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Piping water from the Okavango River to Namibia – the role of communities and pressure groups in water politics

RICHARD MEISSNER

From the beginning of the 1990s until early 1997 Namibia suffered severe drought conditions which had an adverse effect of the country's water supply. As a result, the Namibian government started to consider using the perennial water sources of the country to alleviate these crippling conditions. All these water sources, however, originate within the borders of the four countries neighbouring Namibia.

During the drought period, the Namibian government started planning a water pipeline from Rundu, on the banks of the Okavango River, to Grootfontein. The Okavango flows across the territories of Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Angola is the upper riparian, Namibia the lower riparian and Botswana the last country to receive water in this international river system. In Botswana, a thick layer of Kalahari sand stops the flow of the Okavango River, forming a myriad of channels and lagoons. This delta is one of the country's main tourist and hunting attractions and therefore a main source of external revenue. It is therefore understandable that the planned Namibian pipeline created widespread condemnation in Botswana.

The proposed pipeline would form part of Namibia's National Water Carrier and was aimed at supplementing the inte-

rior's water resources. It sparked off a controversy between the governments of Namibia and Botswana. The Namibian government, desperate to relieve its water shortage, planned an extraction of only one per cent or 100 million cubic meters a year of the Okavango River's water volume.

The Botswana government opposed this proposal because, they argued, it could have a negative effect on the ecosystem of the Okavango Delta and in turn the tourism industry in Botswana. Non-governmental organisations and Botswana citizens threw their weight behind the government and strongly condemned the Namibian government's proposed upstream extraction.

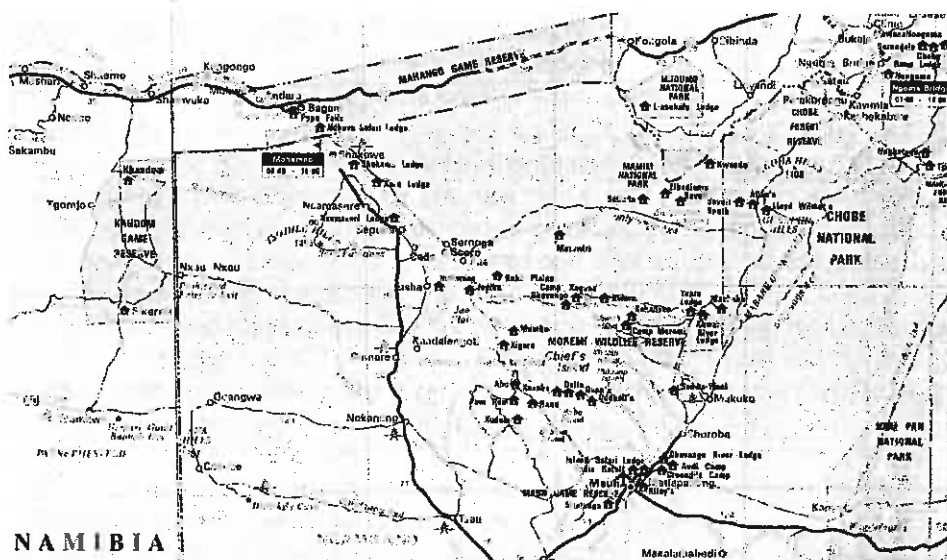
This was not the first time that the environmental lobby, the citizens of Botswana and particularly the communities in and around the Okavango Delta had protested against a proposal to extract the Delta's water. In the early 1980s, the Botswana government planned to use some of the Delta's water for urban and irrigation needs. Communities in the Delta opposed the plan, saying that it would ruin their livelihoods since the project would dry up the Delta.

The international environmental lobby also condemned the project. Greenpeace

started a campaign against Botswana's diamond industry since part of the Delta's water was used to supply water to the Orapa diamond mine in the north of the country. Although Greenpeace proposed an alternative project, it was the expert advice of the World Conservation Union, based in Switzerland, and the Delta communities that swayed the Botswana government to temporarily shelve the project. The reason why Greenpeace was not successful in its lobbying, despite the fact that its scientists are highly regarded, was because the Botswana government perceived it to pursue an overtly political agenda.

The recent Namibian proposal resulted in a repetition of the events of the 1980s. Earthlife Africa, a South African environmental advocacy group, proposed that gas from the recently discovered Kudu gas field, west of Oranjemund, should be used to produce electricity and as a byproduct, to desalinate sea water as an alternative to the Namibian proposed pipeline. According to Earthlife Africa, this would alleviate Namibia's chronic water shortage and make the Okavango pipeline redundant.

The Namibian government, however, saw this as unpractical. The World Conservation Union again played a role in the



Namibia/Okavango dispute. It recommended that international agreements should be drawn up between the riparians in the river system through which future water extractions could be negotiated. The Union's argument was that without such agreements, unilateral extraction of water could jeopardize the interests of downstream riparians.

The citizens of Botswana were again strongly opposed to the proposed pipeline. In December 1996 the Namibian government held meetings with citizens in the northern part of the Okavango Delta and Gaborone. The government was met with reactions ranging from open antagonism and mistrust to appeals for a more inclusive Environmental Impact Assessment that would examine the impact of the pipeline project on the ecological integrity of the Delta. The conservation lobby in Botswana, particularly the Kalahari Conservation Society, passionately attacked the project, accusing Namibia of not wanting to spend money on an Environmental Impact Assessment.

In early 1997 good rains fell over large parts of Namibia and it seemed as though the drought was over since the water levels of all Namibia's dams had risen to satisfactory levels. The Namibian government decided to shelve the Okavango pipeline project, but only temporarily.

A growing population, rapid economic development and the certainty of another drought in future will again motivate the Namibian government to look at the Okavango River as a source of water supply to the interior of the country. The pipeline project might even become a reality. Hopefully, this time around, representatives of non-governmental organisations, pressure groups and the citizens of Botswana will be included at an early stage of the negotiations over the water of the Okavango River, since this will determine the success of the project.

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Journal of Humanitarian Assistance

<http://www-jha.sps.cam.ac.uk/>

The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance is an on-line journal, hosted by the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cambridge (United Kingdom). The journal disseminates information on all humanitarian issues and targets academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), policy makers and practitioners in the field of international humanitarian assistance. It merges practical and analytical knowledge-sharing across professions, organisations and institutions. This regularly updated and user-friendly journal comes at no cost. It includes the most recent information on crisis situations around the world and also proactively and pre-emptively analyses these crises.

The site includes academic articles, book reviews, country or area-specific situation reports, policy statements, mission reports and reference documents from a myriad of international organisations and United Nations missions, analysing issues as disparate as landmines and gender.

Everything can be downloaded instantly. In addition to access to an archive containing information on past and continuing areas of interest, website users can advertise job opportunities and conferences or seminars, and interact to require information or assistance on particular topics.

South Centre

<http://www.southcentre.org/>

The South Centre is an intergovernmental institution of the developing countries based in Geneva and chaired by Julius Nyerere. Its mission is to organise and mobilise the South's considerable combined expertise and experience, thus enhancing its bargaining power. Principally aimed at promoting South-South co-operation, this forum works to assist in developing points of view on major policy issues, and to generate ideas and

action-oriented proposals for consideration by the collective of South governments, institutions of co-operation, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs and the South community at large.

The site offers a list of publications and position papers on topical issues, some of which can be downloaded, in a variety of languages, as well as instant access to an on-line publication, the South Letter. Its latest edition contains articles on, amongst others, lessons from the Asian currency crisis, the effect of globalisation on international financial markets, and book reviews.

The site also features links to the home pages of all the major regional groupings, NGO networks, and United Nations economic and social research bodies.

OneWorld

<http://www.oneworld.org/>

The name says it all – this site is a world of information, a library of references on human rights and sustainable development. Do yourself a favour: take a morning off and explore this Internet community of over 200 organisations that provide information, fora for discussions, search functions, academic perspectives, bookshops, headline news and job opportunities to anyone interested in even the remotest aspect of human rights and development.

For a site this size it is surprisingly easy to negotiate – technically it is well maintained, and because of this it has received countless awards. At times, however, OneWorld might appear somewhat convoluted, but this is mainly due to the myriad of choices available to the websurfer.

In a nutshell, this is a definite asset in the arsenal available to particularly development NGOs. The British overseers of OneWorld aim at creating a 'supersite' of available information – by all accounts they have succeeded.