

Re-negotiating the Boundaries and Authority Structures of Communities - Local Power, State Building and the Globalisation of Environmental Governance in Northwestern Namibia

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Diverse initiatives of community based natural resource management (conservancies, community forests, community based range management, water-point associations) have transformed social-ecological systems in north-western Namibia (Kunene Region) profoundly since the mid 1990s. In a spate of legislative efforts the Namibian government altered state-community relations in respect to resource management profoundly. These measures had a three-fold aim: they were meant to (a) ensure the sustainable management of natural resources in rural areas, (b) to democratise decision making in rural communities and (c) to ensure that benefits of natural resources could be harvested at the local level. Since 1996 communities could then apply for a conservancy status, which provided them with the authority to use game quotas either through hunting or through leasing such quotas to tourism entrepreneurs. They could also negotiate with the private sector to lease out land for the built up of lodges and camps and reap the benefits from such engagements. In order to be gazetted as a conservancy they had to clearly define community boundaries and to define membership within communities. Whereas before both boundaries and membership had become negotiable they were now to be fixed in documents. Similar efforts were taken in the field of water management: the state transferred water-related infrastructure (boreholes, piping) to communities on the provision that they established clearly defined user groups. In many respects legal reform followed the Design Principles of Ostrom for the sustainable management of common pool resources. These governmental efforts which were by and large informed by international agendas on sustainable resource management in the post-Rio 1992 phase had fundamental effects on the political ecology of resource management in north-western Namibia. However, changes did not unfold exactly as envisioned: the use of natural resources has become fragmented with the creation of more enclosures at different spatial scales, a multitude of institutional arrangements (frequently competing) has emerged and local power structures are transformed with the intrusion of party politics, migrant aspirations and elite capture into local resource management. The contributions is based on long term field work in north-western Namibia (1994-2010) and draws on different sets of data pertaining to individual aspirations and strategies, communal institutions and cross-scale interrelations between local actors, NGO activists and administrators.