

**ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF COLLABORATIVE  
MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS: A CASE OF INTRODUCING  
PEOPLES PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF MT. ELGON  
NATIONAL PARK**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses one of the most challenging issues in protected area management in modern times, that is, people's participation. It attempts to highlight issues, challenges and, to a limited extent, prospects of collaborative management using the case of Mt. Elgon National Park in Eastern Uganda. To give a clear picture of challenges and issues the paper presents collaborative management in the context of rural development and then provides information on the historical background of the National park. Much of the information on activities of the park was collected during a field work study in the Mt. Elgon Region in July 1997.

**INTRODUCTION**

It is no longer tenable to label community participation in protected area management as an intellectual undertaking. Times have changed and the role of local people in planning and management of protected areas is now being acknowledged more than ever before as a rational and practical way of cultivating harmony between people and biodiversity in protected areas. The "Colonial" and sometimes conservative tenets that sought to build "fences" around protected areas can no longer be of any reasonable relevancy in the management of protected areas especially in Africa today.

The belief that local people are a threat to wildlife, and that strong measures must be in place to police their access to environmental resources in protected areas has for long failed to instill sustainable attitudes among the local people who interact with wildlife. The intensification of conflicts and the demand by local politicians to degazette parts of protected areas is a loud enough indicator to show that local people need to be recognised as important stakeholders.

Incorporating local people in the planning and management of protected areas represents a positive move towards the concept of "Conservation with a human face" (Anderson and Richards 1987). The Orthodox approach to conservation through National Parks (the most prevalent category of protected areas in Africa) which are "no go" and "no touch" areas is no longer politically and ethically feasible in the face of increasing natural resource scarcity coupled with rapid population growth. It is evident that "gun barrel" management with its active boundaries that seek to exclude local people from their heritage in protected areas will only serve to intensify conflicts and promote encroachment on protected areas. Because people lack viable alternatives, they perceive such protected ecosystems as areas that governments have intentionally denied them access. To them, the government becomes insensitive and not mindful about their socio-economic welfare. Once such an

attitude develops, protected area management turns into a politically explosive and economically expensive venture.

## **PROTECTED AREAS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Any attempt to protect biodiversity in protected areas must be linked to rural development. Though the two have been treated separately, it is evident that the numerous difficulties encountered are similar. Most areas that have acquired the status of protected areas are remote and at the margins of socio-economic development, a fact that has contributed to their being designated protected areas. Such places have experienced rapid population growth with families that lead a predominantly subsistence life and depend almost entirely on resources from the protected areas. The creation of National Parks in their midst therefore entails loss of access to resources or restricted harvesting by the people.

The impact of exclusion on communities without alternatives is enormous because the costs in terms of foregone resources are high while the benefits are marginal and are rarely recognised nor realized by the people affected. It is therefore important that protected area management, assumes rural development concepts. Local people must be facilitated to adopt new alternative sources of income that will enable them improve on their poor standards of living. Local participation offers a meaningful approach for integrating conservation planning and management and rural development.

## **MT. ELGON NATIONAL PARK AND THE SURROUNDING REGION**

The mountain lies on the Uganda/Kenya boarder and rises to a height of 4,320 m above sea level. It has one of the world's largest crater measuring 8 km wide. In terms of climate, the region experiences a bi-modal rainfall regime with a mean annual rainfall of 2000 mm, temperatures range from 10- 25°C. On vegetation the Mt. Elgon area belongs to the Afro-Mountain biogeographical region (ILED 1993). The soils are rich and have been derived from volcanic rock materials and ash.

With such a favourable physical environment the Mt. Elgon region of Uganda harbours a high level of biodiversity and is also home to over 800,000 people living in the two districts of Mbale and Kapchorwa. Because of the inherently fertile soils and the good climatic conditions this region has for long been the bread basket for not only Uganda but also Western Kenya. Subsistence agriculture with intensive farming of coffee, bananas, maize, vegetables, etc, is well developed.

## **HISTORY OF THE PARK**

The history of Mt. Elgon National Park dates back to 1938 when the Mt. Elgon forest reserve was gazetted covering approximately 1116 km<sup>2</sup> (Howard 1991). By that time, this was the largest forest reserve in Uganda. Like many other Central forest reserves created at this time, the major aim was to retain under forest cover all areas of land, the retention of which was considered necessary for climatic and other ecological functions. Government policy on forestry by then and as it is today, emphasized the fact that trees and forests play important roles in the environment both in direct economic terms and indirectly by a moderating climate, protecting catchment areas and minimizing soil erosion.

It should be observed that as a forest reserve a number of human activities were permitted. The Uganda Forest Department gave special permission to exploit the forest reserves. This was permitted encroachment. The permit holder would be given clear conditions specifying nature of activity in the forest, duration, rules to be followed and any other relevant conditions to be fulfilled

while encroaching on the forest. The understanding in this approach, seems to have emanated from a realisation that with a rapidly growing population, the need for more agricultural land could not be contained in areas surrounding the Central Forest Reserves. The local people therefore had to be assisted in some way. This was more so for the Mt. Elgon Forest which is located in a region with one of the highest population densities of over 250 people per square kilometre.

In 1993 the Mt. Elgon National Park was gazetted to officially cover all the area under the former forest reserve. However, the official gazettement was marred heated debates between government institutions. Though the Uganda Forest Department, the traditional custodians of the forest had recommended the area to be gazetted a forest park, the newly created National Park was instead handed over to the then Uganda National Parks, now Uganda Wildlife Authority. This abrupt and chaotic change of management meant much to the local people living in the surrounding communities. Overnight access to natural resources in the park was made illegal without any explanation from the authorities. Local people were not informed of the decision to change management systems on a resource that greatly affects their lives. The communities, especially the 58 parishes that border the park, found themselves "stealing" what they had though belonged to them e.g. bamboo shoots, firewood and a variety of other non wood forest products. Though some people had temporarily settled or were cultivating on the fringes of the forest an action that was illegal, these were hurriedly and roughly bundled out without any compensation or resettlement. Such actions only served to create negative attitudes among the locals.

The coming of the National Park was therefore received with mixed feelings. To the people, the park has meant more sacrifices of access rights, suffering, hunger and alienation from the forest. Their resentment of the park has further been re-enforced by the inconsiderate and "unthinking" implementation of conservation laws. Park law enforcement rangers (task force) are very hostile and appear to have limited or no training in community based conservation. For example, in Bufumbo sub-county local people fail to appreciate the rationale for a national park since they are prohibited to use long established paths that connect distant villages in this mountainous region.

From the historical background outline above, it is clear that a change in approach to National Park Management is inevitable if realistic socio-economic development together with conservation objectives are to be realised. In response to these challenges, the Uganda Wildlife Authority in collaboration with the Mt. Elgon Conservation and Sustainable Development Project have embarked on a plan for collaborative management.

## **THE MOUNTAIN ELGON CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

Some background information about this project will help us understand the process of initiating collaborative management in the park. The Mt. Elgon Conservation and Sustainable Development Project is an integrated Conservation and Development Project which attempts to link biodiversity conservation in protected areas with social and economic development in the surrounding communities. The project began on a sectoral basis in the Ministry of Environment Protection in 1988 with technical assistance from IUCN.

The core objective of the project was and continues to be protected area conservation. It aims to achieve this by promoting socio-economic development, designing and carrying out environmental education and awareness programmes and facilitating people to identify alternative sources of income. Since its inception the project has attained a reasonable level of achievements in:

- . Boundary marking
- . Introducing improved farming in areas surrounding the park

- Popularising alternative income generating activities including zero grazing, bee keeping, fish farming, rabbit rearing, etc.
- Fuel wood conservation
- Soil conservation technologies
- Construction of camping sites, etc.

The project however is not a lead agency and simply operates through government sectoral departments and organisation when carrying out its programmes. The formulation of the Management Plan that addresses collaborative issues has therefore been undertaken through the Uganda Wildlife authority. Pilot activities in collaborative Management have been initiated in two parishes to experiment with the approach in an incremental manner.

From the experiences being gained, it is becoming clear that more time will be required to understand and articulate peoples rights, relationships, responsibilities and returns. Collaborative Management entail long trials on the drawing board in order to conform to national policies and legislation while at the same time addressing peoples' needs in a humane way. Furthermore awareness is essential in assisting communities at the grassroots to appreciate the new approach.

## **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT**

### ***Population Pressure and Poverty***

The area surrounding Mt. Elgon National Park is heavily settled with densities of over 250 people per kilometre being recorded in Mbale and 70 people per sq kilometre in Kapchorwa. The 58 parishes bordering the park exhibit intensively cultivated plots. The people lead a marginal subsistence life heavily dependant on coffee, maize and bananas for income and food, with limited vegetable growing in some areas.

With a rapidly increasing population there is an acute land shortage and the National Park is seen as the only area of possible expansion for agriculture. Local communities cannot easily appreciate why such a large expanse of land is left for conservation purposes. The general belief is to extend the boundary further inside the park and give people more agricultural land. As the soils deteriorate because of continuous cultivation and poor management, poverty, famine and general civil strife is mounting. Tension between park authorities and the local communities is thus bound to intensify. Though considerable efforts have been put in an awareness programme, there is an uphill task to convince local people on the necessity of protecting this rich ecosystem. The fluctuating price of coffee, the major cash crop of the region, has further aggravated the problem. This has sometimes led to the demand for more land for crop cultivation.

### ***Initiating and Sustaining Rural Development***

For any long term success in protecting biodiversity in the National Park, it is inevitable that rural development is initiated in the surrounding areas. The local people must be assisted to improve on their livelihood through integrated rural development. There is an urgent need to introduce and popularise new high value crops, introduce zerograzing, small livestock and poultry projects. Introducing alternatives that will only replace to a limited extent what farmers used to get from the National Park is not satisfactory. It is important to understand that any innovation must lead to incomes over and above the existing levels. It is only then that rural development will be seen to occur.

Currently the concept of rural development is not being addressed by the park authorities. Though the Mt. Elgon Conservation and Sustainable Development Project has tried to do so, their

approach is limited to providing alternative sources of income generating activities that compensate people for lost access to forest resources. It is important to observe that considerable resources to first initiate activities that compensate people for lost opportunities in the park and further financial resources to propel them into socio-economic development are required.

#### ***Defining Appropriate Incentives for Conservation Goals***

It is obvious that to encourage collaborative management, local people must be given incentives. However, deciding on the nature of incentives and their distribution in the community is very important. The National Park has a pilot arrangement, where local communities through their local authorities are expected to receive 10% of revenue from tourists. The amount involved is small because of the few tourists. It is also not clear whether the funds reach the grass roots especially those in the parishes on the park boundary since money is handed over to district authorities. It appears much is spent on the general running of the districts without direct benefit to communities affected by the park.

Employing local people is another avenue of creating incentives. Where tourism has gained momentum the park employs locals as tour guides, porters, etc., but again in many parts of the park, there is no substantial tourism and hence limited employment opportunities. There has also been an attempt by both the park and the project to employ local people within the different ranks. Whereas this is a positive move, the origin of the local people tends to create a lot of tension. In most parishes residents were eager to have their people employed as law enforcement rangers. However, the possibility of encroachment has limited community participation in enforcement duties.

Other incentives being used include technical advice on zero grazing, fish farming, bee keeping and soil erosion control, fuelwood conservation, etc. The challenge however is the weak linkages between what the people want and the activities that are being emphasised for protection. While local people demand for access to the forest and improved socio-economic infrastructure, the project and the park are bent on popularising alternative sources of income. This in itself is good, but to local people these are not viable because they require financial investment and land, the two "commodities" that are in short supply.

For incentives to be acceptable, they must provide direct compensation to what has been lost, must not put extra financial burden on the already impoverished people and also be equitably distributed. For purposes of building confidence, good will and acceptability, the implementation ought to begin with what the local people want however irrelevant they are in achieving conservation objectives.

#### ***The Incremental Approach to Community Participation***

Introducing collaborative management has taken on an incremental approach. Of the 58 parishes surrounding the park only two have been selected in this pilot phase that is Walukusi in Mbale and Mutusheti in Kapchorwa. In these two parishes a memorandum of understanding has been signed between a select committee in each parish and the park authorities. The agreements specify among other things what local people can collect from the park, their responsibilities and obligations, etc. This trial approach, where a small area is picked while a larger portion is locked out may precipitate inequitable development and unleash other socio-economic problems. In addition it may create tension in the larger community. Bufumbo Sub-county happens to be among those places that are not participating in the pilot phase though problems associated with population pressure are many. The people of Bufumbo are aware of the benefits that the experimental parishes are enjoying, and to them it appears they are treated as "not worthy" any attention.

Such incidence highlight the attitudes of local people towards conservation. When they

perceive that one group is benefitting at their expense negative attitudes are most likely to be expressed. Unless the incremental approach is speeded up and preceded by intensive awareness campaigns, it may lead to more encroachment.

### ***Participation and Empowerment of Local People***

The major goal of participation is to empower the local people to mobilise their own capacities to manage resources, make decisions and control activities that affect their lives. In the field of protected area management, empowering local people presents a number of relatively unique dilemmas. How do you tell that the community has been empowered?

In many cases, the process is hijacked by a small group of opinion leaders and elites. In the event of this happening, the whole process of participation will be seen by the silent majority as a way of creating privileges for the chosen few.

In the area surrounding the park, one glaring issue is the limited opportunities available to the local people. Resources are scarce outside the park while abundant in the protected area. The empowerment, if not preceded by appropriate environmental awareness may create more problems. The local people will view parks as national and international assets of benefit to the wider community but a socioeconomic cost to them. Naturally, people may demand compensation requiring that significant resources be directed to their areas in return for their willingness to cooperate in conservation. Should such an anomaly occur governments may find it difficult to handle. In many cases the cause will be championed by local opposition politicians who may have their own agenda. This could be a potential source of social and political conflicts.

### ***Time Lag in Adapting to Requirements of the New Management System***

Working with communities to manage protected areas is a new concept not only in Uganda. The approach demands a great deal of tolerance and appreciation of local people's problems. Technical officials must learn to listen and avoid passing blind decisions based on assumptions. They must address and respect the views of the local communities.

It is apparent that embracing community involvement has not been properly incorporated into the management of the park. The law enforcement rangers (task force) still operate and behave in the same old way. Arbitrary arrests are still common. During this field study villagers pointed out this as one of the most irrational and prevalent abuse of power. Arrested villagers are marched to camps deep into the park and money is allegedly demanded from their relatives for their release.

Though community participation does not encourage local people to break conservation and park laws, it nevertheless seeks to nurture and promote more friendly law enforcement and mutual understanding. Coercive enforcement of laws and regulations is discouraged and dialogue together with awareness advocated as the basic tools of management.

Park authorities should also internalize a new management style based on community participation. This is the only realistic way in which confidence and partnership in protected area management can be strengthened. The law enforcement unit requires considerable retraining given their background. Security forces – the army and police -- should not treat offenders of park law in the same manner as common criminals. This is in itself offensive to the community because they "see" nothing wrong and consider themselves to be in the same situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of collaborative management has been initiated and so far a clearer picture of the challenges and prospects is emerging. Given the worsening socio-economic and environmental

conditions in the communities surrounding the park, there is no doubt that the approach has a fertile ground on which to progress. As the park authorities accept the role of the people on the one hand and the people begin to understand the value of the park on the other, then joint management has a future. Local people recognise that access to environmental resources in the park must be controlled. They have suggested possible modes of control. The challenge is therefore to initiate communication and information exchange between the people and the park. The observed problems stem from poor communication of intentions between the two parties. In most cases the people know little and have distorted information about park management while the managers in most cases work on assumptions.

In conclusion therefore success of collaborative management hinges much on the ability of Mt. Elgon National Park to open channels of information exchange and effective communication. There is need for unimpeded flow of information from the park planning authorities to the local communities. Recognising the role of local councils is another effective approach to successful collaborative management. There should be an attempt to decentralise some simple functions that are in the hands of the National Park. This will enable local communities build confidence and the capacity to participate in meaning full collaborative management of the National Park.

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