

However, we must not lose sight of an opportunity that CPPPs might provide, which is a need to re-look at the good and bad about CBNRMs. In addition, we need to look at whether the involvement of the private and public sector do not create opportunities for pragmatic partnerships. However, even if we were to forget the Ps for a moment; the challenge of economic empowerment in rural and urban areas require a range of approaches to be explored. Provided that this challenge is tackled in a manner that is non-exploitative, fair, and brings about greater equity and distribution of wealth. Most importantly, engaging issues of empowerment, as Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationist pointed out in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: that the best manner of empowering poor people is when it is understood from their perspective and is carried by their will and commitment.

In order to take CBNRMs or any community based initiative beyond a narrow subsistence or welfarist approach, one needs to explore new 'business' opportunities through the stimulation of local economic development that integrates small enterprise development with that of larger initiatives. For instance, the harvesting of veld products, or even traditional medicines are good examples of how indigenous knowledge, practice and home-industries can be fashioned and packaged into products and services that can be sold in urban centres and international markets. These require creative partnering and networking with more savvy entrepreneurs who have established knowledge of markets and relations with high-end consumers. Initiatives in these areas have done more than pure conservation orientated CBNRMs could ever do. They have expanded the boundaries by opening new markets, and new entrepreneurial opportunities for rural communities. The exploration and exploitation of, if you want, commercial opportunities, requires a great deal more of pragmatism than ideology. The State and other agencies potential role could be to facilitate these entrepreneurial niches, so that the overtly profiteering motives that drive private sector involvement do not set the overall influence and agenda for economic development in impoverished areas.

Our famous Rooibos tea, which once started off as a home-industry (never mind the fact that it was perhaps an idea stolen from the indigenous San), is now a major export commodity for South Africa. The reason why 'business' opportunities never surfaced in the discussion around CBNRMs is because CBNRM debates were dominated by lefties, who thought and still think that business or enterprise development smacked too much of capitalism. Well, it must be said, that there is nothing wrong with trade, as it is an ancient custom, provided it is not peppered with greed and down right exploitation.

The views expressed here are not that of the IUCN, but the opinion of the author(s)

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Where to from here: Is Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) a thing of the past?

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The promotion of CBNRMs (community development projects with a conservation or environmental flavor) in Southern Africa vacillates between different ideological tendencies and practices. Ranging from ultra-conservative conservationist; expedient conservationist, pragmatist, donors looking for nice 'soft' projects, and left-leaning intellectuals who found in CBNRM possible aspirations and the opportunity to re-invigorate new experiments in collectivism or ujama. Then there are others who participated paternalistically in order to assuage their guilt.

Different worldviews give rise to different outcomes. Perhaps we chose not to allow these differences to surface, for fear that this might result in a failure to secure crucial compromises when tabling proposals to donors or requiring government support. However, it would have been healthier to expose these ideological differences, so that fundamental debate on the relationship of CBNRM and the larger political economy, could have taken place.

CBNRM provided a platform for advancing the intellectual and academic horizons of theories that did not quite catch the leash on changing times. Theories were developed on notions of common-property rights that bore no resemblance to constant transformation in communal systems. Theories that were fixated on the idea of the primacy of tradition over organic adaptation. This is not to say that theory is not essential, but one needs to ask where it has all gone in the end?

We all seem to think we speak the same language, when in fact we do not. Perhaps we conveniently ignore these differences for the sake of 'harmony'. As the window of interpretation, on the reality of living in rural areas, became tainted by various perspectives the real factors shaping rural life and economics probably never came to the fore.

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The rule of interpretation is that there should be constant vigilance over our own discourse, because it is layered and often tempered by our own notions of what reality ought to be. These are often pot shots, selectively culled to 'recreate' reality according to the political fad of the day. Sadly, we are also often prone to subscribing to self-interest. It is this self-interest and lack of vigilance that has fostered the continuation of inappropriate CBNRM interventions, that in the end may have jeopardized some successes, which we could have been a cause for celebration today.

On hindsight (because we all learn from our mistakes), CBNRMs could never really have been expected to contribute to real change for several reasons¹:

- ❑ Its conservation and environmental overtones diminished its political clout.
- ❑ Its conservation and environmental overtones attracted an incestuous circle of practitioners who repeat the same discourse and constantly pat each other on the back.
- ❑ In some instances practitioners were so fixated on their pet-theories that the interventions recommended never quite addressed the adaptive challenges that communities in need of development assistance would have had to make.
- ❑ Some CBNRM initiatives may have required skillful and diplomatic confrontations with authority in order to ensure that any developmental agenda set by national policy did not place poor people in a greater poverty trap than they already were in.
- ❑ At times, rural areas were conceived as places where fortresses needed to be erected, so as to protect 'tradition', when in fact the world was changing and all of us within it were also changing.
- ❑ It never boldly admitted that in some areas communal tenure would not work, given that traditional rule systems had collapsed and therefore a new system needed to be invented.
- ❑ It focused on selected resources, like the benefits of wildlife, when it ought to have been exploring other options where more value could be added to existing livelihood practices, and engaging in projects that would grant disempowered and dismembered communities real economic power.
- ❑ In the end, the lack of a national effort meant that certain communities were becoming more privileged than others, because they benefited from donor funds; government support; and local and international media attention.
- ❑ Seeing CBNRM issues in isolation was more of a detriment, than an advancement of its cause. The process of South Africa's land reform demonstrates the power of national policy reforms in advancing CBNRM issues.

¹ Hypothetical, as some of the reasons are true for some people, and not true for others, but I choose to lump them all together here.

- ❑ With globalisation new pressures are beginning to impact on rural/urban dynamics. This also throws out any fancy notions of tradition that we may have harboured. Not surprisingly, multinationals like Coca-Cola understand these dynamics better than we seem to do. If one is to travel to many rural areas in South Africa, multinational logos are prominent. Even the local village- which we once thought as innocent and conventional- is being globalised and gobbled up in the process: embracing corporate logos and brands as part of the rural cultural fabric.

In reality, it is doubtful as to whether CBNRMs have had any dramatic change in peoples' lives. At most, they merely become welfare projects, whereby the impact of poverty was perhaps cushioned, and postponed. This is largely due to the fact that in southern Africa CBNRMs have failed to be an instrumental part of political change, and have been unable to address the fundamental problems associated with the structure of rural economies. Given that it failed to address these issues, CBNRMs were isolated interventions. Neither were they a part of any radical discourse or political movements. More likely than not, they were tolerated because they helped some regional governments feel obliged to ignore social and economic issues facing rural communities, as donor assistance, via the NGOs, merely provided them with an expedient means to cop-out.

In South Africa CBNRMs found an inspirational boost through land reform and other political changes. In effect, it made it possible for more organic types of community initiatives to be pursued. In other Southern African countries, CBNRMs provided a useful guise to start the process of addressing issues of governance; land reform; agricultural restructuring; and local economic development in countries that were less than democratic, and where policy pontifications were more so rhetoric than reality.

The South African discourse is also changing. The shift has been seen with the launch of the community public private partnerships (CPPPs) initiative, launched by the Department of Trade and Industry; the IUCN; and other key national departments. CPPPs are an attempt to bring about new approaches to dealing with issues of empowerment within the CBNRM debate. One has to also accept, as is evident from the historical catalogue of CBNRMs, that the discourse on CPPPs can also generate it's own ideological twists and turns. Indeed, for some it represents the 'corporatisation' of collective resources- a general fear whenever there is talk of involving the private sector. To others, a genuine recognition that the private sector has certain skills, networks and resources which cannot be matched by government agencies or the NGO sector, and which has tended to dominate the development of CBNRM initiatives.

Then there are conservationists with a particular mindset, who in their protectionist fetish are interested only in so far as there are sufficient 'bribes' given to villagers. They are in this way hoping to inculcate a modicum of appreciation for the 'pristine' value of wildlife

resources. Anyway, in their opinion poor rural people could not be expected to have the capacity to participate in ‘sophisticated’ modern economies. So it was also the case that conservationists never really explored, or allowed these options to be explored.

The irony of it all, is that while the entrepreneurial and business aspects of CBNRM were lost in conservatism and left wing ideology, these self-same conservationist and lefties were the most business-like and entrepreneurial when it came to selling CBNRMs to donors, or when they became interested as direct investors in the commercial aspects of community based projects.

The issue, which arises time and again when dealing with CBNRMs is: the issue of the ‘collective’. The slavish paranoia over the collective had led to young bright entrepreneurs who were full of ideas and energy, being marginalised. Entrepreneurs could have added greater value to local economies if given the right incentive, training and support. Instead, they packed their bags and went to cities, attracted by the glitter of city lights, and other opportunities. They left, because the external agents were too hung up on collective aspirations, when in fact if more innovative approaches were taken, individual entrepreneurs might have entered into some form of social contract. In this way, their capacities would have been retained, and the real value of their enthusiasm and skills could be channelled into creating new opportunities from collectively owned resources. So, just as much as the collective matters, so do aspiring individuals. CBNRMs have not quite struck the balance between private and collective tensions and interest.

The verdict is clear: CBNRMs that have been propped up with external agency support - in the welfarist mode- are putting nails to the coffin. Those that were more cautious, shrewd, were clever in their partnering with external agents, and widened the circle of opportunity and are as a result on their way to some sort of success or the other. Perhaps the underlying rationale for all our efforts is best expressed by the Rap group: *Arrested Development*, where in one of their lyrics a guiding principle can be extracted: “Give a man fish he’ll eat for a day. Teach em how 2 fish and he’ll eat 4 ever”.