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Challenging the balance of power in combating desertification: power relations, institutions and environmental change in Swaziland*

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Abstract
The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) (1994) marks a novel, integrated approach to addressing land degradation and sustainable development issues. Concepts such as 'community participation' and 'local level decision making' are embraced throughout its text, so as to involve those people experiencing the effects of land degradation in actions aimed to reduce its impacts. This paper takes a political ecology approach to assess the appropriateness of such concepts to the people actually living with degradation and desertification. A participatory project to combat land degradation in the village of Engcayini, Swaziland, is taken as a case study to explore these issues. Conflicts are shown to have developed between new and old village institutions as a result of a shift in the power balance between the village elders and a newly democratically elected development committee. These power struggles are not unique to the local level, but can be traced to the broader political processes in Swaziland, in particular to an emphasis on tradition, which is used to legitimise the securing of power by a small proportion of the population. It is concluded that whilst the UNCCD promotes many honourable democratic ideals, it cannot be implemented to its full potential in the present Swazi context. Power balances between new and old institutions need to be challenged if future participatory sustainable development and land degradation mitigation initiatives in Swaziland are to be successful.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) came into force in 1997 and marks a novel, integrated approach to addressing land degradation and sustainable development issues. Since the science-led international conferences of the 1970s, desertification had been viewed exclusively as an environmental issue (Thomas, 1997). However, the UNCCD together with other agreements emanating from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992), began to acknowledge that desertification and land degradation are not exclusively environmental problems. Rather, that there are important social and economic underpinnings to the issues and that they are intrinsically linked to unsustainable development, social inequalities and poverty. These in turn affect the livelihoods and well being of many rural people (Chasek, 1997).

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The UNCCD is a unique agreement because the idea generated from the African states. It is also the first international Convention to take a people-centred approach towards environmental problems by emphasising the potential role of land users themselves in helping to reduce degradation. Taking a decentralised approach, the UNCCD promotes 'community participation' and 'local level decision-making', stressing the role of NGOs in projects aimed to decrease land degradation and improve rural livelihoods. Throughout its text, reference is made to the core principle of 'participation of populations and local communities in combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought' (UNCCD, 1994).

Although the UNCCD provides definitions of 'scientific' terms such as 'land degradation', 'desertification' and 'drought', the term 'participation', which is also hotly contested, is not defined. Whilst it calls for participation at all levels, the nature of the involvement is far from clear as it remains subjective as to what extent local people should be involved (Dobie, 2003). This is problematic because numerous different levels are cited at which participation can occur and most commentators acknowledge that whilst it appears a fair and just approach to community development, it does not necessarily mean the equal sharing of power (Ribot, 1995; Michener, 1998). The term 'participation' is therefore open to interpretation throughout policy creation and project implementation, whilst the cultural and political contexts of its application will differ between Parties to the Convention.

This paper takes a participatory community project in Engcayini, Swaziland as a case study to examine the utility of concepts such as 'participation' and 'local level decision making' and consequently, the appropriateness of the UNCCD's approach, to the people actually experiencing land degradation. Beginning with an outline of the political history of Swaziland, a community project in Engcayini is then considered, as data collected in 2002 and 2003 reinforce the notion of 'participation' as a contested term. Conflicts are shown to have developed between new and traditional institutions and these are traced back to national level power relations. Challenges to the balance of power indicate that renegotiations must occur if future development and land degradation initiatives are to be successful in the Swazi context.

SWAZILAND
Swaziland is a small landlocked country located between 25°-28° S and 31°-32° E with an area of 17, 364 km^2. Situated in Southern Africa, it is surrounded largely by South Africa but shares its easternmost border with Mozambique. Its location is illustrated in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Map showing the location of Swaziland

The contemporary Swazi state was formed early in the 19th century as part of the process of regional state formation triggered by the rise of the Zulu empire (Daniel and Vilane, 1985). By 1860, under the rule of Mswati I, the country had settled into a tributary mode of production (Cocks, 2000). Aristocrats comprising the monarchy, princes and chiefs were the dominant social class. Their traditional authority was legitimised through control over land, access to cattle and wives, and the male monopolisation of the material basis of wealth (Gulbrandsen, 1995; Levin, 1997). Until the last quarter of the 19th century, the Swazi monarchy controlled all of the land, both directly and indirectly through chiefs.

The continual threat of invasion by the Zulus and repeated loss of land to the Boers and British in the late 19th century resulted in the alliance of Swaziland with the British. In 1902 Swaziland became a British Protectorate, during which time the monarchy was partially retained. King Sobhuza II took the role of 'paramount chief', whilst the British assumed administrative control (Levin, 1997). By the 1960s, Swaziland was demanding independence, which the British were prepared to grant on the basis that the Swazi government would consist of a Legislative Council, elected on a universal franchise (Swazi Observer, 2001) and on the condition that King Sobhuza's role was amended to that of constitutional Monarch (Funnell, 1991). This posed a threat to the power of the monarchy and the control of the traditional institutions, so in response, in 1964, King Sobhuza established his own political party, the *Imbokodvo* National Movement (INM). The INM was heavily dependent on the prestige of the King, a unified Swazi nation and the authority of the chiefs, who attained their position due to traditional Swazi law and their selection by the King (Levin, 1997). The INM promoted the ideology of traditionalism and the 'Swazi' way of life according to presumed ethnic roots, whilst Sobhuza personified 'tradition'. This was successfully presented as a struggle for the legitimacy of national institutions in the fight against colonialism and united the masses behind the throne (Cocks, 2000). The INM won the first elections in 1964 and 1967, monopolising Swaziland's politics. Independence was eventually gained in 1968. However, the Westminster-style constitution that had been adopted indirectly legitimised a dual system of government, concealing the fact that the King was still in control, only through the INM (Macmillan, 1985).

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Royal hegemony was accentuated further on 12th April 1973 with King Sobhuza's abrogation of the constitution in a parliamentary coup that was orchestrated to make him an absolute monarch (Mzizi, 2002). Sobhuza argued that the constitution had:

> '....permitted the imposition into our country of highly undesirable political practices, alien and incompatible with the way of life in our society, and designed to disrupt and destroy our own peaceful and constructive and essentially democratic method of political activity. Increasingly this element engenders hostility, bitterness and unrest in our peaceful society' (Daniel and Vilane, 1985: 57).

In 1979, a new parliament was established along what is described as 'traditional lines' based on the *Tinkhundla*[1] system, whereby the public vote for electors from an approved list (Macmillan, 1985). This created a dual political system and allowed the King to distribute royal power throughout the countryside whilst maintaining centralised control, thus reinforcing the traditional ideologies to his mass base of rural people and remaining loyal to 'traditional custom'. As had been the case in the past, 'tradition' was used as a disguise to legitimise the securing of power by a small proportion of the population (Bishcoff, 1988). Swaziland remains a monarchy today with all powers now vested in King Mswati III. The political system is therefore still highly centralised (Sallinger-McBride and Picard, 1989) and is summarised in Figure 2.
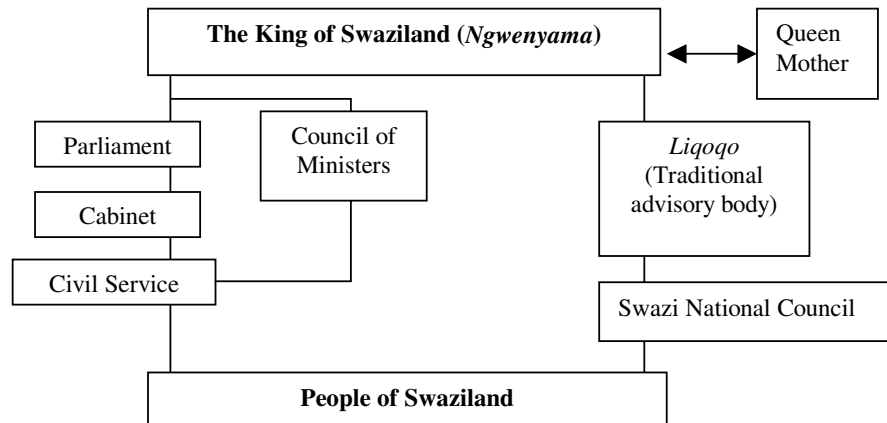

Figure 2: Swaziland's contemporary political structure (source: based on JICA, 2001)

Today, the constitution remains under review, whilst traditional administration and Swazi culture are regulated by judicially recognised, uncodified laws and customs. Multi-party politics are illegal and trade union activity is restricted (Barrett, 1998). Access to land remains centralised and continues to be administered through 180 chiefs, each appointed by the King (GOS, 1996). Although control over land remains the basis of power for the chiefs, it has gradually decreased in importance in modern times due to the increased potential for private land ownership by ordinary

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[1] *Tinkhundla* is the plural of *Inkhundla*, which when translated into English means 'meeting place' and applies to rural centres of administration. Reforms introduced in 1992 by King Mswati III formally defined the *Inkhundla* as 'the common delineated area for both local and national government' and each *Inkhundla* has a representative in the House of Assembly (JICA, 2001).

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Swazis. This has come about because waged labour opportunities have become more available to Swazis, thus resulting in the control of the aristocracy becoming considerably less complete (GOS, 1995). However, money and returns on private investments and royal funds have also increased in significance, allowing the aristocracy to maintain its position within Swazi society.

BACKGROUND TO THE COMMUNITY PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

In 1996, the government of Swaziland requested the government of Japan to undertake a study to investigate the improvement of degraded land in Swaziland's middleveld region. As an outcome of the consultancy report that was produced, three target areas in which a need for urgent land rehabilitation had been recognised were recommended as suitable sites to host pilot land rehabilitation projects. Focus was on soil erosion occurring on communal land. This would enable whole communities to benefit from the project and would allow participatory approaches to be taken involving local land users, as advocated by the UNCCD. Following numerous workshops and consultative meetings, Engcayini chiefdom was chosen by representatives from all of the communities in the Kukhanyeni *Inkhundla* to host the pilot land rehabilitation project.

Engcayini is a small rural settlement with a high dependence upon subsistence farming. 28% of residents regularly sell part of their maize crop, whilst the sale of arable produce represents the primary source of income for 18% of Engcayini's population. Situated in the upper middleveld of Swaziland, Engcayini has a population of approximately 734 people, who belong to one of the 74 household units known as *umuti*. The level of infrastructural development is basic. All *umuti* obtain their water from the nearby Mbuluzi River and there are no tap water or irrigation facilities. Nor is there infrastructure available for electricity.

During participatory workshops convened by MOAC/JICA[2], the people of Engcayini highlighted cattle as the main cause of the gullying on communal land in their chiefdom. This was considered a result of overgrazing and the creation of cattle tracks when taking cattle to the river to drink or to the dip tanks. In response to this locally identified cause of soil erosion on communal land, broad approaches to intervention were proposed by JICA. Rangeland areas in Engcayini totalling approximately 102 ha were demarcated for controlled grazing and were fenced. A feedlot was constructed with an initial 2 ha for the cultivation of fodder and a re-vegetation programme around one of the larger gullies in the village took place. Each of these actions involved some degree of participation by the local land users, whilst a Swazi NGO 'supervised' local efforts. It was decided by JICA that a maximum of 10 head of cattle should be allowed in the feedlot area at any one time in order to remain within the carrying capacity calculations according to the physical environmental conditions of the area, although the use of such static concepts in non-equilibrium environments remains highly contentious (Dougill *et al.*, 1999).

JICA/MOAC recognised the advantages of utilising bottom-up and participatory approaches, as outlined in the UNCCD but from the outset acknowledged the limitations of the time schedule, the objectives of the study and the size of the project. In order to deal with these constraints, planning was conducted together with the community, though not actually by the community (JICA, 2001). This represents 'consultative participation' (Pimbert and Pretty, 1994) and indicates that participation was facilitated and not engendered, despite the attention paid to the principles of the UNCCD. To ensure that the project was managed as much as possible by the local people, it was decided at one of the workshops that a project committee should be set up through the democratic election of representatives from the village. The intention was that the committee would work

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[2] MOAC is Swaziland's Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. JICA is the Japanese International Cooperation Agency.

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together with the NGO to bridge the gap between JICA/MOAC and the local people and would motivate and mobilize the community to join in with the project. The committee members comprised five males and four females. It is not known whether all committee members were also cattle owners or wives of cattle owners.

In September 2002, 46 people working on the community project were interviewed with regard to how participatory they thought the project was, what it would achieve and what the perceived benefits were. This was followed up in May 2003 with a focus group with the village project committee and semi-structured interviews with the committee chairman, representatives from the Swazi NGO. A focus group was also held with the consultants working for JICA.

RESULTS
In October 2002, the construction of the project infrastructure was almost complete. Those working on the project offered many positive responses. Of those participating in the initiative, 100% thought it necessary for the betterment of the community, with 93% stating that they believed it would be a success when fully functional. The remaining 7% said that they did not know if it would be successful, so this demonstrates that no one felt outright that the project would fail. 89% of respondents reported that they were happy to work on the project but when asked why they decided to become involved with it, 20% said that they worked on it because they had to. This expectation stems from a community meeting at which it was agreed that to ensure the people were committed, fines would be imposed upon those *umuti* that fail to send a representative to work on the project twice a week. Whilst this appears a rather severe measure to ensure participation, it was an idea generated from within the community. According to the committee chairman, fines are the standard punishment in traditional law and practice, with the level of the fine proportional to the severity of the offence.

When asked whether they thought they would benefit from the project, 76% of interviewees stated that they believed that they would. The majority of those who thought that they would not benefit were either female, under the age of 19 or not owning any cattle. This demonstrates how the benefits of the project were understood by the people to be unequal between different stakeholder groups because those perceiving themselves as non-beneficiaries were already marginalized groups in terms of access and their lack of capability to exploit communal land resources (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

When questioned about the nature of any benefits that may be realised, only 42% offered direct economic reasons, even though the improvement of rural livelihoods was one of MOAC/JICA's main objectives in carrying out the project. This indicates that the people were either unaware of the range of ways in which the project can help them, which, given the selection of other benefits they suggested, is unlikely. Second, the concept of profit making and gaining income from cattle sales is not a common cultural expectation so this may be a new and difficult concept for people to grasp. The third, more probable, possibility is that the priorities of the local people, and MOAC/JICA do not match directly and that the people feel they would benefit from other interventions, not necessarily focused upon communal land.

According to the results of a questionnaire conducted by the Japanese team, indifference is demonstrated towards gullying on communal land in a number of instances and only those people whose arable land or *umuti* are directly affected worry notably about further gully encroachment. Whilst people are aware of the presence of gullies in their chiefdoms and they are considered to be a serious issue, they are not understood to be a priority for attention. This differs from the understandings of the Swazi government, which regards gullying to be in need of urgent action, as

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demonstrated by its prominent position in many national policies. Issues of concern to local land users such as soil fertility loss and weeds infestations are not presented as policy priorities, so their concerns are largely overlooked. These contrary understandings call into question the relevance of the consultative processes followed to recognise the need for the participatory land rehabilitation project, as it appears that the knowledge of the most powerful prevails within policy and in initiating interventions. Despite diverse understandings of environmental change and differences in the meanings ascribed to environmental changes, the data collected in this study show that the local people have accepted the JICA/MOAC scheme and then shaped it according to their own needs. The emphasis of local understanding is that the project represents a labour-saving initiative, as this will allow them to spend more time weeding and tending to their cultivated land, with a view to producing more favourable yields. The project was intended to be an intervention that addressed ecological improvement and enhanced livelihood sustainability through cattle sales. It meets this aim, only not in the same way as it was intended. This highlights the importance of differences in perceived benefits and values when working with local people in such projects because local people have shaped the scheme to address their own priorities.

When asked if they would join in should another community project take place, 96% of the respondents said that they would, with 4% stating that it would depend on what the project was addressing. There were no signs of conflict within the community and at the end of the first field season the NGO representatives involved in project construction reported that they were very satisfied with the hard work of the people. By the end of the first period of data collection in October 2002, the only major manual tasks left to complete were the planting and subsequent cutting of the feedlot grass, which would then lead to the functioning and running of the scheme.

On return to Engcayini in March 2003, a focus group held with the project committee members indicated that the project was a success. However, when asked about ownership of the project, the committee stated that the project belongs to the community, saying that the Japanese gave them some help at the start but now it is theirs. This view is inconsistent with data collected during the previous field season, which show that the people working on the project construction did not necessarily feel that they owned it. Of those interviewed, 70% felt excluded in the project design and planning processes and 57% stated that they would have liked more input in the community-level decision-making processes. All of the people working on the project felt that they were fully involved in its implementation. This highlights some discrepancies between the views of the committee members and those of the community. The intention of the project as stated by JICA was that due to their constraints, it would not and could not provide an example of 'transformative participation' (Pimbert and Pretty, 1994), because the idea for the project was conceived outside of the village. Thus, the needs, priorities and inputs of the land users remained peripheral to the remit of the intervention.

DISCUSSION
When evaluating the main problems associated with the project, four main issues arose from the focus group meeting with the project committee. Each of these identified problems is now explored further.

1. ABSENCE AND POOR TIME KEEPING
At the outset, representatives from each *umuti* were divided into groups. Each group was assigned to work on the project on specific, designated days. The absence or late attendance of a number of representatives was a big issue, as it slowed the progress made with building and construction. This is thought to have occurred because people had their own chores to do at their homes and suggests that working on the project was not a priority for many. Due to the nature of the

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community, where reliance for income and food is placed in many cases solely on subsistence farming, people were not unexpectedly, putting their livelihoods and survival first. This was particularly apparent at critical times of year according to the agricultural calendar such as harvest time, when attendance was at its lowest levels. The efforts of those *umuti* who do not own cattle are especially likely to be focused on activities to sustain their livelihoods rather than participating in a community project from which they perceive little or no benefit. There is also the issue of motivation because the benefits of the project were not immediate. The future profitability of the project may have been a new concept for the people to grasp.

2. FINE AVOIDANCE
Many *umuti* sent young children as their representatives in order to avoid paying the fines for non-attendance. This created problems because the manual work required strength and fitness. It was not suitable labour for children aged from as young as ten years old. In some instances it also resulted in their absence from school. To avoid the fine as well as maintain adult labour levels on their own land, people therefore distributed the available labour according to their interests and priorities (cf. Shackleton and Shackleton, 2001). Sending children to work on the project suggests that it was not a priority endeavour for many *umuti*.

3. UNEQUAL BENEFIT DISTRIBUTIONS
Another point of contention is that it was agreed that those people with several head of cattle would pay the same membership fee to belong to the scheme as those who have no cattle, even though an additional levy will be imposed on each cow that uses the feedlot. This was decided upon by the committee and is based on the premise that although at present 32% of households do not own cattle, by subscribing to the scheme they are maintaining their access rights to utilise it should they one day have some. This displays a degree of optimism that one day everyone will be capable of affording cattle. However, it permits the committee members and the current cattle owners, who are currently more able to exploit the resource endowment, to dominate the project. The accumulated funds and infrastructure will increase the material availability of resources, but for those community members who at present do not have cattle and cannot afford the access fee due to poverty, the scheme will have reduced the potential availability of what previously were common land resources (cf. Nightingale, 2003). This reinforces existing inequalities as cattle owners are presented with the opportunity to increase their wealth, whilst the enforced participation of poorer households in such collective action exacerbates the extent of their poverty (Baland and Platteau, 1999), as some groups have acted to exclude other groups from the communal land.

4. POOR TIME MANAGEMENT
The final problem raised by the committee was that the community were behind schedule. The grass for the feedlot was ready for use but the committee were planning to begin using it in July instead of in May as intended. This was attributed to a lack of communication between the project committee, the elders and the acting chief. The JICA team also said that there was a problem with the initial release of funds from the Japanese government and they too had recognised issues between the various institutions involved. Another potentially contributing factor to the delay is that the acting chief lives outside of the community and as a result, greater responsibility in decision-making was delegated to the village elders. Through interviews with the committee chairman, various tensions became apparent between the committee and the village elders.

At a superficial level, the focus groups with the project committee and the JICA team highlighted mostly logistical issues that arose due to a lack of clear communication between the different stakeholder groups. However, many other core issues emerged which lead to the questioning of

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the appropriateness of the project administration and the approach taken given the wider context of Swazi society. Whilst the pilot project in Engcayini may be addressing the community priorities with regard to gullying and overgrazing, people are more concerned with issues such as soil fertility declines and weed infestations in the overall remit of their daily lives; issues that impact more upon their livelihoods and well-being. In this respect, the appropriateness of the initiative to the community may have been overestimated because the effects of the project on the sustainability of rural livelihoods will be minimal, even if a select few *umuti* can boost their income levels sporadically thorough the sale of fattened cattle. Indeed, the idea for the project was conceived outside of the context of the community and the people who 'participated' in the project were viewed as tools for decreasing gullying rather than active knowing agents (Goldman, 2003). This demonstrates that despite the political emphasis on incorporating indigenous knowledges, values and understandings into policy, this is yet to be put into practice. The danger with this is that it may mask the real ecological and social issues demanding attention according to the land users themselves.

DIVERSITY AND POWER RELATIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY
Notions of community ownership of projects sometimes tend to reify the community as a single stakeholder and a homogeneous entity (Harrison, 2002). This was the case in Engcayini. In doing so, the various power structures and hierarchies present in each place are masked and these can strongly influence the level of success of participatory initiatives. Agrawal and Gibson (1999) explore this diversity and note that the concept of community as a representation of shared norms and common interests depends highly upon the perceptions of its members. Any shared norms are not static but come into being in relation to contextual factors and linkages with the wider social network and indeed, use of the term 'community' directs attention away from the internal village politics and from questions of the nature of actual social relations (Botchway, 2001). Unlike external interventions that involve concepts of community that link to a specific space or territory (such as the project in Engcayini), in implementing participatory land management projects that require common goals, the emphasis should be placed upon shared understandings, with greater exploration of the positions of each group within the broader social network.

Successful cooperative environmental management requires individuals to sacrifice part of their individuality order to achieve a shared goal and this can often mean either the relinquishing of power, or as noted by Da Chuna and Pena (1998), the assignment of costs and benefits in accordance to the pre-existing local power distributions. The project in Engcayini treated all land users as equals when in reality they have different interests in the implementation and use of the grazing scheme. The 'community' can be divided into a number of subgroups, including those according to social status, gender and economic status. With regard to power distributions and the costs and benefits of the pilot project, the following stakeholder analysis can be constructed, shown in Table 1.

These stakeholder groups are not discrete entities, nor are they static. They overlap and change over time. The role of institutions is therefore central to mediating the power relationships between such subgroups, particularly when projects deal with sensitive social and cultural symbols such as cattle. For example, in Engcayini it was decided that the grazing management committee should make the rules regarding the use of the rangeland. This involved the re-negotiation of power relationships particularly between the traditionally powerful members of the chiefdom and the democratically elected grazing management committee who previously may have not been of key social standing in the chiefdom.

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Despite inequalities in the benefits from the project and the control over access to communal land, the asymmetric benefits of such hierarchical organisation may be more sustainable, even if they are unfair (Agrawal, 2002). Questions of inequality and its impact on collective action have dominated recent common property resource management literature and current theories remain divided in opinion. Cooperation by small resource users may be needed for management to be sustainable, however inequality may give those users too small incentives to cooperate (Baland and Platteau, 1999). In Engcayini those facing small incentives dealt with the issue by distributing labour in relation to livelihood priorities, sending children to work on the project or attending late themselves following the completion of what they understood to be higher priority tasks. Returning to what the project set out to achieve, the aim was to develop sustainable land use practices, improve rural livelihoods and to improve the quality of the communal land. This aim could be achieved without providing uniform benefits to the community so in this case inequality could be conducive to sustainable environmental management.

Another dimension to participation in a joint pilot project such as this is that all stakeholders should be aware of their roles and should join in accordingly. These roles were set out at an early stage so that each party knew of their responsibilities to the project from the outset. JICA (2003) reported that each time a meeting was held within the community to discuss the project, it was always the same people that attended, so this did not contribute to the achievement of full participation or the involvement of minority groups. Further consideration was needed by MOAC/JICA with regard to why people failed to attend, as such meetings sought only to reinforce existing power stratifications within the community. One of the causes of tension between the committee and the community is that whilst the role of the committee was made clear to its members, it was not necessarily communicated to the community as a whole. As a result, some participants working on the project felt the committee members were not working hard enough. However, the committee members had management responsibilities and if they were absent from the site, it did not necessarily mean that they were not working. This resentment could be another contributing factor as to why people were frequently absent or arrived late. Such misunderstandings could easily have been rectified through greater levels of communication between stakeholders. However, they may have been perpetuated by the attitude of the committee. It is possible that the committee perceived themselves as a separate institution to the community and in doing so afforded themselves greater status and power. This challenge to the balance of power could be at the root of many of the misunderstandings associated with the project.

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Table 1: Stakeholder analysis of costs and benefits of the MOAC/JIAC project to each social stratum of Engcayini

Community sub-groups	Potential benefits from pilot project	Potential costs of pilot project
Cattle owners	- Income generation through the sales of cattle and cattle products - Improved condition of grazing land which leads to better diet for cattle - Increased carrying capacity and decreased risk of overstocking and overgrazing - Greater levels of milk production. Leads to better meeting of dietary requirements - Higher cattle reproduction rates due to better quality beasts. Leads to elevation of social status - Stronger draught animals - Decreased costs as herd boys no longer needed	- Decreased access to grazing land - Only 10 head of cattle can be accommodated at any one time in the feedlot area so some people will have to wait - Payment of maintenance costs of the scheme
Non cattle-owners	- Increased availability of draught animals leading to faster and cheaper land preparation for cultivation - Increased access to markets to purchase cattle and cattle products	- Payment for membership of a scheme from which they cannot currently benefit although by paying they are maintaining access rights - Payment of maintenance costs of the scheme
Village elders	- Elevated status within the *Tinkhundla* of target area 1 for hosting the project	- Decreased power with regard to decision making over community issues -Decreased control over access to land -Payment of maintenance costs of the scheme
Indvuna	- Elevated status within the *Tinkhundla* for hosting the project	- Decreased power with regard to decision making over community issues - Decreased control over access to land - Payment of maintenance costs of the scheme
Women	- Increased resources such as grass for thatching, grass mats, fuelwood where land has been allowed to recover - Time saving due to increased natural resource abundance so greater time for weeding etc.	- Decreased access to natural resources in fenced area which may lead to temporarily having to travel further for fuelwood and wild resources

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Youth	- Better chances of getting an education because fewer herd boys will be needed	- Absence from school whilst working on the project
Committee members	- Increased power with regard to decision making over community issues - Elevated status within the *Tinkhundla* for hosting the project	- Payment of maintenance costs of the scheme
All residents of the chiefdom	- Increased capacity building in terms of management skill and land rehabilitation practices - Improved condition of grazing land and increased wild resource abundance	- Payment of maintenance costs of the scheme

The end of the project saw conflict develop due to the duality of institutions in the village. The committee was making decisions without fully consulting the elders, therefore going against traditional Swazi practices. At the community level, the elders exert considerable influence, who being older and having greater life experience, are able to exhibit significant levels of authority under the auspices of tradition. This can be traced back to the national level and the legacy of Sobhuza, as outlined earlier. The King is described as an absolute monarch but is also surrounded by advisors on the National Council. The King himself appoints these members, though traditionally the wisdom of the elders is said to guide him in his decision-making. The cultural position of the elders is therefore traditionally powerful. Older Swazi citizens often have less formal education but have enforced respect and gain from the traditional institutions. They are often resistant to changes, particularly those that involve the relinquishment of decision-making and authority, as they wish to maintain their power and status. JICA (2001) state that the elders were involved with the planning and execution from the beginning of the project in response to a recognised need to respect Swazi culture. It was envisaged that the elders could assist the committee with the motivation of the community in participating in the project. However, the conflicts that ensued impacted upon the internal cohesion and organisational capacity of the committee, hence the delay in putting the feedlot scheme into action. In Swaziland, the usual method of resolving community disputes is through the channels of traditional authority but when such negotiations are laid within or around the village elders, conflict resolution becomes rather complicated.

Another issue rooted in the negotiation of power relations is that the committee chairman in Engcayini is reportedly a very strong leader and the committee have clear ideas about what they want to achieve. The nature of participation is that it does require leadership and organisation, created from within the community rather than imposed from above. However, the views of the committee do not always correspond with the views of the community. Similarly, the views of the chairman do not always correspond with those of the committee. As stated by Mosse (2000), people themselves actively concur in the process of problem definition and planning, manipulating authorised interpretations to serve their own interests. Although decisions relating to the project were made collectively by the committee, they may not necessarily have represented the best interests of the entire group (Da Chuna and Pena, 1998). The surfacing of such differences of opinion between committee members provides a clear example of how multiple understandings of a situation can cause conflict (Robbins *et al.*, 2002) and demonstrates how pre-existing power relationships prohibit the development process from being truly representative, as control over levels of participation lacked an exploration of the controls on village power relations.

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Despite the responses of some people who stated that the project had good leadership, other members of the community found fault with committee. This resulted in criminal acts such as the cutting of the fence around the grazing area. Such criticisms and sabotage may be due to either a lack of understanding of the benefits of the project, or because of misunderstandings between the non-participative community members and those who are more motivated. Some people may also be jealous of the leadership success. This illustrates how in the context of natural resource management, the negotiating of social relations can produce ecological consequences (Nightingale, 2003), as the damaging of the fence could allow cattle access to the areas that had been left to regenerate. The formation of the committee caused the legitimisation of otherwise informal village power relations as power was partially relinquished from a culturally bound institution (the elders) to a rationally and democratically formed one (the committee) (cf. Robbins, 1998). This highlights the need for more than decentralised authority over resources, as patterns of difference and stratification within a 'community' need to be understood when empowering local actors (Ribot, 1995; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

Through the preceding discussion of the implementation of a contemporary land degradation mitigation project in one community in Swaziland, it has been revealed that community natural resource management is highly complex. This case study illustrates that natural resource management is another context in which social relations are constituted, contested and (re)produced (Nightingale, 2003). It has also demonstrated the networked nature of interactions between ecological conditions and processes with the socio-political aspects of land management at the village level, whilst additionally considering the influences of wider society and practices, including traditional institutions and the balance of power, on the level of success of a 'participatory' community grazing land project.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BROADER PROCESSES OF DEVELOPMENT
Despite the conflicts and tensions that arose from the project, the achievements of the community, the committee and all of the stakeholders must not be downplayed. Considering the unfamiliarity of the villagers with participatory development processes, the Swazi preference for stability and the *status quo* (Daly, 2001), the tradition of patriarchal and inherited dominance and control, and in acknowledging that this was an experimental pilot project, much was achieved. Many positive aspects emanated from the project as a result of hard work, cooperation and enthusiasm and if this is maintained throughout the functioning of the initiative, there is a chance that the villagers can reap the benefits of their efforts and with the necessary government support, the project can be sustained. Many lessons can be learnt from this pilot project, from both the approach and implementation, the benefits of which should be constructively applied to future land and conservation initiatives in both the *Tinkhundla* and in the national Swazi context.

Whilst the condition of the communal land was not a concern for the majority of villagers, the people of Engcayini were willing to acknowledge that the gullies were an environmentally unfavourable occurrence. In order to receive some perceived benefits from the project, they shaped their needs and priorities to match the project's administrative realities. This therefore validated an imposed scheme with local knowledge, as external institutional interests became built into community perspectives, legitimising decision-making and the project as being participatory (Mosse, 2002). In this respect, the project failed to allow people to define their priority needs, resulting in the substitution of community participation in place of structural reforms (Botchway, 2001). Sustainable grassroots participation requires changes in the whole culture and procedures of the organisations facilitating it, whether they are NGOs, government departments, donor agencies, universities or training institutes (Chambers and Blackburn, 1996). This was not the case

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in the project in Engcayini due to the incompatibility principles of the UNCCD with three key characteristics of Swazi politics. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Areas of potential conflict between the UNCCD and the political structure of Swaziland

Potential conflict area	UNCCD	Swazi politics
Broad scale power relations and decision making	Local, decentralised	Centralised, control by King through chiefs and elders
Local level power relations and decision making	Bottom up from within the communities	New committees v traditional institutions
Nature of power relations and decision making	Inclusion of marginalized groups	Patriarchal society; women and the youth often excluded in decision making and denied access to resources

Whilst concepts of local level natural resource management and decision-making, and the inclusion of marginalized groups, are honourable in themselves, they are not necessarily appropriate to the context of Swaziland given the centralised authority of the monarchy and the current gendered socio-political conditions. The centralised power and control of the aristocracy means that 'participation' is an alien concept to many of the people who are unfamiliar with democracy due to the national ban on multi-party politics. Whilst the ethnic traditionalism introduced by King Sobhuza gave the Swazi people positive identities as members of a Swazi nation, in reality this estranged them from the political process (Levin, 1991). Although increasing moves are being made towards greater democratisation, this will not be achieved without the introduction of broader political and structural changes. In terms of the implementation of the UNCCD, Swaziland's political circumstances restrict true community participation in that the decisions of the King or chief or elders take precedence over the needs and priorities of the people.

The inclusion of marginalized groups in decision-making is another significant element of the UNCCD that is not entirely compatible with Swaziland's political context because it is a highly patriarchal state and the power of men within society is tightly bound with tradition and hierarchy (Daly, 2001). Traditional symbols of status and power centre around the ownership of cattle and control over women through polygamous marriage relations. Wives and children provide the core of the food producing labour force, so the ability to marry more than once means an increased ability to accumulate and redistribute wealth. Access to women therefore constitutes a form of class stratification amongst rural *umuti* and this interacts with gender relations in complex ways. Men have disproportionate power compared to women, and older people are more powerful compared to younger people. Images of complete female subordination are misleading however, particularly if they fail to take age into account because traditionally, respect is gained through life experience. Older women therefore are granted more respect and power than younger females, though not as much as older men.

In the UNCCD, the inclusion of marginalized groups is considered key to the successful combating of land degradation and desertification and the mitigation of drought. Particularly given the division of farm labour between men and women, it is the women who often demonstrate a greater awareness of their environment, as it is they who perform such tasks as collecting firewood, harvesting natural resources from communal land and weeding and cultivating the allocated land

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(Daly, 2001). Their inputs with regard to natural resource management are therefore critical. The patriarchal nature of Swazi society means that women continue to lack voice in public policy issues and decision-making, both at local and national level. Without change to gender relations, the indigenous knowledge of female Swazis will be largely overlooked.

Walker (1999) states that in much of Southern Africa, democratisation, community participation and enhanced environmental protection have been taken to be mutually reinforcing. Indeed, authoritarian rule can mean that the policies from which the elites benefit can be freely pursued, whilst imposing environmental harms on local people. Democratisation is promoted as advocating greater responsiveness of political leaders to the needs of their communities and this can result in the investment of rural people in sustainable agriculture and conservation, even where population growth prevails (Tiffen *et al.*, 1994). Also, by increasing participation in environmental decision making, democratic governments can (in theory) avoid ineffective policies by promoting greater respect for local needs and through tapping into local knowledge and skills, rather than working against the interests of affected people (Walker, 1999).

Should democratisation processes continue to evolve in Swaziland, it is necessary to ensure that the strengthening of institutions and civil society also occurs because within the current political structural framework, the UNCCD and other sustainable development policies cannot be implemented to their full potential. The role of NGOs in implementing the UNCCD is paramount, however, very little is actually known about their efficiency and impact, let alone whether they are capable of delivering and fulfilling expectations (Marcussen, 1996; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). It must also be ensured that NGOs do not just provide legitimacy to international decision-making processes (Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu, 2002) and that they offer a concrete institutional structure for participatory engagement because participation in the community project in this research did not achieve the representation of the poorest people in the village and benefits both real and perceived, were demonstrated to have been unequal. Similarly, the role of the NGO was restricted to that of a service provider, when it could have offered so much more to the development process, particularly in terms of capacity building. Again, power relations between the NGO and donor remain unchallenged. Analysis is needed as to whether the role of NGOs in implementing the UNCCD and related agreements in Swaziland is sufficiently flexible given the national ban on trade unions, political parties and other forms of associationalism. There is a danger that NGOs could be employed instrumentally in order to attain and legitimise top-down, anti-democratic policy outcomes (Lewis, 2002; Lane, 2003). In affording Swazi NGOs greater interaction with policy and implementation processes, this will inevitably lead to the decentralisation of power (Forsyth, 1999). Again, given the political context, whether this can actually occur with real authority being delegated to local citizens remains ambiguous.

CONCLUSION
The retro-fitting of old policy objectives to new approaches as demonstrated in this paper does not constitute the necessary reforms. A new participatory approach applied in the same social, institutional and political-economic context is likely to result in incomplete project ownership and consequently limited success, as these same factors shaped the current socially skewed and ecologically deleterious outcomes (Ribot, 1995). Sustainable grassroots participation requires changes in the whole culture of the organisations facilitating it (Chambers and Blackburn, 1996) because it cannot be successful if shifts take place within the existing political and structural framework (Mortimore and Tiffen, 2004). Local hierarchies and power relations need also to be considered in the execution of participatory processes, as stratification within communities must be understood when empowering local actors (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Whilst moves towards greater public participation demonstrate a positive shift in attitudes towards the ideals embraced in

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the UNCCD, the project in Engcayini nevertheless represents only a small advance, as the shift has taken place within the existing political and structural framework (Mortimore and Tiffen, 2004). In order for true changes to occur to the ways in which natural resources are managed, the balance of power must continue to be challenged through the renegotiation of social relationships at and between all levels.

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