

Co-Management is About Cultivating Relationships



Benet women participating in the negotiation process

Co-management is often hindered by a break-down in communication due to histories of conflict. Implementing co-management policies requires innovative strategies for renewing dialogue and establishing new types of relationships.

Given the limitations of exclusionary policies in protected area management for meeting livelihoods and conservation objectives alike, approaches to collaborative management have gained in popularity worldwide. However, many of these policies are slow to be put into practice due to limited capacity or political will on behalf of officials, and histories of conflict between people and parks. Often times, conflict is so severe that communication has completely broken down and suspicions and mistrust are high, polarizing the issue and the perceived wrongs committed in the minds of both parties. The tendency is for each party to focus on their own positions, further entrenching conflict through extreme views without giving any regard to the needs of the other party. Given that non-communication often results from deep histories of conflict, co-management needs to start by cultivating new types of relationships.

Mt. Elgon National Park and the Benet

Mount Elgon National Park in eastern Uganda exemplifies this global scenario. The Benet, traditionally hunter-gatherers, have resided in the forests and Moorlands of Mt. Elgon for the last 200 years. Shifting conservation policies, from informal acceptance of Benet residence and use of protected area resources under British rule to forced exclusion from the park and all resources therein, have created very tense



In a first gesture of reconciliation, UWA give KADLACC technologies to distribute to the Benet.

relationships between the people and protected area officials. In addition to official fines, abuses committed by local-level protected area officials have exacerbated the conflict. These have included the burning of houses within the protected area, and beating and physical abuse of women and children. Negative conceptions by each party toward the other prevailed, Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) officials considering the Benet “encroachers” and the Benet considering that UWA’s only interest was “trees and animals.” The history of Benet marginalization from their traditional resource base led them to pursue a legal resolution to the conflict at national level. A court case between the two parties to seek reinstatement of Benet land rights was ongoing at the time of AHI involvement.

Strategies for Jump-Starting a Meaningful Dialogue

The Kapchorwa District Landcare Chapter (KADLACC), with the support of AHI, has worked over the past two years to seek

ways to address the impasse between UWA and the Benet. Co-management was under-going implementation in other parts of Mt. Elgon National Park, but had thus far excluded the Benet due to the history of conflict. This Brief describes how such a severe breakdown in communication can be slowly overcome for the benefit of both conservation and livelihoods.



Discussions with Benet, UWA, and partners on buffer zone location and resource management within Mt. Elgon National Park

- *Toward a First Gesture of Reconciliation.* To address any conflict, gestures of reconciliation are needed. Hearing of the Benet's desire to access technologies available at the UWA station, KADLACC took the initiative to meet with the UWA Sector Warden and mention the Benet's interest in the technologies. Ready to explore any opportunity to minimize the escalating conflict, UWA readily agreed, initiating a gesture of reconciliation that helped to depolarize the conflict.
- *Identifying Allies.* Within UWA, the managers were less polarized in their views than the law enforcers (park rangers), who had less to lose from the conflict. Therefore, working through the Sector Warden opened the dialogue much more readily than had KADLACC worked through the park rangers. The first gesture of reconciliation by UWA managers also "woke up" lower level officials within UWA to the new tone of collaboration.
- *Lobbying with Both Parties.* During most of this period, KADLACC was informally

lobbying with each party to bring them closer to reconciliation—encouraging them to see the views of the other party and opportunities from co-management. They used traditional wisdom to encourage the Benet to draw upon their historical interest in natural resource conservation for its future use value, and encouraged UWA to consider the Benet role in protected area stewardship.

- *Focus on Interests, Not Positions.* To unlock the impasse, KADLACC encouraged UWA to focus not on existing positions (Benet exclusion from protected area resources) but on their interests in biodiversity conservation. At the same time, the Benet were encouraged to focus not only on ownership of land in the protected area but on access to essential resources. This emphasis on interests helped to minimize the perceived threat of dialogue among both parties.
- *Identification of Bottom Lines.* Emphasis on "bottom lines" rather than getting all needs met also helped to further the reconciliation process. A mutual understanding on the bottom line of biodiversity conservation went a long way in fostering dialogue and a commitment to shared custodianship.
- *Balanced Concessions.* Conflicts are most easily reduced if each party concedes something to the other in the spirit of reconciliation and the collective good. UWA, on request, supplied technologies (tree seedlings) and authorized extractive activities perceived to be compatible with biodiversity conservation (access to bee hives, bamboo stems and shoots). The Benet, in turn, pledged to provide the necessary safeguards against encroachers from within and outside their communities.

In conclusion, co-management is about relationships. Cultivating relationships where collaboration has broken down requires efforts to break the communication impasse, identification of individuals who are less polarized as future champions of co-management, and strategies to move away from interests to positions and protect agreed upon bottom lines. Early efforts at reconciliation were also rewarded at the conclusion of the Benet court case, as groundwork has been laid for implementing resolutions.

—Awadh Chemengei, Simon Nyangas, William Cheptegei, Joseph Tanui, Frances Alinyo and Laura German



African Highlands Initiative
P.O. Box 26416
Kampala, Uganda

tel:
256-41-220602
256-772-671152

fax:
256-41-223242

e-mail:
j.tanui@cgiar.org



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