

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Institutions for the Management of Common Pool Resources in African Floodplains: The AFWeP Research Project, by Tobias Haller

Looking for the Tourists: Institutional Change of CPR Management in Botswana's Okavango Delta

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The Okavango Delta is known for its tourist potential and its untouched nature. Interestingly, Common Pool Resources (CPRs) in this area are not under pressure in the same way as the other cases presented. Although there are plenty of resources, local “bushmen” and pastoral groups are waiting for their gains under the new regime of the Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM). They depend mostly on money from the State stemming from exports of diamonds.

During the preparation for this research project, the focus was on institutional change and resource degradation. But fieldwork in Ikoga, a small village of agro-pastoral farmers and fishermen in the Upper part of Botswana's Okavango Delta, revealed that there were no severe conflicts over the delta's common pool resources (CPRs) such as wildlife, fish, pasture and gathering resources and also that none of these CPRs were overused. This is interesting because depletion of, and conflicts over, natural CPRs, mostly grazing areas under open access tenure, have been a serious problem in other parts of the country in the past. But how can this be when people with different ethnic background and resource use patterns claim access for fish, pastures, and veld products that are nowadays in most cases under open access tenure?

Three interrelated factors seem to be responsible for the current social and ecological stability in the research area compared to the other case studies: a low population density, the government's distribution of goods and money (social welfare system), and the absence of markets and demand for products of the research area. The low population density reduces the pressure on the CPRs in a subsistence economy that is largely based on natural CPRs. The government's supply of goods and services covers some of the most basic needs of the people who would otherwise be forced to exploit the CPRs more intensively. And the absence of regional and national markets together with a low demand for local CPRs on the national and international markets make commercial exploitation not (yet) profitable. In addition, the diamond driven economy offers opportunities for jobs in the urban centres.

Policy makers and development agencies agree that this rather positive situation will not necessarily remain forever, especially if the conditions for the “diamond economy” worsen once socioeconomic or political factors change. A popular development and conservation approach called Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) has thus been adopted in Botswana. Under CBNRM both, economic development and conservation is sought to be achieved by involving communities such as Ikoga into the management of wetland resources that have economic potential. The management of parts of the Delta is thus partially and temporarily transferred from the government to local communities or community based organisations (CBOs).

These CBOs usually sublease “their” area to a professional tourist operator who, accordingly to the deal (defined in a management plan) must share his profits with the CBOs who in turn must cut back on

agricultural, fishing, and gathering activities in the areas that are reserved for tourism. But will the profits from the deal with outside entrepreneurs outweigh the costs from the reduced access to natural CPRs and will the people really stay away from exploiting the CPRs?

People are easier to convince to enter into such agreements when they have no real alternatives. Well-approved subsistence and agricultural techniques have eroded over time due to tough climatic conditions. The negative impacts of government measures like labour market-oriented education, by strict hunting regulations, and by limitations on cattle meat trade escorted by cattle eradication programmes and continuous food handouts are also felt. The difficulty to receive land tenure rights to establish commercial activities and the uncertainty of legal land tenure rights for agricultural plots near and within the delta are preventing peoples' economic perspectives from going beyond tourism. Since most of the Delta's areas are in one way or another already part of profitable sightseeing programmes and photographic and hunting safaris, locals might look forward to take part in an economic segment that can also generate income for them in one way or another. Many people believe that at least some will find jobs nearby, and that the lodges might increase demand for local products such as fish or handicrafts.

But these perspectives also contain potential sources of conflicts. How, for example, is the rent from the lease distributed within the community? Who will get the jobs at the lodges and who can sell his or her products there? Since only the winners of the new situation will be defending the new regulations, friction is likely to arise between them and the tourist operators (and tourists) on one side and those local resource users who have to switch to more marginal resource areas, the losers, on the other. The narrow focus on tourist activities also limits the range of the people's economic activities and the communities' freedom of choice. New rules defined in management plans are accepted by the communities while others have been made superfluous by the Government's transformation of former common property regimes into open access tenure. Institutional changes are thus not only the result of economic change, but also largely from government action.

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