AN ACT OF FAITH - COMMUNITY BASED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN BOTSWANA

Lucas Chambers

In Botswana, the concept of communities managing their own resources is approximately thirteen years old. This may not seem surprising at first glance, but upon deeper reflection, this figure can't be right. What did people do for thousands of years before governmental agencies made decisions for them? What happened between then and now?

Colonialism. War. Overpopulation. Modern government. Generations later, people in rural communities are amnesic. Only a vague trace of their traditional knowledge remains, and their social fabric is in tatters. Many nomadic groups were forced to settle around boreholes at the turn of the last century. After independence, supporting these growing communities, where the desiccated land could not, became a matter of national pride. Much of western Botswana began living on government handouts. Today, everyone recognizes the need to break this dependency, but few recognize how long it will take. And some are starting to lose patience.

In 1989, an USAID initiative put faith in the capacity of rural communities to manage their own natural resources. After a series of meetings held with five communities in the Chobe Enclave in northern Botswana, measures were set to give local residents this opportunity. Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) was created with the assistance of numerous local and international NGOs, both as a rural development project and as a conservation strategy.

It took some time to break down suspicions toward this initiative among the local communities, but, 13 years later, CBNRM in the Chobe Enclave is an example that 130 other villages, organized in 50 odd community organizations throughout the country, have followed. Activities are now funded by the Botswana Government and international donors like the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) through IUCN, who took over the CBNRM supportive role from USAID in 1999.

"Our role is to keep the furnace burning," says Nico Rozemeijer, advisor for the CBNRM support program. "We are facilitators for collaboration between stakeholders. We aim to document lessons learnt during implementation and disseminate relevant information to the CBNRM practitioners to make their work easier."

Though Botswana still lacks a unified policy granting local communities secure rights over their natural resources, CBNRM is now an accepted rural development strategy in the country with resulting socioeconomic empowerment of local communities and the conservation of natural resources.

So far, CBNRM has followed a straightforward approach: a community creates a Community Based Organization (CBO) to obtain a resource use lease from the District Land Board. They then proceed to sell their entire wildlife quota to safari companies and,

either bank the money, or invest it in local development projects with varying degrees of failure.

"This falls far short of what CBNRM could be," Nico is quick to point out. To maintain the momentum it has achieved, CBNRM is now beginning to address the weaknesses in the formula. As it stands, communities are not so much managers of their own resources as they are passive beneficiaries of them.

To obtain the rights over local resources, a CBO must form a representative and accountable body, such as a trust, and submit a land use management plan to the government. So far, only five communities in Botswana have actually drafted their own plans. Admittedly, most lack the skills and information necessary to do this, but the government extension agents appointed to assist them have done little to change that.

Most agents tend to be academics coming from the southeast of the country where Tswana is the dominant ethnic group. They have little desire to live in the bush, and even less to deal with illiterate remote area dwellers such as the Baharero, Bakgalagadi and the San or Bushmen, with whom the Tswana have never been close.

Typically, agents will simply contract a city-based expert to come in and draw up a plan. Within two weeks, it is presented to the local populations who are more likely to use it as kindling than to read, much less understand it.

"I'd rather see the process take two years if the end result gives communities a sense of ownership," says Nico. This, however, requires money and NGO support which CBNRM cannot always find. In the five communities where this process occurred, however, local residents did then take a far more pro-active role in applying the plan. Unfortunately, this did not result in those communities actually managing their own resources either. This is due to a more fundamental impediment.

Although communities holding a land use management plan are given responsibility for their resources, they are not given the authority to make decisions about them. The Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) still does not trust the local populations. Communities cannot set their own quotas. In theory, however, their input is taken into consideration.

At Khwai, a village on the eastern edge of the Okavango Delta, chief Merafe has his doubts as to whether this actually ever happens in practice.

"We have, for several years, contributed data from our wildlife sightings," he explains, "but I have yet to see evidence that this has made any difference to subsequent DWNP decisions." In the Chobe enclave, local communities have stopped commenting on quotas for the same reason.

This attitude seems justified considering that, earlier this year, the department took lions off the national quota without consulting either the private sector or CBOs in wildlife areas. Many feel this measure was unnecessarily conservative as a lot of controversy remains over the accuracy of the aerial surveys used by the DWNP to set quotas.

According to Nico, this method is effective for species found in open terrain, such as the buffalo or the elephant, but totally unreliable for cats that spend most of their time

in hiding. Considering a black-mane Kalahari lion can fetch up to 25,000 USD, the sudden ban has nearly halved the annual income of many communities. Nevertheless, chief Merafe recognizes that his community would be in no position to make such decisions alone.

"We do not have the technical ability or the equipment necessary to set our own quotas," he admits. What concerns Merafe above all is that such a valuable resource be conserved. Yet he is not alone in stressing that communities should be given the training and support to set their own quotas in the near future.

As one socioeconomic researcher noted: "Authority without responsibility is meaningless and obstructive."

Another, perhaps more important point on which the government's mistrust of local communities still impedes the CBNRM process is in the limitations stipulated in the land lease that CBOs obtain from the Land Authority. The rights and responsibilities this document grants expire after 15 years. Furthermore, the lease does not give communities rights over the land, but merely over the use of resources.

Such constraints dissuade both CBOs and private operators from making any long term investments. This is self-defeating. Longer-term investments would help communities create infrastructure, develop skills and boost employment - something the government is trying to accomplish nationwide.

This point is particularly relevant for areas with little or no wildlife where the tourism industry is, at present, near non-existent. Here, alternative activities such as bush experience with bushmen and other cultural exchanges could be introduced. But, again, this would require an infrastructure few are prepared to invest in under the present legislative framework.

Leery of arbitrary government decisions that could make their investments obsolete, CBOs initially opted for distributing all benefits obtained from their resources equally among the community. This was a mistake.

"In one rural settlement in western Botswana, I ran into a group of bushmen smoking tobacco rolled up in their checks," Nico relates chuckling. "Too much money falling out of the air is only creating problems." When this strategy also began leading to a rise in alcoholism, however, most communities decided that the money should be banked.

But with the growing call for development in rural areas, CBOs could not keep accumulating idle money. Eventually, many began venturing into investments in spite of their apprehensions. Results now indicate that restrictive land use policies may not, after all, be the most fundamental problem communities have with investing.

In 1999, the village of Kavimba decided to build a campsite. Despite being advised against it, they built along a noisy and dusty road. Soon after opening, the water pump broke and was never repaired. Without functional toilets or showers, without proper management, but with plenty of roaring trucks near by, the site recorded all of three tourists in the peak season of 2001. This is but one of many examples of investments failing due to lack of skills and business sense among local residents.

CBNRM members are trying to assist where they can, but, often, their advice is not taken.

"CBO representatives over-estimate themselves," says Nico. "They see lodges run by skilled operators. On the surface it looks easy, so they get the impression that it's just a matter of 'build it and people will come', but they aren't aware of all the marketing that's happening behind the scene. When tourists fail to show, and when the project begins to lose money, residents begin to lose interest too. That's when the whole thing unravels."

The language barrier also hinders training programs. Assistants sometimes have to translate information in four different ways before the message gets across, then, when it does, it is not always accepted. This is sometimes due to ethnic tensions between government extension agents and trainees, but, often, it is due to an ironic twist in perceptions. The trainers are young urban professionals skeptical of local residents' ability to learn, while the trainees are older, rural folk skeptical of their trainers' ability to teach.

"These are people fresh from university who *we* will have to teach," says one village elder about his trainers. He feels that, with legal advice, CBOs could adequately manage their own investments.

The general consensus among local residents, however, is that they still need external support. What they request now is that it come from more than one donor.

"If acting alone, a donor will try to control us," one CBO representative argues. He cites an incident when a donor pushed his community to buy a laptop computer no one in his community had any use for. "It's more difficult for them to do that kind of thing when they are not alone supporting us," he explains.

A clear policy on how to deal with corruption or abuse at this level is still lacking in the CBNRM process. It is also lacking where corruption occurs within a CBO. One government extension agent admitted being aware of an instance of fraud, but he did not know what to do about it. This will be an important point to set straight before better investments can lead to better living for all members in communities.

"What needs to change is the process by which communities obtain their constitutions," Nico states bluntly. A community needs a constitution to register a trust and obtain rights to their own natural resources. "Right now, government extension agents just grab a standard constitution off the shelf and modify a few entries. This invariably leads to a CBO composed of twelve 'wise' old men who will then run the show like oligarchs."

In 1995, research did indeed show that trust members tended to be primarily older men from wealthy families. Wealthier households were also more likely to know that a trust actually existed than poorer ones. This situation had improved by 1999, but trust activities today continue to reflect the interests of an affluent minority over a marginalised majority.

Women, particularly, remain under-represented. Due to cultural stigmas, they tend not to attend meetings and participate little when they do. Research has also shown that, over the last five years, more employment opportunities have been created for men than for women. Again, longer-term investments in the tourism industry could help

change this by providing a market for women's foods and crafts and by creating a demand for the skills they possess. More difficult to integrate in the management process, however, are the San.

For the Bushmen, hunting is not merely an issue of subsistence, but also of cultural identity and spirituality. They would prefer to see 70% of their community's quota set aside for this activity. The Baherero and Bakgalagadi, on the other hand, are farmers and herders content to sell off the entire quota to buy more livestock and fencing. As they are, on the whole, wealthier, they tend to get their way.

"What communities need are custom-made constitutions that reflect their heterogeneous ethnic compositions," says Nico. Other NGOs involved in CBNRM have also proposed an election process in which each interest group in the community would elect a representative to the CBO. This approach has been tried in the Ukwi community, but it is difficult to say how well it has worked. Little feedback has been recorded, and more monitoring and control is needed. It appears this is true for most other aspects of the CBNRM process. According to Nico, it is what the future of CBNRM may depend on.

"CBNRM is soon going to hit a crisis. I think better monitoring and control may be the only thing that will get us through it." There have already been signs of the iceberg ahead.

A number of parliamentarians are under pressure to oppose the CBNRM process because people living outside wilderness areas consider it unfair that those living within draw benefits on a resource defined as 'national' by the constitution of Botswana.

In early 2001, the government finally issued a statement expressing a growing impatience with the inefficiencies of communities managing their own resources. The statement threatened to disempower communities and to destroy the CBNRM process.

"The move had no legal backing," says Nico. "Community based organizations are registered as constitutional entities and, as such, cannot be dissolved on a whim."

Without a legal leg to stand on, the statement died quickly and quietly. But it was ominous. "If it happens again, those responsible will be better prepared," Nico says, "and that's why we need hard facts to justify our existence."

IUCN Country Program Coordinator, Masego Madzwamuse, explains that, in addition to stepping up monitoring, CBNRM also plans to sensitize politicians to the realities of living in a wildlife area through radio programs and other media outlets.

"On the surface, it may seem that communities in wildlife areas have an advantage, but people forget that they must also bear the cost of living with wild animals," she explains. "They cannot rear livestock or go into arable agriculture, and, while people are out harvesting thatch and grass, elephants often come in and tear down their fences to get at their food stores. So, much of the money made on quotas goes to offset these costs. "

From equitable benefits distribution at the base, to political wrangling at the top, CBNRM faces many challenges in keeping up the momentum that it has attained in Botswana. None that cannot be overcome though. What all those involved in the process emphasize is that social processes take time. A French author once wrote:

"Do not be afraid of making mistakes, as long as you make them with enthusiasm."

Farmers, hunter-gatherers, and herders are not turned into entrepreneurs over night. It could take up to a generation before communities can successfully manage their own natural resources. What people did for thousands of years, however, they can do again, even in a modern context. But they need to be given that chance.