The membership problem in people-centred approaches to natural resource management in southern Africa

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Who should qualify to be a member of a natural resource management (NRM) programme in southern Africa with the attendant benefits and responsibilities? In Zimbabwe, membership of such programmes could be described as *membership by decree*, in Namibia, membership tends to be characterised by *coalescence of interest*, while in Botswana there is a combination of the two approaches. Other types of membership in the region are *membership by cultural affiliation*, membership deriving from *association with an NGO*, and membership by virtue of being a member of a *civic agency* (as has been done in South Africa). This policy brief sets out some of the issues which should be considered when seeking answers to this vexed question.

Introduction

Despite its appeal and convenience, the term 'community' is a collective cliché that often masks ambiguities of membership and identity in people-centred natural resource management in southern Africa. Defining membership in people-centred approaches to natural resource management is easier said than done. This brief is presented as a problematic, posing more questions than it provides answers. We acknowledge that the range of perspectives presented here and the nomenclature used to describe them are by no means exhaustive. We challenge practitioners to seek alternative perspectives on dealing with the question under consideration, and to develop more appropriate terminology where necessary.

Membership and boundaries in NRM

Common property theorists have long argued about the need to set boundaries on who can make decisions about, participate in, benefit from, and access resources in natural resource management arrangements (McCay & Acheson 1987; Bromley 1992; Ostrom 1994). Murphree (1993) identifies two principles that are relevant for the issues discussed in this policy brief. The first is that 'the unit of proprietorship must be the unit of production, management and benefit'. This emphasises ownership as being central to the success of common property regimes. The principle is that a group of common property resource managers should be able to identify themselves as the owners of the resources they manage, and that this ownership must be recognised by neighbouring communities and all other decision-making bodies. Turner (1996) asserts that this principle implies that members of the management unit should have unambiguous powers to

exclude non-members. Murphree's second principle is that 'the unit of proprietorship should be as small as practically possible, within ecological and socio-political constraints'. The need for as small a size of unit as is practical could be interpreted as emphasising close relationships between the members of units of proprietorship. The members should ideally know each other and meet often to discuss issues related to resources management, be able to effect peer pressure on one another, and recognise themselves as part of an established local institution.

Models in use in the region

In Zimbabwe, collective custodianship over wildlife resources under Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) schemes is termed 'appropriate authority', and it is held by the rural district councils (RDCs) in which communities in wildlife-rich areas reside. Membership in such communities is defined on the basis of sub-district political administrative units called wards. These wards were established in the mid-1980s through a proclamation issued by the Prime Minister of the time. Thus, the CAMPFIRE model of membership – in which anyone falling within the confines of a demographically defined administrative unit becomes a member – appears to equate with *membership by decree*. But if expediency and less red tape are the virtues of defining membership by decree, then arbitrariness may become its vice. The arbitrariness of decreed units manifests through the widely acknowledged lack of fit between unit boundaries and resource-use by people living within and outside the concerned units. Such political administrative boundaries generally lack relevance as the basis for defining who should be included or excluded from people-centred natural resource management initiatives.

In Namibia's conservancy programme, *coalescence of interest* sets the basis for defining membership. Voluntary registration provides the basic requirement by which all those interested become members of the conservancy, regardless of political or administrative boundaries. Despite notions of self-identification and choice, the conservancy model of membership still carries a fundamental paradox. Extending membership to interested people who live far from the resource setting, and who do not incur the costs of directly living with the resources, is more akin to privileging free riders. Denying such membership to those people living with the resources, but for a variety of reasons (including a general lack of know-how) fail to register, is like disenfranchising the salient group of people who really matter. The 'producer community' is the group of people that really matters from the perspective of matching the costs of resource management with its benefits, since these are the people who directly live with the resources concerned. The aforementioned lack of know-how – and the exclusion of certain important segments of such 'producer communities' – often underlies why the process of fulfilling the conditions (including constitutions) necessary for the formalisation of conservancies in Namibia is painfully slow.

In Botswana, community boundaries are set by the physical boundaries arising from the administrative decree of controlled hunting areas (CHAs). Under the decree, only people living within areas adjacent to a protected area where concessions under the CHAs are issued can form trusts or other community-based organisations. These can then enter agreements with the state. Although, technically, communities can define themselves, the condition is given by the physical boundaries set by the state. In other words, the Botswana case is *a combination* of both a decree, as in the Zimbabwe case, and has elements of some coalescence of interests, as in the Namibia case. The formation of some community-based organisation in the Botswana situation causes communities to have some degree of manoeuvre – grouping together those with common interests to form a trust (or some other organisation) in order to gain benefits from CHAs.

If the logistical and other costs associated with the establishment of new units in the three models above are high and prohibitive, then building on existing customary forms provides an expedient and presumably cheaper alternative. Despite a history of mixed fortunes, customary leadership has tenaciously remained central to many aspects of people-centred natural resource management within the region. Building on existing cultural forms carries the promise of continuity; and is more akin to *membership by cultural affiliation*. Despite their tenacity, chiefly and headman institutions have been deeply tainted by the colonial experience in which they were functionaries of political administrations under a system of indirect rule. The essential features of indirect rule were, in some instances, seemingly perpetuated through postcolonial experimentations aimed at enhancing and securing the state's reach into the countryside. Such regimes of tribal authority are often characterised as having been 'clenched fists' – a formulation that portrays the extent to which they combined the arbitrariness of fused legislative, executive and judiciary roles within the persons of the hereditarily-appointed tribal chiefs and headmen. Such an administrative 'clenched fist' is alternatively also referred to as a 'decentralised despotism' (Mamdani 1996). Thus, building on such forms of authority without fundamentally reforming them still carries the stigma of extending 'decentralised despotisms'. In some instances, such tribal authorities have failed to overcome the stigma of arbitrariness and opacity by providing levers for the entrenchment of privilege, including elite capture of benefits. In some instances, the self-interest of such elites is argued through arrangements that are inclusionary with respect to costs, but exclusionary with respect to benefits. Such tendencies often signify the opacity associated with the bestowment of broad and unfettered discretionary powers in a few individuals.

In their quest for enhancing transparency, representation and accountability, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often sponsor the crafting of new institutions that incorporate marginalised groups, including women and the youth. This appears to accord with *membership deriving from neo-liberal ideals*. In facing up to the membership question, this perspective appears to discount multi-stakeholder agency by implicitly assigning 'victim and villain' as well as 'master and servant' identities on various segments of the rural population. The underlying assumption is often that deepening democracy is a panacea. In practice, such an assumption is confounded by a dynamic interplay of interests and agendas that often manifests through conflict and complicity between the supposed victims and the villains of systems concerned.

Meanwhile, 'civic' has emerged as another fashion term associated with contemporary society's preoccupations with deepening democracy through improved transparency and accountability. Such ideals have also been extended to the area of the environment. For instance, in South Africa's Fish River, the management of scrub-biome resources appears to entail *membership by civic agency*, in which some issue of concern spurred residents into a partnership of civic association and civic advocacy (Cocks 2000). Residents' associations that have emerged to challenge privileged access to resources by urban-based entrepreneurs champion such advocacy. However, such associations are politically tainted as they are often aligned to the ruling political party of the country concerned. The associations have emerged as *de facto* local custodians and managers of the resource at the expense of political and other institutions, with outcomes still contested by the sidelined authorities.

We can begin, therefore, to discern the problems of defining the membership of a community of natural resource managers. Practitioners in the field of community-based (or people-centred) natural resource management can profitably draw lessons from experience to improve the processes of devolution and empowerment.

The notion of 'community'

One of the many interesting facets of this discussion is the term 'community' and what it means. Practitioners and scholars get frustrated with what they regard as a matter of semantics, while others are deeply interested in matters of community and membership. According to Jim Latham:[1]

A community is a group of people who recognise each other on a face-to-face basis. They live for the most part in a locality whose known and accepted boundaries (both spatial and jurisdictional) provide those within the community with access to resources and deny outsiders such access. They have a number of enduring institutions serving their needs; a sense of togetherness legitimated by a shared worldview and a sense of belonging within a locality that exceeds any sense of belonging with outsiders; and they have the potential to co operate in matters of common interest.[2]

Is this definition enough to satisfy our need to understand the idea of community? Though seemingly all encompassing, this definition still surely remains far from adequate – as is the case with any definition of community.

It is not difficult to visualise 'community' as an abstraction that loosely names an assemblage of people. In the context of people-centred NRM, more depth can be added by using terms like 'landholder community' or 'village community'; or by considering a more detailed definition such as Latham's. A more pragmatic perspective to addressing the term, advocated by Brian Child,[3] is that NRM is about turning concepts into reality – so ideas of what constitutes 'community' and 'membership' develop as practitioners transform initiatives from plans into reality.

The pragamatic approach is not without its problems. Firstly, the characteristics of the most closely-knit and isolated village community change over time as babies are born, the old die, some leave to live elsewhere and in-migrants settle. Communities thus have porous boundaries and the number of members and their level of involvement in NRM may change over time. The concept of porous boundaries is also relevant to the land occupied by a village; the resources associated with that land; whether the resources are mobile (like animals and streams) or relatively fixed (like plants and soil); and the security of village tenure over resources *vis-à-vis* neighbouring villages or higher levels of social aggregation such as 'tribes', districts, regions and nations. These communities are all linked in various ways and are perhaps better viewed as a dynamic continuum that varies from the individual through family, village and outwards to the global community of humankind. All of these communities have some interest in land, natural resources and the goods and services that these provide for human livelihood. How these interests affect a village and the members of that village is a matter of environmental context, a complex set of variables that change with space and time.

Secondly, of all scientists, social scientists have the most difficult task in maintaining an objective distance between themselves and the subjects of their research. This is part of the methodological and epistemological problems that affect ethnography and are described at length in the anthropological literature using jargon that is a veritable minefield of misunderstanding for the uninitiated. Looked at more simply, much of the problem stems from empathy, which we suspect is very strong among most social scientists whose cultural roots are close to the African village. It is difficult to avoid getting involved in the affairs of the village when working in the field of people-centred NRM. While experienced social scientists and the impatient may sometimes grow weary, matters of community and membership will continue to be an important topic of debate.

Other dimensions of the issue

Space does not permit a more thorough investigation of this issue here. However, some of the factors which should be considered are:

- Whether membership should be based on 'people-centred' or 'community-based' criteria.
- The role of community boundaries in membership (and the role of land tenure reform as a basis for defining both).
- Whether membership should be based on participation.
- Whether membership should be based on land tenure.
- The role membership plays in playing collective interests off against individual ones (with altruism as a central motive)
- Institutions to ensure good governance and democratic practice.
- The relationship between membership and community development.

Another way of looking at the problem is to think in terms of continua: for example, the continuum of conditions that might lie between a totally devolved management regime where the individual operates alone; and a totally centralised management regime where 'the state' manages everything, but uses insights from community practice as a guide.

Plants can be classified and ordered in terms of their structural complexity. The same applies to animals, although the mobility of animals makes classification more complex. The classification and ordering of human systems must take intricate human interaction, language and culture, and social processes and conditions that evolve in response to the effects of the social (cultural, economic and political) environment, as well as the physical and biological environment.[4] This holistic, ecological perspective brings us to the realisation that, in people-centred approaches to NRM, we are dealing with complex systems that can be viewed in any number of ways using any variety of analytical tools to bring enlightenment. Holding dogmatically to one view based on one analytic perspective leads to stagnation, while embracing different perspectives may lead to better leads to better understanding of how to approach and refine practice.

Conclusions

Issues of community and membership are an essential part of our identity; who we are as individuals; how we relate to our families and the larger community in which

we live. Among other things, consideration of community and membership raises self-reflective questions of what it is about us that is unique; what we have in common with our fellows; how we use our talents; and what roles we play in each of the various community settings to which we belong. This search for personal identity is simply part of the process of growth and change that begins at the moment of conception and ends with death. It determines our beliefs, our values and our behaviour as individuals and as part of the society in which we grow up. As a natural process, growth is a force as immutable as gravity; and attempting to deny that force by imposing external beliefs and values will ultimately be self-defeating. It is the nature of people as individuals and as communities to grow and adapt, as they will, to suit their understanding of their environment.

If for no other reason than their own self-determination, intellectuals with an interest in the social sciences will inevitably ponder and debate matters of community and membership. This is far from being the sterile or self-appeasing exercise that some would call it. It is part of the essence of life and a reflection of the desire of all living beings to grow and flourish. In the development context that is part of people-centred NRM it behoves us all to be more aware of ourselves and our place in community – a process that will take us all a lifetime of learning.

Definition of boundaries, natural resources, institutions and communities, which are all determined through customary and other social factors, establish whom to exclude from natural resource benefits, access and decision-making. This policy brief has described approaches used in Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The bottom line is that there is no silver bullet for defining membership or community in people-centred natural resource management. This is mainly because membership is established through negotiation and consensus, and therefore necessarily flexible and complex, since such processes vary from time to time and from place to place.

Endnotes

1 Jim Latham, Centre for Applied Social Sciences, at the University of Zimbabwe.
2 Contribution to the CASS/PLAAS discussion on membership on the website: www.uwc.ac.za/plaas
3 Brian Child, Associate Professor (African Conservation), Center for African Studies The University of Florida, bchild@africa.ufl.edu
4 A recent article in *New Scientist* lists language as one of evolutions ten greatest inventions ever, and as far as humans are concerned, the ultimate innovation that distinguishes us from other species. Some animal behaviourists might disagree with the last part of this claim.

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