



## Research Paper

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# Market–community collaborative wildlife management in Malawi: subjectivities and shifting configurations of protests and celebrations

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**Summary**

Although wildlife management models across the world have since the early 1980s shifted from top-down fortress conservation to different labels of people-friendly community-based conservation, their outcomes remain contested. This paper explores how, and in whose interests, approaches to wildlife conservation in Malawi have been reconfigured from fortress conservation to market–community collaborative management. Based on qualitative field data, we demonstrate how varying levels of community participation in the processes of wildlife conservation transformed the identities and interests of powerful groups of people regarding wildlife conservation in the Majete Wildlife Reserve. We highlight how commodification and monetarization of wildlife conservation served the interests of the emergent powerful groups whilst marginalizing those of the weak. The work indicates how new community identities with regard to wildlife conservation mask the power hegemonies that dictate mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion regarding natural resource use.

**Introduction**

Although wildlife management models across the world have since the early 1980s shifted from top-down fortress conservation to different labels of people-friendly community-based conservation, their outcomes remain contested. Market–community collaborative management (hereafter referred to as ‘collaborative management’), a form of public–private partnership (PPP) that seeks to exploit the positive contributions of communities and markets in environmental conservation, has gained popularity (Agrawal 1997, Fletcher 2010). It aims at sharing benefits from wildlife conservation with communities living within protected areas whilst protecting them from harm from wildlife. So-called fortress conservation disenfranchised communities living around protected areas from their resource user rights through state-backed evictions, enclosures, policing of protected areas and stiff punishment of those breaking conservation rules (Hulme & Murphree 1999, Morris 2016). This situation arose not only because protected areas were created in areas inhabited by subsistence farming communities (Adams & Hulme 2001, Brockington 2002), but more so because most postcolonial governments prioritized the objectives of conservation over the interests of communities living within the protected areas (Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012). Collaborative management posits that the private sector can conserve natural resources by establishing beneficial partnerships with communities. Despite being framed according to various different objectives, collaborative management promises equal distribution of benefits from conservation and the political empowerment of marginalized communities to shape the direction of resource management (Fox et al. 2008, Büscher & Fletcher 2019). Collaborative management sees communities living within protected areas as harbouring qualities that support conservation whereas hitherto they were perceived as impediments (Agrawal 1997, Sullivan 2012).

The shift to collaborative management has since the early 1980s been driven inter alia by the disenchantment with state and market approaches to conservation, demands for more community participation in development from democratic political movements and increasing perception of flaws in the conventional approaches of natural resource conservation (Agrawal 1997, Büscher & Dressler 2012, Natrass 2021). Widespread conflicts between communities living within protected areas and conservationists in Kenya (Matheka 2008), Malawi (Morris 2016), Namibia (Natrass 2021), South Africa (Büscher & Dressler 2012) and Tanzania (Benjaminsen & Svarstad 2010) attest to the troubled relationship between communities and conservationists. Like any other policy implementation process, collaborative management is, however, a complex process that not only transforms the loci and exercise of power but also restructures the distribution of benefits from conservation (Agrawal 1997). Besides the practical

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challenges of equally distributing conservation benefits to a heterogeneous community holding unequal power, there are different ways to think about shifts towards collaborative management – for instance, between more mainstream theories and critical theories such as convivial conservation. For instance, although mainstream neoliberal conservation sees collaborative management as a path to institutionalizing market-based governance at a local level (Büscher & Fletcher 2019), convivial conservation promotes the coexistence of and not separation between humans and nature. Unlike convivial conservation, which challenges the elite technocratic management of natural resources, mainstream conservation sees scientific knowledge, technological advancement and technocratic management as solutions to the ecological crisis (O'Connor 1988, Jänicke 2008).

This paper delves into the shifts in wildlife management in Malawi, where, after five decades of fortress conservation, the government signed a 25-year delegated management concession with the African Parks Network (APN) in 2003 to manage Majete Wildlife Reserve (MWR). In this arrangement, full management responsibility of the Reserve is delegated to APN, whereas the government maintains policy and legal enforcement and gets 10% of the profits generated from tourism (APN 2017). Delegated management describes a situation 'where a non-profit shares governance responsibility with the state and is delegated full management authority' (Baghai et al. 2018: 3). APN is one of the largest wildlife conservation non-profit companies in Southern Africa; it was founded in 2000 to attract donor funding towards wildlife conservation through a PPP strategy. Currently, APN manages a total land area of 14.7 million ha, comprising 18 protected areas in 11 countries in Africa (APN 2022a, World Rainforest Movement 2022). It is important to note, however, that behind APN is a group of northern and southern governments, international conservation organizations, multilateral institutions, millionaire family foundations and rich individuals that fund conservation business, including the Wyss Foundation, WWF-Belgium, USAID and DANIDA (Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012).

The adoption of collaborative management in Malawi begs questions especially as to how PPPs can deliver outcomes for the state, market and communities living around protected resources. Drawing on MWR, the first wildlife reserve in Malawi to adopt collaborative management, this paper explores how, and in whose interests, approaches to wildlife conservation in Malawi have been reconfigured from fortress conservation to collaborative management. Our work is informed by the environmentality framework within political economy that explains how 'new environmental subject positions emerge as a result of involvement in struggles over resources and in relation to new institutions and changing calculations of self-interest' (Agrawal 2005: 3). Environmentality is an analytical framework for analysing environmental politics, the role of expert knowledge, institutions, regulatory practices, subjectivities and self-formation resulting from involvement in regulation (Agrawal 2005). It explains how the involvement of political actors in institutional processes of policymaking and implementation helps to create new environmental subjectivities, environmental problems and their solutions (Bryant 2002). In community forest management in Kumaon (India), Agrawal (2005: 3) showed how new subjectivities can be understood by 'examining the emergence of new technologies of government that incorporated rural localities into wider net of political relations'.

We specifically interrogate three questions in relation to collaborative management at MWR: namely, how has the institutional arrangement for the management of wildlife at

MWR changed since the adoption of collaborative management? How has collaborative management transformed the relationship between APN and the communities living around MWR and amongst communities themselves? And how have wildlife conservation subjectivities amongst different groups of people living around MWR emerged out of their varying involvement in and benefitting from wildlife conservation activities?

## Methodology

### Study site

The data were collected from MWR (Malawi) during 2014–2017, with other field visits conducted in 2019 and 2021. MWR covers an area of 700 km<sup>2</sup> and is located along the Shire River Valley, being surrounded by 85 villages that practise subsistence farming (APN 2017). MWR was established in 1955 and, like many other wildlife reserves established during that period, was created from the eviction and resettlement of communities living in the declared areas (Kjekshus 1977). The people surrounding MWR grow maize, beans, cotton, millet and sorghum and stock cattle, goats, chickens and pigs. MWR is a microcosm of protected areas hitherto under fortress conservation that are undergoing processes of decentralization through private-sector participation.

### Methodological approach

This study adopted a constructionist ontological approach, which sees the social world, phenomena and realities as subjective and revoked and (re)constructed by social actors within a context-specific situation (Bryman 2015). This approach requires collecting data about the targeted population's varying experiences, expressions, perceptions, narratives and interpretations in understanding the outcomes of discursive social phenomena (Bryman 2015). Employing qualitative methods of data collection, this approach allowed an in-depth understanding of the lived realities of the different groups of people experiencing collaborative management at MWR to be obtained.

The study purposively sampled respondents from a population of c. 140 000 people spread across the 85 villages around MWR (GoM 2017, Gordon 2017). These respondents included traditional chiefs, community leaders, subsistence farmers, leaders of community-based organizations (CBOs), school-going children and APN and government staff from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW). A total of 43 in-depth interviews were conducted, including of 25 subsistence farmers (10 male and 15 female), 5 CBO leaders (3 male and 2 female) and 5 traditional leaders (2 male and 3 female). We also interviewed eight staff from APN, five from DNPW and three from the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi (WESM). We conducted a total of 12 focus-group discussions (FGDs), one each in 12 of the 20 CBOs under APN (4 with male subsistence farmers, 4 with female subsistence farmers and 4 with members of the CBOs). Each FGD comprised of 12 members who were identified with help of the local leaders. To avoid male dominance, the FGDs for females were conducted separately from those of males. In addition to the FGDs, the study team participated in 12 community meetings organized by the CBOs and spent 2 years visiting the Reserve. Permission to carry out the study was sought from DNPW and APN, and consent to participate in the study was sought from each study participant. The study anonymized all personal data to protect the respondents.

We used thematic and discourse analysis to analyse the data, which involved the systematic identification of emerging themes

**Table 1.** Views of respondents on wildlife management structures at Majete Wildlife Reserve (MWR).

Quote	Description of interviewee	Date	Interview/FGD no.
'[W]e work through a network of CBOs that we have established, it's easy to enforce laws through CBO'	APN staff at MWR	24 July 2014	5
'APN works with its own CBOs. Though in theory CBOs are supposed to report to VDC, they don't'	Male member of VDC	13 June 2015	9
'Times are changing, environmental conservation is good for all of us, our duty is to ensure that rules are followed. As CBOs, we patrol and report illegal poaching and teach communities the need to conserve wildlife'	FGD with one of the CBOs	12 August 2017	10
'[W]ildlife conservation has the support of traditional leaders because APN pays chiefs a sundry allowance'	FGDs with female subsistence farmers	12 October 2017	21
'[A]s chiefs, we are partners with APN and government in conserving wildlife, we cannot openly oppose APN decisions'	Senior traditional chief	15 October 2017	24

APN = African Parks Network; CBO = community-based organization; FGD = focus-group discussion; VDC = Village Development Committee.

from the consultations. Thematic analysis involves classifying respondents' responses and coding the spoken words and scripts that captured individual and collective viewpoints. Discourse analysis involving identifying 'who said what, about what, to whom and in what format' (Rugg 2007: 159) allowed for unpacking of how and why certain ideas relating to collaborative management were constructed in the way they were, and why certain groups of people at MWR supported/opposed the approach. Of particular interest in this analysis was unpacking how and why specific constructions of collaborative management became dominant over others within different community groups.

## Results

### *Reconfiguring institutions for community participation: sidestepping and disempowerment*

The first step in the implementation of collaborative management involved the 'establishment of an effective law enforcement team ... the implementation of an effective informant network, whereby community members would alert the reserve to any illegal activity' (APN 2017: 2). APN established 20 CBOs around the Reserve, which are under the leadership of traditional chiefs (GoM 2017). According to the interview conducted with one member of a CBO in 2017, 'no-one can kill, process or sell wild meat without being caught, those who indulge in hunting within the reserve should go far away in order to sell their meat; otherwise, they will be caught'. Although a shift towards people-centred wildlife management demands restructuring existing institutions to shift the loci of authority (Agrawal 1997), the case of MWR suggests that such a process is entangled in conflicting instrumental interests within the communities. One striking feature of collaborative management at MWR is how existing local governance structures have been sidestepped in favour of the CBOs. According to GoM (2013: 37), the Village Development Committee (VDC) and Area Development Committee (ADC) are the primary local-level units for 'identifying and prioritizing community needs as well as preparing project proposals'. Thus, the establishment of the CBOs at MWR not only creates decision-making structures akin to existing institutions but also reconfigures relationships amongst new centres of power. There were many views amongst the interviewees on how collaborative wildlife management arrangements created competing structures of power and interests within the communities (Table 1).

The sentiments of the different groups of respondents presented above suggest that although APN perceived the CBOs

as key to achieving community compliance with established rules, the use of the CBOs over existing institutions created power struggles amongst the community leaders. This is because existing leaders such as VDC members felt that the CBOs were taking over their work. The practice of sidestepping existing governance structures with new structures disempowers communities who are the subject of empowerment (Chinsinga 2005). A case in point is how a VDC member interviewed in 2015 chided the practice of the CBOs reporting to APN and not to VDC (Interview 9).

The case of MWR suggests that new institutional arrangements for collaborative management at MWR have not transformed how power is exercised between communities and external conservationists and within the communities themselves. It is still primarily top-down. For instance, the National Parks and Wildlife Act of 2017 gives power only to the state to enter into agreement with the private sector. Section 6(c) of the Act specifically empowers the Director of National Parks and Wildlife to 'enter into a wildlife agreement with a wildlife management authority'. Consequently, unclear institutional pathways through which communities are to participate in wildlife conservation is making genuine interaction between APN and the network of CBOs it has established more difficult and thus immune to community scrutiny and accountability. A case in point is the way in which the 'Big Five' animals (lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo and elephant) were reintroduced without the consent of local communities. Male subsistence farmers interviewed in 2017 reported that 'despite promising that dangerous animals will not be introduced in the Reserve without informing the surrounding communities, APN reintroduced the Big Five in the Reserve without informing us'. On their part, APN argued that 'introducing the Big Five was a priority because that's what attracts tourists to the area'. As of 2017, APN reported that over 2900 animals had been introduced into the Reserve, and that the elephant population had grown to over 430 individuals (APN 2017). The role that youth-led CBOs in particular have come to play in the management of wildlife at MWR is especially pertinent. Multiple representatives from the youth-led CBOs showed how the youth have come to take the promotion of environmental management as their obligation (FGD 10). GoM (2017) documents that 1683 students and 81 Wildlife Clubs were trained in wildlife conservation and leadership skills, respectively, in 2016.

### *Celebrating and protesting against collaborative management: divided interests and power games*

The celebrated success of MWR is publicized on most APN and Government of Malawi publications. Thus, MWR is 'living proof

**Table 2.** Views of communities on outcomes of collaborative wildlife management at Majete Wildlife Reserve (MWR).

Quote	Description of interviewee	Date	Interview/FGD no.
'[L]eaders of CBOs and traditional chiefs are those that mostly benefit from wildlife conservation here, some of us do not see the benefit. We were promised continued access to resources in the Reserve, but APN has always prohibited communities from harvesting grass, reeds and even fishing in the Reserve'	FGDs with male subsistence farmers	15 April 2014	2
'Mr XXX was caught twice in the Reserve. On the first occasion he was forgiven on the basis that he was very old. On the second occasion, he and his two friends were imprisoned for one month and fined USD 75'	FGD with male subsistence farmers	15 April 2014	4
'[C]ommunities have no enforceable right in law to force APN to implement its promises, we are not a party to the agreements between APN and government'	FGD with community camp management committee	15 March 2017	5
'APN involves us in promoting wildlife conservation and organizing traditional dances for tourists. In addition to APN funding towards running of CBOs, we get a share of the money generated during traditional performances to tourists'	FGDs with youth CBOs	12 August 2014	8
'In 2003, MWR had very few animals. With our involvement, the Reserve now has many animals'	Traditional chief	14 June 2015	11
'[W]e are not allowed to collect resources from the Reserve, we need fodder, reeds, honey, grass, mushrooms, fish. APN tells us that we will benefit through incomes from tourism and yet we do not see this money'	FGDs with middle-aged female subsistence farmers	12 October 2017	12
'[T]he current benefit is inadequate considering the loss of not accessing resources from the Reserve'	Female subsistence farmers	15 October 2017	32
'Not all of the youths are involved in CBO activities. We would love to have access to some fishing points in the forests'	Interview with some youths	15 December 2017	16

APN = African Parks Network; CBO = community-based organization; FGD = focus-group discussion.

of how a park once deemed to be a wasteland can be revived and restored to serve as a life-source for both wildlife and humans alike' (APN 2017: 1). The evidence that APN presents as attesting to the success of collaborative management includes: no single elephant or rhino has been poached since APN took over management of MWR in 2003; the population of game in the park has grown to 12 000; and over 9000 tourists visited MWR in 2017, with around USD 550 000 in revenue being generated from tourism. There is evidence that APN has managed to reverse the decreasing amount of game at MWR. According to Sherry (1995), from populations of 300 and 157 elephants spotted at MWR in 1989 and 1991, respectively, no single elephant could be spotted in the Reserve by 1994. Not everyone, however, agrees with APN's account of its success with wildlife conservation at MWR. There are divided views over the success of APN's collaborative management (Table 2).

The above sentiments suggest that APN's touted success masks divided interests, benefits and power games within the communities. One stark observation arising from interacting with different people during data collection is worth highlighting. Although songs, dances and long positive accounts celebrating collaborative management were articulated in open village meetings and offices, dissatisfactions with the approach were expressed privately in in-depth interviews and FGDs, accompanied by repeated pleas for anonymity. Privately expressed dissatisfactions point to how collaborative management is entangled in dynamic structures of power in which marginalized groups of people are not free to express their positions in public. A vivid case of the attack on collaborative management is the killing of an APN game ranger. APN (2022b) reports that 'during the pursuit of the poachers, Mr ... was separated from his colleague and reported missing. His body was subsequently discovered in the early hours of Friday, 21 October 2022 close to the fence at Chingalumba–Chandeta by fellow rangers called on to assist in searching for him.'

The above discussion points to how acts of celebration for and protests against collaborative management coexist. The case of MWR specifically shows how community participation in wildlife conservation serves as a tool for the empowerment of marginalized communities as well as for the maintenance of the existing structures of power. For instance, although collaborative management has promoted youth participation in wildlife conservation, the very process is shaping youths along a neoliberal path of conservation. Agrawal's (2005) view that freedom rather than force can be a form of power that facilitates individuals' subject formation along a preferred way of behaving and conduct is insightful because it challenges the win–win narrative that drives the popularity of collaborative management.

Collaborative management at MWR has not empowered marginalized communities to enforce their interests with regard to the conservation of wildlife (FGD 5). This community perception may be appropriate; in other sectors such as mining, community development agreements are signed by both investors and communities (GoM 2017). Although collaborative management has the potential to benefit communities living around protected areas, the lack of community involvement in the formal agreement over the management of MWR may benefit existing powerful elites.

### *Reframing benefits of conservation: commodification and monetarization of wildlife benefits*

Although collaborative management is supposed to achieve both environmental conservation and local economic development and thus benefit all stakeholders (Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012), the findings from MWR reveal two stark outcomes. Privileged elites (traditional chiefs, secondary school-educated youths and school-going children) have passionately celebrated the success of collaborative management (Interviews/FGDs 8, 11 and 24),

but middle-aged subsistence farmers have lamented the continued loss of land to conservation and their exclusion from access to MWR's natural resources (Interviews/FGDs 2, 12 and 32). The sentiments of subsistence farmers over collaborative management point not only to how collaborative management is transforming the means through which MWR's communities were accessing the benefits from wildlife conservation, but also how such a transformation was eroding poor subsistence communities' livelihood systems. Instead of accessing natural resources, monetary benefits have become the means through which communities access the benefits of conservation. Restricting subsistence farmers' access to natural resources does, however, go against the agreement between the Government of Malawi and APN. Officials from the DNPW interviewed in 2014 reported that 'the concession that government granted to APN requires that surrounding communities have periodic access to natural resources in the Reserve'. APN staff interviewed in 2014, however, argued that 'frequent movement of people in the Reserve disturbs animals. Communities should benefit from wildlife conservation through employment and income-generating activities.' Differences between APN and local communities over how communities can benefit from wildlife conservation supports the argument of Guha and Alier (2013) that poor communities that depend on the environment for their livelihoods in the Global South resist resource enclosures that threaten their livelihoods.

Notwithstanding the fact that monetary benefits from wildlife conservation can be used to meet households needs, such benefits were not reaching all groups of people. For instance, while youth-led CBOs have been getting some form of financial benefit through APN funding of environmental conservation campaigns, not all youths were taking part in these activities. The youth CBOs were largely patronized by male youths with secondary school education. With literacy levels of c. 60% and some 51% of the population in the area being female (GoM 2020), the youth CBOs were not representative of all youths. Equally important, because of their traditional role of looking after children, female subsistence farmers expressed the need for dependable access to natural resources. Multiple sentiments expressed by interviewees suggest that community members that were members and/or held positions in the network of CBOs established by APN were not only supportive of collaborative management but also were accessing some form of monetary benefit from income generated due to tourism-orientated activities (Interviews/FGDs 2, 8 and 21). Thus, MWR shows that although commodification of wildlife can benefit some groups of people surrounding the protected area, it may harm others who solely depend on the environment for their livelihood. Varying forms of involvement in wildlife conservation at MWR have shaped mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and consequently wildlife conservation subjectivities amongst the population. The above discussion reflects the 'shifting grounds of politics, institutions and subjectivities that together characterize government in the sense of conduct of conduct' (Agrawal 2005: 7).

The failure of APN to allow poor communities to access some natural resources from MWR perpetuates past wildlife conservation practices that disfranchised marginalized communities from enjoying the fruits of conservation (Morris 2001). The observations from MWR suggest that the harmonization of the different interests of the people in a community to achieve successful conservation initiatives involving communities (Agrawal 1997) is compromised. Monetary benefit has become a yardstick for measuring the success of collaborative wildlife management at MWR; thus, in 2016, the Government of Malawi

considered APN to be meeting its contractual obligations based on the community campsite having generated USD 6700 in housing and food sales (GoM 2017). This criterion, however, overlooks the fact that access to land resources also matters (Natrass 2021).

Although collaborative management has brought monetary benefits to some community members at MWR, it has also limited access to natural resources to others. A good case in point is the APN Scholarship Scheme, which has supported c. 1000 secondary school students with tuition fees since 2006; in 2016, it supported 100 students with fees totalling USD 2250 (GoM 2017). On the other hand, the strict rules for accessing natural resources in MWR have affected marginalized and less powerful groups of people, such as an old man who was imprisoned for catching fish in the Reserve (FGD 4). It seems that collaborative management has been benefitting a group of people that have aligned their environmental conservation interests with those of APN and the state.

## Discussion

Collaborative management (Baghai et al. 2018) and similar modes of conservation governance, including community-based conservation (Büscher & Dressler 2012, Natrass 2021) and participatory conservation (Benjaminsen & Svarstad 2010), are undoubtedly improvements on fortress conservation, which excluded communities from deriving benefits from conservation. However, we contend that the neoliberal reconstruction of conservation benefits coupled with divergent interests and unequal power relations within communities make it difficult for everyone to benefit from this approach. In the case of MWR, this situation has arisen because the commodification of wildlife conservation has reconfigured the means through which communities are to benefit from conservation. Instead of accessing natural resources from the Reserve, communities are supposed to accept monetary benefits. This situation demonstrates a vivid discrepancy between how subsistence communities at MWR value nature and what they are told to value by conservationists from elsewhere (Büscher & Dressler 2012). This situation raises the questions as to who has the power to shape the nature of wildlife conservation: conservationists or the communities living within the protected areas? Although founded on a rationale of changing the power dynamics that gave birth to the exclusionary tendencies within fortress conservation (Agrawal 1997), the experiences from MWR demonstrate how the approach is recreating new forms of exclusion.

The institutionalization of monetary means of benefitting from wildlife conservation is specifically legitimating the dominance of private capital in wildlife conservation. Through this process, some emergent populations who see the income flowing in from conservation activities as offering them an alternative livelihood source not only become beneficiaries of the approach but also become co-opted into the logics and rationalities of market-based conservation. Therefore, this paper shows how collaborative management not only leads to contestations over resource use and access but also fits a neoliberal governance approach in which the market plays a much greater role than the communities (Fletcher 2010). The case of MWR particularly demonstrates how the objectives of environmental conservation may be used by powerful groups of people to achieve instrumental goals that diverge from those of marginalized people (Brockington et al. 2008). Although collaborative management promises to offer significant community benefits, the capture of wildlife conservation benefits by elites may extend beyond fortress conservation's exclusionary practices (Vaccaro et al. 2013). This is so because without real input from

marginalized groups, collaborative management may divest weaker groups of people of their land-based livelihoods (Fletcher 2010). The case of MWR suggests that collaborative management is slowly reconstituting resource use in favour of the partnership between powerful segments of the community and the private sector. Some marginalized people such as youths and secondary school-going children benefit from collaborative management. However, marginalized groups benefit as a way of enrolling them into the new management model, hence the youth-led CBOs at MWR seeing community sensitization to wildlife conservation as their duty. The idea that communities will benefit from market-based platforms of wildlife conservation means that monetary benefits from wildlife conservation have become more important than physical access to the natural resources in MWR. We question the adequacy of collaborative management for ushering in win-win wildlife conservation outcomes.

The implementation of collaborative management at MWR has involved the creation of new institutions, principally CBOs, through which communities around the Reserve are to participate in the activities of wildlife conservation. Notwithstanding that the creation of new institutions permits shifting of the loci of power and in how power is exercised (Agrawal 1997), the way existing decentralized governance structures were sidestepped at MWR occasioned the emergence of parallel centres of decision-making and elite capture of conservation benefits (Chinsinga 2005). For instance, most of the CBOs at MWR were led by secondary school-educated youths and literate members of the community. Although the involvement of youths in conservation activities is commendable, when participation is driven by material interests, it promotes elite capture. The new institutions at MWR have not included illiterate female subsistence farmers, who largely depended on access to natural resources for their livelihoods. As pointed out by Benjaminsen and Svarstad (2010: 385), 'conservation NGOs are primarily concerned with extending large-scale protection of landscape even if poor people have to bear the costs'.

## Conclusions

The findings from this study belie the dominant narrative from neoliberal mainstream conservation that collaborative management results in beneficial outcomes for communities, private conservation companies and the state. Different groups of people at MWR variously benefit from wildlife conservation. Collaborative management has found support amongst some community members who were hitherto vehemently against wildlife conservation, and understanding this change and its implications is the puzzle that this paper set out to unpack. The observations particularly highlight how the varying benefits from collaborative management at MWR have shaped celebrations of and protests against wildlife conservation. We specifically highlight how the instrumental interests of some segments of the communities, including traditional chiefs and youth-led CBOs, have transformed their conservation objectives and interests. In particular, that monetary benefits from conservation were promoted over physical access to natural resources in MWR suggests that collaborative management is not only entangled in the canons of neoliberal conservation but also inherently enrolls actors that sustain neoliberal rationalities.

The adoption of collaborative management is a significant policy shift in wildlife conservation. Although there is a strong theoretical argument from the governance literature for community-based

natural resource management approaches, there is a need to unpack how such management approaches are themselves structures of power that may shape and sustain hegemonic structures and rationalities of power. Collaborative management is obviously an improvement on the past fortress conservation that exclusively limited community access to conservation benefits. However, our observations indicate that collaborative management may be caught up in existing power structures that sustain historical forms of control and exclusion. The implication is that there is a need to understand how power dynamics in a particular area shape mechanisms of wildlife governance and the distribution of wildlife conservation benefits. This understanding should guide the formulation of the contract between governments and private-sector actors involved in wildlife conservation. These contracts should be clear in terms of the rights and obligations of the communities, the state and the private companies managing wildlife reserves.

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