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Ethnic Minorities and Development: A Prospective Look at the Situation of African Pastoralists and Hunter-Gatherers

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Ethnic minorities and development

A prospective look at the situation of African pastoralists and hunter-gatherers

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ABSTRACT  This article seeks to assess the impact of development on the lives and livelihoods of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers in Sub-Saharan Africa. It queries the discourses on human rights and on indigenous peoples and whether they accurately describe and address the situation confronting pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. The importance of access to land for pastoralists is examined and evidence is presented showing how policies have undermined livelihoods. The effect of ‘forced’ and of ‘voluntary’ sedentarization is discussed, and is followed by a review of the situation of contemporary hunter-gatherers. Finally, the article concludes by arguing for the need to move beyond the rhetoric of rights and to better understand how and why policies create and undermine pastoralists and hunter-gatherers.

KEYWORDS  human rights ● indigenous peoples ● Sub-Saharan Africa

This article seeks to assess the impact of development on the lives and livelihoods of indigenous pastoralists and hunter-gatherers in Sub-Saharan Africa. This assessment requires an examination of the role of African states and international development agencies in framing policies and pursuing actions that are detrimental to the interests of indigenous peoples. In particular, I assess the impact of development policies on livelihoods and indigenous peoples’ access to land by highlighting the significance of cultural differences as a factor in the discrimination faced by indigenous peoples.

I begin by querying various discourses on human rights and on indigenous peoples and whether they accurately describe and address the situation confronting pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. In the second section I
examine the importance of access to land for pastoralists and look at how policies have undermined livelihoods. The third section examines the effect of sedentarization on pastoralists, and the fourth section reviews the situation of hunter-gatherers. The final section concludes by arguing for the need to move beyond the rhetoric of rights and to better understand how and why policies create and undermine pastoralists and hunter-gatherers.

PROBLEMATIC DISCOURSES – ‘HUMAN RIGHTS’ AND ‘INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’

International legal concern with indigenous peoples began with the 1957 International Labor Organisation (ILO) Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations that – in viewing indigenous peoples as a ‘relic of the past to be ‘developed’ or ‘integrated’ out of existence’ – adopted an assimilationist position (Thornberry, 2002: 520). However, more recent legal conventions have recognized the ‘historicity and cultural indelibility’ of indigenous peoples’ (Thornberry, 2002: 521). Thus Article 27 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, represents a call for positive discrimination towards indigenous peoples and states that:

In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of the group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.

However, there are two major problems with international conventions. First, many countries fail to sign up to international conventions and function outside international law. Second, the positive discrimination articulated in such conventions towards an indigenous people is perceived to conflict with a policy of equality. The most recent, non-binding, definition is contained in ILO Convention No. 169 (1989), which identifies indigenous as:

Peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country . . . at the time of conquest or colonisation, or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions. (Article 1b)

The 1989 definition has the advantage of focusing on the process by which an indigenous people is incorporated into a nation – by conquest or by economic incorporation – and the consequences this has. Namely, incorporation may dispossess an indigenous people of land and resources, it may destroy their sociopolitical organizations, and it may undermine, if not
destroy, their livelihoods and reduce them to the status of a legal minor. Crucial to this issue, but left out of legalistic approaches, is the contribution of ‘external’, non-legal processes. While international conventions establish the moral and legal standards for assessing contested legal claims between an indigenous people and the nation-state, on their own, such conventions provide an insufficient basis for understanding and addressing specific cases because of the complex and contested nature of political and social life.¹

As Wilson has noted, ‘the whole concept of “indigenous peoples” is now inseparable from human rights discourses’ (1996: 10). The term takes its meaning from a global development discourse in which international legal conventions define the issues and identify appropriate policies and action (Grillo, 1997). However, by examining specific cases it becomes clear that different actors and institutions often hold quite different understandings about the concept, its application to a specific conflict, and about the appropriate role of local, national and international agencies. The result is that at any one time there are several, competing discourses about rights and indigenous peoples at work – at the local, national, and international level – which shape social perception and action, even though some are more powerful in formulating policy. As this paper will demonstrate, while donor and national policies towards indigenous peoples appear to be irreconcilable from the standpoint of international law, they both undermine the wellbeing of such peoples.

Central to the determination of the ‘rights’ of indigenous peoples are two issues: the nature and status of a claim to a territory, and the actions of dominant groups. The status of indigenous peoples’ claims to land and resources rests on forms of ‘controlled access’ land tenure in which rights depend upon membership in customary social institutions. However, the ability to implement this form of tenure is undermined by socioeconomic inequality, the operation of markets, and the effect of policies that undermine traditional institutions (Lane and Moorehead, 1994). In addition, controlled access systems are disregarded by outsiders due to the ‘unoccupied’ nature of such lands – which stem from the resource endowments of marginal lands, low population densities, and the need for social and geographic mobility – and because outsiders possess radically different understandings about indigenous peoples’ livelihoods.

At the same time, ethnic categorization practised by dominant groups towards pastoralists and hunter-gatherers produces ethnic discrimination. Discrimination ranges from the refusal by dominant ethnic groups to extend commensality and/or to intermarry members from subordinate groups, to the appropriation of their land, labour and resources (Woodburn, 1997). This stigmatization, denial of rights and segregation is found in differing degrees and is characteristic of situations where population pressure and demand for land are greatest (Woodburn, 1997: 351). At the same time, agriculturalists encroach on pastoral lands, and
agriculturalists and pastoralists occupy hunter-gatherer territory. An ethnic hierarchy develops based on unequal political power which translates into unequal access to, and control over, land. For indigenous peoples, land is simultaneously the basis of rural livelihoods and it is critical to their cultural identity; not surprisingly, access to land is a major source of friction. However, while loss of access to land has serious implications for the livelihoods and wellbeing of all rural people, for indigenous peoples the effect of loss of land are catastrophic. Specifically, when conflict and/or policy forces indigenous peoples to ‘abandon’ their territory they are not assimilated into the dominant population. Instead, discrimination remains and their situation worsens as they no longer possess viable social institutions to ensure access to food and shelter; the process results in marginalization and the destruction of a group and its cultural identity.

As so often occurs in situations of conflict and unequal power, dominant groups ‘exaggerate [notions of cultural] difference and the incommensurability of cultures “in order to revalorize closed cultures, roots and traditions” at the expense of the less powerful’ (Werbner, 1992 cited in Feldman, 2001: 148). Paradoxically, the articulation of national policy in neutral and/or positive terms by the political elite is increasingly seen by subordinate social and ethnic groups as an attempt to interpolate dominant interests into national policy. In this context, state policies and programs inadvertently create the conditions for the revival of traditional beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples, and thus for the establishment of political movements by such indigenous peoples to regain their territories and to revalorize their culture, language etc. (Feldman, 2001).

Today, hunter-gatherers and pastoralists occupy marginal lands and/or remain resident on what is left of land that is seen as non-economic by dominant groups. The ‘minority’ status shared by such groups raises issues concerning their human and ‘cultural’ rights and the environmental status of their territory in light of its incorporation into the world economy. Both groups have seen their lands appropriated by other people, and both are under pressure to adopt private land tenure. In addition, such groups have been marginalized by war.

In this article, I argue that the term ‘indigenous peoples’ as defined by international law is of limited help in analysing cases in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the first place, the legal definition excludes groups other than hunter-gatherers who also led an independent existence prior to colonization and who make similar claims to territory. Second, claims regarding autochthonous status are contested, may be absent in particular cases, or may be claimed by other social groups. Third, the term arbitrarily distinguishes between groups who suffer from similar forms of social discrimination and from policies that sedentarize them and that fail to meet their needs.

In what follows, I argue for a different understanding of the term
‘indigenous peoples’. Thus, following Saugestad (2001: 43), the term ‘indigenous people’ is taken to refer to a situation in which a specific group:

a. claims to be descendants of the first inhabitants of an area;

b. occupies a position of non-dominance and are a numerical minority;

c. have, or had, livelihoods based on the adaptation of resources and territories that differ from those of the majority; and

d. perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as different from the majority and define themselves as indigenous.

I emphasize the contested nature of political claims made by groups who refer to themselves as indigenous peoples. In addition, I argue the importance of analysing the wider socioeconomic and political setting that affects the situation and rights of indigenous peoples. This approach allows me to assess the situation of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists (international conventions are confined to the former group). A major emphasis will be on the extent to which these groups are subjected to inappropriate development policies. This situation arises, I argue, when an indigenous people become a sociological and political minority, indeed it derives from the status of the group as an ethnic minority.

Due to the absence of accurate information it is only possible to provide a conservative estimate of the number of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers who are at risk of losing their land, livelihoods and cultural identity. My calculations suggest that at least 22.5 million people are at risk (see Table 1).

Broadly speaking, there are two reasons to be concerned with the survival of these groups. First, their cultural and physical survival is determined by the outcome of a very unequal political struggle. While the discrimination, overt persecution and violence inflicted on some groups is relatively well known, it is also necessary to take into account systemic and covert forms of violence (‘domestic genocide’) that undermine their identity and social institutions. Examples of overt violence include forced removal, the appropriation of land and property, as well as physical violence, murder, kidnapping, rape, intimidation and genocide. Covert, systemic persecution includes actions/policies that dispossess people of their lands, the refusal to recognize indigenous peoples’ culture and language, sedentarization policies, and policies intended to assimilate minorities to mainstream institutions.

An equally important issue to the loss to world cultural heritage which their assimilation or extermination represents, is a concern for the conservation of the marginal habitats that indigenous people occupy. Such lands are increasingly under threat as a result of the ‘mining’ and extraction of natural and mineral resources – land, pasture, mineral, timber, water – by
national and multinational interests. Another factor that places pressure on indigenous peoples comes from the expansion of agricultural populations, a long-term process that has already led many displaced people to resort to unsustainable practices to survive. For example, the pressure of livestock on restricted areas of land and more intensive farming can lead to loss of ground cover, soil erosion and deforestation (Clay and Cook, 1989). The outcome is the depletion of resources for future generations.

At the same time it is important to avoid the stereotypes and misconceptions that dominate thinking about indigenous people (Waller and Sobania, 1994; Swift, 1982). One myth is that all hunter-gathers and pastoralists are necessarily ‘in tune’ with nature because of the natural affinity between their cultures – taken to be in their pristine state – and environmental sustainability. As historical and archaeological evidence makes clear, such arguments are fallacious. For example, the Aka pygmies of central Africa have not been isolated at all but have been in contact with

Table 1 African pastoralists and hunter-gatherers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nomadic pastoralists</th>
<th>22+ million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunter-gatherers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San/Bushman:</td>
<td>104,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>49,475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>38,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>9,750</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>4,700</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadza (Tanzania)</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okiek, Torrobo, Elmolo (Kenya)</td>
<td>14,000–15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koegu (Ethiopia)</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twa (Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania, Uganda)</td>
<td>11,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pygmies (central and west Africa)</td>
<td>250–350,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bantu-speaking peoples for 2000 years and have been involved in commodity trade since the seventeenth century (Bahuchet and Guillaume, 1982). In Eastern Africa, pastoralists and hunter-gatherers have been involved in exchange networks for 4–5,000 years (Marshall, 1994). What is needed now is to move beyond stereotypes to appreciate the complex interplay of factors that affect the status of marginal lands and the survival of indigenous peoples whose livelihoods and identity are linked via traditions of mobility to their territories.

UNEQUAL CLAIMS AND CONTROL OVER PASTORAL LANDS

The situation confronting pastoral societies – in which pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and cultivating groups have been interlinked historically, economically, politically and ritually – is typified by actions that have:

- appropriated land outright for individual gain;
- dictated development; and
- deliberately restricted access to key resources in the name of conservation.

Land appropriation began with European misperceptions of communal land tenure systems. Colonial policies introduced western concepts of private property and the concept of ‘eminent domain’, which gave the right to a state to control land held under customary tenure in order to undertake urban and river basin development, natural resource conservation, to create national parks, for capital accumulation, and for strategic policy considerations (Azarya, 1996, Chapter 6; Colchester, 1993).

The creation in 1904 of the first Maasai reserve in Kenya was accompanied by the separate establishment of a game park, the first of many which excluded pastoralists (Knowles and Collett, 1989; Lindsay, 1987). The appropriation of pastoral lands to create ‘national parks’ has expanded in recent decades and is resulting in large-scale displacement and forced relocation of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. For example, parks created in Uganda in the 1960s contributed directly to the extinction of the Ik hunter-gatherers (Turnbull, 1972), while the establishment of national parks in Tanzania continue to exclude pastoralists (Brockington, 2002; Knowles and Collett, 1989). The creation of national parks, and the exclusion of the indigenous inhabitants, is widespread and has also occurred in Cameroon (Njiforti and Tchamba, 1993), Malawi (Banda and de Boerr, 1993), Central Africa, Ethiopia (Said, 1997), Namibia (Devereux, 1996), South Africa, and Botswana.
In the 1970s, the Tanzanian government appropriated 70,000 acres of land from Barabaig pastoralists in north-central Tanzania and awarded it to a state corporation receiving Canadian development assistance to produce wheat (Lane and Pretty, 1990; Freeman, 1982). The case raised two issues: the legality of the land transfers and the absence of provisions to protect Barabaig rights of way and ritual sites. Also, project staff appear to have perpetuated human rights abuses against local people. Furthermore, inadequate compensation was paid to the Barabaig and the project failed to employ or provide services for those it displaced. In short, the entire scheme was unsustainable. The failure of the government to learn any lessons from that act is indicated by the establishment of new national parks in Tanzania in the 1990s that exclude pastoralists (Brockington, 2002).

Policy makers have yet to comprehend and address pastoralism in its own terms as opposed to policies that seek to sedentarize pastoralists. For example, pursuit of such policies in Kenya has resulted in a situation in which the Maasai explicitly reject:

... any compromise of positions [with Government] ... until the underlying logic of development and conservation policies in Maasailand is analysed and seen for what it really is by those in power – an attempt to ‘civilise the savages’, rather than an attempt to bring the benefits to the people which they themselves desire. (Knowles and Collett, 1989: 453–4)

Thus, attempts in the late 1970s to establish game parks in Kenya completely failed to appreciate that indigenous pastoralists and hunter-gatherers were an integral part of the ecosystem (Lindsay, 1987). Poorly planned and with minimal participation of the Maasai, conservation was and is based on generating tourist revenue and inducing the Maasai to leave the reserve.

In the Amboseli, ‘Group Ranches’ were introduced in the 1970s as a means of getting the Maasai to ‘buy-in’ to the idea of a national park (Lindsay, 1987: 156). However, despite early evidence that park conservation was failing, the policy was maintained as a way of introducing ‘modern’ land tenure instead of providing secure land title to Maasai. Group Ranches are resulting in ‘a significant transfer of land’ to a neighbouring ethnic group (Galaty, 1992: 36). The extent to which Maasai are divesting themselves of land – ‘out of insecurity, in order to get something now rather than have nothing later’ (p. 38) – underlines the inequities of a de facto privatization of semi-arid land that is incapable of supporting commercial ranching or cultivation (Galaty, 1999; Hogg, 1986).

Pastoralist access to land is also undermined by ‘scientific’ ‘rangeland conservation’ policies that rely on the ‘tragedy of the commons’ thesis in which ‘common property rights’ in land and natural resources are incorrectly linked to overgrazing and environmental degradation (Hardin, 1968). However, with respect to pastoralist herding strategies and common
property regimes, it is clear that Hardins’ thesis is too simplistic to accommodate herd dynamics, the flexibility of pastoral systems, species diversification (animals and plant), and the long-term dynamics of human demography and ecological change (Fratkin and McCabe, 1999; Fratkin, 1997; Scoones, 1994; Behnke et al., 1993; Homewood and Rodgers, 1987). While research has refuted the Hardin thesis, advocates of land reform continue to use the idea. In any event, throughout East and Southern Africa the incursion of cultivators and/or the expansion of cattle-keeping by rich farmers or urban-based civil servants and merchants has created a new dynamic with its own potential for environmental degradation and rural poverty; in short, increasing amounts of semi-arid land are being removed from pastoralists for commercial and private use by urban entrepreneurs.

SEDENTARIZATION AND THE DEMISE OF PASTORAL SOCIETY

Often development is masked by a benevolent rhetoric that shows a limited understanding of, and little participation by, local people. Sedentarization is a prime example. Beginning in the 1960s in the Awash Valley of north-east Ethiopia, the state promoted commercial agriculture, state farms, and the establishment of national parks that alienated massive areas of pasture which the Afar, Arsi, Ittu, Jille and Kereyu depended on (Bondestam, 1974). In an attempt to appease Afar for the loss of land, government introduced a settlement scheme onto which a small number were accommodated (Kello, 1989: 101). With the change of government in 1974–75 the scheme was expanded. However, the settlements never attracted a permanent population; they were unproductive, relied on state subsidies, and involved little participation.

Recently the promotion of irrigated agriculture alienated 44 percent of dry and wet season pasture which, together with the land given to Awash Park, undermined Afar livelihoods (Said, 1997). In addition, herbicides from commercial agriculture have dangerously polluted water supplies, rising salinity from irrigation has led to the abandonment of large amounts of land, inability to control seasonal flooding (to replenish the grasses) has reduced pasture, and access to vital dry season pasture has been lost. Furthermore, the Afar have become more exposed to the effects of drought and more dependent upon humanitarian relief, while at the same time the scarcity of pasture and water has contributed to intraethnic conflict (Getachew, 2001).

The failure to address the needs of pastoralists, and, in particular, growing numbers of destitute households, is a major problem. Since the
droughts of the early 1970s in northern Kenya, two missions have provided famine assistance and social welfare to impoverished Ariaal and Rendille pastoralists (Fratkin, 1991). In the context of recurrent drought, political insecurity, stock raiding, and high livestock mortality rates, the missions – which view pastoralists as ‘primitive and irrational’ – have sedentarized a few thousand persons. More serious, because it affects far larger numbers of pastoralists, is the ongoing process of ‘voluntary’ sedentarization in which tens of thousands of destitute households have settled in and around development projects and small urban centres in an attempt to survive. Dependence on famine assistance and limited ability to access markets is producing growing poverty and malnutrition, a situation exacerbated by the withdrawal of donor assistance from areas experiencing chronic violence (Fratkin et al., 1999; Mitchell, 1999; Zaal and Dietz, 1999).

Have pastoral societies reached a point of no return? Is it time to encourage pastoralists to become agriculturalists, or should efforts be made to restore and protect their rights to water and pasture, recognize their knowledge, and support traditional livelihoods (Fratkin, 1997)? An argument for the latter option comes from north-west Kenya where an international non-government organization (NGO) has created pastoral development associations which operate as participatory management committees responsible for local development (Department for International Development (DfID), 1997).

A review of the Wajir project was positive, though concerns were raised about the slow institutionalization of the associations (Oxfam, 1996). An economic impact assessment in the project’s fourth year (Odhiambo et al., 1998) concluded that:

1. Households required less food aid;
2. Household milk consumption increased, as did household expenditure on food;
3. There was less peri-urban destitution in project sites (primarily through better access to, and availability of, water);
4. Animals were less likely to die (which translated into substantial financial gains for households);
5. Water supplies were more reliable; and
6. Five hundred destitute pastoralist families and 1500 women enjoyed more income earning opportunities than before the project started.

Pastoralist associations, based on customary norms, expectations and local knowledge, were performing new tasks that included: organizing supplies for their members, acting as an effective vehicle for community consultation and decision-making, making good use of income to maintain communal facilities, and helping to target food aid. Although associations deliver undeniable benefits and assist local households and communities to
be more self-reliant, they require long-term support and a favourable overall policy environment which, in Kenya specifically and the region generally, is unlikely.

Overall then, it appears that Goldschmidt’s early pessimism about pastoral development policy remains relevant. Writing in 1980, Goldschmidt noted that only basic flaws in planning, including ‘a consistent disregard of pastoral peoples’ own knowledge’, could account for the complete and utter failure of pastoral programs (1980: 117). In particular, he noted that African governments and their western advisers ‘want somehow to change the character of pastoralists – to make them over into something more like farmers or townspeople. The urgent desire [is] to eradicate pastoralism’ (p. 107). It is extremely worrying that 20 years later the same concerns are repeated by Fratkin, who notes that ‘government interventions, ostensibly for economic development and for improving range management and livestock, have been uniformly negative and frequently disastrous’ (1997: 251). The net result, Fratkin argues, is that pastoralists ‘are moving into the twenty-first century with less ability to maintain their subsistence economies than at any time in their past’ (p. 252).

DISCRIMINATION AND BENIGN NEGLECT: THE END OF HUNTER-GATHERERS?

African hunter-gatherers experience differing degrees of exploitation and pressure as a result of their relation to the nation-state and with dominant ethnic groups. However, smaller numbers and exclusion from national politics – which has not been the case for all pastoralists – means that the hunter-gatherer experience is one of stigmatization and powerlessness. The key issues for hunter-gatherers – whose society is small-scale and has a low population density and who have ancestral claims as original inhabitants of the land, an economy based on hunting and gathering (foraging), and who lack formal political leadership (Woodburn, 1991, 1982) – revolve around disputed claims to territory (Woodburn, 1997; Bahuchet and Guillaume, 1982; Blackburn, 1982: 296).

While hunter-gatherers have a long history of contact, their situation has markedly deteriorated as a result of colonial and postcolonial policies that have removed them from their territories. The net effect of such policies has been to economically marginalize such groups and to deracinate them by denying them rights to land and thus the ability to maintain their culture.

The ‘Bushmen’ or Basarwa/San of southern Africa illustrate the experience of many hunter-gatherers. To start with, the term ‘Bushman’ is a derogatory term coined by outsiders to categorize hunter-gatherers. In fact, considerable diversity exists between groups based on differences in
language (80 dialects), degrees of sedentism and types of settlement pattern, type of economy (some were independent cattle-owners who foraged to supplement household income), social organization, and the experience of being removed from their territories and forcibly settled (e.g. Lee and Devore, 1976; Leacock and Lee, 1982; Hitchcock, 1982; Vierich, 1982).

In the seventeenth century, changes in the economy of the Kalahari resulted in the Bushmen being dispossessed of their livestock, land and labour (Hitchcock, 1987; Wilmsen, 1991). From independent controllers over, and producers of salt, copper ore, hides, ivory and feathers, the Basarwa were increasingly confronted by the Tswana state which monopolized access to the means by which to hunt. The collapse of the Kalahari economy in the nineteenth century transformed these peoples into dependent herders of Tswana livestock.

By the 1920s, when colonial authorities began to express concern about Bushmen, the majority were already destitute. It was, therefore, easy to conceive of them as quintessentially isolated hunter-gatherers (Lee, 1976: 18; Wilmsen, 1991). While there was considerable concern about whether they would survive culture ‘contact’, and what their exact status was with respect to the dominant Tswana, it was not until the mid-1970s that the first steps were taken to address their situation (Russell, 1976; Hitchcock, 1987).

Today, the extent of Basarwa dispossession is well documented. In Namibia, where 38,275 Bushmen live, most are legally dispossessed of their lands either by the creation of national parks and/or by the ‘indeterminate status’ of their land rights which legitimizes encroachment by pastoralists and agriculturalists (Hitchcock, 1996, Chapter 4). In effect, only 3000 Namibian San have been able to claim legal rights to a foraging territory (Biesele, 1993). The overall political situation in Namibia supports continued land privatization and undermines the rights of the San (Devereux, 1996).

In Botswana, the principal means of displacement has been through: (a) the creation of national parks from which resident Basarwa are prohibited from keeping livestock, and then removed to settlements; and (b) restrictions on hunting that are reinforced by land privatization and fencing which denies Basarwa access to ‘veld’/wild produce.

The 1975 Tribal Grazing Lands Policy (TGLP) that removed land from customary tenure reflected Governments refusal to recognize possible Basarwa land claims that might have preempted the claims of the elite. TGLP proclaimed that all citizens should have equal access to land (Hitchcock, 1987: 325), however, the nominal safeguards established to protect Basarwa were easily set aside (Guenther, 1976; Wily, 1982). Indeed, dispossession and marginalization intensified with the expansion of the cattle industry into the central and western Kalahari where water and grazing...
rights were acquired by the elite (e.g. Peters, 1994; Sporton, 1997; Twyman, 1997).

Regardless of a national program to assist the Basarwa (the 1974 Bushman Development Programme, later renamed the Remote Area Dwellers Programme or RADP), no amelioration of their position has occurred because of government refusal to grant the Basarwa and other ethnic minorities legal recognition (Hitchcock and Holm, 1993: 316). As one of a number of Remote Area Dwellers along with Herero, Kgalagadi and impoverished Tswana pastoralists, the prognosis for the Basarwa is destitution (Good, 1993; Saugestad, 2001).

Refusal to recognize the Basarwa as an indigenous people legitimizes rangeland privatization by the elite. In effect, denial of a link between Basarwa cultural identity and their foraging territories can only be interpreted as directly contributing to their extinction. While government provision of water, education, health facilities, food, etc. maintains their lives, it has turned them into dependents of the state. In addition, resettlement has brought increasing health, employment and social problems – including rising levels of interpersonal violence linked to alcoholism and illiteracy – and it reinforces their low status and dependence on outsiders (Lee and Hurlich, 1982; Hitchcock, 1982; Biesele, 1993). The consistent refusal of government to recognize that Basarwa have any rights is linked to the refusal to provide appropriate cultural and development assistance (Chr. Michelsen Institute, 1996).

Dependency has entailed a host of problems for the Basarwa:

a. hunting is greatly restricted (Hitchcock and Masilo, 1995), yet limited access to basic services and employment has seen some Basarwa leaving settlements to forage;

b. displacement and squatting have contributed to a long history of stock-theft, animosity and violence towards Basarwa;

c. the government has refused to legislate a minimum wage which deepens Basarwa dependence on cattle-owners for a living (Hitchcock and Holm, 1993: 312).

d. projects assisting sedentarized Basarwa reinforce their dependence on outsiders due to low Basarwa educational standards, illiteracy, and interethnic misunderstandings (PEER Consultants, 1997).

Following the collapse of apartheid, the San/Bushman in South Africa face the possibility of a better future. Recognition of San claims to land and the right to maintain and promote San languages create a policy environment in which steps can be taken to recognize San rights. In March 1999, a small group of Khomani Bushmen (600 people) obtained the right to reoccupy land outside the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. However,
other San groups, ex-South African Defence Forces (SADF) soldiers and their dependents, await a decision that would allow them to leave tented camps and settle on their own land. This latter case involves 4500 Angolan Bushmen who belonged to the SADF in Namibia and who were resettled in South Africa in the early 1990s (Vorster, 1995).

There are serious difficulties in assisting the San and people like them. In the first place, the ability to ‘participate’ in development depends upon whether a group is able to represent itself (without intermediaries ‘facilitating’ decisions), and whether decision-making is undertaken in their language rather than the language of the dominant ethnic group. Second, assistance needs to be channelled through an organization which has legitimacy in the eyes of the San and which can design and implement culturally appropriate assistance (Riddell, 1998; DfID, 1998; Moser and Norton, 2001). Even so, nascent San political leadership will not find it easy to undertake this journey until such a time as the power of political patrons and of state institutions is curtailed by the official recognition of San rights, and the San are provided with sufficient political space and economic resources to organize themselves. The fragile San ‘communities’ – shaped by decades of discrimination and marginalization – are deeply divided over questions of representation, decision-making and leadership. Unfortunately, these issues are ignored by the state and donors, which see the solution to their problems in policies aimed at reducing rural poverty. However, as Saugestads’ analysis of such attempts in Botswana shows, a focus on poverty creates two insurmountable hurdles for indigenous people. First, it results in a welfare program ‘which leads inevitably to a clientization of the recipients’ (2001: 163). Second:

... in its effort to be culture-neutral [it] has become culture-blind. In the context of Botswana ... trying to be all things to all people, has in effect deprived the target group of a cultural identity which could have been a mobilizing factor in local development. It has also deprived the target group of dignity as they are reduced to being passive welfare recipients. (p. 164)

Elsewhere the result is much the same: the marginalization and poverty of hunter-gatherers is compounded by neglect and intervention in their lives by dominant ethnic groups and outsiders – including commercial interests, NGOs, religious organizations, nation-states and donors – who rarely understand the link between indigenous culture, social identity and physical survival. The experience of the Twa of Rwanda shows this clearly. Despised by Hutu and Tutsi, the Twa, who numbered 29,000 in 1991, lost at least 30 percent of their population to Hutu genocide and Tutsi reprisal (Lewis and Knight, 1995). However, genocide was preceded by systemic discrimination, land grabbing, physical and verbal abuse, denial of access to resources, and denial of access to education, health care and legal redress (Lewis and Knight, 1995: 50). The new government is deeply suspicious of
the Twa and of efforts to assist them. In addition, they remain very poor (the majority of men are dead, in hiding, or in prison) and vulnerable to Hutu and Tutsi.

The condition of pygmy populations in central and eastern Africa shows that hunter-gatherers are prone to violence – including being forced into servitude by rebel groups and being killed and eaten when they are unable to supply their captors9 – by dominant groups and that their interests in, and dependence upon, the forest are systemically set aside in favour of commercial logging and land grabbing10 (Colchester, 1993). In addition to the destruction of the forest, the influx of strangers affects pygmy social organization. Pressure to assimilate derives from the influx of strangers, limited access to education, and attempts to sedentarize them (Survival, 1998). Rapid social change, destruction of the habitat, or exclusion from it, and the absence of rights have led to a widespread loss of pygmy culture, sedentarization, and destitution.

A BLEAK FUTURE FOR AFRICA’S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Pastoralists and hunter-gatherers are on the verge of extinction as a result of processes that have rapidly accelerated since independence. These societies are caught between processes of rapid social change and ill-conceived policies and programs that attempt to transform them and to dispossess them of their lands. Rather than seeking to bring the benefits of development to these groups, policies have destroyed their livelihoods and rendered them more vulnerable to social change and to the whims of patrons and outsiders. The limited efforts to assist such groups – nearly all of which rely on sedentarization – are culturally inappropriate and have turned self-reliant people into vulnerable clients.

Why this is so should now be apparent. First, international attention has focused primarily on agreeing definitions (defining legal norms and guidelines) at the expense of understanding the socioeconomic and political processes that contribute to the precariousness of indigenous peoples. Second, the principal problem for pastoralists and hunter-gatherers is the loss of access to land, a long-standing process that is caused by greed, the rapid growth in population of agricultural peoples, and misconceived policies that reduce indigenous peoples to destitution. The reason for this situation is sedentarization: forced sedentarization is imposed on a small percentage of indigenous peoples; the real damage comes from ‘voluntary’ sedentarization which follows on from failed development programs and endemic political instability. Third, as the case of the San demonstrates, a major factor contributing to the destruction of indigenous peoples arises
from the poorly conceived, short-term policies pursued and advocated by donors.

The contribution of donor policies to the plight of indigenous peoples has multiple sources, of which the most obvious are policies based upon the ‘tragedy of the commons’ thesis imported from North America which, in the context of Africa, became intertwined with land reform and elite politics. Such ideas have had a disastrous impact on indigenous peoples and on semi-arid lands. Such policies reflect a search for quick development fixes based on models from developed societies, too limited an understanding of the complexities of African land tenure, and from turning a blind eye to elite politics.

It is essential to better understand the impact of socioeconomic processes and state policies on indigenous groups, and how donor policies reinforce these processes by strengthening the state at the expense of local autonomy. Another way of phrasing this is to note that all too frequently the interests of dominant ethnic groups coincide with ‘national interests’. By analyzing the impact of donor programs and state policies on indigenous peoples, it becomes apparent how some indigenous groups are transformed into ethnic minorities whose situation is best described as one of political encapsulation characterized by:

- widening socioeconomic inequality between indigenous peoples and dominant ethnic groups that, over time and due to development policies, transforms the situation of an indigenous people from a position of ‘complementarity’ into one of structural inequality;
- subsequently, this inequality is translated into institutional policies and practices that legitimize and promote cultural difference as ‘natural’, i.e. as racial or ethnic, masking elite interests in ethnocentric assumptions that justify ethnic inequality.

The ethnic stigmatization and marginalization of indigenous pastoralists and hunter-gatherers is now understandable: while Africa’s elite are contemptuous of indigenous cultures and desirous of their lands and resources, Euro-American development ‘experts’ consistently denigrate indigenous knowledge as ‘unscientific’ and blame environmental degradation on traditional livelihoods (Sillitoe et al., 2002). In effect, expert perceptions and donor policies reinforce elite interests at the expense of indigenous peoples, an observation brought home by the lack of consultation with indigenous peoples and by policies and programs that seek to transform them rather than to meet their needs.

What, if anything, can be done? While it is certainly correct that development is uneven and that it creates inequality, it should also be evident that a human rights perspective represents a one-dimensional view of the problem facing indigenous peoples. As such, international action to defend human rights will founder without a clearer appreciation that international,
national, and local/customary legal codes reflect different cultural understandings and revolve around major axes of political power; differing interpretations about rights should be used as a guide to ‘allow us to see rights not just as instrumental mechanisms but also as expressive of tensions around ethnic, nationalist and religious identities’ (Wilson, 1996: 15). Without such an understanding, efforts to impose a human rights agenda will fail. First, failure to understand and address the perceptions and interests of national elites, including national and local-level institutions, will close important avenues for policy reform. Second, while national elites disdain indigenous peoples, donors and their policies have also contributed to the problem through a consistent failure to understand indigenous cultures. Such failings are reflected in the absence of culturally appropriate forms of assistance and from the absence of consultation and dialogue with ethnic minorities. In this regard, there may be little to differentiate between policies – whether it be human rights, ‘participation’, ‘market-based’ freedoms, or poverty reduction strategies – imposed on aid recipients to the extent that donors fail to understand that the very terms on which such policies are premised; such policies reflect the perceptions and interests of dominant outsiders and they are implemented in a way that will reinforce the position of powerful social groups and institutions at the expense of the marginal, the poor, as well as ethnic minorities and indigenous groups.

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Notes

1 For example, many pastoralists and hunter-gatherers have had to diversify their economic strategies to include cultivation which, in the eyes of some, blurs any attempt to draw clear boundaries between them and societies whose traditional mode of production is based on cultivation.

2 In addition, because pastoralists and hunter-gatherers have been affected by social change they are not socially homogeneous, indeed considerable socio-economic inequality exists.

3 In Gabon, Congo and the Central African Republic ‘practically all land outside urban areas is state owned; customary law . . . only secures rights of use, rights which are readily extinguished in the “public interest” ’ (Colchester, 1993: 25). In these countries, in excess of half of all forest has been given to private concessions.

4 Between 1997 and 1999, 49,000 hectares of land was sold by local Maasai in...
Narok District to Kalenjin and Kikuyu small-holders; see ‘Land Tenure Killing off Pastoralism’, *Daily Nation* (Nairobi) 15 April 1999, p. 6.

5 Particularly in the ‘Caprivi Strip’, see: ‘Hundreds San Flee to Botswana’, and ‘San “Starving to Death”’, *The Gazette* (Botswana), 18 November 1998, p. 13. Himba pastoralists in Namibia are also losing access to key pastoral resources due to the construction of a hydroelectric dam (Bollig, 1997).


7 Between 80 and 90 percent of Basarwa are dependent on Government food and cash-for-work projects (Hitchcock and Holm, 1993: 310).

8 See: ‘We are so excited we can’t put into words how we feel’, http://www.survival.org.uk/bushman.htm; Lee and Hurlich, 1982; Hitchcock, 1996, Chapter 6.


10 As is the case in Kenya, where the Okiek face eviction from the forest by the Government; ‘Honey Hunters of Kenya Resist Eviction’, downloaded from www.survival.org.uk/ogiek.htm on 15 June 1999.

**References**


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