

What is Limiting Success of Community-Based Approach to Conservation of Natural Resources in Southern Africa?

Zyambo P*

Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Zambia

***Corresponding author:** Paul Zyambo, Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Private Bag 1, Chilanga, Zambia, Tel: +260978290175; Email: paulzya@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Despite registering some successes, community-based conservation approach has been criticised as having failed to achieve the objectives of biodiversity conservation and livelihood sustenance. Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify key challenges that are limiting success of community-based conservation of natural resources in southern Africa and suggest ways of addressing them. The study is based on reviews of published documents on the matter. The study identifies four challenges that are limiting success of community-based conservation programmes in southern Africa and these are: inability to sustain livelihoods, weak land and resource tenure, weak community institutions and poor governance. These challenges are probably the major constraints because they undermine decision-making, participation and capacity to manage resources, and hinder equitable benefit flow that incentivise conservation efforts by communities. Measures to address these limitations are suggested as diversifying benefit flow, strengthening property rights to natural resources and community institutions, and improving governance at all relevant levels.

Keywords: Benefits; Community; Conservation; Livelihood; Natural Resources; Southern Africa

Introduction

High biodiversity loss through habitat and species loss has been a major global problem [1,2]. The accelerated rates of biological diversity loss are a consequence of human activities [3,4]. The problem of accelerated biodiversity loss has continued despite increased establishment of new protected areas, high international spending on conservation and availability of international agreements on conservation of biodiversity [5].

Consequently, it has been argued that the conventional approach to conservation through isolating protected areas, sometimes referred to as 'fortress' or 'fences and fines' has not been effective. For example protected areas in developing countries have been described as ineffectively managed and providing little or no protection for biodiversity [6,7]. The main reasons advanced to explain the increasingly unpopular fortress conservation include high economic costs, low economic returns compared with alternative land uses and the

exclusion of local people from protected areas has been condemned as unfair and unreasonable [8-10]. As a result, an alternative approach to conservation, commonly referred to as community-based conservation and management of natural resources, has become widely adopted particularly in developing countries [11].

In southern Africa, community-based approach to conservation has been in place for about three decades. It has taken forms such as park outreach, collaborative management and the community-based natural resources management [12]. The community-based conservation approach seeks to involve local communities in decision-making, management and utilisation of natural resources and sharing of benefits derived from resource utilisation [13]. It is based on the premise that if conservation and development could be simultaneously achieved, then the interests of both could be served [14]. Therefore, the objectives of community-based conservation are conservation of biodiversity and maintenance or enhancement of community livelihoods. The relative emphasis of either objective is dependent on the typology of community conservation initiative being implemented [12].

Despite recording some successes in eastern and southern Africa, community based conservation has come under criticisms from various scholars, conservation professionals and policy makers [13,15-19]. Criticisms include failure to achieve the objective of biodiversity conservation; abandonment of clear scientific analysis; unsustainable utilisation of natural resources; and being based on flawed assumptions [20-25]. Consequently, there have been suggestions that the community-based conservation approach should be abandoned and revert to fortress conservation approaches [26].

Since it is apparent that both the 'fortress' and community-based conservation approaches may have successes and shortcomings in as far as biodiversity conservation is concerned, it is appropriate that the two approaches complement each other. In this respect community-based conservation should be viewed as one of the available alternative strategies in biodiversity conservation [24]. Therefore, it is vital that challenges that are limiting success in community-based conservation be identified and addressed accordingly. This will help improve the performance of community-based conservation and build on the limited success scored so far in the last three decades. In this paper I will identify key challenges that are limiting success of community-based conservation in southern Africa and

suggest ways of addressing them. These are based on reviews of published documents on the matter.

Inability to Sustain Community Livelihoods

The objective of community livelihood sustenance is an integral part of the community-based conservation in southern Africa [12,27]. It is premised that if benefits accruing from management and utilisation of natural resources and sustain the community livelihoods, then the community will have the incentive to conserve the resources [13]. However, there are indications from southern Africa that benefits derived from utilisation of natural resources for communities and especially at household levels may not be adequate or appropriate [28-32]. It implies that the households in the communities are incurring more resource management costs compared to benefits received from resource utilisation. This is especially so in areas where households experience crop damage and livestock losses due to wildlife and have grazing and cultivation opportunities denied [15,29]. Inadequate incentives are unable to influence local people to abandon illegal harvesting of resources if individual returns from illegal harvesting outweigh benefits accruing from legitimate resource uses [16]. As a result, communities may not be willing to fully support community conservation schemes [12].

One of the reasons for failure in sustaining community livelihood is that community-based conservation approaches in southern Africa are usually dependent on one or two sources of revenue such as trophy game hunting and ecotourism. Trophy game hunting and ecotourism have not generated enough benefits for most community households because of inadequate charismatic animal species [28,29]. Furthermore, these ventures are high risk prone as they are dependent on a lot of external factors. For example, when the Zambian government enforced moratoria on trophy game hunting in 2001 and 2012 to 2014, there were no benefits for communities and this had a negative impact on conservation efforts.

If the objective of maintaining community livelihoods is to be achieved, it is imperative that appropriate benefits for communities are increased through diversification of sources of benefits or incentives. Since community-based conservation approach is based primarily on inducements, it requires benefit flow that is large enough to spread throughout the community [33]. The benefits or incentives should include all possible set of social-

economic factors that create an enabling environment and motivate communities to participate [25]. Salafsky, et al. found that effective community conservation was not linked to financial benefits alone but also to other incentives [34]. Therefore, sources of benefits should, apart from revenues from trophy game hunting and ecotourism, include protection from crop raiding and livestock depredation from wildlife, access to water and grazing areas for livestock, employment for the local communities, game meat, thatching grass, building logs and others that address specific community livelihood requirements. Evidently, benefits should not be economic only, but should also include those of social and cultural significance to respective communities [28,32].

Weak Tenure, Ownership or Property Rights to Resources and Land

Land tenure and rights of access to resources are critical to rural livelihoods and community-based conservation [12]. Predictable, secure, and long-term tenure and rights to land and resources confer incentives and confidence to individuals to invest time and effort in conservation [35]. However, state governments in most southern African countries own land and natural resources while individuals or communities may enjoy only the access right to use the resource [36]. Furthermore, in some cases the community access right to use resources is just negotiated with the authorities and is often uncertain [28]. Therefore, there is only limited devolution of power and authority over land and resources from the state to local communities that are involved in community based conservation approaches [37].

This has several consequences on the performance in maintaining community livelihoods and achieving biodiversity conservation. First, the communities are unable to invest their efforts and time in protecting a resource that is perceived as not theirs. Since they do not own the resource, they have no power to decide who comes to exploit the resource in the area. Therefore, the communities will have no incentive to conserve the resource for the future because they do not control its exploitation [38]. For example in Zimbabwe, the Rural District Councils were the appropriate authority for wildlife in the communal lands and the communities did not have the right to use wildlife directly, only the right to benefit from the use of wildlife by others [39]. As a result, communities in Zimbabwe continued to view wildlife resource as belonging to the Rural District Councils or

state and were thus focusing on land-uses that are incompatible with wildlife [39].

Second, communities are not able to negotiate for economic investments in their area because they have no claim to land or resources. Hence communities have limited sources of revenue to enhance their livelihoods. Therefore, weak tenure or ownership of land or resources is one of the major reasons for inadequate economic benefits in southern African countries with community-based approaches to conservation.

The third problem associated with access right to resource use in southern Africa is that communities usually have user rights to only one type of resource within their areas. Communities with the potential of earning economic benefits from forestry, wildlife, fisheries and minerals are restricted to one type of resource like wildlife because that is how far the user rights go. The communities do not have integrated user rights for various natural resources in their area. Thus the chances of having insufficient economic benefits are high if such benefits are derived from only one type of natural resource.

The initial step in addressing the problem of weak, unclear and unpredictable tenure to land and resources is to undertake policy and legal reforms targeting at devolving tenure and more authority to local communities. It is important that the policy and legal reforms should take into account the devolution of integrated stewardship of wildlife, forestry, fisheries, land and other natural resources to communities. Then the state and its agents must practically retrain themselves from preventing the actual implementation of policies and laws that devolve stewardship of land and resources to communities.

Weak Community Institutions

Strong community institutions are a requirement for community-based conservation approaches to work best in achieving its objectives [33]. Communities as institutions should be strong in making its rules about use, management and conservation of resources, implementation of rules and resolution of disputes that arise as a result of interpretation and application [40]. Strong community institutions that are likely to succeed in achieving its objectives should have (1) the authority, ability and willingness to restrict access and use; (2) the necessary means to offer incentives to use resources sustainably; (3) technical capacity to monitor ecological

and social conditions; and (4) the managerial flexibility to change incentives and rules of access in order to cope with changes in the resource or its users [33,41,42]. However, most community institutions in areas with community-based conservation programmes are weak, only implementing rules made elsewhere and are constantly struggling to offer incentives [33,40].

In southern Africa, most community institutions for managing natural resources have been weakened because (1) resource related decision-making was shifted from communities to the state or local governments during the colonial era and has continued to present times; (2) demographic pressure on resources has increased due to population increase; (3) individual or private land tenure instead of communal land tenure has increased; (4) wealth differentiation has become a common feature within communities; and (5) the emergence of commercial market linkages [43]. As a result, community institutions have virtually lost their traditional management system that provide the local social control to enforce access restrictions and therefore fail to control use of resources [33]. While such communities resent enforcing rules made elsewhere by the state, they fail to make their own rules about use, management and conservation of natural resources. This is one of the major reasons why community-based conservation approaches in southern Africa have registered limited successes in achieving their objectives.

Although it is difficult to create community institutions that can effectively conserve biodiversity where economic, social and technological conditions are highly variable the problem of weak community institutions can be addressed successfully like the case of the Sibuyan Manyan Tagabukid in Philippines [33,44,45]. The important first step is to devolve stewardship of land or natural resources to the local communities. This confers ability to communities to make decisions on resource use, management and conservation. Secondly, revive the legitimate traditional political structures that have power to formulate and enforce rules and policies on resource use, management and conservation [45]. The existing institutions in the communities such as traditional authorities may be considered because in many countries they allocate land, administer justice, arbitrate disputes and have authority over natural resources [15]. However, measures must be put in place to ensure that such institutions do not manipulate decision-making, control benefit flow or undermine community participation. Thirdly, identify and encourage the use of local or traditional knowledge in resource management and conservation that should also be integrated with scientific

knowledge as suggested in the Traditional Ecological Knowledge models [46]. Fourthly, community institutions require capacity building through training in among others legal matters, monitoring of resources, indigenous 3-dimension mapping, use of GIS/GPS technologies and map reading [46]. This will empower the community institutions to make decisions, participate and manage resources in their areas.

Poor Governance

Natural resource governance is considered as key for success and benefit flow to local households because it concerns rules and processes that create and enforce negotiated agreement related to people's access to and use of natural resources [47]. Hence, to achieve the goals of biodiversity conservation and supporting livelihoods, there must be good governance at all relevant levels. As a social process, good governance is characterised by being participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable, and inclusive, and follower of the rule of law [48,49]. However, poor governance tendencies have persisted at the macro level where government agencies have been imposing drastic decisions on the use of resources on the communities [50]. At the meso level also, poor governance has emerged in last decade in community-based approaches of sub-Saharan Africa. Primarily, this involves traditional leaders and the elected committees in the institutional structures of community-based approaches have manipulated and controlled decision-making and benefit streams for their personal gain at the expense of the local communities [44,51]. This is described as elite capture and has been observed in varying levels and forms in Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. According to Muyengwa *et al.* elite capture has facilitated biased selection of the community projects, controlling and spending most of benefit money on overheads costs and allowances and biased composition of elected committees [51]. Consequently, decision-making and participation in conservation by local communities have been undermined. Additionally, transparency is also diluted while benefits are not equitably allocated. Thus, ordinary members of local communities are left disillusioned and resentful.

The first measure for addressing poor governance in community-based resource management approaches is to decentralise governance further to lower-level governance structures, such as from elected committee to ordinary community members. Realisation that current levels of decentralisation may not be enough could be

crucial for motivating improvement. Further decentralisation moves the system of governance from representative towards that of participatory. Therefore, wider participation approaches within communities should be encouraged rather than thinner representation approaches. In Namibia, further decentralisation enhanced performance of community by increasing flow of benefits to the local communities [52]. Secondly, the supportive governance systems such as guidelines, legal statutory instruments, auditing and monitoring of benefit flow should be strengthened and applied. Poor governance as expressed in elite capture emerged because these supportive governance systems were weak or missing altogether [50,51]. These supportive governance systems should be participatory when being developed and when implementing guidelines, monitoring and evaluation of resources and provision of equitable benefit flow and feedback. Where these have been strengthened and applied, good natural resource governance has been enhanced resulting in improved performance and equitable benefit flow in community-based natural resources management programmes [53,54].

Conclusions

The inability to sustain livelihoods, weak land and resources tenure (limited devolution), weak community institutions and poor governance are probably the major challenges limiting success of community-based conservation approach in southern Africa. Poverty is usually associated with accelerated biodiversity decline [55]. It is also observed that highest poverty is found where there is weakest governance [47]. Therefore, poor governance is associated with increased biodiversity decline. Jones and Murphree indicated that robust devolution and communal institutional cohesion were the two pillars of community-based natural resources management [56]. Barrett, et al. also pointed out that weakness of existing institutions at all levels - including community - was the greatest challenge for achieving sustainable tropical-biodiversity conservation [33]. Thus, these limitations adversely impact on both biodiversity conservation and livelihood support in southern Africa.

The four limiting challenges have adversely affected biodiversity conservation and livelihood support through undermining decision-making and capacity of the communities to participate in resource conservation and management programmes in their areas. The constraints have also hindered equitable benefit flow that gives incentives to communities to use resources sustainably.

Therefore, measures for addressing and dealing with these challenges should include diversifying benefit flow, strengthening property rights to natural resources and community institutions, and improving governance at all relevant levels. These measures will enhance the relevancy of community-based natural resources management in contributing to reduction of biodiversity loss in southern Africa and in supporting sustainable livelihoods of local communities.

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