

People in conservation and development in Namibia and Argentina: participation, institutions and questions of transfer

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Premise

I am undertaking a study which examines issues of popular involvement in processes and institutions which govern natural resource management, as they occur in and relate to specific rural populations in Namibia and Northwest Argentina. In Namibia, community based natural resource management both as discourse and practice is well established; in Northwest Argentina, it is a very new, as yet virtually untried set of ideas. From this observation, my most central research question can be derived: are specific developments in the Namibian context appropriate, relevant and potentially applicable in Northwest Argentina?

Background

My PhD thesis is in many ways an extension of research started through my MSc dissertation. I examined how some of the problems and contradictions connected with participatory approaches to development surfaced in the empirical context of Zimbabwe's Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (Campfire). My literature review was engaged to a considerable degree with some of the increasingly hostile criticism participation has come in for:

- Relations of power, which in some contexts had demonstrably shaped the public consensus generated by PRA, so as to favour certain powerful groups within a community (Mosse, 2001). In part this was a consequence of the inability of PRA methods to reveal the influences of power relations upon the knowledge they generated (Ibid.).
- The tendency of participatory methods to view the problems of marginalised groups as knowledge-based, thereby failing to come to terms with much graver difficulties such as those arising from inequitable access to resources. These were not solved by merely carrying out ranking exercises to establish the groups' needs (Brown, 1999).
- The claims of ethnocentrism, which bring into question how universally appropriate participatory approaches are, if they depend upon beliefs and assumptions which could not be shown to have a validity transcendent of the specific empirical context in which they had arisen (Newsham, 2002).
- Unacknowledged processes of translation, connected to the need to render intelligible the acts of people in one context to those in an entirely different one, and the risks of collapsing the distinction between what is being translated and the translation itself (ibid).

These are weighty and complex considerations, which I will have the opportunity to explore through employing participatory methods in two different empirical contexts (more on this later).

The area in which I chose to look at participation, community based natural resource management, was very much concerned with underlying debates about ways to achieve conservation objectives. In Zimbabwe, Campfire had arisen in reaction to preservationist, 'fortress' attitudes towards conservation. One of the Programme's underlying principles is that of sustainable utilisation of resources, as opposed to military-style attempts to enforce an absolute ban on their use (Duffy, 2000). A platform of sustainable utilisation has in great measure been predicated on: a re-evaluation of the capability of indigenous natural resource users (Pimbert & Pretty, 1995); greater awareness of the unrealistic aims of Western notions of conservation (Adams & McShane, 1992); and the disruption and criminalisation of centuries-old, sustainable livelihoods (Murombedzi, 1992). In many ways, the Campfire Programme, along with similar projects across Namibia is a flag bearer for the 'counter narrative' of community conservation, which has come to discredit the 'narrative' of fortress conservation and undermine its international hegemony (Adams & Hulme, 2001).

Another notion intrinsic to sustainable utilisation is to see natural resources in terms of an economically viable use of land. Sufficient incentive for those living with the costs of conservation has to be created to make it worth their while to continue to do so (Murphree, 1997a). The biggest incentive that can be given to a community is to devolve to it *de facto* control and ownership of resources (ibid.). Attempts, with varying levels of success, to deliver such complete devolution, have often imposed frustrating restrictions on the scope of community based conservation programmes in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana (Jones & Murphree, 2001, Rozemeijer & van der Jagt, 1999). It is against a background of contested access and ownership rights, the politicisation of the debate over how best to distribute revenues generated, and the roles of different stakeholders in the processes which govern the outcome of ostensibly community based conservation projects, that issues of participation become extremely pertinent.

Why Namibia and Argentina?

Originally, I had intended to work in Zimbabwe and Argentina, but the events of the last year particularly in Zimbabwe have rendered such an idea untenable. In terms of my study, though, Namibia is by no means a poor second choice. In Namibia, the last couple of decades have played host to considerable and ever-increasing activities that try to involve communities in initiatives which link – and posit as complementary or even mutually interdependent – development and conservation goals, through the concept of sustainable utilisation. In particular, the establishment of conservancies (legally designated areas in which local communities living on communal lands are allocated ownership and management rights over wildlife resources) have met with international acclaim by development and conservation agencies and movements alike. Across the country there is an impressive amount and variety of community based natural resource management projects. In the tourism sector alone, a couple of years ago, Roe, Grieg-Gran

and Schalken (2001) listed 34 tourism initiatives in which Namibian communities were involved; many more initiatives have since been started (Roe, pers. comm.). Moreover, conservancy legislation is to a significant degree influenced by principles derived from common property resource management theory, and the success of conservancy-based initiatives is implicitly and explicitly held by many commentators to be predicated in large measure on the extent to which they adopt such principles (for examples, see Jones, 2000, or Murphree, 1997a).

In Argentina, notions of sustainable utilisation do not appear to have taken root on nearly the same scale as in Namibia. There is no government-led community based natural resource management programme. There is not the same interest among the international donor and conservation communities, and hence not the same level of funding available. Most importantly, as a consequence, there is very little in the way of actual projects that involve communities in the sustainable use of the natural resources to which they have access. It is, therefore, an intriguing, perhaps vital place in which to raise questions and kick-start debate concerning communities, institutions and natural resources. Indeed, such an exercise is valuable and beneficial on a multitude of levels. Ideally, the thesis would generate knowledge for a wide variety of existing and potential stakeholders, both in Argentina and Namibia, which could be used to help initiate projects in Argentina which attempted to involve specific communities in the management of natural resources, and to provide useful feedback, analysis and evaluation for existing Namibian initiatives. Ideally, the central question would be fairly straightforward: what can people in one country with little experience in notions of sustainable utilisation of natural resources learn from another with a well established tradition of community based natural resource management? However, if this approach is to be of any worth then certain assumptions need either to be jettisoned or brought rigorously into question. Primarily, Kunene Region in Namibia and Argentina's Province of Salta constitute vastly different empirical contexts, with widely diverging histories, ethnicities, social, political and economic structures, to name but a few crucial variables, which rules out the possibility of assuming that what 'works' in the one place will therefore 'work' in the other. Rather, it becomes necessary to focus not on what works per se, but to identify those conditions which are essential to and those which impede its working. This objective dovetails rather well with Ostrom's stated intention of elaborating the "underlying design principles" which render some common property resource institutions successful over time (Ostrom, 1990:27). Indeed, given the influence of certain principles of common property resource management theory in the formulation of conservancy legislation and policy, investigating the extent to which those principles are relevant, appropriate and applicable in such different empirical contexts becomes a meaningful and important source of comparison between the two countries. It is, further, a means through which to make a contribution to the theory of common property management. Finally, bringing into question the enterprise of taking ideas in one context and applying them in another and establishing even in two fairly local contexts the extent to which it is possible and helpful, may prove very important in the still very generic world of development. In the high-pressured pursuit of success, where questions of scale and compatibility are as

important now as ever they were, it has been and still is easy to overlook the importance of context specificity.

Along with tenets of common pool resource theory, the following factors serve as comparative foci between Argentina and Namibia:

- The extent, or lack therein, of devolution of control over natural resource management to the local level. What correlation exists between devolution and successful community based natural resource management, and how do claims for devolution fit into conflict with or become co-opted by wider political strategies?
- Political hierarchies and how their interests impact on and are catered for by processes of conservation and development. What incentive patterns and clusters of interest are likely to make key actors become involved in or excluded from such processes?
- Troublesome notions of 'community', which could undermine any project aiming to foster community based conservation. How is the label of community attached, for what reasons, and how does the make-up of any group of individuals who share access to a set of resources affect their appropriation?
- Advances and restrictions put in place by legislation governing natural resource use. To what extent could Conservancy legislation be helpful in assessing the legislative state of affairs in Argentina?
- The precarious tenure situations of specific groups of people which affect or even dictate the livelihood options available to them. In contexts where the lack of legal status of certain groups of people prohibits or restricts access to and management rights over natural resources in their vicinity, what does 'community based natural resource management' actually mean?

Events in community based natural resource management in Namibia could provide an invaluable opportunity to kick-start debate in the Argentine context, which could then provide feedback for academics, practitioners, government staff and communities in Namibia.

Objectives

The principal aims of the thesis are:

- To ground concerns about some of the epistemological and ontological assumptions of participatory rhetoric in concrete empirical settings, with special reference to ethnocentrism and translation. A study that takes in two very different empirical settings lends itself very well to this purpose.
- To analyse and evaluate the dynamics, success levels and general state of community based natural resource management in the Kunene Region of Namibia, both at the level of rhetoric and practice, through fieldwork focusing on initiatives occurring within established and emerging conservancies.
- To investigate the extent to which ideas applied and experience gained from ecotourism and trophy hunting enterprises in Namibia are appropriate, relevant and potentially applicable in specific sites in the Northwest of Argentina.

- To ground theories concerning common property resource management in very different empirical contexts, to see whether the sorts of principles the theory appears to offer, are as widely relevant and applicable as they are often held to be, by policymakers, academics and a variety of different groups in both countries.

Research design

My intention is to spend nine months in Namibia and another six in Argentina. In Namibia, I hope to become an associate researcher with the Social Sciences Division of the Multi-Disciplinary Research Consultancy Centre, at the University of Namibia, from September 2003 until February 2004. I am interested in establishing links with two Namibian NGOs, the Namibian Community Based Tourism Association (NACOBTA) and the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), in an attempt to negotiate access to particular initiatives in the Kunene Region and possibly others as well. Specifically, I wish to look at ecotourism and trophy hunting initiatives in established and emerging conservancies. In the locations in which I will be researching in the Argentine context, both of these sets of activities would appear to be, at least potentially, relevant, appropriate and applicable. The existence of a national programme, in the form of conservancies policy, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism's Policy on Wildlife Management, Utilisation and Tourism in Communal Areas, and other important pieces of legislation and policy, along with the amount and diversity of current initiatives, provide a rich base for research into community based natural resource management. Much can be learned from developments in Namibia, and the analysis of the state of CBNRM could lead to insights and knowledge of value both within and outside of the country. The Kunene Region is a desirable place in which to locate the study precisely because it boasts a range of different initiatives, some longer established than others. Analysing both emerging conservancies and established ones is a good way to bring out both the problems faced by people who want to manage complex resource systems and the attempts made at solving them. The information generated, again, could be valuable in and outside of Namibia. With at least some of these considerations in mind, the Torra and #Khoadi/Hoas conservancies would be good initiatives to study. Nevertheless, there is a strong case for investigating projects which have met with varying levels of achievement, as a means to arriving at a wider awareness of all the factors which have contributed to or detracted from their success. I am still in the process of identifying which of the emerging and established conservancies are the most suitable to work in from the point of view of choice of field-sites.

In Argentina, I will be working in the Northwest province of Salta, from April – October 2004, in two sites: Los Toldos and Lipeo. Both are villages within the Municipality of Los Toldos, and both fall under the remit of two distinct programmes. One of these is the *Plan Estratégico*, a strategy for local development; the other is the planned *Corredor Ecológico* (Ecological Corridor), an international conservation programme. Los Toldos is the only Municipality in Argentina to have devised a *Plan Estratégico*, or 'Strategic Plan', which is an attempt to define the scope and trajectory of development for the area. At present Los Toldos is something of an impoverished

backwater, with little in the way of employment for local inhabitants, many of whom – especially in the village of Los Toldos – depend principally on state services such as health centres or local government offices as a source of work. Many of those who do not work for the government receive state subsidies, and almost everyone who has access to sufficient land, employed or unemployed, engages in some agricultural activities for subsistence purposes. Part of the *Plan Estratégico* is to generate new forms of employment, such as the currently unexploited possibilities of tourism. It is this aim which may render developments in ecotourism in Namibia pertinent in Argentina, especially given the Municipality's desire to involve the people of Los Toldos actively in the *Plan*. Los Toldos is 1800m above sea level, nestled in an Andean mountain chain covered in *Yungas*, or subtropical mountain forest, has its own recently established nature reserve, and is very close to the relatively untouched Baritú National Park. As such it offers a potential base for various activities, such as walking and photographic tourism.

Lipeo, a tiny village just inside Baritú National Park, is another place which has potential for tourism. Baritú National park is host to a variety of wildlife, and a rich source of biodiversity, constituted as it is for the main part of uninhabited, seldom explored *Yungas*. It is also one of the very few places in Argentina where there is a significant population of jaguar. Although the tourism and trophy hunting caché of this predator may potentially be high, it is unpopular with the people of Lipeo, who are very uncomfortable with the idea of living within striking distance of what they see as a highly dangerous animal. At present, the Administration of National Parks (APN) is concerned about jaguar population levels, and indeed inhabitants throughout the municipality of Los Toldos have been held at least partially responsible for its endangered status. However, there appears to be little in the way of incentive to reduce either 'poaching' or incidents where jaguars have been killed when seen as a threat. This may well be a problem which is structurally similar in its dynamic to one found across Southern Africa, to which a range of solutions, such as trophy hunting and safari tourism enterprises, have been sought and developed with varying levels of success. This observation gives rise to a central question: could specific community based trophy hunting and wildlife-related ecotourism initiatives in Namibia be relevant, appropriate and applicable in the Municipality of Los Toldos, Argentina?

The jaguar is, further, a component in the *Corredor Ecológico*, an international conservation area that, it is proposed, will stretch from the Tariquía natural reserve in Bolivia down to the southernmost parts of the province of Salta, Argentina. It derives from a recognition of the need for conservation of biodiversity outside of protected areas, as well as within them, and explicitly identifies eight conservation objectives, among them the jaguar itself. Therefore, if trophy hunting and other ecotourism initiatives were viable in the Argentine context, they might also be complementary or weaved into the aims both of the *Plan Estratégico* and the *Corredor Ecológico*.

The tools of research will be varied. Participatory methods will be used to attempt to establish the needs and desires of selected rural populations in Argentina and Namibia. Given the necessity of establishing local perceptions of territory and the varying importance of the resources falling within local boundaries, techniques such as mapping and modelling, transect walks, local analysis of secondary sources and matrix scoring and ranking are identified

as of particular relevance. Employing these research methods also offers the opportunity to explore questions of power, the unreliability of public consensus, ethnocentrism and paradox, which have been raised in connection with PRA.

In addition to this, interviews will be conducted with all major stakeholders involved. There will also be an examination of legislation and policy regarding access to, rights of use for and ownership of natural resources and the land on which they exist in both of the countries which comprise the study.

Of great importance for me is to make my research accessible and relevant to the people to whom it could be of use. It is not enough only to stimulate debate in academic circles, although I do not wish to deny the importance of such an exercise. It is intended that the research will be at least in part a collaborative process, in order to ensure that the information generated, and that decisions about what information to generate, do not come solely from one source, and reflect the concerns of local communities participating in the study. Wholly to depend upon participatory methods, however, would be likely to run into some of the problems elucidated above of power and consensus, and it would be dishonest not to recognise the presence of my own pre defined research agenda, which is not likely to be exactly the same as that of either people either in Argentina or Namibia. Given these circumstances, other forms of benefit to those with whom I will conduct research, in the form of voluntary work, teaching or whatever is deemed most appropriate, are also to be built into the fieldwork.

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