

**“When elephants come...” - Narratives of marginality
in post war Acholi(’s) Murchison Falls National Park,
northern Uganda**

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ABSTRACT

Set in post conflict northern Uganda, this paper analyses the challenges facing local communities living adjacent to Murchison Falls National Park in Acholi land as they grapple with efforts to restore their livelihoods, in view of costs and losses inflicted on them by problem animals. Their return to their villages after 20 years of the war between insurgents of Lord’s Resistance Army and the government of Uganda held a lot of promise. The state sponsored Peace, Recovery and Development Plan; donor funded projects; multinational agricultural companies setting up in the area; and the tourism revenue sharing fund; all pointed to an empowering recovery process for the local community to achieve self-reliance. However, the pain of consistent destruction of their crops by wildlife, an unfair policy on compensation of damage caused by problem animals, worsened by the government refusal to plan with the affected communities made them feel left out. This paper focuses on the Tourism Revenue Sharing Fund as a tool to analyse the costs and losses incurred by local peasants who continue to lose their agricultural livelihoods but whose appeals for dialogue continue to be ignored by the state. Data for this paper were collected using ethnographic methods that included in-depth interviews of key informants, observation, as well as both formal and informal interactions with members of the local community in Pabit parish of Purongo in Acholi sub region, and government documents.

Keywords: post conflict livelihoods recovery, tourism revenue sharing fund, local community, participation, wildlife conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Introduced in 1996 in Uganda, the Tourism Revenue Sharing Fund (TRSF) came in the wake of reforms in conservation and management of natural

resources commons that swept through Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Although the reforms took different approaches, they largely aimed at addressing the threat posed by increasing competition between humans and wildlife for space and resources (Lamarque, Anderson, Fergusson, Lagrange, Osei-Owusu, and Bakker (2009), and also to address concerns about extreme poverty in local communities living adjacent to such resources. Thus, whereas in southern Africa the strategy was to strengthen community based conservancies where communities issued hunting licences to tourists (Bollig 2016), in East Africa the communities were largely limited to receiving the tourism revenue sharing fund. The call for reforms was the outcome of the participatory approach to development, which had joined the mainstream as the new development paradigm in the 1980s (Cornwall 2000). That apart, the reforms had also been made necessary due to costs and losses incurred by local communities living close to conservation areas. The costs to the communities, in terms of the human-wildlife conflict analysis include, among other things, missed resources originally obtained from protected areas such as ‘bush meat’, firewood, building materials, and medicinal herbs that enhanced people’s livelihoods; while the losses refer to social and economic losses suffered whenever problem animals invade local people’s space and destroy their crops and livestock or cause injury to human beings. This study limited its focus the narratives of marginalisation in the context of community participation in the conservation policy, in Purongo sub county, Murchison Falls Conservation Area, northern Uganda. The tourism revenue sharing fund as manifested in the Acholi Culture and Tourism Centre Project in Purongo sub county served as the tool of analysis for community participation in conservation of wildlife and commercial tourism; and also in post conflict recovery of sustainable livelihoods for the region as a whole.

THE BACKGROUND

As mentioned above, sharing revenue from commercial tourism with local communities living adjacent to national parks has been fronted globally as a key instrument for managing protected areas (Tumusiime and Vedeld 2012, Hill 2000). The argument is that ‘sharing of tourism revenues with local people demonstrates the economic usefulness of protected areas and secures local people’s allegiance’. The approach is thus viewed as a form of ‘hybrid environmental governance’ in which responsibility for the world’s biodiversity assets is shared between communities, business, NGOs, and States (Mill 2004); and even termed as *pro-poor* conservation/ tourism. But, as Hill (2004) argues, absence of local participation in the new approach has not only led to lack of locally acceptable ways of effectively reducing the human-wildlife conflict, but it has also contributed to feelings of being

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marginalised among local peasants. The implication is that understanding the human-wildlife conflicts from farmers' perspectives is important; as their beliefs are likely to influence their attitudes and behavior towards wildlife – whether they are going to co-exist with the wildlife or not (Hill 2000). He thus posits that local people's needs and views must be taken into account when discussing conservation incentives, damage compensation, hunting alternatives and co-management; hence the need to involve them in policy discussions. In Purongo sub county, (adjacent to) Murchison Falls National Park on the northern side of River Nile, however, the participation arena for Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and the local community in wildlife conservation policy appears to be quite narrow. In this study, therefore, was trying to understand whether the outcry in the community about being marginalised was the outcome of the existing gap between UWA and the community. I analysed participation at two levels: at the UWA-community level; and at the level of Local Government (LG) vis-à-vis the local community. It is observed that in both cases was not much space opened for effective participation to thrive although on the surface, institutional mechanisms in place appeared to be adequate and effective.

Murchison Falls Conservation Area, in which MFNP is situated, is the biggest conservation area in Uganda, covering an area of 5,162 sq. km. It was started in 1926 on southern side of the Nile and extended across the river into Acholi land, on the northern side two year later. From that point onwards, it became illegal for local communities who had lived there for generations to hunt beyond the new boundary. Here, as was the case elsewhere in colonial territories, from 1920s onwards, game management was completely usurped by the (colonial) state, rendering any use of the resource by local communities, illegal, while permitting limited use by 'white officers'. Even traditional authorities who otherwise enjoyed many privileges were not allowed to hunt (Bollig 2016). Thus, by the stroke of the pen, and without compensation, whole communities were stripped of their right to common resources which had traditionally enhanced their livelihood pursuits for years. Even as the conservation area continued to be expanded after achieving political independence, the same (colonial) exclusionary ideology was maintained. The unique species of flora and fauna found in this conservation area such as giraffes, rhinos, elephants, and leopards continued to make it the favourite tourist destination for licenced hunters and general tourists. This meant higher revenue collections for park authorities. But while the income of the conservation area continued to rise, local communities, stripped of their rights to access natural resources in the park continued to wallow in abject poverty. This was the scenario until 1986 when the insurgency against the new government of Yoweri Museveni broke out. During the period of the 20 years of the insurgency, tourism was one of the sectors in the area that were seriously affected. It was not until after the

ceasefire agreement of 2006 that tourism statistics on the northern side of the Nile started improving again.

The economic importance of the tourism sector and its multidimensional contribution to human wellbeing is evident worldwide in the wide variety of sectors to which it extends its influence and benefits. It is estimated that tourism contributes more than 75 million direct jobs worldwide (UNWTO 2012). In Uganda, the great potential of tourism to grow the economy is witnessed in the sector's position among the nation's investment priorities. It features among the top ten in 2014/2015 financial year (Uganda Budget Brief 2014). However, in spite of the impressive figures in the national budgets, local communities living in Purongo sub county adjacent to MFNP continue to suffer costs and losses associated with problem animals and an unresponsive governance system. Although UWA recently instituted measures to overcome the challenges (digging trenches to stop the problem animals crossing into village gardens, and recruiting youth as scouts to warn members of the community and park rangers whenever the big animals come), positive results of these measures are yet to be seen. Before long, the elephants backfilled the trenches, while the youth scouts project was still rolling out. Youth groups were being encouraged to establish gardens of chilli (hot pepper) to ward off elephants – the most destructive animals in the area. The Community officer of Murchison Falls National Park, when talking about the youth projects, informed that research had shown that elephants detest the scent of chilli. So, by planting chilli, a farmer would get rid of elephants without having to light a fire every night to protect his garden from the 'unwanted intruders'. But some of the youth from Lagaji-A, one of the villages in the parish, told me that elephants still came to the village in spite of chilli gardens.

In the meantime, the local Purongo community's call for dialogue with the government over their post war vulnerability and poverty linked to problem animals of Murchison Falls National Park remained unanswered (Interview Rwot Otto, the Clan Chief of the area). This was compounded by other issues in which the government was seen as the antagonist against the Acholi people in general. Talking casually with members of the local community about 'the elephant problem' in Purongo trading centre during my visits to the area, I soon found out that the outcry of being marginalised was not simply because of the wildlife policy. Three other key issues stood out in these casual conversations and in-depth interviews and group discussions. The government's refusal to discuss the unfairness in the wildlife policy vis-à-vis the animal raids of people's crops was the primary one for the Purongo community. But it also triggered the bitter memories of Acholi cattle that were stolen by 'men in uniform' during the insurgency period. Quite a number of

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researchers in the region highlighted the problem of cattle raids in Acholi in the initial stages of the war as they researched on factors that had caused the war (cf. Weeks 2002, Gelsdorf et al 2012, Gersony 1997, Finnstrom 2006, Dolan 2009). Generally, the raids were blamed on the Karamojong tribe to the north-east, but Acholi communities believed the government had a hand in it because they often saw cattle loaded on trucks heading south being escorted by soldiers. This convinced them the state was involved in impoverishing them. Thirdly, was the issue of land grabs. Although land conflicts within and between families and clans had become the norm in most parts of Acholi since the end of the insurgency, land grabbing claims against the government acted as a rallying cry for all. The central government decision to allocate 1,200 hectares of land in Akaa to Madhvani Group of Companies in the neighbouring district of Amuru in 2007 to grow sugar cane when the 'owners of the land' were still in displacement camps (Atkinson and Owor 2013, Mabikke 2008) was seen as an act of sabotage against the Acholi people. Members of the local community were so bitter, they decided to take the government to court over the matter. The case has been in court since 2007. There is also the Lakang case where old women stripped naked at a public meeting to protest government attempt to grab what they said was their land (Lawino 2012). The government claims the land is gazetted as a wildlife reserve and wants the squatters on the land to relocate but the people on the land claim they are the bonafide owners. The border disputes between Amuru (Acholi) and Adjumani (Madi) over the Joka forest is another case where the government is again seen to be against the Acholi people. Government officials claim the forest is in Adjumani district. Finally, was the issue of corruption and mismanagement of the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan (PRDP) funds for northern Uganda in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). Billions of shillings under the programme were either misappropriated or stolen by officers in the OPM. This also, according to members of the focus groups was seen as 'sabotaging' the recovery of the Acholi given that they were the most affected by the war, and therefore, the ones that should benefit most from the programme. The sum total of all the above was that when researchers and the local elite highlighted these issues, the Acholi community viewed themselves as second class citizens who were being deliberately marginalised by their own government (Alavi 2008). A leading Acholi politician, Norbert Mao, is quoted as saying, "We are either full citizens, equal to all others, or non-citizens..." (Sunday Monitor Feb., 21 2010; New Vision, 3 May 2009). Politicians even threatened to lead the secession of Acholi and northerners in general from Uganda to form the Nile Republic.

Basing on the above, I observed that in spite of the 1995 national constitution which gives power to the people, the continued government

refusal to dialogue with the Purongo community on compensation for their losses emanating from crop raids by problem animals, risks the dismissal of ‘participation’ as a mere buzz word (cf. Oivier de-Sardan 2005) largely aimed at attracting donor funds. I thus argue that the feeling among the Acholi, of being marginalised, has been raised by the government’s (action and) inaction in its policy, programming and projects on wildlife management. I hence recommend the need for institutional collaboration and negotiation between institutions as well as between institutions and communities for a mutual resource management regime that benefits both the state and local communities (cf. Bollig 2016). It is the absence of such collaboration which has made the Acholi of Purongo to feel marginalised and also inhibited their ability to participate effectively in the post war recovery of the region.

DATA AND METHODS

Between 2013 and 2016, I continued to visit Purongo sub county on regular basis. Each time I visited the area I stayed for at least one week during which I interacted with members of the community, and also participated in different activities related to the proposed cultural centre project while collecting data in the process. The primary data was in form of recordings and field notes of interviews and discussions I held with various respondents, and personal observation of various activities and events (Mugenda and Mugenda 2005, Mikkelsen 2005). I also made use of government and NGO reports, minutes of meetings, and other forms of documentation. In meetings, I observed the nature and conduct of members, including the general atmosphere in which the meetings were conducted. I was also able to conduct in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with various individuals and groups. These included elders, religious and cultural leaders, LG officials, and members from civil society organisations, among others. Often times I used these interviews for triangulation purposes to corroborate data I had so far received or observed. Data analysis mainly took the form of content and discourse analysis.

‘GIVE THEM GOATS’

‘Give them goats’, which gives title to this section, sums up the resolution of the sub county LG on the TRSF for 2012 when Nwoya was granted district status. I noted that the language of the sub county LG resolution demonstrates a paternalistic approach, which is contrary to principles of participation embedded in the guidelines on the revenue sharing funds (UWA Guidelines on TRSF).

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The first time local communities in Purongo received benefits of the fund directly was 2012 when Nwoya county acquired district status and officially broke away from Amuru to become Nwoya district. That was also the year when Purongo sub county LG used TRSF disbursements to purchase and distribute goats to the local communities living adjacent to the park instead of investing it in existing social infrastructure as had had been the practice. Purongo Seed Secondary School, the only government secondary school in the sub county, was one of the projects LG leaders in Purongo often mentioned with pride as an investment from TRSF.

However, the distribution of goats in 2012, apparently, left many people disgruntled; as narrated by an elderly lady in the community meeting in Paromo parish. The lady started by praising the government for instituting the fund. She believed it was a good scheme that would help the community to fight poverty. To her, the goats scheme was a good idea that came at the time people were returning to their homes after many years in IDP camps. But she decried the manner in which it was mishandled. No one in her area was given any goats. She wanted to know why. An elderly man supported her. He was convinced that only those with 'big' relatives in the LG council had been favoured. Sub county officials who were in the meeting endeavoured to explain. The entire Paromo parish did not share a border directly with the park and so it was not on the list of beneficiary communities. Apparently, community members present at the meeting understood the explanation. But they continued to ask why they had been left out when they too suffer the same problem. They said animals did not see the administrative boundaries between the parishes and only followed the scent of the crops they liked. So, why were they being discriminated? Sub county officials informed the Paromo community that Paromo parish was not supposed to receive revenue sharing fund directly; that was why they had not been given goats. But they were now included in the cultural centre project. So, they too would nominate representatives to the project committees. I noted that issues of being left out were not only at the macro level (between the government and Acholi), but they had also manifested themselves at the micro level (between the sub county LG and a parish). However, accusations of corruption and nepotism were later corroborated by the sub county LG chair. Although he did not cite any specific case of nepotism, he nevertheless admitted in an interview that the goat scheme had faced a number of challenges and that was why it was not continued the following year as the LG had earlier planned. He explained that from the sub county council point of view, the logic of giving out goats was to stem local poaching, which park officials had told them was a big problem in the area. By supplying goats, they were hoping to substitute 'bush meat' with goat meat. Given that most peasants in Acholi generally only hunted small animals for home consumption, members in the council assumed that the goats would go a long way to support wildlife conservation.

But the goats were either ‘slaughtered for Christmas or New Year festivities, or to celebrate last funeral rites of their departed relatives. Within a few months they were gone, but poaching continued’. The council decided to change its approach. In 2013, they set up a small committee to explore other options, and the proposed cultural centre was the outcome.

PARTICIPATION OR MARGINALISATION?

The concept of participation has a long history in Uganda dating back to colonial times but in the sense of people centred governance and development, it was first experienced in 1979 after the fall of Amin’s military regime. It came in form of the 10-cell system imported from Tanzania. The Uganda version was locally termed as ‘mayumba kumi’. Under the system, every ten homesteads formed a cell as the basic socio-political unit through which community involvement in governance and development started right from the grassroots. The Ugandan public, however, did not embrace the system readily as they associated it with socialism which they blamed for much of the poverty among Tanzanians at the time. And the leadership wrangles that cropped up between the different Ugandan factions that had united to overthrow Idd Amin made it worse. However, since Museveni came to power in 1986, the 10-cell system was substituted with Resistance Councils under which the village/ward became the basic unit. By the time northern Uganda entered the post conflict phase in 2006, and the community in Purongo started to receive the goats in 2012 as its share of the TRSF, participation had already embroiled in the mainstream by the 1995 National Constitution. In its objective x, the constitution states that, ‘the state shall take all the necessary steps to involve the people in the formulation and implementation of development plans and programmes that affect them’ (GOU 1995). But from the accusations in the community meeting in Paromo parish, it was clear that the local communities near the game park had not participated in the discussions and decisions that led to the wildlife policy nor the TRSF.

According to Hill (2004), the absence of local participation not only leads to lack of locally acceptable ways of effectively reducing the human-wildlife conflict, but it also contributes to feelings of being marginalised among local peasants. The Purongo farmers’ call for a dialogue suggests that local participation was absent in the formulation of both the TRSF and Uganda’s Wildlife Policy in general. This, together with the issues of stolen cows during the war, land grabs and mismanagement of PRDP funds, suggested that the outcry of being marginalised was more complex than non-participation in policy, but the focus in this paper is mainly on participation.

Anthropologists and other critics of the community participation paradigm have often argued that the effectiveness of participation is

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exaggerated; and that because of elite capture, participation ends up perpetuating the existing power relations (disaggregated along gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and education level, among other things) and poverty among rural communities instead of empowering them to achieve self-reliance (Burkey 1993, Kapoor 2002, Olivier de Sardan 2005, Rahnema 1992, Cooke and Kothari 2001). For Mosse (2001), emphasis is on the knowledge gap existing within local communities, which affects the extent to which certain categories of the community can involve in participation; implying that even if local communities were involved, they would not participate effectively because of their limited knowledge on certain technical issues or details. However, whereas Chambers (1993,1994) is aware of these differences and acknowledges the possibility of elite capture, he nevertheless posits that participation is possible. In his analysis, what is required is change of attitude for development professionals not to approach local communities with superiority complex. My experiences in Purongo with the local communities these last three years have shown that although it can make progress painfully slow, participation is possible and necessary for local communities to be empowered into self-reliance.

The TRSF (the logic of which is apparently rooted in the concept of participation), was introduced as a pilot project in Uganda in 1996 but only became fully operational in 2001 (Tumusiime and Vedeld 2012). As discussed in the background of this study, the logic of the fund was to involve local communities living adjacent to game parks in the management of wildlife conservation. However, interviews and group discussions that I conducted with members of the local community in the area revealed that there had never been any public meeting with park authorities on issues that frustrate their efforts to recover their livelihoods after 20 years of war. And it made them bitter. Rwot Otto (the clan chief in Pabit Parish) told me about the efforts he had made and his frustrations:

I tried as much as possible to discuss this issue (of compensating for damages caused by wildlife) with the park authorities here but they only point at the policy, saying it does not allow the government to pay compensation. I even went to the politicians ... but no one was willing to help me access the president. But I will not give up...

Although a number of scholars, as indicated above, have expressed their misgivings about the very possibility of effective communication between the different categories of people within the participatory arena, the public meetings that I attended, showed a people that knew what they wanted and were articulate enough to express their hopes and fears. And I was left with no doubt that despite the differences, it was necessary for consensus building on issues that affect a people's wellbeing.

Setting the project

When I came to Purongo in 2013, a number of activities related to the proposed cultural centre project had already been accomplished. A select team of councillors had already conducted a study tour western Uganda to learn from their counterparts in Queen Elizabeth and Bwindi national park areas who were already operating similar projects. Their findings from the tour had resulted in the sub county LG resolution to purchase a 5-acre piece of land for the project, setting up two grass thatched huts on the site, and constructing a fence to mark the boundaries of the land.

I entered the field as one of the two members from Gulu University who were co-opted by the ad-hoc project committee set up by the sub county LG council to, along with others, constitute the technical team for the project. Other members on the team included two from Murchison Falls NP, and three from Purongo sub county LG, bringing the total to seven. However, considering that I was also doing this as part of participant observation for my research on post conflict livelihoods recovery, I decided to declare my research interest to the sub county leadership and the project technical team members that I was working with. They acknowledged and offered to cooperate whenever I needed their attention or participation. I felt quite privileged as my position on the team gave me access to the community and institutions in the area quite conveniently.

The very first day I joined the technical team we received a brief from the sub county LG chair. He explained to us our mandate and responsibilities; which was followed by a guided tour of the project site in Pabit parish. We needed to assess the land already purchased and the facilities established on it. Thereafter, we embarked on the programme of sensitising local communities in the sub county about the new UWA guidelines for the TRSF, and to share with them the need for and relevance of the proposed cultural centre project. In our meeting with the sub county LG chair before going out to meet the people, he had informed us that our major task was to provide technical guidance on how best to manage the project as a profitable self-sustaining enterprise while at the same time taking care of the interests of the local communities. In that regard, our recommendation was that the proposed cultural centre project should be operated as a Community Based Organisation (CBO). But we did not want to dictate to the council nor the communities whose share of the TRSF money was being used to set it up. We needed to share our views and recommendations on these issues with the communities and to come out with resolutions on priorities and action points without imposing our ideas on them (cf. Chambers' 1993). We therefore

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advised the councillors that we would need to conduct a tour of the entire sub county along the LG structures. In Uganda's LG structure, the lowest political level of elective leadership is the village, followed by the parish, the sub county and the district, in that order. On the other hand, the parish is currently the basic level of public administration and it is followed by the sub county and the district in that order (GOU 1995, Saito 1998, Villadsen and Lubanga 1996). While political structures are headed by chairpersons, administrative structures are headed by paid chiefs.

Although we had wanted to hold as many meetings as possible to ensure we reached everybody, this was not possible due to logistical constraints. However, after a long discussion, we decided on one meeting in each parish. Apparently, each parish had a specific place designated for such meetings. Herein lay the very first challenge of the participatory paradigm. Did we reach everybody in each parish? Did we even reach the most vulnerable? Without actual statistics of all the households in each parish, it was not easy to say what percentages of the population attended the meetings. But one thing was for sure. By the end of the five meetings with local communities, we had not only explained and clarified the new guidelines comprehensively, but we had also managed to get support for the proposed cultural centre project in each of the five parishes. We applied a dialogical approach (Freire 1972) in which validity claims rather than power claims were used to reach consensus (Sullivan 2012). In the end, it was agreed that, in line with the guidelines, each parish should elect 9 representatives to the Parish Project Committee and 5 to the Parish Procurement Committee. The communities also offered their share of the TRSF to be used in setting up the project as a joint venture that would belong to all the parishes of the sub county. They also agreed to participate in the project through the committees that were to be set up; and by contributing Acholi cultural symbols and trophies to the museum that was to be part of the project. Recommendations drawn from the parish meetings were later presented to the sub county council that discussed them and made resolutions on that basis. Finally, an Interim Project Committee (IPC) was formed with the short-lived mandate of working closely with the technical team to set up the project in the shortest time possible. The IPC was therefore expected to set up the CBO and its structures before going into the actual project itself. In more practical terms, this meant writing the constitution and registering the organisation at the district headquarters in Anaka town, about 10 km away.

THE POWER GAME SETS IN

With the challenging tasks of operationalising the CBO hanging over their heads, IPC members wasted no time. As soon as they were constituted they

made a work plan that was to guide their activities; but soon things started to drag. After three years they were yet to register the organisation. During that period, I observed there was a silent power struggle between the sub county LG and the IPC. It was clear the latter looked at the proposed project as their brainchild and wanted to have the upper hand. The IPC, on the other hand, considered itself the legitimate institution to plan and implement the project, having been elected by the grassroots communities in their parishes. Thus, right from the beginning, the two went on a collision course. It all started when the IPC rejected the proposal of the sub county LG leaders to include retired civil servants and elders on the IPC. The LG had invited five elders to attend the first IPC session at which its executive committee was to be elected and work plan made. But the majority of elected members of the IPC rejected the idea. 'UWA guidelines do not mention elders among the categories to constitute grassroots committees', said the interim chairman shortly after his election to the post.

At first we did not understand why scheduled IPC meetings always delayed to take off. I remember how IPC meetings often delayed to start for almost two hours. Sometimes we simply rescheduled them to the afternoon or the following day because quorum had not been realised. When late coming and absenteeism persisted, we put it for discussion in one of the meetings. That is when the community representatives told us how the LG had refused to finance the activities of IPC claiming there was no money. Neither the IPC chair nor any of his committee members was allowed to attend LG meetings to present their case. When we asked the councillors on the technical team why IPC members could not be allowed to present their issues to the LG Executive, the answer was that the law did not allow non-members of the executive and management to attend such meetings. In principle, this meant that the official channel of communication and collaboration between IPC and LG had been blocked, yet if any positive change was to be achieved, there was need for the two institutions to interact and plan together (Bollig 2016). In fact, at this point there was another point of conflict. Whereas IPC members preferred the proposed project to be operated directly by the community through the CBO that was being formed, LG officials wanted it to be contracted out. The gap was getting wider. As the LG tightened the squeeze further, members of the IPC found it difficult even to attend meetings for lack of facilitation. Eventually some of them stopped coming. But sub county authorities continued to make resolutions on the proposed project without input from the IPC or the technical team. In the last quarter of 2014, the LG contracted a construction company to put up two semi-permanent structures, and in April, 2015, the project was launched. Members of the IPC still hoped to follow the original plan whereby members of the local community were to participate both directly and indirectly. But

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one year after the launch, there were still no funds released to the IPC, and not even a single sub-committee had been formed. All indications were that the redundant facility was wasting away.

The failure of the project to take off suggested a number of practical challenges to the participation paradigm. Interviews with individual members of the LG showed that council felt humiliated when IPC rejected the elders it had invited. The subsequent ‘lock out’ of the IPC was therefore ‘a punishment a parent gives to a wayward child’. However, in spite of being the financiers of the project, and the setters of the conditions IPC was purporting to follow, park officials who knew about the impasse appeared to have no capacity to ‘influence’ the LG to do the right thing. Judging from the zeal with which they had supported the cultural centre project, I had concluded that park officials wanted it to succeed. It was expected to provide a forum for collaboration and participation between the park and the community; and also a shield of wildlife protection from poachers and other dangers. More tourists would mean more revenue to the game park; but also more customers for the cultural centre, more income into the project, and into the community directly through cultural tourism, sale of foods, crafts and artefacts. The power struggle between LG and IPC was therefore neither good for wildlife conservation nor for post conflict community livelihoods recovery. Yet park officers could not intervene to save the IPC or the project. The conflict, therefore, underlined the importance of a wider mode of participation and collaboration not only vertically within sectors but also horizontally across sectors to neutralise power struggles and other bottlenecks within and between institutions (both local and national) that often frustrate efforts to transform local communities (Saito 2003).

THE LOUD SILENCE

The government’s continued silence about dialogue on compensation became even louder when the cultural centre project stagnated, as the people became more frustrated by crop losses. “When elephants come ...”, is therefore, a narrative of the Purongo local community that presents their frustrations over problem animals as they try to reconstruct their livelihoods after 20 years of war. Although there were other challenges that affected the agricultural livelihoods in Purongo, ‘the elephant’ (as a symbol of wildlife destruction) was considered to be the major one. When I asked people in focus groups to rank the major impediments to agriculture, problem animals were ranked higher than erratic rains and drought conditions, yet these two were also a big threat to agro-production in Acholi sub region and beyond. Lack of inputs, lack of modern farming skills, unpredictable markets and low prices,

were also mentioned as areas where the state had not done enough in spite of Northern Social Action Fund (NUSAF) and National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) projects. In my interaction with the Parish Chief of Pabit a few days after the focus groups, he agreed with the ranking of focus groups on the elephant problem. He narrated to me how in the long rains of 2015 he had himself fallen victim. He cultivated 5 acres of rice from which he had expected to raise the equivalent of US \$1,500; but elephants just ate it all up. In the end he was barely able to cover his production costs. With a lot of bitterness, he narrated the scenario in general terms as follows:

When elephants come at night, we phone them (meaning, park warders) to come to our rescue but they don't respond. When you are lucky and they answer the phone, they tell you they don't have transport. ... But even when they say they are coming, they take so long that by the time they arrive, the animals will have done so much damage and probably moved on. You know how an elephant does not move alone and you know how big they can be. When they descend on your gardens, oh my dear, you don't want to witness it! So, I am just there. I don't even know what to do next.

The chief's narrative was only representative. Others were even more emotional with wider impacts on education, health and general welfare of the families concerned. The common factor among them all was 'the elephant'. Focus groups said they could not understand why the government refused to listen to its own citizens' outcry but instead chose to show more concern for the welfare of wild animals even when the president had always said that 'power belongs to the people'. They recommended that government should be responsive to the people's outcry and revise the wildlife policy to accommodate compensation alongside the TRSF, but also create a platform for coordination and continuous engagement between UWA and the communities. They even pointed out that most of those affected by problem animals were peasant farmers who could not afford sophisticated farming techniques but who were nevertheless important citizens like everybody else. Otherwise, the current structure where the affected communities remain on the margins when major decisions are taken, yet such decisions have such a profound effect on their livelihoods, was no longer tenable under the era of liberalised economic systems and decentralised governance.

CONCLUSION

Although there was very little by way of community participation in formulation and implementation of the wildlife policy in Uganda, the

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TRSF was nevertheless viewed as a good scheme aimed at giving back to the community. By investing the TRSF money in community projects such as Purongo Seed Secondary School and Acholi culture and tourism centre, Purongo sub county LG tried to distribute its benefits to as wide a community as possible. Hence, although the challenges of problem animals still remained, communities were expected to feel involved in wildlife conservation as it was the source of the fund that gave them such projects. The logic behind the cultural centre project even went further. The fact that the project would need a continuous flow of tourists, most of whom would be primarily visiting the park, meant that the community would actively participate in efforts to ensure that wildlife was protected from poachers and any other dangers. But the power relations that erupted between the sub county LG and IPC turned the project into a forum for conflict rather than community transformation through positive engagement between park authorities and the community. Hopes for community empowerment through livelihood skills and capabilities, and the cultural awakening that were to be gained through the project have all been frustrated. Instead, there is continued wastage as the project buildings on which so much resources were spent remain in disuse. The danger is that once the marginality and exclusion played out at the macro level is replicated at the micro level as was being played out in Purongo between the sub county LG and IPC, it could lead to institutional crises and public disorder.

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