‘Win-win partnerships? Local people and the private sector in Ecotoursim?

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Will Wolmer commentary[1]

This is a thoughtful paper that subjects the ecotourism partnerships touted as ‘win-win’ to some welcome scrutiny. The field of enquiry is deliberately very narrowly defined to focus solely on income streams from these initiatives. As the paper admits framing the issue in this way ignores a range of important issues – particularly the broader implications for livelihood strategies, power relations and institutional dynamics. Yet in practice these issues cannot be wished away – and actually despite setting out to exclude them they keep cropping up in this paper.

The cynic in me is always awakened by the phrase ‘win-win’. Private-community partnerships are, almost by definition, uneven ones and inevitably influenced by patterns of social, economic and political differentiation. As the paper recognises communities inevitably lack power vis-à-vis the private sector – indeed it notes this appears to true even of the high profile and well-supported Makuleke community.

Experience in southern Africa to date of private-community ecotourism partnerships suggests financial benefits may be long in coming, highly vulnerable to risk and captured by elites and that communities have limited protection from unscrupulous players. Not everyone will gain from new opportunities, especially if investment is prioritised over equity.

Given the dangers inherent in these partnerships the question, then, is how to mitigate risk. Peter-John Massyn correctly identifies two critical factors. The first is that ownership of land gives leverage communities leverage in negotiations with both the state and the private sector. Where communities have been granted sovereign power to control the use of their ancestral land within protected areas there is considerably more potential for them to find a voice. Having explicit and secure land rights gives local communities opportunities to outsource their own ecotourism and safari concessions and gives them bargaining power vis-à-vis the state and private sector . In these circumstances the community is landowner, lessor and contractural partner and not just employee or recipient of charity. Restituted land means community has more legal power, market power.

A second key potential mitigating factor identified is the existence, on behalf of the community, of the institutional/technical capacity to bargain effectively. But crucially this depends in large part on the willingness and ability of the state to intervene on behalf of historically disadvantaged groups (for example in the South African case: by favouring

[1] This discussion draws on Ashley. C. and Wolmer. W. (2003) ‘Transforming or tinkering? New forms of engagement between communities and the private sector in tourism and forestry in southern Africa.’ Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa Research Paper 18, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton [http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/env/PDFs/wRP18.pdf].

Black Economic Empowerment in procurement, encouraging community equity shares and outsourcing; putting in place staturory minimum employment standards, collective bargaining rights; and providing start-up subsidies or ‘infant-business’ protection etc). In South Africa ‘equity strings’ have been attached to private sector bids for ecotourism concessions on state land. Interestingly the stick has in some cases been as effective as the carrot in encouraging the private sector to take on board equity criteria. For example in Zimbabwe the implicit and explicit threat of land appropriation for resettlement forced major equity concessions from private sector players in the wildlife industry. Strategic state intervention is a mechanism by which the access of the poor to new markets and opportunities can be boosted and attempts made to redress the inherent imbalances of the unlevel private-community playing field.

However the state doesn’t always have the power derived from adjudicating tenders for commercially competitive sites or threatening designation of land for resettlement. The South African and Zimbabwean cases can be contrasted with Mozambique where critics of private-community partnerships have pointed to large areas of land given up to private investors to become resource extraction enclaves regardless of claims by local people and existing uses - ‘communities’ often lack the capacity to hold the private sector to account, as governments have not provided adequate incentive, regulation or technical back-up for communities to act as genuine partners.

One problem with the focus of this paper on the benefits or lack of benefits deriving from private-community ecotourism is that it diverts attention from the very real opportunity costs of such ventures which can be very high. The danger is that communities can lose a measure of control over their resources with little benefit in return and managing land for wildlife means forgoing other options such as agricultural production which can carry a heavy opportunity cost. The Southern African experience is littered with examples of communities whose livelihood strategies have been hindered by ecotourism initiatives – such as those who have been prevented from fishing in the sightlines of lodges because that would make the vista inappropriately peopled (and insufficiently wilderness-like) or those who lose crops and livestock to wildlife depradations. Ecotourism can have more indirect livelihood costs too – the greater surveillance of borderland wildlife areas in southern Africa where transboundary natural resource management schemes are operating has had the, possibly unintended, consequence of policing transboundary livelihood activities such as trading and labour migration that are critical to local livelihoods.

Any assessment of whether private-community partnerships are genuinely win-win, therefore, cannot afford to ignore either power relations or the opportunity costs to alternative livelihood strategies.