Benefits and challenges of community-based wildlife conservancies in Kenya's Maasai Mara ecosystem

To complement the conservation role of statutory protected areas that prioritize conservation over livelihoods of local people, community-based wildlife conservation models have been implemented across the world. In East Africa, wildlife diversity hotspots occur in economically - poor regions. Therefore, it is envisaged that participation by local communities in wildlife co-management should be a win-win solution for both human communities lacking basic commodities and declining wildlife populations. In Kenya, communities can set aside land and formally register it as a wildlife conservancy, which allows them to generate revenues via ecotourism. At present there are more than 160 conservancies in Kenya that cover approximately 10% of the country's terrestrial land surface area and draw memberships from a total of 707, 460 local households. Most of the conservancies were established on lands adjacent to statutory protected areas in arid and semi-arid ecosystems where poverty levels are relatively high. Leadership of the respective conservancies comprise boards of management constituted by elected representatives of conservancy landowners and directors of tour operator companies that operate tourist facilities within the conservancies. But are the conservancies having any impact on poverty alleviation? How effectively are the conservancies governed? To address these questions, I conducted social surveys in five wildlife conservancies in Maasai Mara ecosystem, south-western Kenya.

Socio-economic benefits and governance challenges

Interview respondents reported that the wildlife conservancies conferred numerous social and economic benefits to locals participating in wildlife co-management. Some of the benefits included enhanced income from gainful employment and new business opportunities, membership to cooperative societies and participation in community work (e.g. school bursary and feeding programmes), enhanced social relations, improved access to credit and health facilities, enhanced physical infrastructure (schools, roads, and

bridges), improved physical security, and coordinated sharing of pasture and water for livestock. However, the respondents felt that the conservancies also had some negative socio-economic impacts, most commonly, capture of conservancy-related resources by local elites and costs of human-wildlife conflict.

In terms of environmental governance, the respondents noted that the following principles were well implemented in wildlife co-management in most of the conservancies: i) *Legitimacy* (i.e., conservancy land owners elected democratically members of conservancy management boards); ii) *Inclusiveness* (i.e., leadership of conservancies involved conservancy landowners in some key management decision making); iii) *Adaptability* (i.e., leadership of the conservancies were able to forecast and manage opportunities and threats in the conservancies such as those posed by climate change), and iv) *Integration* (i.e., some conservancies had initiated women empowerment enterprises and involved women in conservancy leadership and benefit – sharing schemes). By contrast, some respondents held the view that co-management in some conservancies lacked: i) *Transparency* and *Accountability* (i.e., leadership of some conservancies did not provide relevant information on conservancy management including audited financial statements); ii) *Fairness* (i.e., leadership of some conservancies offered inadequate compensation to sections of conservancy landowners); iii) and *Capability* (i.e., some conservancies lacked the capacity to deliver satisfactory services to sections of landowners).

Reconfiguration of local institutions, and technological and managerial fixes needed to improve wildlife co-management and benefit sharing

Generally, the conservancies were perceived to have enhanced wellbeing of the local people. However, there were perceived institutional shortfalls, which constrained the capacity of the conservancies to deliver satisfactory services to a varied cross-section of the local communities. As Kenya's governmental legal and policy instruments on wildlife conservation encourage co-management by local communities, the state may facilitate sharing of information among the conservancies on best practices to enhance tourism revenue generation and sharing and minimise costs of human-wildlife conflicts. State-supported conservation covenants and easements may also be used to make the conservancies more sustainable. For instance, the state could provide tax rebates and hardship funds during off-peak tourism seasons when the conservancies fail to generate sufficient revenues to compensate conservancy landowners who participate in contractual wildlife conservation.

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