

# People, Parks and Poverty: Integrated Conservation and Development Initiatives in the Free State Province of South Africa

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## 1. Introduction

Conservation policy and practices over the past few decades have strongly emphasised the linkages between rural poverty and environmental degradation and, more specifically, the importance of reconciling the socio-economic needs and expectations of local communities with the objectives of biodiversity conservation and protected-areas management. Several international agencies and organisations, including the World Bank, World Wide Fund for Nature, The World Conservation Union, USAID and United Nations agencies, have come out in support of the idea that biodiversity-conservation programmes should take into account the socio-economic needs of the local population. Protected areas are thus increasingly expected to cross the boundaries of conventional biodiversity protection and take their place on the national development agenda by contributing to poverty reduction among rural communities adjacent to parks and reserves. In fact, over the past two decades or more, there has been growing recognition in conservation circles that national parks and other protected areas cannot be managed successfully without consideration for the subsistence and economic requirements of their neighbouring communities (Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Kothari et al., 1998; Naughton-Treves, 2005; World Parks Congress, 2003). With world leaders and development agencies increasingly coming out in support of poverty-alleviation initiatives, and the Millennium Development Goals – particularly the first of the eight goals – that aim to curb poverty significantly by 2015, it is important to understand and assess the role that protected areas may potentially play in this endeavour. This chapter explores one example of how a national park in the Free State Province of South Africa has reached out to its neighbouring communities in an attempt to channel conservation benefits to the local people and thereby to address some of the developmental needs of the population in the surrounding areas. More specifically, the chapter distils some of the key findings and lessons derived from a poverty-alleviation project at the Golden Gate Highlands National Park – a project that operates under the banner of the *People and Parks* Programme of South African National Parks (SANParks) and attempts to involve neighbouring communities in the conservation of biodiversity in a mutually beneficial fashion. The *People and Parks* Programme embodies the new policy framework of conservation authorities in South Africa – a policy that represents a significant change in philosophy from the conventional protectionist and fortress approach to conservation. In

order to appreciate the context of this policy, we need briefly to trace the origins of the current approach to integrated conservation and development initiatives.

## **2. People or/and protected areas: From strict reservation to cautious integration**

The concept of a “protected area” was coined in the late 1800s in response to growing concern at the loss of wilderness areas. Although The World Conservation Union distinguishes six different categories of protected areas (Harmon, 1994), the term is now commonly used as an umbrella concept so as collectively to include national parks, biosphere reserves, nature reserves and marine protected areas. The majority of protected areas are located in rural environments with the primary purpose of protecting biodiversity. Yet such areas may also include a range of important social, cultural and economic functions (Dudley et al., 2008).

Since the proclamation of the very first national park in the world, official approaches to conservation had, almost without exception, concentrated on protecting the ecological biodiversity inside a demarcated and fenced area. This was achieved by segregating the local population from the protected area and preventing the utilisation of biodiversity inside the proclaimed park or reserve (Algotsson, 2006). Local communities have traditionally been fenced out from such protected areas and have, in some instances, even been forcibly relocated for the sake of conservation. Some estimates set the total number of people worldwide who have been displaced as a result of the establishment of protected areas at more than ten million (Dudley et al., 2008). The main focus of protected areas fell on the conservation of biological biodiversity, the demarcation of boundaries and the provision of tourist facilities, with little consideration for the influence of these areas on the livelihoods of (often poor) local communities. The same approach to conservation was adopted by authorities in Southern Africa, where local communities were seldom consulted in the establishment of protected areas (Fabricius et al., 2001). This approach – fostered by the rapid expansion of protected areas during the second half of the twentieth century – often conflicted with the developmental needs of rural populations in developing countries.

Protected areas worldwide have increased more than tenfold in respect of total coverage since 1980 (Zimmerer et al., 2004). During the period 1900-1949, there were fewer than 600 officially protected areas worldwide (Pelser & Sempe, 2003), but this figure has increased exponentially over the past three decades. The campaign to increase the proportion of protected areas significantly was first seriously promoted at the 1982 World Parks Congress in Bali, where all nations were set a target of having 10% of countries under protection (Naughton-Treves, 2005). At the World Parks Congress in 2003, it was reported that the number of protected areas had tripled over the preceding 20 years bringing the total to an estimated 100 000 worldwide (World Parks Congress, 2003), although some put the current figure at more than 105 000 (Upton et al., 2008). The impact of these expanding protected areas on the livelihoods of neighbouring communities, has however largely been ignored by conservation authorities.

The continuous expansion and proclamation of protected areas for the exclusive protection of scenic areas of biodiversity became increasingly ill suited to the socio-economic realities of the developing world and tended to conflict with both the existing resource-use and livelihood practices of local peoples (Ghimire, 1995). Conservation authorities in Africa and elsewhere soon realised that “protection” and “development” were not necessarily mutually

exclusive concepts; in fact, the successful management of most protected areas became irreversibly intertwined with the provision of benefits to and the cooperation of rural communities. More specifically, the expansion of large protected areas, such as national parks, is today increasingly confronted with the reality of rural communities stricken with dire poverty – communities who are often entirely dependent for their survival on the very resources that have now been proclaimed “protected”. As, internationally, both the debate around sustainable development and the need for conservation approaches to take into consideration not only socio-economic but also environmental aspects gained momentum (Spenceley, 2008b), management approaches in Southern Africa started to shift towards conservation that included local communities in both the sharing of conservation benefits and in the management of the natural resources in the protected areas (Algotsson, 2006; Balint 2007; Fabricius et al., 2001). In terms of the “new” approach, people are recognised as the primary resource, or, as Summers (1999:193) puts it: “... it is essentially a bottom-up conservation approach”, while Kothari et al. (1998:27) describe it as “conservation of biological biodiversity ... based on the involvement of local communities”.

Despite this shift in biodiversity conservation, many of the programmes undertaken within this new management approach appear to have failed to provide communities with benefits that make a real and lasting difference to their livelihoods (Fabricius et al., 2001). In fact, the transfer of tangible benefits to local communities has been hampered by several factors, amongst others the lack of commitment among stakeholders (De Beer & Marais, 2005), internal tensions and indecisiveness (Collins & Snel, 2008; Guyot, 2005) and the conflicting interests of stakeholders (Decker et al., 2005; Sammy & Opio, 2005). The new conservation approach, however, is also increasingly being challenged by a contrary perspective: in recent times there has been, as Brechin et al. (2007:39) articulate it, “... a renewed rhetoric advocating both (1) an abandonment of the social agenda related to conservation efforts ... and (2) a greater emphasis on, or return to strict preservationist practices”. This basically represents an appeal from the ranks of “protectionist conservationists” for a return to the core mission of biodiversity conservation, and to do so without being burdened by efforts to accommodate social challenges and agendas. Despite this backlash rhetoric that has emerged in some circles, both the reigning conservation philosophy and conservation practice in most countries are still firmly embedded in a people-sensitive approach. This particularly applies to South Africa, where the *People and Parks* Programme of the new political dispensation is seen as an attempt to address some of the socio-economic ills that became associated with conservation during apartheid rule. For the foreseeable future thus, the once dominant narrative of fortress conservation has lost its official standing – both in Africa and elsewhere – in favour of a counter-narrative of people-centred conservation approaches.

## 2.1 The nature of people-centred conservation approaches

Many of the protected areas established before the 1980s had no or limited linkage to neighbouring communities. Conservation policy during that period dictated strict segregation between biodiversity protection (met by proclaiming protected areas) and poverty reduction (met by providing various forms of financial assistance). Once an area was earmarked for biodiversity protection, it was fenced off, and in many cases the local population within its perimeter was removed – sometimes even forcibly.

The 1980s, however, saw conservation agencies pioneering a variety of new approaches to protected area management – approaches that aimed to foster a stronger symbiotic relationship between conservation and development. Growing recognition that the social

and economic needs of local communities had to be considered in conservation approaches had since spawned a number of innovative people-centred conservation approaches that allow for community involvement in biodiversity conservation and management. The common denominator in these approaches is the assumption that whenever communities feel that they are part of conservation efforts and where the conservation of the resources translates into benefits for the community, the sense of ownership and positive attitudes towards conservation can be enhanced (Simpson, 2009). Child (2004) confirms this in arguing that seeing protected areas as common resources which also generate value for the surrounding communities, conservation objectives can be achieved more sustainably. Poor rural communities – particularly those living adjacent to parks and other protected areas – may potentially reap significant benefits from conservation spin-offs in protected areas. Such benefits span a wide range of opportunities, and could vary from employment opportunities, shared revenues, small-business development opportunities, and the sustainable utilisation of resources inside the protected area (Fabricius et al., 2001). It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that handouts alone will not necessarily contribute to either dynamic relationships or sustainable livelihoods. As Algotsson (2006) emphasises, communities should also feel that they are able to participate in the decision-making process and the management of the protected area.

Yet the new initiative towards people-centred conservation does not however imply a uniform or homogeneous approach, or even some kind of blueprint applicable to all communities and to all conditions. Labels such as *community-based conservation*, *community wildlife management*, *integrated conservation and development projects*, *collaborative management models* and *community-based natural resource management* are commonly attached to initiatives of this kind. These approaches have become known under many different collective names, but the umbrella term “integrated conservation and development programme(s)” (ICDP), as suggested by Wells and McShane (2004), is perhaps the most descriptive and viable collective term for conservation initiatives with socio-economic development goals. Barrow and Murphree (2001) propose a threefold classification of ICDP approaches: *protected area outreach*, which is aimed at the education and economic benefit of neighbouring communities in order to enhance the biological integrity of protected areas; *collaborative management*, whereby conservation authorities and local communities (or their representative bodies) enter into agreements for access to natural resources under the jurisdiction of a joint management committee or other statutory monitoring authority; and *community-based conservation* that strives to put communities in control of the sustainable management of natural resources by placing the control over such resources in the hands of community structures. This broad typology of ICDP approaches, though useful as a theoretical construct, is nevertheless at best a simplification of the typologies of community conservation, and most conservation policies in Southern Africa tend to incorporate elements of more than one of the different types of ICDP approaches. The three proposed categories are thus not mutually exclusive when it comes to official conservation policies at the national level; yet they all subscribe to the philosophy of conservation with benefits to neighbouring communities.

Although many of the benefits offered by protected-areas management are non-financial in nature, these are nevertheless valued by communities (Fabricius, et al., 2001). Some of the non-financial benefits may include new and improved infrastructure, environmental education programmes, increased access to health, and to education training and information, improved relations between stakeholders, skills development that unlocks employment opportunities for local people, an increased sense of identity of communities

and the building of local leadership (Fabricius et al., 2001; Simpson, 2009; Spenceley, 2008a). Direct benefits such as employment opportunities, for instance, may arise in terms of either the primary conservation function of the protected area, or through commercial tourism operations and accommodation facilities, or even a combination of these options. As described in Spenceley (2008a), shared incomes could take the form of tourism incomes through joint ventures with private operators, revenues from concession fees, community-based tourism and accommodation facilities, and revenues from wildlife-utilisation activities, such as hunting fees and live game sales. Several examples of such initiatives, and in many cases a combination of them, can be found across Southern Africa and particularly in South Africa. In addition to the mentioned direct revenue streams that could be channelled to communities, indirect incomes could also be generated by developing local small and medium economic enterprises. This particularly applies to opportunities offered in the supporting and associated activities rendered to the protected area, such as the sale of goods and the rendering of services by both local entrepreneurs and the informal trade sector (Spenceley, 2006; Spenceley, 2008a).

These benefits – particularly the direct benefits – could, however, be limited and sometimes community members might feel that they are not deriving sufficient economic benefits from the protected area (Spenceley, 2005). In many instances, communities tend to over-estimate the potential financial benefits that can potentially be accrued. The reality, however, is that the latter are often negligible, particularly in the case of large communities, high poverty rates and many households that need to share the limited revenues on offer (Fabricius, et al., 2001). In other cases, the financial benefits could be limited to only those few members of the community directly involved in employment or tourism opportunities (Simpson, 2009:201). Yet despite such limitations, it should be emphasised that large segments of the said communities live in conditions of extreme poverty, high unemployment levels and with otherwise very limited options from which to derive an income. It therefore stands to reason that, when compared with other sources of income, the potential *additional* income that some households may expect to derive from opportunities in the protected area, no matter how marginal these may be, “*can make a significant difference to people living on the edge of subsistence*” (Fabricius et al., 2001).

The transfer of worthwhile benefits derived through biodiversity conservation is often hampered by one or more barriers – barriers that erode the benefits that accrue to local communities. Some of the most common barriers to the realisation of community benefits include inter-community rivalry and power struggles (Collins & Snel, 2008; Guyot, 2005); a lack of commitment, and the conflicting interests of different stakeholders (Sammy & Opio, 2005); weak or malfunctioning local structures (Fabricius et al., 2001); indecisiveness when it comes to decision making (Collins & Snel, 2008); nepotism and undemocratic decision making (Guyot, 2005); the domination by elite hierarchies imposed by established tribal systems (Simpson, 2008); and, the non-equitable distribution of benefits (De Beer & Marais, 2005). These barriers all contribute to constrain the progress of development projects; they dilute the potential impact of benefits and thus eventually also the success of poverty-reduction initiatives in local communities.

## 2.2 Protected areas as platforms for poverty mitigation

Ever since the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, the links between environment and development and, more specifically, conservation and poverty, have been intensely discussed and fiercely debated – a debate that has gained momentum in recent

times (Andam et al., 2010; De Sherbinin, 2008; Dudley et al., 2008; Simpson, 2008; Upton et al., 2008; Wells & McShane, 2004). Scrutinising the social role of protected areas and their impact on rural livelihoods and development has become an increasingly central component of this debate (Naughton-Treves et al., 2005; Simpson, 2009; Spenceley, 2008b). In the Durban Accord of 2003, the World Parks Congress emphatically emphasised the role of protected areas as "... contributors to poverty reduction and economic development and as creators and sustainers of livelihoods" (World Parks Congress, 2003:2) and moreover continued to urge commitment to protected areas that strive to alleviate poverty amongst their neighbouring communities. Although much has been achieved in terms of understanding the links between conservation and development in different spatial contexts (Wells & McShane, 2004), the absence of extensive comparative data on the dynamics of poverty among the communities surrounding protected areas worldwide continues to hamper comprehensive analyses of the interrelationships between protected areas and neighbouring communities (De Sherbinin, 2008).

The insistence on protected-areas management to contribute towards poverty reduction should be seen in the context of the prevailing poor economic development and the low levels of quality of life that typify rural conditions all over Africa. Almost two-thirds of the population of Africa are currently subsisting on less than US\$2 per day (PRB, 2009). Further complicating this situation is the fact that those African countries displaying the highest indices of poverty also enjoy the greatest coverage in terms of protected areas of The World Conservation Union's Protected-Area Categories I-V (Upton et al., 2008). Hulme and Murphree (2001) note that, in most African countries, rural communities surrounding protected areas are likely to experience poverty rates higher than the national average. Amidst these realities, the policy switch towards people-centred conservation in Africa has promised to alleviate poverty, not only by contributing to local economic growth, but also more directly by creating employment opportunities for the local people and, in some cases, providing increased access to resources within the protected area. It must however also be emphasised that the additional flows of income to households via community conservation initiatives in most cases is not of sufficient magnitude to make fundamental contributions to the eradication of poverty. Hulme and Murphree (2001) explain that although there might be a few cases where the economic benefits derived from a protected area could form an element of a poverty-reduction strategy, the magnitude, benefits and impact of these programmes are however too small to claim that they could become the cornerstone of a comprehensive poverty-alleviation programme, no matter how favourable the circumstances. At best, such programmes can hardly be more than a welcome supplement to the livelihoods of the poor, which means that such programmes should be seen as no more than additions to the more formal and existing human development programmes.

The size of a population (neighbouring community) living around a protected area is an important factor that determines the ability of any conservation outreach initiative to contribute to the well-being of the community (Dudley et al., 2008). In the case of a relatively small population that is reliant on the opportunities in a protected area, such opportunities and outreach initiatives could indeed make a significant contribution to poverty eradication. What this means is that the capacity of a protected area to function as a poverty-reduction tool strongly correlates with the size of the neighbouring community that stands to benefit from such opportunities: the smaller the target population – or the number of potential beneficiaries – the greater the outreach impact of the protected area is likely to be, and vice versa. In the face of significant population pressure, however, any attempt to promote a

protected area as a vehicle for poverty alleviation will simply not be feasible (Dudley et al., 2008). Strategies that aim to reduce poverty, and that are initially successful may later run into problems if, for instance, they create such expectations as to encourage increased human migration to the protected area. If not managed with care, increased population pressure on the available opportunities may threaten to turn a potential “win-win” situation into a “lose-lose” one. Even successful examples of the mutually beneficiary relationship between biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction have their limitations and cannot necessarily be duplicated as blueprint models. Dudley et al. (2008) continue by emphasising that, in many cases, the *most* important socio-economic role of protected areas is fulfilled through benefits that are *not* narrowly interpreted in financial terms. If poverty is indeed understood and recognised as a multi-dimensional reality, then a protected area’s contribution to poverty alleviation should not be confined to the financial aspects of poverty only, but should also allow for a broader social and economic scope. This perception of poverty reduction is clearly manifested in the South African approach of channelling conservation benefits to neighbouring communities.

### 3. The South African approach to conservation

Housing an estimated 10% of Earth’s diversity of plants and animals, South Africa is considered the world’s third richest country (following Indonesia and Brazil) in terms of biodiversity. Of all the vascular plant species found in South Africa, some 80% occur nowhere else on the planet (Pelsler & Redelinghuys, 2008). Notwithstanding this wealth in biodiversity, a series of factors such as population pressure, land degradation, overconsumption of resources, pollution and the expansion of agricultural land and urban settlements have interlocked to both cause and propel the destruction of natural habitats at an alarming rate. Strengthening the existing network of protected areas in the country therefore implies not only an improvement in terms of management effectiveness; it also requires that the protected area estate be expanded (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009). To this end, a National Protected Areas Expansion Strategy (NPAES) was tabled in 2008, its aim being to expand the current 6.2% of land area under conservation to 12% in order adequately to cover a representative sample of national biodiversity. The target of 12% will meet the 10% international target for terrestrial biodiversity cover (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009).

Wishing to follow the example set by international practice, the official approach to conservation in South Africa had also traditionally been a protectionist ideology, i.e. one of excluding local people from management decisions and restricting the utilisation of biodiversity (Algotsson, 2006:82). Emerging in the late 1930s, this management style would form the basis of conservation policy in South Africa for some decades to come. Firmly embedded in the broader philosophy of apartheid that demonstrated disrespect for basic human rights, this conservation approach often resulted in forced removals of communities, social conflict, hostility towards conservation, increased levels of poverty and even further environmental degradation (Pelsler & Sempe, 2003).

With the dawn of the new political dispensation, SANParks (as the official conservation agency) gradually transformed from an institution of protectionist conservation to one embracing a community-oriented model that attempts to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with the challenges of human needs and socio-economic development. Following the first democratic elections in 1994, SANParks initially inherited 17 national

parks, including the second oldest and one of the most renowned parks in the world, the Kruger National Park. Today there are 22 officially proclaimed national parks in South Africa, and although the Kruger National Park is unrivalled in both size and biodiversity of plants and animals, the remaining 20 parks constitute important and representative examples of the country's many diverse ecological systems (see Figure 1).

SANParks' post-1994 approach to conservation hinges on linking conservation with economic development and human needs, i.e. on the *inclusion* of neighbouring communities rather than on the *exclusion* of the local population in its conservation practices. Unlike its predecessor, this conception of conservation is imbedded in a philosophy that embraces the principle of a harmonious relationship between parks and their neighbouring communities. It subscribes to the belief that the protection of biodiversity should be linked to human benefits and, if possible, the sustainable utilisation of resources. Essentially, this entails various initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life of neighbouring communities through options such as environmental education, recreational opportunities and the unlocking of economic opportunities. This change in conservation philosophy has been supported and enabled by changes in the legal and policy frameworks of environmental conservation in the country. The National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (Act No 57 of 2003 as amended in 2006), for instance, provides the legal framework for the *People and Parks* Programme of SANParks.

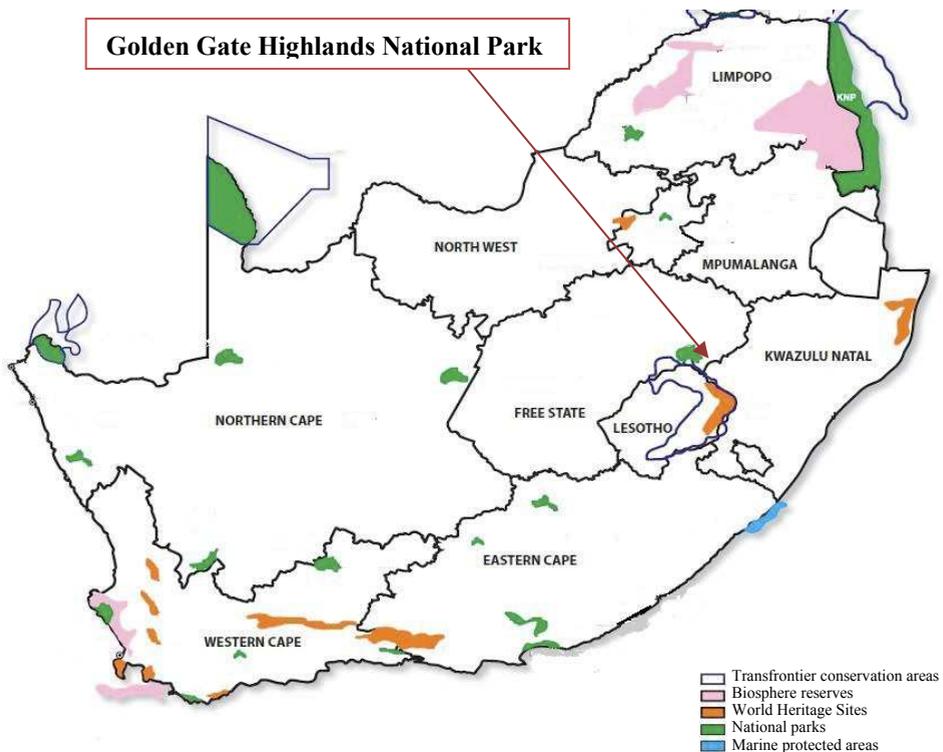


Fig. 1. Protected areas in South Africa (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2011, adjusted).

### 3.1 The *People and Parks* Programme of SANParks

The *People and Parks* Programme of SANParks emanated from the World Parks Congress held in Durban in 2003. Several important themes emerged from this conference: The “benefits beyond boundaries” theme for instance emphasised the importance of providing socio-economic benefits to surrounding communities (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009). The interdependence of communities and conservation was recognised, and the conference confirmed that protected areas can and should contribute towards the alleviation of poverty (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009). The Congress further highlighted the important role of protected areas in sustainable development and of the conservation of biodiversity and the mitigation of poverty amongst neighbouring communities. The *People and Parks* Programme should be seen as a direct response to these concerns, and embodies the South African Government’s efforts to address land reform, rural development and conservation in a coordinated and holistic fashion.

A strategy to develop new management plans for national parks in South Africa through a range of stakeholder engagement processes has seen 18 parks with representative forums facilitating public participation in park management (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009). Several outreach initiatives serve as examples of how the new approach embraces the philosophy of integrated conservation and development: since 2007, more than 300,000 school children have enjoyed free access to national parks; cultural heritage repatriation and sites – including historical graves – are promoted and managed in most national parks; an average of 5,100 people per annum are employed in a conservation-related extended public works programme (EPWP); and sustainable resource-use projects are run, which allow and assist communities in harvesting resources from national parks in sustainable and economically beneficial ways (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009).

The main objectives of these environmentally oriented programmes are enhanced biodiversity through the clearing of alien plant species and rehabilitation of infiltrated wetlands and other areas, the construction of conservation-related infrastructure (roads, rest camps, fences, etc.) and the facilitation of the development of small and medium enterprises within the neighbouring communities. Depending on circumstances, a total of 2,000–8,000 people are employed annually by the EPWP nationwide (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2009). The EPWP is a government initiative to mitigate poverty by encouraging labour-intensive activities and by providing temporary employment opportunities, particularly by targeting deprived communities and vulnerable sectors within these communities. There are four programmes specifically dedicated to job-creation opportunities in the environmental sector, i.e. *People and Parks* (focusing on infrastructure), *Working for Wetlands* (wetland rehabilitation), *Working for Water* (alien vegetation removal) and *Working on Fire* (fire control and prevention). As indicated in the next section, these programmes exemplify Golden Gate Highlands National Park’s efforts to contribute to the alleviation of poverty in communities adjacent to the park.

## 4. Case study: Poverty alleviation in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park

### 4.1 About the park

The Golden Gate Highlands National Park (Golden Gate) – one of 22 national parks in South Africa and the only in the Free State Province – is nestled in the foothills of the Maloti Mountains in the north-eastern part of the province (see Figure 1). The park comprises more than 30 000 hectares of highland habitat and is home to a large variety of mammals,

including 10 antelope species and almost 900 bird species. Specially protected fauna in the park include the endangered Cape Vulture, the Bald Ibis, the rare Bearded Vulture, the endangered Oribi and the Sungazer. Golden Gate is currently the only national park in South Africa that protects the Afromontane Grassland biome, the most neglected biome from a conservation point of view. More than 60 species of grasses have been recorded in the park (SANParks, 2011). Grassland can support vast herds both of domestic and wild animals and also serve as protection for crucial wetlands. South African grasslands constitute the second largest ecosystem in the country and are collectively protected not only by three World Heritage Sites but also by many provincial reserves and national parks. Golden Gate offers one of the best places to appreciate grassland conservation in South Africa. The park is also part of an ambitious international conservation project that extends from the Eastern Cape, all along the Drakensberg mountain range through KwaZulu-Natal and into the Free State on the South African side of the international border with Lesotho to constitute the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project.

Golden Gate is situated in one of the most important water-catchment areas in South Africa and more than 50% of the country's water supply comes from this area (SANParks, 2011). The initial park of 4, 792 ha was proclaimed on 13 September 1963 at a time when parks were mainly established for pristine-area protection. The park was subsequently enlarged – in 1981, 1983, 1988-89 and again in 2008 – to reach its present size of 34 000 ha (SANParks, 2011; Taljaard, 2010). Apart from its aesthetic beauty and the fact that it represents the threatened grassland biome, the park also has major geological significance. The geological formations in Golden Gate were created by swampy rivers and volcanic activity over a period of 160-200 million years ago to form three main layers of rock: a red layer, yellow sandstone deposits and basalt (SANParks, 2011). These rock layers also inspired the name of the park: Golden Gate derives its name from the soft shades cast by the setting sun on the west-facing sandstone cliffs, which turn the cliffs into a glowing gold colour. Archaeological findings at Golden Gate (particularly stone tools and rock paintings) suggest that the Stone Age Khoisan people (Bushmen group) were the first inhabitants of the area, using the many overhangs and caves in the park as shelters. Equally important paleontological discoveries were made in 1973, when the first ever fossilised dinosaur eggs with foetal skeletons of the upper Triassic Age (200-230 million years) were discovered in the park. The initial identification of the dinosaur eggs was for many years disregarded by the scientific community, and only in 2008 was it proved that the fossils did indeed contain the remains of *Massospondylus* embryos – a find that catapulted the larger Golden Gate area as one of the most important dinosaur fossil sites in the world (Tucker, 2010). The 1973-discovery was since followed by the discovery of several examples of fossilised dinosaur bones and footprints.

Conservation management in the park faces three main challenges: erosion control, alien plant control and fire management. Problem plants in the park include Poplars spp., Blue Gum spp., Wattle spp., Prickle pear, Weeping Willow, Pine spp., Bramble spp. and Black Berry. The Golden Gate soil is very sensitive to erosion by wind, water, stock path and fires from neighbouring communities. The wetlands in the park are particularly diverse and highly important for biodiversity conservation, but are degraded as a result of the overgrazing practices of earlier farmers before the park was proclaimed. Wetland rehabilitation initiatives in the park therefore attempt to stabilise soil erosion and silt that are washed into the wetland. At least six distinct vegetation types are common to the wetland area, and rehabilitation intervention is mainly in the form of gabion structures and

earthworks (Working for Wetlands, 2010). The rehabilitation and conservation of these wetlands – in which members of the neighbouring communities play an active role – are of paramount importance for water catchment and water security in South Africa.

#### **4.2 The neighbouring communities of the park**

Although the concept of “neighbouring communities” is central to SANParks’ people-centred conservation approach, the definition and demarcation of such communities often create numerous challenges. For the purposes of this discussion, the concept “neighbouring communities” denotes groups living in close proximity to Golden Gate, or groups that may live some distance from the park, but nevertheless may have reasonable expectations in respect of benefitting from opportunities created by the park (SANParks, 2000). Within the South African historical context, and given the broad objectives of the *People and Parks* Programme, the concept usually refers to black and “coloured” communities residing in rural or semi-urban settlements. Yet, as in the rest of Africa, several challenges confront rural areas in South Africa and thus also the communities in these areas. These challenges include poor access to both socio-economic infrastructure and services, low levels of literacy and skills development, socially disruptive migratory labour practices, as yet unresolved restitution and land-tenure issues, the overconsumption and/or unsustainable use of natural resources, and high rates of unemployment and poverty with a consequently high dependency on social grants and other forms of social security. The rural population surrounding Golden Gate is no exception to this trend.

Golden Gate and the surrounding areas fall within the boundaries of the Thabo Mofutsanyana District Municipality (TMDM) – one of five district municipalities in the Free State Province. With a total population of 694 319 (2007) – 93.7% of whom are black people – TMDM is the district with the second largest population in the Free State (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2010). The average household size is 3.7, which is more or less equal to the national average. Because of the dynamic of migrant labour in the district, the gender distribution is somewhat skewed, with almost 54% of the population being females – by far the highest female proportion of any district in the province. One in every three persons (32.2%) is 14 years or younger, and a staggering 64.2% of the population (or 445 753 persons) were living in poverty in 2007 (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2009). In fact, not only does TMDM have the highest poverty rate of the five districts in the Free State, it also registers one of the highest poverty rates for district municipalities in all of South Africa. The district is thus characterised by relatively low levels of socio-economic development, low literacy and/or education levels and a high unemployment rate. To add to this, the 2009 South African Antenatal Survey reported an HIV prevalence rate of 31.3% among pregnant women in the TMDM (National Department of Health, 2010). In general, the majority of the people in the area – particularly those on the north-eastern boundaries of the park – are hamstrung by low levels of human development and a low quality of life.

#### **4.3 The Working for Water and Working for Wetlands Poverty Alleviation Programme at the park**

As mentioned earlier, alien plant control and wetland rehabilitation are major challenges to conservation management in Golden Gate. Invasive alien plant species cover an estimated 10% of South Africa and are increasing exponentially, to such an extent that they are considered the single biggest threat to South Africa’s biological biodiversity (Department of Water Affairs, 2011). These plant species pose a direct threat to water security, land

productivity and to the optimal functioning of ecological systems in the country. The *Working for Water* Programme in the Department of Water Affairs was nationally launched in 1995 and is leading the fight against invasive plant species. The programme enjoys international recognition, not only as an admirable example of environmental conservation in Africa, but also for its role in job creation and poverty reduction (Department of Water Affairs, 2011). The socio-economic empowerment and development of the local population is recognised to be an integral part of environmental conservation, hence initiatives such as skills training and HIV/AIDS projects are also important objectives of *Working for Water*.

The *Working for Water* and *Working for Wetlands* Poverty Relief Programme at Golden Gate was launched in 2002. Both *Working for Water* and *Working for Wetlands* are informed by the EPWP in terms of policies, the recruitment of workers and the duration of their contract. SANParks' Department of People and Conservation at Golden Gate assists in identifying target groups through an advisory committee. Workers are recruited both from neighbouring communities - Monontsha Village, Maboletla, Bluegum Bosch, Clarens, and Eerstegeluk - and from neighbouring farms. Members of these communities serve on the advisory committee and help to identify previously disadvantaged people. The programme aims to target 60% women, 25% youth, and 2% disabled people in the recruitment process and in the identification of beneficiaries (Nthangeni, 2011).

Close on 770 people have been employed since the inception of the programme in 2002, and a total amount of R3.1 million (US\$500,000) was spent locally on wages, materials and training during the period 2007-2010. Local people employed in the project are empowered by means of training courses while they are working on the programme. In addition to project- and task-related training such as gabion-building and skills development of workers, this also includes courses in health and safety, personal finance, business management, fire awareness, first aid and general environmental awareness. This training, while enabling workers to accomplish the tasks associated with wetland rehabilitation and clearing of alien plants, can also be used as foundation for further economic empowerment and capacity building when the beneficiaries exit the project (Nthangeni, 2011). The Golden Gate initiative thus clearly demonstrates the characteristics of a protected-area outreach programme, in accordance with the typologies suggested by Barrow and Murphree (2001) as discussed earlier.

Benefits of this initiative fall into three categories: direct benefits to the community, indirect benefits to the community, and benefits to the park. Benefits to the park mainly encompass the provisioning of labour power to rehabilitate wetlands and free it from invasion by alien species, thereby contributing to the recovery of indigenous fauna and flora and, ultimately, to achieve the conservation objective of the park. Direct benefits to the neighbouring communities include financial benefits for those involved in the project, capacity building and benefits achieved through increased social awareness. The programme also arranges special social days or events as further direct benefits to the community. This initiative aims to promote environmental awareness (such as, for instance, celebrating World Wetland Day) and social education (specifically HIV/AIDS awareness and knowledge). Women's Day and World Aids Day are further examples of social awareness initiatives annually celebrated by the programme. Local schools also visit the park for a week-long programme that includes field visits to wetland-rehabilitation areas with a view to experiencing mechanisms used to stabilise soil erosion and soil decomposition caused by moles. Indirect benefits, on the other hand, relate to households and extended families who depend on the wages of those employed in the

programme; the provision of clean water to households affected by both the rehabilitation of wetlands and by clearing them of alien plants; and, to goods and materials that are purchased from the local market and used in the running of the programme. However, as mentioned earlier, the sustainable impact of these benefits has not once been assessed since the inception of the programme at Golden Gate.

## 5. Research design and methodology

The field study made use of a qualitative methodology and was designed around a hybrid of primary and secondary data to constitute a sequential mixed-method approach. Following an evaluative design, existing secondary sources of information that focused both on the people and parks interface and on institutional arrangements and barriers to community benefits were reviewed and interpreted, and eventually also supplemented by primary data collected by means of focus-group sessions and semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries of the programme.

The field study was designed in accordance with the principles of programme evaluation. Programme evaluations are conducted for several reasons, amongst others to (i) improve the efficiency of a service, (ii) to plan more effectively and (iii) to improve existing programmes (Alston & Bowles, 2003). Using outcomes analysis as a framework platform for programme evaluation, this study determined the extent to which the objectives of a poverty-relief programme at Golden Gate have to date been met and how the programme can be strengthened by identifying and addressing the impediments to the implementation of the programme. Key questions underpinning the outcomes analysis included: How successful is the programme? What barriers have prevented the optimal outcomes of the programme? How satisfied with the programme are the beneficiaries? Does the programme reach its target community effectively? How can the programme be improved? (Alston & Bowles, 2003).

In order to assess the impact of a poverty-relief programme at Golden Gate, it was important to have clear definitions of what was understood by concepts such as "poverty", "poverty reduction" and "well-being". There is no universally acceptable definition of "poverty", except perhaps for the widely applied US\$1 or US\$2/day criteria used by the World Bank and United Nations agencies. This measurement of poverty, however, poses different challenges in different contexts. While in narrow terms related to income, the essence of poverty can possibly best be summarised as being a lack of opportunity or an inability to achieve one's potential (Dudley et al., 2008). The World Health Organisation (1997:69) therefore argues that poverty exists "... when individuals or groups are not able to satisfy their basic needs adequately", with "basic needs" comprising food, social and cultural life, primary education, health, and favourable living and environmental conditions (clothing, shelter, water, air, etc.). Closely related to/associated with poverty and poverty reduction is the concept of well-being. The United Nations Environment Programme (2004:2) states that "[T]here is widespread agreement that well-being and poverty are the two extremes of a multi-dimensional continuum". This implies that if we understand poverty as a multi-dimensional state of human development rather than just a question of income, then protected areas have more chances of contributing to poverty reduction (Dudley et al., 2008). This, in fact, was also the operational definition and approach to the measurement of poverty reduction adopted for the programme evaluation at Golden Gate.

Stemming from the above and following the methodology of the World Wide Fund for Nature (Dudley et al., 2008), five fundamental dimensions of well-being were recognised for the purposes of the field study. Thus, any improvement in the following dimensions as confirmed by the outcomes analysis of the programme evaluation should contribute to poverty reduction:

1. *The subsistence dimension*: These are non-economic programme benefits that contribute to human well-being, i.e. health, nutrition, clean water and shelter.
2. *The economic dimension*: This dimension refers to programme benefits that provide participants with the ability to earn an income, to consume resources and to possess assets.
3. *The cultural and spiritual dimension*: This refers to programme-related activities that instil a pride in community, confidence, and which promote living culture, spiritual freedom, and further education.
4. *The environmental services dimension* relates to the role of the programme in promoting environmental stability and providing natural resources.
5. *The political dimension* allows for programme activities or objectives relating to issues of governance and thus influences decision making.

## 6. Findings

The ability of this specific programme to contribute to the alleviation of poverty and to increasing the levels of human well-being in the target communities identified above were assessed by drawing on the views and opinions of beneficiaries in relation to the above five dimensions. The first dimension to be addressed is that of subsistence.

### 6.1 Subsistence dimension

Focus-group participants indicated that the programme had significantly improved their lives and that there had been an improvement in their overall standard of living as a result of the programme. Beneficiaries recurrently used the phrase “*improved a lot*” to express the improvement in their overall standard of living after they had started working on the programme and expressed the view that they were “*being taken out of poverty*” by working on the programme. All the focus-group participants unanimously agreed that the programme had improved their lives and those of their families in many ways. When asked to comment on whether they had experienced an improvement in their general well-being and quality of life, respondents’ reactions included statements such as “*Oh so very much*” and “*Oh yes, my life improved so much*”. The reasons given for this perceived improved quality of life relate, amongst others, to better health and an increased ability to provide for basic needs such as of food, shelter and clothing.

Beneficiaries insisted that, through working on the programme, their health had improved markedly. Before starting to work on the programme, some of them constantly fell ill, but this was seemingly no longer the case since having joined the programme. Resulting from the combined impacts of regular exercise and sufficient water intake, participants perceived themselves to be much healthier than before they had started working on the programme. Some participants experienced healthy weight loss directly linked to the physically demanding nature of the work on the programme, which includes walking long distances in the mountainous terrain of the park. The health benefits derived from working on the programme are undoubtedly more multi-dimensional and

comprehensive than those mentioned above. Better health also resulted from the improvement in the economic means of participants, as earning an income had since enabled them regularly to purchase sufficient and better quality food. Beneficiaries were also able to improve their housing conditions and the type of fuel used for domestic purposes such as cooking and heating. Therefore, they were better able to insulate themselves and their families from the effects of diseases associated with poverty and poor living environments. A further dimension of health highlighted by participants was the increased psychological and mental well-being that they experienced as a result of their involvement in the programme. One participant articulated the psychological health benefits experienced as follows: *"I was constantly diagnosed with stress [before I started working on the programme] because I could not provide for my children, but now I no longer have stress. I am able to provide for my family."*

In addition, beneficiaries were able to afford better health care and this further raised their health status and quality of life. A participant whose mother suffers from diabetes explained that, in the past, the family could neither afford to take her (the mother) to a doctor, because of being unable to afford the consultation fee, nor were they able to buy the medication that a private doctor would subscribe for her diabetes. Consequently, they were obligated to use the services of the under-resourced local primary health care clinic and her condition did not improve. Since being on the programme, this particular beneficiary was subsequently able to take her mother to a private doctor and to purchase the necessary medication for her. Thus, beneficiaries on the programme were able not only to improve their own quality of life, but also those of their extended families. The improvement in the quality of life of beneficiaries also had an economic dimension to which attention now turns.

## 6.2 Economic dimension

As explained earlier, this dimension refers to programme benefits that offer participants opportunities to earn an income, to consume resources and to possess assets. Local people employed on the programme obtain their wages directly from the project and therefore benefit financially from the programme. Beneficiaries thought it important to have the park here *"because if it was not here we would not have been employed on this programme"*. The participants in the focus groups all associated the programme's success with its ability to create employment for the poor - an impact participants considered to be the most important benefit of the programme. Beneficiaries also expressed their pride in and gratitude towards the park because of the effort made by the park to alleviate poverty. One beneficiary stated: *"[I am] grateful to this park because I managed to find a job within the park"*, while another maintained that she *"like[s] the park a lot because we are now working on the ... programme"*. Yet another beneficiary was *"very proud of this park because it took us out of poverty by giving us an opportunity to work here"*.

Beneficiaries were generally satisfied with the financial benefits attached to being involved in the programme. They pointed out that they were compensated well for their work and that the income they received had contributed significantly to improving the quality of life and the well-being of their families. As a result of the income received, they were now in a better position to provide for their families' basic needs and their families could now afford to live a better life. The phrase *"able to provide"*, voiced by several beneficiaries, underscores the link between the increased economic means of the beneficiaries and their current ability to fulfil their basic subsistence needs. In this regard one beneficiary remarked: *"The best thing*

*for me is being able to work and earn some money, because without money you will not be able to live and survive.*" In an isolated case, a single mother indicated that because of her particular family's needs, the income earned was not enough. Nevertheless, she still agreed, "... it is true that this money does help", at least, to meet some of her family's immediate needs - even if she had no money left for less urgent needs.

Beneficiaries however expressed their discontent over the current payment procedure, which, according to them, was not conducive to their economic well-being. While being generally satisfied with the remuneration that they received through the programme, beneficiaries had an issue with the frequency with which money was paid out to them. The beneficiaries emphasised that they did not always get their salaries on time, or that they would be paid less than anticipated, which made it difficult for them to budget. Sometimes they would thus not be able to fulfil their basic needs. They described the payment procedure as being a lengthy and drawn-out one and felt that "*sometimes ... weeks [or] even a month would pass without getting paid*". Thus, while beneficiaries did generally feel that they received adequate remuneration for their work, they were sometimes confronted with an inability to provide for their families owing to the payment procedures currently followed. This directly affected their ability to provide for the needs of their families, contributed to additional stress over their financial situation and, consequently, affected their quality of life.

The programme enabled beneficiaries to buy household items and commodities that they had in the past been unable to buy. Among the most important needs highlighted by beneficiaries were food, children's clothing (notably school uniforms) and furniture. Some beneficiaries were also able to open store accounts because of the steady income they received from the programme. They were therefore able to purchase more expensive household items, such as furniture, on credit. Some beneficiaries were also able to settle old debts (mostly store credit accounts) with the money earned from the programme, which markedly improved the financial position of these families. Money earned while working on the programme enabled them to build houses for their families, while others were able to expand their current dwellings with the income earned by working on the programme. One beneficiary pointed out that she "*was able to buy building material and now my children are no longer sleeping in a shack. I have built a house with two rooms*".

Beneficiaries were intensely aware of their advantageous economic position in relation to that of the rest of the community. One beneficiary felt that "*... we could see the difference between us and people who were still unemployed*". The prevailing magnitude of poverty amongst neighbouring communities, however, makes it difficult effectively and comprehensively to impact on poverty reduction by means of one single poverty-relief initiative. Participants pointed out that there were simply not enough employment opportunities available in the communities from which they came. Therefore, even though not wanting to rely solely on programmes such as this one to provide employment, they felt that there were simply not that many other employment opportunities available in the community. Participants pointed out that it was "*very difficult for us to find jobs in this area*", or asked "*[N]ow tell me how it is possible to find employment in this area?!*" It was also pointed out that "*there are so many people who want this job*", which is a clear indication of the extent of the poverty and levels of destitution in these communities.

In the face of the overwhelming needs of the communities targeted in this programme, one should not expect a programme such as this to be the single answer to alleviating the suffering of people in these communities. On the other hand, it would be imprudent to deny

the definite impact that such a programme has on improving the well-being of at least a small number of families through providing them with the economic means necessary to improve their quality of life.

### **6.3 Cultural and spiritual dimension**

The cultural and spiritual dimension of a programme evaluation addresses the ways in which the programme instils a sense of pride in community, improves the psychological well-being of community members, promotes the living culture of the community, and furthers education in these communities.

#### **6.3.1 Sense of community**

Beneficiaries displayed a strong sense of community solidarity, expressing the wish that the programme would do more to alleviate poverty in their communities. Some beneficiaries wanted others in their community also to experience the benefits of employment and higher quality of life that they were experiencing through the programme. To achieve this, some beneficiaries indicated that they attempted to share what they had learned on the programme with other people in the community, either formally through community awareness campaigns or informally in their day-to-day interactions with other community members. As a result of such initiatives, many of the beneficiaries mentioned an increased awareness of specific social issues like HIV/AIDS and also emphasised the importance of putting into practice what is learned through participating in social and environmental awareness programmes of this nature.

#### **6.3.2 Confidence, self-worth and a sense of independence**

Poverty has a demoralising effect on individuals and families and, as a result, people trapped in poverty may display a sense of fatalism and may also lack a sense of self-worth. The desperation felt by breadwinners who are unable to fulfil their family's financial needs in the face of poverty and unemployment was highlighted by a number of the beneficiaries. A male beneficiary pointed out that it is *"bad for a man [of the house] not to work and seeing your family suffering while you are suppose[d] to provide for them"*, while another beneficiary emphasised that *"there is nothing that is more demoralising than a woman providing for her husband"*. By working on the programme these participants were able to achieve a sense of accomplishment in providing for their families, particularly within the context of a rural patriarchal culture in which economic provision is still regarded as a predominantly male function within the family. One male beneficiary remarked in this regard that *"working on this programme has made me feel proud of myself as a man and that made me feel good"*.

Both male and female beneficiaries felt that the programme had contributed to their sense of accomplishment, self-worth and self-confidence. A female beneficiary remarked that she looked at herself differently since being on the programme, while another beneficiary stated that she felt *"like other women"* because her house was now in a better state than it had been before because of the money she had invested in her house and in household items. According to some participants, one of the best aspects of the programme related to being able to wake up every morning and go to work *"because as a person you become fulfilled by that"*. Ultimately, the programme contributed to restoring people's sense of dignity and, as one beneficiary observed, to making them *"feel like humans again"*.

Another aspect that contributed to the higher sense of self-worth and confidence experienced by the beneficiaries was the increased financial independence that flowed from working on the programme. Resulting from the increased financial independence of these poor households, they relied less and less on their extended families – notably elderly parents – for financial assistance. Beneficiaries claimed that they were now able to provide for themselves and that they no longer relied on their parents for financial support; others, again, expressed their sense of financial independence in much stronger terms, such as *“I do not feel like my parents’ burden anymore”*. The fact that beneficiaries were earning an income held additional benefits for the extended families since beneficiaries were, in turn, able to assist their aged parents with money. Especially among women working on the programme there was an emphasis on the ability to care for their children without having to wait for their husbands to provide them with money for food and clothes.

This independence was, to an extent, undermined by the insecurity beneficiaries experienced over when exactly they were paid for their work. Beneficiaries referred to the cumbersome payment system that led to financial insecurity and an inability to plan around the money that they would receive. However, as one beneficiary pointed out; *“I think [the programme has] helped us a lot. Even though we only received our salaries after a long time, the fact is our salaries remained our salaries and we were able to do whatever we wanted with our salaries.”*

### **6.3.3 Improved future prospects**

The programme also markedly influenced how beneficiaries felt about their future prospects in terms of employment and sustained quality of life. Beneficiaries believed that, because of their involvement in the programme, they were now able to plan for the future. Some beneficiaries felt that they would be in a position to start their own businesses once they exited from this programme because of, on the one hand, the training that they had received, and, on the other,, because of having been able to save money to start up new businesses. There were, in fact, beneficiaries who were already involved in entrepreneurial pursuits in addition to working on the programme. One beneficiary stated that his life had improved since he was – in addition to working on the programme – now also a small businessman. This particular participant used some of his income from the project to settle his college debt and to buy shares both in a small liquor store and in a cellphone company. Thus, the programme, in addition to providing immediate relief from poverty and a marked improvement in the quality of life of participants, also enabled participants to branch out into other ventures that would steadily improve their future prospects. These successes were nevertheless limited and occurred on a small scale.

### **6.3.4 The promotion of living culture**

Although not an objective of the programme as such, it appears that the programme contributed to the promotion of living culture in the target communities. Most notable in this regard was the impact that the programme had on the empowerment of women in the target communities. This was a significant contribution of the programme, since there were a large number of female-headed households in these communities experiencing extreme levels of poverty. One beneficiary observed: *“I think this programme helps women around this area more because most of the households around this area are women-headed.”* Thus, the

programme, through improving the economic position of women in the communities, enabled them the better to support their families, which contributed not only to raising their confidence and sense of self-worth, but also contributing to the upkeep of other members of their families.

It transpired that the programme also served to sensitise male beneficiaries to the issues of gender and gender equality. One male participant expressed it as follows: *“Sometimes men tend to abuse their authority and powers within their families and through this training I was taught, as a man, that I should consider and treat my wife as an equal and that has helped me a lot in my family. I practise that in my family and now I have a happy family.”* The programme thus had an indirect impact on improving the functioning of families in the target communities.

### **6.3.5 Further education**

Capacity building was one of the direct benefits of the programme. Local people involved in the project were empowered through training received while working on the programme. The skills obtained through the training were seen as a form of capacity building that was able to benefit beneficiaries even after they had exited the programme. The type of training mentioned by focus-group participants included training in respect of personal finance management, business management, first aid, health and safety training, contractor development, firefighting, and herbicide and pesticide application.

Beneficiaries confirmed that they had learned a wide range of skills on the programme and were pleased that they received certificates for all training sessions attended, believing that at a later stage they would be able to use these certificates to apply for other employment opportunities, for example in hospitals. Some of the participants mentioned having received computer training and they believed that this too would improve their chances of securing future employment. Beneficiaries were positive that since they were able to add work experience to their curricula vitae and attach certificates to job applications when applying for vacancies, they would be able to secure employment even after having left the programme.

Others emphasised the generic skills learned through the programme. These included leadership skills and the ability to work with people from different backgrounds. One beneficiary also indicated that she had progressed through the ranks of the programme – from a worker to a supervisor – and now works on the programme as a contractor, therefore being able *“... to grow as a leader within the programme”*. Several of the beneficiaries expressed a desire to start their own businesses at some time in the future. Some beneficiaries strongly believed that the training they had received would help in these endeavours.

In addition to the training received, the programme also enables participants to further their education. Many of the beneficiaries mentioned that they had been able to save money, either to settle outstanding college debts, or to further their education. In one instance, a beneficiary was able to pay her outstanding college fees and, as a result, could receive her college certificate. Since having received her college certificate, her future employment prospects expanded and improved considerably. Beneficiaries also indicated that the income received enabled them to pay for their children’s, and in some cases, their family members’ further education. One beneficiary recounted: *“Before I started working on this programme, my parents died and my sister had to drop out of college. However, after being employed on this*

programme, I made arrangements with the college to pay for my sister's studies and now she has completed her studies." The programme therefore considerably raises the future prospects of beneficiaries and their dependants in terms of future employment, thereby making a significant contribution to improving the socio-economic well-being of the people in these target communities.

There is also recognition by the beneficiaries that the programme offers particularly valuable opportunities to those who are uneducated. This was important in the eyes of the beneficiaries in this study since they pointed out that employers are generally more interested in appointing people who have at least some education. The programme thus provided them with an opportunity both to receive basic education and training and consequently to improve their prospects for future employment.

#### **6.4 Environmental services dimension**

The environmental services dimension touches on the role of the programme in environmental stability and the provision of natural resources. Beneficiaries were asked to comment on their awareness and understanding of the role of the programme in promoting environmental sustainability. They were also asked to indicate their awareness regarding the programme's role in the provision of resources, such as water, to their own communities and to other parts of South Africa, these being included in the environmental objectives of the *Working for Water/Working for Wetlands* Programme.

Beneficiaries are, to a certain extent, aware of the larger environmental benefits of conserving this particular park. They are also, to an extent, aware of their contribution towards this endeavour, but do not generally link the conservation of the park with larger issues such as water provision for their communities and other areas. Only a few of the participants were able to link the conservation of the land and wetlands in the park with bigger issues such as national water security. One beneficiary observed: *"We were told that this park supplies other South African provinces with water and electricity"*. Another beneficiary stated that *"I did not know that some of the trees in my yard consume lots of water. I did not even know that we have a shortage of water in our country, but I now know all about this and I am grateful for what I have learned"*. Yet another beneficiary emphasised: *"The programme has opened my eyes, because I never knew about wetlands."* However, some stated outright that they did not know the reasons why the park had to be conserved and that no one had explained it to them before.

Focus-group participants felt proud to be a part of the conservation efforts in the park. Several participants made mention of the abundance of animal species in the park that needed to be conserved and felt that the park was conserving the natural environment well. They were generally proud of the park because it gave people the opportunity to visit the park and to see the *"beauty of nature such as animals and mountains within the park"*. Beneficiaries were grateful that their children were given the opportunity to visit the park and be educated about the environment and conservation.

Focus-group participants further specifically pointed out that before they had worked on the programme, they had been unaware of the threats posed to water and soil by alien trees. Beneficiaries generally commented that they neither knew how to distinguish between different types of trees nor how they impacted on the environment, but that the programme had changed this. They pointed out that they were now aware that some trees were a threat to the environment since they consume large volumes of water and contribute to soil

erosion. Some participants indicated that they had been surprised to learn that some of the alien trees had strong root systems able to damage their houses. Another beneficiary observed that her grandmother *"had an alien tree and her other trees could not grow well, because this tree was consuming a lot of water. I advised her to remove the tree from her yard. After she has removed the tree, her peach tree is growing very well"*.

As a result of the programme, beneficiaries were thus able to develop a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between environmental issues and their own quality of life. They were able to apply this knowledge and awareness to improve their own well-being and quality of life. However, as one participant pointed out, in spite of this knowledge they did not have the same equipment or chemicals available in their communities as those that they used on the programme to act on this knowledge; some however indicated that they would like to *"do the same things we are doing in the programme in [our] communities"*. Some participants indicated that they were sharing this knowledge, particularly about alien plants, with other members of the community.

### **6.5 Political dimension**

The political dimension relates to how the programme objectives link up with issues of governance and decision making in target communities. Resulting from the process by which beneficiaries are selected for the programme, it transpired that community members to an extent felt that they would have liked to have more influence when it came to the selection of beneficiaries. General workers are identified by the politically elected ward councillors in each community. The assumption is that the ward councillors are best able to identify those in their particular wards who are most vulnerable because of being poor and therefore they (the councillors) are best placed to select potential beneficiaries. Beneficiaries affirmed that the councillors were aware of the socio-economic status of each household in their ward, thus knowing exactly who was struggling and who could not provide for their families. This qualified them to make the decision as to whom to select to work on the programme. One beneficiary conceded that the councillors were perhaps sometimes not fully aware of the socio-economic status of the people in their wards and further used outdated data on the strength of which to select people.

Some of the beneficiaries, however, were not entirely satisfied with the way in which the programme relied on political councillors to be involved in the selection of workers. It appears that councillors would sometimes show favouritism and only select people who were loyal to them politically. As a result, people who did not really qualify for the programme were sometimes selected, or in some cases, more than one person from the same household was selected. Beneficiaries particularly pointed out that often the councillors would select people who were less needy, while there were other families experiencing more severe conditions of poverty and who would therefore benefit more from working on the programme. However, from discussions with the management of the park it transpired that the ward councillors do not independently decide who will be most likely to benefit from the programme: after identification of potential beneficiaries by ward councillors, identified beneficiaries are selected with the inputs of a larger advisory committee that include the councillors, members of the community, and also park employees. Yet, the focus-groups sessions revealed that the selection process could benefit from better communication between the community, the councillors and the programme management.

Some of the respondents expressed the need for similar programmes in their target communities. One respondent remarked: *"I think it is a good programme because it has helped people to improve their standard of living and I wish there were more programmes of this nature throughout poor communities."* In addition, participants criticised the programme for not creating enough opportunities for either employment or further economic development. Given the above, the following conclusions are drawn with regard to the programme.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

The future of biodiversity conservation and the socio-economic needs of local people are strongly intertwined. Collaboration with local communities will remain essential if protected areas are to survive and achieve their objectives, particularly in developing countries in which a significant proportion of such areas are surrounded by impoverished communities.

The Golden Gate study has confirmed that prevailing levels of poverty remain a major problem for large sectors of the communities that border on a protected area. The magnitude of poverty in the rural areas adjacent to national parks highlights the need for conservation benefits to be channelled to such communities, and more generally, for mutually beneficial economic opportunities and arrangements between communities and parks. It is crucial, however, that local people should not entertain overinflated expectations regarding such opportunities – particularly those concerning job creation. Community expectations are raised from the moment that a project activity is undertaken – even more so when it involves employment opportunities, no matter how limited these may be. It is therefore imperative that communities should have realistic expectations of the type of developmental and social benefits that can potentially be derived from their partnership with conservation authorities. The hard reality is that it falls beyond the scope, ability and mission of any protected area significantly to reduce poverty amongst its neighbouring communities. Beneficiaries working on the Golden Gate programme equate the programme's success with its ability to provide employment and improve the ability of the poor to earn a living. While the programme does help to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life of some households in the target population, the positive impacts of the project remain limited to the beneficiaries and their families who are directly involved in the programme.

This case study has proved that strategically planned and well-focused interventions can nevertheless make huge differences to the livelihoods of impoverished households, albeit on a relatively limited scale. The main strengths of programmes of this nature are probably their ability to increase the health and well-being of the communities surrounding conservation areas and their ability to better the future prospects of beneficiaries and their families. Programme beneficiaries and their dependants experience relief from the direst impacts of abject poverty, and benefit from increased health and well-being, better nutritional status, the ability to pay for their children's education and also their immediate basic needs. Although only a tiny fraction of the community benefitted from direct employment on the Golden Gate programme, the impact on those individuals and their dependants in terms of improved quality of life was tangible and significant.

Evidence suggests that the transfer of skills to the beneficiaries may facilitate the development of small enterprises that can provide more sustainable alternative livelihoods options to the poor once the beneficiaries have exited the programme. This applies particularly to cases where such enterprises require little financial input and where resources are readily available. The training received by the beneficiaries should be seen as a vital first step towards improving the educational status of the members of poor communities and consequently improving their future employability. The training, skills development and work experience gained through participating in the programme are recognised by beneficiaries as important benefits of the programme. Not only that, beneficiaries duly recognise the impact that the programme has on improving the educational status of their children and other family members. The programme therefore makes a significant contribution towards bettering the educational status of the targeted communities, thereby helping to improve the future prospects of the younger generation. Thus, the impact of the programme may extend well into the future as the beneficiaries' children and dependants are able to improve their own prospects for future employment.

An important condition for the success of any outreach programme of this nature is an efficient and supportive institutional structure. As shown in other studies of this kind and again demonstrated in the case of Golden Gate, the institutional structure should ensure that participation is aimed at the most vulnerable and needy segments, and not hijacked by the elite. Furthermore, the institutional structure should respond to the overall developmental and social needs of the community, and not only to conservation issues. This requires close collaboration between the conservation authority, the local and the district municipalities and even the provincial government. The Golden Gate study made it evident that such collaboration also needs to be strengthened by actively involving stakeholders from the political and the economic spheres in structuring and developing the programme further to enhance the benefits of the programme in targeted communities. In other words, in order to maximise the impact of any poverty-alleviation programme at Golden Gate, it should tie up with and feed into existing poverty-intervention strategies of other institutional stakeholders. Local government, however, should fulfill a coordinating role in such a network of role players and stakeholders, which means that outreach programmes targeting neighbouring communities should not be seen as stand-alone projects, but as complementary to existing development initiatives – particularly initiatives aimed at job creation and income generation.

The impact of national parks and other protected areas on their neighbouring communities – particularly poor rural communities in developing countries – is arguably one of the most controversial debates in conservation circles. This debate is intensifying as protected areas in developing nations continue to expand, consequently limiting agricultural development and access to natural resources. Some sectors within the conservation community are increasingly contesting the notion of an integrated development and conservation approach, and argue that the needs and objectives of both agendas cannot be met in a single, integrated and holistic approach without posing major threats to biodiversity protection (Brechtin et al., 2007; Upton et al., 2008). Integrated conservation and development programmes can only succeed when stakeholders pool resources, in other words when conservation authorities engage with local and provincial government authorities whose first commitment should be to the delivery of key services to the community. No ICDP

should be seen as a *substitute* for government-initiated programmes to mitigate poverty; at best it can *supplement* such programmes. This is not to say, however, that a national park such as Golden Gate cannot make an important contribution towards reducing poverty levels. Exactly how it should be done, under what conditions, and how the impact can be maximised and sustained need adequately to be researched and documented. This having been said, the following overall lessons and recommendations cascade from the analysis in this chapter:

- Both the opportunities and the limitations of a protected area should be clearly stipulated when it comes to poverty alleviation. To avoid a situation of overinflated expectations and inevitably disillusionment amongst community members, both the type and scale of poverty-mitigation interventions should be communicated explicitly to all stakeholders and affected parties.
- In assessing the contribution of protected areas to the well-being of neighbouring communities, a multidimensional understanding of poverty should be applied to allow for the exploration of the entire range of benefits available from protected areas. When poverty is conceptualised in terms broader than merely the monetary, then specific elements of poverty (reduction) can target the most vulnerable groups, such as women, the elderly, children, etc.
- Strategic, informed and careful segmentation of the neighbouring community, and particularly of the most marginalised and needy groups within the community, is necessary to optimise the distribution and impact of programme benefits. This could require compiling a community profile and regular analysis of the socio-economic dynamics within the community, so as to ensure that benefits from the protected area are indeed channelled to the poorest sectors of the community.
- Strong, integrated and efficient partnerships with local and key stakeholders across different sectors are a prerequisite if any outreach programme – and particularly a poverty relief programme – wishes to maximise its impact among the neighbouring community. A cross-institutional partnership of this nature should involve not only conservation and development agencies, but also democratically elected representatives of the target population in the area.
- Strengthening the impact and efficiency of an outreach programme calls for regular and continuous monitoring and evaluation. In this way, programme weaknesses can be identified and addressed, new opportunities unlocked and potential threats overcome. Open communication and wide publicity of the successes and failures can assist in facilitating a learning environment and contribute to an inventory of best-practice policies in the wider context of integrated conservation and development initiatives.

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