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## COMMUNITY BASED GAME RANCHING AND POLITICS IN CHIRIWO WARD OF MBIRE DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

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**Abstract** — Community based wildlife management in Zimbabwe is rooted in ideas of global significance whose central premise is that local communities will manage natural resources sustainably when rights and responsibilities are devolved to them; benefits of management exceed costs; they capture benefits; and they are small enough in membership to enforce group rules. Using results of research conducted in Chiriwo Ward, Mbire district, this paper revisits these core principles. Six years after CIRAD handed over Chivaraidze Game Ranch to the community, the project is revealing a schism between the aforesaid principles and actual practice. First, the ideal of devolving authority over wildlife to the community has come up against powerful local sectional interests. Second, the ideal of benefits of management exceeding costs is being contradicted by the reality of costs exceeding benefits. Third, the ideal of the community capturing benefits is being negated by the reality of elite capture of benefits. Fourth, the ideal of community cohesion is being neutralised by local leaders' divisive use of kinship and party political ties to gain access to and control the ranch and its wildlife. On the basis of comparative literature and our own findings, we argue for the necessity to investigate and analyse the politics behind project appropriation at the local level. We conclude that building community collective action in wildlife management requires scrutiny and understanding of power politics which shapes local participation and structures the outcomes of wildlife management.

**Key words:** community based game ranching; politics of appropriation; benefits; costs; networks, elite capture, Zimbabwe

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In Zimbabwe, community based natural resource management (CBNRM) took root in the late 1980s onwards under the flagship Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE). CAMPFIRE's conceptual premise is that local communities will sustainably manage natural resources when: rights and responsibilities to protect and use wildlife (and other natural) resources are devolved to them as managers; benefits of managing the natural resources exceed the costs; communities enter into business partnerships with the private sector; benefits of wildlife conservation are captured by the local communities as resource managers; communities are small enough in membership to be cohesive and to enforce conformity to group defined rules (Martin, 1986; Murphree, 1990; 1991/1992; Hulme & Murphree, 2001).

Martin's (1986) formulation envisaged village communities forming natural resource cooperatives in which inhabitants would obtain legal proprietorship of wildlife as shareholders and profits would be used for communal benefit or shared among the individual shareholders. State bureaucrats resisted devolution, but a decentralisation compromise was reached in 1988 and Guruve and Nyaminyami district councils received *appropriate authority* status (Murphree, 1990). The councils determined, subject to restrictions imposed by government, schemes of wildlife utilisation in their areas of jurisdiction (Mapedza & Bond, 2006). The two councils began earning revenue by leasing sport hunting and non-consumptive tourism rights to private sector operators (Taylor, 2009) but they too remained reluctant to devolve power over wildlife and benefits to sub-district levels (Murombedzi, 1991).

Inspired by CAMPFIRE's philosophical insights, CIRAD supported the establishment of Chivaraidze Game Ranch (CGR) in Chiriwo Ward from 1996 to 2004 under the French funded Biodiversity Conservation Project (Le Bel *et al* 2004). At the same time, and through the financial support of USAID, Chiriwo ward also established the Karunga Hunting Camp, managed by the Karunga Community Development Trust which it leased, and continues to lease, to the safari operator awarded a hunting concession in the area by the district council. The council and ward both receive revenue from this lease arrangement. The game ranch project sought to offer an alternative to this classic CAMPFIRE sport hunting arrangement. The project followed closely Martin's (1986) original formulation of CAMPFIRE and sought to establish a cooperative company whose shareholding would be held by all the households in the ward but, as we shall see, this stirred up unexpected political dynamics.

Using the case of CGR, and comparative evidence from other districts, this paper revisits the foundational ideas informing CBNRM in Zimbabwe and contributes to the ongoing debate on their potency at the local level. The paper is based on primary and secondary research. Primary research involved ethnographic interviews, first hand observations and analysis of political strategies. Secondary research comprised the review of past and present project documents. The paper begins by situating the case study within Zimbabwe's legislative and policy context. It then describes the study area; provides a brief history of CGR and outlines important institutions obtaining in Chiriwo ward. Results from our investigation are discussed in the light of empirical evidence from other wards and districts in Zimbabwe and we conclude that it is the specifics of differential meanings, power politics and contestations that are crucial to understanding the outcomes of CBNRM in rural Africa.

## **2. CONTEXT**

Among the many factors conducive to the establishment of CBNRM in the Mid-Zambezi Valley during the 1980s four contextual factors can be discerned namely the eradication of tsetse fly (*Glossina* spp.), the abundance of biodiversity in the valley, the installation of favourable legislative and policy frameworks and donor support to state and non-state agencies. The eradication of tsetse fly during the late 1980s created favourable conditions for the rapid expansion of human settlements and agriculture in the Mid-Zambezi Valley which threatened to take away wildlife habitats (Le Bel *et al*. 2004). The increase in cultivated zones was accompanied by a decline in game species (Fritz *et al*. 2003) and this

threat opened opportunities for establishing CAMPFIRE. The 1982 amendment to the Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975 enabled the Minister of Environment to confer *appropriate authority* on rural district councils as managers of wildlife in communal areas (Murphree, 1990) and this formed the spring board for the articulation of a sustainable wildlife use policy that found concrete expression in CAMPFIRE. The Prime Minister's decree of 1984 led to the creation of village, ward and district development committees as focal points of development planning. These new entities ran parallel to traditional institutions comprising chiefs, headmen and spirit mediums. By 2001 donor support had helped to roll out CAMPFIRE in 37 out of the 57 districts in the country (Taylor, 2009).

### **2.1. The study area**

Chiriwo ward covers a total area of 718 km<sup>2</sup>; its altitude is 340-420m above sea level and its mean annual rainfall of 620-680 mm supports dry land cultivation of cotton and food crops (Le Bel *et al.* 2004). The ward's population 10 621 people (Ward Office, 13 July 2009) is spread across 24 traditional village clusters of which the largest cluster, Gonono, has a secondary school, a health centre and retail shops. The people in Chiriwo ward, as in the rest of the Zambezi Valley, are vulnerable to recurrent droughts and most depend on food aid. The ward is covered by dry forests and woodlands but along the Kadzi River the dense forest supports a range of floral and avian species. The vegetation in the ward is of great biodiversity conservation interest and is an important refuge for wildlife (Fritz *et al.* 2003).

### **2.2. Brief history of Chivaraidze Game Ranch (CGR)**

The CGR project was established under the Biodiversity Conservation Project funded by FFEM from 1996 to 2004, the details of which are as follows.

#### *Box 1: CIRAD and the Chivaraidze Game Ranch*

CIRAD undertook feasibility studies between 1988 and 1995 which culminated in the setting up the game ranch in 1996. With the blessing of local leaders and residents, an area covering 3 200 ha was set aside. The size of the ranch was influenced by financial constraints and the need to provide game meat. The ranch's wild animals initially consisted of small populations of impalas, kudus, duikers, warthogs and bush pigs, representing the community's contribution valued at US\$35 000. From 1999 to 2002, 509 impalas and a mixed population of 200 head of zebras, wildebeests, sables, tsessebes, waterbucks and elands were translocated valued at over US\$81 000. Three boreholes were sunk and infrastructure such as butchery, office and storerooms constructed. A tractor, trailer and basic ranch equipment, and horses were bought and game guards equipped with rifles and portable VHF radios to ensure security. The institutional framework of the ranch was established in phases with the assistance of a capacity building NGO, the Zimbabwe Trust (ZIMTRUST) and the district council. In October 2000, the CGR became a CAMPFIRE company and this enabled it to open a bank account. A new constitution defined the company's mandate in five clauses, that is, (1) the provision of game meat at reduced prices, (2) the reduction of poaching, (3) job creation, (4) the creation of wealth and (5) the search for financial viability and ecological sustainability. In January 2002, a wildlife exploitation contract was signed with a private safari operator and this was followed in June 2003 by the first trophy sport hunting and cropping of wild animals. In November 2003, the ranch transformed itself into a cooperative company with help from ZIMTRUST. In April 2004, when CIRAD handed over the ranch, the cooperative company was formally registered and a 12-member board of directors elected. The idea of households buying shares in the company foundered on the rock of local politics. Between 2005 and 2007 the cooperative company experienced internal instability arising from power struggles between itself and the ward leadership. Most of the trained workers left the ranch and politically loyal but inexperienced staff was recruited. The performance of the ranch declined amidst increased poaching of wildlife. This was compounded by the general economic and political crisis in the country. In 2008, the cooperative company was informally merged with the Karunga Community Development Trust to form the Karunga-Chivaraidze Cooperative Company (KCCC). This new outfit has not yet been formally registered but it has a unified management and board of directors.

*Sources: Chardonnet & Le Bel (1998); Le Bel et al. (2004)*

### **2.3. Institutions in Chiriwo Ward**

Interlocking institutions in Chiriwo ward include traditional leaders; a ZANU-PF party affiliated councillor; a ward development committee (WADCO); Movement for Democratic Change (MDC); and the Karunga-Chivaraidze Cooperative Company (KCCC). The Chief and headman do not live in Chiriwo ward and to fill this 'void' the councillor mobilises village

heads to elect a leader every 5 years and this leader effectively becomes the ward's deputy councillor. The WADCO consists of the councillor who chairs its meetings, the ward secretary, district chairpersons of ZANU-PF, chairperson of ZANU-PF's war veterans, all the 24 traditional village heads and their respective secretaries, and chairpersons of projects. In Chiriwo ward the formal political structures of the MDC were not readily apparent but during the 2008 an MDC candidate reportedly contested the councillorship and lost narrowly to a ZANU-PF candidate. The KCCC is accountable to the WADCO. Its organisational structure comprises a 12-member board which elects its own chairman, secretary and finance committee. Below the board is a management team led by the company manager, a finance officer, a clerk, a security sergeant, a supervisor of two game guards and two fence minders.

Institutions carry different meanings for different social actors and in Chiriwo ward, the power struggles between various institutional actors is strongly influenced by ZANU-PF but the MDC is making its presence felt.

### **3. RESULTS**

This section presents what we found out about the wildlife ranch, villagers' perceptions of how things were during CIRAD's presence, how things are at the moment; why things have become what they are today and the political strategies used by the political elite to appropriate CGR for sectional benefit.

#### **3.1. What was then...?**

Ordinary villagers in the ward and former and current CGR leaders recalled the golden years of the project (1996-2004) when CIRAD was involved and the turmoil and crisis that gripped it after CIRAD left at the end of the Biodiversity Conservation Project. They remembered how ordinary villagers were selected by traditional village heads in different parts of the ward to provide casual and permanent labour at the ranch and how the income earned helped to sustain their families. They recollected with a sense of nostalgia how they used to buy game meat at low prices and how a Land Rover distributed meat to remote villages.

#### *Box 2: Game cropped in 2003*

Out of a cropping quota of 160 game animals allocated by the National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, 133 were cropped in order to provide meat to people living in and outside Chiriwo ward. In all, five tonnes of meat were produced in 2003 of which 2.5 tonnes came from impalas; 1.3 tonnes from wildebeest and 1.2 tonnes from kudus. Three quarters of the meat was sold fresh at an average price of US\$0.50 per kg. Some of the meat was given to ranch employees and the remainder was dried and sold at US\$2.00 per kg. About 57% of the meat was sold in Chiriwo ward and the remaining 43% was sold to neighbouring wards.

In 2003, the ranch's costs were US\$12 170 and its income was US\$10, 138; the ranch therefore had a shortfall of US\$2 032. The expenditure of the sum of US\$12 170 consisted of 42% running costs; 30% staff and administration; 11% cooperative company and training; 15% infrastructure and maintenance and 2% purchase of equipment. The sources of income were 62.5% sport hunting; 32% sale of game meat; and 2% was generated from secondary activities which included market gardening, hiring out of the tractor and hunting camp.

*Source: Le Bel et al. (2004).*

CIRAD provided considerable quantities of game meat to the community and CGR almost broke even financially during 2003. Local people remembered how, when CIRAD was present, CGR had a functional game meat butchery, equipment and boreholes. They recalled how a tractor ferried them to work at the ranch and brought them back.

The few game guards at the ranch recollected how patrolled CGR on horse-back to monitor wildlife, water points and poaching. They remembered hunting using a Land Rover; how carcasses were transported to the butchery where meat was processed hygienically, stored in deep freezers and sold. They recalled receiving fair wages. They remembered with a sense of pride how CGR teemed with various plains game animals.

#### **3.2. What is now...?**

Now, ordinary men and women and leaders of CGR are disillusioned by the present status of CGR which they say is a far cry from what it was during CIRAD's presence. They see a motionless tractor at the ranch offices which has one wheel missing because the ward councillor gave it to Mbire Rural District Council. They do not see the tractor-drawn trailer and tow grader because the councillor also gave these assets to the rural district council in order to position himself for the post of council chairman which he now occupies. They see a dysfunctional Land Rover vehicle whose parts the councillor took away saying that he was going to buy replacements but that was never done. They do not see the six horses because all of them died from starvation and disease.

Villagers see most of the wild animals roaming outside CGR because poachers and natural floods breached the perimeter fence and most animals escaped. Ranch workers are spending months on end without receiving salaries because CGR has no money and to offset this deficit they reportedly poach wildlife and sell the meat. CGR has no money to pay casual labourers who made fire guards and now wild fires destroy the vegetation on which wild animals.

The original hope that the sale of game meat at low prices would reduce poaching still has to be realised. The meat from the few animals that CGR crops is mostly bought by villagers who live near CGR; most ward members have no access to legal game meat.

The Safari Operator whose license to hunt in CGR was meant to help it realize more income from trophy hunting has never fully utilized the quota allocated by the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority. This is an important fact explaining the weakness of CGR before and after it was handed over to the community after 2004. Without a strong and regular income from trophy hunting, CGR was in a weak position, susceptible to high-jacking by political leaders.

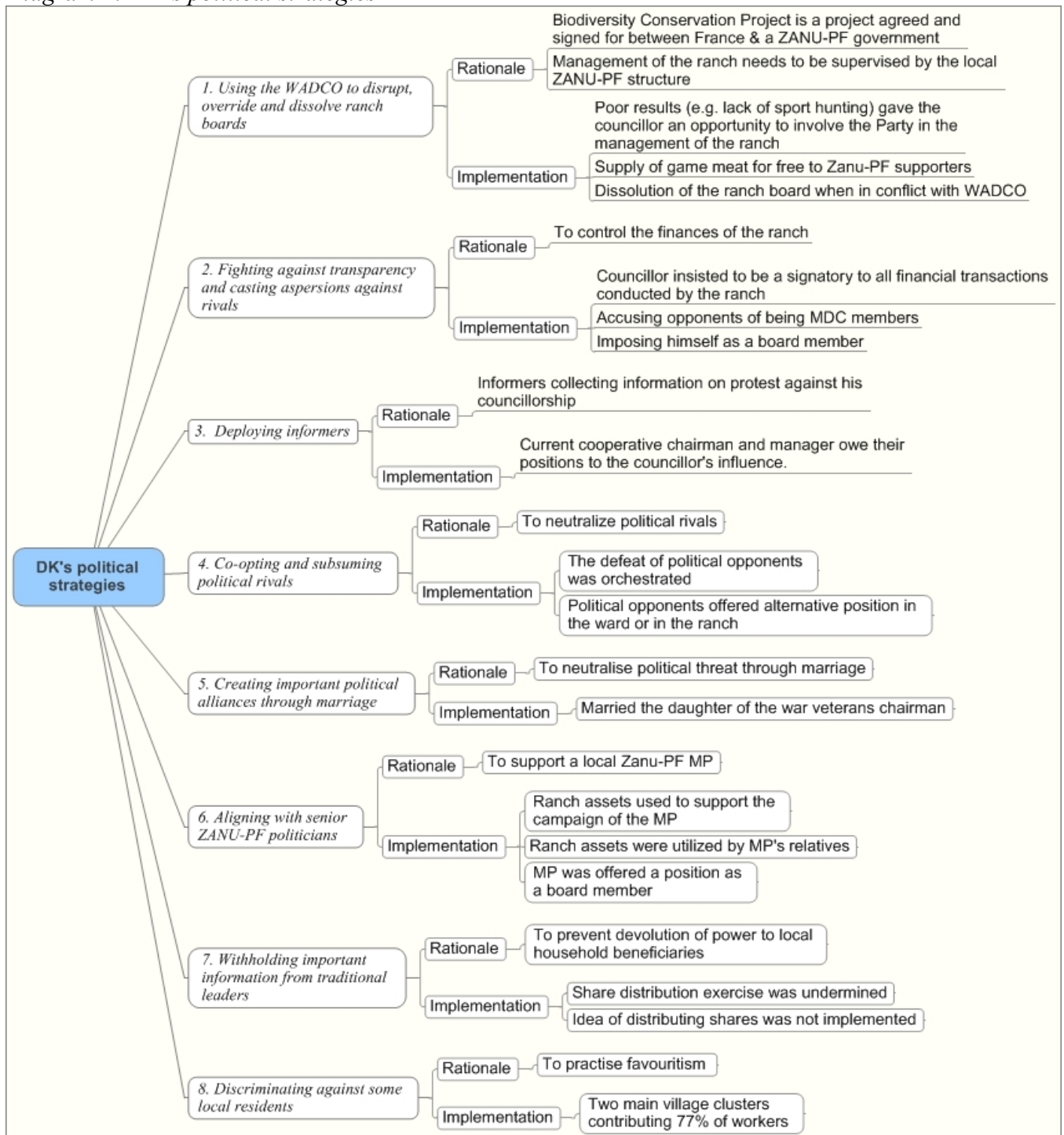
### **3.3. Why have things come to be what they are today...?**

The Zimbabwe politico-economic crisis has had a deleterious impact on CAMPFIRE (Balint and Mashinya, 2006) and associated community based projects like CGR. These contextual factors have, over time, coalesced with local politics to get CGR to where it is today. To understand these issues, we need to analyze power politics, institutions and actors involved, their networks and their ideological justifications for appropriating CGR and then going off at odds with the ideals of CAMPFIRE and democratic governance.

CGR has been bedevilled by power struggles between the ward councillor, DK and successive chairmen of the ranch's boards. During the period 2001-2009, CGR has had six boards of directors, that is, six boards in the space of eight years. Most of the experienced ranch workers lost their jobs and inexperienced staff appointed on grounds of political loyalty, kinship and neighbourhood ties. The central actors have been the ward councillor, DK, the ZANU-PF dominated WADCO and traditional village leaders. DK's political strategies and networks are critical in understanding how and why CGR has been appropriated for sectional interest.

*Community based game ranching and politics in Chiriwo Ward of Mbire district, Zimbabwe  
(Mombeshora, S & Le Bel, S)*

*Diagram 1: DK's political strategies*



DK's multiple political strategies include using the WADCO to disrupt, override and dissolve CGR boards; fighting against transparency and casting aspersions against rivals; deploying informers; co-opting and subsuming village heads and political rivals; using marriage to create crucial political alliances; creating ties with senior ZANU-PF politicians; withholding important information from traditional leaders; and discriminating against some local residents.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Child (2009) argues that the poor performance of CBNRM in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa arises from the weak implementation of the principles informing grassroots conservation and not from the weakness of the principles themselves. Be that as it may, CGR reveals a chasm between the ideals of CAMPFIRE and actual practice especially with regard to devolution, benefits vis-à-vis costs, benefit sharing and community cohesion.

##### **4.1. Devolution of rights vs. dominant local interests**

A diacritical feature of CBNRM in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in southern Africa, is the ideal of devolving from the state to local communities bundles of rights over wildlife, fisheries, forests, water and so on (Barrow & Murphree, 2001). The argument is that if natural resources, in this instance wildlife, are managed at the local level by communities, then they will be looked after better because local systems of accountability are more effective and transparent than centralised ones (SLSA Team, 2003).

Such arguments, cut through, show the evident neglect of the politics of appropriation of conservation and development projects which is itself embedded in wider institutions of governance. As Diagram 1 shows, grassroots wildlife ranching is significantly shaped by relations of party politics, kinship affiliation and identity. In Child's (2009) argument, space for power politics is constricted by focusing on the moral imperative of empowering the rural poor without paying attention to who actually gets empowered and who loses out. In Chiriwo ward, it is the ZANU-PF leadership and its supporters who hold sway over CGR and who cream off the benefits.

##### **4.2. Benefits perceived to exceed costs vs. costs perceived to exceed benefits**

Another quintessential idea behind the creation and operation of CAMPFIRE is that rural people will care to protect and use wildlife when the benefits of doing so are perceived to exceed the costs (Murphree, 1991/1992). Following Emerton (2001) we see benefits of wildlife as consisting of use and non-use values. Whilst use values can be further segmented into *direct* and *indirect* values, non-use values mainly comprise the *existence* value of wildlife.

CGR's direct use values include hunting quotas, meat, jobs, political patronage and agro-services. As pointed out above CGR's hunting quotas were never really fully utilised by the safari operator. Lack of safari hunting has trapped CGR in a cycle of low income and, low maintenance of assets. A significant direct benefit of CGR has been the provision of jobs to some local residents. The beneficiaries include the cooperative board members who receive sitting allowances for attending meetings, the management and ordinary workers who are trying to make CGR resilient by increasing anti-poaching patrols.

CGR was meant to provide indirect benefits in the form of ecological and environmental services associated with wildlife and its habitat. These include the conservation of woodlands and bushes, grasses, natural water sources, soils and the sequestration of carbon (Emerton, 2001). Wild fires are compromising the conservation of wildlife and its habitats. The conservation of wildlife is also being hampered by poachers who cut the perimeter fence and use it to snare wild animals.

A few Chiriwo Ward residents pointed out the *existence* values of wildlife (Binot *et al*, 2009). They observed that Chiriwo ward could become a hub for community-based game ranching if CGR is revived. Children in the ward grow up knowing at first hand the different



species of plains game in CGR. Most adults regard the wildlife in CGR as part of their local heritage.

However, there is a growing clear-headed perception that the direct and indirect costs of this wildlife venture are exceeding benefits and that these costs are spread unevenly among ward residents. The direct costs of CGR include staff salaries and wages, the maintenance and repair of equipment and infrastructure. The cooperative company's financial statement for the period January-June 2009 shows that it generated US\$3 220.50 when estimates for repairing various assets amount to US\$50 000.00. Clearly, the direct costs of operating CGR exceed what it currently is able to generate.

The *indirect or opportunity costs* are the crops and livestock production options that local people forgo in order to keep and sustain CGR. The ranch imposes opportunity costs on ward residents subtracting potential sources of subsistence livelihoods such as wood fuel, pasture, crop land and medicines and imposes the burden of crop damage by wildlife. Villagers living near CGR argue that they are bearing the full burden of crop raiding by wildlife and yet they are excluded from leadership positions at CGR because they are immigrants. They prefer converting the wildlife habitat inside CGR into agro-pastoral land from which they can derive direct benefits.

Clearly, there is an abiding tension between the vision of benefits exceeding costs and the lived reality of costs exceeding benefits and significant segments of the population perceive themselves as being in a worse pickle because they are not deriving any benefits. In their view, the primary beneficiaries of CGR are the cavalier political leadership and its supporters.

#### **4.3. Local community capturing benefits of management vs. elite capture of benefits**

In Chiriwo ward as in Mahenye ward in Chipinge district, Nenyunga ward in Gokwe North district and in Nyaminyami district, power politics is central to understanding who captures benefits and who loses from wildlife management initiatives.

In Mahenye in Chipinge district, the ZANU-PF aligned traditional leadership has usurped power and control over the project and its finances from the elected leadership (Rihoy *et al.*, 2007). They no longer apply participatory decision-making because they make the decisions and then inform 'their people' about how CAMPFIRE money has been allocated (Balint & Mashinya, 2006). The withdrawal of NGOs and government agencies has opened space for traditional leaders to assert power, influence and control over 'community' wildlife resources.

Mapedza & Bond (2006) explain that in Gokwe North ZANU-PF political processes have extended right down to local institutions to the extent that the party has become an important gate-keeper of most wildlife conservation activities. In Nenyunga ward, the ZANU-PF aligned local councillor and chief do not allow immigrants to contest elections for fear that key political positions might be taken over. The councillor accuses immigrants of belonging to the MDC thereby forestalling their election to CAMPFIRE committees. Significantly, Chief Nenyunga and the ward councillor have used their positions to access and appropriate CAMPFIRE resources for their own benefit (Mapedza & Bond, 2006).

In Nyaminyami district, CAMPFIRE is now characterised by unaccountable power structures, lack of community benefits and council's ineffective response to human-wildlife conflicts (Balint & Mashinya (2008). The ward wildlife committees are largely seen as rubber stamps to ZANU-PF councillors who are feared by local people because of the threat of violence. Nyaminyami councillors appropriate ward-level CAMPFIRE revenues for personal perquisites. Meanwhile CAMPFIRE funded community projects such as grinding mills; schools and a butcher shop are in decline because councillors capture benefits (Balint & Mashinya, 2008).

These examples demonstrate that the application of the model of devolved natural resource governance triggers-off important power contestations whose results shape access to and control of wildlife benefits by local political elites. By overlooking the centrality of power politics, state and non-state agencies and actors overestimate the capacity of the

participatory 'democratic' approach to deliver conservation and development benefits more equitably and effectively (Platteau and Gaspart, 2003).

#### **4.4. Internal community cohesion vs. divisive use of kinship and party political ties**

Barrow and Murphree (2001) maintain that internal community cohesion is the social glue which persuades people, in spite of their differences, to act collectively to enhance mutual interests and to represent these interests to others. Earlier on Murphree (1991/1992) argued that natural resource management institutions work better if the community is small enough in membership size for members to be in occasional face-to-face contact to enforce conformity to rules through peer pressure.

This construction of 'community' overlooks the fact that social life organised through kinship is also conflict ridden. As this paper has tried to show, the common ethnicity and geography of Chiriwo residents is seen through disputes over who is actually the 'authentic' member of the community; who should gain access to and control wildlife and benefits and who should be excluded (Brockington *et al.* 2008). Kinship, ethnicity and affinities to political parties are all fault lines along which struggles over access to wildlife resources, meanings, institutional legitimacy and control are occurring in Chiriwo ward. The management of CGR is therefore embedded in contested power relations whose contingent constellations may pull in different directions. This renders elusive the attainment of the ideal of a socially cohesive community in Chiriwo ward and with it the realisation of a unitary logic of game ranching.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

We have argued, on the basis of the Chiriwo ward's experience, and also on the basis of evidence from Mahenye ward, Nenyunga ward and Nyaminyami district in Zimbabwe, that it is the politics of project appropriation that is central to understanding the outcomes of wildlife management. By concentrating the optic on local actors, their life-worlds, the strategies they use to gain access to wildlife projects, the ideas they marshal to legitimate their actions, we are better able to see the disconnect between the policy vision of equitable 'democratic' participation and the existential realities of elite capture. Focusing on actors and their strategic actions gives us a better handle on differential power, meanings and political processes triggered by donor supported projects which despite being technical successes can be vitiated by local power struggles. The policy ambition of devolving wildlife management to local communities has to contend with the realities of predatory sectional interests which policy actors cannot afford to ignore.

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