Special Section

On *the Local Community:* The Language of Disengagement?

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Abstract: *For several decades now, social researchers have advocated and steered the popular paradigm of participatory, grass-roots research. The emergence of research that engages, transfers authority to, and empowers 'the community', apparently marks the end of centrist, top-down research initiatives. We offer an alternative interpretation of this assumption. In the case of one Indaba in South Africa—a participatory meeting—we show that while it seems to have achieved its stated objectives on the surface, underlying research beliefs and attitudes still interpreted 'local people' and 'the community' as simple, discrete concepts. Such concepts turned abstract processes into concrete entities. In turn, the use of such concepts by researchers ensured that local settings remained simple so that themes, participants and communities were readily accessible and easily understood. Social researchers thus reinterpreted local reality as if it were an absolute so that results would remain simple, effective and digestible. We conclude that rather than allowing local people to speak on matters that concern them, the discourse of this and other participatory meetings ensures that social researchers speak on behalf of 'the community'.*

Keywords: participatory approaches, conservation, community, marginalisation, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

IN APRIL 2005, over 70 people interested in 'conservation and development' issues in Southern Africa participated in an Indaba (meeting) at Skukuza rest camp inside the Kruger National Park in South Africa. The Indaba set out to explore the nature and consequences of social research 'in communities near protected areas, and the dynamics between affected actors: local people, conservation officials, NGOs and donor agencies, and social researchers'.[1] In this context, we seek to explore how the Indaba itself used participatory approaches to explore the role and affect of social researchers who pursue themes that explore the links between *conservation*, '*local people*' and/or '*local communities*'. We question whether the use of both concepts during this participatory meeting offered any new contributions to how social researchers can 'engage' local people and communities in a just and equitable manner (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 2). Just intentions aside, it became clear in our diagnosis that fulfilling the Indaba's objectives would prove lofty and difficult. Part of the problem lay in how the Indaba's design, concepts and language were already predefined and set according to the 'participatory *status quo*', such as Log Frameworks and Network Meeting Models, in order to draw locals into pro forma 'dialogue' with social researchers (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 16). From the start, social researchers set out to design the Indaba as a means of bridging community concerns with those of social and natural scientists. The ways in which these conditions drove the Indaba suggest from the outset, that those planning the meeting would have difficulty in engaging the complexity of local participants' lived experience. This effectively reinforced misconceptions of 'local people' and 'local communities' and left the expectations of the 'participatory' meeting largely unfulfilled.

In this paper, we narrow the focus of the meeting by examining the interplay between two groups of participants—'social researchers' and 'local people'/'communities'—to demonstrate how the design of the meeting, the concepts used, and the use of language in these concepts, had reinforced certain assumptions of what 'communities' should be: stable, concrete and unified collectives. We demonstrate that the overall discourse of the Indaba—the 'ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to a phenomenon'—had been rendered from the positions of power of social researchers who had already envisaged predefined outcomes (Roe 1994: 2). The Indaba reproduced such outcomes by encouraging the use of language that helped stabilise assumptions about local people and village life: 'that cooperation was latent in village life' and that communities had social institutions sufficiently intact for 'community-based natural resource management' (Cleaver 2002: 14; Leach and Mearns 1996). The Indaba had set predefined objectives based on the assumption that local people's social 'structure' could easily lend itself to support community inputs as social output for conservation—a social audit for conservation's 'corporate social responsibility'

(Mosse 1997; Cooke and Kothari 2001). Our aim then is to refresh the long-standing critique of the use of 'community' in conservation (see Li 1996), by showing how design, concepts, and language work together during meetings to *re*produce and *re*inforce the received wisdoms of 'local people' and 'local community' in participatory conservation. We build on the research of Li (1999) and Mosse (2005) who suggest that the broader discourses that inform narratives through conservation agencies can be expressed in policy assumptions as productive power 'which engenders subjectivities and aspirations' in its target audience: local people *and* social researchers (Mosse 2005: 6–8). In turn, once locals accept these assumptions, policy begins to control social life from afar. We discuss how the planning process of the Indaba and planners themselves had exercised the terms and practice of how to get people 'on board' and how this ensured that participation 'secured consent' for conservation. The unfortunate outcome is that upon achieving the desired result of 'consensus', it became unnecessary to consider local people's everyday lived experience, and how this experience can conflict with the 'production' of conservation.

Evidence for our assertions comes from an examination of how the discourse of the Indaba—its *design, concept and language*—influences how social researchers and local people engaged each other at the Indaba for the purpose of facilitating participatory research for 'conservation and development'. We question the usefulness of researchers examining and managing social and environmental change as part of predefined conceptual categories (see Li 2002). While conceptual heuristics can be useful, framing and packaging social analysis within conceptual boundaries misses the nuances of the terms of engagement, informed by local histories and struggles. Such conceptual packaging currently oversimplifies and 'white-washes' complex local and extra-local processes and does little to support conservation or the rights of marginalised peoples.

While many interventions use participatory research, we argue that most projects continue to conceptualise the notion of 'community' and 'community dwellers' as essentialised and naturalised. Beneath this ethical veneer, one finds the organic and functionalist ideals of earlier anthropologists (e.g. Redfield 1955; Hillery 1955), whose theories have influenced the structure and content of social organisation and thus participation including, for example, representation during social meetings. Endowing social boundaries with a sense of concreteness renders otherwise heterogeneous social groups as discrete entities. By conceptualising local people and how they organise in this way, it becomes much easier for social researchers to construct and maintain conceptions of social phenomena. The prospect of maintaining one form of truth is partly dependent upon how many people ascribe to the version of truth that anchors a concept. Thus, the success of concepts such as 'local people' and 'local community' is largely contingent upon maintaining a level of support for such concepts (Latour 2000, cited in Mosse 2005: 8–9; Gellner 1983). In time, this effectively denies the plurality of rural people's existence as their

positions of struggle become contained within readily accepted concepts for social organisation, such as solidarity and collective action.

The ways in which social researchers and conservationists divorce their interventions from multiple local realities leads us to interrogate the Indaba's principal question: how social researchers should collaborate with and build the capabilities of local people, communities and conservation initiatives. Part of this effort was for social researchers to investigate 'certain social and ecological phenomena that *must* be translated into empowering and sustainable results'. But who frames and fulfils this objective and does it reflect the social, political and economic reality and expectations of local settings? Whose assumptions inform such objectives? Our paper answers these questions by first examining how the design and concepts of the Indaba affect the terms of engagement between social researchers and local people/local communities. We examine how social researchers' engagement of 'the local' produces strictures involving (the design, concepts and language) of (1) speaking for the community and (2) solving on behalf of the community. Second, we examine how the language of social researchers impacts on the ability of local participants to engage in dialogue and consider what this means for 'conservation and development' more generally. Third, we turn to examine how their perspectives are contained in broader discourses that frame the dialogue between the Indaba's 'stakeholders' vis-à-vis 'the community' and 'the state'. We conclude by suggesting that rather than using these terms as coherent wholes, the phenomenon of 'community' be interpreted in light of political tensions, cultural (re)creation and power relations (Li 1999).

While we examine each sub-theme in light of relevant theories and discourse, we realise the need to expose at the outset that by funding and organising the Indaba, various organisations and people (including the authors) have also influenced the nature of the topics discussed. Those agencies funding and organising the Indaba had made their agenda of biodiversity conservation well known, while those (local participants) trying to speak about land, livelihood and dignity had been given fewer opportunities for dialogue. A range of organisers from IUCN-South Africa to South African National Parks had paid into the Indaba, while academics and practitioners had fuelled debate, with many siding with international agendas of biodiversity conservation. In contrast, community members had served as 'participants', rather than as drivers of, or partners in, forming the Indaba's agenda.

METHODS

This paper uses critical discourse analysis to examine those ideas or patterns of thinking embedded in the Indaba's language and broader message. As a method, discourse analysis involves the study of how and why certain ensembles of ideas, concepts and language co-produce meanings for particular phenomena (Roe 1994). We pay particular attention to those ideas that are often

repeated and attempt to distil the meanings of these ideas into meaningful 'descriptions' (Bernard 2002). Our focus is on the particular context in which each 'stakeholder's' position emerges, how often it is articulated, and whether it reproduces dominant concepts in and through 'conservation and development' (van Dijk 1993).

We also offer a degree of reflexivity to expose how our position and that of others at the Indaba informs the broader discourse of participatory research at the community level. We highlight the need to situate ourselves in the process of shaping and reshaping the objectives and outcomes of social research. While we fail to properly investigate how our role in the Indaba also affected its outcome, we recognise that our involvement and interpretation of its process also shaped this 'meeting of minds'. We thus acknowledge belonging to a system that strives to produce equitable research output through the so-called advocacy-based agendas. Reforming the participatory *status quo*, however, requires that researchers reflect on how and why they might be reifying and (mis)representing the people and 'communities' they work with.

DESIGNING THE MEETING: INCORPORATING 'PARTICIPATION' AND TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Rather than holding a regular Indaba, organisers knew from the outset that in order for the meeting to assess how social researchers affected local people, it was necessary for the venue's design to encourage local involvement in discussing the issues at hand. The best way to achieve this was to bring the questions to 'the people'. In order to understand what local communities thought about the impact of social researchers studying conservation-related themes, those planning the meeting had facilitated case studies in order to examine 'local attitudes towards social researchers'. After meeting with officials from South Africa National Parks (SANParks) and Kruger, two villages adjacent to the park, Makuleke and Seville B, had been identified as ideal cases where local people had already dealt with park authorities and researchers. After the 'appropriate authority' gave permission, local researchers from the villages assisted in implementing a qualitative survey designed to elicit the views of the villagers. 'Community researchers' and representatives from eight community forums along the Kruger National Park then held a meeting at a university field station (the Wits Rural Facility).[2] Thereafter, representatives had a separate tête-à-tête to consider and discuss the findings of the researchers as an independent contribution to the Indaba.

The second part of the design phase had involved participants forming breakaway groups in order to 'problem solve'. This was the first instance where a plenary broke off with a set of guiding questions that eventually framed a series of *concepts* for discussion. The concepts were broad, focusing on constructing the terms of engagement and how engagement actually unfolds between social researchers, local people and local communities. The

first of these dealt with how social researchers conceptualised and envisaged the terms of engagement with 'local people'. The second set of concepts involved the ways in which engagement becomes actualised, that is, how the conceptualisation of 'local people' and 'local community' become manifest in practice. What exactly did the concept of 'community' mean and what did its application do in practice? We examine these conceptual categories and resulting questions in terms of diagnosis and prognosis. Diagnostic in approach, the initial category of constructing the 'terms of engagement', held positions and various questions that cast the social researcher as a problem; prognostic in approach, the second set of categories involved 'how engagement unfolds', with social researchers as part of the solution in supporting the needs of local people. How, for example could social researchers contribute towards organising and empowering local peoples so they can better negotiate decisions affecting them? (IUCN and TPARI 2005).

In what follows, we document the language of the discussions of each of the concepts examined in the breakaway sessions that cover (1) constructing the terms of engagement and (2) how engagement unfolds with local people and local communities, paying particular attention to the motives and claims of 'stakeholders'. Who assisted in reinforcing the notion of community and for what purpose? Did the concepts and related questions draw attention away from the real problems affecting local people in 'local communities'?

Constructing the Terms of Engagement for Conservation, rather than Community

One breakaway group on 'Engaging Conservation' accounted for the attitudes between social researchers and local peoples, and how 'constructive exchanges between these groups' might be optimised for conservation and development. The central question asked was: 'What is the appropriate role for social research in conservation?'

According to one conservation practitioner at the Indaba, 'power relations' embedded in 'the subjugation of local knowledge' needed exposure since 'global classification schemes … backed by scientific authority' submerged 'local classification schemes' in South African conservation. She argued 'what right do we have to deprive the people whose resources we are looking after of information about their conservation status?' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 11). Other questions suggested that while social researchers have a long history of placing emphasis on defining and understanding community dynamics, they now had to shift their emphasis by offering their ethnographic expertise for biodiversity conservation. The use of each social category for biodiversity conservation further hardened notions of 'local people' and 'local community' as practical management units.

Speaking for Kruger Park, another practitioner drew attention to the park's relatively new mission statement of incorporating social issues into manage-

ment planning and regulation. He noted that Kruger's (social) researchers were 'striving' to view *the environment*, but not conservation *per se*, as 'an integrated social and ecological system' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 11). Moreover, one presenter argued that social research could help in understanding the social context of conservation initiatives. An American academic noted, for example the social researcher's viewpoint that perhaps 'conservation practitioners are unfairly blaming local people by creating an overly simplistic link between local resource use practices and environmental degradation, based on insufficient and anecdotal data' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 12). She noted further that convergence exists between conservation practitioners and social researchers in their effort to support the survival of socio-ecological '*systems*' and that both recognise the promise of 'constructive exchanges'. She claimed that this could only work if a new culture of 'working together early … and [during] conservation planning…'arose, which, in turn, might produce accountable and legitimate conservation (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 12). The fact that social researchers might use the notion of socio-ecological systems to explain social and environmental change, feeds into the heuristic of communities being unified 'social systems'.

In the final breakaway sessions, one group questioned the activities of social researchers who involved themselves in social and legal advocacy on behalf of 'local people' and 'local community'. The group suggested that social researchers focusing on land issues and other politics of recognition must not support community claims to land since they no longer had the internal cohesion to manage or endure the land restitution process. The group challenged the 'popular perception … that all people living on the border of the park have some claim to it. This they suggested is historically not the case and cannot be used as the basis for all people and park relations'. As a result, they argued 'land restitution is creating *new disparities* among local people/disadvantaging certain categories of people. [And that] it is further not the responsibility of Parks or private game reserves to become development agencies' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 14). Such assumptions suggest that local claims to land and resources are only legitimate when individuals belong to unified social groups with long-term occupancy, use and tenure over communal lands near the national park. Such statements resonate with powerful images of communities being 'small, integrated [units] using locally evolved norms and rules to management resources sustainably and equitably' and that any disruption makes 'the collective' incapable of managing socio-political risk and uncertainty (Agrawal and Gibson 2001: 7).

Speaking and Solving on Behalf of the Community?

Given the participatory nature of the meeting how, then, did social researchers engage with and solve on behalf of communities in the process of researching conservation and development? Those presenting on behalf of the community

delegates, called on researchers to provide feedback to the community in a timely and ethical manner—a concern expressed during the pre-Indaba research process and the basis of 'ethical' participatory meetings. The people who were charged as 'community researchers' in Makuleke and Seville B before the Indaba had revealed that residents were very concerned about the lack of feedback from social researchers (see Tapela et al. this volume).[3] Social researchers also raised false hopes just to acquire information from their interviewees, which prompted calls for 'better [local] control over research'. 'Responsible and respectful community-based research' thus involved community leaders granting permission for research to take place and becoming active participants in the research process (IUCN and TPARI 2005:10). Others highlighted that 'over-researched' communities like Makuleke and some 'under-researched' ones had specific and *situated* expectations about research. The use of such language makes it abundantly clear that 'community' representatives considered it problematic that social researchers often began their work by finding ways to harvest local knowledge expeditiously. They lament that social researchers always look for the 'best type' of knowledge—knowledge that easily fits within theoretical concepts—from local people whose status (elders, officials, etc.) is considered to be representative of the ideal community to research.

Two separate groups, one consisting of community delegates and the other of mainly social researchers, then discussed how to narrow the gap between social researchers and communities. Social researchers recommended the compilation of a database to record all social research, suggesting a key role for SANParks. This 'community-based database' was to help manage research and ensure feedback to the communities (IUCN and TPARI 2005). Community representatives also drew up a list of ingredients for 'useful research partnerships', suggesting that the 'usability' of research must be based on whether it 'will help understand and solve the historical and present problems of local people' (see Tapela et al. this volume). Others wanted to be clear about 'whose knowledge' is being divulged; they wanted clarity on 'the control or ownership of local knowledge and its interpretation, especially when indigenous knowledge is then published'. Community representatives thus made their points clear: how could social researchers help them understand 'why people are now deciding to engage their social space, why they have not been engaged with in the past, and how can they be engaged with more effectively in the future' (IUCN and TPARI 2005). In many respects, then, the best prospect for social researchers to manage otherwise abstract local knowledge was to place it into discrete categories that easily fit into the segments of larger databases of 'traditional' knowledge.

The final breakaway group sought 'a common language in which social and natural scientists [could] engage the issues affecting conservation and local people' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 17). Here it became important to consider how the semantics of the concepts used informed the motives and outcomes of

the meetings and, more broadly, the discourse of 'conservation and development'. The community representatives' perspectives of outsiders engaging them contrasted strongly with the Indaba's objective of finding 'common ground' between researchers and local people for poverty alleviation. They made it clear: 'We can hear you, but we can't speak'. They insisted that because researchers' promises of consultation are empty rhetoric, research interests must be expressed and discussed with their *indunas* (the local headman) 'but [that] it's better if a meeting with the whole community is called' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 17). Others called for formal agreements from the outset so that the language of engagement could be spelled out clearly and contractually binding. Community participants noted that the use of 'contractual language' in formal agreements between themselves and social researchers would ensure that researchers engaged in proper consultation were held accountable for the information they appropriated, and gave accurate field accounts in their publications. One community participant stated, for example, that because researchers 'always have limited time', they needed to be held more accountable for their actions. By suggesting a quasi-legal route by way of 'memoranda of understanding' between researchers and themselves, many now spoke of taking the route of litigation in order to hold social researchers accountable for the promises they make (paying research assistants, etc). Many wanted to establish a research protocol to which all concerned parties had to subscribe, 'a measure of control at the local level … to ensure that the researcher complies with the agreement' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 18). However, could such dialogue facilitate constructive agendas in support of social research that strengthens the capabilities of local peoples and conservation? We offer possible answers to these questions below.

THE MEANING OF LANGUAGE IN CONCEPTS

The planning and language that drove the Indaba suggested that the objectives of social researchers are still far removed from the everyday struggles of 'communities' in the former 'homelands' created under Apartheid (through dispossession and forced resettlement). In many ways, the Indaba's driving force never came from the communities themselves. Rather, it was the result of the broader discourse of engaging 'with the broad array of people who reside near and around protected areas' (DEAT and IUCN 2003: 3).[4] The 'community' came in not as an active role player, but as one of several vexatious 'categories' under investigation, including 'governance', 'sustainability' and 'equity'. The very fact the Indaba had stressed that 'dealing with these [concepts] required the assistance of social researchers and improved collaboration across the disciplines', suggested that community representatives were peripheral to the planning process. Subsequently, the broader challenge was that social researchers would monitor and comment 'on efforts by … protected area managers to implement [policy] recommendations' of larger agen-

cies, including South African National Parks Board, and others attending the World Parks Congress (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 4). In real terms, the implication was that 'the community' had only received the social researchers' interpretation of policy design and social categories, rather than influencing the process by which outsiders influence insiders. Thus, the planning process failed to engage the dialectic between the concerns of researchers and the concerns of individuals in the 'community'.

Further evidence of this was reflected in the fact that social researchers also spoke on behalf of community members by pressing the dictum that it was necessary to use equity and sustainability as drivers of biodiversity conservation. This had created a sense of unease among many local participants. With foreign funds and actors supporting this 'local' participatory endeavour, many raised the concern of insufficient feedback and consultation *during the Indaba*. Feelings that the Indaba was extractive gave rise to several sub-questions: who had the legitimacy to speak on behalf of communities and according to whose interests have these concerns been expressed? Here the use of absolute language and concepts caused 'local' participants to question the intentions of the Indaba. Difficulties in accepting who had the *means* of defining the concept of 'community' had made proper engagements with local participants problematic. If engagement is participation, involvement, or the act of sharing activities in a group, then predefining the concept of 'community' had clearly run contrary to the Indaba's stated objectives. If, for example, it was social researchers from afar who defined what 'community' meant and how it ought to be engaged, whether partly influenced by community perspectives or not, what degree of legitimacy could have possibly existed in the public participation process? Indeed, as the Indaba's own summary of proceedings stated, this required at a minimum 'interaction and communication between citizens, researchers and policy-makers' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 8). Resentful of false promises and negative conservation impacts, it had become clear that many would only participate in conservation-based projects if they had a say in programme design and possible outcomes. This was clear when community representatives called for social researchers to 'facilitate a better understanding of *community*, sensitive to what people want to be called and avoiding its negative, anti-engagement meanings' (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 14).

While new management approaches have promoted the need for flexible participation, the rhetorical language of 'participatory management' ideals has paralysed any constructive exchange between social researchers and local people. The language of 'development and biodiversity-speak' at the Indaba reflected the heavy consumption of western *paradigms*.[5] With the exception of knowledgeable locals, other community representatives in the room, seated to one corner, would confess afterwards that 'We hear, but we can't speak back'. The persistent use of development vernacular shrouded direct meaning, intent and action, and spoke less of engagement than of who held power;

those who spoke English overwhelmed local participants by using PowerPoint. The fact that outsiders brokered the Indaba's research agenda in this way suggested that it was already embedded in the control of normative, participatory research. The result of the session dividing diverse groups into 'modern actors' and 'traditional recipients' had failed to reveal a new 'language of engagement'.

DISCUSSING THE INDABA'S OUTCOMES IN REFERENCE TO BROAD CATEGORIES: ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNITY AND THE STATE

The paragraphs above suggest that few community representatives could hear anything amidst the cacophony of categories, concepts and contests on how to properly engage 'the community'. While many of the community representatives at the Indaba understood English, they had limited potential to engage in meaningful debate with white and black intellectuals. Since community representatives could not engage the conversation in English as well as they could in their native tongue, the scientific knowledge base of social researchers (including the conservationists present) effectively 'out-spoke' the needs and concerns of 'the community'. The fact that certain individuals could express technical jargon in English further communicated a degree of authority and thus control over the flow of the meeting. In this sense, the authority of the speaker to use the English language for expression served as the 'means by which they attest to the authority of the (conservation) institution which [first] endow[ed] them with the power to speak' (Bourdieu 1991: 9).

What, then, can we learn from the way the Indaba cast local participants and 'the community'? One of the glaring silences was that the notion of 'community' had not been sufficiently engaged because of how it had been initially conceptualised. Without critical engagement, for example, social researchers used the term in a way that risked its further reification so as to separate *them* (the community or *laypersons*) from *us* (the researchers or *experts*). Although some social researchers clearly know that communities are complex and heterogeneous, many still follow earlier anthropological and sociological ideals of how to *conceptualise* community: 'collective consciousness', 'common ideological ground' (Durkheim 1965), and/or an association based on common beliefs (Tönnies 2001). The danger of drawing upon broad concepts is that they create a 'sense' of community when in fact there may be none (McMillan 1996). It is for these reasons that policy discourse and practice easily conceives of otherwise abstract and entangled social relations as 'social collectives' and 'social systems'.

The fact that similar applications of 'community' in Southern Africa are partly rooted in a long history of colonial practice and imagination deserves further elaboration. Native Affairs under colonialism, for example, was a primary reason for why this socio-economic binary between the educated 'us'

and the ignorant, rural 'community' still exists (see Neumann 1995). Colonial interpretations of societal order in Southern Africa, for example, produced policy that moulded the African's 'character'—the 'them'—according to western cultural values—the 'us' (Neumann 1995). As such, the colonial state's views of community 'development' rested in a broad ordering of local society and landscape, where the 'local tribe' was the true African 'community' in need of support (Neumann 1995). Social researchers and other participants at the Indaba reinforced such concepts, in part, perhaps because they 'wanted to help' and/or because framing community in concrete language and concepts reduced anxieties of 'how to help'. In this sense of engagement, the Indaba did very little to question the composition of 'the local community', what social researchers thought of the concept, and how and why their thoughts eventually translated into action. Beyond the 'local' community in the periphery of protected areas, the idea of community would be better read according to its own sense of reality—the flogged idea of *emic* descriptive categories cast in anthropological interpretations. How, for example, might local people imagine *their own* sense of community?

Understanding how and why people come to experience their sense of belonging through the experiences they accumulate over time and space would have directed the discussion towards a more realistic end. That is, rather than reproduce conceptions of community in the history that helped produce and subjugate it (Leach and Fairhead 2000), we argue that researchers pay closer attention to how the language they use and the actions it informs gives rise to and affects the struggles of individuals 'on the ground' (Mosse 2005). By reflecting on how language, action and history informs the 'origins' of community, it is more likely for social researchers to peel away the conceptual glue to reveal how and why 'community' cannot be divorced from earlier histories of subjugation and oppression. 'Communities' are far from tangible, bounded entities that can be 'solved' (Anderson 1991).

In Africa, colonialism—and Apartheid in the case of South Africa—coercively classified African subjects into fictitious categories divorced from people's lived realities. In alerting ourselves to these conceptual distortions, we urge instead sensitivity to how our own perceptions and interpretations of community can neglect the genealogy of social constructs in conservation practice. For example, any imagining and discussion of the community cannot escape the consciousness of the nation and its history of racial oppression, and now the rapid changes brought on by neo-liberal economies and globalisation. Social researchers must therefore become aware of the hetereogenous and layered social and economic fabric of social groups, and then interpret and use language that describes social groups according to their reality. During such meetings, then, social researchers must weigh their language accordingly. The language for engagement must therefore incorporate local expressions of grievance and protest as a necessary part of forging new relations between social researchers and people living near protected areas.

We worry that social researchers still develop research programmes according to remnants of the colonial state's ideal of ordering and separating humans and nature: traditional locals become discrete groups and wild spaces become protected spaces. Scott (1998: 88) captures this ordering eloquently in stating that its purpose arises from the 'administrative ordering of nature and society:' because only certain forms of knowledge and language enable the ordering and control of landscapes, those who possess it are charged with exercising a narrow sense of reality. It was at the Indaba that this narrowing of reality simplified local complexity as a means of maintaining control over 'local people'. As simplified concepts, 'local people' and 'local community' become legible to extra-locals in power: social researchers.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND A DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF

The concepts and language that describe social groups must be used carefully so as to avoid negating how people see themselves as active members of their own society. People are not tethered to territory; they recreate and reinvest through lived experience. Yet the idea of 'local community' as a conceptual category in social research continues to impose a pass system on any of these fluidities. In its concrete form, the category of community or those who orchestrate it, police the boundary between insiders and outsiders. While colonised people clearly had senses of 'community' and 'place' prior to colonisation, the problem is how social researchers (e.g., anthropologists), then and now, appropriate its abstract character as part of their own interpretation. The language that social researchers use to explain and act on their findings reinterprets their investigative space in concrete terms, which cuts away or, at best, blends complex factors into idealised themes. As a result, the themes that emerge from 'the field' are the same discourse-laden issues that already belong to conceptual frameworks. Participatory research, programmes and management have also fallen victim to the prepackaged, normative research approaches so evident in the social sciences. As such, participatory meetings continue to frame 'community' in ways that produce results of coherence and transferability.

Our own language of engagement must accept that the language and the jargon of participatory interventions also create unequal relations in the theatre of 'community-based' research, development and/or conservation. The discourse of such research is informed by language that assigns functions and political power: to exercise the use of certain language informs our perceptions of 'community' (Nancy 1991). Language repertoires, as David Laitin (1998) insists, mobilise (participatory) research opportunities *by* rationalising spaces into a tangible other—the community.

While it is not the province of this essay to offer concrete measures on the way forward, we conclude by reiterating the urgency of a deliberative, bottom-up language of engagement. This language would take into account the

experiences and social practices of the people of the land in question as legitimate interpretations from which to understand issues that render conservation problematic. There is a sense in which social researchers, villagers, and parks can be resources to each other. Subsequent Indabas should focus on the different languages being used, each one laid out on the sand so that 'stakeholders' can target and deliberately factor in the nuances of other people's experiences and interpretation(s) of reality, particularly from the 'local' level. Individuals in groups could put forth their own modes of dialogue, address and etiquette for others to engage with openly and deliberatively, and to accept as legitimate (without excessive conditions). From there, they could identify points of agreement and disagreement, then manoeuvre from common ground towards points of difficulty, until at last, they reach languages that factor in (and privilege) multiple interpretations of reality that are mutually understood and acted upon. Rather than engage in language as a strategic action to enforce/impose one view or understanding upon others, it is wiser to coordinate dialogue that directly engages alternate interpretations of phenomena such that a plurality of understanding evolves into mutual understandings (Habermas, 1988). Only then can engagement move beyond a dialogue of the deaf so characteristic of the Indaba. The time of lecturing rural people on what they need and should want is over; these people know their problems and have ideas about solving them. The time has arrived for them to become active partners in directly engaging the policies that affect their lives. Any designs, concepts and languages of engagement must include villagers' interpretations of lived experiences as legitimate expressions that question the *status quo* of research and conservation.

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Notes

1. The term 'social researchers' includes both social and natural scientists who conduct research into or related to the social dimensions of conservation and local people.
2. The Wits Rural Facility is a research facility that belongs to the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
3. Makuleke are an indigenous people of northern South Africa who recently reclaimed lands from which they were dispossessed by Kruger National Park.
4. The media release from which this quote is taken represents one of three main recommendations coming from the Vth IUCN World Parks Congress. These recommendations arise from the Durban Accord and Action Plan. While they are not legally binding, 'they carry the voice of this decade's most prestigious assembly of resource managers, conservation scientists, civil servants and community leaders devoted to protected areas' (DEAT and IUCN, 2003: 3). Other treaties and conventions also drove the message home. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) emphasises maintaining the planet's biodiversity by creating networks of protected areas and connecting landscapes of various human uses. Finally, it was also a result of the Seventh Workshop of the Parties (COP-7) of the CBD in Kuala Lumpur in 2004, which recommended the doubling of the size of protected areas by 2010 (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 5).
5. This problem is not peculiar to southern Africa (see Cooke and Kothari 2001; Mosse 2005).

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