

COMMONS FORUM *Commentary*

Institutions for the Management of Common Pool Resources in African Floodplains: The AFWeP Research Project

Tobias Haller, PhD.

University of Zurich, Switzerland

African floodplain wetlands are important regions for local livelihoods and are of special interest for conservation organisations such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN). These ecosystems are interesting because the inundation patterns in an otherwise semi-arid environment make them resource-rich pockets when the water recedes, in providing much sought-after resources during the dry season and between seasons. Most of the time these areas become resource rich after the water recedes. Most of the resources are Common Pool Resources (CPR) such as fish, wildlife, pasture, forests and water, which are managed through common property regimes and local institutions (rules, norms, and regulations). These institutions have been developed in pre-colonial times and were operating partly still during colonial times. Today, however, CPRs are managed by different regimes in the form of a legal pluralism but mostly controlled by the state, which has partly dismantled local rules and regulations. In many, though not all of these floodplains, CPRs are under pressure and there are signs of degradation: Pasture areas show signs of erosion, fish and wildlife stock are declining, and forests and water resources are less available.

At the same time, conflicts over access to resources occur in these areas, as they become more and more attractive to seasonal immigrants. These immigrants are interested in the commercial use of the CPRs and feel legitimised as citizens of the state to get access to these national resources. In order to analyse if there is a general trend in CPR management and the manner in which it is related to institutional change in Africa, a comparative research project was initiated at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Zurich, called *African Floodplain Wetlands Project* (AFWeP) in 2002. Eight researchers from this department and from two African Universities (University of Yaoundé and University of Dar es Salaam) did fieldwork in similar floodplain ecosystems with the primary research design developed at the University of Zurich. Research concept and co-supervision of different PhDs and MAs, together with the three Universities, was done by the author. In February 2005, a conference and a workshop was held in Zurich with a view to presenting the results of the research team.

As a theoretical framework, we used the New Institutionalism in economics, anthropology and political sciences. Institutions (rules, norms and regulations) are seen as important for they structure access and use of CPRs between different actors because they make resource users and resource use predictable. The institutional approach of Elinor Ostrom (1990), served as a tool for data collection and discussion of CPR-use in the very similar ecosystems of the African floodplains. These similar ecosystems and the common-property institutions that developed there, are interesting cases for a reevaluation of the common property theory, on the basis of a comparative study. Such an approach is supported in the new CPR-literature. In addition, a historical approach was adopted in order to analyse the changes in local institutions and the conflicts, which are characteristic of these areas today. The research group tried to investigate how institutional change contributes to the degradation of CPRs that is taking place in many of the areas studied. Institutional changes stemming from the relations between external (economic, demographic, socio-political and technological) and internal factors of a local setting were analysed in order to determine strategies of different actors and actor groups. We also focused on bargaining power stemming from political, economic and demographic (immigration) factors and on the question of which

ideologies are used in conflict situations in order to legitimise access and use of CPR. This approach is based on the work of Jean Ensminger.

The papers presented in this issue of the *Digest* are based upon presentations made during the first two days of the *African Floodplain Wetlands Project* Conference formed to present the results of work on these varying groups and floodplains.

hallerto@yahoo.com

Please note: the majority of funding of the African researchers was done by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North South: Research Partnerships for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change. For more information see: <http://www.nccr-north-south.unibe.ch>, especially the individual project IP 6: Institutional Change and Livelihood Strategies, Institute of Geography, University of Zurich, Switzerland.

African Floodplain Wetlands Project Overview

Mali: Internal Niger Delta. Bozo and Somono Fishermen
Sabrina Beeler (PhD student) and Karin Frei (MA student), Dept. Of Social Anthropology
Funds: Dept of Social Anthropology, Zurich; Boral Stiftung, Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC)

Cameroon: Waza-Logone, Kotoko and div. Pastoralists
Gilbert Fokou (PhD student), University Yaounde; Gabriela Landolt (MA student), Dept of Social Anthropology, Zurich.
Funds: NCCR North South IP6

Tanzania: Pangani River Basin, Pare and Maasai
Gimbage Mbeyale (PhD Student) Uni Dar es Salaam.

Tanzania: Rufiji Floodplain, WaRufiji.
Patrick Meroka (PhD student), Dept. of Social Anthropology, Zurich.
Funds: NCCR North South, IP6

Zambia: Kafue Flats, Ila, Tonga, and Batwa.
Tobias Haller (Post-doc), Dept. of Social Anthropology, Zurich.
Funds: Swiss National Science Foundation

Botswana: Okavanga Delta, Hambukush and Baiai
Roland Saum (MA student), Dept of Social Anthropology, Zurich
Funds: Dept of Social Anthropology, Zurich.