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Democracy and environment: congruencies and contradictions in southern Africa

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Abstract

Using case studies from Malawi, South Africa, and Mozambique, this paper suggests that there is no necessary relationship between democracy and the environment. In Africa, democratization since the late 1980s has been the source of increased optimism about the environment, particularly as ideas of ‘participatory’ resource management have replaced older top-down conservation models. However, this optimism may be premature. Commonly identified linkages between democracy and environment include increased accountability, development, and participation. In many African countries, however, ‘democracy’ is an empty shell, lacking the political institutions, civil society, and economic and cultural conditions necessary to achieve real democratic competition and accountability. Moreover, the paper illustrates from the case studies that even where the goals of democracy are realized, these can have negative as well as positive environmental consequences. Hence, faith in ‘democracy’—wherever and in whatever form—to solve Africa’s environmental problems may be misplaced. The question that needs to be asked is not whether democracy is good for the environment, but *how* and *when* it can be made to work to meet social and environmental objectives. There is room for hope: democratization in Africa has provided a more open arena for political discourse, in which questions can be asked about the specific kinds of political, social, and economic reforms and social institutions that will be needed to make ‘participatory’ community-based resource management successful. The optimistic discourse about democracy and environment in Africa tends to obscure these difficult questions, putting at risk the true promise of democratization. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

On March 22, 1998, Bill Clinton embarked on a state tour of Africa, the first in 20 years by an American President. Although the visit centered largely around trade, the President also aimed to celebrate the accomplishments of African countries that have recently implemented historic democratic reforms. High on the agenda for discussion with the ‘new generation’ of African leaders were issues of environment and sustainable development. This celebration of African democracy and the promotion of sustainability reflected an assumption common in certain contemporary discourses about Africa—that environment and democracy go hand in hand. Yet the actual experience of democratization in Africa suggests that the relationship between democracy and the environment is more complex. This paper provides some preliminary thoughts about the congruencies and potential contradictions between environment and democratization, and presents case studies illustrating these interactions in three southern African countries that recently experienced major political transitions—Malawi, South Africa, and Mozambique.

The potential contradictions between democratization and the environment have been largely submerged in the understandable euphoria about recent political changes in Africa. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the wave of democratization that swept away some of the world’s most entrenched autocratic regimes, much of southern Africa experienced an emergence or renewal of democracy. South Africans saw the end of apartheid and the inauguration of their nation’s first president elected through all-race elections. Namibia, the last colonial state in Africa, gained independence. Zambia and Malawi ousted long-reigning autocrats and replaced them with opposition political leaders. Mozambique saw the end of a brutal 16-year civil war and held general and presidential multi-party elections.

The convergence of democratization and increased international concern about the environment contributed to a loosely articulated sense that these processes are inherently mutually reinforcing. International institutions and non-governmental organizations often identify democratization and environmental protection as key policy goals. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, identifies ‘protecting the environment’ and ‘fostering democracy and participation’ as two of its five key policy objectives for Africa (USAID, 1996, p. 8). The implied congruence, or at least compatibility, of these objectives is supported by the idea that accountable, democratic governments are “more likely to pursue sound economic policies and broad-based, sustainable development” based on “sound natural resource management” (pp. 8, 21) and more likely to encourage local participation in resource management. Similarly, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 1997, p. 141) states:

Many of the mechanisms required to successfully implement sustainable development rely on accountable partnerships between government, industry, business, and the community at large. The value of popular participation by both individuals and interest groups in the development of environmental policy is increasingly being recognized by formerly centralized governments; thus, opening the way

for greater environmental citizenship in the future. In Africa, decentralization of government authorities offers potential for increased grass-roots participation in policy development and implementation in the future.

However, specific linkages between democratization and sound natural resource management are rarely discussed in detail, and even proponents acknowledge that the relationship between democratization and sound resource management in practice is “yet to be assessed” (UNEP, 1997, p. 25). Contradictions between these goals and the other major policy objectives of international institutions, including structural adjustment programs (SAPs) are also rarely discussed.

There is an extensive scholarly literature supporting the idea of congruence between democracy and environmental quality (Dryzek, 1987; Eckersley, 1992; Gleditsch and Sverdrup, 1995; Gundersen, 1995; O’Neill, 1993; Payne, 1995), although this literature often does not differentiate between the experiences of Western societies and those of the ‘South’ and is generally more normative than analytical or empirical. Only recently has the idea of an inherently positive relationship between democracy and environment been critically assessed (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996a; Lake, 1996; Midlarsky, 1998).

This paper begins to fill some of these gaps by examining the experiences of democratization in three countries in southern Africa, and considers some of the ways these experiences have re-shaped the politics and practices of resource management in specific local contexts. The paper concludes that there is no necessary link between environment and democratization as it has been experienced in southern Africa. ‘Democratization’ in southern Africa generally describes partial shifts from strongly centralized political systems to those with limited political checks and opportunities for community participation, and the implications of these partial shifts for the environment vary according to their effects on specific political and economic processes and institutions.

Nevertheless, the increased emphasis on participation of local communities in resource management and decision-making provides important opportunities for improving both the effectiveness and equity of conservation programs. In recent years a substantial literature has emerged that suggests that ‘sustainable development’ can only be achieved with the participation and support of rural communities (Ghai and Vivian, 1992; Ghai, 1994), and recent efforts to promote community-based conservation in place of top-down conservation approaches, has created opportunities for more effective policies and methods of environmental management.

At the same time, the absence of state policies and local institutions to promote effective community-based management, as well as the general scarcity of economic opportunities for rural people, calls into question whether increased participation is enough to achieve hoped-for improvements in environmental management. This is not, however, necessarily cause for pessimism. By rejecting the simple notion that democracy—wherever and in whatever form—is always good for the environment, this paper suggests the need for closer examination of specific forms and processes of democratization and their relation to the environment, as well as greater consider-

ation of the kinds of economic and institutional changes needed to provide the foundations for a sustainable future in southern Africa and other developing societies.

‘Virtual’ democracy in Africa

In considering the relationship between democracy and environment in southern Africa, it is essential to first recognize that ‘democracy’ in this region is ambiguous and incomplete. In quantitative terms, the transition in Africa has been breathtaking. In the 5 years before 1990, competitive elections were held in nine African countries. From 1990 to 1994, this number more than quadrupled to 38 competitive elections held in the 47 sub-Saharan African countries (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997, p. 7; also see Owusu, 1997, p. 123). Qualitatively, however, democratization in Africa has been less impressive. Many of the new ‘democratic’ governments demonstrated little willingness or capacity to challenge established interests, to tackle pressing economic and social problems, or to establish and maintain institutions to assure government accountability and participation—producing what Joseph (1997) calls ‘virtual’ democracy. Zambia and Kenya, where recent nominally ‘democratic’ elections masked de facto one-party political systems, are among the more extreme examples. Thus, the recent experiences of democratization in Africa are generally characterized not by radical transformations of political systems but by incomplete and tenuous shifts toward more representative government (Adekanye, 1995; Booth and Vale, 1995; Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Chabal, 1998; Ihonvbere, 1996a, b; Joseph, 1997; Makinda, 1996; Nyang’oro, 1996; Owusu, 1997; Rasheed, 1995; Wiseman, 1996).

This suggests a need to critically assess what we mean by ‘democracy’ and to what extent it has been achieved or is likely to be achieved in this region. To answer this question requires an understanding of the origins of the recent democratization movement in Africa. The beginning of the recent period of democratization in Africa is usually linked to the collapse of Soviet-style communism in Eastern Europe after 1989, which ended the Cold War superpower struggles that had fundamentally shaped African politics since independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The earlier strategic interest among Western powers in propping-up autocrats and client states in Africa was replaced by a new set of international objectives (Decalo, 1992, p. 17) based on goals of economic and democratic reform. With African states heavily dependent on Western aid, the international institutions and the Western powers they represented were in a position to make demands for democratic and economic reforms, which had been relegated to a lower tier of priorities during the Cold War. Opinions differ between those who emphasize the role of these international factors (Diamond, 1995; Joseph, 1997) and those who stress the importance of internal pressures from Africans yearning for reform after decades of misrule and disastrous economic policies (Wiseman, 1996; Bratton and van de Walle, 1997). The ratio of internal to external pressures is less important, however, than the fact that African nations imported Western political instruments (e.g. multi-party elections) that often fit poorly with African political cultures, civil societies, and social histories (Makinda, 1996).

As a consequence, although the wave of ‘democratization’ after 1989 brought to Africa many of the practices of Western-style democratic systems, this cannot be equated with the creation of democracy as it is known in the West. Huntington (1984) (p. 195), following Schumpeter, defines a political system as democratic when “its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote... a democracy thus involves two dimensions—contestation and participation.” Although this definition identifies the functional characteristics of democracy, it provides little insight into the social institutions necessary to achieve these goals. Chabal (1998) usefully expands our understanding by identifying four dimensions of democracy: instrumental, institutional, cultural, and historical. The instrumental dimension of democracy—which relates to such mechanisms as a legal framework requiring periodic elections—is the focus of most discussions by Western policy makers and institutions, and is the usual basis for optimism about politics in Africa. As the experiences of certain countries (e.g. Zambia, Kenya) illustrate, these instrumental dimensions alone are not enough to guarantee democracy in any meaningful sense.

The institutional dimensions of democracy, as identified by Chabal, refers to institutions to assure that voters have real choices and that once elected leaders will uphold their duties to represent the interests of both local and national constituencies. For example, Chabal notes that in African ‘democracies’ lacking such institutions, parliaments have become mere ‘rubber stamps’ (p. 297) for powerful chief executives. In addition, institutional biases may favor incumbents and well-established political parties, explaining, in part, why many of the new ‘democratically’ elected leaders in Africa were drawn from the same classes of ‘old-guard’ politicians who had ruled in previous governments (Ihonvbere, 1996b). Bratton and van de Walle observe that: “the election of re-cycled leaders engendered doubts about whether they would govern any differently than the men they replaced”.

Such problems suggest a need, for example, for institutional rules and norms that enable and protect substantive political debate and participation by opposition political parties, as well as mechanisms to limit corruption, maintain regular communications between elected leaders and their constituents, and to assure a ‘level playing field’ for opposition parties. These institutional dimensions can take considerable time to develop (Barkan and Gordon, 1998; Makinda, 1996), but without them, there is the real threat that democracy in Africa will generate little more than sham elections or games of musical chairs played by self-serving political élites.

The institutional characteristics of democratic systems in Africa also point to the importance of civil society. Although civic organizations can in some circumstances destabilize fledgling democracies by making unrealistic demands, both theoretical and empirical studies indicate a strong link between a robust civil society and responsive, accountable democratic governance (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Wunsch, 1998). Yet in much of Africa opposition parties, the independent press, labor unions, and various other civic, religious, and professional associations remain weak or are still in their infancy. Resolving the numerous financial, organizational, and oper-

ational constraints on civil society will take considerable time and resources (Makinda, 1996; Owusu, 1997; Makumbe, 1998).

Other questions about democratization in Africa involve what Chabal calls the cultural dimension of democracy. Broadly, this cultural dimension involves the ‘fit’ between political instruments and institutions and specific political cultures. For example, Chabal argues that voters may not expect or demand representation and accountability from elected leaders (Chabal, 1998, p. 298). Likewise, the new elected leaders that emerged were often motivated more by personal and ethnic rivalries or the desire to accumulate wealth than by any articulated social or economic philosophy (van de Walle, 1997, p. 436). Similarly, Makinda (1996) argues that one of the abiding problems of democracy in Africa is a ‘winner takes all’ political culture badly suited to pluralist Western systems. These problems have prompted observers to ask whether Western models of democracy can be applied in Africa without significant modification (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Chabal, 1998; Ihonvbere, 1996b; Makinda, 1996; Owusu, 1997; Rasheed, 1995).

These cultural issues are closely linked to the historical dimension of democracy. Chabal (1998) (p. 299) reminds us that democracy in the West did not appear *sui generis* but emerged through centuries of turbulent political change under particular social, cultural, and economic conditions:

(1) the birth of Western democracy was both protracted and violent; (2) the emergence of democracy was underpinned by the development of a uniquely dynamic and productive economic system—capitalism; and (3) the effective functioning of democracy rests on the widest possible agreement about the legitimacy of the relationship between individual representation and parliamentary political accountability.

Thus, the recently renewed optimism about Africa’s political future implies that Africa can be expected to achieve in less than a decade what took Western countries centuries, under considerably more auspicious circumstances. In particular, in contrast to the earlier experiences of most Western democracies, the present transition to democracy in Africa coincides with a period of deep and protracted economic crisis. Chabal (1996) (p. 199) echoes the seminal work of Lipset (1960) in arguing that “nowhere has democracy emerged and survived where there was not a sufficiently strong and productive economic basis to sustain such a political system”. Africa remains the poorest region in the world, where many countries face negligible or negative economic growth. In addition, virtually every African nation has undertaken structural adjustment programs (SAPs) established by international financial institutions that involve politically destabilizing austerity measures (Adekanye, 1995) and restrict state capacity to invest in the institutions necessary to support political competition, participation, and accountability (Makinda, 1996). While the SAPs played a role in precipitating the recent democratic transitions in Africa, they also have the capacity to destabilize nascent democratic governments.

Another important aspect of democracy, not specifically noted (but implied) by Chabal is a general atmosphere allowing ordinary citizens to participate in political

discussions. An often overlooked benefit of democratization has been the growth of the independent media, even in countries where democratization appears otherwise stalled (Mahmud, 1996, p. 411). More broadly, with the end of the police state in some African nations (Malawi, South Africa) there is increased willingness among ordinary citizens to express opinions contrary to those of the government.

Democracy and environment

If democracy in Africa is an incomplete and evolving project, what, if anything, can be said about its relationship to the environment? This hinges on two questions. First, what theoretical links can be identified? Second, how does the actual experience of democratization in southern Africa correspond to these theoretical links?

Reflecting on the differences between democracy and authoritarian systems and their relative merits regarding the environment, Martin Jänicke (1996) has written: “There seems to be no need for explanation”—democracy is superior. Yet, the exact nature of this relationship, and any potential contradictions, are rarely considered:

there has been a strong tendency to assume something of a ‘natural’ congruence between democratic decision procedures and sound substantive environmental policy outcomes. Democracy and enhanced environmental protection have been taken to be self-evidently mutually reinforcing, a perspective which is particularly marked in the emphasis on ‘participation’ to be found in the large body of documentation emerging from international bodies such as UNCED, UNDP, UNEP, and UNESCO. In fact, there are good reasons for believing that the relationship between democracy... and good environmental practice is far from being straightforward. (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996b, p. 2)

In assessing this relationship, it is important to distinguish between democracy and the process of democratization. There are indeed theoretical grounds to postulate links between democracy—defined as political systems and institutions that effectively foster competition and participation leading to accountability and generally equal representation—and good environmental management. However, democratization in southern Africa describes diverse, on-going processes of political change resulting in partial and often tenuous shifts toward more democratic forms of governance. Thus, the interactions between the environment and the recent political transitions in Africa illustrate the interactions between the environment and *democratization* rather than democracy. This distinction is often lost in discussions about democracy and environment in Africa, accounting for many overly optimistic predictions. Thus, this paper does not argue that democracy and environment have no theoretical positive relationship; rather, it suggests a need to more closely examine the underpinnings of this relationship and to identify the particular aspects of democratization that prevent these congruencies from being realized in practice.

Although the literature on linkages between democracy and the environment is remarkably thin (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996b, p. 1), at least three links are

frequently identified. First, where citizens can hold leaders accountable for their actions, they are in a better position to insist on environmental policies that benefit them, and to resist policies from which they would suffer. Authoritarian governments can freely pursue policies from which they benefit while imposing environmental harms on local people. Examples would include logging or mining concessions sold by government for the profit of the state or individual rulers while degrading the environmental basis of local livelihoods (the struggles of the Ogoni people against degradation of their local environment for the benefit of foreign oil companies and the Nigerian government comes to mind). Democratically-elected leaders should in theory avoid imposing these kinds of environmental hardships if they face a real possibility of losing their office (and associated 'rents') as a result.

Second, to the degree that democracy promotes greater responsiveness of political leaders to the needs of their constituencies, it can bring increased efforts to promote social and economic development, giving rural people greater capacity to invest in sustainable agricultural and conservation. In Africa, both colonial and independent governments have heavily exploited smallholder labor, land, and agricultural production to finance state and private capital development. Numerous scholars have identified linkages between these forms of extraction of surplus value and what Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) call poverty-driven 'desperate ecocide' (see also Bunker, 1984; Hecht and Cockburn, 1990; Peluso, 1992; Stonich, 1989; Watts, 1983). Where rural people have adequate economic opportunities and political freedoms, they can and do invest in sustainable agriculture and conservation, even under conditions of rapid population growth common in Africa (Boserup, 1965; Tiffen and Mortimore, 1994; Turner et al., 1993).

A third plausible link is increased local participation in environmental decision-making and management. Democratic governments may avoid misguided and ineffective policies by promoting greater respect for local perceptions and needs and tapping into local knowledge and skills through participatory conservation approaches that work for rather than against the interests of affected communities.

Gundersen (1995) makes this argument in the case of the United States, suggesting that increased public participation in policy making promotes more sophisticated and effective environmental decision-making. Others have provided evidence of the benefits of state–local 'co-management' schemes (Baland and Platteau, 1996; Jentoft et al., 1998; Pinkerton, 1989).

The history of conservation policy in Africa suggests that considerable benefits may be gained from these new 'participatory' approaches. Since the 1930s, when conservation first emerged as a major issue of public concern in Africa, governments have pursued heavily top-down approaches in which environmental management mainly reflected the perceptions and priorities of the state. Although there are examples of enlightened conservation under colonial rule (Grove, 1995), policies were often based on racist views of an 'ignorant' and environmentally destructive African population rather than sound science (Beinart, 1984, 1989). These policies commonly denied local people access and control over resources they traditionally considered 'theirs', creating strong local resistance, including extensive 'poaching' of resources. In the post-colonial period, the basic structure of colonial conservation

policy was largely maintained in many African countries, producing a kind of lingering, embittered stalemate between African states unable to fully enforce conservation policies and local communities unable to fully escape state controls. Leach and Mearns (1996) stress the role of ideology and poor science in constructing ‘false histories’ leading to misconceived ideas of environmental crisis and misguided, ineffective policies. Batterbury et al. (1997) (p. 126) suggest a need to ‘democratize’ both our definitions of environmental problems and our research methods to produce knowledge that will prevent threats to ecosystems “but also leads to policies which improve the quality and relevance of ‘development’ [for] those affected”.

Of the three plausible links between democracy and environment identified (political accountability, development, and participation), it is in the area of participation that the most substantial improvements have been made in southern Africa. Overall, however, the implications of democratization for the environment appear mixed. The following sections illustrate some of these congruencies and contradictions in Malawi, South Africa, and Mozambique. These case studies were selected to represent some of the most important political transitions in the region. The case studies do not necessarily represent general trends in Africa, and they are not intended to be comparative (in the sense that environment is a dependent variable affected by the independent variable of ‘democracy’). But the cases do suggest that the dynamics between democratization and environment vary in specific settings with differing social and political contexts, and that the multiple strands of this relationship sometimes pull in different directions.

Data were collected from field work and secondary sources. The Malawi case study is based primarily on dissertation field work conducted by the author over 12 months in 1995 and 1996 in two villages in southern and central Malawi (Fig. 1), and also draws on periodic field work by the author in other areas of Malawi conducted between 1990 and 1998 (roughly equal periods before and after the first democratic elections in 1994). Data were collected using multiple methods, including social surveys, oral history, and key informant interviews with over 180 households, as well as archival research. The Malawi case study focuses on deforestation and tree planting only, reflecting the virtual absence of in-depth social analysis of other resource issues in Malawi. However, the political dynamics associated with trees are not untypical of environmental politics in Malawi in the periods before or after democratic transition.

The South Africa and Mozambique case studies describe two of the region’s most heated environmental controversies and illustrate some of the complexities of the new environmental politics in the region. These cases are based mainly on secondary materials (journal articles, newspaper reports, government documents) and personal communications. Although reliance on secondary sources clearly places constraints on the analysis, the broad political dynamics of these case studies can nevertheless be identified with confidence, with 43 newspaper reports and government documents supplementing the few scholarly works available on these cases. The inclusion of these cases despite the limited availability of data is justified by their value in providing evidence that the kinds of contradictions between democracy and the environment found in the more empirically robust Malawi case study are not unique in southern

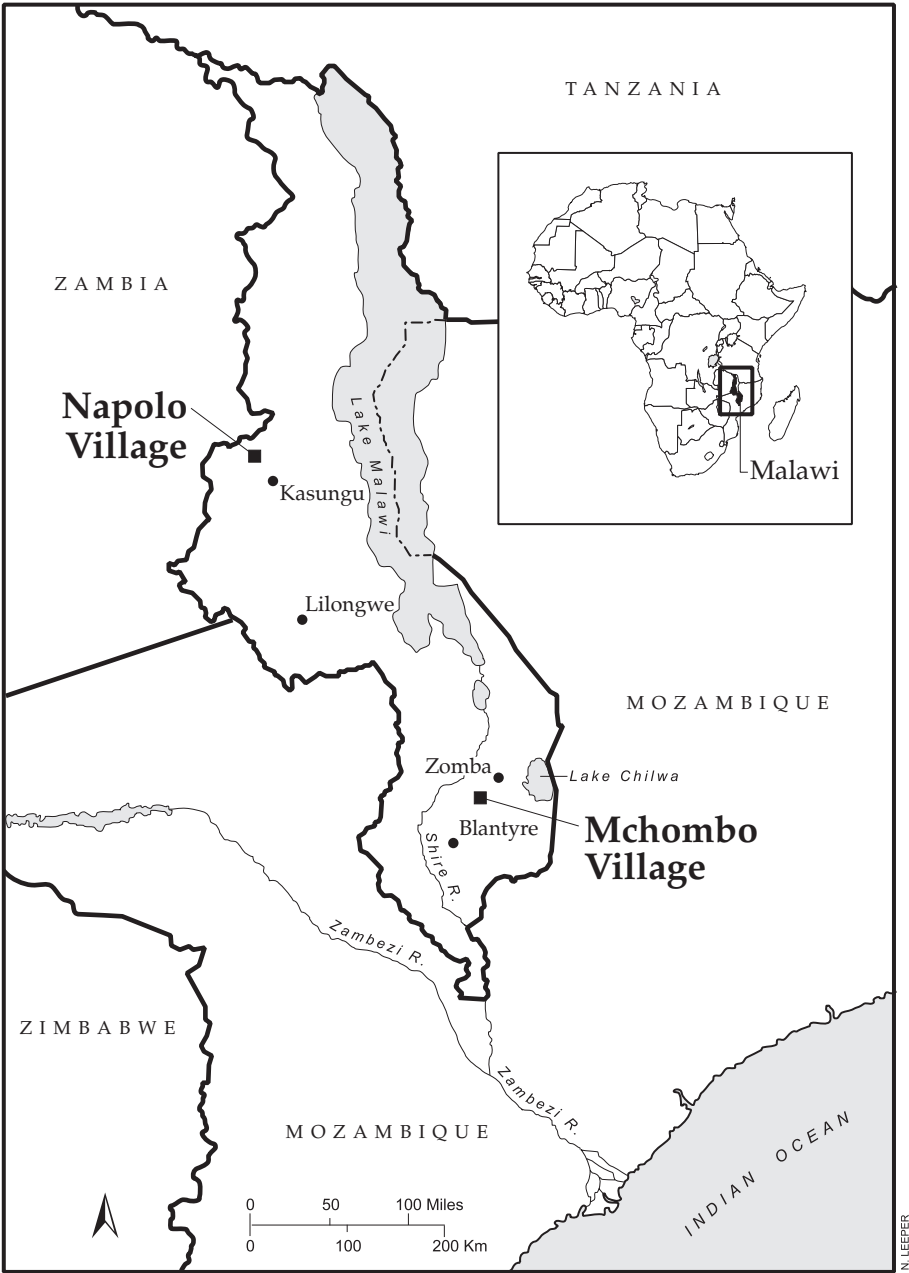


Fig. 1. Malawi research sites.

Africa. It is also hoped that these brief sketches will inspire more scholarly attention to what are certainly two of the most interesting and important examples of the changing environmental politics in the region.

Deforestation and tree planting in Malawi

Malawi's peaceful democratic transition in 1994 ended 30 years of autocratic rule by Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and ushered in a new era of freedom and open political expression. After Banda came to power as the nation's first independent leader in 1964, he built one of the world's most brutal authoritarian governments, in which expression of views at odds with those of the 'Life-President' could lead to torture and death. In the early 1990s, a conjunction of forces that included pressures from international institutions and church leaders, a severe drought, and a long-submerged but powerful yearning among Malawi's people for political freedom (McCracken, 1998) weakened Banda's position sufficiently that he allowed a public referendum that ultimately led to multi-party elections and the end of his rule. Almost overnight, a nation that previously had only a single government-run newspaper now had almost a dozen new independent newspapers (Maja-Pearce, 1996), and ordinary Malawians bubbled with the excitement of freely expressing their opinions, many for the first time in their lives.

Like his colonial predecessors, Kamuzu Banda displayed considerable concern for protecting natural resources. Although Banda relaxed some of the most oppressive conservation policies established during the colonial period, his government maintained a heavily top-down style. And, like the colonial government before him, Banda viewed forestry and tree planting as matters of greatest importance. Banda expanded the production of trees in government plantations and maintained strict controls on the use of forest reserves.

Nevertheless, a substantial trade (of unknown proportions) in illegally collected firewood and charcoal existed under Banda's rule, although it was conducted secretly and with considerable difficulty. After Banda's election defeat in 1994, the trade in illegally harvested tree products exploded. Although cutting from plantations and forest reserves remained illegal, the common—and largely correct—perception was that 'democracy' implied that the government would no longer use force to stop illegal cutting and selling, and that people could now exploit previously tightly controlled resources. Even in urban areas, in plain view of the police, whole forests disappeared in a matter of months after Banda's defeat. The charcoal trade, which had earlier operated almost entirely at night and on back roads, was now conducted in broad daylight on the main highways. Today, bicycles overloaded with firewood and charcoal heading for market are a routine sight on roads leading into urban areas.

Even before 1994, Malawi suffered one of the highest net rates of deforestation in the world, estimated at 1.3 percent per year between 1981 and 1990—the second highest recorded in Africa (World Resources Institute, 1994, p. 306). Like many developing countries, in the 1970s the Malawi government became increasingly alarmed by an expected 'fuelwood gap'. To address the problem, government-run nurseries (largely funded by the World Bank) were established throughout the coun-

try to supply small farmers with eucalyptus and other tree seedlings. Despite considerable effort and fanfare, these nurseries usually operated well below capacity, and a great deal of time and money was wasted in trying to keep the programs operating (French, 1986). Each year on 'National Tree Planting Day', Banda appeared before the government-controlled media with smiling communities enthusiastically planting trees. But under Banda's regime any failure to display enthusiasm for 'Kamuzu's' policies could invite dangerous accusations of disloyalty. Thus, many of the trees planted on National Tree Planting Day later died for lack of maintenance. In a recent study of two villages in central and southern Malawi (Fig. 1), only about half of smallholders had planted trees, and those who did planted only enough to meet an estimated 10–15 percent of their own domestic needs (Walker, 1997, pp. 94–95).

These tree planting programs failed largely because they were designed to suit the priorities of the Banda government and paid little or no attention to the needs or perceptions of the small farmers who were expected to carry out these policies. From the perspective of most small farmers, planting trees was simply not a high priority in relation to their more immediate needs (Park, 1997; Walker, 1997). Contrary to some of the development discussions of the time, neither weak land tenure nor population density were significant constraints to smallholder tree planting. Customary land tenure in Malawi is generally secure (Dickerman and Bloch, 1991), and comparative research on tree planting in high and low-population areas shows only a weak relationship between population density and the number of trees planted by smallholders (Walker, 1997).

Rather, the key constraint to tree planting is poverty. For most smallholders tree planting is viewed as a luxury. In a series of participatory role-playing exercises, husbands and wives in 154 households consistently indicated that tree-planting is considered a desirable use of scarce household resources only *after* needs for another 15 items (including food, agricultural inputs, housing, medicine) are fulfilled—a remote possibility for most Malawian smallholders (Walker, 1997, pp. 99–103). For most, domestic needs for tree products can still be met from small remaining patches of woodlands or through substitution. In addition, because marketing channels for wood products are weakly developed and price structures are unfavorable (French, 1986), few smallholders sell tree products to urban markets, preferring instead to allocate almost all household economic resources to producing food and cash crops (see also Dewees, 1989). In addition, the fast-growing eucalyptus varieties promoted by the government deplete soil moisture and nutrients (see Onyewotu et al., 1994) and represent a threat to nearby food and cash crops. Thus, for most small farmers, Banda's rhetoric about the benefits of tree planting were sharply at odds with reality.

With the departure of President Banda in 1994, there is increasing acknowledgement by government that tree planting policies in the past were misconceived, and that many poor farmers will not plant substantial numbers of trees unless these trees complement their food and cash-producing strategies. In practice, this has led to increased attention to agroforestry species to enhance soil fertility, and other species that provide benefits such as fruit and fiber. The earlier absence of this kind of attention to the needs and perceptions of small farmers probably doomed programs

such as the World Bank's Wood Energy Project from the start. A top-level research officer for the Malawi government reported, "What has been limiting in the Wood Energy Project was that we didn't actually do a needs assessment" (Walker, 1997, p. 148).

Today there are efforts to involve local communities in planning and implementing conservation policies. The Malawi National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), established in 1994, makes increased participation a key objective of environmental policy:

The goal of the NEAP is to provide a framework for integrating environment in the overall socio-economic development of the country through greater public participation...

...the main objective [is] to involve local communities in the identification of localised environmental problems and in the formulation of possible solutions

(Malawi Department of Research and Environmental Affairs, 1994, pp. i, 5).

Although the achievements are modest so far, the change in the style (if not always the substance) of public decision-making has been profound. Most importantly, local people themselves are gradually learning not only that they *can* speak up, but that their opinions are valuable and deserve respect.

Thus, the experience of Malawi shows there is no simple relationship between democracy and environment. The removal of government constraints on freedom of expression and the relaxation of repressive conservation enforcement contributed to both rapid depletion of forests in some areas *and* to significant, albeit preliminary, steps toward potentially more effective community-based strategies. In the short run, the impact on local environments has clearly been negative, with no effective community institutions yet in place to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of state enforcement mechanisms. In the longer run, the impact of democratization in Malawi is likely to depend on whether government can address problems of underdevelopment that undermine the capacity of local people to invest in conservation, and whether it makes the legal and institutional changes needed to provide means and incentives for communities to effectively participate in managing their own resources.

Ecotourism vs. mining in South Africa's St. Lucia Wetlands Park

While the victory over apartheid in South Africa in 1994 fundamentally changed the political landscape of southern Africa, there remain serious questions about the likelihood of achieving a democratic system that can effectively represent the many economically and ethnically heterogeneous groups in South African society (Giliomee, 1995). Indeed, there are reasons for concern that South Africa may be moving toward the kind of de facto single-party system seen in other new 'democracies' in Africa. The power-sharing arrangements established under the Government of National Unity have effectively broken down, giving the ruling African National

Congress control over the presidency, the cabinet, the National Assembly, and seven out of nine provincial governments.

Concerns about the concentration of power under the ANC have coincided with increasing public frustrations about the slow pace of economic reforms. South Africa's constitution is unique in the world in its specific references to the rights of access to housing, health care, food, water and social security, to health and well-being and the right to basic education, and to a safe and productive environment. Under the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the government pledged to achieve these goals through land reform and rural development, building urban infrastructure and housing, and improving educational and economic opportunities, especially for disadvantaged blacks. The actual results of the RDP have been deeply disappointing for many South Africans, leaving many feeling disillusioned with both the ANC and democratization itself.

Despite these shortcomings, democratization in South Africa has had important consequences for conservation and the environment. The end of the old regime created opportunities to work toward both social and environmental goals, for example by relieving poverty and overcrowding that contributed to severe environmental problems in the apartheid-era 'homelands'. In addition, the experience of apartheid-era conservation left many black South Africans with feelings of deep hostility toward environmentalism, viewing it as a white, middle-class concern (Cock, 1991). The establishment of nature preserves, for example, often came at the expense of the forced dislocation whole black communities to make way for a mythical African wilderness devoid of human beings (Adams and McShane, 1992). The justifications for these forced removals were often expressed in bluntly racist language, in which 'ignorant' and 'destructive' blacks were portrayed as a threat to the environment—a portrayal that is not forgotten by black South Africans today.

With the end of apartheid, it became clear that these exclusionary, class- and racially based conservation models were no longer acceptable. As McDonald (1998) describes the transition: "the top-down, racist environmental policy making of the past—generally conducted by white apartheid bureaucrats and politicians behind closed doors—was inconsistent with the broader democratic reforms taking place in the country and there are on-going efforts to develop more participatory and more democratic forms of environmental planning". In 1993, even the National Party, then struggling for its political life, belatedly acknowledged the need for a more 'holistic' approach that takes into account 'socio-economic factors' (cited in McDonald, 1998).

South Africa today is struggling to develop conservation models that integrate environmental protection with the pressing needs for economic and social development. With the slow progress of the RDP, and with the 1999 national elections around the corner, political pressures to quickly achieve tangible improvements are considerable. Where community-based conservation is slow to bring these benefits, communities are finding other means of livelihood, sometimes at the expense of the environment, and political leaders have been reluctant to intervene. For example, the government has been unwilling or unable to remove squatters illegally occupying land and causing serious ecological damages in parts of the Kruger National Park and the Ntendeka Wilderness.

The tensions between environmental objectives and social needs are also illustrated by controversies surrounding proposals to allow titanium mining in the Greater St. Lucia Wetlands Park. This battle began in 1989 when the Richards Bay Minerals (RBM) company applied for government permission to mine titanium in ecologically fragile dunes inside the park. The park, located on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal (Fig. 2), contains some of the most unique and scenic wetlands in Africa. The proposal to mine inside the park created an enormous public outcry in the early 1990s, spurring the largest petition drive in the nation's history. The then-ruling National Party declared that mining in the park would create unacceptable damage, and proposed instead that the area be developed for ecotourism. In 1995 the new South African Cabinet reaffirmed the government's commitment to development through ecotourism rather than mining. RBM scrapped its proposal to mine in the park, and environmentalists declared victory.

Since then, however, the slow pace of development in the park and the increased political sensitivity to the demands of communities surrounding the park resulted in the re-opening of what once appeared to be a closed matter. In September 1997, KwaZulu-Natal ANC leader Jacob Zuma declared that if tourism in the area does not become a major force in creating jobs soon, the option of mining might be reconsidered (Barker, 1997). This tapped into frustrations felt by many local blacks who fear that developing the park for ecotourism will effectively continue the policies of the apartheid era that led to the loss of their land and to exceptionally high rates of unemployment.

In addition, some local people fear that further development of the park for ecotourism will jeopardize land claims put forward to the government after the end of apartheid to recompense blacks who were forcibly removed from their land from the 1950s onward. The slow pace at which these claims have been handled has raised fears about the seriousness of the government's commitment. A local councillor, Albert Mdaka, complains: "if our own government gets into the trap of the previous regime in the name of development, then there is something wrong. We will fight and fight. If we do not have rights to land *then what is independence for?*" (quoted in Mutume, 1998, emphasis added).

The new South African government is sensitive to these kinds of questions, creating tensions between conservation, social reform, and development objectives. The official position of the government is that development and conservation goals complement each other. In an April 21, 1997 speech, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Dr. Pallo Jordan stated:

Now that we have shed our pariah status and apartheid policies, we are re-orienting government spending to meet the social and economic goals of the new democratic government... In the past though local communities often had to bear the costs, they saw very little of the benefits of [eco]tourism. As a result, historically, local people have been alienated from the conservation estate because they received no share of its benefits. By ensuring that all eco-tourism development projects involve the local communities in a meaningful way, we will be able to



Fig. 2. South Africa and Mozambique case study areas.

restore the pride of these communities in their natural heritage by giving them access to the substantial benefits of tourism.

However, the slowness of ecotourism development calls into question whether social and environmental goals can be achieved simultaneously in a timeframe acceptable to local people. For example, the slow pace of ecotourism development is ironically in part a result of other manifestations of the government's commitment to social equity. It may take many years for the government to review local land claims, and some private developers are threatening to take their money elsewhere if land issues are not resolved soon. Similarly, the government has largely given up efforts to prevent impoverished local people from gill-net fishing in the park, potentially reducing the park's scenic value and ecotourism potential. In addition, the Natal Parks Board has invited public discussions and a lengthy review period for park planning, further slowing ecotourism development.

In the meantime, although RBM denies any intention to re-submit its request to mine in the park (Maré, 1998), the company nevertheless stands ready to begin mining—a possibility with considerable appeal to many local residents. RBM has also cultivated community support by investing in education, training, community development, and public health projects for local people. Although the mining operations would last only until the dunes are depleted of titanium, the expectation of a rapid economic boom based on mining has powerful local appeal. In the run-up to national elections in 1999, this may translate once again into political support for opening the St. Lucia Wetlands Park to mining.

Eco-resort in Mozambique

Only about 100 kilometers to the north of St. Lucia Wetlands Park and across the Mozambique border (Fig. 2), another ecotourism development project has begun. In this case, however, the Mozambican government has proceeded without the hesitation seen in South Africa, partly reflecting Mozambique's weaker democratic institutions. In violation of rules requiring public commentary and participation in decision making, the Mozambique government secretly signed a multi-million dollar contract with a foreign investor to develop a major tourist resort and game park the size of Israel, complete with golf courses and floating casinos (Brouwer, 1998b; Economist, 1997; McNeil, 1996). The project has proceeded with effectively no consultation or participation from affected communities, including thousands who will be displaced from their land.

In 1992, Mozambique signed a General Peace Accord, brokered by the United Nations, ending 16 years of vicious and destructive civil war. In October 1994 the nation held its first multi-party elections, resulting in the victory of the incumbent Frelimo Party. The former rebel military organization Renamo transformed itself (with financial assistance from the USA and South Africa) into a viable opposition political party and now controls 112 of the 250 seats in the Assembly of the Republic. However, neither Renamo nor Frelimo has developed any coherent political ideology or policies, and both appear to "have degenerated into little more than vehicles for

[partly officials] to access rapidly diminishing state resources” (Wood and Haines, 1998, p. 115). Democratic institutions in Mozambique are much weaker than in South Africa, and government at all levels is plagued by corruption. Despite efforts by international institutions such as the World Bank to institute mechanisms to increase local participation, politics in Mozambique remains heavily top-down, with little or no effective ‘voice’ for local communities (Hughes, 1998).

During the war, government capacity to administer social programs and to enforce environmental protections broke down almost completely (Sayer, 1992) and much of Mozambique’s rich wildlife was indiscriminately slaughtered to help finance the war (selling illegal ivory and rhino horn) and to feed desperate people. The signing of the peace accord and the slow re-building of government capacity and institutions has brought hope not only for the human population but also for the few wildlife and landscapes that survived. One of the landscapes that survived relatively intact is the coastal area south of Maputo to the South African border, a vast area of grasslands, dunes, and breathtaking beaches named in 1992 by the Rio conference on biodiversity as one of the most ecologically unique on the planet.

After its electoral victory in 1994, President Joaquim Chissano’s government was approached by foreigners with competing development plans for the area. One of these, a South African company called SAPPI, planned a eucalyptus plantation that would destroy sensitive wilderness areas but promised to create large numbers of local jobs relatively quickly. Another proposal was made by American billionaire James Blanchard III, who planned a 236 000 hectare, \$800 million ecotourist resort that would conserve and rehabilitate local ecosystems by attracting wealthy foreign tourists willing to pay large sums to see spectacular animals and landscapes. In a widely criticized move, Chissano’s government secretly approved Blanchard’s application in 1996. In an alliance with environmental agencies, NGOs, and the World Bank, Blanchard persuaded the government to cancel the SAPPI plantation concession (Massinga, 1996). Blanchard Mozambique Enterprises has already begun purchasing and re-locating wildlife (including some non-native species) to replace elephants and other big game slaughtered during the war, and even has plans to import bushman villages from the Kalahari as part of a (re-)constructed ecosystem.

Although the government and Blanchard’s representatives say that the park will create local jobs, this remains a distant promise. Since the end of the war, although tourism in Mozambique has dramatically increased, this has not been accompanied by a significant increase in employment (Massinga, 1996). In addition, local people are concerned that they will lose their land. Some reports estimate that 10 000 subsistence farmers living on land that will become the park will be displaced (McNeil, 1996). Officials insist that these people will not be removed by force but will be ‘persuaded’ to move to areas outside the park where they can benefit from jobs and development provided by the project (Reber, 1997). The government and Blanchard’s representatives point to provisions in Blanchard’s contract that reserve jobs and project-financed community development projects for local people. Although there is much optimism among local people about the promised jobs (Brouwer, 1998a), critics counter that the government has neither the capacity nor the will to enforce these social provisions. Speaking about the loss of employment from the cancelled

eucalyptus plantation, a local government worker observed that “Up to now we haven’t been properly informed [about Blanchard’s park]. All we know is that we’ve lost our jobs. People are afraid. They don’t like the idea of being surrounded by wild animals, and they fear they will lose their land” (Koch, 1997).

Congruencies and contradictions

Although the few brief case studies presented in this paper cannot represent the interactions between democracy and the environment in Africa generally (nor, even, in other areas of the countries described), they do indicate a need to reassess the optimistic discourse about the beneficial environmental effects of democratization. To begin, these cases show that the term ‘democracy’ must be critically assessed before any relationship can be inferred. As numerous authors have noted, democratization as it has been experienced in most African nations has not achieved what by most definitions could be described as ‘democracy’. Moreover, the case studies in this paper suggest that even where some of the goals of democracy are realized, these outcomes are not necessarily congruous with protecting the environment. In particular, where increased government accountability and participation by previously disenfranchised communities is achieved without accompanying improvements in social and economic conditions, poor communities may use their new political power to press for increased exploitation of local resources. Nevertheless, the cases also suggest that even where social and economic reforms are not attained, the ‘democratization’ of environmental research and management (Batterbury et al., 1997) provides real opportunities to advance beyond the failed top-down approaches of the past.

These cases further suggest a need to reassess the democracy–environment linkages identified in policy discussions and some scholarly literature. First, democratization in southern Africa has brought only limited improvements in government accountability, and where accountability has improved, the implications for the environment are potentially negative. Most of the southern African nations that introduced multi-party elections in the 1990s have moved toward *de facto* single-party systems. Nevertheless, the mere existence of legal opposition parties and their capacity to vocalize and capitalize on popular discontents provides at least a limited form of accountability (see Manning, 1998). In addition, the respectability and financial rewards associated with having at least a nominally democratic system can sometimes compel governments to behave in ways that mimic competitive democracy (Thomas, 1996, p. 52). Thus, what we see in Africa generally is not democratization but liberalization (Giliomee, 1995)—a shift from political systems with virtually unlimited power, to systems with modest political checks.

While these limited improvements represent a major achievement in their own right, the link between accountability and environment appears ambiguous. The idea that increased responsiveness to local concerns will benefit the environment assumes that the state necessarily takes the position of the environmental aggressor against ecologically-noble communities—a notion that can be immediately dismissed.

Indeed, much of the literature on peasant liberation movements (e.g. rubber tappers in Brazil, the Chipko movement in India) has mis-characterized what are essentially livelihood struggles as pro-environmental movements (see Keck, 1995; Rangan, 1996). The distinction is crucial: livelihood struggles may or may not converge with environmental protection in the Western sense of preserving aesthetic and ecological values in nature. In many developing societies the environment is valued first and foremost for its income-generating capacity (Goodman and Redclift, 1991), which may or may not coincide with environmental goals.

Where local income-generating opportunities potentially conflict with environmental objectives, increased government accountability may intensify political pressures to exploit resources. In the South African case, the government has vacillated on the question of allowing mining in the St. Lucia Park in part because of political pressure from local communities unwilling to wait indefinitely for the benefits of ecotourism. By contrast, the Mozambican government, with few effective institutions to represent local communities, unhesitatingly pursued ecotourism instead of ecologically damaging plantation agriculture without public debate. Hence, any assumption of an inherent positive relationship between government accountability, local interests, and environmental protection appears at best an oversimplification.

However, increased government accountability may indirectly promote congruence between local interests and environmental protection if it leads to increased economic and social development. Poverty is the key factor underlying most tensions between local needs and environmental quality (Blaikie, 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Richards, 1985, 1997). Unfortunately, democratization in southern Africa has yet to produce substantial improvements in social or economic development. In Malawi, where earlier governments heavily favored tobacco and tea estates at the expense of desperately poor smallholder farmers, the democratic elections of 1994 produced a 'new' government still composed largely of wealthy estate owners. With the Malawian press preoccupied with political scandal mongering, there has been little substantive public debate about the need to fundamentally reform Malawi's estate-biased economy. In South Africa, the ambitious goals of the Rural Development Programme remain a distant hope for most rural people. In Mozambique, post-war reconstruction has greatly improved economic conditions for much of the population, but the government's capacity and commitment to long-term development in rural areas remains in question.

In addition, the ability of governments to deliver development in some southern African nations is limited by the constraints of externally-imposed structural adjustment programs. Many African economies have been stabilized without the fundamental re-structuring of economic and social relations necessary to produce long-term growth (Uzodike, 1996; White, 1996). Meanwhile, the fiscal constraints imposed by these financial institutions constrain government capacity to invest in social development and environmental protection. Thus, ironically, while the SAPs significantly contributed to the emergence of democratization in Africa after the late 1980s, they now represent an obstacle to achieving the reforms needed to achieve the social and economic promise of democracy (Adekanye, 1995).

As with increased accountability, even if democratization does bring increased

social and economic development, this achievement may or may not benefit the environment. Although increased income opportunities can provide local people with the means to invest in sustainable resource use, increased access to markets may also increase pressures to exploit local resources. In Malawi, for example, tobacco production has played a central role in the nation's extensive deforestation (World Bank, 1992), and the increased participation of smallholders in commercial tobacco production under recent economic liberalization programs is likely to exacerbate this problem (Walker, 1997).

While democratization has produced only limited improvements in political accountability and structural reforms to reduce poverty, the process of democratization in southern Africa has nevertheless contributed to an atmosphere of increased freedom of expression and participation by local communities. In Malawi, for example, open opposition to government policy was virtually unknown before the early 1990s; today it is difficult to avoid vigorous political debates on almost any public street corner. Public protests against government policies have become almost routine, and the government has shown laudable tolerance toward these demonstrations. In both South Africa and Mozambique, freedom of expression by opposition political groups remains a matter of considerable tension, but the extension and protection of civil liberties generally in the post-apartheid and post-war period has improved drastically. Thus, to borrow from the language of democratization in a different region, southern African nations appear to have largely achieved *glasnost* even if they have failed to implement *perestroika*.

This atmosphere of increased openness of political discourse has important potential consequences for the environment. Numerous authors (notably, Adams and McShane, 1992; Beinart and Coates, 1995) have observed that environmental problems in Africa are interpreted and acted upon based on politically-constructed knowledge. In Malawi, disinterest in tree planting programs has often been interpreted by government and agency officials as evidence of smallholder 'ignorance' or 'laziness', impeding any deeper understanding of the ways that tree planting either fits or does not fit into the smallholder economy. Thus, a more open atmosphere for public discussion of environmental issues can contribute to more sophisticated understanding of the social and economic constraints to local conservation.

However, increased attention to the needs and perceptions of local people has, so far, only infrequently translated into effective programs incorporating local participation. Initial steps have been taken in South Africa with the Integrated Development Plan for the Greater St. Lucia Wetlands Park, which seeks to include community organizations in the planning process. In Malawi, the government has recently adopted a policy of working through community-based resource conservation groups. However, the experiences of successful community-based management in other southern African countries such as the well-known CAMPFIRE projects in Zimbabwe, which involved fundamental changes in property laws and the relationship between the state and local authorities (Murphree, 1995), indicate that community-based conservation will only succeed where the state is willing to make the legal and institutional changes necessary to provide rural people with adequate incentives and means to invest in conservation.

While the increased openness of public discourse may represent the most promising outcome of the recent democratization experience in southern Africa with respect to the environment, local participation itself is not unproblematic. It is possible to achieve local 'participation' without democratic representation, and there is the danger that participatory approaches may reproduce local inequality (Peters, 1996; Ribot, 1995, 1996). If the benefits of local participation in resource management are to be realized, questions such as 'who's local here?' and 'who will benefit?' need to be asked to prevent powerful groups and individuals from 'capturing' the benefits of participatory programs. Notional access to resources and participation in policy-making as specified by official 'participatory' policies may be quite different from the actual experiences of the intended social groups (see Leach et al., 1997 on 'endowments' and 'entitlements'), and local institutions must be designed to assure real equality of access.

Another challenge involves the question of whether participatory approaches can lead to meaningful improvements in environmental management in the absence of fundamental political and socio-economic reforms. In situations of severe poverty, no amount of local participation will persuade people to invest scarce labor, land and cash in conservation for tomorrow if this means children will go hungry today. The government of Malawi, for example, clearly pursued a dead-end street in encouraging desperately poor rural people to plant trees for urban markets when this implied reducing their production of food and more profitable cash crops. In a nation in which nine-tenths of households run out of their stores of the staple food crop before the next harvest (Peters and Herrera, 1989), it is difficult to imagine any participatory conservation program that could by itself persuade smallholders to invest significantly in tree planting.

Conclusions

This paper suggests that there is no necessary relationship between the environment and democratization as it has been experienced in southern Africa. In the case studies presented, recent political changes have brought potentially important shifts away from the old top-down, authoritarian conservation policies that largely failed under both colonial and post-colonial governments. However, this generally positive shift has been accompanied by less environmentally beneficial changes as well. In Malawi, when strict top-down controls on forest reserves were removed, large areas were cleared by local people for short-term economic benefit. In South Africa, increased political sensitivity to local concerns has resulted in renewed interest in proposals to conduct ecologically destructive mining in a unique wetlands park being developed for ecotourism. Progress in developing ecotourism is slowed by land redistribution programs that reflect the government's broader commitment to social equity. Another ecotourism project in Mozambique has proceeded without equivalent political obstacles, reflecting Mozambique's relative lack of political accountability. Thus, although democratization may hold the key to community-based environmental management in the future, in the short-run democratization can also represent a threat

to the environment if top-down conservation enforcement is curtailed without adequate local institutions in place to fill the gap, and where increased political sensitivity to local needs intensifies pressures to exploit resources for immediate economic benefit.

These findings contradict optimistic discourses about democracy and environment in at least two ways. First, democratization as it has been experienced in many African nations cannot be equated with ‘democracy’. The successful implementation of the instrumental mechanisms of democracy (e.g. multi-party elections) has not generally been accompanied by the creation or strengthening of the necessary institutions, civil society, political culture, and economic and social circumstances necessary to foster true accountability and political participation by all social strata. Thus the argument that democracy and environment in Africa go hand in hand is made murky, or perhaps even meaningless, by the failure to distinguish between ‘democracy’ as an ideal and the messy rough-and-tumble politics that have characterized democratization in the region.

The argument for a positive relationship between democracy and environment in Africa is made still murkier by an inadequate theorization of the assumed linkages. This paper has examined three of the most important linkages identified in the policy and academic literature: accountability, development, and participation. The experiences of democratization in Africa suggest that these remain distant goals in many African countries. Even where there has been real progress, however, the case studies in this paper suggest that the links are not always positive. As the Malawi and South Africa case studies suggest, the elimination of repressive environmental enforcement tactics and increased political accountability to local communities can create threats to the environment reflecting the economic needs of poor rural people. Development, too, can be a double-edged sword: while development may give local people the economic capacity to invest in sustainable resource use, it may also create incentives to increase the exploitation of local environments for the market. Finally, effective and fair local participation in policy formation and implementation depends on the existence of well-functioning local institutions that represent the interests of all community members. Building or re-working local institutions to serve these goals can be a complex and time-consuming process, and policies that devolve control over resources to ‘the community’ without considering the capacities of local institutions can transform local environments into *res nullius*, with potentially disastrous consequences.

Despite these potential contradictions, democratization in southern Africa has created important opportunities. If we move beyond facile assumptions of congruence between ‘democracy’ and environment in the region, we open important new areas of social inquiry. In examining both the limitations of democratization in the region as well as the problematic nature of the assumed linkages, we can shift the focus of our inquiry to ask what kinds of institutions and political systems are needed to make democracy work for people and the environment. The question should not be whether democracy is good for the environment but *how* and *when* democratization, in its varying forms, can change the structures governing decision-making and access and control over natural resources in ways that favor social and environmental objec-

tives. In particular, despite the many questions and hazards surrounding the idea of local participation, in a region where state capacity to enforce environmental protections is shrinking and where history has shown top-down conservation practices to be ineffective and a mechanism for unacceptable social exploitation, we need to ask difficult questions about how to make laws and policies work to support effective community-based resource management. At the same time, we need to assess what kinds of policies and institutions can bring urgently needed social and economic development while providing communities with incentives and means to prevent overexploitation of local environments. This will require a great deal of hard work. Thus, democratization—perhaps even *democracy*—is no panacea. Nevertheless, the recent political transitions provide an invaluable (and perhaps fleeting) opportunity to work toward building the kinds of political and social institutions needed to achieve social and environmental goals. Despite its weaknesses and the many challenges it presents, democratization offers the one thing almost absent from discussions about the environment in southern Africa until only a few years ago—hope.

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