



Contextualising integrated conservation and development projects: Restoring the lost ‘harambee’ link in Kenya

Evans Mark Ouko

Department of Geosciences and the Environment, School of Pure and Applied Sciences, Faculty of Applied Sciences and Technology (FAST), The Technical University of Kenya, PO Box 52428, 00200 Nairobi, Kenya



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ABSTRACT

Kenya was at the vanguard of adopting Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) in the 1980s in response to high population growth rates that posed a serious threat to globally valued ecological zones. But most ICDPs were criticised for failing to deliver on the promise of sustainable development. The failure by project planners to internalise contextual socio-economic factors into project design is often cited as a major cause for the unsatisfactory outcomes. Development practitioners in Kenya consistently utilise self-help collectives structured on a nationally popular concept known as “harambee” to distribute project resources in order to satisfy prevailing community inclusion imperatives. This research utilises a political ecology approach to examine the perceptions of local and external actors involved in implementing a forest-adjacent ICDP among two communities. The study found that the assumed trickle-down effects from the introduced income-generating activities largely failed to materialise. Harambee collectives have a strong normative component for social cohesion in addition to surplus creation functions. The failure to appreciate and internalise these two sometimes contradictory aims by development practitioners resulted in missed opportunities for adaptive learning and greater community engagement that could be potentially transformative to rural development practice in Kenya and beyond.

1. Introduction

Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) do not operate in isolation from prevailing development practice in Kenya (Alpert, 1996; Emerton et al., 2001; Juma and Ojwang, 1996; KFMP, 1994); they reflect the predominance of neoliberal approaches that have shaped national economic development. Kenya adopted market-based principles as an integral part of its development policies after independence in 1963. The country’s approach was itself a reflection of the growing global hegemony of neoliberal practice propagated by international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other multilateral bodies (World Bank, 1994; Wunder, 2001). However, such policies eventually led to growing poverty and inequalities at local and regional levels (Dressler et al., 2010; Gore, 2000; Mazur and Stakhanov, 2008; Mwabu and Thorbecke, 2004; Pieterse, 2002; Southgate, 2006).

The search for alternative modes of economic growth in the 1970s led to the widespread adoption of the Kenyan self-help development model known as “harambee”. Harambee is a popular cultural mechanism for development at both local and national levels in Kenya. It is recognised as the best known collective action for development of its

kind in Africa (Hill, 1991; Ngau, 1987; Thomas, 1987). The harambee ideology originated out of the material basis of community “workparty” structures found in a majority of Kenyan societies (Hill, 1991). The self-help projects are based on voluntary pooling of resources in order to meet identified social or economic needs. On a smaller scale, it involves household livelihood improvement activities such as bush-clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting, and engagement in small business. On a larger scale, it fulfils bigger social objectives such as the construction of schools, dispensaries, irrigation schemes and roads.

Harambee-type collectives continue to dominate local development processes. But this development model has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention despite its contribution to rural change. Even less analytical focus has been placed on its implications on collective livelihood and conservation models in rural Kenya. Most harambee studies in the early 1970s and later decades focused on its links with national politics (Barkan and Holmquist, 1989). A major conclusion of these studies was that politicians misused the ethos of harambee in order to improve their popularity by appropriating leadership positions and misdirecting the accumulated resources (Thomas, 1985). The capture of harambee practice by the political elite reduced its popularity as a local, regional and national level development model and may have

E-mail address: evans_ouko@yahoo.ca.

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discredited its developmental merits in academic thought. Although many development practitioners are aware of the local socio-economic importance of harambee, there have been few attempts to understand how it impacts project implementation. The tainted notion of harambee may have contributed to the dearth of research on harambee from the late 1980s – a period that coincided with the emergence of ICDPs as a major development strategy. The Leadership and Integrity Act of Kenya (Chapter 182) of 2015 that prohibits state officers from soliciting contributions for a public purpose has been a source of recent friction in political circles, but the harambee approach described here has not been impacted by this law. Regardless of the prevailing problematic reputation of harambee, both anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that it continues to play an important role in Kenya's rural development practice.

This paper endeavours to elaborate the lessons learnt and the opportunities missed in selected livelihood-conservation projects undertaken by local community collectives in the coastal and western regions of Kenya. The linkage of the two concepts of neoliberal-informed economic growth and harambee-based development ideals reveal both compatible and contradictory aims that are potentially significant to the success of ICDP implementation in Kenya and beyond. The aim is to show that the continued neglect of harambee ideals in neoliberal informed development projects has a major impact on their eventual outcomes. The risks and opportunities inherent within collective-based but neoliberalist informed conservation projects are identified. The two forest-adjacent communities are compared and contrasted by assessing their historical modes of community production and economic livelihood activities. Multiple causal factors beyond those related to the immediate project are taken into account by including political, cultural, economic, institutional, and technological factors. The major aim is to analyse the factors that motivate individuals and groups to co-ordinate their activities in increasingly market-dominated development scenarios (Gibson et al., 2000; Ostrom, 2010; Sandler, 2004). The efficacy of utilising collectives as instruments of choice for introducing alternative income-generating activities in rural areas of Kenya is determined. Both project beneficiaries and losers are identified by tracing forest resource streams (Shackleton et al., 2010). This is undertaken in the context of tacit power and scale relationships and the broader subtext of community, knowledge, valuation and culture.

2. Background: Local community development and conservation practice in Kenya

A major drive to establish protected forest and wildlife areas in Kenya occurred during the colonial period at the start of the 20th century (Ofcansky, 1984). The colonial rulers introduced policies aimed at promoting two major economic initiatives: first, establishing the basis for profitable commercial forestry by designating selected areas as protected state lands; and second, placing the foundations for tourism activities linked to a large and elaborate park system (Mogaka et al., 2001). These major economic policy goals which largely excluded adjacent local communities from freely utilising what had previously been open resource goods were adopted without any meaningful changes by the newly independent Kenyan state in 1963 (Juma and Ojwang', 1996). The natural resource-dependent communities had few alternative livelihoods available to them (KMFP, 1994; Norton-Griffiths and Southey 1995). The growing recognition of the strong link between natural resources and local community livelihoods of rural communities as well as threats to biodiversity in the 1970s led to global agreements such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). These global trends encouraged the search for more equitable forest utilisation. Kenya actively participated in these global processes and readily adopted the ICDP model as a centrepiece of its mitigation strategy. The ICDP model was largely informed by market principles that aim to maximise profits.

In the 1980s and 1990s the government of Kenya attempted to implement the much-discredited Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) prescribed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Bank (IMF). Social safety nets such as free schooling and medical treatment were progressively eliminated (Kimenyi, 2002). The adoption of these neoliberal principles in ICDPs largely failed to uplift the rural majority from its subsistence state (Muriithi and Kenyon, 2002; Norton-Griffiths and Southey, 1995). The government increasingly lacked the resources to finance its programmes and pay its personnel. Furthermore, the worsening economy led to growing unemployment in urban areas which further exacerbated many rural households' poverty levels because of widespread dependence on remittances from urban-based relatives. These factors intensified the dependence of forest-adjacent communities on protected area products for their daily livelihood needs (Kaimowitz and Sheil, 2007). This inevitably led to intensified forest depletion that was exacerbated by endemic corruption in the forestry sector (Klopp, 2012). The deteriorating economy further diminished the ability of government to finance ICDPs. The resource gap in ICDP funding was gradually filled by local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose development agenda and effectiveness became a source of great debate and controversy (Mitlin et al., 2007).

The often-conflicting goals of conservation and livelihood production continued to present a major challenge to the stakeholders into the 21st century. Cost-benefit analyses of forests and parks protection and conservation in Kenya and elsewhere showed that local communities often bore most of the costs while most benefits accrued to the global community (Guthiga, 2007; Muriithi and Kenyon, 2002; Norton-Griffiths and Southey, 1995; Akama, 1996; Larson et al., 2007; Sunderlin et al., 2005). Moreover, women and poorer community members often endured inequalities in the share of benefits and costs in ICDPs despite claims of their inclusivity (Ribot et al., 2010). It is important to note however that the emphasis in many of these studies was on the direct economic outcomes of such projects. Most studies neglected important aspects of learning-by-doing in community conservation project practice (Adams and Hulme, 2001). Indeed, the influential early 1990s analyses of ICDPs by Wells and Brandon (1993) made an important but often ignored conclusion; that many of the projects had been hurriedly declared failures and therefore missed opportunities for reviews, experimentation and learning.

3. Methodology and data analysis

Case studies were used in this political ecology study because they conform to the logic of inference through careful case selection and investigation of rival hypotheses (Gerring, 2004). Aggregation, comparison, and contrast of case studies serves to identify broad patterns which can in turn be used to inform management and policy objectives (Bebbington, 2003; Gerring, 2004; Sunderlin et al., 2005). The methodology is necessarily qualitative and eclectic. Collectives act as the lens for investigating collaborative action among the selected communities. Collectives, groups and teams are used interchangeably in this study. A collective is defined as a set of two or more individuals that adaptively and dynamically interact through specified roles as they work toward shared goals (Dyer, 1984; Salas et al., 2009). According to Brewer and Chen (2007), common interests, fate, and mutually agreed upon social practices bind individuals within a collective to one another. The intention is to investigate how group members synergistically pool the sum of their talents within ICDPs in order that outcomes exceed the sum of their capacities; also referred to as the wisdom of collectives (Salas et al., 2009). Ten forest-adjacent collectives consisting of between 10 and 40 individual members were selected. Five collectives were located at Kakamega in Western Kenya (Fig. 1) and five at Arabuko-Sokoke in Coastal Kenya (Fig. 2). The two study sites varied in culture, livelihood opportunities, climate, spatial and temporal aspects. Unlike quantitative techniques, causal qualitative analysis of a small

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