

# The impact of people-centred approaches to natural resource management on poverty reduction



*Brian Jones*

Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is often promoted by governments, NGOs and donors as a means of reducing poverty in rural communities, particularly through income-generation from various natural resource-based activities. CBNRM is increasingly being adopted as a means of poverty reduction in the national development strategies of most southern African countries. But can these high expectations be met? Evidence shows CBNRM is able to contribute to combating poverty in terms of empowering local communities, helping to buffer them against shocks, and building natural capital, rather than putting large amounts of money into their pockets. But CBNRM approaches do not reach their full potential because of policy weaknesses and gaps in implementation. That said, the lack of clear criteria and indicators means that the contribution of CBNRM is not measured, and has probably been underestimated. CBNRM cannot combat poverty on its own – its impact is partially determined by larger political and economic conditions, and it does not address all the causes of poverty. CBNRM should therefore be a part of a broader, multi-faceted national strategy to deal with poverty, and it should be strengthened through further policy reform and improved implementation.

## Introduction

Most southern Africa countries have initiated formal CBNRM programmes in which rights over wildlife and tourism are transferred by government to a community-based organisation (CBO) that represents the local community. These CBOs usually have a constitution, a defined area of authority, and a defined membership or group of resource users. Once the CBO receives the rights over wildlife and tourism from government it is able to enter into contracts with hunting and photographic tourism companies to develop enterprises based on different forms of wildlife use. Once the CBO has covered its own operating costs, the surplus income is used for natural resource management and for community benefit.

The underlying premise of CBNRM is that if rural communities have decision-making authority over their natural resources and are able to benefit from the resources, they will use these more sustainably. In the past governments, development agencies and NGOs saw potential in this approach for generating income and jobs in rural communities and promoting rural development at the same time as promoting natural resource conservation. However, more recently, several analysts have concluded that CBNRM is having little impact on poverty and that

governments and donors should pursue other strategies. In particular, CBNRM has been criticised for failing to generate much income for rural households and for not directly improving their quality of life. Yet this analysis tends to focus on one very narrow aspect of combating poverty – income generation and material well-being.

Modern understandings of the causes of poverty suggests that several other factors are also important. These include a lack of voice and empowerment, a lack of adequate institutions, vulnerability to shocks and a lack of different types of assets. Further, it is also important to consider the contribution of CBNRM in terms of the particular conditions that affect rural livelihoods in the region. Much of the region can be classified as 'dryland' i.e. receiving 100–1000mm of rain annually, having a prolonged dry season, and being subject to highly variable rainfall across time and space. Even the highest rainfall areas of the region can be subject to considerable annual variation in rainfall, leading to periodic droughts and uncertainty and risk for rural livelihoods. The effects of poverty under these conditions are often made worse by the lack of development options caused by scarcity of water and climatic uncertainty. In these conditions diversification of livelihood activities and of land uses forms one of the main coping strategies of rural people.

## **CBNRM's contribution to combating poverty**

Evidence from around southern Africa shows that CBNRM is successful at generating income that communities can use for different development purposes. In Namibia in 2005, CBNRM generated nearly R20 million (approximately US\$3 million). Community benefits included cash payouts to members of the CBOs called conservancies, distribution of meat and skins from hunted wildlife, support to schools, the establishment of soup kitchens for the elderly, and the mitigation of human wildlife conflict. More than 560 full-time jobs were generated by CBNRM, mainly in tourism and employment by conservancies. In Zimbabwe more than US\$20 million was earned through CBNRM between 1989 and 2001. In Botswana in 2003 14 tourism and hunting joint ventures between communities and the private sector alone generated around US\$1.6 million for the communities involved.

Although the cash payouts to households are often small (ranging from around US\$5 to US\$75) even small amounts can have an important impact in rural areas where jobs and cash are scarce. For example the R630 per household paid to each member by Torra Conservancy in Namibia in 2003 could cover basic grocery costs for a local household for three months, and was equivalent to 14% of the average annual income (R4 500) for individuals in the region.

In general, CBNRM has not provided substantial cash benefits to the majority of households involved. However, it is generating a number of other important benefits to communities that assist in combating poverty. Through CBNRM, communities are developing new institutions that are able to manage common pool resources that are important collectively as well as for households. These institutions are often becoming vehicles for other sectoral development activities such as HIV/Aids programmes. They also enable communities to lobby governments, donors and other organisations and to represent community interests in local and national forums. Through access to jobs in tourism, the sale of crafts or the provision of other services to tourists and hunters, local people are able to diversify their livelihood activities. Wildlife and tourism provide diversified forms of land use that are important in times of drought when crops fail or livestock dies.

Overall data from CBNRM interventions in three countries in the region—Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe—suggest that CBNRM is having the following positive impacts with regard to combating poverty:

- generating discretionary income at community level for social welfare or other purposes such as infrastructure development
- providing jobs and additional income for some residents
- providing cash 'dividends' for households in some cases

- increasing household and community assets
- providing land use diversification options in semi-arid and arid areas
- providing livelihood diversification options for some residents
- building skills and capacity
- empowering marginalised rural people through devolved decision-making, fiscal devolution, improved advocacy and institutional development
- supporting local livelihood safety nets
- promoting sustainable natural resource management
- strengthening or building local institutions for common property resource management and driving local development.

This suggests that the contribution of CBNRM programmes to combating poverty is currently more in terms of diversification of livelihoods, creating buffers against risk and shocks and empowering and giving a voice to local communities than in terms of income generation. While CBNRM can lift some people out of poverty, particularly through job creation, its main contribution currently is in poverty alleviation, particularly in remote and marginal areas of the region. In such areas the poorest people are often those receiving support from CBNRM.

## **Can CBNRM's performance be improved?**

The performance of CBNRM in combating poverty can be improved in a number of ways. First, many CBNRM activities do not yet fully exploit their potential. Sometimes this is because communities keep their income in the bank, but often the range of income-generating opportunities has either not been fully implemented or not fully explored. Often, communities do not have the capacity to take on the management of additional contracts and enterprises which could increase their income. There is a need to support communities to understand the different ways in which their income can be used and to increase their capacity to take on the management of additional enterprises.

Furthermore, the positive impacts of CBNRM could be strengthened if the underlying principles, particularly that of devolution, were more rigorously applied. Governments in the region have devolved limited and often highly conditional rights to communities over wildlife and tourism. The positive impacts of CBNRM so far suggest that stronger devolution would lead to an even greater contribution to combating poverty. Policy and legislation need to ensure that local communities have access to the full income-generation potential of natural resources. For example, forest legislation needs to afford rights to local communities over what in Mozambique are called 'productive forests', i.e. those with sufficient reserves of commercially exploitable hardwood timber. In several countries, legislation can be amended to expand

the range of uses of wildlife that communities can take advantage of, rather than limiting this to trophy hunting. At the same time, means need to be found to ensure that a greater share of income from tourism activities reaches local levels. Political will and boldness are now required for governments to follow through on the limited devolution that has been introduced in the region thus far.

### Criteria and indicators

We know very little about the contribution of CBNRM to poverty reduction, and its impact is probably undervalued. Most data is aggregated at the national or community level, so there is little indication of the impacts of CBNRM at household level. Intangible benefits such as empowerment, provision of security against shocks, capacity building, and provision of safety nets and building of institutions are seldom measured. CBNRM should be measured against criteria and indicators in the following areas to develop a better understanding of its actual and potential contribution to poverty reduction:

- household economic well-being
- empowerment of people and institutions
- improved infrastructure and social welfare schemes in local community areas
- diversification of income-generation opportunities
- improved natural resource stocks.

### CBNRM as part of a larger strategy

In the marginal areas of southern Africa's drylands, CBNRM is providing support to poor people where most other rural development activities are constrained because of hostile environmental conditions. CBNRM needs to be viewed as one of the strategies that can be applied with others such as improved and more sustainable agricultural practices to sustain livelihoods in the drylands. It addresses a number of the key such as diversification, generating off-farm income, institutional development, empowerment, and providing a social safety net.

Recognition also needs to be given to the uneven distribution of resources across the rural landscape such that not all communities will be able to derive large amounts of income from sustainable use of high value species such as wildlife or timber. However, the sustainable management of grazing, forests, wetlands and other important resources and habitats on which people depend for sustaining their livelihoods is in it itself a significant impact.

CBNRM is not a panacea for poverty reduction. Even if its income-generation potential is fulfilled, CBNRM is not the solution on its own. It can, however, play an important role as part of integrated and complementary national poverty reduction strategies to address the multi-faceted causes of poverty. It is appropriate for governments to give attention to issues such as job creation in urban areas and creating the macro-economic conditions for economic growth. Within an appropriate national framework,

CBNRM can complement these efforts through providing support to livelihoods in marginalised and marginal rural areas.

### Policy recommendations

1. Recognise CBNRM for what it is – not the panacea for poverty reduction, but one strategy among others for supporting poor people in the remote, marginal and marginalised areas of southern Africa's drylands.
2. Support CBNRM's contribution to combating poverty through further devolution of rights and benefits to local communities in order to unlock even more opportunities for income generation and enterprise development.
3. Support local communities to develop accountable institutions that have the capacity to manage partnerships and their own enterprises
4. Develop clear criteria and indicators for measuring the different ways that CBNRM contributes to combating poverty, in particular measuring household economic impact, but also measuring the intangible benefits such as empowerment and institutional development.

### Reference

Jones, BTB. 2004. *CBNRM, poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods: Developing criteria for evaluating the contribution of CBNRM to poverty reduction and alleviation in southern Africa*. Harare/ Cape Town: Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Zimbabwe/ Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape. (Commons Southern Africa occasional paper; no. 7.)

#### Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies

School of Government, University of the Western Cape

Private Bag X17, Bellville 7535, Cape Town,  
South Africa

Tel: +27 21 959 3733; Fax: +27 21 959 3732

plaas@uwc.ac.za

www.plaas.org.za

PLAAS engages in research, policy support, post-graduate teaching, training and advisory and evaluation services in relation to land and agrarian reform, community-based natural resource management and rural development.



This is the fifth of a series of Commons Southern Africa policy briefs published within the PLAAS series.

## **CBNRM publications from the Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Zimbabwe (CASS) and the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape (PLAAS)**

### **PLAAS policy briefs**

*(Published by PLAAS and downloadable from [www.plaas.org.za](http://www.plaas.org.za))*

**No. 23. Doreen Atkinson, Michael Taylor & Frank Matose. 2006.** *Management of some commons in southern Africa: Implications for policy.*

**No. 22. Elias Madzudzo, Jonathan HaBarad & Frank Matose. 2006.** *Outcomes of community engagement in community-based natural resource management programmes.*

**No. 21. Webster Whande, Isaac Malasha & Friday Njaya. 2006.** *Challenges and prospects for trans-boundary fisheries in Lakes Chiuta and Kariba.*

**No. 20. Frank Matose, Alois Mandondo, Alfons Mosimane, Karl Aribeb, Claudious Chikozho & Mike Jones. 2006.** *The membership problem in people-centred approaches to natural resource management in southern Africa.*

**No. 19. Bram Büscher. 2005.** *Land and resources in a transfrontier setting: The case of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project.*

**No. 15. Munyaradzi Saruchera & Saliem Fakir. 2004.** *Common property resources and privatisation trends in southern Africa.*

**No. 14. Patricia Kyer & Munyaradzi Saruchera. 2004.** *Community conservancies in Namibia: An effective institutional model for commons management?*

**No. 12. Munyaradzi Saruchera & Michael Odhiambo. 2004.** *Civil society and social movements: Advocacy for land and resource rights in Africa.*

**No. 11. Munyaradzi Saruchera & Patricia Kameri-Mbote. 2004.** *Multilateral environmental agreements and land and resource rights in Africa.*

**No. 10. Munyaradzi Saruchera & Daniel Omoweh. 2004.** *Nepad, land and resource rights.*

### **Community-based natural resource management occasional paper series: Commons southern Africa**

*Produced by PLAAS in collaboration with CASS. The numbers below are downloadable from [www.plaas.org.za](http://www.plaas.org.za)*

**No. 14. Alfons Wabahe Mosimane and Karl Mutani Aribeb. 2005.** *Exclusion through defined membership in people-centred natural resources management: Who defines?*

**No. 13. Isaac Malasha. 2005.** *Contested fishing grounds: Examining the possibility of a transboundary management regime in the Lake Kariba fishery.*

**No. 12. Claudious Chikozho. 2005.** *Policy and institutional dimensions of integrated river basin management: Broadening stakeholder participatory processes in the Inkomati River Basin of South Africa and the Pangani River Basin of Tanzania.*

**No. 11. Doreen Atkinson. 2005.** *People-centred environmental management and municipal commonage in the Nama Karoo.*

**No. 10. Alois Mandondo. 2005.** *Dialogue of theory and empirical evidence: A weighted decision and tenurial niche approach to reviewing the operation of natural resource policy in rural southern Africa.*

**No. 9. Friday Njaya. 2005.** *Challenges of co-management on shared fishery ecosystems: The case of Lake Chiuta.*

**No. 8. GC Kajembe, J Nduwamungu & EJ Luoga. 2005.** *The impact of community-based forest management and joint forest management on the forest resource base and local people's livelihoods: Case studies from Tanzania.*

**No. 7. Brian Jones. 2005.** *CBNRM, poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods: Developing criteria for evaluating the contribution of CBNRM to poverty reduction and alleviation in southern Africa.*

**No. 5. Moenieba Isaacs, Najma Mohamed, Zolile Ntshona & Stephen Turner. 2000.** *Constituting the commons in the new South Africa.*