Briefing

Institutions for Natural Resource Management

MZ02

Traditional leaders and CBNRM

Key Points:

1 CBNRM projects in Mozambique have tried to work with traditional Chiefs to gain legitimacy

2 In a case study in Manica, a new Chief was chosen during the war, as the old one had fled

3 Since the war, the new Chief's interaction with the government has been problematic

4 Questions over his legitimacy have led to delays, obstructions, and misunderstandings

The role of 'traditional' leadership has been in flux in rural Mozambique since the colonial era. After independence, the formal abolition of the system of traditional leadership was a major plank of government policy, yet came to be resented by many rural communities. By the end of the civil war, the government expressed renewed interest in working with, rather than against traditional leaders. This has been particularly true in the field of natural resource management (NRM), as conservation actors have sought to identify and work alongside legitimate representatives of the 'community' at a local level.

The war and traditional leaders

An interesting characteristic of the war in Mozambique was how quickly, when areas fell under control of the rebel Renamo movement, the traditional hierarchy of Chiefs was reinstalled. Some observers saw this as an opportunistic move to gain support amongst rural people. The traditional hierarchy represented a useful source of logistical support for the guerillas, especially for food. Using traditional leaderships was an alternative for Renamo to establishing their own administrative apparatus.

However, it could also be said that many within Renamo genuinely supported the traditional leadership, particularly the rurally-recruited guerrillas. Certainly, since the end of the war, both Renamo (now the opposition party) and Frelimo (the government) have taken care to court traditional leaders.

Traditional leaders in Moribane Forest Reserve

An interesting example of post-war attempts to work with traditional leaders is presented by the Moribane Forest Reserve, within the Chiefdom of M'punga in Manica Province. Here, a CBNRM project implemented by a government agency is trying to work with local communities to conserve a forest that was first gazetted as a reserve in 1950.

In Moribane, the traditional leadership was reinstalled early on during the war, as the entire surrounding area fell to Renamo. However, re-introducing the traditional leaders was not a simple thing after the disturbances of Frelimo rule, and long years of colonial interference. The person most commonly identified as the rightful successor to the Chieftancy of M'punga had fled the area early in the war for a government-controlled area in the Beira corridor. Therefore, the Renamo forces asked the elders of the area for a substitute.

They put forward the brother of the rightful successor. He, in turn, chose a number of *sagutas*[1] from his own retinue, rather than accepting the people who had been *sagutas* in colonial times. It is this group who continue to control the M'punga chiefdom in the post-war period.

Working with the traditional leader

Since the introduction of a CBNRM programme into Moribane in 1996, the government have made a number of efforts to work with Chief M'punga. They have found

this a difficult process. Concurrently, the Chief himself has suffered challenges to his leadership from sections of the local population. The result has often been mutual distrust between the government, Chief and the people, rather than the building of a participatory relationship.

Making contact

A first difficulty was faced as the government project team tried to establish contact. Initially, the Chief refused to meet the team, saying they should meet with his spiritual advisor, who would then relay matters to the Chief. He postponed meetings for six months before finally meeting the team.

Establishing a base camp

An initial objective of the project was to establish a base camp in the reserve, so further links could be made with the community, and research carried out into the area's natural resources. The Chief was asked to designate an area for this camp, However, the site he recommended had to be abandoned when the company that supplies electricity from the Cahora Bassa dam to Maputo complained it was too close to a set of power lines that run through the reserve.

The Chief agreed the project could choose an alternative site, but ruled out four successive sites because they were unacceptable to the spirits of the M'punga chiefdom. When a fifth site was accepted, a traditional ceremony was held, involving the sacrifice of a black chicken provided by the project team, as is usual in local rituals to receive newcomers on the land.

Establishing a community committee

Once a base camp was established, the project team proposed that a committee should be set up, to represent community interests. However, a community meeting rejected the idea. It was felt that such a committee would be like a 'co-operative' - a development strategy which many rural people perceived to have failed after independence. Eventually, project workers persuaded the community to set up a committee, but it still has no terms of reference, and refers every important decision to either the Chief, or the project staff.

Challenges to the Chief's authority

At every step, there have been difficulties in the relationship between the traditional leadership and the government project team. At the same time, the Chief has also come under attack from some local residents, who have charged him with accepting bribes from the government.

There are various reasons for this. At times, the Chief has reflected community suspicions about the motives of the project in coming to the reserve. But he has also sought strategic alliances with the project to strengthen his own authority, which is not based on a clear historical mandate. As the project team has started to disseminate conservation messages that are opposed by locals, the Chief has been seen by some as the agent of a hostile government.

Concluding comments

Traditional leaders in Mozambique often command respect, and may be more legitimate sources of authority than the government at local level. Yet, the complex history of Chieftaincies, and the past and current alliances sought by particular leaders, can weaken this authority, bringing difficulties for NRM policy based around traditional structures.

In particular, working through traditional structures cannot wish away a history of conflict between rural people and government, or the differences between these actors. Cooperation on the part of Chiefs may be as much to consolidate their own positions, as to accept a community-based NRM policy.

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[1]The saguta is the next stage down from Chief in the traditional hierarchy in this particular area.

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