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Subsidized elephants: Community-based resource governance and environmental (in)justice in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

After independence, and in accordance with global environmental policies, the government of Namibia partly transferred the responsibility for managing wildlife and water to local communities. In this article, we use the concept of environmental justice as a theoretical guide to explore the combined effects that these new policies have had for pastoralists in arid, rural Namibia. We find, firstly, that partly due to conservation efforts, the elephant population has increased significantly. While a healthy elephant population supports exclusive, international tourism, the elephants are causing ever-increasing destruction at communal water points thus leading to increasing local financial costs. Only a small fraction of the revenues from community-based tourism, however, remains in the communities, and relatively few people profit from these revenues directly. Secondly, as new community- level sharing institutions for water emerge, pastoralists who are economically marginalized are subsidizing the financial costs of water for both their wealthy neighbours and the tourism industry. Looking at the combined effects of CBNRM policies for water and wildlife management, these policies are likely to lead to better resource management but greater economic inequality. To interpret these findings, we consider how CBNRM transforms landscapes and wildlife into global commodities. This process pulls communities into new common property regimes as well as towards privatization at the same time and helps to explain the social-ecological changes we observe.

1. Introduction

With Namibia's independence in 1990, there was an urgent need to address the injustices of the past. Since the apartheid state had based its regime inter alia on wildlife and water policies, natural resource management after independence thus required serious attention. In this societal context, it became imperative for Namibia's environmental legislation to transfer the responsibility of managing wildlife and water from the state to local user groups (Jones and Weaver, 2009; Nuulimba and Taylor, 2015; Schnegg, 2016b; Vette et al., 2012). This ambitious political project was informed by global environmental policies and, most importantly, by the model of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) (Jones, 2010; Jones and Weaver, 2009).

The model of CBNRM is partly supported by research which has shown that local user groups often develop institutions to govern natural resources successfully over long periods of time (Berkes et al., 1989; Bromley et al., 1992; Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1994).[1] Therefore, CBNRM promotes reforms that decentralize rights from the state to local communities (Agrawal, 2001; Dressler et al., 2010:3). According to the supporters of this development regime, the livelihoods of people improve once they are empowered and they are able to reap the benefits that had previously been beyond their control. Furthermore, once people profit economically they have more incentives to protect their resources for sustainable usage. According to critics of this model, in order to generate profits locally, CBNRM turns both landscapes and wildlife into global commodities (Garland, 2008). Since conservancies require financial capital to create those commodities, they open up 'the commons' as symbolic and material spaces for capital accumulation to private investors (Brockington and Duffy, 2010:479). As a result, decisions, including those about the distribution of benefits and costs, increasingly spin out of their control (Bollig, 2016; Silva and Motzer, 2015; Sullivan, 2006, 2017).

After independence, the Namibian state guided by NGOs adopted a positive approach to CBNRM and promoted community-based approaches as a perfect cure for the injustices of the past, promising social, economic and political empowerment for rural communities as well as ecological sustainability. With these political ambitions in mind, the first Namibian government began enacting new legislation for water

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[1] Other motivations include the aim of neoliberal policies to transform the role of the state from a manager of public goods to a guarantor of market mechanisms.

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and wildlife management.

With regard to wildlife, communities were given the opportunity to manage large fauna on their own (in locally bounded user groups called conservancies) and to reap the financial benefits obtained through their conservation efforts. At the same time, private investors gained access to landscapes and other resources formerly out of their reach (Silva and Motzer, 2015; Sullivan, 2006, 2017). With regard to water, the shift towards CBNRM implied that community associations had to find ways to share pumping costs (Falk et al., 2009; Heyns, 2005).[2] These CBNRM policies have led to situations where actors at different levels – local, national, and international – now share the costs and benefits involved in new orientations toward the environment (Bollig, 2016; Bollig and Menestrey Schwieger, 2014; Schnegg, 2016b).

In Namibia, and many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, CBNRM is applied to different resources simultaneously. However, these resources are regulated by specific legislation and often fall under the control of different ministries. Yet, the various environmental resources including water, wildlife and forests are intertwined in people's daily lives (Bollig and Menestrey Schwieger, 2014).[3] Given the interconnectedness of resources in daily use, we introduce and further explore a holistic framework for analysing the social-ecological consequences of environmental policies and change. This strategy allows us to avoid singling out specific resources, both politically and analytically.

The overall aim of this analysis is to explore the consequences of CBNRM policies for rural communities in northwestern Namibia. In other words, we ask who gets what and who has to live with what. In addressing these issues, we apply the notion of environmental justice as a theoretical guide. The concept of environmental justice originated in the early 1980s in the United States as a way of analysing the effects of dumping waste on poor, minority, and marginalized communities (Schlosberg, 2009; Walker, 2012). During the past few decades, environmental justice has developed from a framework that aims to make the unequal effects of environmental pollution in industrialized countries more visible to one that is also applied to many other environmental issues in developing countries (Agyeman et al., 2016; Schroeder, 2008; Schroeder et al., 2008).

Initially, studies of environmental justice focused on how costs and benefits of living with particular environmental conditions are distributed among different social groups, e.g. racial groups, classes, and communities (Martin et al., 2013:123; Walker, 2012). In general terms, justice is seen to take place if the members of a community perceive the relationships among them as equitable and fair (Alexander, 2008:134). However, what is perceived to be 'fair sharing' hinges on a plurality of culturally and contextually embedded principles (Henrich, 2004; Sen, 2009; Schnegg, 2016a). Thus, environmental justice first of all aims to explore (1) who gets what, (2) who has to live with what, and (3) whether people perceive this distribution to be equitable and fair.

More recently, however, some scholars have pointed out that the focus on the distribution of costs and benefits is too narrow to adequately capture the concerns of justice (Martin, 2013; Martin et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2013; Schreckenberg et al., 2016; Sikor et al., 2014; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). To overcome this narrow focus, they have proposed to acknowledge *procedures* and *recognition* as two additional dimensions of justice (Schreckenberg et al., 2016; Sikor et al., 2014). *Procedural* (in)justice refers to the process by which members of a community engage in political decision-making, for example in processes leading to participation or elite capture (Agrawal and Gupta, 2005; Dasgupta and Beard, 2007). *Recognition* (in) justice emphasizes the fact that people have different epistemological and ontological worldviews and refers to policy designs and implementations that acknowledge such differences and avoid interference with people's worldviews and the enjoyment of their rights (Martin, 2013; Martin et al., 2016). In the context of CBNRM, this implies acknowledging partly incommensurable value-frames and orientations towards the environment beyond Western, neoliberal ideologies (Martin et al., 2013; Sullivan, 2006).

In this article, we focus first on *distributional* effects, because, as our analysis reveals, distribution is a major concern for the communities we work with. Every single day, people negotiate, quarrel, and even fight about the equitable distribution of various costs and benefits associated with CBNRM. Based on our understanding of distributional justice, we examine how distribution impacts on procedures and recognition.[4] As the analysis shows, injustices in one domain have consequences for the other two.[5] Before proceeding to assess these questions, some background on the ethnography that provides the basis for our research is in order.

2. Living in northwestern Namibia

The ethnographic focus of our study is the Kunene region in Namibia, and specifically the ǂKhoadi ||Hôas conservancy. Established in 1998 as a communal conservancy, ǂKhoadi ||Hôas has a population of about 4,300 inhabitants and occupies 3,366 km^2 of land. ǂKhoadi ||Hôas is a phrase in Khoekhoegowab, a Khoisan language of the Khoe-Kwadi family. The name consists of the two words, ǂkhoadi ('many female elephants') and ||hôas ('corner'). Thus, it refers to the 'elephant's corner'. Nuances of this meaning will become clear on further reading of this text.

In the reports of conservation NGOs, ǂKhoadi ||Hôas is often presented as a success story and serves as a model for CBNRM in Namibia. ǂKhoadi ||Hôas is well known for being the first to construct a 100% community-owned tourist lodge and receiving a Community Benefit Award at the prestigious World Travel and Tourism Council's 'Tourism for Tomorrow'.[6] Moreover, since 1999, ǂKhoadi ||Hôas has been a stable player in Namibia's trophy hunting industry and creates employment and cash income for the local community (Nuding, 2002; Roe et al., 2001; Lapeyre, 2011).

Throughout Kunene, pastoralism is the main subsistence strategy and thus dependency on natural resources is high. Across the region, the average annual precipitation is below 300 mm and occurs in summer between November and April, with very high temporal and spatial variability (Schnegg and Bollig, 2016). With these climatic constraints, water and land are the two salient natural resources for a pastoral livelihood. During the entire year, an average access to more than 25–30 ha of land is needed to sustain one head of cattle (Burke, 2004). The wide-ranging pastures are common property, and the organization of grazing does not incur monetary contributions, nor does it require cost-sharing arrangements.

Throughout the Kunene region, natural springs and pans which fill after rainfall can sustain significant human, livestock, and wildlife populations. In addition, and partly in response to access restrictions imposed by colonial regimes, pastoralists use different strategies to acquire water, including: (1) constructing dams along seasonal rivers, (2) digging holes into the sandy beds of the rivers where the water stays long after the river has stopped flowing at the surface, and (3) drilling

[2] In relation to water it would be more precise to speak of community-based water management (CBWM). However, to facilitate the analysis of two community-based approaches to natural resources, we refer to both policies under the more general term of CBNRM.

[3] In the area under study, forests were not much of a concern, so the focus was only on the combined effects of water and wildlife policies.

[4] Our prioritization of distributional justice does not imply that distribution should always be the entry point of analysis. In selecting this focus, we rather follow the local discourse and concerns. Moreover, there are links between procedures and recognition in the tripartite environmental justice framework, which we do not explore further in our analysis.

[5] In addition, conservancy programmes have direct effects on the latter two categories of (in)justice, even though we do not focus on them explicitly here.

[6] See https://grootberg.com/conservancy, accessed 7/3/2018.