Central Africa: Management of protected areas and participatory approaches

“Co-management: a situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and guarantee amongst themselves a fair sharing of the management functions, entitlements and responsibilities for a given territory, area or set of natural resources.” (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2000) [1]

In the countries of Central Africa, numerous programmes have been undertaken since 1990 to demonstrate that protected areas can be more effectively managed through a participatory or “co-management” approach. There are three main reasons for the adoption of this approach:

* Recognition of the limitations, if not the total failure, of policies that exclude certain actors from participating in the management of protected areas, especially since those excluded are often the most important actors.

* The search for alternatives to these policies.

* The desire to promote the adoption of protected area management “norms” developed with the effective participation of all actors involved. The assumption is that participation will guarantee respect for these norms and the continued survival of the protected areas.

An idealized approach

Today, almost all policies, legislation, decisions and activities related to the management of protected areas in Central Africa refer to co-management. The use of the term “co-management” with regard to decision-making processes would appear to imply that those responsible for administering protected areas have the knowledge, expertise and “modernity” required to solve any problems that arise.

This concept was first sparked among those responsible for protected areas by the publication of a series of preparatory studies for the Programme for the Conservation of the Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa (ECOFAC) [2], then spread like wildfire among theoretical and field researchers like Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, Alain Karsenty, Jean Claude Nguinguiri, Vincent Ndangang, Norbert Gami, Michael B. Vabi, Tchala Abina, Aurélien Mofouma and Zéphirin Mogba, who have crisscrossed the region’s protected areas armed with tools and procedures to facilitate the co-management process. The intellectual and technical outputs of their work (reports, publications, methodologies, presentations at conferences and seminars, etc.) have come to form part of protected area management programmes.

Content of research outputs

What can be said about the content of these outputs? First of all, it should be clarified that, as in the case of previous approaches, the populations who live in and around protected areas are examined, explained, presented, represented and interpreted in a multitude of discourses and from different

angles: historical, demographic, anthropological, sociocultural, socioeconomic, etc. While these studies may be necessary, given that they contribute basic data for activities aimed at development and conservation of biological diversity [3], they are not always directly applicable to development or conservation. The simple description of facts, which is what most of these studies amount to, is not enough to raise awareness of the need for the desired changes (the effective conservation of biodiversity, improvement of the living standards of local populations, co-management of natural resources).

Secondly, programmes for the conservation of protected areas seek to serve as the means for participation by local populations in the management of these areas. For instance, ECOFAC, a regional programme funded by the European Commission, declares its intent to distance itself from previous approaches focused on protecting patches of forest from local populations, and consequently “seeks to implement a policy aimed at the involvement of these populations in the rational management of resources in order to demonstrate that it is in their own interest to protect these areas in the long term.”
From this perspective, it is assumed that the redistribution of the benefits derived from the conservation of forest ecosystems (salaries for project employees, income from tourism and game hunting activities, employment in the tourism or rural development sectors) will encourage local populations to participate in the conservation of natural resources in protected areas. In effect, the ECOFAC programme pays out around 10 million CFA francs monthly on salaries in the Dja Reserve (Cameroon) and 14 million in Odzala National Park (Republic of the Congo). It also supports economic activities that supposedly relieve pressure on natural resources in protected areas (fishing, farming, horticulture, forestry, crafts, wood sculpting, carpentry, etc.), implements labour-intensive techniques, promotes the use of local materials, renovates and repairs health care facilities, schools and roads (Vautherin, 1996), provides human resource training, and promotes community organisation. Thanks to ECOFAC, the communities of Idongo-Da in the north of the Central African Republic and the Lengui-Lengui reserve in the Republic of the Congo derive 60% and 30% of their total income, respectively, from tourism.

The experiences of the ECOFAC programme inspired similar initiatives in other areas. For example, the PROGECAP project included the recruitment of “eco-guards” from among local commercial hunters. This was a brilliant conservation measure, but ultimately precarious, since these are short-term projects and there is nothing to prevent the eco-guards from returning to their previous employment (as commercial hunters) once the projects have ended. These initiatives are also meant to involve the participation of local populations in the management of protected areas. However, while the communities may in fact participate in the management of protected areas in the sense that they benefit in some way from forest conservation, they can only be considered to “negotiate, define and guarantee a fair sharing of management functions, entitlements and responsibilities” with forestry companies to the extent that they receive a share of the benefits of this forestry activity (licensing fees, salaries as employees in the sector, etc.), and this is not the case. As Shiva points out, you cannot describe as “co-management” an approach that seeks the consent of local populations for the execution of conservation programmes but places control over all of the activities in the hands of external agents (who may be “experts”, NGOs, state officials or all of them at the same time).

Conclusion

We recognise that the models described above are not without merit, and they have been implemented throughout Central Africa for a good number of years. But we should now be focusing on the present and the future. In this regard, it would be neither legitimate nor scientifically

acceptable to immediately extend these models to all of Central Africa. It would not be legitimate, because over the last 50 years (to limit ourselves to the post-colonial era), numerous strategies, theories, techniques, etc., have been implemented, and not always with the desired results. On the contrary, the system of protected areas has tended towards entropy: today, most are undergoing a process of disintegration, due to the multiplication of paradigms and management bodies and a lack of internal coherence. It would not be scientifically acceptable, either, because all too frequently, ideas are implemented without foreseeing the transition between the place where they are developed and the place where they are put into practice, and without testing their effectiveness in a limited area in order to determine, among other things:

* The capacity of local populations to assimilate new activities.
* The local populations' interest in these activities.
* The potential for linking new activities with existing knowledge and skills, in order to lessen the resistance to change and increase the acceptance of ecosystem conservation initiatives.
* The increased effort that may be required by new activities as compared to traditional activities of harvesting natural resources.
* The profitability of the new activities from the viewpoint of rural dwellers first and the national economy second, as well as the cost of new conservation and development measures in terms of social upheaval or cultural fragmentation, as was the case with the implementation of the Conkouati project in the Republic of the Congo, for example.

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The full article is available at:
http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Africaspeaks/Gestion_Aires_Protegees_En_Afrique.pdf

[1] Borrini-Feyerabend, G., Farvar, M. T., Nguinguiri, J. C. & Ndangang, V. A. (2000) Co-management of Natural Resources: Organising, Negotiating and Learning-by-Doing. Heidelberg (Germany): GTZ and IUCN.

[2] UICN (1988-1990) La série des analyses environnementales préparatoires au programme ECOFAC.

[3] Information on the relationships between humans and the natural environment: practical reasons for the use of biodiversity resources (human consumption or sale), frequency of extraction of these resources, reasons for the traditional choice of activities, techniques used, current composition of the population and migrations, traditions, customs, demographic growth, views on conservation, beliefs, taboos, local populations' perception of projects, etc.