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Community-Based Natural Resource Management and Global Climate Change in Namibia

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Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) is a system of resource governance that has developed across much of southern Africa as a way to protect certain resources such as freshwater, forests and forest products and wildlife populations and their habitat while empowering local populations. It is intended to do so by devolving control from central government to local communities so that they in turn become responsible for both the costs associated with managing resources but also any possible benefits that can be accrued from doing so. The literature on CBNRM generally approaches this form of resource governance as an apolitical domestic policy tool within a framework of local environmental conservation. My recent fieldwork in the Namibia, however, has pointed to two important points that the existing literature has not yet adequately accounted for. First, CBNRM should be understood as a global phenomenon, and that even conservation activities that take place in the most rural African community are intimately tied into broader issues in global environmental governance. This occurs as rural communities lack the capacity to benefit from projects through ecotourism in the way they are intended and must partner with a vast network of NGOs that have developed in order to administer funds from a variety of donors within the international community. This has a great affect on how power is rearticulated on the ground and leads to a blurring of the local, the national and global as well as the public from the private. Second, Climate change has profoundly changed the role that CBNRM plays in Namibia.

While not all environmental/conservation issues are directly related to climate change and CBNRM was not developed with climate change in mind, the two have become intricately intertwined and CBNRM can now not be understood outside the broader effects of the changing climate in Namibia. This has resulted as rural Namibian livelihoods which relied traditionally on various forms of subsistence agriculture have become severally threated due to the drought. As a result, many communities now rely solely on income derived from the CBNRM programs and its economic offshoots. Beyond this, the Conservancies themselves have grown and developed into governance apparatuses that provide important public services that are now needed more than ever.

Reviewing Key Details in Namibia's Historical Context

Like many countries on the African continent Namibia has a challenging history of resource governance that largely saw colonial administrators and white settlers benefit from the unsustainable extraction of resources while black populations were restricted from utilizing resources they resided close to. In Namibia, the colonial legacy including Apartheid rule under South Africa, a protracted drought in the 1980s and a long and violent armed struggle leading up to independence in 1990 contribute to wildlife populations being in steep decline. Following independence, the newly elected Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) government began exploring ways to correct the wrongs of the past and to give land and resource rights back to the people. Increasingly it became evident that this could realize greatest success if local residents were able to benefit economically while organizing to be locally empowered as well. These ideals came from development discourse at the time that suggested that development efforts should be focused on the ideals of participation and ownership. From this came the 1996 Nature Conservation Amendment Act that was to reform the oppressive and unfair Nature Ordinance of 1975 passed by Apartheid leaders at the time. The legislation outline provisions for communities to come together, decide on a group size and territorial boundary and to outline a constitution for local elections to take place as well as resource sharing plans. Once

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communities met these strict criteria they could be officially gazetted by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) as a Conservancy. Once gazetted, Conservancies would be granted the rights to manage local wildlife populations and through joint-venture agreements with private tourism companies could benefit economically through ecotourism. From this its three broad goals were 1) inclusive economic development; 2) environmental conservation; and 3) community empowerment through the development of local level institutional capacity. Simple enough in theory, though as the next section will begin to outline, the implementation and management of these programs is quite complex.

The Globality of Community-based Conservation

Despite the fact that CBNRM intends to devolve power to local communities so they can be empowered and manage their own resources effectively, they often lack the resources and capacity to do so in the way the program intends, and they certainly cannot do so outside the global political economy as well as broader efforts in environmental conservation for two main reasons. First, rural Namibian communities largely lack the capacity to effectively develop governance apparatuses and get Conservancies up and running from the outset. For this they require the assistance of any number of the network of NGOs that have developed across the country and proliferated since the drafting of the Nature Conservation Act enabling the Conservancy program. Namibia gained its independence from South Africa only in 1990 following a long and bloody struggle and more than anything this meant that Namibian populations lived under oppressive Apartheid rule until 1990 as well. The timing for independence was also important as this was shortly following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the supposed 'end of history' that would see neoliberalism win out.

With the Cold War over, the West and especially the US had more resources that could be diverted elsewhere and thus a great deal of funds began to be channelled into developing countries to help with development efforts. From this stemmed the rationale for 'the three policy pillars of the neoliberal age - privatization of the public sphere, deregulation of the corporate sector, and the lowering of income and corporate taxes, paid with cuts to public spending.' In this way the neoliberal rationale is about the rebounding of society's problems back onto itself to organize and develop sustainable solutions of its own. Within these efforts to universalize neoliberalism, there was an emphasis placed on contributing to conservation goals as the global environmental movement was gaining a great deal of momentum at his time. Thus, funding flooded in from USAID, the World Bank, WWF international, as well as from a wealth of other NGOs, private donors and many EU nations. Funds were to be administered in certain places deemed areas of potential success and Namibia in general, and CBNRM in particular, was seen as the perfect launching ground for a neoliberal win. Working within this rationale CBNRM seeks to conserve natural resources by putting a price on them, while also serving to empower local residents for their own development and economic well being.

From this push for neoliberalism a dense network of NGOs developed and fanned out across Namibia in order to partner with communities to draft local level constitutions, delineate a strict boundary, group size and become gazetted as Conservancies. From there NGOs would provide training and technical assistance as well as resources to get the projects up and running from the outset with the plan to work toward them becoming self-sufficient and ultimately turning a profit.

The second reason CBNRM in Namibia can only be understood through attention to global networks is because of the specific type of natural resource it seeks to conserve. While CBNRM is a broad form of resource governance that can take many distinct forms, in Namibia it consists mainly of the conservation and management of wildlife populations for the purposes of eco tourism. Dr. Chris Brown, one of the architects of CBNRM in Namibia outlines that

wildlife, and particularly the more charismatic megafauna of Africa, is Africa's global comparative competitive advantage over the rest of the planet. While virtually every country on Earth has cattle, sheep, and goats, only the continent of Africa has the variety and spectacle of wildlife that makes it stand out on the global landscape.

It also has some of the least productive agriculture while similarly not being geographically close to the world's most lucrative markets. All of this is to say that for Namibia, wildlife management is much more productive than elsewhere,

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while the inverse is true for agriculture. Because many of the species exist only in Africa and as many of them are endangered it has given them a particular value to the world and many within the international community feel a real sense of necessity when it comes to their preservation. These species include elephants, rhinos, lions, cheetahs, leopards, hyenas, giraffes, zebras, springbok, gemsbok, and many more.

The specific nature of Namibia's wildlife gives this natural resource a distinctly global edge in a similar way as UNESCO World Heritage sites or the Wonders of the World. As human beings we see ourselves in these historical sites as they are so integral to human history and it is in a similar vein that we see these animals, renowned worldwide for their beauty, as species that have intrinsic value that would harm all humans as well as future generations to lose. This has resulted in a great deal of resources and efforts being put to the conservation of these wildlife populations which have become a sort of symbol for the global conservation movement. Wildlife populations are intimately tied into the successful protection of natural habitat and thus human population growth, urban sprawl, agricultural intensification, pollution, water issues, deforestation, desertification and climate change all pose great challenges to the success of animal populations. Thus, while the wildlife themselves are the face of what it is we as the human race need to protect, it can actually be achieved through treating the important list of issues outlined above. Climate change as the most overarching and global of these issues and its relation to CBNRM will be discussed in the next section as the second major takeaway from my fieldwork in Namibia.

Natural Resource Management as Climate Adaptation

Today when interviewing people at any level—whether government, NGO, tourism companies, tourist staff, Conservancy councils and staff, farmers, villagers or city dwellers—it is extremely rare to get through a conversation without at least mention being made of climate change if not having a good portion of the conversation dwelling on it. Most of Namibia to varying degrees has been affected by a severe drought for the better part of a decade. It is already one of the most arid countries in Africa outside the Sahara and as a result possesses extremely fragile environments. The flora and fauna of Namibia have all adapted over thousands of years to this harsh landscape and as a result much of the country has developed around the realities of water scarcity at the best of times. Now however being the worst of times, new particularly difficult challenges are being presented and interestingly the CBNRM program is helping populations adapt to meet these challenges.

From respondents I often heard some version of “our livestock are dying, we cannot grow anything. Without the CBNRM program we would have nothing.” This specific quote was expressed to me by a rural farmer in the Torra Conservancy in Namibia who succinctly outlined the thoughts I heard from many during my research. Traditionally rural Namibians have relied on communal farming based largely on subsistence agriculture growing what they can and where they can while herding livestock – mostly goats – in order to feed local communities who all contribute in some way and all share in the profits. The severe and protracted drought the country has been facing has been threatening this way of life and in some places that have not received any rain in over four years now, eliminated it entirely. CBNRM, initially formulated to conserve local wildlife populations and their habitats, has seen some successes in its more abstract goals of community empowerment. This has been realized through the development of local institutional governance capacities that have enabled communities to diversify largely based on incomes derived from tourism as well as the many positive economic offshoots this provides. This includes shops, restaurants, food takeaways, cultural museums, and the sale of a plethora of artisanal products and crafts. CBNRM and ecotourism activities have not replaced farming but have simply supplemented it as the two are designed to work synergistically and to complement one another.

Despite best efforts, the relationship between farming and wildlife conservation is not always a harmonious one as increased wildlife populations pose dangers to livestock. Aside from climate change, human-wildlife conflict is the biggest challenge facing the success of CBNRM in Namibia. However, as the drought has been getting worse for all, rather than pitting farmers even further against the program and the conservation of wildlife they had previously seen as dangerous and destructive, even they are beginning to realize the benefits of wildlife conservation.

Having spent years engaging deeply with the literature on CBNRM I myself separated it from the broader issues of global climate change and as a result did not travel to Namibia planning to discuss their changing climate at great

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length with respondents. It quickly became clear that there was no separating the two however, and from there became an essential part of my inquiries. The statement that stuck out most to me from all the interviews I performed and conversations I had throughout my fieldwork stint was when I asked Maxi Pia Louis, the Director of the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organizations (NACSO) early on in my work if there were many climate change deniers in Namibia like we see elsewhere in the world? With this question she looked at me a little crooked, laughed and said "here people do not have the luxury of not believing in the science. Climate change is all around us, it is undeniable, and it is threatening our way of life in the immediate..." As my fieldwork continued and I spoke at length with Namibians affiliated in a variety of ways to the CBNRM program, similar responses came as it was clear that the drought as well as the climate that has been changing for some time was bringing existentially threatening effects to the country and its people. At times their knowledge was grounded in science which they could easily point to and at others it was based on their families and their people having lived off the land in the same spot for generations and having watched the way their ability to live off it had changed so dramatically. They were increasingly being forced to take more and more desperate measures to simply maintain the outputs previously enjoyed, while in some cases these levels were dropping drastically.

It was here that they were able to point to the Conservancies as one of their beacons of hope as for those in need it had become a sort of social safety net where it was able to provide basic goods and services to the community. Most importantly however, where they had been implemented correctly and been blessed with a series of successful elected Conservancy councils a level of organization had developed that was with varying degrees of success realizing the goals of developing and improving infrastructure to help farmers obtain invaluable freshwater supplies, protect livestock herds, as well as to provide compensation where and when these protections failed. In these ways while CBNRM was not created to help with climate change mitigation and adaptation, it is now providing a great deal in the way help in these areas.

Conclusions

Here I have discussed two key components of CBNRM that are at the heart of how it functions as a form of resource governance and have similarly contributed a great deal to how it has evolved over time. During the 1990s when Namibia first implemented its CBNRM program, NGO staff travelled the country consulting and engaging with communities to understand their needs while trying to educate them on the possible benefits these projects could bring to the communities. It took time but as the first communities began to be officially gazetted as Conservancies by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) and realize initial successes, the program caught on and slowly spread across most regions of the country. This is an integral point to understand as it gets to the crux of how power is reshaped and rearticulated on the ground as well as the way it is exercised in novel ways by a variety of actors.

Beyond this, climate change has presented both the CBNRM program and the entire country with a set of challenges that are becoming existential. While in some areas these challenges are threatening the very viability of the programs, in others it is elaborating on its strengths. CBNRM is intended to achieve the three goals of economic develop, environmental conservation and community empower. While the first two of these goals are the most obvious and easiest to point to with empirical results over the past 25 years since the program's inception, the third is much more abstract and it can be hard to define what this goal means or hopes to achieve. In digging deep enough one can see that this third leg that was carefully crafted into the legislation that would allow communities to develop their own institutions and governance capacities to help manage wildlife, but also once these capacities were in place the idea would be that they could be similarly employed to deal with other challenges in local governance, such as climate change as we are now seeing. Thus, it becomes important to adequately unpack CBNRM as a form of resource governance and to analyze the politics that are involved in it from the local to the global levels in order to fully understand what its goals are, how successful it is in accomplishing them, and importantly to understand its scope beyond only the management of wildlife populations.

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Andrew Heffernan is a PhD candidate in the political studies department at the University of Ottawa, Canada. He is author of 'The official discourse of the Moroccan authorities and their allies in the greening of their public policies: modernization of authoritarianism, international insertion and the fight against climate change' (Relaciones Internacionales, 2019) and 'Africanizing the State: Globalizing the Discipline' (Nokoko, 2019). He is also a contributor on the ongoing project The Future of Protein with fellow colleagues at the University of Ottawa and has published several online policy briefs including 'The Globality of Community-Based Natural Resource Management in Namibia' (CIPS, 2020) and 'Sustainable development and good governance through responsible natural resource development' (IMPACT, 2019). Follow him on Twitter @heff_andrew.