Human Rights, Development, and the Peoples of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, Botswana

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Resettlement in the name of wildlife conservation and tourism promotion has been advocated by a number of African governments and environmental non-government organizations. Such resettlement has major human rights implications, especially in terms of reducing the standards of living and access to land of people are relocated. In May 1997, the government of Botswana chose to resettle several hundred residents outside of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, the third largest game reserve in Africa. This resettlement, which had been planned since 1986, is having major effects on the people not only in the Central Kalahari but also those in the area where people have been resettled.

In February 1996 Botswana government ministers announced at a community meeting in the central Kalahari that the residents of the reserve would be required to leave the area. Local people reacted strongly to this request, arguing that they should be allowed to stay where they were. They pointed out that the Central Kalahari Game Reserve was established originally as a means of protecting the land and resource use rights of local people. They also suggested that the resettlement of people out of the central Kalahari would have a whole series of negative effects on both the people who are moved as well as those people who reside in the areas where resettlement occurs.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Botswana government had pursued a policy of "freezing" development in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. When the borehole at !Xade, the largest community in the reserve, broke down, it took months before it was fixed. Buildings and roads were not maintained in the reserve except for those going to Department of Wildlife and National Parks camps. Even drought relief feeding programs were slower in the central Kalahari than elsewhere in Botswana, a situation which threatened the well-being of people in several parts of the reserve.

Pressures were also brought to bear on people in the central Kalahari through selective enforcement of wildlife laws and what some local people perceived to be intimidation. Data collected on households in the central Kalahari and adjacent areas reveal that up to two thirds of the resident adult males of some communities have been arrested at one time or another by game scouts from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, police officers, or Botswana Defense Force (BDF) personnel. One of the impacts of high rates of arrest was that there was withdrawal of much-needed labor from households and communities. This was especially problematic if the person arrested and jailed was a bread-winner or a hunter.

Families who had a member arrested often faced both economic and nutritional difficulties. In some cases, people who formerly had been self-sufficient economically had to seek government assistance as
Local people claim that people in remote areas like the central Kalahari tend to be arrested more frequently and receive higher fines and jail sentences than do people who reside in towns and villages, some of whom actually engage in greater amounts of hunting than do remote area residents.

Even more disturbing than the high rates of arrest were the charges that people have been mistreated by game scouts and other officials. There were a number of incidents where people claimed that they were tortured or received inhumane or degrading punishment when suspected of poaching or when being questioned about other people who might be engaged in illegal hunting. According to one report, the most common form of torture included the use of a "rubber ring" placed tightly around the testicles and a plastic bag placed over the face of a person. There were cases where people died of injuries inflicted upon them by game scouts, as occurred at !Xade in August, 1993, when a 40-year-old man died after being questioned by game scouts. Community leaders in the central Kalahari have argued that authorities have stepped over the line from antipoaching to persecution.

The population of the Reserve in 1996 was 1,482 people (Applied Research Unit 1997:22, 24, Table 5). The population of the reserve in general has declined from some 5,000 in the early 1960s to the present population of around 1,400.

The central Kalahari case provides an excellent example of some of the kinds of responses that Africans are employing to deal with the situations they are facing as a result of wildlife preservation and management efforts. The San (Basarwa, Khwe) began to organize at the grassroots level to protest the ways that they were being treated. They formed indigenous advocacy organizations, one example being Kgeikani Kweni (First People of the Kalahari), which was established in 1992. The first action of Kgeikani Kweni was to attend a national-level workshop on Sustainable Rural Development held by the Botswana Society in April, 1992. There they spoke out on issues ranging from poverty to cultural preservation. They stressed that they wished to be treated with greater respect by officials of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks and other agencies of the Botswana government.

San spokespersons also attended a series of international meetings, including the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples (WGIP) of the United Nations in Geneva in 1993. There they argued forcefully that they should have land and resource rights, the right to practice their own culture and learn their own languages, and to have a say in decision-making about development planning. They pointed out that the type of treatment that some San and Bakgalagadi had received was potentially in violation of international human rights law, especially the severe forms of torture employed and what they felt were tantamount to extrajudicial executions. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Survival International took note of these allegations, as did the United States Department of State. The defense that some people offered when charged with a crimes such as violations of the fauna conservation laws was that they committed these acts "because they were hungry." Poverty and hunger, however, are not considered to be extenuating circumstances under Botswana law. As a result, people were jailed or fined for what in essence was an "economic crime."

San and other indigenous groups in Africa have sought to use the media to positive effect, and they have requested the help of intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations as well as NGOs, including environmental ones. In their discussions, they have stressed how much damage forced relocation does to local communities. Extensive research by social and natural scientists and by development workers has shown that involuntary community relocation of people with strong ties to the land has nearly always resulted in a reduction in the standards of living of those who were moved. While some of the people moved may temporarily be better off, over the longer term conditions can be
expected to worsen, in part because of increased competition for natural resources and employment opportunities.

The Botswana government has continued to urge the residents of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve to relocate to places outside of the reserve. It underscored the importance that they attached to the resettlement when it was noted in some of the public meetings that people remaining in the reserve would not receive development assistance in the future should they choose to remain in the reserve. The reason for this proposed policy was that it was too expensive to provide services to such a remote and scattered population and that it would be easier have people in a centralized location so as to facilitate service provision. The government officials who spoke to the people of the CKGR offered them the incentive of cash compensation for relocating outside of the reserve. While there were widespread rumors concerning the large amounts of compensation that would be provided, including "enough for a new four wheel drive vehicle," most of the payments made thus far have been at most a few thousand Pula (around US $1000). Given the resources that people will have to give up if they move out of the reserve, this amount is, according to local people, far below what would be required to reestablish themselves at a level at least equivalent to what they had while living in the reserve.

According to some of the human rights and development workers who have been in the reserve (e.g., those from Ditshwanelo, the Botswana Center for Human Rights, and Kgeikani Kweni, a Khwe advocacy organization), the majority of the people in the Central Reserve continued to maintain that they did not want to move out of the reserve in 1996 and 1997. The problem that the president of the CKGR faced was the lack of government willingness to listen to their stated desires. People in the reserve were concerned that the government would stop the various programs and development assistance, including provision of water, food, and development aid in the reserve.

The Botswana Government maintains that it will not force people out of the reserve and that it will not stop the basic livelihood supports that are provided to those people who are in need of assistance generally in Botswana. A major concern of the residents of the reserve is that all kinds of livelihood supports and development assistance programs that exist in the CKGR will be reduced, phased out, or discontinued completely if people there did not agree to being moved.

In March 1997 the Minister of Local Government, Lands, and Housing requested that the Botswana Parliament approve a budget of P6,000,000 for the resettlement of people outside of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Some of these funds were to be used in the development of New !Xade, a resettlement location outside of the CKGR. New !Xade is located in the Okwa Wildlife Management Area in Ghanzi District, just to the south of the second Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP) commercial ranching area which lies near the southeast corner of the Ghanzi freehold farms. The resettlement of several hundred people out of !Xade in the CKGR to New !Xade was carried out in May, 1997. People were moved into the settlement which consisted of lines of tents; no attention was paid to local patterns of social organization, kinship, or ethnic affiliation, something that could potentially lead to problems later on.

A group of 11 people was resettled out of the southern Central Kalahari Game Reserve to a place in the Kweneng District known as Kauduane. The government insists that the resettlement of !Xade and Khutse residents outside the reserve is voluntary. The Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (BOCONGO) openly criticized the matter in which the resettlement of people outside of the CKGR was being handled. As a report produced by BOCONGO noted, "The removal of these Basarwa communities is aimed at paving the way for the development of tourist resorts inside the game
reserve." Whether or not this is actually the case is uncertain; there have been applications made to the Botswana government for permission to build tourist camps in and around the Central Kalahari, but there is little evidence that these plans have been approved. What has been approved is access to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve for mobile tour operators and, reportedly, members of four-wheel-drive vehicle clubs, some of whom have already begun travelling in the reserve in large numbers and who reportedly are having significant environmental impacts on the vegetation and pan surfaces as well as scaring what little game is left in the CKGR.

BOCONGO protested what it described as inadequate consultation with the affected communities in the CKGR. As the report notes, "People do not really understand why they should be resettled and what the implications of resettlement will be." The BOCONGO report went on to say that the concerns of the affected people regarding their loss of identity as a result of the resettlement process have not been addressed at all by the government. It also noted that there were concerns expressed by CKGR residents that the graves of their ancestors, which have social and spiritual significance to them, are not being considered as part of the compensation process. Finally, it was noted that there was no provision made for those who elected to stay in the reserve.

According to people who have visited the resettlement site at New !Xade, where the majority of people who have moved out of the reserve are now located, there are numerous complaints by local people about the lack of wild plant and animal foods in the area, a severe problem for people who obtain a portion of their diet from the bush. They also noted complaints about the slow pace of Land Board response to the applications of resettled people for arable and residential plots in the settlement area. An additional problem, they point out, is the high level of alcohol sales by outside agencies and individuals in the settlement, which allegedly has contributed significantly to fights and to spouse and child abuse problems.

The people of the Central Kalahari formed a negotiating team which they hope will be able to meet with the President of Botswana, Sir Ketumile Masire. This negotiating team has had several meetings and some of the members have taken part in workshops, one of which was held in December 1996. Some members of the negotiating team attended the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) of the United Nations in July 1997. Requests have been forthcoming by some people in New !Xade to be allowed to return to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. One response of government officials was that those people who returned to the reserve would be arrested and forced to repay the compensation that they had been given when they relocated. Another issue that came up among the residents of the Central Kalahari was that they had heard that part of the reserve (the southeast portion around Gope) would be turned into a "precious stones area" (i.e., a diamond area) by a mining company. Thus, they were worried that this area would be off limits to anyone not associated with the mining company, thus restricting even further the land that they have available to them for foraging purposes.

The conclusion reached by a number of people in the Central Kalahari was that their worst fears were being realized. They were being resettled outside of the reserve. The resettlement location was not planned in such a way as to accommodate their needs. The compensation payments were such that they were too little to enable them to restore their livelihoods to the levels that existed prior to their relocation. The quality of the land and resources in the new settlement area was insufficient to sustain them. There was no attempt to plan the settlement in such a way as to allow people to live together with their kin or with friends and others with whom they had close social and economic ties.
Ironically, the land and resources in the Central Kalahari are now being exploited not by the people who had lived there and managed the resources for generations, but rather by outsiders, including tourists and mining companies. The question that local people asked was whether or not the resettlement out of the reserve was in line with human rights principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The question remains open as to whether or not the government of Botswana is truly interested in promoting conservation and tourism development with its Central Kalahari policy, or whether it is instead attempting to suppress dissent among indigenous minorities who chose to resist resettlement.