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Farming Inside a National Park – What Is the Way Forward?

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Abstract

Bwabwata National Park is among the few protected areas in Africa where people are permitted to reside inside the Park. However, the strict regulations on resource use created a challenging food environment for the local indigenous previously hunter-gatherer San people. Due to the daily struggle with food-insecurity, farming plays an increasingly important social and cultural role among these communities. The aim of this study is to investigate whether and how present farming practices inside the NP can support food security and conservation aims simultaneously.

Between March and May 2017 in-depth interviews were carried out with 50 farmers across 5 villages to understand the local characteristics of past and present farming practices, the available inputs and the gained crop yield. Semi-structured interviews with governmental officers, NGO representatives and conservation and agriculture experts were also undertaken. The interviews were analysed by qualitative content analysis, and GPS mapping and harvesting surveys were carried out to supplement the qualitative data.

The results show that food security is not being met with present farming practices. Crop yields are generally low and support the families of the farmers for only 3–4 months a year at most. Conservation efforts are also challenged by the current ‘slash and burn’ practices as farmers frequently shift their crop production areas due to soil erosion and human-wildlife conflicts. Local farmers lack the means and knowledge to undertake soil management and protect their crops from pest and wildlife damage.

Stakeholders involved in the management of the NP have conflicting and minimal interactions with each other and with the local farmers. Meanwhile, experts with local knowledge are proposing new approaches towards local food security in the NP. We identify these conflicts and contradictions, and present possible solutions and pathways forward for both local food security and conservation in the park.

Keywords: Conservation, farming, food security, indigenous peoples, national park