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**Title:** The decline of a model community-based conservation project: governance, capacity, and devolution in Mahenye, Zimbabwe

### **Abstract**

This paper reports the results of our research, conducted from June through August 2004, on the community-based conservation project in Mahenye, Zimbabwe. Previous studies have described this project as a model example of Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program. We explore the project's recent performance within the context of the country's post-2000 political and economic crisis and address the implications of our findings for arguments supporting devolution of authority for natural resource management to the community level. These issues are related in that calls for devolution are at least partly contingent on the demonstrated capacity of local institutions to manage projects in the community interest despite difficult circumstances. In our research, we found that outcomes in Mahenye have deteriorated sharply from conditions described in earlier studies. We found further that local failures of leadership combined with the withdrawal of outside agencies responsible for oversight and assistance may be more to blame for this decline than the ongoing national turmoil. Our results suggest that even in apparently

successful conservation and development projects, local participatory decision-making institutions are fragile and require continuing external support. Consequently, we argue for caution in promoting full devolution of authority to the community level without safeguards to maintain good governance and adequate capacity.

**Keywords:** Community; Governance; Capacity; Devolution; Zimbabwe; CAMPFIRE

## **1. Introduction**

In the late 1980s, the government of Zimbabwe instituted a program known as CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) to promote community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) in its rural districts. Mahenye Ward in Chipinge District, in the southeast corner of the country, was an early site for implementation. Both CAMPFIRE and the Mahenye project have been followed closely. CAMPFIRE has been studied repeatedly because it was one of the first examples of national level CBNRM and has served as a model for similar programs in other countries (Derman, 1995; Alexander and McGregor, 2000; Logan and Moseley, 2002; Newsham, 2002; Chaumba et al., 2003; Muchapondwa, 2003). Mahenye is of particular interest because it has frequently been cited as a strong CAMPFIRE project with a positive record (Peterson, 1991; Murphree, 1995; Bond, 2001; Murphree, 2001; Matanhire, 2003).

This paper reports the results of a study of the Mahenye project that we conducted from late June to mid August 2004. Our research focused on two sets of questions. First we wished to examine whether the project has sustained previously reported gains despite Zimbabwe's severe post-2000 political and economic crisis. Second, we wished to explore the implications of

outcomes in Mahenye for the commonly stated argument (Matzke and Nabane, 1996; Murombedzi, 1999; Logan and Moseley, 2002; Mugabe, 2004) that a key flaw in CAMPFIRE design and implementation is the lack of full devolution of authority to the local level.

Arguments for devolution in natural resource management are commonly based both on political ecology theory and on empirical evidence from the field. Scholars bringing the perspective of political ecology to the study of CBNRM often build on foundational assumptions favoring the rights of communities to manage their own affairs. Bryant and Jarosz, for example, observe that diverse strands of political ecology share a point of view “that privileges the rights and concerns ... of the poor over those of powerful political and economic elites” (Bryant and Jarosz, 2004, p. 808). And researchers reporting the results of fieldwork note that domination of local resource management decision making by external authorities can lead both to social injustices and to conservation and development failures (Neumann, 1998; Goldman, 2003).

Yet the literature in political ecology also reflects considerable skepticism concerning the idealization of rural communities as harmonious entities that if left alone will naturally promote sustainable ecological and social development (Zimmerer, 2000). For example, Gray and Moseley, citing among others Agrawal and Gibson (1999), Neumann (1997), and Ribot (1996), note, “Much work is now focused on how local community structures are frequently unaccountable, inequitable and non-participatory. Programmes overlook the fact that village social relations are based on conflict and competition, which, in turn, can lead to negative environmental and equity outcomes” (Gray and Moseley, 2005, p. 16). In related findings, empirical evidence from the field suggests that assumptions favoring local resource management regimes over state or multilevel management may be misplaced or oversimplified (Robbins, 1998).

Our research contributes to this debate. In our fieldwork, we examined whether gains in Mahenye have been maintained despite Zimbabwe's ongoing national crisis and, consequently, whether outcomes in this project continue to support broader calls for devolution in CBNRM. The issues of the sustainability of gains and the appropriate extent of power sharing are linked in that arguments for full devolution of authority are at least partly contingent on the demonstrated capacity of local leaders to manage projects in the community interest despite difficult circumstances.

To provide context the paper begins with brief histories of CBNRM and CAMPFIRE in general and the Mahenye project in particular. In this background section, we also review the recent political and economic disruptions in Zimbabwe and discuss their impact on rural conservation and development efforts. In the following section, we describe our methods and present the results of our field research. In the closing section, we consider the implications of our findings for debates over devolution in community-based natural resource management.

## **2. Background**

### *2.1. CBNRM*

Human communities in rural areas of the developing world are often poor. Yet in some cases the territories where these communities are located have significant national or global conservation value. In eastern and southern Africa, where conservation efforts often focus on wildlife and habitat, this is particularly likely to be true in communal areas bordering national parks or game reserves. Protected areas generally do not encompass the entire ecosystems of concern (Zimmerer and Young, 1998), and wild animals rely on corridors through adjacent territories to reach other areas of their range (Goldman, 2003). These protected areas and wildlife

corridors are under increasing stress as external tourism and local populations expand and as current residents seek both to recapture or retain customary rights to nearby natural resources and to protect themselves and their property from wildlife predation (Neumann, 1998).

In principle, this convergence of pressing development and conservation needs provides opportunities to integrate socioeconomic and environmental objectives (Wainwright and Wehrmeyer, 1998). The idea is that if poor people who live near protected areas can earn significant income from the wildlife and habitat on their lands, local standards of living will improve and conservation threats will abate (Hackel, 1999).

Projects designed to take advantage of these opportunities are often referred to generically as community-based natural resource management, although various related concepts and terms are found in the literature (see Roe and Jack, 2001, for a review of terms in use). CBNRM programs typically attempt to foster community development through revenue sharing programs established by park management agencies or more significantly through the promotion of independent ventures on communal lands, typically linked to sport hunting or wildlife viewing and cultural tourism. Conservation gains are expected as local residents then have incentives to limit poaching and maintain wildlife habitat on their territory.

Although straightforward in principle, CBNRM in practice faces a variety of obstacles and complications, and projects implemented in the field have an uneven record of success (Songorwa, 1999; Twyman, 2000; Emerton, 2001). Researchers examining individual projects or reviewing overall trends report significant structural challenges relating to historical patterns, current social and ecological conditions, stakeholder relationships, and project design and implementation practices (Gibson, 1999; Hackel, 1999; Leach et al., 1999; Turner, 1999; Roe et al., 2000; Brown, 2002; Goldman, 2003). The problem of integrating conservation and

development in rural communities appears to fall into the category of what are known as “wicked” problems, characterized by deep divisions among participants regarding social, economic, and environmental priorities; inherent complexity and uncertainty in predicting social and ecological outcomes; and the absence of optimal solutions (Allen and Gould, 1986; Berkes, 2004; Stewart et al., 2004).

## 2.2. *CAMPFIRE*

In 1975, the Rhodesian government devolved rights for management and commercial exploitation of game animals from the state to private landowners, particularly white farmers and ranchers (Matzke and Nabane, 1996). The new law did not apply to the rural black majority, who generally held land in common without secure land tenure (Murphree, 2001). In 1982, the recently independent government of Zimbabwe amended the law to give the same rights to rural district councils (RDCs), sub-national government institutions with responsibility for development in the previously neglected communal areas (Jones and Murphree, 2001). This amendment provided the statutory framework for CAMPFIRE. While communities continued to lack legal standing to institute CBNRM independently, the RDCs could apply for authority to implement projects on their behalf. The first CAMPFIRE projects, which focused on trophy hunting in the Zambezi River valley, were approved in 1988.

CAMPFIRE was one of the earliest national CBNRM programs (Marks, 2001). It garnered strong positive reviews and served as a model for similar efforts in Zambia, Botswana, Namibia, and elsewhere (Jones and Murphree, 2001; Marks, 2001). Developing an overall judgment of the program is a complex task, however. On one hand, over the first decade of its existence CAMPFIRE absorbed more money in donor funding (approximately US\$30 million)

than it produced from local projects (approximately US\$20 million) (Hasler, 1999; Muir-Leresche et al., 2003). Moreover, only about half the revenue directly benefited participating communities (Muir-Leresche et al., 2003). The remainder of the income was withheld to fund activities of the RDCs and the CAMPFIRE Association, a national nongovernmental organization (NGO) established to support local projects. Consequently, actual cash disbursements to households were modest (Bond, 2001; Wolmer et al., 2004). On average in 2001, for example, each of the approximately 100,000 households around the country that participated in income-producing CAMPFIRE projects received the equivalent of about US\$5 in direct earnings.

On the other hand, one estimate suggests that since its inception CAMPFIRE's contribution to Zimbabwe's gross domestic product may be on the order of five times greater than the direct revenue from constituent projects (Muir-Leresche et al., 2003). While only a small portion of these gains accrued to the rural poor (Emerton, 2001), the nation at large benefited as donor aid, project revenues, and visitors' additional non-CAMPFIRE spending flowed through the economy. Furthermore, households in communal areas with plentiful trophy animals and successful hunting concessions earned CAMPFIRE dividends significantly higher than the national average (Muir-Leresche et al., 2003). Benefits other than direct income including roadwork, grinding mills, school buildings, and other rural infrastructure improvements related to CAMPFIRE also enhanced community life and provided employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that for some residents multiplied benefits associated with the small direct revenues.

As with CBNRM in general, however, once the initial enthusiasm of the early 1990s waned, scholars and practitioners began to review CAMPFIRE more critically (Hasler, 1999;

Newmark and Hough, 2000; Bond, 2001; Hughes, 2001; Wolmer et al., 2004). Some observers questioned the program's ability to meet either its conservation or development objectives. Others highlighted inherent conflicts among stakeholder groups—including local communities, donors, conservation and development NGOs, government agencies, and private sector firms—which often have sharply differing worldviews, interests, and incentives.

An additional concern regarding CAMPFIRE's structure and design is that, despite articulated ideals of devolution, communities do not have full authority for project management (Derman, 1995; Matzke and Nabane, 1996; Hasler, 1999; Logan and Moseley, 2002). Rural district councils retain the power to make and break contracts with hunting and tourism operators and to siphon off a significant portion of the proceeds through various taxes and levies. Lack of full devolution and continuing interference by the RDCs were the criticisms of CAMPFIRE that we heard most often as we talked to experts in Harare in preparation for our site visit.<sup>1</sup>

### *2.3. History of the Mahenye CAMPFIRE project*

The central government of Zimbabwe authorized Chipinge District's CAMPFIRE program in 1991, making Mahenye one of the first officially recognized sites for implementation. But efforts at community-based natural resource management had been underway in Mahenye since the early 1980s and had served as an early model for development of the CAMPFIRE concept (Peterson, 1991; Murphree, 2001).

Mahenye Ward is situated in southeastern Zimbabwe along the border with Mozambique. The Save River forms the southern and western boundaries of the ward and separates the

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<sup>1</sup> Academics and professionals from the University of Zimbabwe Center for Applied Social Sciences, the Worldwide Fund for Nature Southern Africa Regional Programme Office, and the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association interviewed in Harare, June 2004.



communal lands of Mahenye from Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park. Prior to the 1960s when the Rhodesian government expropriated the land, part of the area that is now the national park had been traditional territory of the people of Mahenye. Because the colonial government had asserted state ownership of wildlife both inside and outside protected areas, the resettled people found themselves forbidden to hunt on either the old land or the new. Nor were they legally permitted to kill animals that moved through their villages threatening life and property.

Not surprisingly problems with poaching arose, sparking a running conflict with park managers. After independence in 1980, the people of Mahenye were angered further when the new government reneged on a promise to return lands from Gonarezhou to them. In 1982, however, in an effort to reduce the strife, park officials and local leaders worked out an innovative arrangement, which in its implementation served as a precursor to CAMPFIRE (Murphree, 2001). The authorities agreed to allow the community to earn income from government-sanctioned trophy hunting in the area. In return the people of Mahenye agreed to limit illegal takes and to maintain wildlife corridors on their lands.

Initially, the project faced a variety of problems, many related to conflicts with the rural district council. Because the national CAMPFIRE program was not yet underway, no official mechanisms existed for managing and disbursing funds generated through community-based projects. Consequently, for several years, money earned from sport hunting in Mahenye Ward was retained at the district level, frustrating the community (Murphree, 2001). In 1987, as CAMPFIRE was about to be launched nationally, the Chipinge RDC finally allowed the funds that had accumulated to be used to support infrastructure improvements in Mahenye. In 1991 the process was formalized as Chipinge District joined the national program.

Leaders of the Mahenye project were also innovators in exploring means to supplement hunting revenue. Through the 1990s in Mahenye, annual CAMPFIRE dividends per household from sport hunting averaged between US\$10 and US\$30, depending on the number of animals hunted and the size of the trophies (Muir-Leresche et al., 2003). While these sums were significant—on the order of 5 percent to 10 percent of average family income from crops and livestock—additional sources of income were clearly needed.

In the mid 1990s, within the framework of its CAMPFIRE project, the community and its representatives made arrangements with a national hotel firm to establish two upscale tourist lodges along the Save River in Mahenye, sited to take advantage of the proximity of Gonarezhou National Park. In return for the right to build on communal land, the firm agreed to pay the RDC an annual fee rising over the 10-year contract from 8 percent to 12 percent of the lodges' gross receipts. In turn, the RDC, as with income from trophy hunting, committed to channel about 75 percent of the revenue back to Mahenye Ward (Murphree, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

At the outset, the community benefited from this venture in important ways. Construction of the lodges required the firm to improve the 50-kilometer unpaved road leading to Mahenye and to bring in electricity, telephone communications, and potable water. Telephone service was extended to the community's clinic and police post, and water sources connected to the lodges' potable water system were installed in the village for people and livestock. The community also took an advance on its first few years of receipts from the venture to pay to have power lines continued from the lodges into the village to provide electricity for the grinding mill, clinic, general store, and other common-use buildings. In addition, the lodges provided about 40 jobs

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<sup>2</sup> Under the initial agreement, the RDC kept 20 percent, and 4 percent went to the CAMPFIRE Association. At the time of our research, we were told that the RDC's portion had risen to 30 percent as the district had negotiated for higher returns (CAMPFIRE committee chair and RDC councilor interviewed in Mahenye village center, July 2004).

for locals as waiters, cooks, mechanics, drivers, maintenance workers, housekeepers, launderers, and so forth.

An elected CAMPFIRE committee has responsibility for managing the project at the local level and for representing the community interest in dealings with the RDC and with the safari hunting and lodge operators. The bylaws require committee members to be elected every two years, for the financial records to be audited every three months, and for a general meeting to be held annually to facilitate broad community participation.

From its inception through the worsening of Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis in 2000, the Mahenye project was consistently judged a model CAMPFIRE program (Peterson, 1991; Murphree, 2001; Matanhire, 2003; Muir-Leresche et al., 2003) both for its diversified sources of income and for its stable, participatory community leadership arrangements. For example, Matanhire (2003) evaluated local project management institutions in Mahenye for the first six months of 2001, the latest cycle for which data were available, as having an 89 percent performance rating, with 75 percent being the standard for model status.

#### *2.4. National conditions*

For the past six years, Zimbabwe has suffered through a debilitating social, political, and economic crisis. The disturbances have a complex history, shaped by links between residual effects of colonial rule that only ended in 1980 and recent struggles over the country's political future. An essential component of the colonial legacy was a distorted pattern of land ownership in which the white minority continued to control most of the arable land (Chaumba et al., 2003). While the question of land reform had been on the agenda since independence, political and

economic trends in the mid to late 1990s contributed to making it a primary focus of government policy by 2000.

Robert Mugabe, the leader of the movement in the 1970s to overthrow Ian Smith's white-minority government, became head of state at independence in 1980 and remains in power. He imposes authority and controls parliament through his ZANU-PF party. While broadly admired in Zimbabwe during the early years of his rule, his popularity fell during the 1990s as the economy weakened, adversely affected by recurring droughts, counterproductive structural adjustment programs, and ineffective governance (Human Rights Watch, 2002). By 2000, his standing had declined to the point that in February of that year government-supported changes to the constitution were defeated in a referendum, and in June, despite widespread vote-rigging and intimidation, ZANU-PF lost substantial ground in parliamentary elections to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). These unfavorable electoral outcomes contributed to Mugabe's implementation later in 2000 of an accelerated land redistribution program that in many areas degenerated into chaotic and often violent invasions of white-owned farms and ranches, and even of state-owned national parks and other protected areas (Chaumba et al., 2003; Wolmer et al., 2004). This radical and destructive land reform initiative was interpreted as a populist move designed to strengthen support for the ruling party among the poor rural majority.

Negative international reactions to the contested election results, uncompensated land seizures, and associated domestic political violence caused extensive further damage to an already fragile economy. Sanctions were imposed on government leaders, foreign firms and donors pulled out, international tourism declined sharply, hard currency supplies constricted, and inflation soared. Since 2000, gross domestic product in Zimbabwe has declined by 15 percent to 20 percent per year, annual inflation rates have averaged between 300 percent and 600 percent,

and approximately 75 percent of the working age population has become unemployed or underemployed (Muir-Leresche et al., 2003). In a self-reinforcing cycle, Mugabe's rule has become increasingly authoritarian and conditions in the country have continued to deteriorate.

The economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe has adversely affected CAMPFIRE in various ways. First, around the country project incomes have fallen. Negative international publicity dramatically reduced game viewing tourism, and, while sport hunters are less affected than conventional tourists by reports of political disturbances, hunting revenue has also declined. Bookings for trophy hunts are flat or down somewhat. More damaging, however, is the government's policy of significantly overpricing the Zimbabwe dollar in official exchange rates, thus devaluing CAMPFIRE receipts (Muir-Leresche et al., 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, in conjunction with its land reform program, the ruling party also worked to consolidate its position in the countryside by recruiting traditional leaders to enforce party discipline in preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2005. During the period of our research in 2004, for example, chiefs around the country, including in Mahenye, received valuable perquisites from the government, such as pickup trucks, boreholes, and electricity connections. This strengthening of the chiefs' authority through the backing of a government willing to use political violence could be expected to threaten the stability and durability of local participatory institutions established for management of CAMPFIRE projects (Matanhire, 2003).

### **3. Mahenye case study**

#### *3.1. Methods*

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of our research, US\$1 bought approximately Z\$5400 at the official rate and approximately Z\$6500 at the "parallel market" rate. Thus central government institutions could appropriate about 20 percent of the value of foreign currency exchanged at the official rate.

We conducted research in Zimbabwe from late June to mid August 2004. During an extended stay in Mahenye, we observed CAMPFIRE project activities and interviewed people living or working in the area. Both before and after visiting Mahenye, we interviewed representatives of relevant NGOs, government agencies, and private sector firms based in Harare and Chipinge District. In all, we completed open-ended interviews with 54 respondents both inside and outside the community.

Our respondents outside the Mahenye area were professionals whom we sought out for their specific expertise. In Harare, we interviewed people affiliated with Africa Resources Trust, the CAMPFIRE Association, the University of Zimbabwe Center for Applied Social Sciences, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Southern Africa Regional Programme Office, the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association, and Zimbabwe Trust. We also interviewed representatives of the Chipinge Rural District Council and River Lodges of Africa, the firm responsible for managing the two lodges established in Mahenye in conjunction with the community's CAMPFIRE project. When seeking appointments with these professionals, we explained our interest and purpose and secured their consent to be interviewed.

In Mahenye, we sought out respondents along a continuum from project insiders to project outsiders. Among those closely tied to the project, we interviewed traditional community leaders, members of the CAMPFIRE committee, committee staff, and people working at the tourist lodges, including both local residents and company employees brought in from outside. We also spoke to people—former CAMPFIRE committee members, for example—who had been closely involved with the project in the past but were no longer engaged. We selected these current and former insiders because of their personal knowledge of the project's history and current status.

We also solicited the opinions of people in the Mahenye area with no direct links to project management. We talked to people as we met them in public places, including at the grinding mill, at shops, on the road, on paths in the bush, at the schools, at the river, and so on. We also approached people in their homes and gardens and asked for permission to speak with them.

The respondents we encountered in Mahenye fell into three categories: permanent residents, temporary residents, and non-residents. Permanent village residents constituted the majority of our interviewees. Temporary residents we spoke to included secondary school teachers who had been assigned to the village after completing their training. Non-residents were generally people from nearby communities who happened to be in Mahenye visiting relatives or conducting business, but this group also included rangers at nearby Gonarezhou National Park who were long-term neighbors of the community. We sought out these respondents from Mahenye and its environs to learn about the perceptions and attitudes of people in the area who were not directly involved with project activities.

On first arriving in Mahenye, we met with the traditional chief, explained our purpose for visiting, and asked his permission to stay in the village and conduct our research. He agreed to our request while emphasizing, falsely as it turned out, that he personally had no involvement with the local CAMPFIRE project. Although we were exploring what we later found to be a highly charged topic, we started our visit with considerable ignorance. None of the professionals we interviewed in Harare prior to our trip to Mahenye appeared to have any awareness of the depth of current troubles on the ground. While after the fact we found this lack of knowledge among outside experts surprising, we believe in practice it helped us undertake our work at the site with objectivity and open-mindedness.

On approaching prospective respondents during our research in the community at large, we explained our interest and purpose and requested their consent to be interviewed, promising to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. No one refused to speak to us, and many engaged us in open discussions. Some respondents, however, were more reticent. While we were patient and took our time to see if their opinions would emerge, we did not attempt assertively to extract ideas that people wished to keep to themselves.

With professionals outside Mahenye, after receiving permission, we recorded interviews using audio tape recorders. We supplemented the tapes with our notes taken after each session regarding non-verbal cues. With villagers, we did not use recording devices. Instead we wrote down field notes as soon as possible after each encounter.

Interviews typically took the form of face-to-face meetings of between 30 and 60 minutes in length involving one or both of the authors and a single respondent. There were several common variations, however. Some interviews, particularly our ad hoc meetings with villagers in Mahenye, were often shorter, perhaps five to 15 minutes in length. In contrast, interviews with particularly important respondents were often more extensive. These discussions either lasted longer during the course of one day or continued over several days. We conducted more extensive interviews of this type in Harare with Zimbabwean staff at WWF and in Mahenye with CAMPFIRE committee members and with several key informants among villagers not affiliated with the CAMPFIRE leadership.

While for most part we interviewed respondents individually, we also occasionally took advantage of opportunities for group discussions. In Mahenye, we engaged in group discussions with CAMPFIRE committee members, with primary school teachers, with women at the



grinding mill, and with tourist lodge employees. We facilitated these discussions using focus group techniques.

We emphasize that we explored political and socioeconomic rather than ecological outcomes and acknowledge several additional limitations with our methods. For the most part we were not able to verify independently what our respondents told us about the history of the Mahenye project since 2000. We did not witness the events described, researchers have not published reports of the project's development over the past several years, and the project's records are incomplete and unreliable. In addition, several important respondents had reasons to dissemble, including both current insiders who may have wished to hide problems and former insiders who may have wished to exaggerate them. The impressions of other informants were clearly affected by anger or fear.

To address these potential weaknesses and distortions, we worked to take likely biases into account and to get multiple characterizations of important issues from as wide a variety of respondents as possible. In the end, the unusual unanimity of public opinion in Mahenye gave us confidence that we were capturing accurately both the substance of significant events and the perceptions of community members regarding project performance.

### *3.2. Results*

Here we describe what we learned about the recent history and current state of the Mahenye CAMPFIRE project, highlighting changes from conditions reported in earlier published assessments. Most striking, we encountered broad and deep agreement among respondents that the project is no longer managed to benefit the community. No one unaffiliated with the leadership expressed satisfaction with current management practices, and even several

interviewees with close ties to project leaders were critical of their performance. Regardless of gender, age, or education, and whether responding individually or in groups, local residents complained of bad management, corruption, nepotism, and intimidation. One respondent said, for example, “Let them steal a little. If I had CAMPFIRE money in my pocket and I was thirsty, I’d buy myself a beer, too. But it’s not right to take it all.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, we found no sense of community solidarity in the face of Zimbabwe’s more general problems and the associated pressures on the CAMPFIRE project. Instead, community members not part of project management universally expressed various combinations of resignation, anger, and fear directed at their own local leaders. Reflecting the sentiments of many residents we interviewed, one woman when asked about CAMPFIRE replied, referring to the community leaders and their families, “It’s for them, not for us.”<sup>5</sup>

In describing particular problems, our respondents repeatedly referred to several significant deviations from desirable governance and management practices. Perhaps most important, beginning in 2000 the democratic process for selecting CAMPFIRE project leaders was abandoned. Up through 2000, committee members and the chair were elected every two years as stipulated in the bylaws. In 2000, however, the chief, who has no formal authority over CAMPFIRE activities, ruled unilaterally that the sitting chairman could no longer serve because he had acquired property outside the village thus raising questions about his residency.<sup>6</sup> The chief then elevated his own brother, who was deputy committee chairman at the time, to the leadership post. Since then there have been no elections.

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<sup>4</sup> Gonarezhou park guard interviewed near the Save River, August 2004 (translated from Shona by Mashinya).

<sup>5</sup> Woman interviewed at her home in Mahenye village, August 2004 (translated from Shona by Mashinya).

<sup>6</sup> Former CAMPFIRE committee chairman interviewed at Mahenye primary school, August 2004.

Procedures intended to promote community participation and maintain transparency and accountability have been undermined. The required annual general meeting at which the CAMPFIRE committee reports to the community at large was not held as scheduled in 2004. Also, the project's financial records have not been audited since the change in leadership in 2000. When at our request the current chairman showed us the records, we found them in obvious disarray. The most straightforward annual totals for income and expenditures could not be found. The chairman, apparently embarrassed, chastised the bookkeeper in our presence for what was clearly long-standing normal practice. While in the office, we also observed casual disbursements of CAMPFIRE funds. The amounts were relatively small, but there was no accounting.

We asked the current chairman about his accession to committee chairmanship, the lack of elections for the past four years, and the canceling of the annual general meeting for the current year. He acknowledged that our characterization of events was accurate. Regarding the change in leadership in 2000, he repeated that the previous chairman could no longer serve because of a change in residency. Regarding the lack of elections, he told us that the community had decided that stability in the leadership was important. Regarding the canceling of the annual general meeting, he said that villagers did not understand the issues and just liked to complain.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to commenting on the lack of transparency and accountability, our respondents from the general community also reported evidence of misallocation of funds and mismanagement relating to the CAMPFIRE revenue-generating projects. For example, money promised in the past year for school construction and entered in the records as paid to the local school authorities has not been delivered.<sup>8</sup> We observed that one of the two secondary school

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<sup>7</sup> Current CAMPFIRE committee chairman interviewed at Chilo Lodge, August 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Teachers and administrators interviewed at Mahenye primary school, July 2004.

blocks continues to sit unfinished and deteriorating without a roof in place. We were told that no work has been done on the building since the change of CAMPFIRE committee administration in 2000.<sup>9</sup> Also, the village store, established with CAMPFIRE funds as a cooperative to provide a convenient local outlet for common household goods and to generate funds for community improvements, has been given over to private merchants.

Interviewees in the community at large also expressed profound disillusionment and skepticism regarding the annual disbursements to families from the CAMPFIRE project. In the most recent cycle, for example, each of the approximately 1000 households in Mahenye eligible for benefits was to have received 6,100 Zimbabwe dollars (Z\$) as its share of CAMPFIRE revenues for the previous year.<sup>10</sup> Before payment and without prior notification, however, clan leaders subordinate to the chief deducted Z\$6,000 from each family's payment to cover a community development tax. The RDC delegates this tax collecting authority to the local kraal heads, who are allowed to keep 10 percent of the funds they collect. Although this levy is unrelated to CAMPFIRE, villagers saw the manner and timing of its collection as one more means by which the traditional local leadership expropriates community CAMPFIRE benefits. In March 2004, after this tax was deducted, each household in Mahenye Ward received a payment of Z\$100 in return for its participation in CAMPFIRE for 2003.<sup>11</sup> As one respondent commented, this was not even enough for candy for the children,<sup>12</sup> and it certainly was not sufficient to compensate families for the costs of living with wildlife.

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<sup>9</sup> Teachers interviewed at Mahenye secondary school, August 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The official exchange rate in March 2004 was US\$1=Z\$3930, thus the payment would have been equivalent to approximately US\$1.55.

<sup>11</sup> Approximately US\$0.03 at contemporary exchange rates.

<sup>12</sup> Teacher interviewed at Mahenye primary school, July 2004.

Moreover, there is evidence that this amount did not reasonably account for project earnings. For example, while at the time of our research the project's records were poorly maintained, we did see documentation of a recent payment from the hotel firm. After withholdings to cover levies for the RDC and the CAMPFIRE Association, the committee in early 2004 received Z\$28.9 million from the firm as the community's share of 2003 lodge receipts.<sup>13</sup> This amount does not include project revenue from hunting safaris or from other sources, such as the operation of the grinding mill or the sale of elephant hides. Historically in Mahenye about half the income from CAMPFIRE is used for committee expenses and contributions to general infrastructure improvements in the village, and the other half is distributed directly to households. Yet following receipt of the payment from the lodges, the committee failed to distribute funds promised for school construction, and annual disbursements to households totaled only about Z\$6 million,<sup>14</sup> well below half of even this partial contribution to project receipts for the year.<sup>15</sup> While this accounting of revenues and expenditures is far from comprehensive, it adds credibility to our respondents' skepticism regarding the CAMPFIRE committee's management practices.

Local leaders also monopolized equipment and employment opportunities meant to benefit the community. A pickup truck donated by the professional hunter to be used as an ambulance or for other local emergency services was co-opted for personal use by committee members. In the course of one private trip, the vehicle had been extensively damaged and as a consequence was not in working order at the time of our research. In addition, members of the

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<sup>13</sup> This represents approximately US\$7,400 at contemporary official exchange rates. In interviews, both the committee chairman and the lodge manager confirmed that the committee received this payment.

<sup>14</sup> Each of the approximately 1000 participating families received a payment of Z\$6,100 (pre-tax).

<sup>15</sup> We note that several respondents in Mahenye independently mentioned mysterious bags of money, assumed to be CAMPFIRE funds gone missing, that had been found recently buried in the bush.

chief's family filled jobs allocated for locals at the tourist lodges.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the chief's brother, the CAMPFIRE committee chairman, was himself on salary there as community tourism officer.

Moreover at the time of our research the CAMPFIRE committee, without authorization from the community or the RDC and without support from the CAMPFIRE Association or other outside agencies, was negotiating a new contract with lodge managers. Under the proposed arrangement, the community would receive about 15 percent of the lodges' profits rather than 12 percent of gross revenues, as currently stipulated.<sup>17</sup> Because of the decline in tourism in Zimbabwe, however, the lodges are unlikely to be profitable for some time,<sup>18</sup> and as a consequence the proposed new arrangement would clearly benefit the firm at the community's expense. Yet in these negotiations the asymmetry of business expertise unfairly favored the firm over the community, and the employer/employee relationship between the lodge management and the CAMPFIRE committee chair created a conflict of interest.

Perhaps most disturbing, we heard allegations of intimidation during several credible, independent interviews. One respondent told us, referring to the current CAMPFIRE committee chairman, "He's my uncle, but I'll still tell you he's a bad man." The respondent went on to say, speaking of the community leaders, "If you speak against them, the sun will not set on you."<sup>19</sup> We were also told that because the chief retains his traditional authority to determine land-use patterns in the communal area those who might criticize the current CAMPFIRE leadership are silent for fear of losing rights to the plots on which they depend for subsistence livelihoods.

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<sup>16</sup> Employees interviewed at Chilo Lodge, August 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Manager interviewed at Chilo Lodge and Chipinge RDC councilor interviewed at Mahenye village center, August 2004.

<sup>18</sup> The manager told us that occupancy rates in 2003 had averaged about 20 percent, well below the breakeven point.

<sup>19</sup> Hitchhiker interviewed on a drive from Mahenye to the Cheredzi highway, August 2004 (translated from Shona by Mashinya).

It might be reasonable to suppose that Zimbabwe's national political unrest is largely responsible for the collapse of participatory project management processes in Mahenye. Yet this is an isolated community with little history of violence linked to the national struggle for power. Even during the 2000 parliamentary election cycle, Mahenye was spared the attacks by war veterans and youth militia loyal to ZANU-PF that occurred in many parts of the country. Our respondents confirmed that this lack of politicization had continued up to the time of our research. For example, a secondary school teacher currently working in the community showed us scars he said he had sustained during a political attack on teachers that occurred in 2000 when he was working in another location, but he told us that during his time in Mahenye he had seen no disturbances associated with national politics.<sup>20</sup> Another resident told us that in Mahenye there was no problem with ZANU-PF but that when he visited relatives living out by the main Chiredzi highway he stayed indoors to avoid political troubles.<sup>21</sup> The manager of Chilo lodge also confirmed that the political unrest seen elsewhere was not evident in Mahenye.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, none of our respondents reported any interference or intimidation from factions linked to ZANU-PF, and we observed no activity by either the ruling party or the opposition MDC.<sup>23</sup>

We have focused on issues of governance in Mahenye to this point, but some of our respondents also reported significant problems with management and oversight at other levels as well. Community leaders, for example, expressed frustration with the Chipinge RDC. They told us that the current professional hunter secured the Mahenye hunting concession through RDC

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<sup>20</sup> Teacher interviewed at Mahenye secondary school, August 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Driver interviewed on the Mahenye village road, August 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Manager interviewed at Chilo lodge, August 2004.

<sup>23</sup> The people of Chipinge District, including Mahenye Ward, are primarily Shangaan, a small minority ethnic group constituting about 1 percent of Zimbabwe's population (which is dominated by Shona and Ndebele). Since independence, Chipinge has consistently voted for Shangaan parliamentary candidates under the banner of the minor ZANU-Ndonga party.

favoritism and that his performance has been unsatisfactory.<sup>24</sup> They noted that in the previous year the hunter led safaris taking four elephants. They reported that he did not take the full quota of seven animals, and thus generate maximum revenue for the community, because he was overextended with other concessions elsewhere in the country.<sup>25</sup> They also complained that he has often been unavailable when the community needs him to deal with problem animals that threaten village residents and their property. Community leaders further asserted that under current arrangements between the hunter and the RDC they have no representative present when trophies are weighed and their values assessed.<sup>26</sup>

In response to criticism of RDC management of the hunting concession, a Chipinge district councilor explained that the council selected the present hunter because the previous hunter is also a partner in the Mahenye lodge management firm. The councilor told us that RDC officials felt this gave the previous hunter too much involvement in the affairs of the local CAMPFIRE project and led to conflicts of interest.<sup>27</sup>

Thus relations between the RDC and the Mahenye CAMPFIRE committee remain adversarial rather than cooperative, continuing a pattern dating back to the early 1980s when CBNRM was first implemented in Mahenye (Murphree, 2001). This is not unexpected since the two institutions have differing incentives. Nevertheless, several residents of Mahenye that we spoke to, particularly the primary school teachers, spoke against the idea of full devolution of authority from the RDC to the community. While acknowledging that the RDC is not an ideal custodian of the community's interests, these respondents maintained that under current local

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<sup>24</sup> CAMPFIRE committee chairman and members interviewed at Mahenye village center, July 2004. With hand gestures they appeared to go further and indicate that the hunter had bribed district officials. When we asked directly, they confirmed that this was what they had intended to suggest.

<sup>25</sup> CAMPFIRE committee member and RDC councilor interviewed at Mahenye village center, August 2004.

<sup>26</sup> CAMPFIRE committee members interviewed at Mahenye village center, July 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Chipinge RDC councilor interviewed in Mahenye village center, August 2004.



conditions, characterized by mismanagement, misallocation of funds, and intimidation, the district council serves as an essential check on the power of local leaders.<sup>28</sup>

The NGOs responsible for guidance and oversight are part of a third layer of project management subject to criticism. At the beginning of the CAMPFIRE program, the CAMPFIRE Association was formed to provide administrative support to the communities and the RDCs, which lacked experience in CBNRM. Other national and international NGOs, which had acted as implementing agencies when donor money flowed in to underwrite CAMPFIRE development, also had capacity building responsibilities. Yet during the time of our research, our respondents reported a complete absence of external support for the Mahenye CAMPFIRE project. Moreover, NGO staff members whom we interviewed in Harare were unaware of the project's collapse. As mentioned earlier, their primary concern and recommendation was a change in the law to allow full devolution of authority to the community.

#### **4. Discussion**

Our study reveals the decline of a promising CBNRM program. We found that the Mahenye community no longer receives the flow of significant social and economic benefits reported in earlier studies. In this section we summarize the problems, consider reasons for the deterioration in outcomes, and discuss the implications of our findings for devolution in community-based natural resource management.

The central failure of the Mahenye CAMPFIRE project is that participatory decision-making processes have broken down. Following the undemocratic takeover of the committee in 2000 by the chief's immediate family, there have been no elections and no outside audits of

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<sup>28</sup> Teachers interviewed at Mahenye primary school, July 2004.

receipts and expenditures. Moreover, progress on school construction and other community infrastructure improvements has stalled, and households have received only insignificant annual disbursements that fall well below the 50 percent share of project revenue that they received before the change in administration. Given the sharp decline of benefits and the lack of transparency and accountability, community members no longer trust the CAMPFIRE leadership or feel any sense of ownership in the project. Residents have seen the ruling clan fill jobs at the lodges, use project vehicles for personal purposes, and privatize the community's cooperative store. These overt violations of CAMPFIRE principles fuel what our findings suggest are residents' legitimate suspicions regarding the management of project revenues and the motives of the leadership.

Zimbabwe's broader crisis has contributed to these adverse outcomes. We found evidence of significant negative impacts from the national turmoil, including lower revenues from the lodges, challenging problems of financial management in a time of hyperinflation, and both reduced services and increased pressure for higher shares of project income from the RDC. Yet we also found that these national political and economic disruptions are not sufficient to explain the full extent of the collapse of Mahenye's CAMPFIRE project. Our research suggests that there were opportunities for resilience and survival.

First, on the political front, none of our respondents, whether members of the CAMPFIRE leadership, other community residents, or outsiders, suggested that Mahenye had been directly affected by violence and intimidation linked to national politics. This was not a consequence of fear of speaking out on the subject. Indeed, many of those we interviewed volunteered their opinions about the national situation, often complaining about political and economic conditions in the country.

Second, on the economic front, the project's two primary sources of income, hunting revenue and lodge receipts, are both to some degree buffered against external shocks. As mentioned, trophy hunters are less likely than other types of tourists to avoid countries with political troubles. Mahenye committee members told us that the professional hunter often failed to take the full quota of elephants not for lack of clients but because he was occupied with other concessions. Also, while game-viewing tourism in Zimbabwe is down sharply, the project still received substantial revenue from the lodges because language in their current contract guaranteed payment of a percentage of gross receipts rather than a percentage of now nonexistent profits.

Thus, while we observed damaging effects from the national crisis, our findings suggest that local failures in governance and capacity contributed significantly to the decline in community benefits and the near universal distrust and disillusionment voiced by our respondents. Indeed, it appears that problems noted more generally in community-based programs may ultimately have undermined outcomes in Mahenye as well. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, the tendency of local elites to expropriate benefits and the instability of local participatory processes linked to community projects that our respondents in Mahenye described have both been reported elsewhere (Ribot, 1996; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Li, 2002; Gray and Moseley, 2005). In addition, our results indicate that in Mahenye, as noted in other projects in times of economic stress (Balint, in press), the incentives of private firms—the professional hunter and the lodge operator in the Mahenye case—came to conflict with community development goals. We also found that the Mahenye project experienced the pattern reported in other cases (Derman, 1995) that when donor funding comes to an end, as it did

nationally for CAMPFIRE in 2000, essential outside support for local projects drops off, thereby undermining success.

In Mahenye, following the withdrawal of NGOs and government agencies responsible for oversight and capacity building, the traditional community leaders usurped power from the elected CAMPFIRE committee and then co-opted benefits and otherwise mismanaged project activities. These outcomes highlight both the importance and the fragility of good governance and adequate capacity in CBNRM. Our findings thus add weight to arguments for caution in promoting full devolution of authority, particularly in the absence of safeguards to protect the broader community interest.

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