

**‘Our land is our life’:
Lessons learnt from participatory land mapping in the northern Kalahari**

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“The name Khwe came as we didn’t meet any other people on the land, just ourselves. We lived on our own and we didn’t know where these other people came from but they took our land. Now we are just there without our land...So we have started working with these maps and names, as we are forced to do this to try and claim our land. Maybe the government will recognize us as people when they see this information in the maps”

Khwe member of the Teemacane and #Heku Trusts, Botswana, 2003

Like other San groups, the Khwe, whose ancestral land lies in northern Kalahari in Botswana and Namibia, as well as parts of Southern Angola and Zambia, have a history of land dispossession and are amongst the most marginalized and disadvantaged people in the region. The Kuru Family of Organisations (KFO), an alliance of NGOs owned by the San, has the mission of empowering the Khwe and other vulnerable groups of indigenous peoples in southern Africa to gain control over their own destinies through a holistic process approach to development. We see oral history coupled with participatory land mapping, as useful tools in the development process.

In our experience, the gathering and transcription of oral histories from elders by their literate youth, has formed the foundation from which land mapping follows. Material developed from the oral history project has been used for mother tongue literacy material, a history booklet and the production of a book, ‘Voices of the San’ that tells the story of the San from their own perspective. The young people trained in oral history work have developed the tools to become more effective and dedicated development workers. Out of the oral history testimonies also came information about existing and former land and natural resource, and a desire from communities to document this knowledge in a way that could help them to regain control over traditional lands.

The land mapping process has involved trained community members going out with their elders and vividly describing the landscape with rough diagrams, followed by geo-referencing of key sites, and production of maps. Communities have used these maps in their efforts to apply for land from the government.

However, land applications based on traditional claims proven by participatory maps have up to now, not always led to increased land rights. The following discussion traces the typical course of land disentanglement of San in Botswana. Botswana has a policy of improving access to basic services like water provision, schools and clinics, by centralizing settlements. Many indigenous minorities then, have left their traditional lands, or gathered at central points on the land, in order to attain village status and thus obtain government services. In many cases, the land where they originally settled becomes available to any citizen of the country to apply for cattle farming or is reserved for wildlife and tourism development. Sometimes, government allocates the land a status that does not allow future settlement by the original residents.

When applying formally for land where they had lived before, San communities often request conditional user-rights for Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) projects, such as camping or lodge sites for tourism development, or areas where communities could actively become involved in wildlife management. In order to gain entitlement to areas set aside for CBNRM, the Botswana government has set up district level technical advisory committees comprising representatives from a number of government departments to guide communities. However, these committees do not always have the capacity or time to effectively guide communities applying for land.

The next step towards land acquisition involves applications to a locally elected Land Board. Members of marginalized indigenous communities like the San are hardly ever represented on these bodies. In the case of a number of Community-Based Organisations, land claims are stalled, sometimes for years, at Land Board level. The dominant philosophy about land in the country is that the land should be available for the benefit of the entire nation. Traditional claims alone, or hunting and gathering as a form of livelihood are not regarded as legitimate grounds for land acquisition.

Once maps are produced then, it is critical that there is sufficient institutional support in order to transform these tools into something that can tangibly improve people's situations. There is a danger in empowering communities who come to see the maps as potent agents of change when the political environment does not allow for the realization of these dreams. For example, the KFO was involved in mapping of an area that forms part of the Khwe traditional lands, but which is now classified as a wilderness area where settlement is prohibited. The maps provided a wealth of data that displayed the community's intimate knowledge of the bush, of plant and animal resources on the land and of former settlement patterns and natural resource management practices. The community expected the maps to defend their claims for conditional user-rights of this area. However traditional land usage does not constitute sufficient grounds for community land claims. On the one hand, mapping offers a prospect of augmented visibility and power for this marginalized group. On the other, mapping stands to become yet another part of the cycle of opportunity and disillusion which characterizes San experiences of their alliances with others. In an attempt to find win-win solutions where both the community and government stand to benefit, the KFO continues to work with communities to implement their plans.

This brings us to a critical point that mapping is a tool, a block in the development process, and not an end in itself. Maps *are* powerful tools that can be used in protecting heritage, land claims, community development, etc. As with oral history collection, the process of mapping brings about the dynamics of generational reconciliation and restoring of balance in communities, something which is an intangible benefit that cannot be measured as to its impact on the development of communities, as the status of the fibre of societies has a lot to do with how communities respond to development issues. It can therefore safely be said that mapping and oral history collection, as well as the documentation of any cultural processes such as dancing and healing practices, stories, perceptions and natural resource knowledge is a crucial and dynamic tool for development, especially as entry point or consultation process for agents of change. But mapping just to do mapping is not a full or productive process. Not only is it a costly tool for development, but if it raises unrealistic expectations it can be to the detriment of empowerment and create even bigger dependency, as well as open cans of worms in terms of community relationships that will be destructive if the mapping programme does not fit into a bigger strategy or larger plan, followed up responsibly. There has to be a

development/support agent and a structured relationship between the community and the process. Mapping should allow for the development of visible tools and products that even illiterate community members can associate with, and the mappers should realise that they are custodians of a wealth of information, which in future can still mean a lot, therefore needs to be responsibly cared for and presented back to the community in more than one form. However, apart from creating tangible products, the end result of mapping should be increased security, psychosocial progression, cultural empowerment and dignity and political equality, as well as livelihoods development (both income-generating and non-income generating).

Maps can reveal the original users' wealth of knowledge about the land, maps can also improve planning and management. But on their own they are just a hammer without nails; a hammer without a builder. The power of participatory mapping can only be harnessed when there is either good political will or when there is a strong support network to work in partnership with communities in achieving their aspirations.