

Democratizing wildlife management or not? A Comparative Case Study of Three Village Trusts in Botswana

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As a recourse to failed centralized wildlife management regimes in Southern Africa, the community based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach has been implemented for over two decades. Founded on the principles of devolution and democracy, this approach transfers power and resources to grassroots communities to manage and benefit from wildlife resources. Following two decades of implementation, this initiative is growing in southern Africa and is increasingly gaining recognition as the direction that bridges rural livelihood benefits to natural resource management.

As well as gaining recognition, the CBNRM programs have received huge criticisms in regard to weak institutional development both at the state and micro community level. Poor local governance has translated into elite capture of benefits by a few in the rural communities. As a consequence, the process of devolution from the state to local communities has suffered with incomplete devolution taking place in some areas. At the core of sustaining the CBNRM program is an in-depth understanding of its institutional development. The decentralization of wildlife management that has been implemented in CBNRM thus provides an excellent opportunity to examine this understudied area. My research examines this by focusing on two overall objectives: 1) the vertical relationship between the state and CBNRM communities and the extent of CBNRM devolution in Botswana and Zambia; and 2) examining whether CBNRM communities are democratizing or not; and whether this has led to the provision of CBNRM economic benefits and the protection of the natural resources.

As a first stage in this study, in summer 2009, I undertook research in Botswana in three village communities (Khwai, Mababe and Sankuyo) that have been implementing CBNRM for over a decade. Situated on the northwestern side of the Okavango Delta in northern Botswana, the three villages receive revenue from both photographic and hunting tourism. Revenue received is targeted at providing both individual and communal benefits to the members



of the villages, as well as investment into resource protection. The working hypothesis for this link therefore, was that if power has been devolved from the state to local community institutions, this should translate into democratic entities that would provide both CBNRM economic benefits and in turn, contribute to the protection of the wildlife resource.

Key informant interviews were conducted with members of the communities, Wildlife Department officers, safari operators, Botswana Tourism Board officers and staff from nongovernmental organizations that had worked with these village communities. Participant observations were also conducted in both Sankuyo and Mababe village elections, to examine how participatory these democratic institutions were. Finally, a total of 178 questionnaires were distributed using a random sample of members of the community who were

18 years and above. The surveys aimed to measure two metrics of democracy in each village, i.e. participation and competition.

Preliminary results show that out of the three villages, Sankuyo performed better on both measures of democracy, and also has done relatively well in providing both individual and communal CBNRM benefits. Mababe shows poor results on democracy, and provision of CBNRM benefits. All three villages show poor results, in terms of providing revenue for resource protection.

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