

MZ10

Conflicting perspectives on the natural resource base

Key Points:

- 1** CBNRM projects tend to be based on the dominant narrative of environmental change
- 2** However, there are conflicting narratives and perceptions of the natural resource base
- 3** Political and material interests influence perceptions of environmental change and resources
- 4** Local views and narratives vary, but are generally in opposition to the dominant views

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the 'Marena' research project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

Recent research in environmental history has begun to challenge the accepted wisdom on environmental change in Africa. Of particular relevance to our research in Mozambique is the research on forest history in parts of West Africa by Fairhead and Leach.¹ Their work suggests that while colonial and other Western views portrayed African agriculture as causing deforestation, local views proposed the reverse: that human settlements were actually transforming savanna into forest.

There are similarly stark contrasts in perspectives on environmental change and the natural resource base in Mozambique which emerged in the course of the Marena research. Rather than attempting to determine which perspective is the 'correct' one, this *Briefing* does not assume that there is any one 'correct' perspective. Instead, it considers how the process of social problems are defined, the actors involved, their interests and beliefs, and the narratives constructed on these bases.

Fairhead and Leach contrast local perspectives on environmental change with the 'dominant vision' in policy, forestry and environmental sciences. In Mozambique, there was a similar gulf between local views and the views dominant in the circles of power, but there was also some diversity in local views on the natural resource base, both within and between areas.

The dominant perspective

There is a strong narrative in Mozambique which holds that the natural resource base is being seriously degraded. Degradation is attributed primarily to smallholder agricultural practices and overuse of natural resources in areas where population is highly concentrated. The use of fires for agricultural clearance, poisons for fishing in rivers, trees for fuel wood and charcoal production, wild animals for meat, and general over-use of natural resources are all seen as the prime contributors to environmental degradation. There are worries about species extinction and loss of biodiversity, as well as over direct material

costs such as damage to the productive capacity of the natural resource base.

Amongst those who hold this perspective we can count the various ministries and departments responsible for natural resources, many international and national non-governmental organisations (in particular organisations concerned with conservation), academics and scientists. These are to be found at national, provincial and district levels.

The local view

There is less consensus at a local level over the state of the natural resource base, whether resources are being degraded and for what reason. Variation arises not only from physical and geographical differences, but also within areas, depending on interests (political, economic, and social) and ideologies.

Geographically, there are areas where there is more pressure on natural resources and thus more awareness of the finite nature of resources and the potential for conflict over them. For example, there is no sense of land shortage in Mahate, an area with low



population to land ratio, but there are some people in Tsetserra, where the ratio is higher, who are worried about future availability of land.

However, there is not a precise correlation between the ratio of population to resources and beliefs about the finite nature of resources. For example, there are people in Mahate who articulate beliefs about the value of trees and the need for protection - primarily, though not exclusively, related to spiritual beliefs.

Politics and perceptions of the natural resource base

Owing to historical processes, Frelimo is generally perceived as the party of city dwellers, while Renamo is seen as the party of rural peasants. As the Frelimo-led government enforces policies based on the dominant view of environmental change and degradation, so Frelimo politics have come to be associated with this perspective.

Interestingly, though, in the Dombe area Renamo held a political meeting prior to the elections in 1999 at which they urged local co-operation with the government's conservation programme in Moribane, and expressed agreement with the principles associated with the dominant perspective.

Political motives also influence the perspectives of traditional leaders on the natural resource base. The more people a Chief has living in his area, the more powerful he is perceived to be. Traditional leaders are often keen to assert that there is an abundance of land in their control in order to encourage more people to come and settle. On the other hand, having plentiful wild resources is also important for chiefly power. In Tsetserra, a local leader removed

settlers from a particular area in order to regenerate large mammal species for future use.

Material interests and perceptions

Material interests also influence perceptions of the natural resource base and narratives of environmental change. For example, the Portuguese colonial government developed a narrative of protecting biodiversity and therefore preventing the burning of fires for agriculture which might threaten forests. Local people perceived the narrative of biodiversity as a smokescreen for Portuguese interests in valuable timbers.

A dramatic example of the way in which material interests influenced narratives about the natural resource base was the issue of the elephants in Moribane (see *Briefing MZ03*). For local people, there were too many elephants because they were damaging crops. For the government's wildlife agency, the elephant population was insufficient and needed rejuvenating in order to encourage wildlife tourism.

The biggest clashes in perspective on natural resources and environmental change have been over agricultural practices. On the whole, local people do not perceive their agricultural practices as problematic for the natural resource base. They argue that they have been farming for many years by rotating plots of land and planting in moist ground near water courses, and there are no problems with soil fertility or erosion.

But there are a few dissenting perspectives within communities, as well as a clear dissonance between this view and the generally accepted view outside rural communities.

A large farmer interviewed in Tsetserra saw slash and burn agriculture as a serious threat to the natural resource base. This farmer could afford to hire people to cut down trees rather than burn them, and he was more worried about protecting his houses and granaries from fire destruction. In particular, he had tobacco stored up in his granary for two years while waiting for the market price to rise. He espoused a narrative of 'environmental custodianship' which was a concept foreign to other local farmers. This was also indicative of his exposure to the dominant view through education and the government curriculum.

Concluding remarks

There are clear contrasts between perceptions of the natural resource base which are based on differing interests and ideologies. This evidence suggests that we should exercise caution in accepting one view over another, without examining the interests behind each narrative and casting a critical eye on the evidence mobilized in support of one view or another.

¹J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Reframing Deforestation. Global analysis and local realities: studies in West Africa*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

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The views expressed in this Briefing are those of the Briefing team, and do not necessarily represent DFID policy.

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