

# Re-uniting communities with their landscapes

**Transboundary conservation won't work unless indigenous and other traditional people can reclaim their rights**

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**I**NDIGENOUS and other traditional communities and protected areas in transboundary contexts have a common legacy: the problems caused by insensitive policies in border areas, which have neglected both conservation and social needs. Hence, they also share a number of fundamental objectives centred on the revitalisation and maintenance of both the landscape and the inhabiting communities. This article explores how transboundary conservation initiatives can play a useful role in alleviating the problems faced by local communities in border areas.

## **How many?**

Systematic and reliable data on how many protected areas of the world overlap with the traditional lands and resources of indigenous peoples are yet to be produced. However, a brief review of the literature suggests that perhaps more than 50% of existing protected areas worldwide have been established on the ancestral domains of indigenous and other traditional peoples. TBCAs are not different from other protected areas in this sense and also in the types of relationships, including conflict, that have characterised protected areas throughout history.

But in TBCAs, many local communities have traditionally practised land and resource use with specific patterns and under specific conditions. Perhaps the most typical condition of human habitation and use in TBCAs, particularly in developing countries, is the presence of extensive land-use in low-density habitats, due partly to the fact that areas surrounding national borders frequently contain scattered populations. These types of human habitation include, for example, hunter-gatherer societies who typically move around large areas following cycles of change in game populations, and pastoral peoples using transboundary areas as migration corridors according to the seasonal availability of pastures and natural displacements of animals. Both these forms of management involve a high level of human mobility, which is a condition for the low-intensity use of fragile lands and resources because it allows them to recover through cyclical human occupation.

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Human communities in these areas tend to have flexible, changing borderlines as a result of both their inherent mobility and the frequent overlap of use rights between them. This latter is typically a feature of human use in large landscapes because exclusive land-use rights would lead to fragmentation; porous borders, on the other hand, allow socioeconomic and cultural exchanges and accommodate changes in communities and populations caused by the harsh nature of environmental conditions. Thus, the boundaries of human settlement and occupation in TBCAs are typically natural and cultural, the latter following the former; they are

flexible and porous and allow multiple groups to alternate in the landscape.

## **Country border politics and human communities**

Contrary to this sociocultural configuration of community land boundaries, national borders are largely the product of modern war and conflict, imposition by dominant powers, and/or political negotiation among civil and military elites; few are defined on the basis of traditional, community-configured territorial boundaries. Modern country borders rarely respect natural boundaries or take into account how the historical interactions of communities have traditionally shaped sociocultural frontiers; this is especially true in countries that have undergone the decolonisation process in the last two centuries.

From ancient times, but especially within the context of political disputes around borderlines in the last century, states have displaced communities living in frontier regions and have applied restrictions to community life as a result of conflict and the predominance of military approaches to border politics and relationships with neighbours. Some of the most frequent impacts of such approaches on local communities have been:

- the forced relocation of people living in border areas to allow military control;
- the forced settlement of communities brought from elsewhere, as part of policies of 'living frontiers';
- the splitting of communities through imposed borderlines, creating enmity between neighbours who were once united and shared the same culture and landscape;
- restrictions on the movement of people and goods (eg restrictions on traditional migration and pastoral transhumance); and
- restrictions on access to certain resources and traditionally used places.

Militarisation is one of the inevitable facts of national-border politics. It is not only an instrument for imposing restrictions on communities and forcing new behaviour, but also a source of sociocultural disruption that often leads to the collapse of local institutions. In the case of armed conflict, the impacts on communities can be enormous and long-lasting. Ironically, the use of the military to impose national security in border areas has often led to a *decrease* in community security.

Today, armed conflict seems more widespread than ever, both in number and in the magnitude of people involved and affected. In some regions, armed conflict has had a sudden and dramatic affect on the lives, settlements and resources of traditional and local communities. This is at the root of refugee problems, which have now reached unprecedented levels and seem likely to continue to increase. Refugees tend to settle themselves in border areas, as these are less

occupied by human communities and tend to be away from power centres where disputes concentrate; also, crossing country borders may in some cases be a desperate option for people escaping war. The consequence is that large numbers of refugees occupy many frontier areas that otherwise could be or are dedicated to conservation. Apart from being a social and human catastrophe, the environmental impacts of the refugee problem are considerable.

Thus, the sociopolitical context in which transboundary conservation takes place is often one of fundamental conflict between the historical shaping of sociocultural boundaries and the processes of establishment and handling of national borders. Many communities have suffered greatly from country politics and have developed an understandable attitude of mistrust, suspicion and even active resistance and opposition to initiatives and policies originating in government agencies. TBCAs, which are generally initiatives negotiated and agreed to at higher levels of government and implemented through government agencies in areas often with a military presence, are therefore often attempted in a social environment marked by hostile feelings among communities and neighbours.

## **Human communities in transboundary conservation**

Given such a context, are local communities interested in TBCAs? What are the possible issues of interest to local people?

In many cases local communities are indeed interested in transboundary conservation, essentially because they see it as an alternative to militarisation and as a tool to bring some degree of protection to the people and the local resources. Since the buy-in of the local communities is essential for their success, a major function of TBCA initiatives must be to protect the people, the communities, their resources and their rights affected by country border politics. They should also help protect and respect the fundamental human rights of local people—including the right to live in a peaceful and safe environment, with no threat to their lives or wellbeing.

One of the most important interests of local people in relation to TBCAs is the restitution of their lands and resources. Customary rights have been denied in many border areas, but without the recognition of such rights local communities will continue to see their lives as under threat—because they have no livelihood security.

Some of the other objectives and interests that local communities have in relation to TBCAs are:

- the free movement of individuals and animals across borders and in the interior of each area;
- the demilitarisation of areas inhabited and used by communities;
- the revitalisation of local institutions affected by conflict or the imposition of military structures;
- the reunification of communities and recuperation of community bonds where they have been lost, either across or within borders;
- participation in local decision-making, with information and communication flowing freely among communities and individuals; and
- participation in national and bi/multinational policies for the management of frontier territories, as they concern their own lives and communities.

## **TBCAs as a tool for social reconstruction**

From the perspectives of local people, TBCAs can be attractive interventions if they support processes of reconstruction of communities and cultures that may have been affected by border conflicts and politics, and if they effectively offer more security to the people and the land. Securing land tenure and access to resources for communities, strengthening local cultures and institutions, tangibly improving people's well-being, and building mechanisms for the genuine sharing of decision-making with community institutions should all be fundamental components of TBCA strategies and actions.

Policies for TBCAs should take into account customary resource management and traditional land tenure systems. Further, they should accommodate the social, economic and cultural interests, values, rights and responsibilities of local communities living in and around their borders. TBCAs should also support and facilitate contact and cooperation between communities living across borders, especially if they belong to the same cultures, including activities in the economic, social, cultural, spiritual and environmental fields.

Encouragingly, a review of TBCAs in Africa (Singh 1999) shows that in many places this is already happening:

*Culturally, transboundary conservation areas assist in the economic livelihood of indigenous groups whose traditional land areas have been divided by international borders ... Transboundary conservation areas assist in developing policies for the resumption (or at least legalisation) of cross-border movement of indigenous groups divided by political international boundaries.*

The challenge for all TBCAs is to achieve such outcomes to the greatest possible extent.

## **References**

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