

Semantics, sustainability and CBNRM

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CBNRM practitioners are a funny lot. We talk big, we use all the right clichés, but when you look at what we really say, it is so full of contradictions that outsiders can hardly be blamed for misunderstanding us and our motives.

Take Resource Africa, for example, a prominent newsletter for CBNRM practitioners in southern Africa. Volume 1, issue 1, describes CBNRM as “an acknowledgement of the need to re-integrate sociological elements and community structures into our methods for managing the environment”. What it appears to suggest is that CBNRM is an improved approach to environmental management. In Volume 1, Issue 2, however, CBNRM is talked about in terms of transforming rural economies, and is described as a “development intervention”.

Is it environment, or is it development? Is the difference semantic, or is it of fundamental importance to the success of CBNRM in the region? Unclear ideas, described in unclear jargon, have resulted in a great number of unclear perceptions as to what CBNRM is really all about.

These contradictions would not be so bad if their only negative effect was to promote confusion amongst outsiders. The real problem, however, is that they are promoting confusion amongst *insiders*. I would argue that taking an environmental or a developmental perspective on CBNRM results in very fundamental differences in the way we approach it.

SAFIRE (Southern Alliance For Indigenous Resources) is a Zimbabwean NGO involved in CBNRM promotion. For simplicity's sake, we have adopted an unashamedly developmental perspective on CBNRM. This is not because we believe environment to be unimportant (half our staff are from environmental backgrounds), but because we believe development, particularly in rural Africa, is so heavily dependent upon environmental sustainability that the notion of environmental management is fully encapsulated within the term development. We don't use the absurdly neutered term “sustainable development” either, for the same reason.

We see CBNRM as a development strategy that is particularly appropriate to marginal areas. Natural resources are the engine for that development, but the end objective is, unambiguously, sustainable economic growth in rural areas.

This fits with the growing trend to describe CBNRM as development. However, CBNRM practitioners repeatedly employ methods that betray their environmental origins. It is not enough to speak the language of development. If we are to be taken seriously, and if we are to be effective, we need to practice CBNRM as development.

The assumptions behind describing CBNRM as a development strategy are generally stated as follows. In marginal areas, where land use options are limited, rural peasants might begin managing natural resources as an alternative to other activities. In addition to being more ecologically sustainable, this might prove, in the long run, to be more financially viable than the alternatives. By increasing incomes at the household level, it might then promote economic growth in these marginal areas. It is a lot of assumptions, and the way we currently promote CBNRM doesn't convey the impression that we have explored any of them very seriously.

Look at it from the perspective of your average rural Zimbabwean peasant. She is facing tough times. Available land is diminishing as the human population continues to expand. The soils are poor, annual rainfall is low, and apparently getting lower. Each year her maize yields seem to be in steady decline, as the lack of tree cover and nutrient recycling take their toll on the soil. Yet year in, year out, she chooses to plant maize again.

Try telling her that CBNRM might be a better option, and you would probably get short shrift. Why? Because there has been a huge investment over the years in developing the market for maize, and it can be readily sold to a nearby depot of the national maize marketing authority. Several financing institutions offer loans at low interest rates to cover capital costs. The local agricultural extension officer has been well trained in promoting maize production, and can offer advice on the right chemical treatments for all the pests found locally, and on the appropriate hybrid seeds for these conditions. She knows she can borrow money against her crop, and she knows she can sell it afterwards. Maize is the obvious choice.

The environmentally-minded CBNRM practitioner might suppose that the declining yields are enough to convince her of the superior ecological sustainability of CBNRM. To the hardened development professional, however, it is obvious that no amount of institutional capacity-building, strengthened tenurial rights or environmental awareness raising is going to change the fundamental precepts on which she made her decision.

So what can we learn from this?

Most obviously, we can see that the investment in building marketing mechanisms and in increasing access to capital has paid off for those who want to see more maize produced. It is reasonable to assume that if the same investment was made for marketing natural resource-based products, and if finance was available to support natural resource-based enterprises, natural resource management might become a realistic option for farmers. Currently, however, to people who don't have the resources to experiment in a field in which the returns are so uncertain, it is hardly an attractive alternative.

SAFIRE's conclusion has been that CBNRM will only be effective as a development strategy if we treat it that way. This means taking on board some of the many lessons that development practitioners have learned over the years. In this light, we believe that rural economic development will depend on, amongst others:

- i) *Optimising the available resource base.* Where that is obviously agricultural, so be it. Where, as in many parts of southern Africa, agricultural opportunities are limited by poor agro-ecological conditions, then other resources, be they human or natural, may be more appropriate. It also means building on the existing knowledge and expertise available within a community.

- ii) *Capital investment.* Nothing comes for free, and whatever the chosen resource base, it will need investment if it is to produce to its potential. Furthermore, if that investment is to be sustainable, it should not be subsidised. This means, where necessary, loans, not grants.
- iii) *Market development.* If there is no market for the product of this resource use, there will be no income generated. In many cases, the markets are distant or non-existent. Here, the case for subsidising the costs of market development is strong.
- iv) *Successfully harnessing the productive energy of a community.* People will not expend energy on ideas in which they do not believe. Hence the need for participation in the decision-making processes, so that people are committed to bringing the ideas to fruition.
- v) *Sustainability.* If the resources to be used are not renewable (and renewed!), or if the inputs (human and capital) required for their exploitation are not continuously available, success will be transitory.

All of these issues have been addressed in some way by different CBNRM projects, but we have yet to see them put together in a cohesive manner. This is what SAFIRE is now attempting through its pilot MITI project in five districts in eastern Zimbabwe. MITI (“Managing our Indigenous Tree Inheritance”) places particular emphasis on market development and fiscal incentives, through facilitated access to finance, for natural-resource based investment by rural communities. MITI also incorporates many mechanisms geared towards promoting ecological sustainability. It would be foolish indeed to commercialise natural resources for income generation without supporting measures to safeguard the supplies of those resources!

Whether it will work we have yet to see. At this stage we are happy enough just to have a reasonable sight of the goalposts.

We run many risks in oversimplifying, and indeed polarising, our understanding of CBNRM. However, since the alternative appears to be to describe it in that entirely meaningless phrase “sustainable development”, and then continue practising it as either an environmental or a developmental strategy, we prefer to be open about our intentions.

To us, the idea of CBNRM as environmental management is *exclusive*. It excludes those people who cannot afford to take decisions based on purely environmental criteria. The idea of CBNRM as development is *inclusive*. It includes everyone who is concerned with adapting and improving their own circumstances. It also includes the notion of environmental sustainability, where such an improvement will depend on that sustainability. Semantic differences? We think not.

As CBNRM practitioners, we all need to stop confusing ourselves and others with jargon-filled justifications for CBNRM that serve only to further mystify the term. If we are serious about CBNRM as a development strategy, we need not only to talk about it in that way, but to practice it in that way. Then, maybe, we will be more clearly understood by those at the policy level, those within the private sector, and those at the grassroots, on whose support we will inevitably depend to succeed.