

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: [Exploring New Approaches to Community Governance](#), by David Brunckhorst

Exploring New Approaches to Community Governance: Understanding Community Dynamics

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David Brunckhorst states that “many property concepts, applications and policies can play a significant role in community governance protecting or regulating resource access and use.” I tend to agree with him, basing my views on my experiences through research in community governance of resources. One of the fundamental elements of governance is the capacity of communities to participate and contribute to decision-making on access to and use of natural resources. Of importance in this regard is the provision of incentives to communities by creating policies that guarantee property rights of the same resources to the concerned users. For example the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) in Zimbabwe confers proprietorship of resources to communities within the peripheries of national parks and living with wildlife. The idea behind this concept is to enhance accountability on the users and therefore sustainability of the resources.

Nevertheless, noble as the idea might seem on paper, as Brunckhorst rightly puts across, it has transpired that on the ground, the same policies that are geared towards fostering sound management of resources can contribute to the ‘adverse fragmentation’ of resource management and ‘interruption of ecosystem’ functions. Where it would be expected to regulate resource access and use, community governance can lead to further depletion of resources. This comes about when access to these resources becomes problematic. For instance, certain policies and institutions in Zimbabwe have made it almost illegal for communities to access ‘their’ resources. It has become difficult for communities to access fish as policy on fish has become so restrictive that access is limited to large scale fishers who have permits to fish. In addition, communities have not been able to access benefits from their wildlife in the form of game meat and cash dividends as before as these proceeds have been intercepted by rural district council officials before they reach the communities. This, it can be concluded, is why poaching has reportedly been on the increase. Where communities are not able to realise benefits from the resources that are considered to be theirs, they have no incentive to conserve them and end up utilizing them in such a way that individuals try to maximise gains. In essence, there is incongruence between

policy on paper and policy on the ground. What I would call ‘giving with one hand and taking back with the other’. The granting of overall proprietorship over resources representing ‘giving’ and the prohibitive sectoral policies ‘taking back with the other hand’. This mismatch of policy as written down with policy in practice has affected regulation of activities in management of resources. Indeed, research and knowledge searching at local level should inform practical solutions on the ground for policy makers and attempt to solve global challenges. Such experiences as those that have just been highlighted present an opportunity for addressing policy constraints at different levels.

While it remains valid that ‘knowledge building and practice for community governance must be embedded, or ‘integrated’, with holistic approaches towards ecological sustainability’, a sociological point of view, in my opinion, suggests a more wholesome approach to sound community governance. This approach encapsulates fundamental elements such as social equity and economic efficiency in addition to ecological sustainability. Emphasis on one or two of these elements leaving out the others presents a situation where community governance results in distress. The whole idea behind this approach is the need to guarantee access, use and management of resources to ensure that users realize economic benefits. There is also a need to guarantee that other sections of users are not marginalized in accessing and using these resources. Also implied is the need to ensure that the resources are not over- harvested, reducing the chances for future generations to enjoy them.

Consistent with neo-liberal thinking, markets play a significant role in shaping incentives for conservation of natural resources, thereby resulting in improved community governance and livelihood security. The assumption behind this assertion is that if communities place a high value on a natural resource, this may consequently lead to sustainable management. Rather than isolating resources for conservation, they must be exposed to the market as their ‘uniqueness and scarcity lead to high valorisation and thus promote conservation’. A case in point is Omay Communal Lands in Zimbabwe where community governance is in distress. Among other factors, markets for resources such as game trophy have become unreliable due to a decline in tourist activities and the current economic hardships in the country. In addition, policy regarding marketing of products requires permits that they do not have and which they consider to be very expensive. However, care must be taken not to overemphasise marketing of resources against ecological sustainability.

My thinking is that although the idea of linking local to regional resource governance is noble, there is need for thorough understanding of the community dynamics surrounding resource management at the local level before attempting to address challenges at a larger scale. There is evidence pointing to the fact that community resource governance, though well planned, is diseased. Although external forces seem to be contributing to the ‘disease’ that has affected community governance, it is important to first analyse local networks and elements that foster/thwart social capital that is fundamental to collective management of resources. These include among others, trust, co-operation and “voluntarism” of community members. There is therefore a need to build a knowledge and practical base that can inform policy first at the local and then regional levels.

For Further Reading:

Hulme, D. and M. Murphree (2001) *African Wildlife and Livelihoods: the Promise and Performance of Community Conservation*. Oxford. James Currey Ltd.

Jones, B and M. Murphree (2001) 'The Evolution of Policy on Community Conservation in Namibia and Zimbabwe' in *African Wildlife and Livelihoods: the Promise and Performance of Community Conservation*. Oxford. James Currey Ltd.

Mamimine, P.W. and Mandivengerei, S. (2001) *Traditional and Modern Institutions of Governance in CBNRM* CASS Publications, U.Z. and PLAAS, University of Western Cape

Murphree, (1991) *Communities as Institutions for Resource Management* Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS), University of Zimbabwe

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