The Conflict Dimension of Environmental Degradation and the Case of Lesotho

Henry M. Sibanda*

Abstract

This article highlights the consequences of conflicts on the environment and its management. Environmental conflicts fall under public disputes, which have been observed to be a result of human needs. This observation is based on the fact that environmental degradation is more a result of social conflicts than of bio-physical conditions, and hence eludes attempts to control it. Numerous international examples of conflicts that have resulted in environmental degradation are highlighted to reinforce this theory. The case for Lesotho's environmental degradation is traced from a historic perspective to present day problems and their manifestations. It concludes by examining the experiences of the National Environmental Youth Corps (NEYC) project and the recognition for the first time of the conflict dimension to the environmental

* Dr H.M. Sibanda is an environmental adviser with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Gambia, and has previously served in the same capacity in Lesotho and Liberia.

degradation. It reviews the mitigation measures put in place by this project and the first positive signs towards the solution of the environmental degradation that has ravaged this country for years. It closes by advocating the equipping of natural resource and land-use planners with conflict analysis skills if the environment is to be conserved effectively.

Introduction

Timberlake and Tinker (1985) state that there is a growing conviction of a correlation between environmental degradation and the conflict over natural resources, which has not been widely documented. Recent research has been focusing on a few articles on environment and conflict, gradually bringing to light the impacts of the socio-economic dimensions on environmental degradation. This study therefore examines the impacts of the socio-economic dimensions on the environmental degradation in Lesotho, which has become second to none in the world.

According to conflict theory, environmental disputes are considered as a sub-sector of public disputes by Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), who also highlight that public disputes come in all shapes and sizes. There are disputes that occur between communities or between a community and decision-makers or planners, or within a community. According to Kraybill (1995) the underlying factor is that environmental conflicts are normally based on human needs and at local level they tend to be over the allocation, distribution and management of natural resources. Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) go on to characterise public/environmental disputes, but the underlying fact is that they all are different from each other. The general characteristics are:

(i) That new issues and new parties keep on popping up as the negotiations proceed.

(ii) That such disputes occur at varying levels of expertise: they can simply be differences over land boundaries, and they can be as complex and scientific as disputes over the pollution of a river and its impacts on the health of the communities down stream, which would require chemical and biological tests on the water and humans involved.

(iii) That they have to deal with different forms or sources of power: one party could be using legal power and the other party financial power, or

power differences may be due to the numbers or skills with which each side is endowed.

(iv) That they normally would have differences in decision-making procedures, e.g. those of government bodies and those of private organisations.

(v) That these disputes normally lack continuity in relationships or even the wish for a continued relationship after the dispute.

Another factor that Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) highlight, is that in most cases these public or environmental disputes are splashed in newspapers, and over TV and radio, which makes their resolution very difficult. Morris (1999) emphasises the fact that environmental issues tend to involve everybody in a community. They often arise over benefits or trade-offs between environmental and economic issues. They can also involve more than one country, however. Trolldalen (1998) describes International Environmental Conflicts (IECs) as conflicts that are a result of the utilisation of natural resources by one country, in a way which has negative environmental consequences for another, or a group of countries.

The foregoing section has introduced the concept of environmental conflicts and their complexity, which will undoubtedly contribute to the difficulty in resolving or managing them.

It is therefore within these confines that this article attempts to argue the following:

> Environmental degradation is more a result of social conflicts, which have not been recognised, than of bio-physical conditions and actions on the environment, and hence there is a low rate of success in most of the projects set up to arrest environmental degradation.

This article tries to illustrate that unless it is recognised to what extent environmental degradation is a result of conflicts, the world will keep battling with the wrong issues and fail to make progress on the environment management front. The article is divided into two major sections. The first section highlights international environmental conflicts and their impact on the environment, and how they have been managed. The second section describes the Lesotho case study, showing how conflicts over natural resources have resulted in devastating environmental degradation and how attempts that have been embarked on for decades, but have ignored the conflict dimension, have been fruitless. It looks at the historical perspective of the problem and concludes by examining the current attempts, which have taken the conflict dimension into perspective.

1. Lessons from International Environmental Conflicts

This section attempts to review conflicts that arise over the management and utilisation of natural resources or the environment, in order to provide background evidence for the case study. The issues dealt with here, as outlined by Morris (1999), are mainly those of the use of environmental resources by an individual in a way which conflicts with the wishes of the society that the individual lives in. For example, although land can be purchased and owned by an individual, the environmental resources on it remain properly public, and therefore the individual cannot just use them as he/she wants. For instance, the tree species on a privately owned piece of land might contain some protected or endangered species, and therefore the public has a right to object to the land owner's wish to fell the trees and clear the land. Goldblatt (1995) says that since land has an intrinsic value and there is scarcity of it, it is not surprising that conflicts erupt over it. As could have been expected when people were forcibly removed from their land in South Africa during apartheid, a lot of conflicts were sparked in those days. This was so because the people had attached value to the land that they were being moved from. The conflict over land in South Africa went into a latent phase during the period of oppression, but as soon as freedom was achieved, all the tribes started demanding restitution and thus reopened the old conflicts. Therefore today, a successful land reform process would have to be characterised by the ability to manage and resolve the disputes over land. Goldblatt (1995) further highlights how in Saldanha Bay, South Africa, conflicts ensued between conservationists and industrialists, and how the industrialists eventually won the cases due to their financial muscle – underscoring the intrinsic value of land. He also indicates how the conflicts that erupted in Kogelberg over a future dam, which threatened a special biodiversity park, reflected a clash of interests between one sector of the community and another.

By means of an example, he shows how a fishing policy should accommodate the fishing rights of local communities if conflict is to be averted. A fishing regulation in the Kariba Dam on the Zimbabwe/Zambian border required every fisherman to apply for fishing permits, ignoring the fact that the Tonga people's staple diet is fish and they had been fishing from the river for their livelihood long before the dam was built. Hence conflicts always ensued when dam wardens tried to arrest the local fishermen (Tongas) as they fished on the Kariba dam without permits. This resulted in the Tonga community fishing at night to avoid being seen, and consequently catching

whatever they could get, big or small. This curtailed the continued harvest from the lake, and re-emphasised the unfortunate results of a lack of negotiations between the local communities and government agents. Goldblatt (1995) also referred to the conflicts that ensued between developers and city residents in South Africa when a new housing development threatened the environmental and cultural heritage of a city. When conflicts over land or natural resources erupt, and management falls foul, it leads to the degradation of the disputed natural resources.

The examples above re-affirm the fact that environmental conflicts are public disputes, and hence they range from technical to political issues. Also, due to their complexity they are difficult to resolve, as highlighted by Kraybill (1995).

Poonan and Mackenzie (1996) describe how, during the implementation of the South African Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), conflicts started due to lack of transparency of an allocation of land claims. They also describe the conflicts that ensued between ecotourism and mining lobbies over certain pieces of land. Cousins (1996) focused on conflicts in the South African Land Reform Committee between the chiefs and civil associations for influential positions within the committee. Conflicts are also recorded to have occurred between the 'would be' beneficiaries of the land reform and government planners, since the communities were not in agreement with the resource management rules laid down by government. This further emphasised the intrinsic value of land as seen by Goldblatt (1995), as well as the lack of proper negotiations over natural resources.

The current Zimbabwe conflict over land is an example of how intense and violent conflicts over natural resources can get. Chitiyo (2000) describes this crisis in five stages, which have all turned violent. The first Chimurenga (guerrilla warfare) of 1890–1929 was the stage when colonialists grabbed the land and imposed white rule over the country after a number of battles. The second stage was the period of the Land Apportionment Act, from 1930 to 1959, when the fertile and good land was legally taken away from the black population and civil resistance ensued. This saw the millions of black Zimbabweans being pushed on to marginal lands with limited resources, which resulted in land degradation setting in. He views the third stage as the second Chimurenga of 1966–1979, when an armed conflict arose, primarily over the land issue. This saw the destruction of farming infrastructure. Dip-tanks were broken or filled with stones, streams were polluted with chemicals, and forests were burnt by soldiers as they tracked down the

freedom fighters. The fourth stage was the post independence period, 1980–1997, when land was superficially returned to the black population through the 'Land Resettlement Programme'. The Land Reform Programme resulted in the opening of former conservation areas to land hungry blacks, who then went in to cut down the trees which had been out of their reach for decades. They then overstocked the land and overgrazed them, gradually devegetating the areas, eventually turning them into a state similar to the communal areas. This was an unpopular process which lacked transparency and ended prematurely in 1988, allowing this conflict to go into another latent phase in its escalation. The involvement of the Zimbabwe army in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1997 and the appeasement gesture given to the war veterans (Z$50 000 per veteran) combined to bring down the Zimbabwean economy by increasing inflation to over 100 per cent. This marked the beginning of the fifth stage. This saw the economy of the country go down, the ruling party becoming increasingly unpopular as the election approached. Seeing their downfall approaching, their only remaining card that could turn the stakes of the downward spiralling of the party was to refocus on the land issue, which they knew was definitely unresolved. This sparked the current white farm invasions. The result of this has been the fragmentation of the land and the plundering of resources as the new settlers cleared bushes to construct their dwellings and cut trees for fuel-wood. This shows how decades of misapplied state intervention in agrarian reform can easily be replaced by grassroots reactions, often in the form of an anarchic conflict resolution process. Unfortunately all these conflicts are taking place at a great expense to the environment. They serve as further proof that mishandled conflicts never go away, but just go into latent phases and only need a trivial incident to go into an escalation phase again.

A review of refugee activities, which are normally a result of conflicts, reveals how they affect the environment and lead to further conflicts (UNHCR 1999). Kakonge (2000) describes refugee activity as a sudden influx of large numbers of people into areas without any planning or any provisions made for them. In the receiving area, they tend to cause competition for resources like fuel-wood, timber for construction, water and fertile land for cropping; hence tensions between them and the receiving communities become inevitable. He notes that even when assistance is given, it is only food supplies and does not include the energy to cook the food. Therefore, for as long as they are there, the refugees will depend on the local environment for the energy source to cook their food. In these camps, deforestation and cropping lead to devegetation,

which leads to soil erosion and eventually results in desertification. It should be noted here that in all refugee situations the assistance is only given to the refugees and not the receiving communities. Trolldalen (1998), highlighting the evidence from Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe during the 1980s and the refugees in the Horn of Africa, describes in detail the kind of environmental destruction that refugees cause – from water pollution to deforestation, from soil erosion to food shortages for the receiving communities. On the other hand, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees alludes to the fact that if environmental degradation or conflicts between the refugees and the resident population are not addressed, it undermines the effectiveness of their programmes. This is an acknowledgement of the negative impacts of refugees on the environment. Although refugees are not expected to put environmental considerations before their safety and welfare, they are expected to minimise their environmental impacts, hence reducing the conflicts with the receiving communities. Suhrke (1994) looks at the problem from the angle of environmental degradation, which causes environmental refugees to be viewed as victims as well as sources or perpetrators of conflicts in the receiving areas. He alludes to the fact that refugees can destabilise states as they move across borders, and that when they move into urban areas, they contribute to fast and uncontrolled urbanisation which is unstable and conflict prone. This definitely causes more environmental degradation in terms of sanitation problems, water pollution and other problems for the receiving community, which may initiate another cycle of new conflicts. This further confirms the spiralling of conflicts as described by Mitchell (1981).

In describing the relationship between development, environment and conflict, Friedman (1994) discusses negotiated development as opposed to development that is imposed on a community. He alludes to the fact that development is conflictual since it destroys some things and creates some things. It destroys the social relationships in a society; hence it can trigger conflicts or violence from threatened communities. Kraybill (1995) describes development as a process that raises expectations and brings change to a society, which always results in conflicts and disagreements, either within the community or between communities, or between the communities and planners. He further alludes to the fact that although on the surface it might look as if the people are competing over resources, the real causes of the conflict are usually much deeper. The actual cause might be that the community needs to be involved, recognised and/or acknowledged in the development that is taking place. Therefore, if the planner does not address such needs, a

seed of bitter conflict would have been sown. Payne (1998) emphasises that in order to avoid conflicts that are a result of environmental problems, sustainable development might be the answer. He alluded to the phenomenon that environmentally caused conflicts tend to erupt in poor countries, which are not in a position to implement sustainable development. It is therefore necessary to note that development can cause negative environmental impacts, which can lead to conflicts, and the conflicts could result in a further environmental degradation and so the cycle continues.

Morris (1999) examines two methods of resolving environmental conflicts or public disputes: the traditional one and an alternative methodology. The traditional method of resolution is arbitration by a government official, but this method does not allow full comprehension of the environmental and economic facts involved in the case. It utilises laws and precedents in earlier judgements, and therefore works against the facts. Each environmental dispute is different from others, and the parties could even be coming from completely different cultures. The precedents may therefore be rendered irrelevant. The settlement in this method is through a third party and not through the parties themselves. Therefore, disputing parties never get into direct interaction to disconfirm their negative perceptions of each other. The parties never really get to know and understand each other. The likelihood is that any settlement reached in this way will not last for very long because it will need to be policed by an external party, which is normally not possible. The alternative method is that of market-based contracts, which was developed by Coase in 1960. This method allows for the deep understanding of the environmental facts, and for direct negotiations between parties. It allows parties to iron out differences in perceptions that normally lead to conflict escalation. It depends on open exchanges of information and understanding of each other's interests, since it is better to comprehend each other than to alienate each other. This method is weak as far as fairness is concerned, so its fairness can only be of value for localised environmental damage. In conclusion, Morris (1999) settled for a hybrid between the two methods, which uses the power of the market-based system to motivate and facilitate efficient settlements while preserving the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the legal/tradition system.

Murphree and Wright (1996) critically evaluate the co-optation methodology as a framework for the resolution of environmental conflicts. They observed that it has three steps or facets, i.e. channelling, inclusion and salience control. Channelling works well with orderly and reliable

communities, but not with disorganised and fragmented communities. Institutionalising might be seen as an attempt at neutralising the opposition parties. The conditions for channelling are that it has to be focused at the leadership that has a majority control, and that it has to be considered in difficult situations. In fact, the bigger the threat, the better it is to use this method. The co-optation method should be regarded as a risk, however, since the community can later be hostile if they discover that this method was used on them. Inclusion involves including the opposite side or the antagonists in the decision-making process, even if their input does not affect the outcome. Their participation in the process increases their commitment and their acceptance of the decision, since they will always feel that they are part and parcel of the decision. This method was effectively used in Zimbabwe's first parliament where the main opposition party, Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union (ZAPU), which had only 20 out of 100 seats, was included in the government. Although they could never change any decision, they felt they were part of the government. Salience control is the third facet of this triangle. It is the appeasement of a group over critical issues, by making it appear as if those issues are being addressed, so the opposition parties do not have to push them to the forefront anymore. A warning is that this might work in the earlier stages, but later co-optation may be recognised and that may lead to the discreditation of the negotiation process. Therefore, it might be a good candidate for environmental conflict resolution, but is to be used with caution in case it backfires.

Campbell and Floyd (1996) examined the use of negotiation or mediated negotiation as a framework for environmental conflict resolution. They alluded to the fact that although it might be faster and cheaper to litigate when one looks at global issues, the decision may be longer lasting and more satisfactory if it is made from negotiation or mediated negotiation. Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), as well as Susskind and Ozanwa (1984) have shown evidence of this. Campbell and Floyd (1996) observed that environmental mediation has developed as a sub-field of dispute resolution, but that, although it has been used extensively, it is still unresolved when mediation should be used as an appropriate tool for environmental disputes. Some of the conditions that are required for mediation are a situation when there is a relative balance of power, and one in which the conflict has reached an impasse. In addition Campbell & Floyd (1996) introduced the role of the development or environmental planner into the environmental conflict matrix. He observed that although the planner is a technician, in most cases

he has to double up as a politician or a hybrid of the two. It will also be an advantage for the planner to be a negotiator or mediator in order for him to be democratic in the planning process. This is a quality that most planners do not possess, which explains the difficulties they face in the planning process and also the number of unimplemented plans.

Griggs (1996) explores how the study and the comprehension of culture would assist in understanding environmental conflicts and in attempting to resolve them. He says that because environmental conflicts are so linked to communities, it is important to understand the four myths of culture. Firstly, 'Culture is a product of tradition', hence successful cultures are those that adjust and respond to the changing physical, social and economic constraints of their environment. Secondly, 'Culture is environmentally determined', hence people choose a variety of adaptation strategies within environmental constraints. Thirdly, 'Culture is an anachronism and will disappear with modernization', but although culture is socially constructed, it cannot be dismissed that easily, because an imposition of new culture could meet with violent resistance. Lastly, 'Culture is equivalent to ethnicity and race', but it is much wider than ethnicity and smaller than race. Griggs concluded by saying that culture has to be recognised as an active force with the task of creating a harmonious balance between the people and the environment. All these theories are illustrated by Weaver (1996), when he examined the management of two swamps in East Africa. One was managed by the use of legislation, fences and armed guards, which resulted in community conflict. The other was managed by local action through negotiations, and this method conserved the swamp in a harmonious manner with no conflicts. He concludes by stressing that outsiders will not produce the expected results; it is the internally generated action that will bring pride within the community and will bring conflict-free management of the environment.

Linsell and McDaid (1996) more or less concur with Griggs (1996) by saying people want control of their lives and their environment. They sometimes therefore go into conflict with environmental groups that want them to choose between their livelihood and saving the environment. If they are consulted on how they would combine the two, the result will be non-conflictual. This re-emphasises the importance of local consultations and internal solutions. Lyster (1990) advocates alternative methods to litigation for environmental conflicts. He argues for civil enforcement, and negotiating for compliance, and recommends the use of dispute resolution where judicial

enforcement has failed. Finally, he propagates the use of the land utilisation planner as a mediator, since he regards this as one of the most effective methods. This is reinforced by Fowkes (1992) who highlighted that the involvement of the public in all the stages of development and policy making will ensure that conflicts do not come up in the future. She highlights four critical stages for involvement: the people should be part of the assembly ('forming'), and then they should be involved in the debate ('storming'), in the setting of norms ('norming'), and in the implementation of the policies that would have been developed ('performing'). If these suggestions are followed by environmental authorities, conflicts may become to be a feature of the past.

Finally, this paper would briefly like to examine how International Environmental Conflicts (IECs) are managed. Trolldalen (1998 chap. 3) divides the management of IECs into two categories, non-legal and legal. The non-legal approach is to identify the threats, assess them and the causes, report on them and advise on how to avert the conflict. Another approach of a non-legal kind has been highlighted as the development of 'soft laws' such as guidelines, resolutions, recommendations and standards. Such approaches, however, should be coupled with national institutional building for monitoring purposes. On the other hand, IECs can be managed through a legal process, such as the production of international treaties or laws, or the documentation of customary laws. In this light, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has a mandate to co-ordinate environmental action globally, and to manage and/or minimise the chances of IECs through monitoring and assessing the development of action plans and of new legal instruments. To date, the UN has been heavily criticised for its approach of merely addressing the manifestations of IECs instead of attending to the underlying causes.

It is strongly believed that environmental conflicts can be effectively managed if all the foregoing experiences are taken into account. One would like to see a situation where most personnel that deal with environmental issues have been trained in conflict management techniques so that environmental conflict mitigation will be part of the environmental planning process. Since it is a generally agreed principle that 'prevention is better than cure', environmental conflict mitigation will definitely be cheaper and more effective than environmental conflict management or resolution, or attending to the consequences of environmental conflicts.

2. The Lesotho Case Study

The Conflict Ridden History of Lesotho

The environmental conflicts in Lesotho have had their underlying causes and their impacts or consequences. Various attempts have been undertaken to manage or resolve these conflicts. Lesotho's environmental problems have reached unprecedented proportions today because attempts to solve them have always focused on the 'green issues' or physical environment, totally ignoring the 'brown issues' of the social, cultural and political aspects of the environment. It is to be hoped, therefore, that an analysis of the conflict dimension will contribute to a new beginning of taking a more pragmatic and genuine approach towards addressing the environmental degradation that we have seen to date as a result of conflicts.

The creation of the Lesotho Kingdom was 'a crisis foretold'. Lesotho, a small mountainous kingdom completely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa, occupies 30 400 square kilometres. Prior to the establishment of Lesotho as a country, the Basotho people occupied the whole of the present Free State Province of South Africa and the present day Kingdom of Lesotho (Lelimo 1998). As the Boer Trekkers moved north from the Cape Province in the 1830s, they temporarily settled in the sweet grasslands and eventually started fighting the Basotho. As the war ensued the Basotho retreated to their defensive posts in the mountains, leaving about 75 per cent of their original land to the Boers (descendants of the Dutch). As the Boers continued to push them, the Basotho king asked for protection from the British, who then established the Basotholand Protectorate under King Moshoeshoe I. By that time, most of what Lelimo (1998) calls 'the conquered territory' had already been lost to the Boers and so became the 'Orange Free State'.

In this unfolding crisis, the Orange Free State retained the flat to gentle undulating land, which was fertile, potentially arable and provided good grazing land. The newly established, tiny Lesotho Kingdom retained only 25 per cent of the original land of the Basotho. Moreover, this part consisted of rugged, unfertile land, of which only about 13 per cent was potentially arable. The Basotho people are traditionally livestock keepers, but since they had been driven out of their grazing lands with their large numbers of animals into the rugged mountains, they had very little choice except to adapt to the mountains. The Basotho as a tribe have strong cultural affiliations, however, and these were further strengthened by the threat of the Boers. This fact is confirmed by Martinussen (1988) who states that tribal and cultural ties get

stronger under threat of losing identity. Therefore, although they were now mountain dwellers, they would not accept the loss of their cultural identity as keepers of livestock. Therefore, as their population inevitably increased with time, the livestock numbers increased proportionally. Also, as the population increased, more land came under the plough until eventually the people started crop farming on the fragile mountain slopes and using the mountains for grazing on a continuous basis, instead of the original seasonal grazing. It therefore became clear right from day one of the kingdom that it will not be a sustainable kingdom unless there was a safety valve somewhere, either by absorption of the excess population into industries in urban areas or by expanding the size of the land. The reality was, however, that none of these options took place, and hence the crisis foretold is with us today.

Lesotho's Environmental Crisis and Impacts

It is an established fact in literature that globally, soil erosion in Lesotho is only second to that of Ethiopia. The question to be asked is whether land degradation, and specifically soil erosion, is the real problem, or whether this is just a symptom of problems with deep-rooted causes. It has to be understood that soil erosion is the final stage/product of a chain of events. From 'the crisis foretold' perspective, it was clear that overpopulation and overstocking would lead to serious problems. A population of 2 million people on an area of 30 400 square kilometres has 0.0152 sq km or 15.2 ha per capita, but if food can be produced on only about 9.4 per cent of the total area, this translates to 1.43 ha per capita. Therefore, the overcrowded population started encroaching into the foothills for more cropland and into the high mountains for grazing, hence degrading these fragile marginal lands. The large number of animals overgrazed the strips of uncropped land in the lowlands and in the fragile mountain ecosystem. The people cut down the trees to build more shelter and opened up more croplands exposing these fragile marginal lands to further degradation. These cycles were repeated, resulting in deforestation and overgrazing, and leading to complete devegetation of the areas. Therefore, as it rained on bare steep slopes, soil erosion set in. The steep slopes and generally rugged terrain exacerbated the erosion process. At this point, the agents of desertification set in as the topsoil was lost, and desiccation of the subsoil resulted in the production of a hard impervious layer which increased the amount of surface run-off, and thus another cycle of erosion begun. Without belabouring the point on environmental degradation, it can be concluded by saying that the environmental problems or land degradation

are characterised by devegetation, soil erosion, and desertification. However, the factors causing, accelerating and perpetuating the process were a result of social issues; hence the need to review and examine the conflict dimension of the environmental crisis in this country.

It should be noted here that from the onset a crisis resulted from a conflict over natural resources, and that when the British intervened, they only protected what was remaining in terms of land instead of looking at the problem and at what lay in the future of these people who had lost most of their land and its natural resources. This conflict then translated from a conflict between the Boers and the Basotho people to a dispute between the Basotho and the British administrators and land-use planners during British rule when the British tried to rationalise the use of the land (Lelimo 1998). When the planners stipulated the livestock carrying capacity of the land and translated it to what each family could have, this became a problem since the number of animals per household was unacceptably low and continued to be reduced as the population increased. When the country got its independence in 1966, this dispute shifted from the British to the national government planners and the land users. Any form of control on the number of animals and the size of land for each family's crops was viewed negatively as repression by the government. Unfortunately the communities could not appreciate or understand that the planners, whether British or local, were only making an assessment of the capacity of the land resources and passing it down to the people. The people at village level saw it as an infringement of their rights. All these refusals and resistance resulted in the collapse of contour ridges, and in overstocking, deforestation, erosion and eventually desertification.

Later this conflict transformed into inter-community and intra-community conflicts as the reality got closer to home, and as the competition for the limited resources became a reality in the villages. As the problem further manifested itself, conflicts ensued between neighbouring communities over use of limited resources like grazing areas, water resources and tree resources. Each community guarded its resources jealously, resulting in boundary disputes between chieftainship areas. Gradually, as the sharing of resources within the community or village got tighter, disputes arose between members of the same village when each member could not get enough land for cropping, grazing for their animals or enough trees for fuel-wood and construction. The communal land tenure system exacerbated the situation in the grazing lands, since it was a free for all situation. Everybody tried to extract as much as they could as fast as they could, in the true form of the

'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968). What then became the results and impacts of these conflicts at the various levels in the system was land degradation, visible as soil erosion, deforestation and desertification, to such an extent that Lesotho became 'famous' for its gullies. This is a social problem which has transformed itself into an environmental catastrophe. It serves to illustrate how conflicts over the use of land and other natural resources leads to the degradation of the same resources. It also illustrates how this starts a vicious cycle where the degraded environment can only support a fraction of the pre-determined numbers of animals and this kick-starts a second spiral of the conflict which is more intense than the first one, true to the conflict spirals of Mitchell (1981). This therefore is a case study within which several conflict theories have been seen to come true, like the typical phenomenon, highlighted by Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), of new issues popping up during negotiations about public conflicts.

The next section analyses what the response has been to this environmental catastrophe. The basic response has been to attend to the damaged environment, which meant attending to the symptoms, and this has proved to have been a complete misperception of what the problem was and still is.

Environmental Rehabilitation: A Historical Review

There have been various attempts to stop the escalating environmental degradation and more specifically soil erosion. Environmental degradation and soil erosion have been talked about in Lesotho for over 40 years, since the colonial days. It is interesting to note that as attempt after attempt was made to halt the soil erosion, it kept on increasing. It was not only the density of the gullies that increased, but they got wider, deeper and longer by the season. This should have been viewed as an indicator that the wrong approach was being used or that attention was being focused in a direction that was not yielding any positive results.

One of the earliest documented attempts was that by the British in the early 1960s when they introduced the contour ridges. They brought in mechanical equipment to construct the structures on the farmers' lands without the farmers fully understanding or agreeing to what was being done. This led to lack of maintenance of the structure, rendering a good technology useless. It was a clear case of attending to the symptoms rather than the core of the problem. The Thaba Bosiu Project was another attempt in the 1970s to curb the increasing soil erosion. After the termination of each project, the structures collapsed and channelled water into gullies resulting in deep

incisions. The Phuthiatsana Project in the 1980s also had an element of soil conservation, and this was followed by the FAO's Soil and Water Conservation Project (SOWACO). These were followed by the GTZ, Matelile Project, which focused on soil conservation, and the Production Through Conservation (PTC I) project which culminated in PTC II.

It was only the PTC II project that started noticing the social conflict aspect of the problem and began actively asking for people's participation and opinions throughout the whole process, from planning through to implementation. The peculiar aspect of all these attempts was that they focused on the rehabilitation of the physical environment. They concentrated on the amount and intensity of the rainfall, the slope of the land, and the resulting impacts on the environment, but – although agricultural extension services were available – nobody ever tried to understand the underlying causes of why the people were part and parcel of the degradation of the land.

The Experiences of the National Environmental Youth Corps Project

The experiences of this NEYC project, which took some lessons from PTC II, are elaborated in the following sections. The NEYC is a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project which was set up as a response to the United Nations Conference for Environmental Development (UNCED) 1992, which focused on environmental rehabilitation and management by unemployed youth. The objectives of the NEYC project were two pronged, that is, to rehabilitate the rural and urban environment and at the same time to create employment for the multitudes of unemployed youth who make up about 41 per cent of the population. This project paid the youth a small allowance while they were being trained to rehabilitate their local environments under the joint supervision of the project and the village leadership. The youth were nominated for the project by the village leadership and the areas to be rehabilitated were identified by the village leadership. The community participation started right from the initial meetings of the whole village, at which the project concept was introduced, and continued when the selection of the youth and of areas for rehabilitation took place. A two-way dialogue was established and maintained by having follow-up meetings and workshops periodically to get feedback from the village on whether what was happening was agreeable and whether they were noticing the benefits to the youth, the community at large, and their local environment. By involving the communities in this way the project management thought it had everything

that was needed to reverse the environmental degradation as per the project design. The project concentrated on activities like establishment of plant nurseries, afforestation programmes, rehabilitation of dongas/gullies, road drainage in the rural areas and solid waste management, including recycling of waste materials, for urban areas. No conflicts were expected to ensue from the project, since this was an empowerment and participatory environmental project. Conflicts did arise, however, out of this supposedly well designed and well implemented project, and these are highlighted below.

First and foremost, the selection of only 20 per cent of the youth to take part in the project generated the first type of conflict. Although the project was fully aware of this factor, the assumption was that if the village as an entity were asked to select the youth themselves on a Village Development Council (VDC) basis, they would amicably agree on who should be engaged in the project. What was not evident was that in an area where poverty and unemployment rates for this category of youth were running at 65–70 per cent, this was enough to open a 'pandora box' (Sibanda 2000). In reality every parent who had a qualifying youth wanted his/her own child to be engaged, not that of the neighbours.

The project also took too lightly the possibility of conflicts arising from other factors. Firstly, the village is basically a conglomeration of relatives. So that a parent may think: 'If my child is not selected, his cousin may be in'. In reality, therefore, the project became a struggle, positioning brother against brother and cousin against cousin. Secondly, the amount that was going to be paid as an allowance to the youth was only R200.00 per month for year 1, R100.00 monthly for year 2 and R50.00 monthly for year 3. The project was worried that this was too small an amount, so it would be difficult even to recruit enough youth for the project. On the contrary, every youth in the village wanted to be in it and every parent backed his or her own child, because in a family where nobody had an income this was a lot of money which would be paid consistently. A third factor that contributed to the pre-implementation conflict was that the VDC, which is made up of 3 or 4 villages, was supposed to select an area (watershed) where the youth group would do some consolidated rehabilitation work. In reality, this had to be in one of the village areas and could not be in all of them. Therefore, the villages within the same VDC started fighting about which village was going to benefit from the rehabilitation while the others were only going to supply youth labour and only get partial benefits of the project. From the above narration one can already visualise that within a week after arrival in each area this

project was no longer as welcome as it had been envisaged at the district level. This started a nightmare within which the project, which had not been prepared for such conflict, had to operate for the next four years.

The bottom line to this unveiling nightmare was that it was on the money that the community focused, rather than on the environmental rehabilitation and proper management of the environment, on which the project was focused. Therefore the intra-village conflicts and inter-village conflicts worked against the achievement of the projects objective. At the initial project-introductory meetings at village level, the project negotiated with the villagers to allocate the gullied area for rehabilitation on a permanent basis to the youth group, and the villagers agreed to this without thinking about it deeply and examining the implications and consequences. The project viewed this as an incentive to the landless youth, and the villagers were not worried about giving the degraded land away since it was valueless. But the physical impact that the project produced in these areas within 6–8 months made the elders in the village change their minds about the allocation. As a result of the high rate of erosion, the gullies filled up with the fertile topsoil from surrounding fields and these former gullies turned into lavish green valleys within a season or two. What once had been valueless land was now valuable land that was admired within the village. The village elders and VDC members who were supposed to assist the youth whenever they needed help, started alleging that these few youth were going to get double benefits, i.e. receiving a cash allowance and then receiving the land they could rehabilitate. The form 'C' (a lease document) that the village chief was supposed to prepare for the legalisation of the transfer was therefore never completed. These problems gradually demoralised the youth as they could not accomplish what they had been trained to do or achieve their objectives, hence the rate of environmental rehabilitation slowed down.

Another issue that sparked some more conflict in the village was the fact that built into the project was an aspect of skills training for the youth leading to environment-related income-generating projects. This would continuously provide an income to the group even after the funded phase of the project. The VDC and chief had been asked at the initial stages of the project to allocate another piece of land for the income-generating project, and in principle this was agreed. When the time for the income-generating projects came (9 to 15 months later), it became one of the most difficult issues for the village to deal with. This was seen as a third benefit to the few youth who had already been privileged. It started a conflict between the youth group

and the village elders, hence confirming Kraybill's (1995) theory that says development brings conflict, because these formerly peaceful villages were now in so much conflict within themselves and between each other just because of this environmental development project.

Consequences of the Conflicts

Although the project focused on rehabilitation and proper management of the environment, it resulted in disputes, jealousies as well as negative impacts on the environment which the project was supposed to conserve. These conflicts were manifested in the following ways. As the youth group constructed the soil conservation structures, some members of the village would destroy them by driving animals over them. Some members from the village would allow the out-planted tree seedlings to be grazed, after they were moved out of the fenced nursery/garden. Animals would be driven into the nursery to feed on and destroy the tree seedlings and vegetables being grown for sale by the youth group. After the tree seedlings were out-planted in the catchment areas/watersheds under rehabilitation to increase the vegetation cover, they would either be uprooted or grazed within a few weeks, rendering the efforts of the youth to fully rehabilitate these areas virtually useless. Therefore, the catchment areas, which were not supposed to be grazed for a season or two, were constantly violated by certain members of the community, especially at night. Reports about these violations to the village leadership yielded no punitive action to curb this behaviour. In some instances, the garden fences were stolen from the nursery/garden leaving the vegetables and seedlings unprotected. In some instances, as the youth group was trying to build the chicken or poultry houses for income generation, the walls would be constantly destroyed during the night. The female members of the group were constantly harassed on their way to and from work on a daily basis. These acts discouraged the youth groups and at most sites they never saw any of their tree seedlings grow to full size trees. Therefore, what was set out to be a village project to benefit all members of the village directly or indirectly, caused all these conflicts with the result that the benefits were small or only short-lived. Meanwhile, the tree seedlings died, erosion continued, devegetation continued and desertification continued to take a grip on the country. The initial objectives of putting some of the rehabilitated lands back to production were never realised fully at more than half the sites.

Another aspect of the project which was hardly achieved, was the objective to increase the vegetation cover. As a matter of fact, some members of the

village complained that the project was taking away their grazing land and putting it under tree plantations, hence they were not going to allow the tree seedlings to grow into plantations. These allegations were not being aired for the first time, because some woodlots, which were planted under the World Bank's 'Woodlot Project', had been set on fire even when they were fully grown. This was done by communities in conflict over land rights and area boundaries.

The positive impacts on the environment were obviously not as could be expected from a project designed to rehabilitate the environment. It only demonstrated that it is possible to do something about the extensive erosion or to rehabilitate the lands damaged as a result of earlier conflicts. What it mainly demonstrated, however, was how the environment suffers as a consequence of conflicts between communities, especially if the disputes are over land or some natural resources. It also showed how even the quest to improve the environment has resulted in conflicts. There are many more examples that can be highlighted to illustrate how the environment is usually the victim of conflicts.

NEYC Conflict Mitigation Measures

This section highlights the current measures being undertaken by the NEYC project to remedy the situation described above. Although the problems discussed above paint a gloomy picture, the project was largely successful to the extent that the government of Lesotho decided to have a second phase and to expand the project by having the project recruit more youth. The project management then decided that before Phase II was implemented it was necessary to look into the problems of Phase I. This took the form of workshops with a representative part of the traditional leadership (chiefs) and the elected local government leadership (Village Development Councils) in each district. The workshops were a combination of fact-finding and problem-solving training forums. Between 60 and 400 leaders per district were workshopped in groups of about 60–70 per group, depending on the district size and the number of chiefs and VDCs. A report was compiled for each district highlighting the perceptions and problems and this resulted in a combined report highlighting the commonalities among the various areas and the strategy devised for phase II of the project.

In addition to what was learnt from the conflicts themselves, the project learnt a couple of key lessons in these frank and open discussion forums.

Although the chief was made an ex officio member of the VDC at the creation of this structure, in practice there was still a power struggle between these two institutions, namely the traditional and the elected leaders of the people. This resulted in a village polarised between the two. Hence where the project worked closely with one side, the other side was busy inciting the people to destroy what was being done. This was aggravated by the fact that the leaders were always trained separately and each did not have the terms of reference of the other, since up until 1998 they reported to different ministries.

Although the VDCs were supposed to be development agents of government, the truth of the matter was that they were elected on party political lines and they saw themselves as party representatives rather than government agents. Whatever development was spearheaded by the VDC was seen as promoting the ruling party, hence the opposition parties saw it fit to destroy the work or incite people to destroy it.

Another conflict unearthed in these workshops was that there is an intra-structural conflict within the local government structures themselves, i.e. between the VDC and the District Development Council (DDC). Although the DDC is normally made up of the secretary and chairperson from each Ward Development Council (WDC), which in turn had similar representatives from the VDC, there was some communication breakdown between the three. Basically the WDCs were not functional, hence what was discussed at the VDC level was not filtering through to the DDC. Similarly, whatever the project management discussed at the district with DDC never filtered down to the VDC where the project was being implemented. This culminated in an information flow problem, which normally resulted in more conflicts.

Land allocation was another controversial subject between the VDCs and the chiefs. The chief believed that it was his sole jurisdiction to allocate land as per powers entrusted to him by the king, but on the other hand the VDC Act says that the VDC with the chief perform the land allocation duties. So the project was always caught between the two. If it got the land for the youth from the VDC, the chief would still go ahead and allocate that piece of land to somebody else just to cause confusion. In some areas, the VDC members never attended meetings or did any of their duties because they saw no point in doing anything since they were not remunerated, while the chiefs were remunerated. In these areas development plans lagged behind and it was always difficult to get any commitment on anything from the VDCs, hence the environment suffered greatly.

Conclusions

It is hoped that this case study has highlighted the complex relationship between the environment, development and conflict and how they impact on each other. What it portrays clearly, is that community conflicts, disputes or disagreements are manifested in different ways but in most cases the manifestations have negative impacts on the environment. The unfortunate aspect is that planners, environmentalists and development agents never examine the social conflict dimension of the problems and programmes that they are looking into, because they do not possess the extra lens provided by conflict management skills. It is this extra lens that is needed in development planning to move the development to the next level by being able to take care of the conflict dimension and being able to understand the conflicts and mitigate their impacts. The lack of this expertise has always left the jobs half-baked without a full understanding of the root causes of the problems that would be under scrutiny. It is a wish and a hope that the recognition of the conflict dimension in environmental management issues will open a new chapter, which might produce great strides in the proper management of the environment.

Sources

Campbell, M.C. & Floyd, D.W. 1996. Thinking critically about environmental mediation. *Journal of Planning Literature* 10(3), 235-248.

Carpenter, S. & Kennedy, W. 1988. *Managing Public Disputes: A practical guide to handling conflict and reaching agreements*. London: Jossey–Bass Publishers.

Chitiyo, T.K. 2000. Land Violence and Compensation: Reconceptualising Zimbabwe's Land and War Veterans' Debate. *Track Two* (May), 1-30.

Cousins, B. 1996. Redressing the apartheid legacy: Conflict resolution in South Africa's tenure reform programme. *Track Two* (December), 23-26.

Fowkes, S. 1992. Storming and Norming: Involving the public in policy making, an environmental case study. *Track Two* (August), 10-12.

Friedman, S. 1994. The concealed community: Who exactly negotiates development? *Track Two* (February), 6-8.

Goldblatt, S. 1995. Land Reform, Conflict and the Research and Development Programme: Altering the parameters of conflict over land. *Track Two* (September), 13-15.

Griggs, R 1996. The cultural dimensions of environmental decision-making. *Track Two* (December), 14-18.

Hardin, T. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science* 162, 1243-1248.

Kakonge, J.O. 2000. A review of refugees' environmental-oriented projects in Africa: A *case for environmental impact assessment. Refugee Projects: Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* 18, 23–32.

Kraybill, R. 1995. Development conflict resolution and the RDP: Towards peaceful development. *Track Two* (September), 1-8.

Lelimo, M. 1998. The Questions of Lesotho's Conquered Territory: It's Time for an Answer. Morija Museum & Archives.

Linsell, L. & McDaid, L. 1996. Of pelicans and people, steel and survival: Big capital is the problem, say environmentalists. *Track Two* (December), 7-10.

Lyster, R. 1990. Environmental dispute resolution, in Pretorius, P. (ed), *Dispute Resolution*. Cape Town: Juta.

Martinussen, J. 1988. S*ociety, State and Market: A guide to competing theories of development*. London & New Jersey: Zed Books; Pretoria: HSRC.

Mitchell, C.R. 1981. *The Structure of International Conflict.* London: Macmillan.

Morris, M. 1999. Social Psychological Obstacles in Environmental Conflict Resolution. *American Behavioral Scientist* 42(8), 1322-1349.

Murphree, D.W. & Wright, S.A. 1996. Toxic waste siting and community resistance: How cooptation of local citizen opposition failed. *Social Perspectives* 39(4), 447-464.

Payne, R.A. 1998. The limits and promise of environmental conflicts prevention: the case of the Global Environment Facility (GEF). J*ournal of Peace Research* (UK) 35(3), 363-380.

Poonan, U. & Mackenzie, P. 1996. Land and justice, animals and diamonds: Unfolding conflict in the Madimbo Corridor. *Track Two* (December), 20-22.

Sibanda, H.M. 2000. The Implementation of the National Environment Youth Corps Project, LES/94/008. Experiences to date. GOL/UNDP Lesotho. Presented as part of the End of Assignment Report.

Suhrke, A. 1994. Environmental charge, migration, and conflict: A lethal feedback dynamic? in Crocker, C.A., Hampson, F.O. & Aall, P. (eds), Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict.

Susskind, L. & Ozanwa, C. 1984. Mediated Negotiation in the Public Sector, in *American Behavioral Scientist* (Nov-Dec).

Timberlake & Tinker 1985. Environmental Refugees: The origins of a construct. Worldwatch Institute, Earthscan, UNEP (chapter 11).

Trolldalen, J.M. 1998. International Environmental Conflict Resolution: The role of the United Nations. WFED, UNITAR, NIDR.

UNHCR 1999. Refugees and the Environment (4 pages). Environmental concerns during refugee operations (3 pages). Recent Developments in environment (2 pages). www.unhcr.ch

Weaver, T. 1996. A tale of two swamps: Community conflict and community conservation in East Africa. *Track Two* (December), 11-13.