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Sustainable natural resource management in Namibia: Successful community-based wildlife conservation

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Key messages

1. Namibia has created the enabling conditions that link economic incentives with environmental management and wildlife conservation. Two important factors in this process have been legal reform that strengthens local ownership and learning from international experiences.
2. Incentives that encourage positive action by private actors are an important element of public policy on the environment, and can work under conditions of community tenure on state land. Devolution backed by effective state support can also deliver significant results.
3. Beyond its intrinsic ecological benefits, conservation management has the potential to generate real wealth over a long time period and real gains for disadvantaged groups.

Summary

Before independence in 1990, wildlife populations in Namibia's communal areas were plummeting as a result of extensive poaching during prolonged military occupation. By applying lessons from neighbouring countries' attempts at community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), and through its own earlier successes in devolving wildlife management to commercial landholders, the context was set for a national CBNRM programme after independence. In 1996, Namibia passed the Nature Conservation Act, giving rights over wildlife and tourism to local communities that formed management bodies called conservancies. This move allowed communities to benefit from wildlife on communal land by working with private companies to create a tourism market.

By 2007, 50 conservancies had been established, and today people see wildlife as an economic asset to be managed. This is in stark contrast with 20 years ago, when hostility towards wildlife was prevalent among communities, as this was a state-controlled asset from which local people received no benefits. Namibia is now an acknowledged pioneer in the sustainable management of wildlife through CBNRM. This positive shift has occurred through community empowerment on a large scale, supported by cutting-edge legislation that links environmental management with economic opportunity.

What has been achieved?

Increase in buffer zones around the country's protected area network

Namibia's national park system covers almost 15% of the country.¹ In addition to the national park system, there are over 50 nationally registered conservancies (as of 2007), 31 of which are directly adjacent to protected areas. These conservancies provide important corridors between protected areas, thus increasing the land available for wildlife by more than 50% beyond the existing national protected area system.

¹ Weaver, C.L. and Petersen, T. (2008) 'Namibia Communal Area Conservancies.' *Best Practices in Sustainable Hunting*: 48-52.

Recovery of wildlife populations

The introduction of grassroots wildlife management practices (wildlife water points, dedicated wildlife production zones, reintroduction of game to facilitate faster recovery rates) has led to significant recovery of wildlife populations. This recovery has been documented in Caprivi and Nyae Nyae and across the entire northwest of Namibia.

Increased economic and social benefits to communities

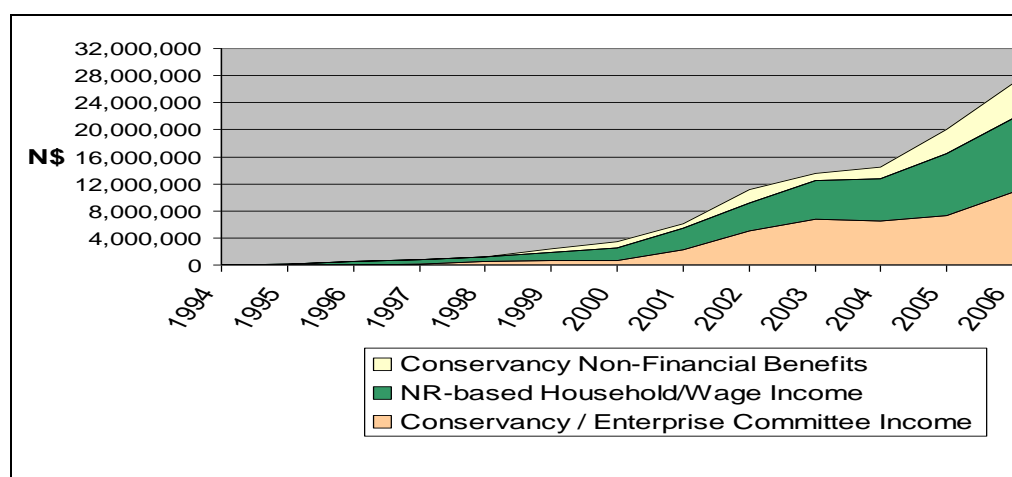
CBNRM and conservancy activities have become a major source of benefit for rural communities, in the form of cash, employment, payment for plant products and in-kind benefits such as meat from game or harvested trophies. Table 1 gives a breakdown of incomes generated in 2004.

Table 1: Breakdown of incomes generated for rural communities, 2004²

Joint ventures with private tourism enterprises	34%
Community tourism enterprises/campsites	28%
Trophy hunting and meat	16%
Thatching grass sales	11%
Game donations	4%
Craft sales	3%
Own-use game meat	2%
Live sale of game	1%

Cash incomes to communities are bolstered by partnerships with the private sector. By 2004, a total of 180 enterprises were operating under the programme. At that time, 37 conservancies were receiving cash incomes, totalling approximately \$2.25 million annually. Importantly, 15 of the 37 conservancies were fully self-financing, and 7 were paying over half of their operating expenses.³

Figure 1: Programme benefits, 1994-2006⁴



In 2008, the conservancies earned \$3.25 million in direct cash income. The value of game meat distributed to members was an additional \$382,500. Conservancies directly employed 154 people, and tourism and hunting generated 605 full-time and 2,267 part-time jobs.⁵ These jobs are often in remote rural areas, where opportunities are few and cash income is low.

² WWF et al. (2008) 'Integrated CBNRM for Economic Impact, Local Governance and Environmental Sustainability. Living in a Finite Environment Plus (LIFE Plus) USAID/Namibia Strategic Objective 7.' End of Project Report.

³ WWF et al. (2008).

⁴ Jones, B. and Weaver L.C. (2009) 'CBNRM in Namibia: Growth, Trends, Lessons and Constraints,' in Suich, H., Child, B. and Spencely A.

(eds.) *Evolution and Innovation in Wildlife Conservation: Parks and Game Ranches to Transfrontier Conservation Areas*. London: Earthscan.

⁵ NACSO (2009) *Namibia's Communal Conservancies: A Review of Progress in 2008*. Windhoek: NACSO.

Research also suggests that conservancies have a beneficial effect on household welfare. In regions assessed, all households were better-off by at least one measure of welfare (household income, household expenditure, per capita income, per capita expenditure).⁶

What has driven change?

Contextual factors

In post-independence post-apartheid Namibia, there was significant momentum for change. The government was open to new ideas on natural resource management and to empowering local communities to reclaim their rights. The CBNRM programme and the devolution of rights to communal areas resonated with new policies that focused on removing discrimination, addressing poverty alleviation in rural areas and promoting decentralisation. The programme also provided a way to manage natural resources in rural areas without straining the government's limited financial resources. The CBNRM programme could therefore be 'sold' politically, both as a conservation programme but also as a poverty reduction and rural development programme.⁷

Changes in environmental governance

Much of Namibia's progress has occurred as a result of improved natural resource governance, formalised in new legislation. Early on, in 1975, the Nature Conservation Ordinance was enacted, which devolved rights to landowners to use and benefit from wildlife on their land. Resulting improvements in wildlife populations led to discussions on how to apply similar incentives to communal land. The 1996 conservancy legislation addressed this issue, with the government devolving rights to benefit from wildlife to communal area residents living in conservancies.

The devolution process was also given financial, technical and political support and sustained engagement, enabling success. For example, Namibia's CBNRM policy established equity, participation and benefit sharing as policy goals. In particular, it requires that communities have a plan for the equitable distribution of income. In this regard, four modes of allocation have evolved:⁸

1. Individual equal cash payouts to registered conservancy members, where the number of members is relatively small and the revenue substantial;
2. A conservancy 'social fund,' from which members can request finances on a needs basis, again where the number of members is small;
3. Payouts on a village basis, where numbers of members are large and revenues modest;
4. Expenditure on social services, such as support to schools and old age pensioners.

Institutionalisation of CBNRM as a development strategy is evidenced by the growth in the number of conservancies and their members, the creation of tertiary degrees in CBNRM and an increased number of local and national organisations that support the CBNRM programme.

Leadership and local ownership

Another important factor of progress has been the quality of leadership of the Namibian government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities. The government has been able and willing to cooperate and partner with many different stakeholders in leading the process of policy reform and providing extension support to communities. NGOs have provided capacity

⁶ Bandyopadhyay, S., Humavindu, M., Shyamsundar, P. and Wang, L. (2009) 'Benefits to Local Communities from Community Conservancies in Namibia: An Assessment.' *Development Southern Africa* 26(5): 733-754.

⁷ Brian Jones, interview, 2010.

⁸ Murphy, C. and Roe, D. (2004) 'Livelihoods and Tourism in Communal Area Conservancies,' in Lond, S.A. *Livelihoods and CBNRM in Namibia: The Findings of the WILD Project*. Windhoek: MET.

building and facilitation, and public interest legal firms have assisted communities in developing their conservancy constitutions and negotiating contracts with the private sector. Along with full community participation in the process, this has helped establish and secure local ownership and empowerment. By engaging directly with local rural communities, CBNRM legislation and practices have become deeply rooted at grassroots level.

Learning from other CBNRM initiatives

Zimbabwe's Communal Areas Programme for Indigenous Resource Management (CAMPFIRE) strongly influenced the development of Namibia's CBNRM programme. Rural communities in CAMPFIRE receive income related directly to use and management of wildlife, emphasising the critical link between community income and wildlife conservation. Another important lesson from CAMPFIRE was that management authority and rights to benefits need to be devolved to the lowest possible units to have a positive impact on people's behaviour.⁹ Namibia applied these lessons, first by moving forward on legislative reform knowing that similar initiatives had worked well elsewhere, and second by amending elements of the programme that had not worked well in CAMPFIRE.

International donor support

The support of international donors has helped considerably in establishing Namibia's CBNRM programme and in putting the conservation and economic benefits in place. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE) project was implemented in three phases from 1993 to 2009. Its main purpose was to support the national CBNRM programme in Namibia by assisting government and NGOs to help local communities establish conservancies. This type of long-term support provided conservancies with the stability and time needed to develop and experiment, and also allowed wildlife populations to recover.

Lessons learnt

- The major lesson learnt is the importance of linking economic incentives with environmental management. In other examples, including Namibia's own past experience of land use management, environmental sustainability has been hampered largely because government has not succeeded in creating sufficient incentives for private sector activity.
- Namibia's progress also owes to its innovation in establishing a legal framework that allows communities to access economic benefits directly, through better management of wildlife and other natural resources on communal (or state) land. The legislation also allows for: devolution to lower levels of government; transfer of authority to community-led institutions; a predictable incentive-based approach to promote participation; a commitment to equity; and linkages to wider social programmes. This has led to an important change in perception among those living in conservancies.
- Benefits of such programmes have in the past often been poorly understood and weakly accounted for. The Namibia case adds to the weight of evidence that, over and above its intrinsic ecological benefits, conservation management has the potential to generate real wealth over a long time period and real gains for disadvantaged groups.

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⁹ Jones, B. and Weaver L.C. (2009).

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