

## Art, culture, and shared traditions in constructing social cohesion

By: Sara Barker



Women bearing the staff of authority during the cultural event of 48 *Cantones* in Totonicapán (Photo By: Peacebuilding Project).

As a part of the USAID-funded Peacebuilding Project (*Proyecto Tejiendo Paz*), I recently attended a cultural activity organized by 48 *Cantones*, a highly-respected group of indigenous authorities in Totonicapán, Guatemala. 48 *Cantones* is a multi-generational assembly who are charged with important community duties such as protecting natural resources, resolving local disputes, and preserving the historical memory of the town.

The event was part of a training process led by *Tejiendo Paz*'s local partner, the Center for Research and Projects for Development and Peace (CEIDPAZ). Our partnership with CEIDPAZ builds upon *Tejiendo Paz*'s goals of conflict mitigation and peacebuilding in the Western Highlands of Guatemala.

The activity included the presentation of historic relics to 48 *Cantones* for safeguarding, including a 200-year-old silver staff representing integrity, authority, and responsibility. The event also included the presentation of the *son* of 48 *Cantones* (a *son* is a piece of traditional music that is played on a marimba). Being present to observe 48 *Cantones*' depth of respect and connection to their Mayan ancestors was incredibly moving. Shared cultural traditions such as this ceremony serve to unite and harmonize communities. Indigenous authorities like 48 *Cantones* are key partners in retaining those traditions. By leveraging their ancestral knowledge and deploying effective dialogue, mediation, and negotiation skills, they are also key partners in peacebuilding.



Giovani Rosales, President of 48 *Cantones*, holds a 200-year-old silver staff presented to group. "With our staff, we feel the strength of our ancestors... when I hold the staff and speak, I feel supported by past generations." (Photo By: Peacebuilding Project).