A crisis in CBNRM? Affirming the commons in southern Africa

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Introduction

Is there a crisis in community-based natural resource management in southern Africa? Should social scientists care? Do they, or anyone else, need to 'affirm the commons' in the region? If so, what contribution can they make? This paper tries to answer these questions. It must begin by exploring what community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) actually is. It argues that community-based nature conservation, despite its prominence, is only one thread in the much broader fabric of rural governance and livelihoods that constitutes CBNRM across the region. It then summarises southern African experience with community-based nature conservation in order to consider whether there is a crisis in that particular kind of CBNRM. It goes on to explore the broader condition of CBNRM as a whole in this part of Africa, in order to establish whether there is a more fundamental crisis in the sector; whether it matters; and what common property scholarship might do about it. In the process, it aims to offer a broader view of CBNRM in southern Africa, and a more accurate perspective of perceived 'crises' affecting it.

What is CBNRM?

CBNRM means different things to different people. In southern Africa, the concept finds its strongest identity in nature conservation. Since the origins of the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) in Zimbabwe in the mid 1980s, a growing number of practitioners and scholars have worked to enhance rural people's participation in and benefits from various forms of nature conservation and management (Hulme and Murphree, 2001). For these people, CBNRM and community-based nature

conservation are generally synonymous. Mostly, the ‘nature’ being conserved and managed in this version of CBNRM is wildlife. Environmentally sustainable trophy hunting that helps relieve rural poverty has been the lead strategy in this kind of CBNRM, and has been a prominent concept in the development of sustainable use approaches to nature conservation and nature-based rural development. Within the global Sustainable Use Specialist Group of IUCN’s Species Survival Commission, the southern African sub-group has been one of the most effective. Its work, too, has been built around a perception of CBNRM as community-based nature conservation, with the accent on wildlife conservation and use – often linked to ecotourism. One of the best web sites on southern African CBNRM to date is the Botswana CBNRM site now hosted by IUCN (http://www.cbnrm.bw/). Having grown up around that country’s community-based nature conservation programme, its interpretation of CBNRM has mainly been in terms of the management of nature conservation and ecotourism by the rural poor. In its early years, the Namibian conservancy movement had similar emphases. Like CAMPFIRE and CBNRM projects in Botswana, the early years of the Namibian programme did not exclude support for the management and sustainable use of plant resources, but built their initial progress on community-based wildlife conservation and related ecotourism opportunities (Jones and Weaver, in press).

There are other interpretations of ‘CBNRM’, however. Two sets of alternative meanings can be identified: those that are resource- or sector-based, and those that differentiate CBNRM in more operational terms.

Besides community-based nature conservation, other resource- or sector-based kinds of CBNRM are easy to identify. Community-based range or pasture management has been a huge field of endeavour for development agencies and scholarship in southern Africa, for example. In recent decades this work has linked increasingly into the vexed questions of rangeland resilience, stocking rates, overgrazing, herd management and production strategies on the communal pastures of this region and others (Scoones, 1994; Vetter, 2003). Social forestry and efforts to create or enhance community forest management have been another major CBNRM sector (Alden Wily, 2002). This work has been given new impetus in South Africa by moves to divest the state of its plantation forests and give the rural poor a stronger stake in the tenure and management of some of them, as well as in management of the indigenous state forests (Government of South Africa, 1998). Community-based fisheries management is a smaller sector. Freshwater fisheries are limited in much of the region.

Concepts of co-management and empowerment are more prominent in marine fisheries, where major local and global companies remain powerful (Isaacs and Mohamed, 2000; Hara and Nielsen, 2003; Hara, in press). But this sector, too, has shown scope for enhancing community governance and profit. Perhaps least prominent to date as CBNRM, but in fact probably the most widespread CBNRM resource sector, is community-based water management. Through much of the region, rural water supply programmes have striven (with indifferent success) to build or strengthen community management of local water resources and systems (on Lesotho experience, see Sechaba Consultants, 1995, 85-88; Mashinini, 2001). South Africa's new catchment management approach (Schreiner and van Koppen, 2001) poses major CBNRM challenges in that country's rapidly evolving but still uncertain local government context.

An extension of this resource- or sector-based approach to CBNRM concerns itself with ways in which the whole landscape of natural resources can be managed, based on existing or enhanced insights into the functioning of ecosystems, hydrology, soils and so on. Some early interventions by outside authorities in communal areas land management – such as colonial soil conservation programmes from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the 'betterment' schemes of South Africa's apartheid regime over roughly the same period (de Wet, 1995) – took this land use planning approach. Typically, they were technically and socially misguided. The land use planning programmes of more recent decades have gradually achieved better technical insights, a stronger input of indigenous knowledge, more participatory approaches and more meaningful links to rural livelihoods, although the end result is sometimes that process overwhelms content. External CBNRM initiatives that address the landscape as a whole are not common. Community resource management structures, on the other hand, must typically take an integrated view of their landscape and its resources, even though (as famously among the Lozi of Zambia and Namibia (Munalula, 2000)) sub-structures may be given responsibility for specific resource sectors like fisheries or wildlife.

It is easy to point out, then, that CBNRM in southern Africa (and elsewhere) is not just about community-based wildlife management or community-based nature conservation. But further insights can be gained by differentiating CBNRM in operational terms, as Fabricius *et al.* (in press) have recently done.

This operational kind of differentiation emphasises that CBNRM is not a recent import to Africa. It is an indigenous practice rooted in generations of evolving local governance systems. Whatever the strains that rapid social and political change are now imposing on those local structures and systems, some kind of CBNRM continues to function across most of the communal areas of southern Africa – in other words, across most of the region. The threat of open access looms large in various contexts where state or communal tenure previously prevailed; but it has not yet become a reality in many. Most rural livelihoods in southern Africa thus continue to be underpinned, at least in part, by 'everyday' or 'general' CBNRM institutions – commonly retaining elements of traditional authority, often decaying and uncertain, but still at least partly in place. These institutions must address the whole landscape for which they are responsible, with all of its component resources, sectors and livelihoods. Typically, they administer land tenure and allocations, as well as natural resource use and management. Governments, and conservation and development agencies, have little or no involvement with most of this vast fabric of 'everyday' CBNRM. Trying to enhance it usually seems too local, expensive and politically contentious. In such contexts, traditional authorities are unsurprisingly resilient. Only in the special circumstances of Botswana's Land Boards and Sub Land Boards (a comparatively rich government and relatively few people) has southern Africa seen successful, country-wide enhancement of 'everyday' CBNRM.

In this operational view, 'everyday' or 'general' CBNRM can be contrasted with 'focused' CBNRM, by which Fabricius *et al.* mean the CBNRM initiatives of governments, donors and other conservation and development agencies. The 'CBNRM' projects of those whose perspective is community-based nature conservation, as well as community range management and social forestry projects and the like, are 'focused' CBNRM initiatives. This kind of CBNRM receives the lion's share of the funding and the analytical attention in southern Africa, but actually involves far fewer people, landscapes and livelihoods than the unheralded 'everyday' or 'general' CBNRM with which most of the region's rural people still try to structure their rural production systems. Enhancing this kind of CBNRM to assure its future through the 21st century is a far greater challenge than delivering more community water, forestry or wildlife management projects.

At this point we should pause to check what any of this has to do with the commons or common property resources scholarship. The answer should be fairly obvious. As successive IASCP conferences have recognised through their extensive discussions of it, CBNRM is an

operational version of common property resource management, deriving from the specific context of rural development and resource conservation efforts in developing countries. It took some time for common property scholars and CBNRM practitioners to find each other, but it has become clear that common property theory can be enriched from the practical experience of CBNRM, while CBNRM practice can be usefully sharpened by reference to the insights of common property scholarship. To all intents and purposes, CBNRM is management of the commons – although technically those commons are sometimes the property of the state or of a nature conservation authority.

The questions this paper addresses thus seem vital to common property scholarship. Is there a crisis on the southern African commons? Have common property theory and 'focused' CBNRM practice failed to develop workable approaches?

Experience with community-based nature conservation

Community-based nature conservation has been one of the most charismatic features of southern Africa's rural development experience over the last two decades. Only the briefest summary will be given here, as there is an enormous literature on the achievements and problems of this kind of 'focused' CBNRM and IASCP has played no small role in its development. Zimbabwe led the way in 1988 with the designation of the first two Rural District Councils as 'appropriate authorities' for the management of wildlife under its CAMPFIRE programme. Although fundamentally flawed at the outset (Jones and Murphree, 2001) and recently compromised by Zimbabwe's political and economic problems, CAMPFIRE achieved significant empowerment for many communities and substantial economic benefits for some. Although less successful than its global reputation might imply, the programme promised until recently to be a modest but sustainable development and revenue strategy for many communal areas of Zimbabwe.

Like CAMPFIRE, Namibia's conservancy programme was rooted in ultimately successful efforts to amend wildlife conservation legislation to give communal areas communities wildlife management authority. As in Zimbabwe, the evolution of the programme over the years suggests that the empowerment and governance dimensions of the Namibian conservancies may ultimately prove more significant than their achievements in community-

based nature conservation and ecotourism. Even more than in Zimbabwe, opportunities in these sectors are unevenly distributed across the communal areas and their populations, while the challenges of local governance and institutional development are universal.

Botswana, too, offers only localised opportunities to build significant economic development from community-based wildlife management. In a few of the Community Management Areas supported by that country's Natural Resource Management Programme in the Okavango, substantial ecotourism revenues could be shared among very small populations. But even there the institutional challenges have been daunting, and a recent review of Botswana's first ten years of 'CBNRM implementation' concludes that "the assumptions on which the CBNRM approach in Botswana is built are rather unrealistic, thus making it unlikely to achieve an enduring positive impact" (Rozemeijer, 2003a:7).

Zambia, like the other three countries just discussed, received USAID support for its 'focused' CBNRM programme, ADMADE, but had to implement it in difficult institutional and economic circumstances. It had demonstrated by 2000 that "CBNRM is a workable system for wildlife management in at least some GMAs [Game Management Areas], and may be applicable to others". It had had some significant local successes, notably in the Luangwa valley, where some GMAs' CBNRM activities were judged likely to be self-sustaining (Clarke, 2000: i). Marks (2001: 123) is less positive about ADMADE's achievements, accusing it of "an inappropriate understanding of the specific context of wildlife uses and related livelihood practices within its Game Management Areas". He concludes that "the inabilities [sic] to control and guide the behaviors of intervening bureaucratic and local institutions continues as a major obstacle to implementing conservation ideas by donors" (*op. cit.:* 136). "Second generation CBNRM" is said to have been achieved in the Luangwa Integrated Resource Development Project, with more local levels of authority and accountability, stronger participation and more direct flow of financial benefits to local people (Child and Dalal-Clayton, n.d.; see also Wainwright and Wehrmeyer, 1998)

In the late 1990s, Anstey (2001) described the process approach taken by Mozambique in shifting from an emphasis on state managed protected areas to community-based nature conservation. There was a rapid change in attitudes and practice during that decade, although formal changes in legislation and subordinate regulations lagged far behind, the administrative structures and systems remained complex and sometimes unhelpful, and

practical benefits on the ground for rural people and biodiversity remained limited. There has been further legislative progress, however, with the new land law of 1997 and the forestry and wildlife law of 1999. Nhantumbo *et al.* (2003: 2) describe "the major thrust" of current policy and law as being the devolution of control over resources to users; local participation in development planning and management; and the intention that "communities living in and around natural resource sources should be the primary beneficiaries of exploitation activities, and will invest in law enforcement themselves."

The historical geography of South Africa automatically restricts community-based nature conservation and ecotourism opportunities there. The country's political history and current intensive restructuring beset what opportunities there are with multiple challenges. There have been some genuine successes - most notably by the Makuleke community, who regained land lost to the Kruger National Park in the apartheid era and are following up on limited trophy hunting with other forms of high value ecotourism (Steenkamp and Uhr, 2000; Reid, 2001). Elsewhere, as in the community ownership and supposed co-management of the Richtersveld National Park, the progress has been more mixed (Isaacs and Mohamed, 2000; Reid and Turner, in press). Current widespread enthusiasm for community-based ecotourism in South Africa probably over-estimates the opportunities to enhance the livelihoods of the rural poor. But some real opportunities do exist and the country is well supplied with the human and financial resources to achieve genuine progress where the circumstances are right.

This brief and partial summary shows that community-based nature conservation has absorbed an enormous amount of development effort and analytical attention in southern Africa. It has achieved significant local successes, weathered many disappointments and still seems to many to offer inspiring potential as a sustainable development strategy. Its charisma derives partly from the megafauna that have been so central to it. But there are broader reasons for its strong profile, linked to its capacity to create win-win situations. It can reverse most colonial and post-colonial nature conservation experience by enhancing ecosystems, securing species survival and strengthening livelihoods in an integrated manner. It can reinforce local governance in ways that benefit other sectors of rural life. With its emphasis on indigenous technical and governance capacities and local responsibility, it is empowering and affirming for people whose abilities have been denigrated or ignored for generations.

A crisis in community-based nature conservation?

Despite these strengths, community-based nature conservation – or 'CBNRM', as its practitioners see it – is increasingly criticised. Since the first practical experiences with this kind of CBNRM in the 1980s, there has always been commentary on the weaknesses and problems of such initiatives, as well as their strengths and achievements. More recently, some broader appraisals of ten to 20 years' experience catalogue at least as many negative as positive points (e.g. Emerton, 2001; Rozemeijer, 2003a,b). But now, the criticism in some quarters is so harsh that some practitioners of this 'focused' CBNRM have come to perceive a crisis in CBNRM.

Riding the rising tide of realism and reappraisal about community-based nature conservation is an increasingly strident species conservation lobby. Based mostly in countries that exterminated much of their wildlife in earlier centuries, these critics argue that there is no time left for experimentation with people-centred approaches to wildlife conservation in Africa and similar regions. The progress has been too slow and unconvincing, they believe, and extinction rates continue to rise. In a review of Brandon *et al.* (1998), for example, Hamilton-Smith (2000) refers to "the stupidity of the naïve assumption that consumption and protection can proceed hand-in-hand". Conventional 'fortress' conservation, behind the fences of formal protected areas, must be reinforced as the only realistic way to protect the earth's remaining biodiversity. What alarms proponents of community-based nature conservation is not only the attraction of such essentially right-wing critiques in the increasingly right-wing global policy environment, but also the inevitable swing of development fashion away from their kind of strategy. Community-based nature conservation is no longer the vogue that it was ten years ago. Can it continue to attract the sort of development funding in this decade that it enjoyed in the last?

In a recent presentation that he prepared with Dilys Roe, Jon Hutton gave a summary of these 'back to the barriers' critiques (Hutton and Roe, 2003). Examples of the literature he quoted were Kramer *et al.*, 1997; Brandon *et al.*, 1998; Oates, 1999; and Terborgh, 1999. One set of arguments, perhaps most attractive to animal rights activists and those buying up tracts of developing countries to create protected areas, is that the conservation of biodiversity is an absolute and overriding imperative, moral as well as environmental. Qualms about the impact of protected areas on local populations cannot be allowed to get in the way. A related line of

reasoning is that protected areas have proved their worth in conserving biodiversity and remain the essential core strategy for that purpose. The exclusion of human residence and resource use from these areas must therefore be reinforced. Thirdly, 'back to the barriers' critiques can point to the uninspiring record of community-based nature conservation, which has so often done rather little to conserve biodiversity or enrich the rural poor (Emerton, 2001; Franks and Worah, 2003). Participation and enforcement of conservation regulations do not work well together, it is argued. 'Sustainable use' may not be as sustainable as is claimed. It turns out to be impractical to combine conservation and development goals in one effort, and it is unrealistic to build development goals onto conservation programmes (an argument that reminds us how many community-based nature conservation initiatives are fundamentally driven by conservation rather than development motives). The fourth set of arguments attacks the notion that rural populations in developing countries are environmentally wise and responsible, with some special innate commitment to nature conservation.

It is not hard to formulate responses to most of these criticisms, as Hutton and Roe went on to do in the presentation quoted above. Emphasis on the absolute rights of nature or the absolute importance of exclusion can be dismissed in its turn as unrealistic and impractical. But comments on the poor track record of community-based nature conservation have to be taken seriously, and do not come only from those determined to strengthen the fences around protected areas. As Emerton (*op. cit.*) points out, most 'focused' CBNRM initiatives of this kind have given far too little attention to the economics of what they advocate (see also Turner *et al.*, 2002: 7-9; Fabricius *et al.*, in press). The opportunity costs of devoting land to nature conservation and ecotourism can be substantial. So too are the direct costs of living close to wildlife, notably the crop damage and livestock losses caused by species like elephants, lions and leopards.

A more political kind of critique comes from those like Dzingirai (2003) who argue that CBNRM programmes like CAMPFIRE have been successfully manipulated by the state and its private sector allies to suppress the economic, institutional and social interests of the rural poor. To them, the current crisis of CBNRM is the invasion of rural society, economy and landscape by these all-powerful external forces, in the face of which even the traditional subterfuges and strategies of the disadvantaged are proving powerless.

Rozemeijer, in the ten-year review of Botswana experience quoted above, refers to "a growing chorus of local critics who are doubtful about the impact of CBNRM" (2003a: 1). He points out that, only ten years after the first Botswana community gained wildlife management authority, it is difficult to judge impacts on biodiversity and rural development. Nevertheless, he says, it is clear that a number of the programme's assumptions were inaccurate. Social homogeneity is the exception rather than the rule, for example. CBNRM does not have the degree of domestic political acceptance and budgetary commitment that outside supporters thought it would achieve. Community capacity for natural resource management has not been built to the necessary level, and community structures are in any case not the best bodies for the management of commercial tourism operations. Furthermore, the revenues that some of those operations are generating are ending up in local infrastructure and in better salaries and support for local elites, rather than being distributed in cash to the population as a whole. So the assumed economic motive for the rural poor to support nature conservation and shoulder its direct and opportunity costs hardly functions. Outsiders' visions of community-based nature conservation driving equitable rural development tend to founder on the realities of established elites capturing most of the authority and benefits, despite guidelines, constitutions and (usually brief) training processes that the CBNRM support programme provided. Overall, Rozemeijer concludes, building community-based nature conservation takes much longer than typical development funding and delivery frameworks are prepared to allow. Will the world (and the government) wait for the intended content of these initiatives to emerge from the apparently endless process?

The inherent weaknesses of Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme are well known and do not need to be repeated at any length here. The initial intention to give communities tenure of the land on which they managed wildlife was frustrated by the entrenched interests of the Rural District Councils, which "created what is the major current weakness of the CAMPFIRE programme" (Jones and Murphree, 2001: 46). The original aim of defining genuine 'communities' as the production and management units also proved unrealistic, with RDCs' existing sub-structures, the Ward Development Committees, taking this role instead. Meanwhile, the revenues generated by rural people's resource management and ecotourism efforts were received by the RDCs, which had considerable discretion as to how much money to pass to the local level. These perhaps necessary tactical compromises have reduced the programme's effectiveness ever since. More trenchant recent critiques argue that, far from empowering and enriching the rural poor, this 'community-based' programme exploits and

marginalises them (Dzingirai, 2003). The current collapse of Zimbabwe's tourism industry is a new and potent threat to CAMPFIRE's intended linkage of nature conservation with rural development, although some of the settlers and other interests involved in current land redistribution still see nature conservation as a legitimate and viable land use (Wolmer *et al.*, 2003).

So far, as outlined above, South Africa's experience with community-based nature conservation has been much more limited. But, drawing partly on regional lessons and partly on obvious social, institutional and economic realities at home, observers are reaching similar conclusions about the need for realism. Ecotourism is very much in vogue among the country's private land owners, almost all of whom belong to the still privileged white elite. The rural poor in the former 'homelands' must compete successfully against established and professional ecotourism operations if conventional conservation with development strategies are to succeed. Quoting South Africa's best known community-based nature conservation success story, the Makuleke of Limpopo Province, Turner *et al*. argue that "the challenges and complexities of the sector make it likely that few other communities or areas will develop such good prospects of sustainable income streams and effective conservation… even in the best of scenarios, locally-based nature conservation and ecotourism do not spell riches for rural communities. This emphasises the importance of bundling multiple forms of sustainable natural resource use into local development strategies, maximising the number of sustainable benefit streams that can be captured" (Turner *et al.*, 2002: 12-13).

New structures and motives have gained prominence in the last few years' growing enthusiasm for Trans-Frontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) in southern Africa. Participatory approaches to CBNRM were supposedly central to the emerging TFCA concept. But there is now widespread scepticism about the sincerity of conservation authorities and their new allies in TFCA promotion, the private sector, with regard to rural community interests and participation (Katerere, Hill and Moyo, 2001: 18-26; Wolmer, 2003: 16). These transboundary initiatives may further nature conservation aims, promote regional peace and capture ecotourism benefits for the private sector, but they appear to be exacerbating the marginalisation of remote rural communities and bypassing the community-based nature conservation approaches that have been developing across the region.

We may give greater credence to the threat of resurgent fortress conservation, to claims of collusion by the state and business against the rural poor, or to the kinds of operational problems identified above in various countries' experience with community-based nature conservation. Whatever our choice, should we conclude that there is a crisis in southern African CBNRM? First, we should remind ourselves that, if there is a crisis, we are talking about a crisis in community-based nature conservation – just one kind of the 'focused' variety of CBNRM that was defined above. It is not necessarily a crisis in other kinds of CBNRM. Secondly, and with regard to the one sub-sector that is under discussion, we should acknowledge that there are a number of serious issues to be addressed. Responses must certainly be formulated to the 'back to the barriers' movement. It is definitely important, as in so many other fields of rural development work, to tackle the fickleness of development fashion and to encourage governments and donors to accept that sustainable development strategies like community-based nature conservation take time. If that battle can be won and the resources for continued support remain available, practitioners and scholars then clearly have a long list of strategic and operational challenges to deal with.

But it is important to realise that, even in this specific sub-sector of 'focused' CBNRM, there is plenty of positive experience on which to build. The conservancy concept in Namibia was first promoted as a way of building community commitment to, and profit from, nature conservation. Now, as more and more conservancies are established and help to fill the gap left by a 'local' government system that does not reach far below the country's ten Regions, conservancies are becoming more of a social movement (M. Jacobsohn, pers. comm.). They offer a way for rural people to organise and empower themselves, enhancing their local governance and sometimes contributing significantly to local revenues. Few observers in Namibia would perceive any kind of 'crisis' in CBNRM (Jones and Weaver, in press). Although success stories (such as the Makuleke) are more localised in South Africa and many community-based ecotourism initiatives have little chance of success, commitment to CBNRM principles can be identified in many areas of national policy (Fabricius *et al.*, 2003) and the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism has now produced an overarching set of guidelines for the promotion and implementation of CBNRM initiatives (DEAT, 2003). Although rooted largely in community-based nature conservation experience, these guidelines offer generic advice for all kinds of CBNRM. South African practitioners would probably prefer to speak of CBNRM challenges, rather than a crisis. Mozambicans, too, are still near the start of a long road of policy and programme development in which they will

rely more on their own intellectual and material resources than those of donor agencies. Although initial community-based nature conservation initiatives in that country have a mixed record, they would probably find talk of a ‘crisis’ premature, preferring to focus on the many challenges for which they have started to find solutions.

A general crisis in CBNRM?

Whether there is a crisis in southern African community-based nature conservation is debatable. But the issues discussed so far certainly do not add up to a crisis in southern African CBNRM as a whole. To identify that kind of crisis, we must see serious challenges to the full spectrum of ‘focused’ and ‘general’ or ‘everyday’ CBNRM as defined above.

There are some grounds for fearing that this bigger crisis does indeed threaten CBNRM as a whole in substantial parts of southern Africa. It seems that in many places, the fabric of tenure, governance and livelihoods that makes CBNRM necessary and workable may be coming apart. The real question is whether and how the commons are to survive in southern Africa. Do they have an institutional future? Do they have an economic future?

To begin with, there are basic questions about land tenure in the region. CBNRM is mainly predicated on the existence of communal areas. In some very specific instances in the South African land reform programme (and, arguably, those of Namibia and Zimbabwe), groups are awarded freehold title to land, in which case some of the challenges of CBNRM are replicated in different tenurial conditions. CBNRM challenges also face those South African communities whose newly formed Communal Property Associations were recently awarded ownership of former ‘Coloured’ reserves under the Transformation of Certain Rural Areas Act (Isaacs and Mohamed, 2000; Wisborg and Rohde, 2003). But the broader question is whether the great swathes of ‘communal areas’ across southern Africa are to persist, with their need for CBNRM institutions.

There are several kinds of answer to this question. In some countries, the indigenous commons are being transformed by evolving policy and legislation. New tenure systems frame individual rights more clearly, but still within a structure of communal ownership and land administration and resource management by (at least partially) democratic group

institutions. This is the course that Botswana has followed since its Tribal Land Act of 1968. With plans for a revised system of individual leasehold of land still held in trust by the King for the nation and governed by new local authorities, Lesotho is also contemplating retention of the commons under modernised management structures. Namibia's Communal Land Reform Act, which came into operation in 2003, also intends a 'modernisation of the commons' with enhanced customary and leasehold rights administered by Communal Land Boards and traditional authorities (LAC and NNFU, 2003).

Mozambique's 1997 land law has also reinforced community tenure while providing a framework for the identification and registration of individual rights and clarifying the role of traditional authorities in the prevention and resolution of conflicts (Norfolk and Liversage, n.d.; Kloeck-Jenson, 2000; Hanlon, 2002). Tanzania's Village Land Act, enacted in 1999 and effective from 2001, "lays out the legal framework and procedures for most of Tanzania's rural land to henceforth be governed through a community based land tenure management system" (Alden Wily, 2003: 1). At the time of writing, the fate of communal areas in South Africa is unclear. Shortly before it was passed by Parliament, a Communal Land Rights Bill was hastily amended to give sweeping new powers over land to traditional leaders, perhaps to persuade them to accept the limitation of their general local government authority in other legislation (Cousins and Claassens, 2003; see also Ntsebeza, 1999; Claassens, 2001). Probably for political reasons, South African land policy and policy-makers seem hostile to, or suspicious of, the modes of equitable community land ownership that must underpin CBNRM. The by now blatantly undemocratic character of the Communal Land Rights Act is still being vigorously contested by land rights activists early in 2004, with general elections a few months away. A challenge in the Constitutional Court seems likely.

The future character of South Africa's commons is not assured at the time of writing, and several other countries' land legislation is so recent that it is premature to judge how secure and equitable individual and community rights will be on their 'modernised commons'. What is clear is that there is no prospect of a wholesale replacement of communal by individual tenure across the region. Any such absolute change remains politically and administratively unfeasible. What legislation is doing in several cases is to clarify and reinforce individual rights within communal systems, notably by stronger leasehold arrangements intended to facilitate lending, investment and the operation of land markets. In some cases (as in

Lesotho's proposed new land law) the opportunity is being taken to strengthen women's land rights.

In these senses, then (and bearing in mind how sketchy and incomplete this survey of regional developments is), there is no general 'crisis of the commons' in tenure terms in this region, and therefore no reason to see a 'crisis of southern African CBNRM' on the grounds that the mode of tenure that makes CBNRM necessary is threatened with extinction. On the contrary, several (certainly not all) of these reforms are appropriate responses to changing political and economic circumstances and may make communal land tenure and administration more equitable and democratic.

This is the nature of developments in southern African policy and statutes. What is happening on the ground may make us less sanguine about the prospects for CBNRM. In several areas, the commons are being enclosed by individuals, either singly or as small interest groups. Sometimes, policy and laws may officially sanction this. As early as the 1970s, fears were being expressed that the allocation of individual rights to large areas of Botswana's communal grazing under the Tribal Grazing Land Policy (via the award of water rights) would facilitate a land grab by the rich (Hitchcock, 1978; see also Colclough and McCarthy, 1980: 118-120). Less formally and more recently, there is evidence of widespread private enclosure of communal grazing by individual stock owners in northern and eastern Namibia, although some communities are responding by fencing their grazing in order to protect their group rights (Fuller and Turner, 1996; Fuller and Nghikembua, 1996). In the decade since the collapse of apartheid land administration in South Africa's former 'homelands', there have been instances of elite groups effectively privatising areas of agricultural or grazing land (Ntshona, 2002: 58-60), or of wetlands containing communal reed beds (Shackleton, pers. comm.), and abundant evidence of chiefs suppressing equity and community interest through corrupt land allocation practice (Claassens, 2001). Perhaps less threatening to the character of communal tenure and CBNRM is the common enclosure of fields held under communal systems in places like Lesotho and the former South African 'homelands', extinguishing traditional communal rights to graze them after harvest.

Whatever the legislation may say, the commons are being eroded on the ground in various parts of southern Africa. Outright *de facto* privatisation constitutes a crisis of the commons – and therefore of CBNRM - in some, still limited, areas. Adjustments like the fencing of fields

can, and usually should be, accommodated within evolving communal tenure and resource management frameworks. Overall, despite the gravity of land grabs in some places, it would be exaggerated on the available evidence to claim a general 'crisis of southern African CBNRM' on the grounds that the commons are ceasing to exist.

To see the gravest signs of a crisis on the southern African commons, and hence a crisis for southern African CBNRM, we must look to the governance of these vast areas. For a range of reasons and with varying degrees of sectoral focus, many governments in the region have (partially) transferred "bundles of [resource management] entrustments" to local groups or entities, ranging from District Councils to conservancies and village committees (Campbell and Shackleton, 2001). But the context for all such efforts is the general framework of local government: its capacity and quality. Indeed, Campbell and Shackleton argue for the integration of specific CBNRM initiatives with this broader local framework: "it is necessary that CBNRM organisations mesh within local government structures and development processes" (*ibid.*: 12). The quality or even the survival of the kinds of local governance that CBNRM needs is increasingly in doubt.

There are complex interplays between the states of war and peace and trends in local governance. In the military liberation and post-liberation struggles of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, for instance, traditional structures were reasserted and had some success in maintaining the fabric of governance at community level. In the attrition and oppression of South Africa's Bantustans, traditional authorities were often co-opted by the regime, creating a grotesque parody of indigenous institutions and values.

In more peaceful circumstances, several things can happen to local governance. Complex and protracted reforms have been attempted in many countries, usually creating a confusing vacuum on the ground. This may be because of the time it takes for clarity to emerge and laws to be passed – as in Lesotho (Matela and Ntlale, 2000: 50; Turner, 2003: 13;) and South Africa (Turner, 1999; Ntsebeza, 1999: 62-63). It may also be because governments balk at the prospect of (re)building local government down to the truly local level, and create structures – as in Namibia and South Africa – that are actually remote from local people (Atkinson, 2002). Often, the respective roles of 'traditional' and 'modern' local government institutions are unclear, as Nemarundwe reports from Zimbabwe: "it is not clear on the ground which authority structures should be doing what" (Nemarundwe, 2004: 288).

Most widespread is the lack of local capacity to respond to modern local government challenges. The only exception (again) has been Botswana, with its strong resources and small population, where local government training has had significant success. Everywhere else, efforts to build the capacity of local government structures (where these formally exist at all) have been pitifully inadequate. South Africa, in fact, retreated from its first attempt at revised local government, realising that there was no prospect of getting the more local first tier structures to work effectively when so much remained to be done at the second tier. It abolished the first tier. From Zimbabwe, Campbell *et al.* report "a demise of community values and a rise of individualism and household-centred behaviour" and find that "local governance structures in Zimbabwe's communal areas tend to be ineffectual". They find that community management of woodland resources is breaking down, although there is not yet a "vacuum of institutions" (Campbell *et al.*, 2001: 592-594). In Lesotho, Matela and Ntlale (2000: 50) find that "common property access is being converted to open access because of the lack of operational regulatory structures and the phasing out of the communally accepted systems of regulation which have over time guided resource use".

A wide array of factors is at work here. Where vacuums and confusion beset local governance, it cannot be assumed that traditional systems can fill the breach. As 'rural' livelihoods and social norms change more and more quickly, it is unclear in some parts of the region whether 'rural' people will retain enough of a social fabric for CBNRM and other local governance to remain workable – particularly as HIV/AIDS ravages the next generation of leaders. Amoral colonial and apartheid regimes helped to stimulate disrespect for customary and statute law in many communal settings. The current pace of social change, the corruption of some traditional and modern authorities and the general ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies in rural areas are all exacerbating this trend. While 20th century labour migration patterns did not entirely disrupt the development of successive generations of local rural leadership, accelerated and intensified 21st century interactions between the rural and urban sectors make competent and committed leadership capacity look less assured in the communal areas. CBNRM is about local governance. If local governance is ineffective, so is CBNRM.

Furthermore, current changes in 'rural' livelihoods often involve decreased dependence on the rural resources that CBNRM can govern, due to increased economic opportunities from

urban employment; the provision in some countries of welfare support; rural land degradation; and changes in the terms of trade for agriculture and other rural production. For generations already, many 'rural' livelihoods in this region have depended heavily on urban sources of income. Yet, partly because the sub-subsistence levels of migrant labour wages necessitated continued dependence on rural production too, the fabric of communal areas agriculture and its requisite CBNRM were at least partially maintained. Now, especially in richer countries like Botswana, South Africa, Swaziland, Namibia and Lesotho (Turner *et al.*, 2001, Turner, 2003), that is less true. Some arable and grazing areas are falling into disuse, and from that perspective the relevance of CBNRM dwindles. Although the poor of these countries may be increasing their dependence on natural resource use as they struggle to survive, the governance of rural landscapes is becoming weaker. This, of course, is prime territory for a few enterprising individuals who do see a future in (usually more commercial) crop or livestock production, and take advantage of the situation by effectively privatising land.

If all these changes meant that the overall quality of livelihoods and the environment in communal areas was improving, there would be no point in lamenting the decay of local governance there, or of worrying about the future of CBNRM. In fact, no such general improvements are taking place. Land degradation and reduced biodiversity are widespread realities. Poverty remains entrenched, although some richer countries (Botswana, Namibia, South Africa) have instituted or strengthened social welfare safety nets for the rural poor. Income distribution is becoming even more skewed. Some communal areas, and especially remoter regions, are increasingly isolated from the mainstream of national socio-economic development. Urban elites and policy makers might want to wish the communal areas out of existence, but they continue to accommodate major (in some countries majority) sectors of national populations who, despite economic linkages with the cities, are not all about to relocate to the urban or freehold sectors. Typically, the contribution of the communal areas to national economies is grossly underestimated. Research from former South African 'homelands', for example, shows the enormous value of natural resource-based production there (Shackleton *et al.*, 2000a,b).

In fact, the communal areas will play many essential roles in southern African societies and economies for the foreseeable future. Their apparently intractable problems are not going to go away, and are being exacerbated by current policy neglect or perversities. In the certain

absence of wholesale conversion to individual tenure across the region, this means that effective local governance of the communal areas – which includes effective CBNRM - will remain vitally important. The current crisis in that local governance is the real crisis of southern African CBNRM.

This crisis is compounded by another kind of policy neglect, related to the operational categories of CBNRM proposed near the start of this paper. It is ‘focused’ CBNRM that receives the lion’s share of governments’ and donors’ attention, although the total of the target populations of all these ‘focused’ projects remains a small fraction of the population of the communal areas as a whole. ‘Everyday’ or ‘general’ CBNRM, which is significant to so many more livelihoods across the region, is rarely tackled as a specific development challenge. Whereas community-based conservation, range management, social forestry and similar initiatives can be tackled within the conventional framework of development projects and programmes, this seems to be much less true for the broader challenges of enhancing community-level governance and natural resource management across local society and landscapes as a whole. Yet this has to be the framework for any more focused CBNRM. These challenges are much vaster, more complex and less amenable to project packaging, both in scope and in time. Enhancing local government has been a component of some governments’ and donors’ development programmes. But, as explained above, these efforts rarely reach the truly local level where CBNRM is needed as a framework and foundation for sustainable livelihoods.

The balance of development attention, in other words, is the wrong way around. This compounds the real crisis of southern African CBNRM – the crisis of community level governance. Throughout the region, rural people still try to govern their societies and their natural resource use. Open access may be in prospect, but it is rarely yet a reality. The institutions of local governance and natural resource management are often decaying, almost always under-resourced, and usually threatened by forces that range from official government neglect, through decreasing respect for local institutions and regulation, to a lack of willing, capable or incorruptible leaders. Despite all these problems, they continue to function, however imperfectly. Yet this vast social effort is largely ignored by governments and donor agencies – because they cannot contemplate the challenge of supporting and upgrading it, because they do not understand the roles it plays, or because of a lack of political or policy commitment to the communal sector. The people of the communal areas are far from giving

up on ‘everyday’ CBNRM. But their achievements and needs go largely unheeded in ‘development’ policies and processes.

Affirming the commons

This paper has argued that, although there may be a crisis in community-based nature conservation in some parts of southern Africa, this is far from being the true crisis of CBNRM in the region. CBNRM is much more than community-based nature conservation, and it faces broader and graver challenges than those of that specific sub-sector. It is hard to see a viable future for the societies and economies of the region without viable institutions and economic activity in the communal areas. A prerequisite for that is effective and equitable local governance, one part of which is effective and equitable CBNRM. That is the crisis of southern African CBNRM, a crisis compounded by being largely ignored.

It should be clear that this is a matter of serious concern for committed scholars of the commons. How can they help to address it? Overall, the challenge is to affirm the commons in southern Africa: to emphasise their socio-economic importance and their potential role in effective environmental management and sustainable development. This challenge is not driven by any idealistic or sentimental commitment to the commons. Indeed, Campbell *et al.* (2002: 140) argue that “ultimately, we would want a world without communal lands”. But in today’s world and today’s southern Africa, the commons and effective CBNRM have a vital role to play in sustaining millions of rural livelihoods. By affirming the commons through their work, scholars can help to attract the requisite level of attention and development support for enhancing governance and natural resource management on the commons. There are three specific ways in which research can contribute to these tasks.

First, more work is needed to value the commons: specifically, to continue research in various parts of the region on the economic roles of natural resources, the ways in which many of these resources or products derived from them are marketed, and the revenue streams that they bring into communal area livelihoods. Data that show the economic and financial value of natural resources in the communal areas are important evidence in advocacy for stronger policy attention to these areas and their governance.

Secondly, sociologists and economists should research the other side of this coin: identifying and quantifying the costs of doing too little to support governance, production and natural resource management in the communal areas. How are the livelihoods of rural (and urban) people degraded by poor governance and a deteriorating natural resource base in these areas? What production and revenues are foregone because of these trends? What extra strains are placed on welfare systems, urban infrastructure and the national exchequer by governance and production weaknesses in such a major sector of southern African society and economy? What, ultimately, are the likely political costs of the instability that a disintegrating communal sector is likely to cause?

Thirdly, researchers should start to identify ways to reinforce local governance and 'everyday' CBNRM across the communal areas of the region. What low cost, large-scale solutions can there be? A first step towards answering this daunting question is to develop better data and explanations about the weaknesses, and strengths, of current governance institutions and practice. To what extent do current weaknesses lie in tenure arrangements, or the impacts of HIV/AIDS, or local or national economic conditions, or political dispositions – to name just some potential factors? Do stronger features of current situations suggest directions or resources on which to build? In all this work the research emphasis should not be specifically on range management institutions, or wildlife management practice, or any other specific sub-sector. Instead, it should be on the full scope of CBNRM within the framework of general local governance. Unless a workable general framework is in place, sector-specific initiatives have little chance of sustainability.

Two more specific research directions are suggested by Namibian experience. Namibia, like many other southern African countries, combines communal and freehold sectors. Much effort in promoting community-based wildlife management there has focused on building the resource management rights of communal areas residents up to the same level as that enjoyed by freehold land owners. This suggests a simple paradigm for CBNRM in such circumstances, which is to identify the differentials between communal residents' and freehold owners' rights and to work to remove them (C. Brown, pers. comm.). The second idea from Namibia, like the first, echoes Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE experience. The institutional vehicle for the community-based nature conservation programme, the conservancy, has grown beyond the original conservation-with-development intentions and is achieving a broader social and institutional empowerment for the rapidly expanding number

of participants in the communal areas. In many Namibian conservancies, as in many CAMPFIRE communities, the biggest benefit of the whole process may ultimately be not the healthier environment or the higher revenues, but the broader enhancements to local governance and political confidence. This suggests a further research task: to seek other originally 'focused' CBNRM initiatives that are achieving, or could be stimulated to achieve, these broader governance and livelihood benefits.

Concerns about a crisis of confidence in community-based nature conservation are valid. But the real crisis of southern African CBNRM lies in much broader weaknesses in the local governance of the communal areas, and in the wholly inadequate attention that these weaknesses currently receive. To secure its societies, economies and environment through the coming century, southern Africa has to affirm its commons. Applied research can help support and inform the changes in awareness, attitude and policy that are needed.

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