

The Globality of Community-Based Conservation in Namibia

In **Analysis** March 27, 2020 **Andrew Heffernan**






PROFILE

Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) has emerged as a critical technique of resource governance in Southern Africa. It is intended to give control over specific natural resources such as freshwater, forests and forest products and wildlife populations and their habitat to local communities. Its three broad goals include economic development, environmental conservation and community empowerment. However, my recent fieldwork in Namibia has shown that this supposed local approach to sustainable development is inherently global and that the existing literature fails to account for the politics involved from the local to the global levels.

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For Namibia in general and CBNRM in particular, this globality means that this form of resource governance that appears at face value as an apolitical technical fix, is actually heavily influenced by politics from the local to the global levels. This means that it does not operate within a vacuum and is instead heavily influenced by shifts in the international political economy as well as by pressures by a variety of actors within the international community.

Namibia suffered a great deal as a result of colonialism. First, under German occupation (1884-1919) and then as a protectorate of Apartheid South Africa (1919-1990). This legacy intimately affects the capacity of rural Namibia communities to effectively manage natural resources and benefit from them economically through ecotourism as CBNRM intends.

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As a result of these limited capacities, since the passing of the Nature Conservation Act in 1996 by the Namibian government, an entire network of NGOs, both domestic and international, have popped up and fanned out across the whole country as intermediaries to distribute donor funds and create partnerships with communities. NGOs from the outset provided technical expertise in the drafting of constitutions so that communities could be officially be gazetted by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) as Conservancies and then be granted rights to manage local wildlife populations. Beyond this, NGOs channel donor funds to build offices, provide transportation, pay staff salaries and provide training for employees, community members and game guards to protect the wildlife from poaching and other dangers.

While local Namibians are empowered by being deemed Conservancies and granted rights over their wildlife, this is only partial. The MET maintains ultimate control of the wildlife, and when various factors impact wildlife populations, the government has been quick to implement specific restrictions. The impact of this has been seen with Rhino populations which are increasingly threatened and have been placed under a particular category under the direct purview of the state as well as an NGO called Save the Rhino Trust. The country has also been experiencing a significant drought for the better part of a decade, which is threatening wildlife populations and has led to the government to reduce hunting quotas drastically – in some places eliminating them altogether.

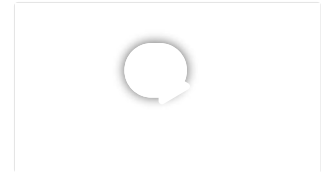
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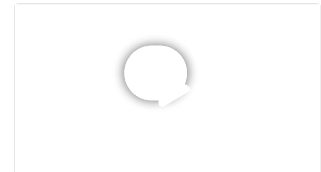


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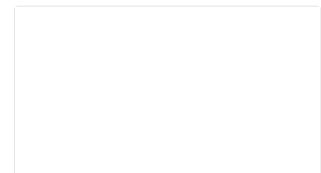
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Namibia's Hardap Region by Mickael Tournier (Unsplash)

Similarly to these varying levels of control maintained by the national government, donor funds do not percolate into communities void of strings attached. Donors of all stripes, whether public or private, have increasingly been targeting funds to specific geographic regions, issue areas, or particular resources and conservation activities. Thus, as NGOs always seek out funds, they must do so by espousing certain types of goals. This means that their activities in the Conservancies often end up being toward a particular end – likely dictated in part by various donors and pressures from the international community. Often the goals of the international community – such as saving endangered wildlife species – are altruistic and honourable, but they can be detached from realities on the ground.

Finally, for Conservancies to create profit from conservation activities, they must engage with private tourism companies to set up lodges, campsites and various tourism activities to draw in foreign tourists. This is a complex industry and again one that rural Namibians are not adequately experienced in to manage themselves and thus, they must engage in these joint-venture agreements through the technical advice and help of the network of NGOs. These joint-venture agreements are intended to keep much of the power and final say in the hands of the community. However, these companies often become virtually the sole employer and source of income for individual Conservancies and even begin providing certain public services where and when the government is unable to. This begins blurring the public from the private and gives these companies a certain degree of power and legitimacy on the ground that can overshadow community voices at times.

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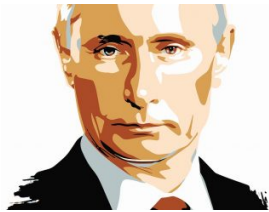
CBNRM is intended to empower rural African communities by providing them with a legislative framework for them to engender their sustainable development through the conservation of specific local natural resources. It is

clear that it in part, accomplishes these goals. The broader picture, however, is much more complicated, than a simple devolution of control from the government to local communities. Instead, what is seen is a variety of actors exercising various forms of power and realizing a variety of goals that are at times in contradiction to one another and, at other times, in harmony. In this way community-based forms of conservation even in the most rural African community is intimately tied into the wider international political economy and are inherently linked to global power dynamics.

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