

Datla, A.; Schmeier, S.; Cuadrado-Quesada, G. and Mothobi, R. 2023.
Echoes of the Okavango Delta – Does the voice of the people matter?
Water Alternatives 16(3): 821-848



Echoes of the Okavango Delta – Does the Voice of the People Matter?

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ABSTRACT: Water governance in a shared basin features a complex array of actors operating at one or many scales, whose knowledge, practices, and authority inform and influence that governance. These relationships can be particularly complex in water systems that form part of a transboundary river system, as is the case with the Okavango Delta. The article discusses the persistent challenges of water access faced by community members in the Delta. Water governance in the Delta has been studied from various disciplinary perspectives; still, the experiences of local communities at the layer nearest to the water resources remain a topic of significant interest. Our research takes an integrated approach combining concepts of scales, institutions, and power. This article is based on a literature review and a qualitative empirical field study; the study found that communities in the Delta complain about persistent experiences of constrained access and limited influence in matters related to water governance. We also observe that the state is entangled in policy and practice at various scales, often appropriating power at the expense of those institutions and mechanisms designed to address the needs of the local community. Our study shows that the exercise of power by formal institutions in the Delta tends to undermine informal institutions, compromising the ability of some community members to participate effectively in water governance processes.

KEYWORDS: Water governance, scales, critical institutionalism, power, community participation, Okavango Delta, Botswana

INTRODUCTION

The Okavango River originates in central Angola and flows into the panhandle at Mohembo. The width of the floodplain at Mohembo is comparatively narrow, but as the river continues to flow, the floodplain widens gradually. The Okavango River meanders through this expanding floodplain, which extends southward from around Shakawe (McCarthy, 2006). Transboundary watercourses cover 47.1% of the Earth's surface, and 52% of the world's population inhabits more than 310 river basins (McCracken and Wolf, 2019). Since these waters tend to transcend national boundaries, the governance of these resources involves actors across local, national, regional, and international scales. These interactions,

which tend to be based on both formal¹ and informal institutions, are complex, driven by asynchronous motivations, and influenced by uneven power distribution. In such a scenario, there is a risk of ignoring the aspirations of people closest to the water resources, undermining their relationships with those resources and their ability to influence planning and decision-making related to such watercourses.

Human beings have co-existed with nature and moderated their consumption of resources since ancient times. Water governance scholars have observed that actors in governance cite the effective management of natural resources as the underlying motive for acquiring access to resources such as land and water. However, actual practices by some national and local government entities tend to suggest that access to resources and the potential for revenue could be critical drivers of resource-related policies (Hirsch, 1990; Kotey et al., 1998; Mohanty, 2004; Ghate and Shodh, 2009). Such an approach could privilege the actors of the state (or those closely related to the state) through formal/informal relationships at the expense of other actors, including communities.

The government of Botswana has pursued policies of inclusive development over the past few decades to integrate many of its inhabitants into the cash economy, drawing them away from nomadic lifestyles by encouraging stable village settlements with services such as education, healthcare, water, and sanitation. This includes the inhabitants of the Okavango Delta (Botlhale, 2015; Botswana, 2020).

We explore some of these interactions through discussions with various actors associated with the Okavango Delta. In doing so, we gain an appreciation for how the communities' relationships with water resources are shaped and influenced by international and regional norms, percolating through the national and local scales. Moreover, we examine the connections among actors and institutions in the Delta, the governance mechanisms they produce, and how they influence the experiences of community members in the Okavango Delta on matters related to water governance. We study the experiences of community members and draw knowledge from experts and bureaucrats associated with the Delta. A synthesis of these experiences can help us understand the nature, extent, and influences of community participation in the governance of water resources in the Delta and thus provide essential lessons for inclusive and participatory water resources governance, more generally.

This article aims to show that these complex interactions tend to be connected, producing experiences that are not necessarily participatory in nature. Furthermore, even if they are participatory in some sense, there may be uneven distributions of power and constraints surrounding participation, particularly for stakeholders from the local communities. The next section lays out the field area and some of the identities of the people situated in it, with their historical and social context.

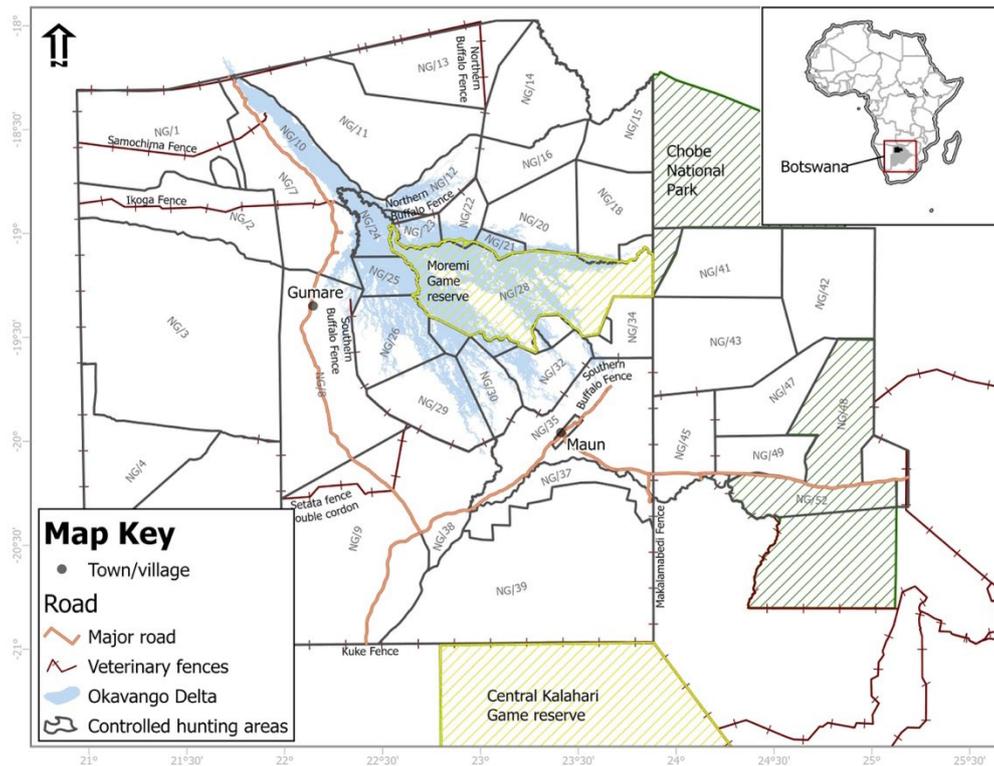
THE OKAVANGO DELTA

The article is synthesised from research conducted in the Okavango Delta in Botswana. The Delta is the largest wetland in southern Africa, situated in the downstream part of the Okavango River Basin in the northwest region of Botswana (McCarthy and Ellery, 1998). The Okavango Delta occupies just over 50% of the basin (McCracken and Wolf, 2019). Scholars observe that besides providing valuable goods and services such as food, water, and materials for household consumption, the ecosystem shapes the landscape, identity, culture, and history of the people around it (Basset and Crummey, 2003; Wolmer, 2007). The basin originates in the highlands of Angola before flowing through Namibia and finally into Botswana. The Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) is the organisation moderating discussions about the river basin (Schulze, 2012). Even though this article focuses on community members' experiences in the Okavango Delta of Botswana, it is essential to acknowledge and

¹ North (1990) describes 'formal institutions' as constitutions, contracts, and forms of government. In the context of this article, formal institutions of the state refer to local government bodies associated with administration, land, and water resources. In this article, references to 'the state' reflect the national government and its related entities for the governance of resources – in this case, the government of Botswana or its relevant actors.

understand the influence of transboundary administrative and policy forces (Armitage et al., 2015). We have noted through our literature review that even though the Delta might be administered by the local government in Botswana, their policies and guidelines tend to draw on guidelines and policies from the realm of the transboundary water system. Among other things, it is necessary to appreciate the impact of knowledge flows and policy inputs that trickle down from discussions and decisions made at the basin level to the national and local scales.

Figure 1. Location of the Okavango Delta.



The inhabitants of the Okavango Delta have a long history of co-existing with nature. Human geographers document the presence of several communities around the Delta, each with a distinct ethnicity. Some of these ethnicities are described in the literature (Hitchcock and Biesele, 2008; Kirkels, 1992; Larson, 1977). The work of Mbaiwa and Stronza (2010) and other scholars helps to identify and explore the lives of these communities. Studies in the region document their histories and varied relationships with the Delta's land, water, and other natural resources (Bock and Johnson, 1993; Segadika, 2006). They note that the HamBukushu, the BaTawana, and the BaYeyi hunt, forage wild fruit, and undertake subsistence farming for their consumption and livelihood needs. The BaKalanga and BaKgalagadi also hunt and forage wild fruit but undertake fishing instead of agriculture. The BaKgalagadi are also known to draw on forest and mineral resources for their livelihoods. They observe that both the Bugakwe and Xanekwe tend to be hunter-gatherers. The former forage in the desert savannah as well as the swamps; the Xanekwe, on the other hand, tend to have a predominantly riverine affiliation in their foraging practices, according to Segadika, and Bock and Johnson. They also observe that the Dxeriku, the Hambukushu, and the Wayeyi resort to subsistence strategies of farming, fishing, hunting, collecting wild plant foods, and herding cattle and goats. While these characterizations cannot be an absolute representation, they could serve to indicate the manner of some natural resource relationships in the Delta.

The Delta is a wetlands system that was recognised as a Ramsar Site by the Convention on Wetlands² in 1996 and a UNESCO World Heritage³ Site in 2014. It is a significant source of revenues to the state (Botswana, 2019), with actors of both state and international multilateral agencies assigning it importance. Tourism accounts for 13.1% of the national GDP and for 8.9% of the employment in the country.⁴

Table 1. Ethnic identities as described by Bock and Johnson (2004).

S.No.	Ethnic group	Communities
1	Bugakwe	Kxoe, Bugakhoe, Kwengo, Barakwena, Mbarakwena, Mbarakwengo, G/anda, /anda
2	Dxeriku	Dceriku, Diriku, Gceriku, Gciriku, Vagciriku, Giriku, Mbogedo, Niriku, Vamanyo
3	Hambukushu	Mbukushu, Bukushu, Bukusu, Mbukuschu, Mamakush, Mampakush, Ghuva, Haghuva, Gova, Cusso, Kusso, Hakokohu, Havamasiko
4	Wayeyi	Bayei, Bayeyi, Bakoba, Bajei, Jo, Hajo, Tjaube, Yei
5	Xanekwe	Gxanekwe, //tanekwe, tanekhoe, River Bushmen, Swamp Bushmen, G//ani, //ani, Banoka

We analyse the influence of interactions through the various institutional arrangements related to the Okavango Delta and their underlying power inequities, informing, and influencing the mechanisms of water governance and their impact on community members in matters related to water resources in the Okavango Delta. The next section discusses the theoretical underpinnings and the local governmental structures relevant to the discussions in this article.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article relies on three important concepts relating to water governance: scales, institutions, and power. As discussed by Syed and Choudhury (2018), the interactions of actors at international, regional, national, and local scales all have the potential to influence water governance. We acknowledge the role of scalar interactions on water governance, but the discussion is focused on how formal and informal institutions and their underlying elements of power in the Okavango Delta influence the experiences of Delta community members at the local scale.

The three key concepts draw from political economy and political ecology. We use the lens of political economy to understand how water governance may take shape through the flow of knowledge across scales, enabled by the state, based largely on normative definitions of socio-economic growth (Hommes et al., 2016; Woodhouse and Muller, 2017). We rely on political ecology to discuss how the uneven power underlying these interactions plays an influential role in shaping water governance (Lebel et al., 2005).

² "The Convention on Wetlands is the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources". <https://www.ramsar.org/about-the-convention-on-wetlands-0>

³ "The idea of creating an international movement for protecting heritage emerged after World War I. The 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage developed from the merging of two separate movements: the first focusing on the preservation of cultural sites, and the other dealing with the conservation of nature". <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/>

⁴ The Tourism Industry in Botswana 2021, accessed in February 2022, at <https://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/5239794/the-tourism-industry-in-botswana-2021>

Scholars in political ecology have argued for the need to absorb the perspectives of specific actors in exploring the nature and role of formal and informal institutions (Hassenforder and Barone, 2019). To align with this argument, we must hear the voices of community members closest to the water resources amongst the various other actors as they describe interactions between formal and informal institutions and water resources.

Thus, we explore water governance through the experiences of community members in the Okavango Delta. We argue that the complex architecture of interactions in a water system tends to be influenced by uneven power across and within the institutional structures underlying these interactions. Water governance arrangements draw on the flow of knowledge and action across scales, through the medium of institutional arrangements, affected by the uneven power of various actors at different scales (Hoekstra, 2011; OECD, 2015; Hirsch, 2020).

Words such as 'community' and 'indigenous' represent diverse groups of individuals. We acknowledge these distinctions, even though dealing with the nuanced layers of identity and association may be beyond the remit of this article. Hill et al. (2020) draw attention to the manner of these groups' organisation – based wholly or partially on customs, traditions, and laws made by themselves. They further explain that local communities maintain an intergenerational connection with a place and its nature through cultural identity, livelihoods, institutions, and ecological knowledge. The Delta is inhabited by indigenous communities, living in the Delta for many generations (Mbaiwa and Stronza, 2010). These terms are used to discuss the experiences of people inhabiting the Okavango Delta in the northwest district of Botswana.

Water governance

In water governance, the issues of concern vary based on the focus of the actors engaging with water resources. Policies surrounding water grapple with the challenges of balancing the multi-layered interests of water users in the domestic, industrial, agrarian, and commercial sectors. A study that examines the influence and role of interactions within and across scales using the lenses of institutions (formal and informal) and power, articulated through the experiences of community members, could be helpful for informing policy and practice. We seek to learn of and inform governance as a dynamic process, constantly made, unmade, and remade through social interactions. This could fill a significant gap in understanding governance through an integrated lens that draws together key elements informing water governance.

Post-critical analysis of governance has criticised the assumption of state control over governance, calling for a deeper reflection on underlying power structures and imbalances (Cleaver, 2002; de Koning and Cleaver, 2012). We acknowledge this construct, and this article mitigates the gap to an extent through its exploration of power as one of the three key concepts.

Institutions

The governance of water resources involves a multitude of actors and their complex interactions. Hence, it needs to reflect the application of processes, rules, laws, and practices organised through formal and informal institutions enabling interactions (Rogers and Hall, 2003; Jiménez et al., 2020). In the context of this article, we examine the role of various actors and both formal and informal institutions in shaping water governance and their influence on the experiences of community members.

North (1990) describes institutions as the constraints devised by human beings to shape their interactions. Institutions refer to the rules of the game and tend to regulate and shape human interaction for individuals and groups. Some of these processes could be formal – as in written, legislated, or authorised by the state. Others might be informal, carried forward through perception and practices based on culture, tradition, or the organisation of life in a society. These (in)formal rules are often fluid and dynamic, contested and transformed over time based on the circumstances, practices, and context

of the people negotiating the systems and resources. Drawing from the synthesis of informal institutions offered by (Helmke and Levitsky, 2012), we consider informal institutions as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels".

In order to ground the idea of informal institutions in the context of the Okavango Delta, we draw on its rich traditions of *Botho*⁵ and consensus-building through consultation (Constance, 2011; Moatlhaping and Moletsane, 2012). This process is expressed in the Tswana language as *therisanyo*, typically organised at a *kgotla* (a community centre) under the guidance of a *kgosi* (a tribal leader). *Therisanyo* can be considered a principal tenet of governance in Botswana, an age-old practice for building consensus, expressed through the *kgotla* system (Botlhale et al., 2015). "The *kgotla* is a traditional meeting place found in all Tswana communities, which the *kgosi* uses "to advise or admonish his followers as well as to impart information to them" (Ngcongco, 1989: 44). The Bogosi Act, 2008, defines a *kgosi* as "a person so designated by the tribe and recognised as such by the Minister under section 4 of the Act" (Botswana, 2008). Informal institutions are typically organised through customary arrangements moderated by the *dikgosi* (plural of *kgosi*) and village headmen (or -women), typically through interactions at a *kgotla*. In this article, we rely on the opinions expressed by community members as well as the *dikgosi* in the conduct and participation of these informal processes of water governance.

In Botswana, formal institutions related to water are organised through national policy and implemented through local government (described in section 4.5); the Okavango Delta is also governed by international and regional legal instruments and policy strategies. At the international level, the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention as well as the UNESCO World Heritage and Ramsar conventions are significant drivers of governance-related action in Botswana and the river basin generally (Keitumetse and Sikorei, 2018). At the regional level, the 2000 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Water Protocol plays a vital role in the governance of water resources (Baranyai, 2020).

The Southern African Development Community has been an effective bridge for helping knowledge travel into its member countries (Swatuk, 2008). The fundamental principles of the 1997 United Nations Watercourses Convention – equitable and reasonable utilisation and the obligation not to cause significant harm – have been enshrined in the 2000 SADC Protocol (essentially in response to the UN convention) (Salman, 2001). The emergence of integrated water resource management (IWRM) as a dominant paradigm around the turn of the millennium has brought focus to the institutions associated with water governance (Mehta et al., 2014). Harmony between formal and informal institutions – the former organised, primarily by the state, and the latter through communities and local practices such as customary arrangements – is a significant element in effective water governance (Rogers and Hall, 2003).

Transboundary water systems tend to be subject to a wide range of governance interactions and related institutions. International water law, international relations, regional, multilateral, and bilateral arrangements, national legislation, and other, similar forces exert influence and play a role in moderating the interactions of various actors with water resources (Warner and Zawahri, 2012). Institutional fragmentation across jurisdictions, unequal power among basin actors in different jurisdictions, the potential for high levels of political conflict, and differences in a culture of decision-making are identified as some of the critical factors that make the governance of transboundary water systems such a complex challenge (Levin et al., 2012; Armitage et al., 2015). This is of relevance in the context of the Delta, which is one section of a transboundary basin, where knowledge flows across international, regional, national, and local scales have played a significant role in shaping the local and national discussions over water.

Current bodies of knowledge address water governance through the neo-institutionalist lens (Hassenforder and Barone, 2019; Nunes and Fielmua, 2022; Whaley, 2022) – viewed through the evolution of water law, regional institutions of governance, the role of the state, etc. and through the

⁵ *Botho* refers to humanitarian values in Tswana. "Botho is an example of a social contract of mutual respect, responsibility and accountability that members of society have toward each other and defines a process for earning respect by first giving it, and to gain empowerment by empowering others". <http://www.ubotho.net/Botho-Vision2016>

critical institutionalism inspired by Ostrom (1991) and informed by the work of scholars such as Cleaver (2012) or de Koning and Cleaver (2012). Scholars have examined the linkages and gaps resulting from applying either or both lenses (Wong, 2016). Studies have also determined the need to empirically anchor investigation and debate in the pragmatic study of water distributions – including resource allocations, expressions of voice and authority, and the travel of water knowledge and expertise (Zwarteveen et al., 2017). As discussed by Norman and Bakker (2009), constraints on resources and capacities continue to impact the effectiveness of local actors in the planning and decision-making of water resources in river systems. Cleaver's (2000) invitation to adopt an approach to institutions that places social relations at the heart of the idea, rather than as a source of context or capital, has gained increasing prominence with the emergence of critical institutional thinking (Suhardiman et al., 2017).

Participation and power

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) offers a three-stage framework defining participatory experiences (OECD, 2001). Their handbook for citizen engagement classifies these stages as Information, Consultation, and Active Participation. The OECD defines information as the unidirectional dissemination of decisions and policies by the government. Consultation is where the government seeks and collects feedback from citizens, while active participation is seen as citizens empowered to participate in decision- and policymaking.

However, Cleaver (1999) cautions against taking participation for granted, inviting a deeper exploration of power and gender dynamics and related hierarchies underlying the involvement of community members. She argues that non-participation could represent a rational choice embedded in social norms and routines – perhaps even an acceptance of the communities' current situations. Cleaver invites a deeper examination of inclusion, empowerment, and subordination through critical analysis of the structures and politics underlying participatory experiences. Meanwhile, Wong (2016) warns against expecting to cure deep-seated inequalities by imposing institutions without addressing unequal societal hierarchies based on structure and politics.

Cleaver (2012) advises against assuming equity in participation or fair and just practices in decision-making merely because these arrangements may appear local and nominal. Wong (2016) demands that water managers pay more attention to the "socially embedded and negotiated nature of arrangements for resource governance" and "the evolution of such arrangements in the interactions of daily life, and their institutionalisation through legitimating discourses and claims to authority".

Local government

Government plays a significant role in making policy decisions and possesses the capacity to enforce them. Stoker (2018) defines a national government as the combination of "formal and institutional processes" operating at the nation-state level to "enable collective action and maintain public order". Meanwhile, Beall (2005) offers local government as the tier of government with the nearest proximity to communities of people.

In Botswana, the government operates through thirty-one ministries and agencies. Many of the ministries have multiple departments with a presence at the district and sub-district levels. The Office of the District Commissioner (ODC) coordinates local governance under the Ministry for Presidential Affairs Governance and Public Administration. The ODC is responsible for planning and coordinating various projects and monitoring progress in a particular district; it also hosts the District Development Committee, a collection of nominated representatives and ex-officio members from various other departments working in the district. Thus, several departments and their respective ministries maintain an administrative and executive presence in local government.

The Ministry of Land Management, Water and Sanitation Services (MLWS) is responsible for water policies in Botswana (Gondo and Kolawole, 2019; Gondo et al., 2019b), with implementation supported

by the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), the Department of Geological Surveys (DGS), and the for-profit Water Utilities Corporation (WUC) (Swatuk and Rahm, 2004). The 1967 Water Act and the 2012 Water Policy regulate water governance in Botswana (Gondo et al., 2019a). In 1970, Botswana's government created a parastatal, WUC, to address the distribution and services related to water for its citizens (Botswana, 1970). According to the Water Act, a user can apply for and receive the rights to access and use water but not own the resource. The water permit, issued under the Act, provides a license to use water for domestic consumption, livestock, irrigation, industry, electricity, and mining – prioritised in this order.

This article relies on the interactions between the expressions of institutions and power in the context of the Delta to explore the experiences of the Delta's community members with the governance of water resources.

A substantial body of literature studies the relevance of policy and state intervention in mediating cooperation and conflict in transboundary river basins (De Stefano et al., 2014, 2017). Similarly, other scholars have examined the influence of institutions in the governance of river basins that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state (Schmeier et al., 2013; Gondo et al., 2019b). However, the role and experiences of local communities in water governance retain value and interest for researchers, especially in the context of the Okavango Delta. In the next section we discuss the methods adapted in our research to extract the knowledge and insights that inform further discussion of the evidence.

METHODOLOGY

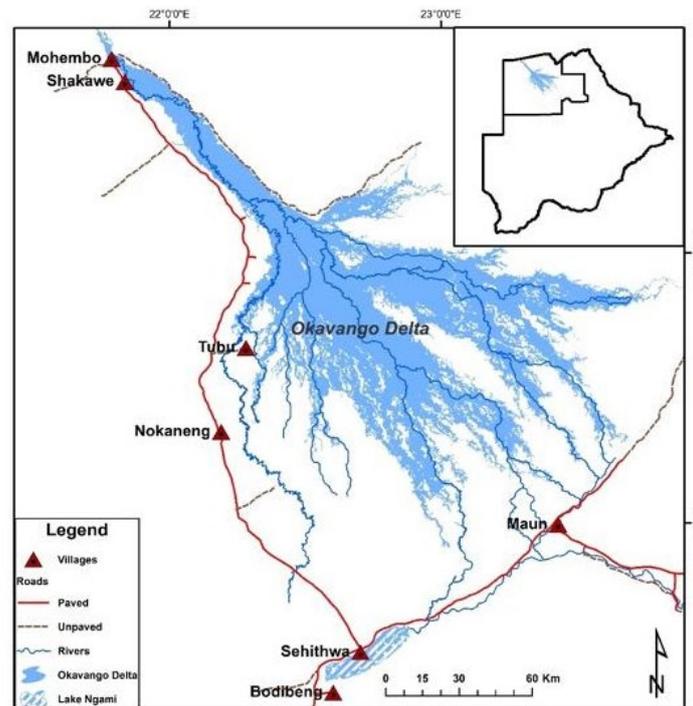
This article is based on fieldwork conducted in the Okavango Delta through a collaboration between IHE Delft and the Okavango Research Institute (ORI) in Botswana. The interactions with community members were conducted in the local language, translated into English, and reviewed for accuracy and completeness by senior researchers at the ORI. It builds on interactions with fifty-three community members from six different villages in the Delta – Sehitwa and Bodibeng in the lower reaches of the Delta, Nokaneng and Tubu in the central part of the Delta, and Shakawe and Mohembo in the upper reaches along the panhandle. The distribution of villages along the Delta was a deliberate effort to bring a degree of diversity to a purposive sample. More specifically, we sought to cover an even spread of villages throughout the Delta – hence we chose two villages in the upper reaches, two in the mid-section, and two along the border with Namibia. The selection of villages was also informed by a desire to cover the length of the Delta: from the border near Namibia, where the Delta enters Botswana, to the outer reaches of Maun, where the Delta ends. The purposive sample contained thirty-three community members, thirteen Village Development Committee (VDC) members,⁶ and seven *bakgosi* (chieftains). Our sampling strategy drew on both 'stratified purposeful' and 'opportunistic', as articulated in Palinkas et al. (2013). There was no intent to limit the study to fifty-three community members, but at the time this research was being conducted, the world was dealing with the pandemic, and Botswana imposed several restrictions on travel and mobility.⁷ However, we made a careful effort to include any participants from the six villages willing and available to participate in the study, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

⁶ A local governance body at the lowest level.

⁷ Travel restrictions and internal mobility constraints were overcome through a collaboration with ORI. Ronald Mothobi is from ORI in Maun and conducted the research using a local travel permit along the villages of the Delta.

<https://global-monitoring.com/gm/page/events/epidemic-0002111.VJFjDdWi2b3M.html>

Figure 2. The locations of places covered in the field research.

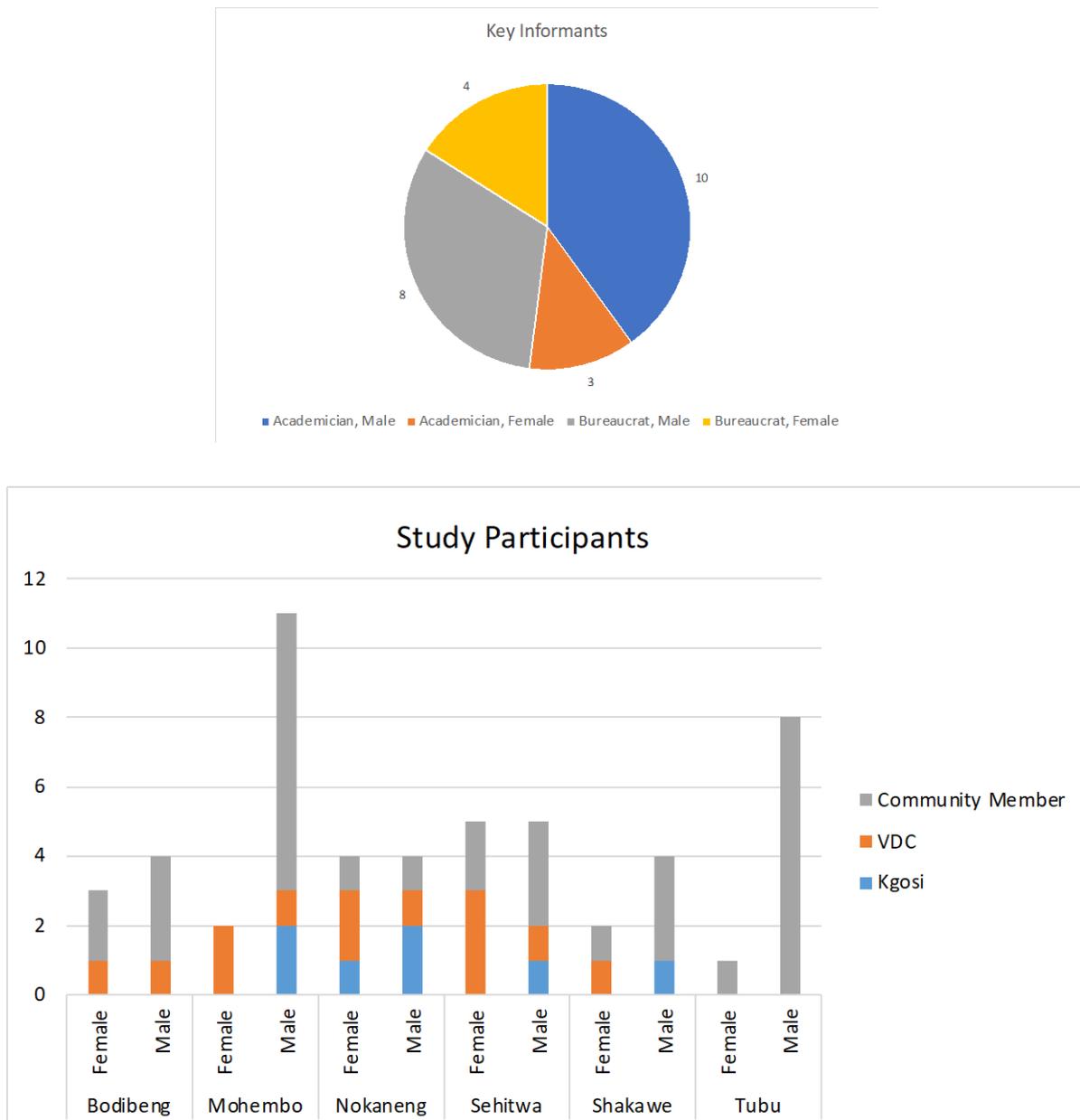


In the end, the sample of respondents included fifty-four men and twenty-four women. We did not set out to choose men over women; the distribution of sampled participants was affected by skewed availability of community members and bureaucrats, influenced by the COVID situation in the country at the time of this research. The article also includes information from 25 key informants – 13 academic scholars and 12 bureaucrats working at various levels of local, regional, and national governance in the Northwest District of Botswana. The key informants were carefully identified in consultation with experts at ORI, OKACOM, and the University of Botswana main campus in Gaborone. (We reached out to an overall population of 50 potential key informants, out of which we were able to elicit comments and opinions from 25.)

The article relies on academic work and regional developments during the past three decades. Even though the river basin extends from Angola and Namibia to Botswana, the focus of this research is limited to Botswana. This enables the discussion to take on a sharper focus, concentrating on a specific section of the basin and considering the global and regional attention on the Okavango Delta in terms of its relevance to the inhabitants' lives.

The field study takes a qualitative approach through case study research, drawing from Yin (2018). We explore a 'contemporary phenomenon': in this case, the participatory experiences of local communities in the Okavango Delta, subject to informal institutions (such as the *kgotla* and *therisanyo*) through which they expect to participate and to formal institutions such as international water law, relevant regional arrangements, and national tenets of water governance. This means that the article draws on the experiences of the community, particularly over the past three decades, in the context of the Delta. We explore how these interactions have influenced water governance in Botswana, particularly in the Delta and amongst its people. The article uses multiple sources of evidence, expecting to triangulate information to achieve credibility and dependability. For instance, information drawn from newspaper articles, national policy, and academic articles informed our interview questions. The information obtained from the interviews was corroborated using the opinions of other community members, key informants, and local academicians.

Figure 3. Charts showing the gender distribution and roles of participants.



Individuals associated with VDCs or those identifying as a kgosi are only identified by their roles in this paper. This does not mean they are not part of the community or are separate from other community members – it is simply that they may exercise distinct responsibilities. These roles could also offer them access to a greater degree of power relative to other community members without these roles.

The next section discusses our empirical data and draws insights from it. We observe that the travel and diffusion of international knowledge and discourse has influenced regional, national, and local arrangements for organising resources and enabling mechanisms for water governance. This was accomplished through the absorption of global knowledge into the regional discourse on water and, furthermore, into national water laws, embedding the state into various mechanisms for moderating the use of water resources. This diffusion informed expressions of collective action, as community members had to organise their relationships with water, governed by the mechanisms afforded to them by the

state as well as locally governed participatory mechanisms through the kgotla system enabled by practices such as *botho* and *therisanyo*. The data we examined suggests that the participation of community members in water governance was influenced and affected by formal and informal interactions with institutions.

The percolation of the international discourse on the tenets of water governance into Botswana – and by extension the Okavango Delta – can be observed from the harmonization of regional and national arrangements. We observe that the flows have enabled the state to use the conservation narrative to further control and moderate resources away from the communities inhabiting the Delta. Additionally, mechanisms of the state may have been used to supplant or undermine traditional systems of local governance. These transitions could be seen to contribute to a vacuous participation experience for community members in the Delta, as will be discussed in the rest of this section using the voices of those inhabiting and governing the Delta.

Influence of international discourse in the Okavango Delta

The international dialogue on water policy in the twentieth century can be accounted for through some key instruments: the 1977 Mar del Plata Action Plan (United Nations, 1977), the 1992 Rio Declaration (primarily Chapter 18 of Agenda 21) (United Nations, 1992b), and the 1992 Dublin Principles (United Nations, 1992a) have all offered important guidance for water governance. The 1997 UN Watercourses Convention was also a significant turning point, offering a basic framework for the harmonisation of water laws. The 2000 SADC Water Protocol revisions were aimed at aligning the regional water discourse in the southern African region in response to the 1997 Convention. The emergence of the Global Water Partnership in 1996 and the 2002 Earth Summit in Johannesburg catalysed the adoption of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) in the region, including in Botswana. Subsequently, the 2005 SADC Regional Water Policy embraced the principles of IWRM, paving the path for percolation to the national and local scales.

The emergence of IWRM as a dominant paradigm for water governance in the first decade of the 21st century needs to be understood here, overlaid with water policy related developments in Botswana, some of which are discussed in the next section. Besides the 1968 Water Act (Botswana, 1967), water management in Botswana has been guided by the 1991 National Water Master Plan (NWMP) and a review of the plan conducted in 2006 (Botswana, 1991). In Botswana, these events were followed by the establishment of the Okavango Wetlands Management Committee and the Okavango Delta Management Plan (ODMP), with participation and partnerships at the heart of its design (Mfundisi, 2008). There are also several instances noting the influence of OKACOM, whose transboundary interventions actively influence water governance in the Delta (Barnes et al., 2009; OKACOM, 2009, 2011b, 2011c, 2019; King and Chonguica, 2016). The interaction between scales is evident in the ODMP (Botswana, 2008); the plan adapts the tenets of the 1971 Ramsar Convention and IWRM principles. The development of an integrated plan was not the only requirement stemming from the Ramsar Convention: Botswana also co-opted integrated planning principles into the Botswana Wetlands Policy. Even though there was no obligation to do so, the ODMP was presented to OKACOM for consideration by the Department of Environmental Affairs, which was the custodian of the plan. OKACOM remains a significant actor, considering its role at the regional scale, as the moderator of resources in the transboundary Okavango River Basin.

Water scholars from the region, participating in this research, feel that the smooth translation of knowledge from the international and regional scales to the national scale may have been enabled by a positive disposition towards that knowledge among Botswana's political leadership. One of our interviewees spoke of the country's friendly disposition towards the influence of international water discourse: "The country has been friendly towards international knowledge on water governance. We can see that particularly with an open approach towards regional norming of water governance through

SADC and the structures of transboundary governance" (research scholar at the Okavango Research Institute [ORI], personal communication, March 2021).

Similarly, another key informant commented on the ODMP as the vehicle which brought international knowledge and practice into the country: "The ODMP was necessitated as a part of Botswana's obligations under the Ramsar Convention upon enlisting the Okavango Delta as a Ramsar site. In that sense, the ODMP was a way to harmonise the convention's provisions into the country" (DEA Coordinator in the Northwest District, personal communication, March 2021).

OKACOM has played an instrumental role in driving water policy and regional integration with other basin countries. For example, the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) (OKACOM, 2011a), a technical study by OKACOM, served as a foundation for the Strategic Action Program (SAP) (OKACOM, 2011c). The SAP produced a framework for managing resources based on four thematic areas: livelihoods and socio-economic development, water resources management, land management, and environment and biodiversity. The SAP also reflected the priorities of the three riparian areas, leading to a National Action Plan in each of the three countries, including Botswana. In addition, the NAP defined the institutional mechanisms for implementation at the national scale, enabling coordination with OKACOM.

In keeping with the commitments made at the 2002 Earth Summit, Botswana also produced the 2013 IWRM Water Efficiency Plan. The status of the 2012 National Water Policy remains uncertain,⁸ as it still awaits the completion of approval procedures. In a 2021 report by civil society actors to the Africa Peer Review Mechanism,⁹ stakeholders in Botswana observe challenges related to unaffordable water tariffs and the increasingly uneven distribution of water resources around the country. They attribute this to the transition of water supply responsibilities from the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) to the Water Utilities Corporation (WUC), a public enterprise. The transition was recommended in the 2006 Review of the NWMP and implemented through the 2013 IWRM-WEP.

An entrenched state

The evolution of land and water institutions in Botswana is well documented (Bendsen, 2002; Mbaiwa et al., 2008; Gondo et al., 2019b). In the immediate aftermath of independence in Botswana, the government legislated land and water through formal institutions such as the 1967 Water Act, the 1968 Tribal Land Act (TLA), and the 1975 Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP). The TLA (Botswana, 1968) paved the way for creating Land Boards in each district (TGLP, 1975). These were local governance institutions of the state, which usurped the role of administering land from traditional systems of chieftainship (Adams et al., 2003; Buckham-Walsh and Mutambirwa, 2014). Several scholars argue that the TGLP (1975) has curtailed mobility and undermined local knowledge (Greenhow, 1978; Cullis and Watson, 2005; Rohde et al., 2006; Basupi et al., 2017a, 2019). Others observe that rangeland policies instituted in the Delta by the state (and ideas of conservation associated with them) have hampered livestock mobility, often ignoring pastoralists' preferences related to grazing practices (Basupi et al., 2017a). In the case of Botswana, the Tribal Grazing Lands Policy (1975) aimed to promote cattle ranches over unoccupied sandveld areas (White, 1993). There are also concerns about the assumptions underlying these policies; Basupi et al. (2017b) point out that lands presumed to be 'unused' were already being used by pastoralists.

The various communities in the Okavango Delta have co-existed in the Delta for centuries (Bock and Johnson, 1993; Cassidy et al., 2011). Political control over the resources in the Delta has been observed

⁸ *The Patriot* reported that much needed to be done concerning the Water Efficiency Plan and pending approvals for the 2012 Water Policy, leaving the country in the grips of an outdated legislative environment. <https://thepatriot.co.bw/the-waterless-villages-of-botswana/>

⁹ The report, by a collection of civil society organisations in Botswana, identifies key governance issues in Botswana, among them challenges surrounding water and participation. <https://saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/agdp-baps-report-botswana-march2021-final-web.pdf>

since the late 18th century, when the kgosi of the Batawana exercised it; the British did so at the turn of the 20th century, and the state has exercised it since the country became independent in 1966 (Bock and Johnson, 1993). The dikgosi gained state employment after independence while remaining in charge of the kgotla system of local governance. But the TGLP also transferred allocation and land management responsibilities to the Land Boards and away from the dikgosi. We discuss how the changes in the role of the kgosi have negatively affected communities in the next section. Motsumi et al. (2012) observe that the introduction of various land use policies in Botswana have undermined the nuanced knowledge practices related to cattle grazing, soil moisture, and water resource availability, which previously defined interactions between the communities and the Delta. Even though the government has made some efforts to strengthen community involvement through the 1986 Wildlife Conservation Policy and the 1990 Tourism Policy, Mbaiwa (2011b) and Mbaiwa et al. (2011) argue that these efforts tend to fail without commensurate investments in capacity building. Their work also shows that prioritizing economic growth through tourism and conservation has eroded traditional livelihoods and contributed to the marginalization of indigenous people.

Magole and Magole (2009) consider the TGLP a failure, leading to drastic changes in the livestock practices and livelihoods of smallholder pastoralists. They observe that this alienation of communities was exacerbated by the sale and lease of territorial rights to large investors – mainly a combination of the political elite, domestic investors with political affiliations, and wealthy foreign investors. Consolidating these investments among the elite – domestic and international – compromises local ownership and access to resources (Mbaiwa and Hambira, 2019). Researchers also lament that the 1991 National Policy on Agricultural Development (NPAD) exacerbated the situation in Botswana, not only by continuing the TGLP ranching policies which took control of 'unused areas', but also by expanding the scope of ranching from unused areas to include specific areas surrounding private boreholes (Peters, 1994; Rohde et al., 2006). In addition, the NPAD enabled preferential treatment and allocations to private herders based on ownership of boreholes (Peters, 1994). A lady from Gumare and several other community members in other villages argued that the state constrained their access to land and water and any opportunity for consensus building:

The development of private reserves forced us to walk long distances to herd cattle and access water, especially for those without a borehole. Further, much of the conversation in the Kgotla was aimed at passing [on] instructions and information. Neither the Kgosi nor the officers present allowed for any meaningful discussions. Even when some community members expressed their views, they were ignored (community member in Tubu, personal communication, May 2021).

Some of the community members participating in this research expressed concerns over the uneven effect of the policies on their access to natural resources. Multiple community members expressed concerns about the role of formal institutions and their effect on the community's relationship with water resources. As pointed out by one interviewee:

The rules in place for land and water have fundamentally affected our relationship with the Delta. There are many constraints on how we can access water and use it to earn livelihoods. The government instructions define where our cattle can graze and drink water, when and where we can fish... (community members in Shakawe and Bodibeng, personal communications, May 2021).

Scholars have observed that practices of the state (such as zoning and fencing, centralizing institutions at the expense of dikgosi, and a modernization mindset) undermine local knowledge and informal institutions (Cassidy et al., 2011). In essence, those who did not own prior access to water resources were disadvantaged in the allocations that followed the TGLP and the NPAD. Furthermore, governance mechanisms at the national scale can also be seen to subsume traditional/informal governance mechanisms in the Delta. These also indicate the uneven power relationships that enable the mechanisms through which inequalities tend to be sustained.

In this context of the state, and the potential impact of its processes and policies, it is useful to note some of the concerns expressed by the residents of various villages about the diminishing relevance of indigenous practices. While the specific reasons or the cultural and economic significance of these practices and underlying perceived threats to this knowledge require further examination, our research has surfaced these concerns. In the table below, drawing from interviews with community members in our sample, we list some of the practices that are perceived to be under threat, based on information provided by the community members and corroborated through key informant interactions.

Table 2. A list of traditional activities at risk, as identified by the community members.

Topic	Indigenous practice
River	Do not cross the river after sunset.
Hunting	Identify and target old males which are beyond reproductive age while hunting for food or functional needs.
Ecology	Certain trees are vital to the Delta, need to be protected, and are never to be cut.
Ecology	Never harm a medicinal plant; use only the relevant part of the plant to care for the sick.
Ecology	Do not cut the mokutsomu, motshaba, or mokolwane trees.
Fishing	Never fish in waters where fish breed.
Fishing	The river is a holy being, and fishing needs to be practiced with particular care and some specific considerations: Keep older fish but return the younger fish to the water. Do not wash clothes used during menstruation in the river, as it is believed to kill the flow. Fishermen cannot engage in sexual intercourse before entering the river. When a man is on the river fishing, his wife cannot 'cheat on' him until his return to the village. Family members of fishermen should not play any games until they return to the village. Avoid cooking or eating fish the day before going to the river for fishing. Tiger fish and the red breast tilapia are revered and not to be eaten before or during fishing. Do not eat the tswii (waterlily) while fishing.

Pretence or participation?

In principle, participation is part of the people's culture, considered an integral tenet of governance in Botswana (Obasi and Lekorwe, 2014; Gondo et al., 2019b). The kgotla is expected to function as a significant feature of public administration, where local communities gather for consultation. The IWRM and Water Efficiency Plan (Botswana, 2013) acknowledged that one of the issues hindering sustainable water management was a "lack of meaningful participation" due to the insufficient involvement of stakeholders in water governance. The Plan sought to emphasize stakeholder participation and capacity building. According to the officials of the DWS, the failure to implement the water efficiency plan has left aspirations for greater inclusion unfulfilled. During our research, several actors – individuals, VDC members, dikgosi, and bureaucrats – expressed concerns over their limited engagement in water governance processes. The use of the term 'compromised' in the article is merely to suggest that certain

aspects related to resource policies, practices, planning, and decision-making do not necessarily reflect the interests or aspirations of the community members.

In spirit, the kgotla system was meant to enable participation (Constance, 2011), but it has been observed that tokenism and uneven power have compromised the effectiveness of the institution; additionally, the VDC's financial relationship with the state, combined with the influence of the kgosi and local political representatives, have diluted its functioning (Phago and Molosi-France, 2018). Beyond this, we observe that class, ethnicity, and power tend to undermine the ability of certain community members to depend on the kgotla or VDC to address their water-related problems. In other words, the state or the elite are not the only actors accountable for uneven participatory experiences. Several key informants, including academic scholars, local bureaucrats, and community members, also confirmed similar practices at kgotla meetings, where an informal power hierarchy influences people's experiences.

Access to piped water has a relatively steep financial cost in the context of the Delta. 85% of the households in the Delta have a monthly income of less than half the amount of money needed for just the annual fees (BWP, 2000) to obtain a private connection from the WUC (Gondo and Kolawole, 2020). The DWS and the Centre for Applied Research (CAR) also confirm that boreholes may be affordable only for large herders owning over 100 cattle (Botswana, 2015).

With such a large percentage of people unable to afford the water permit, the significance of shared community boreholes is evident. The management of and decision-making about these boreholes directly impacts the well-being of local communities around the Okavango Delta. The VDC plays a significant role in this context. Moreover, the kgotla is a venue for expressing concerns or discussions about the situations faced by the community members. However, our data show that participation in these meetings is influenced by unwritten rules of engagement that privilege some community members over others.

Some senior bureaucrats with the Department of Water and Sanitation, who have experience in attending kgotla meetings in their capacity as ex-officio members of a VDC, acknowledged that the experiences of community members can be uneven, based on their social and economic standing in society. As highlighted by an informant:

The experiences of participation are sometimes qualified based on the capacity or standing of the participant as determined by the Kgosana¹⁰ or the representatives of the council, using their influence over arranging quora for these meetings. Even during a meeting, it can be observed sometimes that the conversation can also be moderated by those with access to power (engineer with DWS, personal communication, March 2021).

In Bodibeng, for instance, two older women observed that even though they voice their concerns about access to water at some kgotla meetings, they tend to be ignored. The indifference of the kgosi or those participating in the kgotla can deepen water-related inequalities for marginalized individuals. One of the reasons for such indifference is ethnicity. The chief in Bodibeng is a BaHerero, and according to these elders, identification with the ethnicity of the chief tends to receive favourable treatment even in kgotla meetings. As one interviewee commented:

In the village, experiences can vary based on your tribal affiliation. As a result, some people in the village either do not participate or, even if they do, do so in silence. There were instances where benefits were directed toward the Hereros, or decisions were made without the participation of others and only [communicated] later during the Kgotla meeting without receiving any inputs (senior citizen in Bodibeng, personal communication, May 2021).

Other community members outside Bodibeng also share the women's experiences. At least seven key informants and community members from other villages also confirmed the practice, drawing on their

¹⁰ An advisor to the kgosi.

experiences at various kgotla meetings. Ethnicity (as it is defined in the Constitution) could be one factor underlying the power dynamics in a kgotla, as a community development scholar from the University of Botswana claimed:

Ethnicity is a factor in the nature and extent of participation in meetings at the Kgotla or those with the VDC. The constitution of Botswana recognises eight different tribes. However, several minority ethnic groups with unique identities co-exist in various villages around the Delta. It is common for some of these minorities to subjugate their interests and voices in deference to the informal social structures of that location. Often, they are either not heard or choose to remain silent for fear of facing alienation or disappointment (research scholar at the University of Botswana, personal communication, June 2021).

In addition, some research scholars from ORI, a local government official, and various village seniors all shared similar experiences related to their ethnic affiliation. Our evidence suggests that the presence and practice of an unwritten hierarchy at kgotla meetings lead to uneven experiences for community members. As highlighted by a participant:

The issue of status and socio-economic factors play a role in shaping uneven experiences at Kgotla meetings. The wealthy elite typically get the first opportunity to speak in these meetings. They are followed by other people based on their degree of influence and social status, based on ethnicity (research scholar at ORI, personal communication, May 2021).

Scholars have lamented that Botswana may have tapered into a *minimalist democracy* (as defined in McElhenny, 2004), with the President and the Executive as the key structural centres of power (Good and Taylor, 2008). Officials at the ODC and DWS agree that switching to community-centric modes of participation remains challenging, as the ways of doing things in their offices tend to fit into a top-down approach. A senior official at DWS also spoke of a preference to engage with institutional structures rather than individuals or groups from the community. Even though scholars have offered warnings about the dilution in process and diminished access to resources (Kgomotso and Swatuk, 2006; Mbaiwa et al., 2008), problems of water access and effective participation remain unresolved.

Our observations in this study reflect some of the experiences that continue to validate this view. Even though the local governance units may represent community-centric entities meant to deliver services to the people, some bureaucrats in Maun and around the Delta shared concerns about their inability to function as per design. They suggest a tendency to represent the instructions from the headquarters, which may not always serve the interests of local communities inside the Delta.

Another significant challenge for effective engagement with communities around the Delta could be the need for more harmony among the multiple actors representing the state at the local scale. The departments tend to suffer from a lack of coordination, functioning in silos, which makes it hard for community members to interact with the local government and fulfil their needs smoothly. An informant alluded to the lack of coordination among various departments in local government, overlapping responsibilities, and lack of ownership: "Lack of harmonisation has been a challenge in Botswana, leading to conflict and duplication of effort within the various departments related to the Delta" (research scholar at ORI, personal communication, March 2021).

A bureaucrat added how their approach towards citizen services tends to privilege formal institutions at the expense of informal institutions organised around communities:

We should be interacting far more with the communities, but we tend to target institutions instead of communities, perhaps because it is easier to deliver our interventions through formal institutional structures (such as the office of the district commissioner, etc) rather than through community structures (local government official in the Department of Water and Sanitation, personal communication, March 2021).

Another government official sought to explain how their allegiance to the state affects their interactions with local communities:

Though we come under local authorities, you know that we are central government, representing the office of the President at the level of the district. And it is not that easy to separate that the local government is doing this and the central government is doing this. It is a bit dicey for me to break it down (District Development Planner, personal communication, March 2021).

Community members across the six locations examined in this study shared similar experiences of interacting with each department separately whenever they needed to access services.

In the Delta, there are both formal institutions – legal tenets, conventions or state departments, organisations, etc. – tasked with multiple roles in water governance and informal or customary institutions, such as *therisanyo*, generally conducted at a *kgotla* (Gondo and Kolawole, 2019; Jongman, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these institutions remains questionable. The lack of harmony is a significant concern. For instance, the DWS, responsible for implementing IWRM, exercises limited control over processes and departments such as agriculture and land reform, even though they are connected with water (Woodhouse, 2012). Furthermore, some scholars observe overlapping mandates between institutions of agriculture and water, with neither taking responsibility for improving water access for small-scale farmers at the local level (Mehta et al., 2014).

The Chieftainship can be considered an essential pillar of government alongside the Parliament and the Executive in Botswana. However, some institutional changes in the aftermath of Botswana's independence and policies related to land and water have usurped important traditional functions of the *kgotla* and the *kgosi*. This may have diluted the role of an essential bridge between the people and the various structures of power and influence in Botswana. Good and Taylor (2008) argue that the *dikgosi* have been co-opted into the structures of the state, effectively turning them into grassroots-level agents of the government rather than custodians of the communities they represent.

As noted before, the term used to describe the process of these consultations is *therisanyo*, most often conducted at a *kgotla*, where inhabitants from one or two villages come together to discuss matters that concern and interest them as individuals and as a community. *Therisanyo* could constitute a culturally significant participatory mechanism for the people, but there are challenges in its effective practice. In our study, we observe that factors such as co-opted traditional leaders, local government actors, social hierarchy, and the limited capacities of some community members affect the potential for meaningful participation through the *kgotla*.

Several research scholars and government officials have expressed views that corroborate the opinion that participatory mechanisms could be relatively compromised for community members. As highlighted by one interviewee:

The *kgotla* system could be considered the only formal engagement mechanism between the community members and invited officials. The challenge is that it may not always represent the community: [since] the louder [people] get heard, the more powerful tend to speak (research scholar at ORI, personal communication, March 2021).

As a result of a combination of various factors, symptomatically described by the voices heard in this study, the *kgotla* mechanism and the culture of *therisanyo* could also be considered compromised, to a certain extent. In the absence of resources or mechanisms to address their water needs, certain sections of the community appear to suffer disproportionately in terms of access to water or ability to make their voices heard at the *kgotla* or VDC.

Another potential factor underlying uneven access to water resources stems from the transition of the water utilities corporation into a for-profit services entity. Market forces tend to privilege access for those who can afford the price while compromising access for some in the community who cannot afford it. Some residents of Tubu summarized a sentiment that we observed to be shared by several community members along the Delta:

It takes many months to obtain a community water connection from the WUC. I cannot afford to travel so often to their offices. Also, many of us here cannot afford to pay the fees for private connections. Unfortunately, the WUC is not offering free connections, so digging hand wells or walking to the river are our only options (senior citizen in Tubu, personal communication, May 2021).

At least 16 community members noted that, while paid private connections continue to receive water from the WUC, supply is often unavailable at the community tap. According to these people, the WUC offers a differentiated level of service to the paid private connections, relative to the free community tap. One WUC official suggested that allocation of resources is usually focused on the maintenance and service of paid connections in order to facilitate the timely collection of revenues.

These are recurrent themes surrounding access to water in the Delta. Disruptions in water supply, unemployment, and poverty were observed as everyday experiences in the six villages covered in this study. Scholars have observed similar experiences for the past two decades, indicating that these are persistent issues in the region. For example, it was observed that water supply in the Ngamiland district was erratic, unreliable, and expensive, based on studies in the district between 2004 and 2006 (Swatuk and Kgomotso, 2007).

In addition, many community members expressed a disconnect with local governance bodies, which they perceive as unresponsive or lacking in inclusive governance. Several respondents across six different villages along the Delta echoed similar experiences concerning water, unemployment, and livelihoods. Even when they find an opportunity to interact and share concerns with officials of the local government bodies, they feel ignored, as problems remain unresolved for a long time. This includes VDC members, who tend to enjoy a degree of power greater than those community members who do not have a specific role in local governance.

Ordinary community members and those who represent them expressed dismay over the lack of access in some instances or disruptions to services in other cases. For example, in Sehitwa, Nokaneng, Mohembo, Tubu, and Bodibeng, we heard consistent voices underlining persistent water access challenges – not just from community members but also from VDC members and dikgosi. As one interviewee commented: "There is no water supply to the community water point. The WUC does not explain the reasons for this shortage or attend the Kgotla meeting to understand the situation" (community member in Tubu, personal communication, May 2021).

The helplessness of the VDC members only exacerbates the situation for the communities. "Water supply interruptions are constant. We have approached WUC, but without any effect. The lack of cooperation at WUC is disappointing. They do not inform us about interruptions in supply. Even when we inform them of broken pipes, they do not respond" (A compiled quote, drawing from VDC members at Nokaneng, personal communication, May 2021).

The disruption of water supply and absence of communication from the WUC remain persistent challenges in the Delta. For example, communities in Tubu have experienced difficulties arranging conversations with the water utility through kgotla meetings. Another community member in Sehitwa also corroborated supply disruptions and the need for more communication from the WUC.

While the lack of water supply or, in other cases, intermittent supply can be a significant concern, it is even more concerning to note the apathy marking the relationship between the community members and the WUC. One of the people in Nokaneng expressed dismay at the lack of response from the WUC. Others believe that their communities are on the receiving end of statutory arrangements, constraining their access to resources. Community members from Tubu and Nokaneng lamented the need for more consultation. In a view that found resonance in Tubu, Nokaneng, Bodibeng, and Mohembo, multiple community members discussed how their pleas to various actors fall on deaf ears. These experiences tend to negate their problem-solving initiatives and dilute the value of subsequent interactions, even when held with positive intent. As commented by an informant:

We have no input in water management, and we have been banned from digging boreholes due to safety concerns. The government has made these regulations without consulting us and banned us from fishing. We were informed of these decisions at a Kgotla meeting without any explanation (resident of Tubu, personal communication, May 2021).

Another community member from Bodibeng suggested that some interactions, particularly those at the kgotla, could seem futile, as the concerned officials do not address citizen concerns. A young healthcare worker observed that meetings could be convened abruptly, often to pass on information or communicate decisions. He felt that any inputs provided by the village folk at the kgotla tend to be ignored by both formal and informal structures.

The apathy of local government actors is not restricted to the commoners alone. One of the bakgosi in Mohembo expressed helplessness at the lack of consultation and exclusion from district-level interactions for people in Mohembo, along the border with Namibia. A scholar from the Okavango Research Institute explained how the dilution of the kgotla percolates into local governance. The Village Development Committee (VDC) was designed to absorb and respond to community challenges. However, the absence of formal mechanisms for their engagement with local governance actors proves to be a hurdle.

Views from research scholars and officials underline the gaps between design and implementation. As one informant manifested: "The water efficiency plan provided for a strategic focus on community engagement. The challenge is that we did not implement the plan as designed" (official in the Department of Water and Sanitation, personal communication, March 2021).

The views of an NGO official, echoed by some officials in local government, suggest that presumptive notions of individual capacities might be used as an excuse for a limited engagement with community members:

I do not think there has been much consultation with the communities. But they might not even understand the need for policies or rules about water. Literacy is low, and even if the rules are explained, communities lack the capacity to contribute or appreciate the need for policies. We must consider building capacities before engaging with them in deeper consultations (senior official at NCONGO, personal communication, May 2021).

The utility of participation as an essential tool in governance is widely acknowledged by those in power – officials of the state, scholars, and even members of the VDCs. However, in practice, there appear to be glaring gaps in the experiences of community members. Informed mainly by institutionalist approaches to governance, participation in the Delta region may be perceived by those in authority as a tokenistic instrument of empowerment, failing to fully harness the relevant capacities of community members. On the other hand, the idea of 'limited capacity' has also been used by powerful actors as a factor inhibiting the ability of community members to participate in and contribute to planning and decision-making in the Delta. These thoughts reflect an attitude of condescension towards community members without identifying or apportioning responsibility for either defining capacity or delivering the services needed to build it.

This is reflected in the engagement between local government actors and community members. At times, meetings were hastily arranged upon instructions from one of the government departments or the ODC. For example, in one meeting requested by the DWNP to discuss compensation for wildlife damage to cattle, the aggrieved person was away from the village. The discussions proceeded without that person, and compensation was determined in consultation with the village elders. Even though the community member felt that the compensation was meagre relative to his losses, he had to accept it, partly for lack of further recourse due to economic constraints and partly due to deference to the village elders and the proceedings at the kgotla.

Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) offers an opportunity for local communities to participate in and benefit from tourism and conservation-related efforts (Mbaiwa, 2011a). But nearly thirty years since the first CBNRM project in Chobe, significant investments in tourism remain vested with foreign investors and the political elite in the country. An ORI study observed that poverty rates in the western parts of the Delta, with many tourist accommodations, remain relatively higher than in other areas in the country (Mbaiwa, 2011a). Community trusts remain a small proportion of the tourism ecosystem.

The employment that residents expected from tourism development has yet to materialise. A senior management official at a tourism organisation explained that most operators look for ready-to-serve, trained employees to save costs and maintain quality. As a result, they tend to hire young men and women from Maun, the largest city in the region, with access to better training and education. Several residents of Tubu corroborated the claim, suggesting that youth in the village are forced to find informal work arrangements in Gumare to support themselves and their families. According to some scholars from the ORI, the uneven distribution of opportunity and income is a concerning situation.

Despite a conscious effort at participatory approaches to governance, the effectiveness of these efforts still needs to be investigated. Attempts to institutionalise participation through the CBNRM path have yielded limited benefits to the communities of the Delta. Considering the remote nature of most villages, including those we studied, there appears to be a need for a coordinated effort between the state and the communities – key elements such as capacity building, infrastructure, and promotion all demand resources. Based on our interactions with the local communities, we observe that they need significant financial and capacity-building support to nurture these CBNRM initiatives. Some academic studies have shown that some instances of CBNRM have generated employment and improved attitudes to conservation. However, the successful CBNRM projects – those that improved livelihoods for the communities of Khwai, Sankoyo, and Mababe – have emerged from an abundance of wildlife and significant tourist interest (Mbaiwa and Stronza, 2011). On the other hand, the approach has failed in villages such as Bodibeng and Nokaneng, where financial benefits and employment have not yet reached the level of the community (Basupi et al., 2017b; Mbaiwa, 2017).

Community members in various villages cited their experiences during the development of the ODMP project. According to them, the authorities invited participation and elicited the views of the community members during the initial phase. However, they felt betrayed by the exclusion of local representatives and their suggestions when the ODMP was completed without further involvement. Others – community members as well as research scholars – lamented the uneven distribution of economic benefits from activities around the Delta. As one participant said:

The distribution of benefits from the Delta is uneven. Conservation benefits accrue to concessionaires, and the communities bear the costs. Examples include losses related to livestock and arable crops. Limited livelihood opportunities and low-paying jobs are some benefits, but they do not offset the more significant losses (senior research scholar at the University of Botswana, personal communication, March 2021).

It can be observed through these interactions that community members living around the Delta suffer a degree of disadvantage in moderating their relationship with water resources through a combination of formal and informal statutory and customary institutions. Through the voices represented in this study, we may observe that interscalar influences and uneven power distribution amongst each of the associated entities/actors influence water governance mechanisms in the Delta, which are not necessarily guided by the interests of local communities around the Delta.

In the context of the Okavango Delta, various governance-related influences, drawing from events at the international, regional, and national scales, can be seen to moderate the formal and informal institutions governing water resources.

The discussion here shows that the uneven distribution of power, primarily organised by the state and its formal institutions, tends to undermine the informal/traditional institutions built to enable the participation of communities in water governance. The data illustrate how the path of transmission of knowledge – the state drawing on international discourse on water governance to moderate access to resources in the Delta – is used to define national and local aspirations, influencing the access and experiences of community members with water resources in the Delta. Our research discovers how certain institutions and actors could be privileged over others through the active moderation of resources by the state.

CONCLUSION

Our research shows that community members in the Delta may be constrained through a combination of factors. First, the use of international discourse by the state undermines age-old relationships between communities, the Delta, and its natural resources – particularly water. Second, we notice that policy and practice have (even if unintentionally) turned into tools that affect the utility of informal institutions in attaining their stated objectives of participation and consensus. Third, even amidst abundant water resources, access to tap water remains out of reach for some people due to financial constraints and bureaucratic hassle. Finally, the voices of community members in the Okavango Delta are often not heard or acted upon, based on evidence from our empirical research. It is clear from our observations that the state is embedded in the mechanisms of governance across various scales, and despite claims to the contrary, we have shown that many of the needs and aspirations of community members remain compromised in the Delta.

Even though the ideals of participation and community engagement seem embedded in the policy and design of various interactions related to water resources in the Okavango Delta, practices on the ground do not reflect these values. The experiences discovered in this research suggest that informal and formal institutions can be vulnerable to underlying dimensions of power – local government officials serving their superiors at the centre and the *kgotla* turning into a fiefdom for chieftaincy. However, based on the experiences recorded above, these interactions at the local scale do not suffer from an absence of intent, awareness, or capacity. Instead, the community's interests and bottom-up approaches to water governance can be seen to be undermined through a combination of self-preservation and hierarchical expressions of authority.

An endeavour to enrich the participation of communities needs to be accompanied not only by capacity-building but also by an effort on the part of the institutions concerned to achieve meaningful engagement through planning and coordination. Especially for active service providers such as the WUC, a greater degree of interaction with the *kgotla* system could prove to be productive.

The research suggests that the state may have pursued a narrative of economic growth to appropriate control over natural resources, displacing local communities that had inhabited the Delta for centuries and subsuming their informal institutions. In doing so, they attained access to resources before redistributing the privilege through leasehold arrangements. Revenues from resources once held in common were thus concentrated under the control of the state and the lease-holding wealthy elite from inside and outside the country. Often, this uneven distribution benefits the state and business entities at the expense of community members. The situation is exacerbated by a sense of alienation experienced by Delta communities through a lack of means to participate effectively in the formal and informal institutions designed to serve them.

The findings also show that the transmission of knowledge can be weaponized by certain actors, including those working with the state, to appropriate access or control over resources through narratives of development and economic growth.

We highlight, as have several other scholars, the vital role of understanding the power relationships informing interactions between and within actor groups related to the governance of water resources. Uneven power distribution and other types of inequality tend to present a significant hurdle to inclusive and participatory approaches to governance.

Examining policy, particularly in complex water systems, requires a thorough analysis of both intent and application. As we have observed in this study, the prevalent discourse could be adapted to construct a state-sponsored narrative of economic development and conservation without adequately factoring in the life systems that already coexist with the water system. We see a latent opportunity for further research into the role and contribution of land and water policies to the uneven distribution of wealth and natural resources.

Finally, the research shows that a holistic approach to the study and analysis of governance – one integrating scales, institutions, and power – could prove to be a valuable tool for gaining insights into water governance. Analysing the flows of knowledge, power, and participation across the various scales of a water system could help us develop a deeper understanding of the prevalent mechanisms of governance, its actors, and how they moderate access to natural resources. In addition, delineating the processes of governance and the distribution of power could help us examine how formal and informal institutions moderate these processes and through which actors. Most importantly, grounding this exploration in the voices and experiences of community members could afford us deep insights into the governance of water resources and the challenges faced by those closest to these resources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been supported and funded by the DUPC 2 Water Diplomacy project at IHE Delft. The fieldwork was conducted through an academic arrangement with the Okavango Research Institute in Botswana.

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