leaders.

Tim Quinlan, the National Coordinator for the South African component of TAARN, is optimistic that the Ghana research can influence change in his nation, where he says the relationship between traditional leaders and the government is somewhat strained.

"I hope that the demonstration of the significance of chiefs in Ghana, that the sky doesn't fall in on a government that does use traditional authorities will help influence change," says Quinlan. For the moment, TAARN is focusing its attention on writing up the final report for phase one of the project, parts of which will be included in an upcoming book tentatively titled *African Chiefs in the age of Gender, AIDS, and Development*.

TAARN has categorized traditional leaders' activities against HIV/AIDS into three levels of involvement:

- **Gatekeeping:** The traditional leader opens the door to outside advocates, lending them legitimacy or credibility in the community.
- **Social marketing:** The traditional leader develops a level of expertise and speaks out on the issue of HIV/AIDS him or herself. This delivers an even stronger message than gatekeeping, since it more closely associates the traditional leader in the struggle against the disease.
- **Local capacity building:** Traditional leaders work with government, NGOs, etc., to develop strategies, to not only prevent the spread of the disease, but learn how to live with it and its consequences.

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