

Effects of the Discourse-Practice Divide in Southern Africa

The Paradox of Long-term Planning for Social-Ecological Change

Long-term planning for social-ecological change is a paradox in the current neoliberal era. This paradox is illustrated through combining critical research and practical experience in a transfrontier conservation and development intervention in Southern Africa.

By Bram Büscher and Elna de Beer

A fragile mountain ecosystem, the Maloti-Drakensberg area is characterised by its massive escarpment, indigenous biodiversity, important freshwater resources and the diverse peoples that live in and partly depend on the ecosystem. People and biodiversity depend on each other and some balance between human and conservation needs therefore has to be found. The Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Project (MDTP) between South Africa and Lesotho aims to bring about this positive social-ecological change. The project implementers have developed a 20-year planning strategy that has to coordinate all actors and their actions impacting on social-ecological change in the area until 2028.

Although it cannot predict the future success of this planning strategy, this article describes and analyses some major issues in the run-up to the strategy, which itself lasted well over two decades. By combining critical outside research with practical inside experience, the article argues that governing contemporary social-ecological change in the current neoliberal era is paradoxical due to the fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures and an increasing gap between discourse and practice. In illustrating these paradoxes the article aims to show how the interactive writing between outside researchers and inside professionals can add to the critical understanding of interventions aimed at positive social-ecological change.

Fuelling short-term dynamics through neoliberal pressures

One way to define neoliberalism is as a devolved system of governance that emphasises the market, commercialisation and competition as regulatory principles for behaviour. The neoliberal turn in governing social-ecological change entails the weaving of a regulatory system whereby access to and benefits from natural resources are likened to a market. New relationships bet-

ween actors are fashioned neoliberal style, encapsulated in chains that link production and purchase of a particular environmental service. As such, the trend "to commodify nature and market its services is a massive transformation of the human-environment relationship and of the political economy of regions and landscapes" (Liverman 2004).

During its first phase from 2003 to 2008, the MDTP started experimenting with neoliberal conservation and development models, for instance through the introduction of payments for environmental services. According to a consultancy report produced for the MDTP in South Africa:

"Payment for environmental services provides an incentive for directing landowners towards environment management actions that address priority environmental services, such as water security. As a payment system directly links buyers and producers of environmental services, it build relationships between people who are economically linked and allows market based transactions to take place, reducing the need for further state regulation. Furthermore it focuses on measurable deliverables and consequently sharpens the performance of conservation actors" (Diederichs and Mander 2004).

Spurred by this report, payments for environmental services became a priority for the long-term planning in the MDTP, as captured in the long-term transfrontier strategy document:

"Both countries recognise the vital role that environmental economics tools play in (i) placing a monetary value on ecosystem goods and services (where their lack of monetary value in the past has meant they are treated as "free resources" often resulting in overutilisation), and (ii) in defining how such values can assist decision-makers in mainstreaming ecosystem goods and services into accounting and other business practices. The tools are vital to determine the value of biodiversity to the economy and to people's lives" (MDTP 2008).

The point of concern here is not so much whether payments for environmental services achieve their stated goals but rather that markets are prone to stimulate short-term economic dynamics rather than the long-term political commitments necessary for long-term planning.

The increasing gap between discourse and practice

One of the advocated virtues of planning is to reduce the gap between rhetoric and reality. Paradoxically, however, neoliberal pressures seem to have the opposite effect. A basic reason for this gap is that the necessity for actor all-inclusiveness, often →

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for intervention legitimization purposes. This necessity forces planners to talk in broad, conceptually vague terms that most stakeholders can agree with. Yet, as Mosse argues, “ideas that make for good policy – policy which legitimizes and mobilizes political and practical support – are not those which provide good guides to action” (2004).

The rhetoric-reality gap has long been object of study in the anthropology of development. If indeed “conceptual and discursive systems link up with social institutions and processes without even approximately determining the form or defining the logic of the outcome”, we must question the increasingly greater emphasis on the discursive policy process, for instance through elaborate planning schemes (Ferguson 1994). Ferguson suggests that it makes institutional sense from a planner's point of view to leave out political realities in development planning discourses, leading to more emphasis on the bureaucratic process instead of engaging with what is happening on the ground.

The logical consequence is a widening gap between policy and practice, something which has also hampered the MDTP. In fact, from a critical perspective one could argue that one of the reasons why the South African project team challenged the original MDTP project plan and rather wanted to focus on long-term planning is indeed that this is a safer political strategy than navigating the hazards of local, on the ground implementation. However, by itself this would be too simple an explanation for the focus on long-term planning. Even if political expediency stimulates a tendency towards discourse, it still remains important to not lose sight of the situated complexities regarding discourse and practice that any planning exercise for social-ecological change has to deal with. We will illustrate this point through a brief discussion of three issues that appeared crucial in the MDTP planning process.

Actor all-inclusiveness

The MDTP planners developed various coping mechanisms and practical strategies in their pursuance of actor inclusiveness with the significant reality that long term planning is messy and

it forces the interpretation of divergent realities. Mosse refers to this as “the constant work of translation (of policy goals into practical interests; practical interests back into policy goals) which requires skilled brokers to read the meaning of the project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholders (...) which in itself destabilizes and militate against coherence” (2004). The MDTPs experience with Environmental Education illustrates how continuous translation and brokering in practice leads to complex discourse-practice questions for both professionals and researchers.

One of the MDTPs key objectives was to institute environmental education processes to enable stakeholders to understand, engage with and act upon issues associated with biodiversity and cultural heritage. The MDTP appointed a consortium consisting of environmental education specialists in May 2005. The subsequent process was fraught with translation challenges as the approach to the education programmes was distinctly different from the MDTPs strong project management and planning approach. From a social-ecological perspective, an approach that emphasised process and evolutionary growth in knowledge made pragmatic sense. Concepts like Open Process Framework which supported a plan as you do approach that “moved beyond the simplistic transfer of knowledge as the basis of social change” challenged the MDTP and World Bank's planning before you do approach significantly (Taylor 2006). This was evident in the lengthy discussions between the Consortium, a social-ecologist and the World Bank task team leader during May 2005 where substantial evidence was required by the latter that the open process would deliver the quantitatively measured outputs and impact required.

The main insider lesson learned from this process is that the divide between discourse and practice comes with its own set of assumptions and risks and social change is not simply a matter of applying a single paradigm. The challenge in translation is not to get trapped by political correctness and rhetoric that could inhibit project processes, resulting in providing a false sense of security that progress is made. This is congruent with outside research on the MDTP, which confirmed Taylor's warning of creating “an appearance of change but [that] the underlying development orientation often continues, and ironically, the most substantive change often only occurs in the language” (1998).

Engaging natural and social science

When dealing with planning for socio-ecological change, one has to take into account the tension between the social-political and the environmental contexts as seen in the contrast between social and natural science educated actors in the MDTP planning process. To participants in the MDTP it has not always been clear whether the natural science oriented actors in the project accepted the social realities out of political pragmatism in an attempt to mitigate the risk to biodiversity or whether there is actual understanding of the relevance and application of

social science in biodiversity conservation. The same can be said for the social science practitioners in the project about their engagement with biodiversity conservation. The friendly banter between colleagues many times reflected unease with the distinctly different approaches of the disciplines in engaging with the same issues.

Analysis of the action planning process of the MDTP 20-year strategy currently in progress shows two distinct approaches running parallel. First, the biocentric approach linked to the conservation management strategic outcomes, which reflects hard scientific approaches of data collection that support biodiversity conservation, expert driven best practice and little recognition for the relevance of social science. Second, the anthropocentric approach linked to the cultural heritage outcome, which reflects soft scientific approaches of recognising local knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems through community participation in the development of strategies and management plans aimed at the protection of cultural heritage. Many professionals within the MDTP found it refreshing to see both approaches captured in one long term planning process but the way in which this was done simultaneously also perpetuated divides between the sciences.

Selection and sidetracking

On the level of discourse, the MDTP planners constantly had to strategically manoeuvre their ideas for long-term planning through the many different interests of stakeholders. And even though many did align themselves with the common vision of the MDTP 20-year strategy, at the end of the first phase, it became clear that attempts to bring together the planning frameworks of the key conservation agencies for the next phase from 2008 to 2012 is under threat due to lack of continuity in actor involvement and maintained support. This acknowledgement links in with what Olivier de Sardan notes about development interventions in general and how supposed target populations often react to plans according to the principles of selection and sidetracking (2005). Selection means that the intervention package that is usually portrayed as coherent is never adopted as such by the target population or area, but picked apart to greater or lesser extent. Sidetracking has to do with the reasons with which the target population adopts parts of the intervention package often being different from the objectives of the project staff. Thus, leading to different outcomes than foreseen, planned or hoped.

The currency of the two principles can be illustrated by looking back at the start of the current phase of the MDTP. Planners then had expected that the proposal could be implemented as they had developed it, yet the South African project coordination unit challenged the plans and changed the proposed project considerably. Now this same team faces the identical challenge of getting their plans accepted and implemented by a sizeable amount of crucial stakeholders already in competition with themselves over limited natural or project resources.

Conclusions

Based on this brief analysis, we draw two general conclusions. The first deals with how the three crucial issues in governing social-ecological change, actor all-inclusiveness, engaging natural and social science and selection and sidetracking, both reinforce and are reinforced by the two paradoxes of short-term pressures and the growing gap between rhetoric and reality.

The second conclusion revolves around the fact that open-minded practitioner-academic collaboration can create spaces. This refers firstly at understanding intervention realities on different levels of abstraction. Secondly this can happen by shedding illusions that we grow into, for instance by our academic training which become entrenched in ways of doing and thinking. Thirdly, practitioner-academic collaboration can open up new opportunities through continuous focus on locally appropriate pragmatic solutions rather than globally enforced one-size-fits-all solutions.

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