

Customary Authority and Informal Institutions: Qualitative Methods Symposium and Grant Submission

The Center for Governance and Markets (CGM) at the University of Pittsburgh invites proposals for small grants of up to \$5,000 as part of a research project on the evolution of customary governance. This initiative explores how customary and informal institutions are changing and explores the extent to which communities are leveraging tradition-based authority to address critical challenges of governance, security, and development. Successful applicants will receive funding to support original data collection and will participate in a mandatory Workshop on Qualitative Methods from November 6-7, 2025, designed to equip researchers with the methodological tools necessary for conducting fieldwork on customary and informal governance.

The project is led by Professor Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili (University of Pittsburgh).

The Crisis of Governance and the Resurgence of Customary Authority

We are witnessing a global crisis of trust in public organizations that has sparked a renaissance of new organizational forms, filling critical gaps in governance. This call for small grants and methodological training responds to the urgent need to understand these emerging institutional arrangements. Across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Central Eurasia, there is a puzzling yet remarkable resurgence in the role of customary governance. Rather than withering away as modernization theory predicted, these institutions are being reinvented by a new generation of public entrepreneurs who seek to solve problems when others cannot or will not.

This phenomenon challenges Max Weber's famous typology that places rational-legal authority of the state as inherently more effective than traditional forms of social organization. Recent evidence suggests that self-organized customary authority may actually be more predictable and reliable than state-backed alternatives in many contexts. These institutions are not merely vestiges of the past, but dynamic forms of social organization that should be studied alongside other innovative governance structures such as cryptocurrencies, blockchain technologies, smart cities, independent cities, and entrepreneurial communities.

The past decade has seen a remarkable shift in scholarly understanding of customary authority. Social scientists have renewed their appreciation for these institutions, finding that customary leaders play important roles in providing collective goods, facilitating democracy, and protecting citizens from predatory states and insurgents. However, there are no organizational panaceas. While customary governance may promote the common good, it may also undermine it under certain conditions. What we need is a deeper understanding of when and why these institutions succeed or fail.



Research Priorities and Proposal Types

This project seeks to open the black box of custom to understand the conditions under which these social organizations are reinventing themselves and why. We are particularly interested in proposals that examine how communities are fomenting new alternatives to state governance based on an ethos of entrepreneurialism and innovation that is derived in tradition but often deviates from it.

Target Audience: We welcome scholars from all backgrounds in the social sciences but are especially seeking to engage scholars with strong quantitative backgrounds who have never conducted qualitative methods or who are looking to incorporate qualitative aspects into their existing research programs. This initiative is designed to bridge the methodological divide and equip quantitatively-trained researchers with the tools necessary to understand the institutional mechanisms that drive the effectiveness of customary and informal organizations.

We invite proposals that contribute to our theoretical and empirical understanding of customary and informal organizations through several approaches:

- **Theoretical frameworks** that link customary authority to political and economic outcomes, particularly those that emphasize the internal organization of customary authority (such as centralization versus decentralization, egalitarian versus hierarchical structures) and the relationship between customary institutions and the state
- **Empirical case studies** that examine specific customary and informal organizational structures and their effectiveness in delivering public goods, maintaining security, or promoting economic development
- **Mixed-methods approaches** that can illustrate causal mechanisms and explain why customary authority remains important and effective in contemporary settings
- **Comparative analyses** that examine variation in customary governance across different contexts, cultures, or time periods
- **Policy-oriented research** that explores how insights from customary governance can inform broader questions of institutional design and public policy

Proposals should address questions such as: How do these institutions operate in contemporary settings? Under what conditions do they succeed or fail in delivering public goods? What role does internal structure play in their effectiveness? How does the relationship with the state affect their autonomy and legitimacy? How are public entrepreneurs reinventing customary and informal organizations to promote prosperity? We are particularly interested in research that challenges conventional assumptions about the superiority of rational-legal authority and places customary and informal organizations within the broader landscape of polycentric and entrepreneurial governance.

Mandatory Workshop on Qualitative Methods

Important: Attendance at the Workshop on Qualitative Methods is a mandatory precondition for grant eligibility. The workshop will be held November 6-7, 2025, at the University of Pittsburgh, and will provide intensive training on qualitative research methods and institutional analysis essential for conducting fieldwork on customary and informal governance. This training is designed to equip quantitative social scientists with the qualitative field methods necessary to undertake institutional analysis of customary governance in communities around the world. Researchers must provide evidence of IRB (Institutional Review Board) training from their home institutions before attending the workshop. Only participants who complete the workshop will be eligible to submit grant proposals for funding consideration. This requirement ensures that all funded researchers have the methodological tools necessary to conduct rigorous field research on customary authority.

Grant Details and Application Process

Grants of up to \$5,000 will be awarded to support original data collection on topics related to customary authority, informal governance, and public entrepreneurship. No indirect costs are permitted under this grant opportunity. These grants are specifically designed to enable researchers to collect original data in relevant communities, conducting the kind of in-depth fieldwork that can reveal the causal mechanisms behind the effectiveness of customary governance. All applications must include a research abstract of no more than 300 words, a detailed project description including research questions, methods, and relevance to the Traditional Authority Project (maximum 2 pages), a proposed itemized budget outlining how the funds will be used, brief CVs of project leaders, and evidence of IRB training completion from the applicant's home institution.

Timeline and Deadlines

The project timeline is structured to ensure that researchers receive proper methodological training before conducting fieldwork. Proposal submissions are due **September 29, 2025**. The workshop on qualitative methods will take place **November 6-7, 2025**. Projects should be completed by **May 15, 2026**, with progress reports due halfway through the project period and final papers due **May 15, 2026**.

Eligibility and Requirements

Applicants must currently be faculty (tenured, tenure-track, or adjunct) at an accredited higher education institution, Ph.D. students at an accredited higher education institution, postdoctoral researchers or fellows at academic or policy institutions, or affiliated researchers at think tanks, NGOs, or international organizations. We accept applications from outside the United States, though we cannot distribute funds to individuals or organizations in countries subject to OFAC sanctions. Grant funds may be used for research and travel expenses, access to polling and datasets, interviews and data collection, compensation for interview subjects, support for research assistants, journal submission fees, and publication fees. Funds cannot be used for retroactive expenses, computer hardware, living expenses, or salary supplementation. Grant applications will be evaluated for relevance and adherence to methodological rigor by scholars in the relevant field of study. Applications approved by these scholars will be selected for funding by CGM. All grant recipients must sign a grant agreement as a condition of receiving funds and must inform CGM of any necessary budget changes after disbursement.

This project is supported with funding from Templeton World Charity Foundation.

Submit your full proposal via: <https://forms.monday.com/forms/fd759a385df71b89b871423d77dbfcba?r=use1>.