



Is Small Really Beautiful? Community-based Natural Resource Management in Malawi and Botswana

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Summary. — Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) remains a popular policy with many international funding institutions, in spite of growing evidence of its disappointing outcomes. It is underpinned by theoretically justified benefits which serve to reproduce and market it. The paper explores approaches to understand and rectify these failures. The conclusion is that explanatory effort should be expanded from the “facilitating characteristics” of potentially successful CBNRM sites to include two sets of interfaces—those between donors and recipient states, and between the state (especially the local state) and CBNRMs at the local level. Illustrative examples in Botswana and Malawi are given throughout the discussion.

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1. SETTING UP THE ARGUMENT

Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is, in various forms, an established policy goal of rural development, especially in Africa. It is also a simple and attractive one—that communities, defined by their tight spatial boundaries of jurisdiction and responsibilities, by their distinct and integrated social structure and common interests, can manage their natural resources in an efficient, equitable, and sustainable way. The natural resources in question are usually, though not exclusively, common pool resources. In southern Africa, these are typically forests, open woodland or grasslands for livestock grazing, wood supply, medicines, and famine foods; farm land for gleaning, grazing after harvest, and crop residues; wildlife for game meat and safari incomes; fish in fresh water lakes; and aquifers, tanks, and irrigation channels for domestic and livestock water supply and irrigation (Adams, 2004; Adams, Brockington, Dixon, & Vira, 2000, p. 12).

In this paper, observations on CBNRM are illustrated with the findings of in-country research in two contrasting African nations. The first is Malawi, the rural people of which

have endured decades of sustained dispossession by a neo-patrimonial despot and currently face serious food insecurities and extreme absolute poverty. Over 60% of the population live below the poverty line. Over 85% of the rural population live on customary land, illiteracy is around 50% and 30% of Malawi's households are female headed (FFSSPPFWG, nd). The government has recently pursued a program of progressive legislation for forests removing restrictions to the access and use of woodland, and has specifically targeted women as key resource users (see the National Forest Policy 1997 and Forest Act 1997). It has only had a

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decentralization policy since 1998, approved a Strategic Plan for CBNRM as recently as November 2001, and has proceeded since with some CBNRM implementation especially in forestry and artisanal fisheries. However, policy reform has had to contend with decades of institutional destruction at the local level, and a rural population which had grown weary and wary of any further interventions by the government.

The second case is Botswana, a comparatively wealthy African nation, designated as a Middle Income country with a GDP *per capita* of around \$9,500. It has been able to provide education, health and social security, and this has been important in guaranteeing a minimum level of welfare for its population. However, unemployment and rural poverty remain high (*cf.* 40%). Botswana has low population–land resource ratios and its government has taken seriously the devolution of powers to manage natural resources since the mid-1980s. This has involved CBNRM initiatives since 1998, following assistance from USAID (focusing mainly on wildlife and tourism). Malawi and Botswana have had very different histories of government, but many rural inhabitants of both have recently witnessed the growing interference into, and resulting dissolution of, local chiefly government, combined with territorial incursions by the state and private capital to establish plantations and state forests in Malawi, and private ranches, game and nature reserves in Botswana.

Although the term CBNRM was not generally in use until the 1980s, the notion that communities should, and could, satisfactorily manage their own resources according to their local custom, knowledge and technologies has a long history. The ideas of community have constantly been shaped and reshaped by different outsiders through time (from colonial Governor-Generals, political advisors, European settlers, and more recently rural development consultants and academic writers). Thus, the idea of CBNRM has evolved through time and been specific to particular countries, but over the past 15 years, there has been a convergence of various strands of meanings in the international development literature and in the practice of international funding institutions (IFIs). Today, for example, social and community forestry in India and Nepal and most countries of south-east Asia, and Natural Resource Management Committees in Malawi have some quite close similarities at a general

level. These have resulted from similar strategic policy designs from IFIs. Still, at the level of the detail of administrative, legal and financial structures and of policy implementation, the term means widely different things to different people. In the colonial period in Africa, the practice of Indirect Rule was developed for which “native institutions” had been adapted and shaped for the purpose of rule by colonial rulers, dividing the rural from the urban and one ethnicity from another, and forming an institutional segregation. Africans were relegated to a sphere of customary law (or the harsh *indigenat* in francophone Africa), while Europeans obeyed civil law (Ribot, 1999, p. 23). These institutions, based upon “traditional” (usually chiefly) leadership, amounted to what Mamdani (1996) calls decentralized despotism. These institutions were essentially local and varied according to a great variety of cultures, ecologies and material needs, but usually underpinned by communal tenure and chiefly authority. They were in many ways neglected by administrators except for purposes of political and strategic control, labor mobilization and latterly for soil and water conservation, in the period before Independence. Otherwise, they were treated with disdain or neglect by most colonial writers, who assumed that processes of “natural evolution” would eventually lead to individual tenure, a market in land, and the commercialization of agriculture (Lugard, 1923). The assumptions behind Lugard’s thinking and his “dual mandate” had become standard development wisdom by the period of the winning of independence by most African states. It remains powerful today, even in the minds of many government officials who implement CBNRM programs (see Taylor, 2001). The assumptions were that individualization of land tenure with registration of title would encourage long term investment in natural resource management, would inhibit (what was later styled as) the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), help to provide collateral for production loans, and create incentives to shift production from subsistence to the market—a late colonial narrative with a very contemporary ring.

CBNRM remains a touchstone for much of rural development and sustainable natural resource management and has been promoted by most major IFIs since the early 1990s. Yet, I argue, it has largely failed to deliver the expected and theoretically predicted benefits to local communities. CBNRM has become and

remains so popular to IFIs, but often so *unpopular* with target communities themselves. Faced with such disappointing results and so many critiques, it still flourishes as an important policy goal in all countries in central and southern Africa. In this sense, CBNRM *succeeds!* This paper examines why.

2. (ALMOST) ALL ROADS LEAD TO CBNRM

CBNRM combines a number of powerful ideas, which contribute to its popularity or, more sceptically, “[its] warm emotional pull” (Taylor, 2002, p. 125) in much of academic writing and funding agencies. The first is part of the phrase itself—“community,” the meaning of which may be understood in three ways—community as a spatial unit, as a distinct social structure and as a set of shared norms (Agrawal & Gibson, 2001, pp. 1–31). As I will discuss, empirical evidence shows that the three are seldom co-terminous, and that community boundaries of jurisdiction may make little sense in the rational management of an identified natural resource with boundaries that may bear no resemblance to community boundaries (e.g., a watershed, mobile fish populations, or the habitat of an endangered species of fauna). There is also an extensive and powerful critique of the idea of the “community” as a “myth” (see Cleaver, 1999, 2002) which will be explored in more detail later, and, while the critique contributes to an explanation of the failure of many CBNRM projects, it has failed to tarnish their attraction to IFIs. In Botswana for example, there was a tripling in the number of CBNRM projects during 1996–2003, and a steep rise in the number of CBNRM-related institutions (Arntzen *et al.*, 2003), while at the same time increasing scepticism and critique of their outcomes.

A second powerful discursive tool in the label “CBNRM” is the elision of the notion of sustainable natural resource management (defined by rational and scientific criteria) with “community,” implying that this vehicle for management is well suited for the task, with its connotations of *gemeinschaft* (“intimate, private and exclusive living together” Bender, 1978 in Agrawal & Gibson, 2001, p. 8), local ownership and indigenous expertise. Stevens (1997) goes further and makes the case for a synergistic relationship between local cultural

and environmental diversity, which should be preserved and encouraged in protected areas, allowing communities to exercise their own knowledge and institutions in environmental management. However, the label CBNRM implies that the communities are supposed to be able to deliver on scientifically specified NRM principles (which are by definition seldom, if ever, community-constructed and local).

Herein lies the first contradiction in the label CBNRM, the first confrontation between formal science with its foundations in logical positivism and the independence between the observer and the observed on the one hand—and on the other hand, local knowledge, which is embedded in particular environmental and social histories and continuously negotiated on-site and face-to-face. However, the CBNRM policy narrative goes, this unequal relation of power to name the environment and its processes and trends, can be palliated or even negated by participatory and inclusionary techniques by which some form of hybrid knowledge can be negotiated and implemented (Batterbury, Forsyth, & Thompson, 1997). Here again, there are many instances where local knowledge has not been able to negotiate on an equal basis with official scientific knowledge, but has instead been shaped by what is offered by outsiders, who make strategic choices about which “local knowledge” is heard and conformable to their scientifically given environmental goals, and then ventriloquised as the voice of the community (Mosse, 2001; Blaikie *et al.*, 1997).

Thirdly, CBNRM derives its power from the promise of a diverse range of benefits predicted by social science theory and of a more sustainable management of natural resources. The latter focuses on environmental conservation and the current perceived failures identified through the coercive application of modern environmental knowledge—which is assumed to be scientific, reliable, authoritative, and reproducible—the very antithesis of local knowledge. In this sense, CBNRM often makes more of its promises to deliver Natural Resource Management than to assist a Community. Thus, the promise is not made for, nor delivered to, the community at all, but rather to target-chasing, fund-raising members of the development industry and natural scientists primarily concerned with pursuing a conservation agenda which derives from externally driven scientific research. As Taylor notes:—“one of the expatriate NRMP team members in Botswana

admitted informally that their real aim is conservation, and community development is included as a means to achieve this" (Taylor, 2001).

Emerging from these three powerful narratives, an important argument is that the *practice* of CBNRM (its production, representation in policy documents and implementation), which is situated at the interface between the "community," government, private business and other outside institutions (non-governmental organizations, NGOs), creates profound contradictions between theoretically derived promise and actual delivery. There are two key related but distinct ideas which represent the bridging-points between the outsider and the local. These are decentralization and participation. Both imply a movement of decision-making and real political power from the central to more local levels (e.g., district, county, parish, or community-based organization (CBO)). Participation in decision making about the management of natural resources requires a wide range of quite radical reforms, including transparency in transactions, accountability downwards, the granting of a considerable degree of local discretion over environmental decision making (termed "environmental subsidiarity"), and a degree of competence, confidence and political sophistication by local institutions (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Ribot, 2001, 2002). In the case of Malawi, for example, these institutional reforms centered around decentralization have been very slow to show practical results, in spite of a flurry of planning, schedules, and manuals underpinned by generous donor support (Cross & Kutengule, 2001).

Many of the theoretical benefits of CBNRM operate at a "small-scale" only, and they weave through most of this disparate collection of pro-CBNRM ideas and sentiments. This discursive material circulates in inter-agency networks of multi-lateral and bilateral donors, NGOs and senior governmental officials of recipient countries. The perceived, powerful benefits are as follows:

1. A pro-poor and safety net argument. Small-scale insiders are privileged by CBNRM (which is labor intensive, retains surpluses locally, maximizes internal trade transactions), over the presence of outside capital which would lead to mechanization, loss of artisanal jobs, enclosure, privatization, export of profits and re-investment elsewhere. This argument has become partic-

ularly serviceable in the current round of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers which most African countries are obliged to produce as a condition of debt relief, in which CBNRM are, in a sense, retro-fitted to poverty reduction strategies. This is opportunism: the availing of a set of propositions about the benefits of CBNRM off the shelf and putting them to discursive work in the day-to-day life of IFIs and senior government in Lilongwe or Gaborone. It is the practice of the daily life in policy making and funding, which shapes discursive strategies and therefore influences what off-the-shelf theories are chosen to support and justify them.

2. CBNRM promotes efficient resource use and allocation, locally appropriate technologies and the successful application of indigenous technical knowledge (ITK). This is because local ecological specificities can be addressed by local experience and experimentation, adaptive agricultural practice, wildlife and hunting practices and forest use, local farmer networks, *etc.* It is acknowledged that there are formidable problems to negotiating these knowledges at the interface with development organizations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Long & Long, 1992).

3. New institutional economics and public choice theory indicate that locally managed resource systems with clearly recognizable territorial boundaries will tend to internalize externalities (meaning that the decision makers pay for the costs of their actions), and will tend to deploy all information where local decision makers have most information about that resource, thus enabling service provision to match needs. They will also create local institutions as problem-solving solutions to issues of trust and malfeasance in economic life, and assist in issues of representation and transparency, which requires face-to-face discussion and witnessing in rural environments (thus, the small scale, small number, low transaction costs argument holds) (Cleaver, 1999, p. 601; Ribot, 2002).

4. CBNRM will solve or palliate open access problems resulting from coercive and insufficiently policed state property regimes. Policing will be undertaken by local people, who are on the spot and can see and directly apprehend wrong doers (another functional advantage of the "local"). The

community will have a stake in the protection of the resource and secure tenurial rights, either *de jure* (which is preferable) or informally, *de facto*.

5. CBNRM can be styled as a “local site of resistance,” a bulwark against modernist and de-humanizing invasions, and which can withstand the depredations of the colonial and post-colonial state and globalizing forces (Escobar, 1995, pp. 46–52; Blaikie, 2000; Watts, 2000).

6. CBNRM can initiate a benign cycle of effective participation, empowerment and the development of political confidence and expertise (drawing on Mamdani, 1996), financial independence, as the “fulcrum for democratic change” (Ribot, 2001).

7. CBNRM is an antidote to the acknowledged failure of state-run natural resources (Adams & Hulme, 2001), where the “fences and fines” approaches to wildlife protection have too high economic costs for the state to meet, and to disenchantment with “fortress” conservation (Ghimire & Pimbert, 1997; Inamdar, de Jode, Lindsay, & Cobb, 1999; Songorwa, Buhrs, & Hughey, 2000).

There are also counter arguments against CBNRM. The creation or the adaptation of an existing community-based institution can be seen as no more than an institutional disturbance of existing local relations and thus an opportunity for the powerful to rent-seek, as it can be used to protect or reinforce archaic and regressive forms of governance (e.g., chieftancy and patriarchy), and its benefits can be captured by elites. There are also some epistemological challenges from conservationists and arch-modernists with what they would see as proven ecological imperatives, because they look on community-based approaches as an assault on rational ecology-based conservation in which people are largely absent (Attwell & Cotterill, 2000). These views however do not prevail in most international policy documents—the local is portrayed as progressive and transformative, not laggard and traditional. Small is indeed beautiful. So the story goes...

3. YET ARRIVAL IS ELUSIVE...

For all the theoretical benefits it promises, by and large, CBNRM policy has failed to deliver, in terms of its stated aims (Campbell *et al.*, 2001). Shackleton, Campbell, Wollenberg, and

Edmunds (2002) conclude from 13 case studies in Africa that “most devolved natural resources management reflects rhetoric more than substance” and that “the ways in which local people realize the benefits of devolution differ widely, and negative trade-offs, mostly felt by the poor, are common.” Shackleton and Campbell (2001), in an evaluation of 14 case studies in eight countries of Africa, assessed the outlook for CBNRM as poor overall, although they identify a number of CBNRM projects which show some signs of success. They take the well-trodden path towards the conclusion that the less the state and its line ministries impose and limit local NRM, the more local people can reshape social–environmental relationships in ways which suit them, which usually differs from CBNRM policy agendas. Murphree (1997, p. 3) summarizes a range of criticisms of CBNRM made by those supportive of the idea but with “concerns and reservations” through to vigorous, aggressive academic critique, and concludes that CBNRM initiatives show mixed and inconclusive results. A major review of CBNRM projects in Botswana concluded that “CBOs tend to have more weaknesses than strengths at present,” and the weaknesses of CBNRM are found to be many, compared to its strengths (Arntzen *et al.*, 2003, p. 14). Finally, Jere, Varela, and Voysey (2000) review the presence and absence of problems in eight CBNRM sites in Malawi. “Weak leadership,” “uneven participation,” “corruption,” “problematic lack of official recognition,” and “inadequate income alternatives” were listed along with others and, except for two sites, most of these problems existed in the other six.

There are success stories too, although they are stories told by the initiating agencies themselves. The well-known CAMPFIRE project in Zimbabwe has been boxed up in commentaries as a successful case study, but has since been both widely criticized (Sullivan, 2001) as well as broadly vindicated (Arntzen *et al.*, 2003). A visit to the Compass Tamis website for documentation of CBNRM initiatives in Malawi has a “success story” column title leaving little doubt over the quality of outcomes (Compass Tamis, accessed 2004). Kayambazinthu and Locke (2002) point to the credibility gap between the generally optimistic views about the current benefits of CBNRM that is circulating between Malawian traditional leaders, government officials and NGOs on the one hand, and the confused and indifferent accounts given

by community members on the other. These authors also identify problems of the absence of extension advice and lack of support from the forestry department and find a failure to keep pace with other devolutionary measures being implemented across other sectors in the country (see e.g., Balarin, 2001 for guidelines for decentralization in the fisheries sector). There are huge difficulties in establishing clear criteria of success and failure. These would require baseline studies and monitoring of the before and after situation, establishing evidence of “better” conservation, better production, improved incomes and institutional development (Murphree, 1997; Ribot, 2001, p. 45). But a generalized conclusion may be fairly confidently made that CBNRM programs in central and southern Africa have substantially failed to deliver the promises to both communities and the environment. Why?

4. ... AND AS MANY ROADS LEAD BACK AGAIN: “OUR THEORIES ARE INADEQUATE”

There are a number of epistemologically distinct approaches to explain the failure of CBNRM programs and policies and to take steps to improve their performance. The first is to take theories seriously and accord them a prime role in contributing to policy outcomes. Therefore, the most important task is to rectify or improve them, on the assumption that, if there were better theories, there would be better CBNRM outcomes. This strategy presupposes that there is a rational and instrumental model of policy making and implementation, in which “science talks to policy”—that better theory will be able to predict more accurately the outcomes of CBNRM from initial characteristics of the communities identified, and the natural resource(s) involved. Better theory will then appeal to rational policy makers, who change or adapt the existing policy in directions suggested by the theory. While a complete abandonment of this version of the rational in policy making leads the whole project of government and the possibility of progress into some fairly desolate destinations, it has been comprehensively critiqued and modified (see Keeley & Scoones, 1999, on understanding environmental policy process, Apthorpe & Gasper, 1996 on development policy and Forsyth, 2003 on critical political ecology). As this paper shows, a more discursive and political approach to CBNRM

policy better captures what *actually* happens in the policy process, rather than *ex ante*, and what *should* happen. It also invites a wider scope of enquiry into the disappointing performance of many CBNRMs, which includes not only the initial characteristics of potential CBNRM sites, but also the policy process and the nature of the engagement of state, IFI and community. An important aspect of this engagement is between different IFIs and senior policy advisors of the recipient governments, where theories may be judged less on the grounds of their predictive value than on their discursive power and appeal to their audiences. These audiences are other IFIs and their own political and financial constituencies, specifically in their home countries for bi-lateral agencies and more generally in the international aid network.

An example from Botswana will illustrate how a particular theory with powerful discursive leverage in policy making discourses has been overturned but is still invoked to support subsequent policy making for the formulation of future policy, some years after substantial critique of the theory. In general terms, this is a widespread occurrence:

Stories commonly used in describing and analyzing policy issues are a force in themselves, and must be considered explicitly in assessing policy options. Further, these stories often resist change or modification even in the presence of contradicting empirical data, because they continue to underwrite and stabilize the assumptions for decision making in the face of high uncertainty, complexity and polarization (Roe, 1994, p. 2).

Rangelands, which had been managed largely through community-based and chiefly authority until the late 1970s, are not now in the frame for current CBNRM initiatives (Abel & Blaikie, 1988, 1989; Magole, 2003). Hardin’s *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) acted as a predictive model of the inevitable degradation of the communally managed rangelands of Botswana, and this was used to justify the establishment of large scale cattle ranches which displaced communally managed ranges. The application of the theory to common property (as opposed to open access) was later shown to be misplaced following the establishment of a network of scholars who theorized and championed common property management systems (see e.g., the work of Berkes, 1989; Bromley, 1991). But in Botswana, Hardin’s theory had resonated with a large volume of ecological studies of rangelands in the 1970s, which identified

serious environmental degradation due to what was assumed to be overgrazing of an open access resource. Scientific evidence at the time supported this social theory and provided important “a-political” and authoritative evidence from outside consultants, uncontaminated by political and economic interests from within Botswana itself. The Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP) of 1975, followed much later by the implementation of a fencing component of the National Policy on Agricultural Development (NPAD) of 1991 both drew their legitimacy from a particular social theory (or “parable” as its author has it) and supported by an impressive weight of evidence of degradation of the range. In short, local people could not look after their local resources—therefore, in the name of scientific and sustainable management, they should be privatized through fencing and exclusion of local cattle hitherto grazed on communal lands. The local herder, it was implied, was incompetent (and the community invisible), therefore the range would be invaded and used more responsibly by non-locals. The considerable lapse of time between these two policy enactments attests to the resilience of Hardin’s theory and the scientific evidence of the existence of serious environmental degradation in policy circles, even in the face of overwhelming empirical and theoretical attack, and asks searching questions about the (contingent) role of theory in policy making (Magole, 2003). Between the TGLP (1975) and NPAD (1991), not only had the theories of common property rolled back the applicability of Hardin’s model, but also the scientific basis for explaining rangeland degradation had been abruptly changed by the collapse of the stocking density controversy in the face of new models of natural variability and pastoral adaptation, thus largely exonerating local herders from over-stocking although the debate of the significance of nonequilibrium theories in range ecology still continues (Abel & Blaikie, 1989; Behnke, Scoones, & Kerven, 1993; Illius & O’Connor, 1999; Sullivan, 2002). Needless to say, local voices that had been denying overgrazing were raised but never heard. Nonetheless, the political momentum for privatization continues, with the result that rangeland is one sector which has been almost entirely neglected in CBNRM projects in Botswana (Shackleton & Campbell, 2001, p. 19).

The next avenue for exploring the adequacy and political uses of theory supporting CBNRM is to identify whether the initial con-

ditions for a satisfactory establishment of a local management institution are met or not. This has led to an ever-growing number of ever-growing lists. There is Ostrom’s list of eight attributes (Ostrom, 1990), and Roe *et al.* (2000, pp. 114–120) have five tables of characteristics of communities plus internal and external factors of desirable attributes. Adams and Hulme (2001) have assembled a list of contra-indications, where CBNRM, in this case of wildlife, simply is “not the answer.” This includes conditions where CBNRM could never fulfill any of its major objectives (e.g., the existing wildlife is not sustainable, or a range of wildlife which cannot yield a sustainable revenue flow, and when there is deep resentment at earlier dispossession of land). To take an extreme example, in Lake Mburo National Park in Uganda the inhabitants cleared all wildlife so that the government would lose interest in the area (Hulme & Infield, 2001). In the case of the Okavango Delta in Botswana, resentment and passive resistance regarding earlier and continuing coercive resettlement of the Basarwa (Koi-San) has been revived by the appearance of CBNRM policies. The Chobi National Park was formed in 1960 followed by the Moremi Game reserve in 1964, and involved wholesale relocation of settlements. Special Game Licences (SGL) were established for each community which themselves imposed quite serious restrictions on the level of offtake of wildlife, but were rescinded at the time of the formation of CBNRM Trusts (where village “communities” were strongly encouraged to form Trusts as the only legitimate vehicle for the CBNRM), and the quota of wildlife available for hunting was further radically reduced. Official visits to encourage the Baswara to form these Trusts were seen as yet another attempt to dispossess them of hunting rights and hunting territory. Finally, in Malawi, illegal cutting of trees in the National Park was felt to be morally justified on the ground of long-standing grievances against the gazetting of surrounding lands for the park (Kayambazinthu & Locke, 2002; Walker & Peters, 2001, p. 416). The list of contra-indications for the successful formation of CBNRM in these cases is unfortunately very long.

Agrawal (2001) questions the wisdom of pursuing this seemingly endless task of specifying “facilitating conditions” for successful CBNRM (and implicitly accounting for failure when they do not apply), and lists a synthesis of about thirty such conditions, most of which de-

scribe the three main attributes of an idealized “community” outlined at the beginning of this paper. More specifically, these include for example, the small areal extent of the natural resource; well-defined boundaries; small group size; shared norms; and homogeneity of identities and interests. He then identifies the sets of causal links which are specified in research about common property institutions, with particular attention paid to external factors such as population growth (Lipton, 1984) which leads to attendant growth of transaction costs involved in CBNRM management on account of the size of the group. This is linked to the nature of enforcement, support or coercion by the state. The conclusion the author draws is that careful research and statistical comparison may hold out the prospect of a “coherent, empirically relevant theory of the commons” (Agrawal, 2001, p. 1649). This effort may be helpful for the choice of likely communities for the successful establishment of CBNRMs (see the Malawi Country Report for the establishment of promising sites for CBNRM, Mwabumba, Ngulube, Kamoto, & Milner, 2000), but it leaves policy makers with the task of finding a needle in a haystack, where the haystack itself has far from clear outlines. They will have to look for an existing community with its natural resources which fulfill an dauntingly large number of criteria. Also, there remains the challenging issue: “if communities and the natural resources they control can be found which answer to most of the desirable characteristics for successful management of natural resources, what are the justifications for intervention?” There are answers to this question, but their applicability to a range of possible real-life cases must surely be severely curtailed.

The example of attempts to form CBNRMs in the artisanal fishing sector in Malawi illustrates how IFIs in the early 1990s constructed the case for intervention first, by assuming that there was a strong reason for intervening to ensure the sustainability of fish stocks (principally in Lake Malawi), and proceeded to make a number of assumptions about the “facilitating characteristics” of the fishing people themselves, which mirrored some of the leading ones identified by Ostrom, Agrawal, and others. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that most of these assumptions were erroneous, and the attempts to set up CBNRMs based on idealized blueprints led to unexpected and detrimental outcomes for fishing communities. First of all, the framing of the problem of over-fishing as-

sumed an open access resource and the lack of any common pool regulation by local people. A tragedy of the commons was invoked in a similar way, but for different political reasons, from the fencing and privatization of rangelands in Botswana (Bland & Donda, 1995). It also resonates with similar charges of deforestation elsewhere in the developing world brought about by local people rather than commercial operators from outside the communities altogether. Subsequent research indicates that fish stocks in Lake Malawi were not necessarily over-fished and were determined at any one time more by climatic variation than by the rate of offtake (Allison, 2003, 2004; Allison & Ellis, 2001; Allison & Mvula, 2002). Also, it was found that large scale mechanized pair trawlers, initially paid for by donors as “research” vessels and heavily subsidized by the state, had indeed depleted the larger and high value fish stocks of the Lake, but other species which were most popular with artisanal fisherfolk working from dugout canoes and plank boats were probably not over-fished (Allison, Mvula, & Ellis, 2002).

Other misapprehensions followed. It was assumed that no local pre-existing regulatory mechanisms existed for the management of fish stocks, when these did exist. Homogeneity of fishing communities was presumed erroneously, because many were characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity including migrant fishermen from different ethnic groups. Fishing was often part-time and seasonal with flexible entry and exit in time of scarcity. It remains highly monetized, with variable and flexible interchanges between migrant fishermen and local lake side inhabitants of cash transactions, employment in fishing boats, fish preparation, fish smoking, and sale, all in diverse livelihoods. Any imposed reorganization into a formal CBNRM pattern disrupted these important complexities and interchanges. Each CBNRM was defined by a clear territorial boundary after the classic desirable characteristic of suitability for a CBNRM, in a situation where the main species caught by artisanal fisheries were fugitive and crossed these new artificial boundaries. Finally, it was assumed that fishing officials and other local state employees would take a supervisory and rule-keeping role, but in some documented cases in Lake Chilwa the former fisheries officers had taken over control of the main local institution set up at the local level, the Beach Village Committee (BVA), and asserted exclusive fishing rights for themselves.

Let us take another case more briefly in order to illustrate the opportunities for local people to improve their access to resources and particularly fish which were afforded by the disturbance to customary contracts and regulations by the imposition of blueprint CBNRM schemes. Fishing in Lake Chiuta in Malawi was regulated through complex arrangements between local and migrant fishermen, which were ignored by the setting up of territorially based BVA as described above. Local fishermen, who tended to land lower catches than the migrants, then used the new BVA to attempt to evict the migrants on the grounds that the latter were responsible for over-fishing. Also, BVAs crosscut the jurisdiction of the local Chiefs. Inducements were brought to bear by some of the contestants with outcomes varying from chaotic to partly successful (see also a wider review of Africa's inland fisheries and CBNRM projects, *Geheb & Sarch, 2000*).

It is reasonable to assume that there is an unknown, but probably very large, number of CBNRMs throughout Africa, which operate beyond the searching eye of government, IFIs and NGOs. For example, there are many village committees in Malawi which still organize the maintenance of contour *bunds* for soil erosion control. These were originally set up by colonial authorities. Communities are also active in the repair footpaths which can turn into serious gullies, and stabilise marker ridges with *vetiver* grass, and all this with minimal government support or interference (*Evans, Banda, & Seymour, 1999*). But these are not the focus of current CBNRM initiatives. Again, there are other small fishing "CBNRMs" (as defined by outside institutions) throughout Malawi as well as Uganda and western Zambia. Along the shores of Lake Kyoga, for example, there are attenuated and rather ineffective fishing regulatory bodies headed by a *gabunga*, who attempts to control illegal fishing practice (the use of seine nets close to Nile Perch breeding areas, mosquito nets used for catching *mukene*, and fish poisoning). The latter was satisfactorily controlled by the *gabunga*, but nets are confiscated only when a levy to the *gabunga* is not paid. It is rumored that the confiscated nets are sold on to the neighboring villages. Such a description resonates with accounts of local government in many parts of the developed world as well (ramshackle, sometimes effective, sometimes not, liable to corruption from time to time, and liable to change). In more general terms, it is the variety and complexity of ways

in which rural people manage their natural resources which tend to frustrate efforts to improve the predictive capacities of existing theories, to standardize the local as it were, so as to reproduce it in ways which conform to the theories about it.

Thus, I argue that the successful "arrival" of CBNRM projects and the delivery of their theoretically predicted benefits are a matter, not only of the difficulty of finding favorable initial characteristics, but also of the interfaces involving national politics between administrations, policy elites, and IFIs (e.g., IFIs and bilateral aid agencies).

5. CBNRM AND THE STATE—BLOWING ON COLD EMBERS?

There are two sets of external forces which pose serious challenges to the promotion of CBNRM in ways beneficial to local environments and people in the ways predicted by theory. The first concerns the political interface of the international and national at which CBNRM is produced and negotiated. The history of state formation at and after Independence in Malawi and Botswana, sets the political environment for the interface between IFIs promoting CBNRM and government officials. Malawi has been described as a neo-patrimonial state (for a full discussion, see *Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994*), following years of despotic rule by Dr. Hastings Banda (1964–93). As Dr. Banda said about himself:

Nothing is not my business in this country: everything is my business, everything. The state of education, the state of the economy, the state of our agriculture, the state of our transport, everything is my business (cited in *Alan, 1999*).

Also, he, his family, and the supporters of his one-party state appropriated the newly privatized land, retail and marketing services in a strictly personal sense (*Cross & Kutengule, 2001*). A Land Act was passed in 1965 which alienated large tracts of customary land to the estate sector, the impoverishing implications for small holders of which were further exacerbated by World Bank structural adjustment during the early 1980s, that placed emphasis on estate-led growth to the almost entire neglect of small holders (*Ellis, Kutengule, & Nyasulu, 2002; Harrigan, 2001*). This policy was clearly much more to the liking of the one party state at the time. The appropriation

of natural resources from communal control did not stop there. Further, Dr. Banda's government transferred protection and management of trees and forests on customary lands from Village Forest Areas (VFAs) (which had been set up in the 1920s and had worked well under the overall supervision of the Forestry Department), to District Councils, which were controlled by party members, with the result that the power of VFAs was undermined (Kayambazinthu & Locke, 2002). Thus, the present notion suggested by a CBNRM policy that the local communities may be able to reclaim control of resources, and that taxation may be devolved to regional and District level are threatening to the conduit of patrimony from the local, via the Chief, to District officials and other Big Men and upwards to the capital. This is not an attractive proposition for those at the top of the network. However, those IFIs urging policies of decentralization and the establishment of CBNRMs hold out the promise of training, equipment and opportunities for professional advancement, which form part of what Cross and Kutengule (2001) call the neo-patrimony in many developing nations. Official acceptance of (or acquiescence to) the policy, the waving through of some local NGO projects and some rhetorical gestures in the form of policy papers may be enough to ensure the continuing flow of the neo-patrimony of aid without really compromising the flow from the capillaries which draw patrimony from the local up to the national level. While there were several training and skills development workshops facilitated by the Department of Forests, foot-dragging over approving regulations and management plans has meant that many communities have lost interest.

CBNRM also creates widespread feelings of professional disempowerment from foresters, agricultural research and extension officers, wildlife rangers and so on. The "local" for them is a site for instruction, implementation, and control with specific scientific objectives in mind. But not any longer under the drive towards local community management. Partnership, social engineering, and taking local politics and local technical knowledge seriously are emphatically not what such professionals are currently trained for. Furthermore, IFIs are constantly changing their policies even within the CBNRM sector, and there are different donor practices with low levels of donor coordination, all of which undermine purpose, initiative and a sense of routine for in-country

officials (personal interviews undertaken by the author in Lilongwe, 2002). In the words of one forester "participatory forestry has become a talking shop—we are never left with any clear idea of what we should do" (pers. comm., Lilongwe, 2002). Here, it is the professional not the local farmer who feels disempowered and with little outlet for their skills (see Mayers, Ngalande, Bird, & Sibale, 2001 for a detailed account of the forging of a forestry policy in Malawi).

Botswana had started to take the political and administrative steps to decentralize powers of management to the local level much earlier than Malawi. Official steps included the Wildlife Conservation Policy (1986), the National Conservation Policy (1990), the Tourism Policy (1990), and finally CBNRM since 1990 (Roze-meijer & van der Jagt, 2000). There exists a long history of decentralized planning and the institutional structures are much better established than in Malawi. There are democratically elected District Councils that play an important role, and Land Boards at the District level, which have the power to make a number of decisions about natural resource use, although the Boards are only partly elected by the local population and they remain an arena of conflicting interests. Also, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks keeps quite close scrutiny of wildlife matters through its Technical Committee, which is largely detached from the District Council. The latter sends a few members to the meetings but receives very little of the income which may derive from commercial wildlife ventures. Botswana has a much higher degree of accountability in government and a very much better resourced administration than Malawi, which has contributed to a more visible presence for CBNRM. In spite of this, the range of CBNRM issues and the extent of the powers of local CBNRM Trusts are quite circumscribed and mainly deal with wildlife preservation or tourism. A number of CBNRM Trusts to manage wildlife have been successfully set up. However, the management skills and capital necessary to run a safari enterprise usually cannot be found in a local VDC, with the result that it is foreigners who successfully bid for them, pay a licence fee to the VDC and make little attempt to employ local people, to develop local skills in guide work, or to involve them in building construction, catering, driving, *etc.* This has meant that the "local community" have often become little more than rentiers with

no opportunity for widening livelihood options and associated skills. Further, it is not surprising that relations between the private sector safari companies and local communities are usually marked by distrust and frustration (Twyman, 2001).

Other sectors such as rangelands are largely excluded from CBNRM briefs for historical reasons described in this paper. The management decisions concerning what is left of communal grazing areas after privatization devolves onto the local chiefs, and the traditional meeting (the *kgotla*). The Village Development Committee (VDC) has more to do with community activities other than NRM anyway. However, the power of the *kgotla* to make management decisions over land has been undermined by the Land Boards, engagement is limited to wildlife which has largely been taken over by foreigners, and the Trusts have tended to take the form of wealthy enclaves the benefits from which do not flow to the local VDCs.

6. CBNRM AS TROJAN HORSE

Finally, an account of the overall failure of CBNRM to provide the benefits to local people but to remain a policy “success” must move to the three inter-related themes—the policy process itself, the way in which theory is deployed, and the interface between the state and civil society. As we have seen, CBNRM has enjoyed a long and successful career at the center of international projects and programs, in spite of a stream of critiques and evidence of failure. A sceptical view of CBNRM would treat it as a fashion, in a catwalk of fashions—community development, micro-credit, farming systems, livelihood approaches and so on have filed past (Edwards, 1999), but even the sceptic would concur that this model has had exceptional longevity. CBNRM and participatory models of environmental management are underpinned by a mass of theory as has been summarized earlier. However, the mass itself is seen as a pile of assorted ideas by those who promote CBNRM in the development industry network, where it is the discursive appeal rather than coherence and applicability which is more important.

This remark in no way judges the quality of the theory—most of it enjoys a high international reputation—but the way it is used (and abused) as a legitimizing representation in policy making. Mosse (2001, p. 32) argues that the

institutional realities of development funding and “co-operation” mean that “...projects and programs shape as well as implement policy”—successes and failures on the ground do influence successive rounds of development interventions and the theories that underlay them.

Thus, the intellectual quality of the theories may not be the most important criterion for their deployment. Rather, they take the role of discursive capital in the production, marketing and sale of CBNRM. But the relation between practice and theory runs the other way too, in that theories also shape policy. Note, for example, the burgeoning of manuals on Participatory Rural Appraisal, and studies to establish best practice in CBNRM programs.

The practice of implementing policies for reinvigorating the “local” and conserving the natural environment through CBNRM usually starts with detailed design of policy and projects, terms of reference, organigrams of devolved government, a new legal framework, financing, training of both government officers and local leaders, new political structures and so on. In the case of Malawi, it even involved amendments to the National Constitution. In distinction, the subject of the policy is the community and the resource(es) it is supposed to manage. Both the “community” and its natural environment are usually diverse and complex. Furthermore, the resource focused upon by CBNRM projects has a wide array of different social constructions. For example, a woodlot may be a sacred grove, a supply of fuel wood, a bio-diverse collection of medicinal plants, high quality carving wood for tourist curios, or act as protection of a watershed. These resources may be contested locally, but meanings will always be multiple and be different from one community to the next. Also, the technical specifications of the resource itself have different political implications. For example, multi-species indigenous forest and single species eucalyptus wood fuel lots have a completely different set of management demands and therefore a different local politics. Faced with such complexity (as it appears to the eye of the outsider), manageability becomes a major problem. To render the local manageable, standardization and replicability become essential, and hence legislation and “blueprinting” become the established practice, rather than other alternatives, such as, for example, local covenants drawn up by all local stakeholders.

The re-designing of the local so as to render it manageable requires black-boxing and containerization or local differences. A black box simplifies by hiding troubling complexities within, as in the case of multiple constructions of the resource. Black-boxing can also obscure social differences such as wealth, political power between households, men, women, children and ethnic minorities, and it can conceal the local politics of control and inequality. The example of BVA on the shores of Lake Malawi illustrates this point. CBNRM projects may become in practice an opportunity for new political entrepreneurs, both internal and external, to improve their livelihoods and reduce vulnerability—rather than benefiting target groups (the poor, women, minorities, and disabled), as the egalitarian and pro-poor objectives of CNRM demand. Gender issues, particularly around the asset position of women-headed households, are seldom addressed (because they are difficult to do so within the formula of CBNRM) and reliance on chiefs (who are almost invariably male) may reinforce these inequalities, and exclude most women from the negotiations which local scale management is supposed to facilitate.

The containerization of the “local” in CBNRM policy is another reductionism to render manageable what is a diverse and complex movement of people (and sometimes resources such as fresh water fish and wildlife) through space and time, which transgresses simple mapping of boundaries. Natural resource boundaries and local territorial boundaries often do not coincide. To whom do the wildlife of the Kalahari or the fish of Lake Malawi, which both migrate across territorial community boundaries, belong, and whose responsibility are they? These are not insuperable problems but they require a deep understanding of the ecology and political economy of local resource use. A failure to understand the existing management arrangements often results in inept attempts to territorialize common property jurisdictions (see the example of fishing CBNRMs on Lake Malawi).

For all the rhetorical intentions of CBNRM policies, the contradictions of engagement between the local and centralized institutions still tend to reproduce the community and its resources in a bureaucratically manageable form. There are of course local strategies of resistance. Nonparticipation in unpopular CBNRM projects and policies may become a rational strategy of resistance, or getting what one

wants by other means (stealth, stealing, using through existing networks). The CBNRM project is also an opportunity where changes in authority, local bye laws and sites of decision making provide a disturbance, an opening for new political entrepreneurs, new rents, and control of resources. There are winners and losers but the prospect of being the former may induce a form of provisional acceptance of a CBNRM, subject to fears of dispossession by the state and on conditions which will favor the likely winners. Outright resistance is not uncommon and evokes coercive responses from the local state. For example, the Basarwa (or Bushmen) in Botswana objected to further incursions into their hunting rights, and were met with cajoling by local officials along the lines that “we are all Batswana now” and you should not try and preserve your identity as Basarwa, and “if you do not agree to form a CBNRM Trust (as the vehicle for CBNRM) the government will set it up without you, and you will lose out” (Taylor, 2001, p. 7). CBNRM requires delicate, politically astute and technically sound negotiation on the part of outsiders, in which transparency and downward accountability are essential. All the same, strong forces militate against the actual moment of relinquishing professional and pecuniary control by the state. CBNRM projects have to possess a series of clearly defined objectives, quantifiable costs and benefits and time-bound activities, in order to market themselves to funders. Being *too* participatory wastes time and deflects personnel from fulfilling targets, as Mosse (2001) has noted. Prime attention must be given to outputs (kilometers of soil and water conservation measures completed, numbers of seedlings planted, and number of local institutions formed), rather than outcomes, which cannot be measured in such clear terms. It is outputs and targets which are essential fact-fodder for the nourishment of clients in the development industry, and since CBNRM is such a complex idea, encompassing as it does both the social and the environmental, “success” can be found somewhere, even in the most dismal project.

In these ways, CBNRM projects and programs may be viewed as a Trojan horse. In the guise of decentralized management and greater autonomy in decision making, outside institutions can provide openings and opportunities for new entrepreneurs both from within the community and outside, as the examples from Botswana and Malawi have shown. It

can bring the forces of patrimony closer to the community and reinforce these networks which pass surpluses upwards from the community, via local businessmen and Chiefs to government personnel (e.g., the police) upwards to regional and national elites.

7. CONCLUSION

The attractiveness of CBNRM rides on a heterogeneous set of theories and sentiments but has been increasingly criticized from within the academy and in some professional evaluations. Monitoring the outcomes of CBNRM programs has been very rare, and nonexistent in the two countries discussed in this paper. Furthermore, independent or participatory evaluations of CBNRM by the communities themselves have been conspicuously absent, so that their voices have not been articulated and heard.

Nonetheless, scepticism and criticism have appeared now for about 15 years—too long a period to invoke policy lag as a reason for the popularity and continuation of CBNRM projects and programs. I have claimed that their “success” is reproduced within a network of multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies, international NGOs, in-country NGOs and a limited number of senior government officials in recipient countries. The discursive power of the theoretical benefits to environment and community of CBNRM, the need to proclaim success to other international audiences, and the diffuseness and range of the social and environmental objectives, all lie behind representations of this “success.” Success, in turn, is defined in ways that will allow it to be found. Success stories prevail against criticism that comes from other quarters (particularly local people who have experienced CBNRM, and independent commentary from scholars). CBNRM is porous, can absorb all manner of different agendas, and is rich in the variety of benefits it promises, and there appears to be “something in it for everybody.” In this way, theories about the benefits of CBNRM are judged less by their predictive value than their appeal to the various different constituencies of different international financial institutions.

Any enquiry into the performance of CRNRM must, firstly, extend its focus from the facilitating conditions of candidate communities for the CBNRM treatment (important

though these are), to the political conditions under which they are negotiated between IFIs and recipient countries, and the nature of the state itself. Here the interests of different actors, both within political elites and in civil society, will shape the strategy of acceptance followed by active implementation, acquiescence, rhetorical gestures, or foot-dragging. The second area of focus will be the interface between the CBNRM program and the local communities. Here the bureaucratic necessity is for “blueprints” and replicability, and this denies the complexity, diversity and internal differentiation of local communities. Botswana and Malawi’s experiences illustrate these two foci. Malawi is characterized by extreme poverty, food insecurity and the historical experience of appropriation by a one-party state. The characteristics of the patrimonial state still prevail. While extensive consultation has taken place in the process of decentralization and the formation of CBNRM within a new Malawian forest policy, there is still very slow progress, and new local institutions are prone to corruption. Botswana has a longer history of decentralization and the formation of CBNRM. There is a network of institutions which function and that are reasonably transparent. However, the nature of the safari, tourist, handicrafts and trophy hunting industry has not lent itself well to the development of skills by local people, nor to the emergence of a substantial and widely distributed stream of income for local communities. It has also led to the marginalization of certain groups, especially the Koi-San.

The success or failure of CBNRM may best be judged by the outcomes that project and policy documents themselves profess as goals, in terms of the degree to which it has delivered on sustainable environmental management, enhanced incomes especially for the poor, and institutional learning at all levels. These criteria suggest that difficult and costly monitoring and evaluations will be required. Where clear evidence on these criteria is missing (or adverse) in the existing projects, other measures have often been highlighted as positive. Results are always mixed and open to all sorts of interpretations. There are cases where it is clear that local people, including the politically marginalized, have benefited, especially when the state really has let go of professional and economic control. Also, there are so many others which have produced ambiguous outcomes in terms of CBNRM’s stated goals. However, above

all, it is in the implementation of CBNRM that communities characterized by wide social and environmental variability seem to be regularized, reduced, manualized, replicated, and inserted into program targets. If CBNRM is to

succeed discursively and the project is to survive at all, these communities will continue to be lionized and idealized in the corridors of offices in capital cities, and by significant numbers of donor organizations.

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