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Summary

Struggles over Consensus, Anti-Politics and Marketing Neoliberalism and Transfrontier Conservation and Development in Southern Africa

Despite their ambiguous historical record, conservation/development interventions the world over have remained a popular environmental governance tool. One of the latest global ‘trends’ are interventions to establish so-called ‘Transfrontier Conservation Areas’ (TFCAs): large contiguous spaces that are principally aimed at conserving biological diversity across national boundaries. In line with broader discourses around sustainable development, bioregionalism and Community-Based Natural Resource Management, a second general objective of TFCAs is to uplift livelihoods of rural people living in and around these border spaces. By creating transfrontier institutions that bind states together for these purposes a third dimension emerges: stimulating international cooperation between countries. Consequently, TFCAs are also marketed as ‘peace parks’. As such, TFCAs have significantly increased the size, scope and ambition of interventions and stimulated new institutional forms and politics around conservation and development. This study provides an in-depth understanding of the rise, consolidation and implementation of TFCAs in the region that has appeared most influential in the global conceptualization of transfrontier conservation and development: Southern Africa.

Central issue and focus

The central research question that guided the research was the following:

How is contemporary neoliberalism constituted within transfrontier governance structures and intervention strategies linking conservation and development in Southern Africa and how does this affect the chances of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project of reaching its twin objectives of conservation and development?

The central issue addressed by the study concerns the changing influence and effects of neoliberalism: the political ideology that stipulates the submission of social and political affairs to market dynamics. It is argued that interventions aimed at establishing TFCAs provide a window on the novel directions of and new struggles embedded within the broader neoliberal political and governance dynamics of conservation and development in post-apartheid Southern Africa. Based on multi-sited and multi-level empirical field research between 2003 and 2008, the study covers these dynamics both on the regional Southern African level and on the local level through an in-depth case study of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project between South Africa and Lesotho. What becomes clear from the presented data is that the neoliberalisation of conservation and development has progressed from its earlier political manifestations to be characterized by new 'modes of politics' that work to further entrench more established neoliberal 'modes of governance', such as competition and commercialization.

Importance of History

Before coming to these 'new modes of politics', the study emphasises the importance of the historical context in which the concept of TFCAs has arisen, especially the contemporary Southern African history from the 19th century onwards. From this period, conservation/development discourses started penetrating wider political economic practices around colonial state-building, settler agriculture and hunting. In turn, this led to specific configurations of top-down conservation practices during colonial and apartheid times, with emphasis on protected areas, separation between people and nature and a focus on scientific expertise in the management of biodiversity. In the postcolonial and post-apartheid era, conservation rhetoric changed to take into account (local) people's concerns and historical injustices and emphasis was placed on linking conservation and development. From there, many 'community-based' conservation/development hybrids developed in discourse and in practice, although older 'fortress conservation' models often persist. The study argues that the last 15 years have seen an increasing amount of conservation/development hybrids, which in turn have proved highly susceptible to neoliberal infusion. Against this background, the rise of transfrontier conservation and development within the wider political-economy of Southern Africa should be seen as the

culmination of the many pressures on conservation/development interventions. Moreover, the ways in which South African capital, most notably through an NGO named the Peace Parks Foundation, sought to retain legitimacy in a post-apartheid Southern Africa and new avenues for economic growth through conservation, are emphasised.

Three contemporary neoliberal 'modes of politics'

The rise of transfrontier conservation has unveiled the changes in neoliberal politics of conservation/development over the past two decades. Whereas previous neoliberal discourses stressed the concepts and practices of privatisation, 'state versus market' and liberalisation, new neoliberal 'modes of politics' revolve around three main concepts: consensus, anti-politics and marketing. Regarding consensus, it is argued that strong pressures for actor and thematic all-inclusiveness together with the hybridization of historical demands for socially inclusive conservation and the contemporary need for neoliberal market legitimacy have increasingly rendered the conservation/development nexus a particular type of market. In this 'conservation/development market place', interventions need to use consensus rhetoric to capture as broad a buy-in as possible in order to remain politically legitimate. As a result, contemporary thinking around interventions has significantly broadened in size, scale and ambition, exemplified by the trend of TFCAs. Not only do they 'cater' for biodiversity and 'local communities', they also aim to stimulate international cooperation between states and increase business opportunities through 'public-private partnerships'. The study shows in detail how despite different political agenda's, proponents conceptualize transfrontier conservation and development such that it continuously pervades the image of a win-win strategy for all 'stakeholders'.

But to retain images of all-inclusiveness and consensus in the face of a growing amount of actors capable of critically scrutinizing and resisting one's political agenda requires a second neoliberal mode of political conduct: that of anti-politics or 'the political act of doing away with politics'. Based on neoliberalism's drive towards consensus rhetoric, the study argues that the processes with which actors make decisions that determine social or public outcomes need to be aligned by the suppressing of political debate through a

variety of anti-political strategies. Crucial in this is a more refined understanding of anti-politics that goes beyond the 'standard' interpretation of the concept as either technical or instrumental, but which includes moral, amoral and aesthetic anti-politics. On the regional Southern African level, proponents of TFCAs, especially the Peace Parks Foundation, try to construct transfrontier conservation as a *model of meaning* to which people can attach their identity and fortunes as well as the *Telos* – the end state or 'natural' order - of conservation and development more generally. The case-study of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project illustrates how both the South African and the Lesotho 'Project Coordination Units' try to promote consensus around the intervention based on different anti-political strategies, which leads them to clash repeatedly. Together, the two strategies of consensus and anti-politics lead to a reification of the status quo and a focus on the realm of discourse through extensive planning and research: the realm where – ostensibly – contradictions are easier to avoid.

Yet, the study shows that contradictions between conservation and development, rhetoric and reality, cannot be avoided. Uncomfortable contradictions around the rhetoric of consensus in the face of resettlements of local people from the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park and conflict in the MDTP; around uneven distribution of benefits from tourism; and around the 'payments for environmental services' strategy that aims to institutionalise market legitimacy in conservation/development that inherently favours quantitative monetary values over qualitative intrinsic values, remained. In order, then, to 'control' these contradictions and retain legitimacy for interventions, constant discursive grooming and spin is necessary. Non-compliance to consensus and anti-politics is countered by the disciplining force of the third contemporary neoliberal political strategy: that of marketing. Marketing in the study entails the manipulation of abstraction in order to gain competitive advantage in the conservation/development market place. This is shown to work in two ways: first, by positing TFCAs as (global) 'models of meaning' and second, through the more refined manipulation of abstraction on an 'every-day' basis, for example around the marketing and branding of TFCAs for tourism purposes whereby the image of the area and its people were deemed more important than reality. According to one interview: 'in tourism you don't cater for reality, you cater for

perceptions'. The study concludes that if captured within a highly competitive environment - such as the 'conservation/development market place' represents – actors such as donors, private organisations, consultants, but also communities and the state, increasingly use every opportunity to gain competitive advantage over other actors, thereby again legitimating speculative rhetoric over more grounded realities.

Underlying 'modes of governance'

Taken together, it is argued that the three modes present a particularly strong and resilient set of political practices that is not only able to maintain legitimation for interventions to establish TFCAs, but is also able to mask the 'uneasy contradictions' inherent in current-day neoliberal conservation/development more generally. However, by themselves these modes of political conduct are not able to constitute transfrontier conservation and development in Southern Africa in neoliberal terms. They stimulate and thrive on neoliberal modes of devolved governance, especially those revolving around competition and commercialization such as tourism and 'payments for environmental services'. It is this dialectic between the new modes of politics and more established modes of governance that truly induce actors in Southern African transfrontier conservation and development to self-regulate and self-discipline in order to survive in – and thereby further reinforce – the neoliberal conservation/development market place writ large.

Conclusion

The study concludes by arguing that the 'new political modes' intensify and further fuel contradictions in conservation and development interventions and realities. Attention is drawn to neoliberalism's most profound contradiction: the ability of its proponents to produce and favour discourses seemingly free of contradictions while these saturate its practices. Put even stronger: the very purpose of these discourses is to mask contradictory realities so as to legitimate further neoliberal expansion. As such, the neoliberalisation of TFCAs overall and the MDTP in particular has negatively affected the chances of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project of reaching its twin objectives of conservation and development. It is the historical constitution of the intervention within the donor systems of the World Bank and the Global Environment

Facility, together with the manner in which the 'first' phase of the MDTP actively subjected itself to and in turn triggered neoliberal modes of political conduct and devolved governance that is likely to fuel contradictions in the future that entrench the status quo or even worsen the state of the biodiversity and the fate of the resident people of the Maloti-Drakensberg area. In turn, this leads to a call for a more '*political* political ecology' in two ways. First, to continue the infusion of anthropology and geography dominated political ecology with influences from political science and international relations. Above all, this means to more clearly define and conceptualize politics, power, governance, and so forth, but crucially, to link the ethnographic to the abstract debates surrounding these concepts. The second point is for political ecology to also *be* more political: to accept that science is inherently political and to make a political stance, especially towards the many negative effects of neoliberalism and make these more concrete.