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“Filling gaps and removing traps
for sustainable resource management”

Social Obstacles to the Management of Ecosystem Services in the Cubango-Okavango River Basin

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Abstract

The sustainable management of the Cubango-Okavango River Basin (CORB), southern Africa, is often framed at the transboundary level as a “conservation vs. exploitation” conflict opposing downstream to upstream nations. This masks the existence of more localised barriers to the sustainable management of ecosystem services (ESS) with regard to institutional and social challenges in the basin. Yet, social conflicts and challenges frame the capacity of local actors to engage in a transition towards sustainable resource management.

On the one hand, our contribution identifies key social challenges and conflicts related to the sustainable resource management in the basin. On the other, we identify the existing land use conflicts using the concept of ecosystem services and show which social conflicts they are attached to.

80 texts of interviews conducted from 2012 to 2013 with actors of 4 levels of governance (local, provincial, national and basin) were analysed with a qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Latent and revealed ecosystem service conflicts are identified using a diagnosis key for which the object of conflict was coded for, as well as the involved actors and the intensity of the conflict.

27 revealed and potential conflicts jeopardise the sustainable management of wildlife, crops and livestock, collected natural resources (e.g. wood), water and recreation. We found that social challenges are created by the emergence of new land uses and related ESS. As new parties come into play, the original land-users become marginalised. Yet, intra-community conflicts, such as gender inequality and the generational clash between youth and current land users, also burden the communities in their attempt to find sustainable land-use paths at the local scale.

Currently, smallholders are not actively shaping the debate over the relevance of using farming as a motor of rural development in the CORB. Beyond a technical support, means to facilitate the current political and social challenges to achieving sound resources use would make communities more sovereign to make their own choice towards a better livelihood.

Keywords: Conflict diagnosis, ecosystem services, land use science, social conflicts, social ecology