Revisiting Environmental and Natural Resource Questions in Sub-Saharan Africa
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Edited by
Wilson Akpan and Philani Moyo
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In the last few years, the Environment and Natural Resources Working Group of the South African Sociological Association (SASA) has assembled African and international scholars and researchers, both established and emerging, to debate and offer insights into some of the continent’s most pressing social-ecological questions. Convened by Wilson Akpan under the aegis of SASA and happening within the association’s annual congresses, the dialogues have taken place against the backdrop of a new resource rush that has eventuated in the raiding and re-raiding of the continent’s traditional extractive enclaves and pried open hitherto “unspoilt” treasure troves to some of the same exploitative forces (local and foreign) that have historically made resource development in Africa a study in paradoxes.

At the 2014 SASA Congress in the beautiful coastal city of Port Elizabeth, a small group of environmental sociologists discussed the need to explore ways of bringing the SASA environmental and natural resource debates to a much wider, global audience—at the very least, to ensure that not only scholars but also policy makers, younger researchers and the environmental/development practitioner community had easy access to some of the key issues in the dialogue. Those discussions laid the foundation for this book.

*Revisiting Environmental and Natural Resource Questions in Sub-Saharan Africa* brings together the results of original, mostly field-based, case studies conducted by the authors in Southern Africa, West Africa and East Africa. The few chapters that are desk-based draw on the authors’ many years of carrying out original research on the respective topics; hence, the analyses and commentaries in those chapters bring equally refreshing angles to the issues in question. The case study countries—South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Kenya—are among the continent’s notable mining countries (with the exception of Kenya, which may be termed an “emerging” mining economy).

But, as the title suggests, the book is not only about mining and its antinomies within the context of Africa’s socio-economic rejuvenation. From the very beginning, the Editors’ idea had been to revisit cross-cutting questions of development, underdevelopment and anti-development, with a focus on how these intersect with “green”, “brown” and climate-related...
issues. Some of the questions that have occupied the minds of scholars through the years—about compensation, local participation, benefit- and burden-sharing, and dispossession, for instance—have been re-posed in the ten chapters of this volume and re-engaged from the vantage point of new (mostly empirical) evidence and new epistemic insights.

The intellectual journey starts from South Africa. In Chapter One, Wilson Akpan, Johan van Tol, Melissa Malambile and Ntombesizwe Nqalo interrogate space-place sensitivities, public engagement antinomies, and lurking community-state conflict in some of the rural Eastern Cape communities where the government has proposed to build a major dam (the Ntabelanga dam) as a strategy to “stimulate development” in the area. Essentially the chapter reveals how the government and its consultants appear, in the preparatory stages of the dam development, to have misread both the communities’ “need” for development and the ethno-ecological dimensions of community existence.

Freek Cronje (now late) and David van Wyk dissect, in Chapter Two, the multifarious social-ecological impacts of coal mining in selected communities in the province of Mpumalanga, and bring to light the fact that despite the huge economic importance of mining in South Africa, some of the mining-related environmental and public health issues in mining communities border on the tragic. In certain cases, the chapter reveals, these have been entrenched through “clever” stratagems perfected by mining corporations over many decades. The paradoxes not only call for a review of the institutional framework for mining operations (especially with regard to corporate-community relations) in the country; but, more fundamentally, they raise new questions about the corporate-community-environment nexus in a mining context.

In Chapter Three, Babalwa Sishuta and Anastasia Doyle bring to light a new form of capitalist ecological brigandage in South Africa’s rural communities. Focusing on the multibillion dollar medicinal plant industry, the paper provides a compelling analysis and sociological exegesis of the processes through which communities in Nkonkobe (now Raymond Nhlaba) municipality in the Eastern Cape Province have lost control of a significant part of their ecological heritage (denoted by pelargonium sidoides and other indigenous flora). The concept of bio-piracy is deployed in the chapter to illustrate the intersection of ecological dispossession, economic appropriation (by big industry) and community impoverishment.

Two additional case studies, both focused on climate change, complete the Southern Africa sample. In Chapter Four, Philani Moyo examines the array of “assets” at the disposal of Zimbabwean and South African small-
scale farmers in adapting to climate change. A ‘bottom-up’ analysis guides the chapter’s examination of observed adaptation strategies adopted at the household level with the intention to establish asset “drivers”, their effectiveness and capacity to build local resilience to climate change. The core argument advanced is that environmental risk and natural hazard-prone South African and Zimbabwe subsistence farmers are not passive victims of climate impacts. Instead, they are ‘active agents’ using ex ante and ex post adaptation strategies constructed using an array of endogenous ‘assets’ at their disposal. As evidence that the “assets” basket is not static, Chapter Five, by Thulani Dube and Philani Moyo, brings into the equation a crucial variable: access to climate information. They investigate the extent to which Zimbabwean subsistence farmers have access to climate change information and how well this information addresses their adaptation needs. The analysis reveals that subsistence farmers’ access and use of meteorological climate change information is limited by the fact that many do not have television and radio sets, the two crucial media through which official meteorological information is disseminated, while others cannot comprehensively decipher the information due to its technical complexity. In its place, these farmers are utilising indigenous knowledge-based forecasting techniques. This reliance on indigenous knowledge in climate change forecasting highlights the need to rethink how this rich repertoire of knowledge is perceived and used in climate change information dissemination and adaptation.

Three Nigerian case studies are featured in the book and they focus on substantive and ideational clashes that have become emblematic of “solid minerals” and petroleum development as well as the management of environmental change impacts in the country. The first of these cases (Chapter Six) is on the popular, yet intricate, discourse on compensational justice. Using compelling archival, ethnographic and interview data, Ikechukwu Umejesi and Wilson Akpan engage two South-eastern Nigerian mining towns that are somewhat ecologically different, yet appear to live in a state of painful reminiscences. It is a study of how collective memory of colonial-era relations between mining corporations and local communities, especially on land matters, shape contemporary attitudes towards corporate-community financial exchanges. The analysis yields interesting lessons in how and when not to use financial settlements as a tool of ecological redress.

In Chapter Seven, Cyril Obi brings crucial nuances to the concepts of security, insecurity and peace-building, especially when these terms are applied to one of Africa’s most traumatised resource-rich ecologies. The chapter argues that the granting of amnesty to Niger Delta militants and oil
‘warlords’, a programme the Nigerian government touted at inception in 2009 as a political masterstroke, has broadly not been a success, but has merely only revealed the state’s parochial view of security. A grossly underdeveloped and rural oil province caught in the maze of a global petro-industrial complex is bound to face not simply a “security” problem, as the state often portrays it, but would be stuck in a morass of contending “securities” that demand holistic attention. The chapter offers far-reaching insights for scholarship and policy. Appropriately, Engobo Emeseh, in Chapter Eight, draws on the ecological crisis and socio-political panics associated with oil production in the Niger Delta to make a strong case for effective interventions in the crucial area of climate change impact mitigation.

Kenya is where the journey ends. Chapters Nine and Ten focus on the country’s nascent titanium mining industry, where, paradoxically, conflict related to mining-induced social displacement has been, in part, a result of compensation payment, not its opposite. In Chapter Nine, Willice Abuya and Wilson Akpan provide an ethnographic account of the connects and disconnects between official compensation frameworks and idiographic narratives and existential realities in rural titanium mining communities. The analysis dovetails into Abuya’s in-depth socio-historical analysis (in Chapter 10) of the impact of policy on mining-related conflict.

As the above synopsis shows, the ten chapters interrogate formal institutionalised positions and interventions, old and not-so-old orthodoxies, as well as local narratives relating to these issues. Attempts have been made in several of the chapters to highlight epistemic, theoretical and policy implications embedded in a given “clash of narratives”. In the main, the book highlights the peripheralisation (and, in some cases, outright silencing) of local knowledge in the ways crucial dilemmas associated with the community-development-environment nexus are tackled.

It is the Editors’ hope that policy makers, academics, researchers, university students and everyone interested in environmental sociology, political ecology, and environmental policy will make the book their companion. The book is also recommended to anyone interested in global environmental and natural resource questions, particularly those pertaining to Africa.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the generous support of various institutions and individuals. The South African Sociological Association (SASA), through its Environment and Natural Resources Working Group, provided the intellectual platform over several years on which scholars from different countries debated many of the core ideas and positions advanced in the book. The University of Fort Hare’s Govan Mbeki Research and Development Centre (GMRDC) provided research funding for the research on which Chapters Six and Nine are based, as well as funding (in conjunction with the University’s Projects Office) for the out-of-town retreats that enabled the Editors to focus on their tasks without distractions. The Water Research Commission of South Africa funded the larger research project from which the first chapter of the book has been derived. The Editors are hugely grateful to these institutions. Grateful thanks are also due to the publisher-appointed experts who anonymously peer-reviewed the entire volume. Without a doubt, their critical comments have helped to enhance the book’s intellectual quality. Finally, the Editors would like to thank their colleagues in the Department of Sociology, University of Fort Hare, for their support and encouragement throughout the duration of the project.
ABBREVIATIONS

ACB  African Centre for Biosafety
BRICS  Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CBD  United Nations Convention on Biodiversity and Trade
FGD  Focus Group Discussions
GHG  greenhouse gas
MVP  Mzimvubu Water Project
PIC  Prior Informed Consent
TRIPS  Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property
CHAPTER ONE

SCIENCE, ETHNOSCIENCE AND A DAM:
(MIS)READING THE POTENTIAL IMPACTS
OF THE NTABELANGA DAM, SOUTH AFRICA

WILSON AKPAN,
JOHAN VAN TOL,
MELISSA MALAMBILE
AND NTOMBESIZWE NQALO

Introduction

Among the declarations made by the South African President, Jacob Zuma, in his 2013 State of the Nation Address was that a large multipurpose dam would be built in the Eastern Cape as part of efforts to accelerate the economic rejuvenation of the province, but particularly the area chosen for the project. Ntabelanga Dam, as it has since been officially named, would be built in the Mzimvubu Basin, and, together with a smaller Laleni Dam (also proposed) and other related initiatives, formed part of Mzimvubu Water Project (MVP). Managed by the Department of Water Affairs, Ntabelanga Dam is expected to support irrigated agriculture, boost tourism and enhance water supply in an area where drought remains a major socio-ecological problem and poverty is deeply entrenched. When completed, it will be one of South Africa’s largest dams.

1 The contents of this chapter formed part of a report submitted by the first and second authors (and other members of the larger research team) to the research funders, the Water Research Commission, which reviewed and approved it for publication. WRC’s approval does not signify that the contents necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Commission, nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute an endorsement thereof or recommendation for use.
Utilising empirical data obtained by the authors as part of a long-term multidisciplinary study of the (potential) impacts of the dam, this chapter accomplishes three things. One, it presents a condensed socio-economic profile of the dam communities, against which official discourses about dam dividends can be assessed. Two, it probes local narratives vis-à-vis the dam, and thus foregrounds the study’s key argument that one stakeholder’s reading of (potential) dam dividends can be another stakeholder’s misreading thereof. The slate of narratives and counter-narratives helps to buttress the chapter’s argument that the prevalence of socio-economic deprivations in a community is not a guarantee that local residents would accept “development” without questioning, at the very least, its mode of delivery. Thirdly, the chapter posits that while a major, environmentally intrusive project such as the Ntabelanga dam is bound to present sustainability dilemmas for both benefactor and beneficiary, the destabilising consequences of a clash of narratives (between, say, “science” and “ethnoscience”) can be averted if the project implementation process is preceded and undergirded by rigorous engagement between dam developers and affected communities.

It should be stated at the outset that while preparatory work towards the construction of the Ntabelanga Dam has commenced the project is referred to in this chapter as “proposed”. This is principally because, as at the author’s last major data collection exercise in the area in July 2015, the construction had not begun.

**Public participation: the paradox of engagement**

A viable starting point to pondering the immediate to long-term socio-economic impact of the proposed Mzimvubu Water Project (MWP), and specifically the Ntabelanga Dam, is to have a firm grasp, early in the project cycle, of the socio-economic realities in the communities that will be directly or indirectly affected by the dam, and that could drive support for and/or opposition towards the project. It is also important to take account of how community members articulate such realities. For the research team, this primarily meant seeking ways of accessing deeper narratives about livelihoods and livelihood dynamics, amongst other things. However, since this has to do with an intrusive development project of considerable magnitude, it also meant reflecting (based on the respondents’ narratives) on the quality of the public participation and community engagement processes that might have been one of the bases for the confirmation of the area as a suitable site for the dam project in the first place. Such processes have become not just a practical prerequisite for
the commencement of major development projects globally (White 2000), especially in terms of Article 1992 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. In South Africa, it is clearly a legal requirement (see Republic of South Africa 2014). In other words, the research team’s attempt to understand the reality of local livelihoods, visions of the future, expectations and any oppositional impulses vis-à-vis the dam project was an attempt to demonstrate why engagement matters in the dam-community nexus, at least in a rural South African context.

In the ‘age’ of sustainable development, local participation appears to have attained an axiomatic status: it has to be made integral to the project cycle not only because it enhances sustainability outcomes, but mainly because social justice demands it; it is the right thing to do, as it fulfils an important democratic and human rights imperative. To expand this axiom somewhat: it is indefensible that development should be imposed on people, as that would almost certainly do more harm than good in the long run. Within the context of development-induced displacement in particular—and the Ntabelanga Dam project is bound to lead to a fair amount of displacement—this axiomatic rendering of the imperative of engagement and community participation carries a strong appeal and has remained a powerful advocacy idiom among social ecologists in particular, who insist that both in theory and practice development must be pursued as if people mattered.

This is in spite of the wide-ranging debates around the concept of community participation, one aspect of which can be gleaned from the cynical-sounding title of Khwaja’s (2004) paper: “Is increasing community participation always a good thing?” In the paper, Khwaja cautions against naïve faith in the power of participation, arguing that while autocratic development planning and development delivery can never be justified, community participation does not always enhance project outcomes.

Those sentiments are part of a tradition of critical assessment of local participation in which Sherry Arnstein’s (1969) ideas remain quite seminal. Since local participation was primarily an expression of local power—or, more correctly, an attempt to decentralise decision-making power by enlisting the input of those who would be most directly impacted by such decision-making—Arnstein proposed an assessment scheme that would demystify the participation process. The proposition was that participation is a “ladder” with eight rungs. Arnstein termed the lowest rung manipulation and the highest, citizen control. In the climb from manipulation towards citizen control, the six rungs are: therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership and delegated power.
Arnstein’s schema essentially implies that some types of participation—and some community participation approaches adopted by decision-makers and project developers, or consultants working on their behalf—are tantamount to non-participation, yet they could easily be misconstrued as participation. This is precisely how David Wilcox (1994) views Arnstein’s typology. He describes manipulation and therapy as “non-participation”, informing and consultation as euphemisms for “tokenism”, and partnership, delegated power and citizen control as signifying a “degree of citizen power”. It is from this appraisal that Wilcox (1994, CAP 12) proffers a typology of his own—a five-rung “ladder” with information as the bottom rung and supporting independent community interests as the topmost. In between are consultation, deciding together, and acting together, in that order.

An equally interesting typology is that proposed by Sarah White (2000, originally in 1996) in a paper that dissects the “uses and abuses of participation” in the development arena. White urges a shift from mere descriptions of diverse “forms” of participation, to an in-depth appraisal of the different interests that both project developers (and their consultants) and the beneficiary community bring to the process. Thus, according to White (2001, 144), whereas the interest that project developers have in nominal participation (the lowest in a four-step participation hierarchy) is “legitimation” (they seek to be seen as doing something for the community), what community members seek is “inclusion”. A slightly higher form of participation is instrumental. Here, the overriding interest of project developers in involving community members is to extract “efficiency”, whereas community members regard their participation as a “cost”. In representative participation, developers seek “sustainability” by devolving specific responsibilities to community members, while community members believe their involvement in such a way is important for “leverage”. It gives them a “voice”—which is a measure of influence. The highest form of participation is transformative. According to White, this is the only form of participation where the interests of developers and community members overlap; both regard participation as “empowerment”.

Just looking at White’s typology, and Wilcox’s and Arnstein’s before it, it is obvious that community engagement and public participation processes can be abused or manipulated to serve narrow ends by project developers, their consultants, powerful segments of the local community, or through some form of opportunism involving any combination of these and other stakeholders (see Mnwana 2011).

It is doubtful if the brazen disregard for EIA rules reported in Akpan (2005, 202-203) and Echefu and Akpofure (2003, 73) is possible in South
Africa. However, the foregoing reflections about the paradox of engagement and public participation are important for at least two reasons. First, during the data collection, the authors listened to local stories that indicated that the dam-related community engagement processes they had so far been part of were not as water-tight as they could have been. Second, as shown later, some of the local narratives pertaining to livelihood dynamics, community expectations and fears—and even the metaphors utilised by respondents to describe their fears—were indicative of a community engagement and public participation process that might not have been conducted with utmost rigour.

Methodology

The selection of the sites was done based on experience and information gained from work previously done by the first and second authors in the area (van Tol et al. 2014a,b), detailed investigation of maps and satellite images of the area, and a field visit conducted in March 2015.

Identification of representative communities

The identification of communities for the study was based on the assumption that the Ntabelanga Dam would impact different communities and different subgroups within communities in different ways. It was therefore important to select communities that were representative of the entire area in terms of differential exposure to the variety of anticipated impacts. The five study communities were: Ngxoto, Lower Sinxaku, Ngqongweni, Ndzebe, and Ndibanisweni Administrative Area (AA). While two of these communities (Lower Sinxaku and Ndzebe) are identified differently in Google Earth, in this chapter the names used are those found on local signposts and by which community members know their villages.

Table 1-1: Study location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Local Municipality</th>
<th>District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ngxoto (Emqokolweni)</td>
<td>Elundini</td>
<td>Joe Gqabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Sinxaku</td>
<td>Elundini</td>
<td>Joe Gqabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngqongweni</td>
<td>Nyandeni</td>
<td>OR Tambo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndzebe</td>
<td>Mhlontlo</td>
<td>OR Tambo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndibanisweni AA</td>
<td>Mhlontlo</td>
<td>OR Tambo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ngxoto (part of the bigger community of Emqokolweni) is situated at the dam inlet. When the research team first visited the community in March 2015 (in the site selection phase of the study), it found that despite the community’s significance as a dam inlet (it is located on the banks of the Tsitsa River), awareness of the dam inundation footprint was very low. Two informal interviewees informed the researchers back then that “the dam will not be here, but 20 km downstream”. This irony informed the inclusion of Ngxoto in the study, as it was an issue that could have significant implications for how residents would respond to any positive or negative impacts of the dam before, during and/or after its construction, especially in the light of existing socio-economic conditions in the community.

Lower Sinxaku (identified as Sinxagu in Google Earth) is expected to be adversely affected by the dam, especially in terms of loss of the best grazing land (see van Tol et al. 2014a,b). The soils adjacent to the community are highly erodible. Besides, the town is not included in the formal irrigation plan linked to the dam. It was thus important to probe local perspectives on how the dam would impact the community.

Ngqongweni is located next to the dam wall, and is therefore expected to be directly impacted by the dam construction. In an earlier phase of the study (van Tol et al. 2014b), it was only in this community that local residents knew for certain that a dam project was impending, as they had witnessed numerous visits to the village by “white people”. Now was the time to gain an in-depth understanding of local sentiments, given the community’s anticipated exposure to dam construction activities and close proximity to the dam wall.

Ndzebe (or Machibini, according to Google Earth), in Mhlontlo Local Municipality (OR Tambo District), lies adjacent to the Tsitsa River and stands a chance of being mostly positively impacted. Some areas in the community have been included in the formal irrigation plan. Besides, the community is likely to experience fewer floods, even though, due to its proximity to the Tsitsa River, changes to the stream morphology and water regimes are likely to affect it. It was important to probe local socio-economic narratives in the community, especially in relation to agriculture and irrigation.

The peri-urban community of Ndibanisweni Administrative Area (AA) is on the outskirts of the main rural town of Tsolo (both in Mhlontlo Local Municipality in OR Tambo District). Although located approximately eight kilometres from the Tsitsa River, it is included in the formal plan for irrigated agriculture. The researchers were keen to document how narratives about livelihoods and livelihood dynamics vis-à-vis the dam
project would compare to those in the other four communities, hence its inclusion in the study.

Of the five communities, four are classifiable as “rural”, according to the official South African definition of this term, that is:

the sparsely populated areas in which people farm or depend on natural resources, including the villages and small towns that are dispersed through these areas. [Rural] ‘clusters’ in the former homelands, i.e. large settlements without an economic base except for transfer payments, are also included (Rural Development Task Team & Department of Land Affairs 1997).

Data collection techniques and sampling

Four main data collection techniques were used: conventional focus group discussions (FGDs), town hall FGDs (see Zuckerman-Parker and Shank 2008), individual in-depth interviews, and field observation. A town hall FGD was conducted in Ngxoto, complemented by an in-depth interview of a key authority figure in the community. In Lower Sinxaku, both conventional and town hall FGDs were conducted. In Nqongweni, a conventional FGD was complemented by in-depth interviews. In Ndzebe, eight in-depth interviews were conducted, and in Ndbanisweni AA, a town hall FGD was complemented by an in-depth interview of an established traditional healer/spiritual figure (a sangoma).

Table 1-2: Data collection techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Conventional FGD</th>
<th>Town hall FGD</th>
<th>In-depth interview</th>
<th>Field observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. Group Size</td>
<td>No. Group Size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngxoto</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Sinxaku</td>
<td>1 10</td>
<td>1 15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nqongweni</td>
<td>1 6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndzebe</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndbanisweni AA</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 55 Participants in the “town hall FGD” (explained presently) in Ngxoto were middle-aged and elderly men and women, as well as younger men and women aged about 23 years on average. The (conventional) FGD participants in Lower Sinxaku were young men and women (group size
10, average age 24). Participants in the town hall FGD in this community were all traditional healers (sangomas) - 15 in total (both male and female - see Table 1-2). They spoke passionately about, among other things, the socio-cultural and mystical significance of a river (with flowing water), as distinct from a dam with “stagnant water”, thus voicing their concerns about how the proposed dam would impact not just on their vocations but on the spiritual health of the community as a whole. Among the insights gained from the sangomas was the river-community nexus, from a socio-cultural and mystical point of view, and how a major dam project could interfere with that relationship.

Four women (average age 24) and four men (aged between 40 and 70) participated in the interview in Ndzebe. In Ngqongweni, four in-depth interviews were held, complemented by a (conventional) focus group with six female brickmakers. In Ndibanisweni AA, 55 men and women (including the youth) participated in the town hall FGD, while a separate in-depth interview was held with a local sangoma.

The research process adhered strictly to standard ethical requirements of voluntary participation, guarantee of respondent anonymity and data confidentiality as well as informed consent. In all the data collection meetings, consent forms were signed by individual participants or by one or more participants signing on behalf of the whole group.

A “town hall FGD”, it must now be stated, is a term ascribed to a “super-sized” FGD with a sample size much higher than the six to 10 participants conventionally prescribed for FGDs. The method has come into popular use in recent years among (qualitative) social researchers, especially those working on development and environmental issues in small rural communities. As more knowledge is gained about specific social dynamics in such communities, there is growing realisation of the need to adapt conventional data collection methods to the peculiarities of such locales (see Akpan 2005, 79-80). One such adaptation is with FGDs, which traditionally emphasised small-group dynamics, with six to 10, and sometimes 12, participants considered the maximum (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 57) and six considered ideal. Researchers do “breach” the “small group size” norm in order to accommodate peculiar dynamics of social organisation in such villages. For the present research team, negotiating access to a community invariably entailed working through the local Headman. Once the subject of a major dam project was introduced, the Headman would express his support for the research endeavour by offering to schedule an appointment for the researchers to meet with the target group—in a primary school hall, a village courtyard or some other suitable venue. However, on the appointed day, the researchers would find
that far more people than originally intended had been invited to the
meeting, “in the spirit of transparency and inclusivity”, and that the
Headman had, in fact, called a “formal” town hall meeting, with the
village scribe taking minutes (for the village record). In one of the villages,
the meeting opened with a prayer.

The town hall FGD, or “large FGD” (Zuckerman-Parker and Shank
2008, 632), therefore, is an “invention” birthed by necessity. When
handled professionally and in the right circumstances, it can produce
outstanding results. More than anything else, it yields, within a very short
time, a spread of perspectives and insights that a “normal-sized” FGD
cannot. Indeed, it was during the town hall sessions that the researchers
encountered local sentiments that indicated that there might have been
serious lapses in the dam-related community engagement and public
participation processes hinted at earlier. These sentiments might have
appeared isolated if they were only expressed in individual in-depth
interview or “normal sized” FGD situations. The following remark by
Zuckerman-Parker and Shank (2008, 631), who, like the present
researchers, have made use of a town hall FGD, is instructive: “sometimes,
we choose to take bold and pioneering moves to extend our research
practices, but, more often, those moves are thrust upon us by virtue of
circumstance.”

Findings

The findings are reported under three headings: livelihood dynamics,
oppositional discourses, and engagement dynamics.

Livelihood dynamics

Empirical data from the various communities, but especially from the four
rural communities, highlight the dire absence of sustainable income
sources in the study area. Respondents made repeated reference to being
“unemployed”, “poor” and “needing assistance”. This was in spite of the
fact that they also reported having access to a number of income sources,
including social grants, remittance income, construction and road works,
teaching, farming, convenience shops (known locally as spaza shops), and
traditional healing. It is only through a closer examination of local
narratives about the different livelihoods that one gains a better
understanding of why respondents described them as “unsustainable” and
as “last resort” livelihoods—activities they engaged in because there was
“nothing better to do to make a living”.


Social grants

Transfer payments in the form of child support grants, foster care grants and old age pensions were by far the most pervasive of all income sources in the community and a critical safety net given the precarious economic conditions in most households. Indeed, almost every household had someone who was a beneficiary of one form of social grant or another. Many of the younger women were single parents, whose children were beneficiaries of a child support grant. Older persons aged 60 years and above were recipients of an old age pension, while those with a disability were entitled to a disability grant. In many households, there were dependent children who were being fostered by grandparents or other relatives and who were, thus, recipients of a foster care grant (see Table 1-3).

Table 1-3: Social grants in South Africa (October 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grant type</th>
<th>Grant amount in 2015 (in ZAR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old age pension</td>
<td>1 510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old age pension (age 75 and above)</td>
<td>1 530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>1 510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster care</td>
<td>890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child support</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care dependency</td>
<td>1 510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War veteran’s</td>
<td>1 530</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


People aged between 18 and 60 years who have no disability and are not officially registered with the South African Social Security Agency (Sassa) as foster care providers fall outside the formal safety net provisioning. Technically, therefore, most people in the study communities were not direct beneficiaries of any social grant. This means that whatever social grant was being received in a given household was spread thinly, as it catered for more people than the intended beneficiaries, at least in terms of day-to-day subsistence. In many households, therefore, social grant income was more or less the same as household income. Many of those aged between 45 and 60 were caught in one of the unfortunate dilemmas of social welfare: they had children who were above the cut-off age for child support grant (which is 18 years) but were themselves not old enough to become beneficiaries of an old age pension (which commences
in the year one turns 60). In many such households the burden of unemployment and poverty seemed particularly severe.

From the respondents’ narratives, the researchers noted that within the context of safety net provisioning, especially its reach into the deep rural areas (despite reported grant administration hiccups), the South African state’s social role was quite evident. That citizens in such rural communities as those studied could access welfare grants—and were, to a large extent, dependent on them—was an indication that the South African state was making a great effort to be perceived as a “social state”. But it also raised questions about how far a state could flex its social muscle, and underlined the urgency with which the state must tackle the problem of rural unemployment and rural poverty in a more sustainable way.

Boosting rural household incomes, drastically reducing dependency on welfare grants, and enhancing livelihood opportunities are key developmental imperatives in South Africa, and the extent to which the proposed Ntabelanga Dam contributes to the achievement of these goals must necessarily be viewed as an important sustainability challenge. Against this background a remark by one female interviewee in Ndzebe regarding the poor “employability” profiles of local residents is noteworthy: “Education plays an important role and determines how one lives; when you are not educated you are not able to get employment”.

**Remittance income**

Although not as pervasive and as regular as social grants, remittances from urban-based working relatives were reported by research participants as a supplementary income source for some community members, especially households whose members were recipients of one form of social grant or another. The researchers learnt, however, that while only a few households had access to such informal “safety nets”, even those that benefited could not subsist entirely on it due to its irregularity. Besides, because such inflows ultimately support many household members who do not have a direct income of their own, the overall effect in terms of poverty alleviation in such households remains insignificant and unsustainable.

**Construction**

Several participants reported that they had at one time or another in the recent past worked as casual labourers during the grading of dirt roads in the area. For a number of these respondents, this was their only form of “formal employment” in a long time. At the time of the fieldwork, most of
the dirt roads in the area appeared to have been recently graded and were generally motorable (compared to when the researchers first visited the area in 2013), especially for off-road vehicles. However, the involvement of local residents was at very low levels. Young people were usually hired as “flag boys” and “flag girls” (to alert grader operators and oncoming road users of any hazards) and paid very low wages during the period of road grading.

While the “construction of houses” was mentioned among sources of income, the researchers found that there were very few new construction sites in the study communities. Whatever construction activity was ongoing in the area was not of a scale that could provide sustainable (self-) employment opportunities, even for those who reported having earned an income through concrete brickmaking.

In Ngqongweni, the researchers held an FGD with six women involved in traditional mud brickmaking. The findings showed that these brickmakers considered their vocation somewhat precarious due to the non-availability of water (as they were not permitted to use water from the communal taps), sporadic demand, and the relatively antiquated nature of the craft. The women found it nearly impossible to fetch water from the Tsitsa River, as the village is located on the hills and the brickmaking activity takes place there. They accessed water by furtively “causing” water from a nearby communal tap located further uphill to drain into a collecting point close to the brickmaking site so that it could be fetched to the site using plastic buckets.

To emphasise the sporadic nature of the demand for mud bricks and the endangered status of mud brickmaking in the community, one of the FGD participants remarked as follows:

Basically, we are employed by the person who owns the site where a house is [to be] built. When someone wants to build their house they come to us to make bricks for them. Usually they approach one of us to say they need bricks and we then gather ourselves and start working. We are right now moulding bricks for that house over there. If there is no house to be built that requires mud bricks, we have nothing to do. To make the bricks, we mix mud and water with our bare hands and use a box to shape it. We learnt the trade from our mothers and grandmothers. But the younger generation are not interested in this craft, and so passing on the skills has become quite difficult.

The women expressed awareness about the proposed Ntabelanga Dam. They were, however, not aware of the scale of the project, other than that some homesteads would be relocated elsewhere. They were confident that
the dam project would help the local brickmaking initiatives in the area. For one thing, the drudgery of fetching water would become a thing of the past. Yet, this anticipated benefit had a counter-narrative that is noteworthy, as reported presently.

Another construction-related income-generating activity that was mentioned in all the interviews and focus groups was *ukurhela*—the local term for the harvesting, drying and bundling of grass for sale to people building thatch-roofed homes. While thatching is an indigenous skill, the researchers found that residential dwellings with thatched roofs were no longer in fashion in the study area, as preference had shifted to corrugated iron roofing sheets. While the Eastern Cape has a sizable thatching industry due to the prevalence of thatched tourist cottages and *lapas* (outdoor entertainment structures with thatched roofs and supporting poles constructed near swimming pools in resorts and upmarket homes), *ukurhela* appeared not to be meaningfully linked to this market. Research participants classified it among the “dying” income generation activities in the area.

### Teaching

There was at least one primary school and a crèche in each of the communities. In Ngxoto, the town hall FGD was held in a primary school classroom after school hours. Besides teachers, each school employs a handful of administrators and manual workers such as cleaners and gardeners, and also serves as a source of indirect employment for providers of different services. The study revealed, however, that most of the teachers employed in the various schools were not indigenes of those communities. They worked in the schools on weekdays and returned to their homes (located, in some cases, more than a hundred kilometres away) on weekends and during school vacations. What this means is that while teaching was, ostensibly, an important facet in the latticework of income generating activities in the area, some of the key skills needed to run the local schools (teachers in particular) were sourced from outside the communities.

### Farming

In a previous phase of this study, which focused on Ndzebe and Lower Sinxaku, two of the five communities covered in the present study, it was observed that:
most families devote between 0.1 ha and 0.5 ha of the 1 ha homestead land allocated to them by the tribal authorities to subsistence agriculture. The arable lands are typically consolidated rainfed farming areas, which can be made up of several plots (1–3 ha or more). These lands are in the vicinity of the villages, whose residents cultivate the plots. Distances between homestead and farming area are, in some cases, quite substantial. Large areas of communal land—the higher-lying mountains surrounding the communities—are typically used for grazing of livestock, especially cattle. These areas are communally owned (van Tol et al. 2014a, 4).

This agro-ecological profile holds true for all five communities in the present phase of the study. Although every household had access to a farm plot, with mostly maize, potatoes and vegetables cultivated subject to the vagaries of the weather (“these days heavy rains come in the wrong season”), and some were involved in small farming “projects” funded by the Eastern Cape Department of Social Development as part of a poverty alleviation and rural livelihoods programme, crop farming was not a major income source for most households.

Most households kept livestock such as cattle, goats, sheep, donkeys and pigs, as well as backyard chickens. In Lower Sinxaku, one FGD participant estimated that 80% of households had livestock. For most of those involved in animal farming, livestock was a store of wealth (“we use it as a form of savings”). Except for the very few who were commercial livestock farmers, cattle, sheep and goat were not seen as economic commodities that could be actively sold or exchanged for cash. According to one interviewee in Ngqongweni: “I sell a cow only when there is an emergency. Otherwise, cows are not for sale as such”.

Generally, even those local residents with some access to livestock still described themselves as “unemployed”, living under “difficult economic conditions” and “needing assistance”.

A crucial threat to livestock farming in the study area is stock theft. According to some of the research participants, livestock owners were increasingly hesitant to utilise the communal grazing fields located relatively further away from the homesteads. People preferred to have their cattle graze near the homesteads instead—a situation that respondents believed was not conducive to the growth of livestock agriculture.

**Spaza shops**

Although reported as a source of income, there were very few informal convenience shops (known locally as spaza shops) in the study communities. Because of their small sizes, they were more a source of
income for their owners than a source of employment for local residents who might have wished to work as shopkeepers. In each of the communities, the researchers sighted at least one spaza shop.

Traditional healing

The inclusion of *sangomas* (traditional healers) in the sampling strategy was so as to privilege the perspectives and narratives of a subgroup in the community that has a special relationship with the Tsitsa River (discussed later). This was so that the researchers could gain a deeper, ethnographic understanding of the river-community nexus, how that nexus might be impacted by the dam project, and the possible consequences. It is necessary to state here that *sangomas* do not regard themselves as economic agents, in the sense of being in the vocation just to earn a living. Rather they see themselves—and are viewed by the wider community—as people endowed with supernatural abilities to communicate with “ancestors” and seek solutions to problems afflicting the living. As “intermediaries”, *sangomas* find their roles guaranteed within a belief system that defines the universe as a life-afterlife continuum. Each human in due time will “transition” to the “other side”, assume a new role as an ancestor and continue to take an interest in the affairs of the living. In this cosmology almost every social problem is (or can be) explained metaphysically.

Clients of the *sangoma* are people who seek “release” from all kinds of social misfortunes (sickness, unemployment, business failure, “bad luck”, marital problems, fear of untimely death, and “bewitchment”, to name a few), which they believe are caused by supernatural forces and cannot be tackled through orthodox, western-style interventions.

There is a belief in the study area that *sangomas* are unremunerated, as they act “on behalf of the ancestors”. However, for the purposes of this section, traditional healing is regarded as a livelihood. This is because practitioners charge consultation fees (in cash and/or kind). Also, established *sangomas* enrol trainees (*umkhwetha* or *ithwasa* in isiXhosa)—people who have found out that they have been “called” into the *sangoma* priesthood and need guidance and induction. The trainees “pay” fees, often in kind, “as directed by the ancestors”. A further observation made by the researchers was that despite the pervasive belief in ancestors and in the supernatural dimensions of health and wellness in the area, the study found that only a very small number of community members practised as *sangomas*. 
Ethnoscience and oppositional discourses

Most residents acknowledged that because of the acute water shortage in the area, the dam would bring great relief. Animals would easily find water to drink, the fields would be irrigated, crop harvests would become abundant, commercial agriculture would become imaginable for many people, employment opportunities would be created, and life as they knew it would be positively different. However, the empirical data showed that despite the present deplorable socio-economic conditions in the study communities, and the near-desperate need for socio-economic rejuvenation, people had strong sentimental attachments to the homes, fields, animals, the river, and the socio-cultural networks that defined their existence. Especially in the communities nearest to the proposed dam—Ngqongweni, Ngxoto and Lower Sinxaku—the strong people-environment bond was such that even when no oppositional stance was openly expressed with regard to the proposed dam project, one could still feel a sense of how residents might react to any plans to relocate them.

In several of the FGD and in-depth interview sessions, the fear of displacement was expressed using very strong metaphors: displacement was likened to being “killed”, being “torn down”, and being “thrown away”:

Government will build this dam, right? And then they will move us and throw us far away where we will gain nothing. They want to tear our houses down. With it, the children will work and we will all get jobs. But we don’t want that work. You see that house over there? They are going to tear those ones down. (Female interviewee, Ngqongweni)

It was as if the prospect of a “better” life was at once the certainty of doom. During the town hall FGD with the sangomas near Lower Sinxaku, the following sentiments were repeatedly expressed by participants:

From what I can see, we can get employment from the dam. Beyond that there is nothing to be gained. They will kill our fields. They are moving us, to put us where? They will look for a place for us? They will cut for us a place among the agricultural fields? The fact is that we don’t want to be moved, we don’t want to go to strange villages. We want to remain here. (Male sangoma, Lower Sinxaku)

In Ngxoto, one town hall FGD participant voiced the following as one of the many reasons the dam project could complicate their lives: