

Elite Capture of Community Conservation Programs in Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe

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Decentralization and devolution of power to communities to manage and decide on their resources is a mechanism adopted by several countries to conserve locally valuable resources. In southern Africa, this led to the proliferation of community wildlife management programs such as the Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) in Zimbabwe, Conservancies in Namibia, and Wildlife Trusts in Botswana. Elite capture however, is a new threat to this success, with the potential to reverse the conservation ethic gained by local communities in the past two decades. Consequently, community based natural resources management (CBNRM) is faced with a crisis and constant criticism that it is failing to deliver on its promises: development and conservation.

Based on three purposefully selected communities, Sankoyo (Botswana), Wuparo (Namibia) and Masoka (Zimbabwe), the current study investigated the problem of elite capture i.e. increased privatization of conservation benefits by a few individuals (committees, local politicians, religious leaders, and traditional leaders). The research methodology combines primary and secondary data collection using archival documents, interviews, and focus group discussions. I started this research project in 2009, focusing broadly on governance issues surrounding CBNRM initiatives at local level. This summer (2011), I visited my research sites to conduct detailed interviews.

The findings indicate that in Namibia and Zimbabwe, community development projects initially invested in development projects.



Over-time, significant resources have been spent on meetings (sitting allowances), and rents (demanded by chiefs and other local authorities), while the democratic nature of chieftaincy in Sankoyo helps CBNRM perform better. Based on preliminary analysis, the problem of elite capture is attributable to several factors: (a) the design of CBNRM that accommodates and provides 'special privileges' to traditional authority structures; (b) elite discretion over choice of projects; and (c) community boundedness- i.e. localizing investments and recruitment within the community. In some cases communities are likely to be efficient by investing their incomes in urban areas to generate more revenue and also hire skilled 'externals.'

The study recommends training traditional leaders together with committees to enhance equity and fairness in the allocation of CBNRM benefits. In principle, re-engaging traditional leaders in development administration is likely to make them more accountable compared to the current approach where they 'free-ride' and are not

held accountable for project failure. In addition, I also recommend "second-generation" CBNRM that is well-crafted to overcome 21st challenges such as population increase and increased competition over land-use. As one of one my respondents rightly noted: "CBNRM is a good idea, but its needs to catch up with what has been happening in the past 20 years."

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