

## **COLLABORATION AFTER EXPRESS CONSENT: THE DYNAMICS OF ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN PARTICIPATORY SCENARIO PLANNING IN SOUTH EAST ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper makes the case, based on the author's observations and participation in a community participatory scenario planning project, that collaboration in research after express consensus from communities is a fundamental condition for long term success of projects in conditions of uncertainty. As a process ethnography, it discusses the dynamics of collaboration in applied science where research was only conducted after express consent from semi-literate communities living in south East Zimbabwe. Data collection was based on qualitative semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and scenario workshops. Each participating ward had a series of meetings at which the benefits of the scenario planning approach were explained. In all three wards, communities reached consensus on the importance of the scenario planning approach and subsequently submitted letters of interest to the research project asking for collaboration. They argued that the form of collaboration proposed under the scenario planning project would make them realize their visions and aspirations within the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA). The paper highlights the critical importance of engaging local communities in collaboration that improves environmental governance and present the outcomes in terms of trust, representation and communication in governance central to the long term sustainability of the GLTFCA. Sustainability can only be achieved through innovative research approaches that address human physical, emotional and social needs. Collaborative research which expands room for negotiating future livelihoods is more likely to be accepted and tolerated as it reduces the risks of livelihoods displacement.

**Keywords:** self-selection, participation, consensus building, future livelihoods, South East Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, extreme poverty and biodiversity hotspots are geographically coincident, concentrated in rural areas where livelihoods depend disproportionately on natural capital embodied in forests, range lands, soils, water and wildlife (Barrett, Travis, & Dasgupta, 2011; Myers, Mittermeier, Mittermeier, da Fonseca, & Kent, 2000). A majority of these areas, now designated under IUCN Categories V-VI have overlapping ecological and social significance. These areas include multi-use arrangements and often require incorporation of communities in protected areas planning. A number of scholars (Anthony, 2007; Brown, 2003; Grainger, 2003; Pretty & Smith, 2004; Reed, 2008) recognize the importance of incorporating participatory approaches into protected areas decision-making processes in order to foster the implementation of conservation strategies. In southern Africa, much like elsewhere, the subject of community participation in transfrontier conservation areas has generated spirited debates with several and sometimes conflicting paths. Others argue that the recent transboundary protected areas have been established following the same conventional and exclusionary top-down approach applied to earlier protected areas (Hutton, Adams, & Murombedzi, 2005; Magome & Murombedzi, 2003). Frequently, it is predicted that transfrontier conservation areas will further disenfranchise and displace local users (Büscher & Whande, 2007; Dear & McCool, 2010; Dzingirai, 2004; Lunstrum, 2008). People “living at the edge” of transfrontier conservation are crucial in determining sustainability pathways for these areas. How to meaningfully engage locals is part and parcel of contentious debates about past, present and future relationships between human resource-use and biodiversity and between poverty reduction and conservation efforts (Agrawal & Redford, 2009; Andersson, de Garine-Wichatitsky, Cumming, Dzingirai, & Giller, 2012). Hence, this paper comes at a critical time when relatively little is known about how to engage locals in research especially as more transfrontier conservation areas are at different stages of implementation (Peace Parks Foundation, 2006).

Although its boundary are not yet formally defined, the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area is set to include Kruger National Park (South Africa), Limpopo National Park (Zimbabwe), Gonarezhou National Park (Zimbabwe) and adjacent communal and private game reserves. A major challenge for applied research in such contexts is how to collaborate with locals living in environments characterised by fear and social disarticulation and engage communities to negotiate their future (Murphree, 2004). Even though individual parks (through their community outreach programmes) emphasise integrating public opinion into decision making, there are no blueprints to guide public involvement and engagement with communities. Pretty and Smith (2004) argue that local communities are more likely to comply and to commit themselves to long-term conservation strategies when their knowledge and opinions are incorporated into PA decision-making processes. Community engagement minimizes risks of livelihoods displacements often associated with protected area planning (Chatty & Colchester, 2002). According to Reed (2008), the philosophy of community engagement should be guided by four fundamental elements namely empowerment (Chase, Decker, & Lauber, 2004), equity (Weber & Christophersen, 2002) and trust and learning (Tippett, Handley, & Ravetz, 2007). It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the importance of local voices in research within transboundary natural resource management. Although communities are an important piece of the puzzle in conservation, they “are usually the least powerful among the different parties interested in conservation” (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999, p. 641). As Büscher and Wolmer (2007) highlight, social scientists need to take critical steps in the creation and acceptance of practical spaces for critical political engagement and reflect more consciously on their politics of engagement. This is particularly important to ensure sustainability in conservation planning. To date, emphasis has been

mainly on the role of different stakeholders at the science-policy interface, with minimal research on the actual politics of engaging locals affected by conservation decisions. Little is known about how researchers engage locals living within the GLTFCA and how communities negotiate for collaboration in applied research which seeks to enhance their livelihoods. The popularity of participatory research in the recently established transfrontier conservation areas is driven by this need to insert local voices in transfrontier conservation areas governance. Hirschman (1970) argues that local voice refers to attempts to change objectionable state of affairs through direct appealing to authority and includes mobilizing public opinion. Scholars increasingly advocate for inclusion of the poor in decision making for policies that affect their environments. Roseland (2005, p. 222) argues that “effective and acceptable local solutions require local decisions, which in turn require the extensive knowledge and participation of the people most affected by those decisions”. The long term sustainability of TFCAs will depend on how conservationists and decision makers involve locals living in and adjacent to protected areas in planning. The key to a sustainable future lays on making communities more perceptive and realize how their short term choices may affect their future well-being.

This paper examines a case of public participation in applied research where a participatory project was implemented only after written consent from three wards in south east Zimbabwe. This paper illustrates how participation was institutionalized in a project aimed at improving community futures livelihoods in the context of the uncertainty in planning for the newly established transfrontier conservation area. This research is a contribution to sustainable development because it is driven by a willingness to engage in an evolving, learning-oriented process that is responsive to local needs within the GLTFCA and as such integrates development with research. The paper is presented in four sections. First, it examines research and development interventions in the context of livelihoods displacement which is largely argued to be one of the major challenges for most communities living within the GLTFCA. In particular, it shows the risks of livelihoods displacement within the GLTFCA. Second, it situates the scenario planning and research approach within the context of the GLTFCA. Here, scenario planning is discussed in the context of sustainability debates. Third, the methodological issues to collaboration are introduced paying attention to principles, process and outcomes. Finally, the paper reflects on the challenges of the collaboration and discusses the methodological approach to engagement in the context of power, trust, representation and participation critical for the long-term sustainability of GLTFCA.

### **SCENARIO PLANNING IN THE GLTFCA - A BRIEF REVIEW**

Several transboundary conservation agreements are at various stages of implementation in Southern Africa (Peace Parks Foundation, 2006). As these are implemented, it is now recognised that locals’ lived experiences remain divorced from the national, regional and international arenas of endless debate, decision-making and formulation of policies driving transfrontier conservation areas. For conservation initiatives such as the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area, planners have generally ignored the presence of people in the area, not only living adjacent to this giant park, but also, as is the case in Mozambique, within the National Parks (Magome & Murombedzi, 2003; Milgroom & Spierenburg, 2008). Local people have not been involved in the planning process and largely left out in the implementation process. Wolmer (2003) cautioned that transboundary natural resource management are the latest in a line of top-down, market oriented environmental interventions pushed on Africa by international donors and the private sector. Although their objectives do not point so, the

exclusionary approach at the centre of their planning inevitably produces ethical challenges, calling into question the legitimacy of conservation interventions (Brechin, Wilshusen, Fortwangler, & West, 2002). Transfrontier conservation initiatives are highly politicized conservation programmes (Magome & Murombedzi, 2003), and as they unfold, policy argumentation shifts drastically to regional and global arenas dismembering and selectively forgetting local people living adjacent to and within protected areas. Katerere *et al.* (2001) caution that benefits of participation realised in earlier community based natural resource management are likely to be lost in transboundary natural resource management given the exclusive role of the state in conservation planning. Protected area management agencies and conservation NGOs unaware of or unwilling to address the needs of locals living in these areas will likely be held negligent in the poverty caused by displacement decisions (Dear & McCool, 2010). To address these challenges, practitioners and development researchers are advocating for interactive and deliberative research approaches to create a common future and widen opportunities in which local people participate in the governance of natural resources in these complex environments (Cumming, Biggs, Kock, Shongwe, & Osofsky, 2007; Giller *et al.*, 2008; Murphree, 2004). According to Murphree (1997), new roles and modes of common property scholarship should strive to advance the needs and aspirations communities at the conservation and development nexus. Giller *et al.* (2008) argue that a major challenge for science and policy is to progress from facilitating univocal use to guiding stakeholders in dealing with potentially conflicting uses of natural resources. The development of novel, more equitable management options that reduce poverty and achieve sustainable use of natural resources and minimize conflicts is premised on understanding complexity. Thus most academics are increasingly choosing research environments that are rich in complexity and that provide an opportunity for learning (Tasker, Westberg, & Seymour, 2010). In addition, most academics have come to realize that within these environments their active participation rather than passive observation would be beneficial.

Based on the arguments from pro-poor conservation (Kaimowitz & Sheil, 2007), deliberative approaches focus on ways of improving livelihoods and well being in these newly emerging transfrontier conservation areas. Advocates for pro-poor conservation typically recognize that the goals and outcomes of pro-poor conservation are different from conservation that narrowly focuses on the preservation of biodiversity (Kaimowitz & Sheil, 2007). Deliberative approaches ensure that resource-dependent communities become aware of and mobilise constituencies, coalitions that engage in advocacy for more equitable solutions so as postpone or forego short-term solutions for long term gains (Kallis, Hatzilacou, Mexa, Coccossis, & Svoronou, 2009). In order to achieve desirable goals, all key stakeholders need to be mobilised and the poor need to be accorded freedom to determine possibilities. Consistent with this, Vermeulen and Sheil (2007) argue from a pragmatic perspective predicting that conservation without local support is doomed to fail. Within the GLTFCA, participatory scenario planning is promoted as an approach that can help communities to negotiate their future when faced with uncertainty and complexity in conservation decisions (Murphree, 2004).

Brockington (2004) predicts that conservation projects can succeed even if they lack local participation and support, because communities in these areas are often poor, politically weak, and isolated. Contrary to this, Murphree (2004) argues that communities living in and adjacent to protected areas remain inhibited by weak tenure and access rights, extractive fiscal policies, and the imposition of external policies and a lack of space for local institutional experimentation and innovation. If

they are given room to experiment and negotiate their future, the argument continues, communities will devise locally sanctioned natural resource regimes that enhance their well being. This is in agreement with more ethical arguments advanced by others who maintain that displacing communities without their consent is unfair and displacing already disadvantaged groups is even worse (Brechin et al., 2002; Campese, Sunderland, Greiber, & Oviedo, 2009; Cernea & Schmidt-Soltau, 2006). What is required is to balance legitimate claims of local communities with a larger social claim on biodiversity in order to achieve sustainability (Agrawal & Redford, 2009). Conservationists, decision makers and researchers can only achieve this by embracing innovative approaches that aim to promote dialogue and reduce risks associated with livelihoods displacement in the implementation of transfrontier conservation initiatives. Scenario planning offers a framework for developing more resilient conservation policies when faced with such uncontrollable and irreducible uncertainty (Peterson, Cumming, & Carpenter, 2003). Local participatory scenario planning was conceived as a promising tool to address the livelihoods concerns of local people living in the GLTFCA. In the GLTFCA, participatory scenario planning was meant to enhance the ability of local communities to manage their natural resources through scenario planning, self assessment and adaptive management. Through planning for the future, it was also envisaged that the process would help GLTFCA planners to understand and take into consideration the needs and aspirations of local people.

Broadly, scenario planning is premised on notions of sustainability and sustainable development. Fundamentally, sustainability implies social, institutional, economic, and ecological durability that relies on successful adaptation to changing conditions across time, location, and context (Angelsen, Fjeldstad, & Sumaila, 1994). Participatory scenario planning with communities creates common visions, co-produces knowledge with researchers and planners, and fosters cooperation between different stakeholders from the local level, district, national and regional level (Andersen & Jaeger, 1999; Wollenberg, Edmunds, & Buck, 2000). The long term success or failure of conservation is heavily dependent on co-operative, long-term, and broad-scale human efforts. As most transfrontier conservation initiatives are being implemented participatory scenario planning offers a structured way of coping with the many uncertainties that lay ahead (Peterson et al., 2003) and adapt to changing circumstances so as to realise desirable livelihoods. Adaptation, in turn, requires ongoing learning. Researchers can contribute to sustainable development in such contexts through facilitating processes of continuous learning and innovation (Uphoff, Esman, & Krishna, 1998). Fundamentally, learning is not exclusive to local people and institutions but research and development programmes. Successful adaptation requires that project planning and management be flexible and innovative enough to learn from local people and environments, to gain from past experience, and to respond to changes quickly and wisely. Korten (1980) call this the learning process approach while Holling (1978) coined the concept of adaptive management to describe this type of iterative planning process.

Participatory scenario planning in the GLTFCA was guided by the principle of 'light-touch' facilitation and experiential learning which comes only through experience, structured assessment and adaptation but only in invited spaces (Murphree, 2004). As a precondition to research, communities would need to reach consensus to invite research. Consensus building refers to a collaborative effort in which individuals representing differing interests engage in long term, face-to-face discussions seeking agreement on strategy, plans, policies, or actions. The logic for consensus building is premised on the realisation that although use of common property resources involves a broad spectrum of foci running from international to

local levels, the most critical arena for attention is the local level since it is here that most hands-on management takes place. At this level, a major problem is not a lack of fundamental understanding by resource users of what viable communal property resource regimes require but rather a lack of communally sanctioned entitlements necessary to make them work and the freedom to adapt them to changing circumstances. Where local people are precluded to conduct experimentation in collective entities, the argument continues, it in principle restricts their ability to learn from themselves. Such a fettered status restricts local users and managers of resources to join the discourse on resource use with other powerful social actors. A more structured approach to local planning that gives control and power to locals living within closer to resources is the most idealised form of inclusion. According to Roe (1997, p. 130) an approach to planning privileges local people and gives locals “power in negotiations with state agents where the planning process is itself initiated and guided from within the local ecosystem”. From the contextual environment of the GLTFCA, it became important to investigate how communities respond when they are given option to participate in or reject a research and development project. In this paper, the multiple ways local community members actively engage, manipulate and conform to research interventions are shown and these shape not only the participatory research trajectory itself but also a continued shaping and reshaping the actual practices of participation even in these invited spaces.

## **METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA**

The nature of the research context and question determines the methodology (Crotty, 1998). A qualitative case study approach was adopted for this research. This approach was considered appropriate for an in-depth understanding of a complex process leading to the submission of letters of interest from communities in south east Zimbabwe. Through a process ethnography (Leeuwis & Van den Ban, 2004), the views of different actors were obtained paying particular attention to observation, reconstruction and analysis. The overall approach to collaboration was informed and guided by the methodology followed by the “Local level Scenario Planning, Iterative Assessment and Adaptive Management Project” which was premised on two fundamental conditions which are: a) call for expressions of interest and b) initial diagnostic visits in community. Central to these two conditions were concepts of self selection and light touch facilitation. From the initial formulation of research approach, local level scenario planning was only to commence if and only if communities submit letters of consent to the project implementing agency. Unlike methods from objectivist science where the researcher is presented as an impartial spectator, here the researcher was a key participant and was influenced by the researched and the attempts to bring change to affected actors in the problem context (Neuman, 2003).

The research process was organised into interlinked phases conducted between December 2006 and March 2009. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and workshops. Data source triangulation allowed for corroboration of themes and findings across sources. First, the inaugural workshop for the research held in Chiredzi in December 2006 provided an opportunity to introduce the objectives and its underlying methodological assumptions. This workshop, attended by councillors, Chiredzi and Beitbridge Rural District Council officials, local government officials, NGOs and private sector representatives, lasted one and half days. At this workshop, in line with the project logic, it was agreed that research would only commence upon the express invitation of local people. Communities were free to ‘reject’ the proposed project if they so wished. It was reinforced that councillors for the three wards in Sengwe Communal Lands would

only facilitate meetings to establish consensus view to invite the project in their respective wards. After these consultations, letters of interest were initially submitted to Chiredzi RDC and subsequently forwarded to the project implementing agency in January 2008.

Second, armed with letters of interest, preliminary diagnostic visits were conducted in the three wards. A combination of interviews, focus group discussions and workshops offered us to gradual approach to understand the how the communities reached consensus to invite the project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants including three councillors and two headmen. These interviews were conducted to obtain details of the process of consultation before the submission of the letters of interest. Later in the research, three project inception workshops were held in each of the three wards. These workshops addressed two objectives: (i) to describe the status of planning and implementation of the GLTP and GLTFCA starting from their evolution in the early 2000s, (ii) to introduce local level scenario planning as a methodology whose emphasis was on helping communities to plan for their future livelihoods within the GLTFCA. As these were open meetings, it was important to bring as many participants as possible. Villagers living further from workshop venues were provided with transport. At each of the three introductory meetings, an average of 120 participants attended a majority of who were invited by word of mouth 2-3 days before each workshop. As a first step, the participants were asked to list everything they knew about the GLTP/GLTFCA while the responses were captured on charts. Summaries of key issues were then presented and discussed at length with explanations of 'hot' issues given during a "Question and Answer" session at the end of each workshop. At these meetings, it was emphasised that the local people are planners, village leaders are organizers and the researchers are facilitators; where possible considerations on gender in all meetings

Seven semi-structured interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted after the ward inception meetings. Focus group discussions were organised per ward and included men and women, youths and village elders. Interviews, focus group discussions and workshops were conducted in two local languages (Shona and Shangaan) conveniently offering translations were appropriate to clarify points and using local terms for words such as "scenario" and "visioning". Reflections on each workshop centred on the content, process and topical issues from discussions. According to Watt (2007, p. 82) "learning to reflect on your behavior and thoughts, as well as on the phenomenon under study, creates a means for continuously becoming a better researcher. Becoming a better researcher captures the dynamic nature of the process". At the end of this phase of the research, another community-wide workshop was held at Malipati Business Centre drawing participants from the three wards. The workshop emphasised the nature of the scenario planning project. This workshop was a discussion forum (largely made up of questions, answers, and expression of views) on the proposed scenario planning methodology. Table 1 shows a timeline for the research activities and methods used for each of the research phases.

Table 1 Timeline of main research activities

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Date/Time</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Responsible persons</b>	<b>Venue</b>
Inaugural Stakeholders Workshop	December 2006	Workshop Interviews	CASS team	Chiredzi town
Call for Expressions of Interest	Jan 2007 – Dec 2007	Consultations with Chief Headmen Councillors Sengwe Community	Councillors	Ward 13, 14, 15
Ward Meetings	Jan 2007 – Dec 2007	Ward Meetings	Councillors	Ward 13, 14, 15
Expressions of Interest Received	27 Jan 2008	Letters of interest	Councillors CASS team	Chiredzi RDC, Harare
Ward Inceptive Meetings	Jan – Feb 2008	Workshops Interviews Focus Group Discussions	CASS team	Pahlela, Dhavata, Chishinya, Muhlekwani Maose Masukwe
Training of Community Based Facilitators	Feb – Mar 2008	Workshops Role Plays	CASS team	Malipati Business Centre

After these initial workshops, it became apparent permanent clusters for scenario planning exercises were required. Each scenario planning cluster, which later came to be locally identified as the “scenario planning working group” was comprised of 25-30 participants drawn from 4-6 villages. Six study sites were purposively selected across all three wards namely Pahlela and Masukwe (ward 13), Gwaivi (ward 14) Muhlekwani (Ngwenyeni), Chishinya and Maose (ward 15) (See Fig 1). Study sites were selected based on general accessibility, socio-ethnic background, and distance from the Gonarezhou



National Park. This was meant to capture context specific dynamics which is consistent with actor-oriented perspectives where a variety of cases yields rich context-specific details.



Figure 1: Location of the study area. Wards 13, 14, and 15 are the communal areas surrounding Gonarezhou National Park in south eastern Zimbabwe.

Generally, in Sengwe Communal lands, there is marked livelihoods diversity with a majority of households cattle based, crop based and off-farm income and ethnic differentiation in the area. There are three dominant ethnic groups. In the Chishinya area, most villages are predominantly comprised of inhabitants of Ndebele origin, whilst Muhlekwani, Pahlela and Masukwe are mainly dominated by the Shangaan and Karanga who migrated from south Central Zimbabwe. Geographically Pahlela, Muhlekwani and Masukwe lie very close to the Gonarezhou National Park while Chishinya and Gwaivi are further away

(approximately 15km from Gonarezhou NP). There are marked differences in asset endowments (education, land and livestock) determine livelihood choices and pathways which specific variations for every household.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Dynamics of Community Engagement**

What does this case of collaborating only after express community consent mean for how we should understand and analyse community engagement as it takes place on the ground within the GLTFCA? At the local level, collaboration in research was influenced by factors such as trust, local socio-political and historical antecedents, community's contextual characteristics and communication and facilitation skills of both local and outside researchers. Central to the methodological orientation of this project, the idea of commencing research only after the invitation of communities provided appropriate scaffolding for researchers to manage flexibility and complexity while simultaneously exploring innovative ways of improving community livelihoods.

### **'Self selection' and 'light-touch' facilitation**

There was a consensus view that the scenario planning approach would help communities in planning for their future. However, a number of challenges influenced the process, nature and trajectory of the research collaboration during the initial phases of scenario planning. First, although by design, the research was destined to be implemented in the GLTFCA, actual sites were going to be chosen based on the principle of 'self selection'. Communities were first supposed to establish consensus view to invite the research team. It means that the researchers did not have room to manoeuvre or carryout research activities to meet project deadlines stipulated in the grant agreements. Research was to only commence after receiving expressions of interest implied that researchers could not manipulate the process. The submission of these letters of consent in turn was also influenced by factors which very much lied outside researchers' control. For instance, due the remoteness of the area postal communication is generally poor. Poor communication couple with difficulties in accessing the targeted sites meant the research team had to adopt a "wait and see" attitude till the expressions of interest were formally received. Delays experienced in receiving the expressions of interest were because of the poor postal system. Our interviews with councillors confirmed that although community consent was obtained early, the process of officially submitting the expressions of interest was long and cumbersome. In part because the letters were first submitted to Chiredzi Rural District council, which is the appropriate authority responsible communal areas. Selecting of study sites took longer time than originally anticipated in the project documents. It could be that local people trust their own knowledge and capability to realise future projects but take time to communicate them to external actors. Informal interviews and group discussions with community members yielded far richer and candid insights on how councilors conducted the consultations. From these conversations, it turned out that one of the councilors had been very instrumental in an earlier project by one NGO which was meant on improving livelihoods. This in part explained the speed with which they did the initial consultations and how he publicly praised and pledged support for the project. As local government officials whose powers are based on popular vote, it is possible that their views could have dominated during the consultations as councilors advance the developmental aspects of their respective wards. .

An in-depth retrospective analysis of the “process of entry” shows assumptions about community agency were too farfetched. Local communities are important actors in the GLTFCA and have agency as they can make a difference; they can choose amongst multiple routes of action and projects. Although in principle it was envisaged that communities would see the merits of this futures methodology, they could either join or opt out of the project completely! This process of invitations was very much outside our influence, aside from explaining what the methodology of scenario planning ought to achieve. This we feel, was a serious methodological problem of the form of collaboration that the research design incorporated from the beginning. Although noble in formulation, this process resulted in us waiting for a long time before any experimentation could be done on the scenario planning approach. In retrospect, the research timetable was seriously deficient but arguably these challenges in the process to engagement have far greater significance than normal project planning accords them. The relationship at the individual level is constituted in and by the development of new skills, roles and responsibilities and at the social level new institutional arrangements, norms and values (Steyaert & Jiggins, 2007). At community level, capacity in scenario building and planning was built. The methodology was initially introduced to most people in the six study sites, the group size varying from village to village. Most gatherings had between 50 and 60 participants, although 120 people gathered at Mhlekwani. These initial large groups were narrowed down to between 25 and 30 people who were trained in the methods of scenario building and underwent the scenario planning process. These groups formed ‘scenario planning nodes’ or ‘steering groups’ which in turn trained and held meetings with other community members. This strategy improved participation and attendance during training sessions. By observing how participants acted during scenario workshops, it was possible to witness firsthand the dynamics of power relations and struggles between participants and how this impacted the situation.

A spin-off of this seemingly long process of collaboration is that real partnerships were made between the community groups and the research team – it took time for the researchers to be trusted and for their agenda to be fully understood by all, and likewise, for the research team to trust the community. It took time to bring the communities to the point of self assertion. The impact of the methodology in planning is reflected in the remarks given by one community member who argued that ‘scenario planning has given us knowledge and lifted us up, it has totally changed lives of people - we can now do things by ourselves, such as planning for a clinic –we don’t need to wait for outside help’. Light touch facilitation empowered community and their local institutions to realize their own aims. The “light touch” support provided through the research team is a classic case of giving community institutions in living uncertain environments access to ‘visioneering’ and networking opportunities and help with planning on potential livelihood pathways for the community that are in support of broader conservation goals of the GLTFCA. Interestingly, even these semi-literate groups benefit from the support to review local needs and opportunities, map out their future and reflect on past achievements and difficulties. As facilitators, we provided a brokering role with district level planning officials and other organizations and unblock relationships. Negotiation processes are often successful when there are third party actors assume facilitation roles. In such cases, facilitators address specific tasks necessary to achieve collective learning and integrative negotiation. These included learning about the current situation, learning about other stakeholders’ perceptions, and collective re-phrasing of the nature of the problem and identifying opportunities, coordinating communities based on their lived experiences within the GLTFCA. Elsewhere, consistent and persistent ‘light-touch facilitation’ was used by a Namibian Non-governmental organisation, the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), to assist communities to overcome problems in forming common

property resource management institutions to manage the wildlife and conform with new government legislation (Jones, 1999). Similarly, Mosse (1998) concludes that programmes that engage in development and research simultaneously are poised in a particularly powerful position with respect to sustainability. Such programmes are potentially capable not only of experimenting to find locally appropriate solutions, but of directly applying what has been learned in creating positive local change, which is what the collaboration with Sengwe residents was premised on. As outsiders, during the inception workshops, we resolved common differences between participants. For instance, at one workshop, one participant caused controversy by arguing that the project was excluding other villagers. This episode brought all the underlying issues, problems and power relations to the surface, from the discussions that ensued, we came to realize that the dissent was driven more by control over revenue streams from CAMPFIRE.

Contrary to recommendations that facilitators should only help the participants and refrain from interfering in disputes (Wiesbord & Janoff, 2000) this was untenable as letting a free fall discussion would mean we were not going to meet our schedules, implement the steps of the methodology and carry the process through. Even though facilitators should generally be impartial and not allow personal and institutional biases, they have a stake in the method and its success. As recipients of a researcher grant, we were more interested in promoting the scenario planning approach and seeing if it would help communities in the GLTFCA. Thus after receiving the letters of interest, all subsequent field visits were now based on meeting project deadlines and outcomes. By promoting equal participation of all communities during scenario workshops, it fostered a sense of ownership and strengthened the prospect of continued involvement in using the scenario planning methodology even when the researchers finish the project.

### **Representation in collaboration**

Collaboration between researchers, local communities and community institutional structures should be enhanced for full engagement in participatory processes. Within the GLTCA various stakeholders and local groups wield different forms of power. For instance, even though several NGOs appear to represent marginalised communities, during focus group discussions, it emerged that their livelihood concerns are hardly addressed with several discussants pointing that a majority of the NGOs are biased in favour of council priorities on planning. This is not to say locals themselves lack the wherewithal and power to make a difference for their area. Throughout the research process, we continually asked participants for suggestions and critiques from members to add value to the approach. For example, in meetings with business people, though their concern was more on the opportunities that would abound as a result of high tourism within the parks, they complained that the business opportunities should be carefully planned around local entrepreneurial needs. After a series of workshops, representatives of businesses aired their concerns in public. By reaching to all, the approach we adopted meant that all participants had sufficient understanding and hence control over the scenario planning process.

Locals and their leadership have various webs of influence and exercise power on conservation and seek to influence development policies within the GLTFCA in many ways. When one systematically examines how power plays over time and how it was mobilised by councillors, CAMPFIRE representatives, and headmen, it can actually be noted locals advance discourses that protect their current and future livelihoods and well-being. Anything on the contrary is treated with disdain as

their forcefully argue that it results in their continued deprivation and exclusion. Chiefs, councillors, headmen and other in positions of authority exercise some level of gate-keeping in terms of access to communities and try to exclude research that does not advance communal interest. Despite intra-communal differences, they go beyond location-specific struggles on resource use and appeal for research that is for mutual benefit to all within the GLTFCA. Methods of engaging communities at the edge of conservation areas should continue to be promoted within the framework of broad pluralistic approach to biodiversity protection. It is governance that starts from the ground up and involves networks and linkages across various levels of that is critical for long term sustainability (Berkes, 2007). Great consensus among communities, decision makers, conservationists and scientists can help reduce fears and enhance benefits for people and biodiversity.

### **Trust in collaboration and conservation**

Residents of Sengwe Communal Lands are living with uncertainty and hence highly vulnerable to the whims of conservation policies. Yet the area itself is endowed with abundant wildlife, being closer to the Gonarezhou National Park and Kruger Parks and very much at the centre of development of the GLTFCA. A portion of Sengwe Communal Lands provides a physical link between the Kruger, Limpopo and Gonarezhou National Parks – through the Sengwe-Tshipise Wilderness Corridor. Overcome by fears of livelihoods displacement, most locals interviewed vociferously argued that ‘they do not have a voice in planning for their area’. From semi-structured interviews, it emerged that trust was an important determinant in influencing the community’s decisions to invite the research. The implementing agency had been actively involved in conducting applied social economic research for wildlife management under the CAMPFIRE programme. Decisions emerging from this participatory process were perceived to be more holistic and representative of diverse values and needs, and this enhanced public trust in the decision-making process around the GLTFCA. Most participants at workshops felt that trusting the research team enabled them to share information and increase openness and mutually accept that the research team was offering an integrative approach to addressing challenges of livelihoods in the GLTFCA. Trust should be incorporated as an integral component of effective collaboration and public participation processes in transfrontier conservation area governance. This is fitting as little attention is often given to the dynamic nature of trust and how factors affecting community-agency trust may differ and/or change through the collaboration processes in transfrontier conservation areas. Blau (1964, pp. 91-92) highlights the role of trust in the emergence and maintenance of social exchange relationships. Blau described social exchange as “the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others. One person does another a favour, and while there is an expectation of some future return, its exact nature is never specified in advance”. In this study trust had an important influence in social acceptability of the scenario planning project. In other studies, trust is identified as a key factor in successful collaborative planning processes because it promotes positive relationships and diminishes opposition and scepticism between communities and natural resource management agencies (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). McAllister (1995) suggests that trust does not reduce relationship complexity; rather it reduces relationship uncertainty which enhances the ability to adapt to change and complexity. Building on McAllister’s findings, Nielson’s (2004) study of collaborative relationships proposes that trust creates common interests and expectations, thus facilitating greater tolerance for periods of temporary inequity in a relationship. In our case, trust speed, quality and reliability of information sharing during workshops.

### **Governance and political gains: Ability to challenge the status quo.**

Sustainability within the whole GLTFCA can only be enhanced through multiple policy and institutional strategies in a sophisticated mix especially one that unsettles and disturbs the existing institutional system. From the workshops, it emerged that if there are no viable institutions to represent locals, much of the conservation efforts will always be treated with suspicion. Our collaboration with local communities provided fresh opportunities for researchers and practitioners to play a privileged role in the emergence of a new kind of socio-technical democracy. It marked the beginning of the development of grassroots scientific literacy and the co-creation of knowledge and understanding, in ways that safeguard appreciation of the contribution of science to societal evolution and strengthen locals' capacity and willingness to make problems discussable and to confront the risks involved in planning within the GLTFCA. This need for a deliberative, bottom up- language of engagement has been stressed (Mavhunga & Dressler, 2007). Lack of reflection over power differentials can lead to disempowering outcomes even after achieving a seemingly participatory process. The case reveals that failing to resolve divergent assumptions about power and purpose can lead to fissures that are difficult to overcome. Communities were linked to some of the institutional committees involved in the driving the implementation of the GLTFCA. Based on the three tier system, three-tier system of the ministerial, joint management board and sub-committees in charge of various technical areas such as Conservation and Veterinary, Tourism, Safety and Security and Finance, Human Resources and Legislation it seems anything that connects with the three tiers is positive.

A fundamental principle of the collaboration was that the scenario planning methodology should not be taken providing a static snapshot of the future events within the GLTFCA, but rather one which requires continued use and adaptation to address the local lived-in experiences for Sengwe residents. This required long term efforts at continuously improve communication from local level to higher level planning levels. Our research was in a sense bridging social capital linking locals to higher decision making levels. If communities affected by transfrontier conservation projects are continuously made aware of the available options, it is quite empowering and that they can further harness opportunities for them to benefit from the GLTFCA. Mavhunga and Dresser (2007, p. 57) noted that 'the time of lecturing rural people on what they need and should want is over, these people know their problems and have ideas about solving them. The time has arrived for them to be active partners in directly engaging in policies that affect their lives'. Linking local lived experiences to future livelihood opportunities is important. Ultimately conservation approaches must be sustainable: ecologically, culturally, socially, economically and politically for they risk failing both practically and ethically (Robinson, 2011). The long term buy- in from communities is as a fundamental condition for any success of biodiversity and long term sustainability of the GLTFCA. In addition to the high uncertainty and vulnerability of local livelihoods, collaborative research in invited spaces is resource intensive especially when the aim is a top-down and bottom-up iterative policy cycle.

## CONCLUSION

This paper outlined the process and dynamics of collaborating in research with residents of Sengwe Communal Lands focussing on a pilot project set to experiment with a participatory scenario planning methodology over a five year period in the GLTFCA. It looked at how external researchers build trust and consensus among communities for research cooperation prior any collaboration. The study shows that there are various reasons that guide local in making choices before collaboration and any co-operation with outside researchers can begin. It explored perceptions of trust, reasons for suspicions, and expectations of communities as well as constraints to building trust in a donor funded research project. This is consistent with post normal science ([Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993](#)) in that it not only looks at ethical issues in research but also relate research to uncertainty, non-linearity and complexity given that planning for transfrontier conservation areas occurs across scales. In this regard, collaborating with communities is deeply steeped in contemporary politics of governance to achieve sustainability. Sustainability can only be achieved through innovative research approaches that address human physical, emotional and social needs. In such settings, trust in research is earned; one cannot presuppose its existence. Trust is premised on structural factors such as powers of actors involved in dialogues and links to other networks, for examples, links to CESVI, (an NGO which worked on sustainable resources management in Sengwe and facilitated consultations that led to the demarcation of the corridor), CAMPFIRE committees and government workers. Several constraints to building trust included competing values, knowledge gaps and limited experience with the proposed method of scenario planning. On a more cautionary note, it should be noted that the concept and practice of participation itself is dynamic and must be must be negotiated among an evolving web of roles and relationships. In other transfrontier conservation areas deliberation based on set principles (such as self selection and light touch facilitation) offers a starting point to building social and political capital at the local level.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was undertaken within the “Local-level scenario planning, iterative assessment and adaptive management project” (Grant number 103275-001) funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Additional funding was provided by the Wildlife Conservation Society under the AHEAD-GLTFCA Seed Grants Programme. This research was conducted when the author was affiliated as the Project Facilitator at the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) at the University of Zimbabwe. Special thanks to colleagues at CASS for their help during the preparation and execution of this research.

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