Progress or regression? Institutional evolutions of community-based conservation in eastern and southern Africa

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Abstract

Eastern and southern Africa has been a key laboratory for community-based approaches to conservation for over three decades. During the 1990s, field-level initiatives and national policy reforms across the region put it at the forefront of global experiments with community-based conservation. Community-based conservation, in theory and practice, is closely tied to institutional reforms that devolve rights over wildlife and natural resources to local communities. As such, these efforts have frequently encountered political-economic and institutional barriers that limited their impact. This contributed to a rising sense of rollback and recentralization of community conservation approaches during the 2000s. Since then, community-based conservation has expanded its scope considerably in some countries, notably Kenya and Namibia, primarily as a result of relatively supportive legal and policy provisions coupled with sustained government, civil society, and private sector support. At a wider scale, sufficient devolution of rights over wildlife and natural resources has been a chronic constraint, but community-based initiatives have still managed to persist, adapt, and deliver some evidence of positive ecological and social impacts in Zambia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Three key overarching trends across the region are (a) the significant growth and expansion of community-based conservation where key institutional enabling conditions exist; (b) pervasive institutional limitations on community rights over wildlife and other valuable natural resources, which continue to constrain and undermine community-based approaches; and (c) local entrepreneurship and resilience that continues to create new opportunities for community-based approaches, even under adverse conditions.

KEYWORDS

community-based conservation, eastern and southern Africa, evolution, governance, institutions
1 | INTRODUCTION

Eastern and southern Africa has been a key laboratory for community-based approaches to conservation since at least the early 1980s. During the 1990s, the region played a central role in the global spread of community-based approaches, through both field-level experimentation and national policy reforms (Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Western et al., 1994). However, the early promise of those early initiatives quickly encountered political barriers to institutional change (Gibson, 1999), and by the 2000s, regional narratives were shifting to one of “counter-reform” that highlighted not only the entrenched challenges of devolving rights over natural resources to local communities, but of emerging recentralization of the limited rights granted in some places (Benjaminsen, Goldman, Minwary, & Maganga, 2013; Hutton, Adams, & Murombedzi, 2005; Nelson, 2010).

In this article, we provide an updated overview and synthesis of the evolving institutional landscape of community-based conservation in eastern and southern Africa. Our perspective in this opinion piece is that of practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts at the field and policy level, working over the past 20 years in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Our appraisal highlights the continued, fundamental interrelationships between wider political context and developments, following on from previous work by Gibson (1999), Ribot (2004), and Nelson (2010) among others. We describe how community-based conservation has expanded its scope on a national scale in some African countries, most notably in Kenya and Namibia, even as the institutional and political constraints of limited devolution of rights to the local level remains a fundamental and chronic constraint across the wider region (Galvin, Beeton, & Luizza, 2018). We argue that despite those enduring barriers to greater local rights and economic benefits from wildlife and other natural resources, local communities, conservationists, and entrepreneurs have still managed to advance community-based initiatives in important ways. This highlights the continued relevance and potential of community-based conservation to both conservation and rural development efforts across the region, even in the face of considerable adversity.

2 | REFORM AND COUNTER-REFORM IN COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION: 1990–2010

Building on earlier field-level experiments and key regional contextual factors, including the high economic importance of wildlife and the ecological dependence of mobile wildlife populations on communal and private lands, the 1990s witnessed the rise of community-based conservation across eastern and southern Africa (Hulme & Murphree, 2001). These trends were shaped by the global political context of the 1990s- the post-Cold War period of global democratization, political decentralization, and liberalizing economic reforms, which all supported conservation strategies based on devolution and decentralization of greater rights to the local community level (Ribot, 2004). In countries such as Tanzania and Zambia, the collapse of centrally planned economies and implementation of externally backed liberalization reforms, along with the opening up of the political arena more generally, facilitated experimentation with more locally based approaches in the conservation sector (Gibson, 1999; Nelson et al., 2007). In Namibia, reforms following independence from apartheid South Africa in 1990, catalyzed conservation approaches that sought to extend ownership of wildlife to residents of communal areas, as a part of granting citizens of communal lands the same rights as held by white ranchers on private lands since the 1970s (Bollig, 2016).

By the end of the decade, though, it was increasingly clear that the conceptual tenets of community-based conservation were not translating into widespread institutional reforms. Marshall Murphree (2000), a key intellectual force behind Zimbabwe’s approach to community-based conservation and a regional thought leader, used the term “aborted devolution” to characterize the emerging regional picture, as governments generally failed to follow through with the institutional reforms needed to make community-based conservation a reality.

Gibson’s (1999) seminal study of the political economy of regional wildlife policy illuminated key institutional barriers to community-based conservation, surfacing the inherent tension between community-based reform efforts that sought to transfer control over wildlife’s value to rural communities, at the expense of central government agencies and elites who valued centrally managed wildlife as a patronage resource. His conclusion was that “bureaucrats do not appear interested in creating policies that undercut their own authority” (Gibson, 1999, p. 160).

Over the following decade, evidence accumulated concerning the prevalence of political-economic factors as the critical constraint to community-based conservation efforts across the region, including in Tanzania (Benjaminsen et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2007; Sachedina, 2008), Zambia (Lindsey et al., 2014; Lubilo & Child, 2010), Botswana (Riboy & Maguranyanga, 2010), and to a lesser degree Kenya (Kabiri, 2010).

These African outcomes reflected wider global patterns. Ribot (2004) chronicled the “recentralization” of forest management in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the
decentralization reforms enacted in the 1990s seemed to recede under a shift in political influences and interests. The counter-reform narrative was also shaped by the wider context of economic and political challenges in sub-Saharan Africa following the post-Cold War liberalization period of the 1990s (see Diamond & Plattner, 1999; Van de Walle, 2001).

3 | REGIONAL PATTERNS OF CHANGE

Against the backdrop of reform (1990s) and counter-reform (2000s) narratives of earlier periods, how can we best understand the institutional trajectories of the past decade, during a time of increasing pressure on wildlife and highly inconsistent patterns of political reform and democratization both globally and within eastern and southern Africa? Here we attempt a brief synthesis, highlighting three discrete regional patterns of change.

3.1 | Scaling up community conservation: Namibia and Kenya

Namibia is the African country that went the furthest during the 1990s in devolving broad rights over wildlife—including 100% of the revenue from commercial enterprises taking place in established communal conservancies—and the one country that avoided the trend of rollback and recentralization after 2000 (Jones, 2010). Indeed, over the past two decades Namibia has continued to support communal conservancies as the centerpiece of its national approach to community-based natural resource management. More than any other country, Namibia stands today as a key regional exception to the general reluctance of African states to devolve user rights to wildlife to rural communities.

Namibia’s institutional choices have had significant ecological and economic impacts. Conservancies have spread steadily since the first ones were established in 1998, now covering over 16 million hectares and encompassing roughly 20% of Namibia’s land area (NACSO 2019). Conservancy management plans and land use zoning schemes result in large areas of communal lands being managed for wildlife (Bollig, 2016). Wildlife numbers across conservancies have widely recovered alongside the spread of conservancies, including the tripling of the country’s elephant population since the mid-1990s and regional recoveries of lions and black rhinos (NACSO, 2019; Naidoo, Weaver, Stuart-Hill, & Tagg, 2011).

With improving natural assets in many areas, conservancies have attracted significant investment over the past two decades from tourism and other enterprises, such as sustainable harvesting of natural plants. Overall, economic benefits captured by conservancies have continued to grow, to about $10 million annually, and accounting for nearly 5,000 jobs (NACSO 2019). At the household level, impacts on welfare are more ambiguous, with Bandopadhyay, Humavindu, Shyamsundar, and Wang (2009) finding positive impacts on household welfare, but a more recent study findings more mixed impacts on a range of household social variables, and highlighting the reality that communal benefits may not translate into improvements in household-level livelihoods (Riehl, Zerriffi, & Naidoo, 2015). The performance of local governance institutions in managing benefits and their distribution has been a continued challenge in Namibian conservancies (e.g., Mosimane & Silva, 2015), as in other countries in the region. However, Silva and Mosimane (2014) also highlight the importance of nonmonetary values such as social relations and inclusion in explaining community support for conservancy membership.

While Namibia’s conservancies have all been created according to a consistent legal and policy framework established in the mid-1990s, Kenya’s path to scaling up its own homegrown models of “conservancies” has been more experimental and iterative. Kenya’s conservancies have developed in different parts of the country, often based on agreements between tourism operators and land-holding communities or individuals, or other local conservation initiatives (see, e.g., Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA), 2017; Cockerill & Hagerman, 2020). Two key contextual factors in Kenya were the historic coexistence of wildlife and indigenous pastoralist land use systems, which results in the majority of wildlife living alongside people and livestock outside of state protected areas (Reid, 2012); and the decline of wildlife in Kenya since the 1970s, which emphasized the need to generate more support for conservation by communities and private landowners (Norton-Griffiths, 2007). By 2010, initial field experiments had been established around Amboseli National Park and the Maasai Mara National Reserve, and were expanding on a significant spatial scale in northern Kenya under the Northern Rangelands Trust.

A new Kenyan constitution adopted in 2010—following the country’s 2007/2008 election crisis—included strong provisions for political decentralization, which also applied to natural resource management. As a result, a new 2013 Wildlife Conservation Act was passed that included legally defining and formally promoting establishment of “conservancies” for the first time. This provided a clearer legal structure and standing to the various community-based conservation initiatives that had developed in different parts of the country over the preceding two decades.
The passage of the 2013 reforms led to greater support for conservancies from government, and from civil society. A new national association to represent conservancies, the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA), was created to support the growing movement. Since 2013, the number of conservancies has grown considerably, with over 160 now covering an area of around 6 million hectares, or about 11% of the country’s land area (Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, 2017; Damania et al., 2019; Cockerill & Hagerman, 2020). 930,000 households are now members of conservancies, and conservancies nationwide generate around $12 million in annual tourism income, with these areas playing an increasingly central role in national and county-level (regional) government wildlife policies and investments (Damania et al., 2019). Conservation impacts are increasingly evident, including recovering large carnivore populations in some conservancies (Blackburn, Hopcraft, Ogutu, Mat-thiopoulous, & Frank, 2016) and reduced elephant poaching in key landscapes such as northern Kenya (Ihwagi et al., 2015).

While conservancies are an increasingly mainstream element in the national approach to wildlife conservation and tourism diversification in Kenya, there remain significant questions and localized conflicts related to conservancy structure and governance (e.g., Noor, 2019), the implications for land and resource tenure and local power relations, including tension between conservancy members and neighbors over access of resources and competing land uses (Bersaglio & Cleaver, 2018; see also Greiner, 2012). In some areas, conservancies are integrated into, and support, traditional pastoralist rangeland management practices (Russell et al., 2018), whereas in other areas such as northern Kenya there have been greater tensions around the implications of conservancies for local resource use and grazing practices (Bersaglio & Cleaver, 2018; Cockerill & Hagerman, 2020; Greiner, 2012). As in Namibia, the quality of local governance institutions, often related to their capture by local elites, is a central challenge, as it fundamentally shapes how resource use decisions are made and who actually benefits from conservancy establishment (Oduor, 2020). However, at the national scale, conservancies are firmly embedded in national conservation policies and institutions, with growing support across Kenyan civil society, tourism businesses, and policy makers (e.g., Kaelo et al., 2020).

A key commonality between the experiences of Kenya and Namibia is the creation of a clear legal framework for community-based conservation coupled with broad, if not always consistent, support for implementation across government, civil society, and the private sector. Another key factor in the scaling up of conservancies in both countries is the role of local leadership spanning civil society, government, and the private sector, and effective collaboration across those different actors (cf. Mills et al., 2019). In both Namibia and Kenya, while their community conservation initiatives have received large amounts of external funding, from USAID as well as many international conservation organizations, their approaches are homegrown, emerging out of local community-based experiments that were often considered highly iconoclastic at the time (Owen-Smith, 2010). Locally rooted civil society organizations like Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation in Namibia, and the Northern Rangelands Trust in Kenya, as well as more recently established bodies like KWCA and other regional conservancy associations in areas like the Maasai Mara, have played a key role in pioneering and scaling up new conservation approaches in both countries.

### 3.2 Stasis and struggle: Zambia and Tanzania

If Kenya and Namibia stand as regional leaders in community-based conservation, Tanzania and Zambia are more reflective of regional norms. Both are wildlife-rich countries with a long history of community-based conservation policy reforms and major programs that, for much of the past 20 years, have mostly failed at shifting rights and control over wildlife’s economic value from the political center to the community level (Benjaminsen et al., 2013; Lindsey et al., 2014). However, despite those chronic governance challenges, both countries nevertheless illustrate the potential for continued, albeit halting, progress in community-based conservation even where the national “enabling environment” may be challenging.

In Tanzania, Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) were first described in the 1998 wildlife policy as conservation areas whereby communities would have rights to manage and benefit from wildlife, in order to generate incentives for conservation in village lands adjacent to state protected areas (Nelson et al., 2007). However, during the subsequent two decades, there has been limited progress in devolving the rights and control over wildlife, and revenues from tourism and trophy hunting, in the way that the original policy reforms envisioned (Nelson & Agrawal 2008; Snyder & Sulle, 2011).

Although some government regulations have been revised, such as giving WMA’s the ability to select trophy hunting concessions that were previously centrally allocated, central government still gets about 35% of revenue from tourism activities in WMAs (compared to 0% in Namibian conservancies) and a slightly greater share of trophy hunting fees. Moreover, cost and benefit sharing,
including the allocation of receipts within WMA member villages, remains a fundamental challenge to the sustainability of WMAs (Sulle & Banka, 2017). This is a core reason why the livelihood impacts of WMAs, despite the opportunities afforded by a wildlife tourism industry that generates over $1 billion annually in Tanzania, have been minimal (Keane et al., 2020). More broadly, a considerable body of scholarship has built up over the past 15 years critiquing the limitations of WMAs, including but not limited to their frequently top-down facilitation, the livelihood restrictions they often impose on local land use practices, and conflicts related to both structure and implementation (Bluwstein et al., 2016; Moyo, Funk, & Pretzsch, 2017; Keane et al., 2020).

Despite these substantial constraints, there is emerging and important evidence of WMAs delivering conservation impacts in key areas, particularly in northern Tanzania around Tarangire and Kilimanjaro National Parks. Several studies by different groups of researchers document increasing wildlife populations, including elephant and giraffe, in WMAs during the past decade (Lee & Bond 2018; Klíner et al., 2019). These WMAs in the northern part of the country also have the greatest economic opportunities from tourism, with Burunge WMA generating $488,447 in 2015, and several other WMAs earning receipts in excess of $100,000 annually (NTRI 2019). Makame WMA, a large area comprising over 300,000 ha to the south of Tarangire, is diversifying its economic opportunities through a carbon crediting venture in partnership with Carbon Tanzania, a local business that has successfully developed a similar project with the Hadzabe community in the Yaeda Valley (Blomley et al., 2019).

Zambia's history with community-based conservation since the late 1980s also reflects the challenges in devolving rights over valuable wildlife resources to the community level. While the importance of community benefits, incentives, and involvement in wildlife management has been repeatedly invoked and embraced in policies, actual devolution of rights and control over wildlife's economic value has almost never occurred, save perhaps in short-lived measures instituted in the Luangwa Valley (see Gibson, 1999; Lubilo & Child, 2010).

Today, while these chronic challenges remain, there are renewed hopes in Zambia coming from a combination of field-level innovation and new natural resource reforms (Davis et al., 2019). The 2015 Forests Act provides for the establishment of Community Forest Management Groups that can secure rights to manage and capture revenues from defined areas of forests. While this confers no rights over wildlife, it can be used to improve management of wildlife habitat in the multi-use Game Management Areas that lie adjacent to most National Parks, and provides a stronger basis for community-based natural resource management than Zambia has previously had in law. A number of entrepreneurial organizations such as BioCarbon Partners and COMACO are using this framework to establish and secure large areas of community-managed forest in key wildlife areas, and to generate new sources of revenue for local communities from carbon credits and other forest products (Davis et al., 2019; see also Lewis et al., 2011). Other emerging field-level pilots, such as the Kaindu community game ranching initiative in the Kafue ecosystem, are attempting to create new opportunities for communities to generate revenue from sustainable use of wildlife (Davis et al., 2019).

### 3.3 Survival and resilience: Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources), initiated in the mid-1980s, was a bold and widely heralded attempt to bestow wildlife rights to local communities (Murphree, 2000). The first period of the CAMPFIRE program was supported by quasi-policy guidelines and significant technical and institutional support through the CAMPFIRE Collaborative Group, which contributed to the development of effective local level governance and significant wildlife revenues in some communities. From 1989 to 2001, CAMPFIRE generated over $20 million in total revenues to participating communities (Frost & Bond, 2008). After 2000, as Zimbabwe entered a period of political and social turbulence and economic collapse that it is yet to fully emerge from, CAMPFIRE suffered from declining revenues, a total loss of external support, and politicization of the program at both local and national levels.

Despite these challenges, CAMPFIRE has demonstrated remarkable resilience over the past 15 years as communities continue to receive benefits from the Rural District Councils that formally control the program's revenues (Muchapondwa, Carlsson, & Köhlin, 2008; Tchakatumba, Gandiwa, Mwakiwa, Clegg, & Nyasha, 2019). A recent review of the program shows that communities still receive 45%–60% of proceeds from wildlife utilization through trophy hunting. More resilient communities such as Masoka in the Mbire District were among the first to lobby for new direct payment systems that would reduce the capture of funds at the district level, allowing them to retain more value and to implement community projects (Muyengwa & Child, 2017). While 20 years ago CAMPFIRE was lauded as a pioneer in putting community-based principles into play at the policy and community scale, today one of the program's core lessons is the resilience of such approaches within a context of extreme macropolitical and socioeconomic duress.
A decade ago, in a global review of CBNRM that traced a narrative “from hope to crisis” and reflected on possibilities for renewal of community-based approaches to conservation, Dressler et al. (2010) highlighted the inherent challenges of scaling locally-based approaches and their becoming perverted into a more dogmatic and top-down practice:

In the process of moving from being a diverse grass roots practice unfolding in specific social and environmental contexts, where funds were low but perspective was clear, to being scaled up as a global, pre-packaged solution to local problems, CBNRM’s near universality may lead to its demise.

In eastern and southern Africa, the earlier regional narratives of reform and counter-reform that characterized the 1990s and the 2000s have given way to a more diverse set of experiences that lack a coherent overarching external narrative yet are achieving significant conservation impacts, while continuously attempting to negotiate ongoing institutional challenges. Community-based conservation has not been subsumed by a sense of crisis, despite daunting challenges, and where it has scaled up it has been through a combination of local leadership, effective public-private-civil society collaboration, and continuous resilience.

In Namibia and Kenya, different types of community conservation areas in both countries now cover a greater area of land than the national park estate and are playing an important role in local wildlife recoveries as well as generating new economic opportunities in rural areas. Notably, in Kenya, this has occurred through a highly organic evolution of different types of “conservancies,” which vary from large areas of communal rangeland in the northern part of the country, to aggregations of thousands of private individual landholdings into larger management units in the Maasai Mara. Keys to the spread of community-based conservation in both countries have been two core factors: (a) the existence of supportive national wildlife legislation and (b) effective coalitions of government, civil society, and private sector actors, as well as considerable external funding support, to drive implementation. In both Namibia and Kenya, key ongoing challenges relate to the design and performance of local governance institutions, the integration of customary resource management institutions and practices with statutory conservation bodies, and broader power relations that influence communities’ actual social and political control and ownership over conservancies.

Despite the overall progress demonstrated by Namibia and Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania are more representative of African experiences with community conservation overall. In particular, the core challenge in these countries has been overcoming the reticence of government agencies to devolve sufficient rights over wildlife and its economic value to local communities. In that constrained institutional environment, initiatives that have continued to make progress on the ground have needed to exhibit considerable determination, resilience, and creativity. Progress in the face of those headwinds has often been catalyzed by private enterprises— including those in tourism, hunting, agriculture, forestry and carbon credit markets- and entrepreneurial local conservation organizations working in partnership with local communities (Blomley et al., 2019; Bluwstein, 2017; Davis et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2011; Morrison, Link, Newmark, Foley, & Bolger, 2016).

Zimbabwe is perhaps an even more extreme case of the challenges that community-based conservation—in that case, CAMPFIRE—have had to overcome. However, while the outside world has largely forgotten about CAMPFIRE or consigned it as a relic of the 1990s, it continues to play an important role in the country’s wildlife sector and in generating revenue for communities in key wildlife areas. CAMPFIRE also provides enduring lessons around the design and resilience of wildlife management institutions in the face of significant adversity, lessons which will be even more important as the rest of the region faces new challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and related loss of tourism and other wildlife-based revenue (cf. Kaelo et al., 2020).

Community-based conservation efforts in eastern and southern Africa face daunting challenges from rising human populations, growing levels of resource consumption, expanding infrastructure, and the emergent impacts of climate change. Yet if anything these factors make community-based approaches even more important to the future of conservation in the region as pressures rise. This is perhaps one reason for the resilience of such approaches—there are few alternatives to developing conservation approaches in collaboration with local communities, if wildlife and other natural resources are to persist on a meaningful scale (Tyrrell et al., 2019).

Community-based conservation in the region, in this context, will not evolve linearly and according to the designs of project managers and technocrats, or global NGOs and funding agencies, but according to iterative, inherently political processes of learning, influencing, and negotiating. Community-based approaches inherently involve many years, perhaps decades, of negotiation around resource rights and governance. Occasional institutional breakthroughs happen, as has taken place in
Kenya over the past decade, which can lead to growing impact on a national scale within a more supportive macropolitical environment. Learning and exchange across countries also plays an important role in these evolutions over time. Through such processes of negotiation, adaptation, and resilience, community-based conservation will remain central to the future of wildlife and economies across eastern and southern Africa, and continue to inform the evolution of global approaches to conservation.

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