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# Walking a tightrope: using PRA in a conflict situation around Waza National Park, Cameroon

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### • Introduction

PRA has become a common method to stimulate communication between researchers and local people, often in an agricultural or other development context. In these cases, there is often no sharp conflict between local peoples' and outsiders' interests. But the case is different with protected areas where law promotes the interests of biodiversity, and of future and global generations, often at the expense of local people. Nowadays, it is accepted that some form of co-management has to be reached, creatively integrating the interests of biodiversity ('conservation') as well as of local communities ('development').

This paper reports the use of PRA by a third party to bridge these conflicting interests, a topic included in an earlier edition of PLA Notes (see Rodríguez 1998). We focus on our experiences of dealing with sensitive information on illegal park exploitation. While this information was indispensable in understanding and in anticipating necessary national park management changes, if used carelessly, it could have disrupted the dialogue that had been initiated.

### The area

Like many other protected areas, Waza National Park (NP) was established without compensating or consulting its human population. After its creation in 1934, several villages were removed or decided to move beyond the new park boundaries because of harassment over their use of resources. In

1966, one of the villages inside the park, Zeila, was burnt down following an election in which it had voted against the reigning power. Its twin village, Baram, has remained inside the park boundaries, despite numerous attempts to remove it. Inhabitants, evicted from the park, settled in villages along the park boundary and continued, together with their neighbours, to fish in the park water holes dug by their parents or graze their herds on the park grazing grounds of their elders. But confrontations took place regularly with the game guards.

According to Cameroonian legislation, all exploitation of national park resources is forbidden. Realities, such as settlements inside a park and park boundary communities using the resources, are not recognised, creating a confusing situation. This resulted in some people buying exploitation 'rights' to water holes or pastures from the poorly paid park staff, whereas other local people were excluded, resulting in much opposition to the park. Game guards had to spend much of their time addressing these complicated issues. Additionally, Waza NP authorities have regularly been confronted with well-armed poachers, most often coming from outside the area, attracted by the park's large elephant population. In 1980 they killed the park warden and subsequently, three guards lost their lives and various others were wounded. Given these confrontations, it is not surprising that wildlife has gradually been declining during these years.

**Figure 1. Lougouma, village on the border of Waza National Park (Photo: P. Scholte)**



### Management plan

In 1995, the Waza-Logone (WL) Project was commissioned by the Government of Cameroon to co-ordinate the formulation of a management plan for Waza NP which could lead to an improvement of the tense park-people relations. Once approved by the Minister, a management plan is a legal text, offering the possibility to clarify the ambiguity of park resource exploitation. Prior to the start of the management plan formulation, two important changes had taken place in the area. A park warden who was widely associated with the tensions had been replaced, suggesting a somewhat more tolerant position of the park authorities in future. Secondly, the first results of the development interventions of the WL Project had been realised, leading to a renewed confidence of local people in outsiders' interventions. To obtain background information for this management plan, PRA was carried out in the villages in and around Waza NP.

#### • PRA in park villages

PRA sessions were held in the twelve villages situated on the boundary, with their territory either bordering or inside Waza NP: the so-

called park villages. The team comprised three young people from the area with high school education, two men and one woman, who were temporarily employed by the WL Project and trained for two weeks in PRA techniques. This core team was led by the head of the provincial environmental service, an agro-economist (Jean-Hilaire Mbouche), and a direct colleague of the provincial head of wildlife. Two local translators, a man and a woman, and a supervisor (Paul Scholte) who co-ordinated the management plan formulation, completed the team. Spending one week in each village, the team used PRA to obtain a basic understanding of village situations and their problems<sup>1</sup>. More importantly, a dialogue was started, ultimately leading to a consensus between park authorities and local people on improved park and periphery zone management.

On arrival in a village, the team presented itself as playing a mediating role between local populations and park authorities, under the mandate of the WL Project's management plan formulation. One strict condition on the discussion existed: the existing legislation could not be violated. This had been a point of discussion with the park management

<sup>1</sup> based on Gueye and Schoonenmaker Freudenberger 1991

authorities who had been involved in the preparation of the fieldwork. The warden had expressed his concern that discussion of illegal activities could imply that they would be 'less illegal' by not being immediately refuted. Obviously, this was a difficult condition given the strict interpretation of park exploitation in Cameroon law and would remain so in subsequent discussions. It was also difficult to avoid distinguishing illegal activities, such as poaching, from 'less illegal' activities, such as fishing or grazing. Perhaps inevitably, after the PRA, rumours went out that fishing in the park would be allowed in future, motivating a few people to settle in the area. This led us to be aware of the possible misinterpretations of group discussions and from then on, we decided to discuss illegal activities only informally in restricted groups.

The following tools, used during the PRA session, enhanced fruitful discussions on the village relations with Waza NP:

- *village history*: showing the long pre-park history of the area and the intense contacts and negotiations with park authorities in the past;
- *village territory map*: highlighting the problematic situation with park boundaries, provoking regular tensions with park authorities;
- *transect*: most often we walked or drove with one or two village elders into the park where they showed us the various areas exploited. This provided an opportunity to discuss more informally, in a smaller group, problems related to living in close proximity to the park and the need for certain park resources;
- *informal discussions* on relations with park authorities (see below); and,
- *problem analysis and ranking*: highlighting more explicitly the degree of problems, facilitating their discussions with authorities.

The tools served to facilitate a description and discussion of daily situations and problems, leaving it up to the villagers to raise sensitive issues related to the park. Our experience with

other tools, such as Venn diagrams, was that they were too focused on relations with park authorities, leading to discussions that were superficial or confrontational.

Discussions in the park villages were relatively general during these first contacts, but provided essential background information for the management plan, such as on daily village life, infrastructure etc.. Information, such as that described in Boxes 1 and 2, was important in compiling the management plan.

Many of the PRA experiences were documented in individual village reports, which were distributed in the participating villages. A year later, a summary report was prepared and distributed amongst the authorities. Most of the documented conflict cases described in the reports dated from the previous park warden and were therefore quite harmless. Care was taken not to describe cases in a way which could damage the individuals concerned, both villagers and park staff. This was also the case with verbal communication and information given during meetings. We decided, however, not to distribute our reports on the more sensitive cases, such as those described in Boxes 1 to 3 and below.

### Park exploitation

The sensitivity of (illegal) exploitation in the park motivated us to start additional surveys on park fisheries and grazing. One of us, Saleh, a student at that time, assessed the extent of fishing inside the park. Being related to the ethnic Kotoko, the dominant fishing community, he managed to obtain their confidence by joining their fishing trips into the park. This made him an accomplice, as he was participating in an illegal activity. This enabled a discussion on fisheries in the park and provided him with background information with which he could actively discuss and comment on the production figures people provided.

BOX 1  
**NO WELL FOR SEINY**

Seiny, one of three chiefs of a park village, explained the need to increase the number of wells in his village. Recently, three families had passed by who were willing to settle in his village quarter but who were put off by the lack of drinking water. As the two other quarters of his village already had a well which was almost continuously in use, he asked the WL Project's intervention.

Seiny's demand was an eye-opener to us. In this period, we had an internal project discussion on developing strategies which could help to stabilise increasing population around Waza NP. With the improvement of grazing lands in the floodplain, working conditions, i.e. for animal husbandry, were rapidly improving. However, other factors (living conditions), such as drinking water availability, had to be met before people would settle.

Although unintended, Seiny's comments stimulated a discussion in the WL Project about the need to be careful with the installation of drinking water pumps in park villages to avoid a population build-up along its boundaries. This led to the drinking water programme concentrating its efforts in villages further from the park boundaries. Explaining this to Seiny would be very difficult.

When one of the other authors, Paul, joined Saleh in Baram, the village inside the park, people cancelled their planned fishing trip. Paul was the first European to stay in their village after the warden in the 1960s who, after his visit, had threatened to expel them. Only one person, who had stayed for a number of years outside the village, could be persuaded to continue fishing and he eagerly used the project car to transport his fishing gear. A year later, after finalising his studies and becoming employed by the Ministry of Environment, Saleh was no longer able to continue participating in an 'illegal' activity.

The WL Project has expended much effort in establishing contacts with pastoral groups. Discussions with the well-organised group from Fadaré town made them stop grazing inside Waza NP. They subsequently provided many insights into their contacts with park personnel. We learnt about the ambiguous position of game guards who collected money from pastoralists for allowing them inside the park. In 1995 this reached the equivalent of four months of salary for one of the most 'dynamic' game guards. We decided not to react to the disclosed incidents by, for

example, informing the park warden or his superiors. Earlier discussions with them on these subjects had provoked some confrontations. By not reacting to individual cases, the risk was reduced that people would pass information to us to accuse guards or the warden as a kind of revenge.

• **Conclusions and lessons learnt**

**Methodology and its chronological sequence**

One week PRA village sessions were most useful for establishing initial contacts and obtaining important background information on village life and land use. However, most of the sensitive information was communicated and discussed on subsequent return visits with fewer people and during active participation in (illegal) activities. This complicated the necessary discussions on active community participation in conservation activities, but it reduced the risk of rumours on possible future authorisation of park resource exploitation.

**BOX 2**  
**FORGING SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Andirni, the park village of Seiny, has always had a special relationship with the park authorities. The European warden and his subsequent Cameroonian successors had selected several of its inhabitants as tourist guides, who gained additional income but, in exchange, had to support the park warden in his task to protect the park. During the weeks of preparation of one of the management plan decision meetings, one of the authors, (PS) happened to stay overnight in Andirni. In the morning, some of the older men explained that during a preparation session with other pastoralists a few weeks previously, their special relationship with Waza NP had not been sufficiently recognised. Before leaving, the largest livestock owner offered Paul a bull. He was glad to be able to refuse it and took a ram home instead. A few weeks later, Paul was surprised to be visited by the former warden of Waza NP, who had always maintained a close relationship with the village. (The man who had offered him the bull happened to be his father-in-law). With great detail, he gave his opinion on the present situation in Waza NP. Discreetly he indicated the special relationship Andirni has had with the several park wardens, including himself. It was most notably their 'right' to herd cattle around the village inside the park. He advised that this be taken into account in the management plan. The possibility for limited grazing in the park (under strict conditions, and for a few villages only, such as Andirni) had already been discussed amongst the WL Project team to be submitted to the management plan. A few days after our encounter, this limited park grazing proposal was discussed in a meeting with ministry officials. The principal was quickly agreed upon but Paul's suggestion to authorise grazing up to 2 km inside the park boundaries was rejected and a distance of 1 km was chosen instead. Had anyone known Paul's previous contacts with Andirni, s/he might have thought that he was acting on behalf of the village, disrupting the proposals made and possibly leading to a complete refusal of grazing inside the park.

**BOX 3**  
**LEAVE OR YOU GET CAUGHT**

On our way to assist the PRA team in Mahé, a village on the park boundary, we saw a large concentration of cattle, a few kilometres from the village, well inside the park. The accompanying game guard went to the herdsman and recorded their identities. On arrival in Mahé, the game guard went back to Waza. He would obviously inform the warden, so we sent him a note reporting our observations. In the evening, when the herds had returned to the nomad camps, outside the park, two of us, Saidou and Paul, passed all camps to warn the herdsman that their presence was certainly known to the warden. In this way we showed that although we had been together with the game guard who had noted the incident, we also cared about their situation.

By early morning, about half of the herders had decided to leave. A few hours later, a group of game guards arrived. Saidou was present during the subsequent confrontation when several of the herdsman who had not left were apprehended. Tensions rose when the guards heard that we had warned the herders. This required us to explain later to the warden the different responsibilities of Project teams and park authorities because of the project's need to maintain a good relation with its target groups.

Pastoralists appreciated our independent action and blamed those who neglected our warning by staying behind, who were, according to them, rightly apprehended. This incident certainly increased our credibility amongst the pastoral community and has facilitated the agreement with the pastoral group of Fadaré to refrain from grazing inside the park.

## Need for a neutral third party

As earlier reported for Venezuela (Rodríguez 1998), our experience also showed that in a conflict situation, PRA can significantly contribute to the clarification of the causes of the conflict and stimulate dialogue. However,

the presence and continuous interventions of a neutral third party (the WL Project) was indispensable. It should be realised that such a 'neutral' party also has its objectives which should be clearly communicated. Necessarily, interests may differ greatly and may be very difficult to explain (Box 1). Responsibilities should therefore be clearly agreed upon, although only through experience will people realise the consequences (see Box 3).

## Personnel

The composition of the village PRA team was, through necessity, a compromise. The presence of the provincial head of environment in the team, although relatively independent from the park authorities, may have blocked some discussions. On the other hand, it facilitated the systematic discussion on 'obvious' daily matters which other members of the team, people from the area itself, tended to forget. A team without a governmental agent would certainly have had difficulties in being accepted by the authorities. The (temporary) presence of a member of the WL Project staff (supervisor) was useful to explain with some authority the mediating position of the team and the Project in general. The young, relatively independent team members from the area itself proved to be a real advantage in discussing the sensitive subject of park exploitation. This changed when they became later part of the government system, such as the case of Saleh.

## • An outcome

Much of the sensitive information was on the lack of transparency in the park management. Several times this was discussed with the park authorities but did not result in lasting solutions. This motivated us to propose that all future park exploitation should be programmed in the annual park programme. This

programme should be adopted by the management committee of Waza NP, in which local populations have a major say, before being implemented. Because of our non-confrontational approach, this procedure has been described in the recently approved management plan.

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