



## How to thrive as a contemporary hunter-gatherer

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*The doctoral dissertation of Attila Paksi in Political, Societal and Regional Change Doctoral Programme titled Surviving ‘Development’ – Rural development interventions, protected area management and formal education with the Khwe San in Bwabwata National Park, Namibia underwent public examination on 18.9.2020 at the University of Helsinki. The opponent was Associate Professor Robert K. Hitchcock from the University of New Mexico, USA and the custos was Professor Anja Nygren from the University of Helsinki. The doctoral dissertation is available online at HELDA – Digital Repository of the University of Helsinki: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-6348-6>.*

Hunters and gatherers, also referred to as foragers, are often romanticised in our collective imagination. The lifestyle of a hunter-gatherer provides an alternative imaginary to the life we live in contemporary industrial societies (Buckner, 2017). Hunter-gatherers are depicted as people living free of greed, in natural equality, in harmony with nature, and who collect food and resources directly from the land.

In 1966 Marshall Sahlins coined the phrase “original affluent society” to describe the hunter-gatherer way of life (Sahlins, 1968). The use of the term sparked a heated debate, as a foraging lifestyle could also be seen to constitute a high-exposure to the natural elements, to periodic starvation, and strenuous physical work to provide food and resources needed for survival. David Kaplan, while criticising Sahlins’ idea, noted that the original affluent society thesis “may be as much a commentary on our own contemporary society as it is a depiction of the life of hunter-gatherers” (Kaplan, 2000, p. 318).

It is also important to note that contemporary hunter-gatherers may no longer rely on the same foraging lifestyle as described by Sahlins. The majority of contemporary groups practise a mixed subsistence. Hence, the mode of food acquisition is only one part of a multi-faceted definition of foragers. Their social organisation, or as Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (2006) wrote, the “distinctive social fabric”, is also an important feature that defines hunters and gatherers. Alan Barnard (2002) coined the term



‘foraging mode of thought’, encompassing the specific set of perceptions on accumulation, leadership, kinship and relationship to land that characterises hunters and gatherers. Barnard’s approach provides a framework for a set of social relations that contribute to the continuity of foraging culture. Many of us, including Lee and Daly (1999) on the pages of the Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Hunters and Gatherers ask the question, will foragers continue to live on while facing today’s rapid social and economic development?

In the title of my dissertation, I use the word ‘development’ in quotation marks to reflect the myriad definitions and understandings of the term both as a theory and a practice. While the concept of development, the idea behind the neoliberal, industrial economy, is often understood only in economic terms, more recently the three pillars of continuous *economic growth*, *social development* and *environmental protection* are emphasised (United Nations, 2015; World Bank, 2019).

Arturo Escobar, a leading thinker of the post-development school, argued that the more mainstream development incorporates human and environment-based approaches, the more it appears to impose a western agenda on others. Therefore, rather than blanket solutions, Escobar (1992) urges local communities to address their own challenges in a culturally-rooted, bottom-up manner. Amartya Sen, another influential development thinker, noted that freedom is both the primary objective of development and the principal means of development (Sen, 2001). Consequently, the nation-states have major roles in supporting the different types of freedoms by providing public education, social safety nets, productivity and protecting the environment, etc.

The Khwe hunter-gatherers in North-East Namibia provide an intriguing case study through which to conduct research related to development. Contemporary foragers are frequently displaced from their ancestral land, are restricted in their use of natural resources, and are hindered from practising their traditional knowledge and skills as a result of the ever-expanding neoliberal economy. In my study, the Khwe communities live in the so-called Caprivi strip and are among the few San groups that still live on their ancestral land. Today, their living area has been declared a national park. While they are not allowed to hunt, hunters coming from overseas can participate in trophy hunting activities in the area, paying several tens of thousands of US dollars per hunt. The income received from trophy hunting is the most important contributor to the so-called community based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach to nature conservation in Namibia. The approach promises not only certain management options over natural resources for local communities but also ample monetary benefits to the local economy. However, scholars continue to debate the real impact and benefits of CBNRM on the household level and have called for more in-depth case studies.

The title of Karine Rousset’s work from 2003 is “To be Khwe means to suffer” (Rousset, 2003). This expression also reflects the perception of locals to CBNRM. The Khwe people suffer from the imposed nature conservation on their traditional territories. When I first visited the Khwe in Namibia back in 2015 as part of a scoping field trip, one of the main reoccurring discussion topics was about how the National Park and the natural resources are managed. They also shared considerable concerns about the future generation, in terms of the quality of formal education and the erosion

of their traditional knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, every time I met a Khwe person and asked the question “how are you?”, the reply was “|gambara” which means hunger in the local Khwedam language. These discussions during my scoping field trip were influential in refining the themes of my research and in my consideration to focus my study on local livelihoods.

My doctoral study is situated in the post-development research paradigm. It aims to contribute to indigenous studies, particularly hunter-gatherer studies, by analysing local livelihoods among one specific hunter-gatherer group, the Khwe San people in North-East Namibia.

In my research, I was interested in studying how a contemporary hunter-gatherer group copes with so-called development. How does development impact their livelihoods? My research questions and my peer-reviewed articles were grouped under the three previously mentioned pillars of development.

The first research question relates to the pillar of *environmental protection*. It reflects one of the main concerns of the local community: namely, the imposition of a National Park on their traditional territory. Hence, I asked, **How do externally defined nature conservation strategies, and current protected area management practices, affect the livelihoods of local hunter-gatherers?**

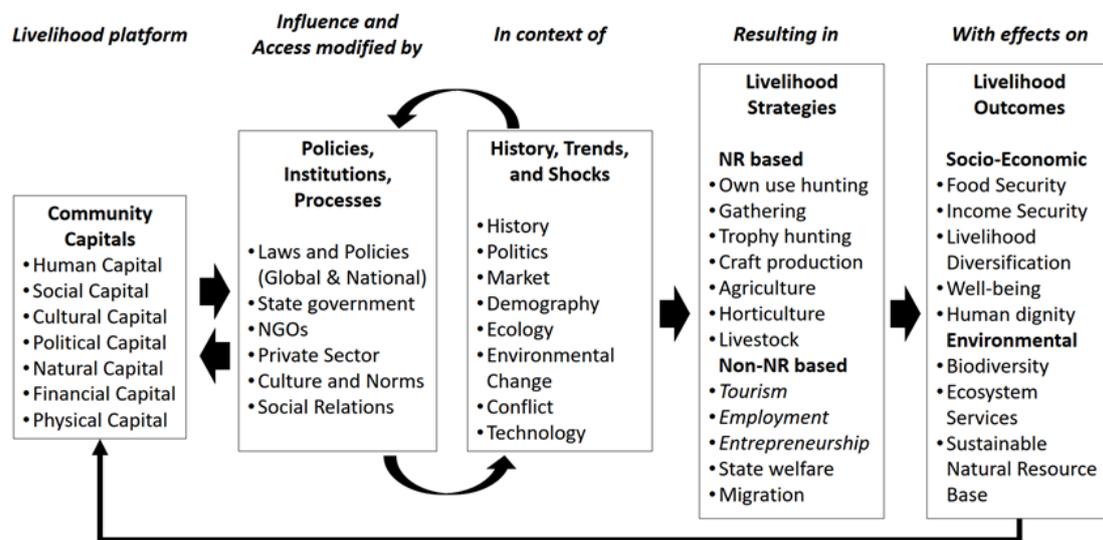
Another pillar of development is its *social dimension*, which is perhaps most prominently manifested among local communities through the provision of formal education. A variety of Namibian policy documents include the phrase “Education is the 'key' to development”, which raises concerns about the impact of an externally defined education on local livelihoods and the local traditional knowledge system. Therefore, in my second research question, I asked, **What is the role of formal education in safeguarding Khwe traditional knowledge and skills? How do the Khwe perceive the relative importance of their traditional knowledge versus school-based knowledge?**

The third pillar of development is its *economic dimension*. The various infrastructural developments, employment creation and income generation activities aim to increase the financial assets of local households. During my scoping trip in 2015 to the study area, I frequently heard the phrase used by the Khwe, that “the government forgot about us”. To illustrate their level of poverty, they would list several factors that are absent, from infrastructure to services and assets. Therefore, I was drawn to include this third research question: **How do rural development initiatives affect the livelihoods of Khwe hunter-gatherers? What factors enable or limit community development projects in improving local community well-being?**

To answer these research questions, I have analysed my data using the sustainable livelihoods framework. The ‘sustainable livelihoods approach’ was formulated in the late 1990s to address rural development, poverty reduction, and environmental management from a more holistic perspective (Krantz, 2001). The approach offers a way of conceptualising the complexity of rural livelihoods in a simplified manner and accounts for the variables that shape activities, objectives, and outcomes. The framework is particularly useful in measuring the costs and benefits of nature

conservation at the local level, including amongst hunter-gatherers. While I use the whole framework developed by Scoones (1998) and Ellis (2000), for my research purposes I adjusted the original framework in two ways to accommodate the contemporary socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the Khwe (Figure 1).

On the livelihood platform, I included the Community Capitals Framework by Flora et al. (2015), to which I added two additional capitals, the political and cultural, to the five capitals already included in the original framework. In terms of the livelihood strategies, I used locally appropriate livelihood options divided into two groups: natural-resource based and non-natural-resource based strategies.



**Figure 1** The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework adjusted to contemporary foragers (adapted from Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 1998)

During the 15 months of my fieldwork, I used a diverse set of research methods to answer the research questions. The methods included observation, survey research, semi-structured interviews, and participatory photography. In addition, I acquired numerous written materials, such as Namibian policy documents, development project reports, and the local schools' educational records.

The first research question was related to nature conservation practices. As presented in my doctoral thesis, government officials believe that the Khwe should be able to generate enough monetary income through the sustainable use of natural resources inside the national park to maintain a sound livelihood. However, my findings suggest that in the study area CBNRM-related income accounts for less than a quarter (21.11%) of overall household income. Most of the households rely on external support, including pensions and social grants provided by the government as well as the irregular deliveries of food aid. More importantly, the Khwe see CBNRM as an imposed

development model through which the state holds onto power and overrules local needs. The rather paternalistic and authoritative approach of government officials towards the Khwe prevents local participation in decision making and collaborations on an equal level.

Current practices in protected area management also have other profound effects on local livelihoods. The ban on own-use hunting, the restriction on gathering, and the limited freedom of movement within the park do not allow the Khwe to rely on other, non-monetary livelihood strategies. The number of wildlife in the area show an increasing trend based on annual game counts in the park. While these conservation outcomes may be successful, they are accompanied by increased degradation of the natural flora and higher numbers of human-wildlife conflicts, raided gardens and agricultural fields. Moreover, the CBNRM income in the study area is heavily reliant on the concession received from trophy hunting. In 2020, no tourists arrived due to the COVID pandemic, leaving the community members gaining an even lower benefit from CBNRM.

The second research question is related to schooling and traditional knowledge (TK). The findings of my study show that the Khwe San face the same substantial barriers at school as do other San communities, including poverty, discrimination and cultural mismatch. Moreover, participation in formal education significantly contributes to the erosion of Khwe traditional knowledge. The Khwe students currently attending school perceive the knowledge and skills obtained from school to be more important than their own traditional knowledge. However, young adults who dropped out of school rely on traditional knowledge and skills around the village, and perceive them as necessary and useful, also emphasising the distinct cultural value that the knowledge and skills hold.

Meanwhile, Khwe parents strongly believe in the obtainable benefits that formal education promises; however, they are aware of the TK erosion among their children and expressed their desire to include a variety of traditional knowledge related topics into the school environment. Conversely, the teachers perceive that the school curriculum incorporates all necessary aspects of the local culture. The interviewed teachers considered only the visible elements of the local culture – for example, traditional dresses, dances, arts and songs – and in many cases they undermined and devalued Khwe traditional knowledge. Local teachers also expressed negative and patronising attitudes towards Khwe students and their parents. They consider Khwe culture as a hindrance to their work. However, they also emphasised the under-resourced school classrooms, the secluded, rural living conditions and the lack of support of the regional and national education offices as major challenges.

The third research question relates to rural development initiatives. In my study, I have analysed 15 of the most recent Community Development Projects in the study area (Table 1) according to several variables, incorporating three main principles of indigenous community development (ACFID, 2014). These include cultural sensitivity, addressing human rights and employing a strength-based approach. While the majority of projects ended well before they could provide a sustainable benefit to the participants, two projects stood out as remaining active, providing benefits and adhering to the principles of indigenous community development.

Project name	Focus*	Main Dev. Agent <sup>#</sup>	Active <sup>†</sup>	Cultural Sensitivity	Human Rights	Strength-based app.
Bakery	Food & Income	GVT	✖	✖	✖	✖
Biocultural Community Protocol (BCP)	Awareness	GVT & KA & NGO	✓	✓	✓	✓
Beekeeping project	Income	GVT	✖	✖	✖	✖
Bicycle project	Income	NGO	✖✖	✖	✖	✖
Chilli gardening	Food	NGO	✖✖	✖	✖	✖
Community Shop	Food	KA	✖✖	✖	✖	✖
Conservation agriculture	Food	NGO	✓	✖	✖	✖
Craft Centre	Income	NGOs	✖	✓	✖	✖
Cultural village	Income	COM	✖✖	✓	✖	✓
Devil's Claw harvest	Income	GVT & KA & NGO	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gardening project	Food & Income	GVT	✖	✖	✖	✖
Goat rearing	Income	GVT	✖✖	✖	✖	✖
Kindergarten	Education	NGO	✓	✖	✖	✖
Poultry farming	Food & Income	NGO	✖✖	✖	✖	✖
TEKOA	Education	NGO	✖	✓	✓	✓

**Table 1.** Community development initiatives in Bwabwata National Park East mentioned by Khwe participants.

\* Project types classified under four categories: Awareness raising; Education; Food production; Income generation.

# Four types of development agents: COM - individuals from the community; GVT - various Namibian government agencies; KA - Kyaramacan Association; NGO - various Non-governmental organisations.

† Project activity: permanently inactive (✖✖); inactive, but initial resources still available (✖); active (✓).

The Khwe perceive these two projects, the Biocultural Community Protocol (BCP) and the harvesting project of a medicinal plant, the Devil's claw (*Harpagophytum zeyheri*), as exemplary projects for different reasons. While the community protocol can mobilise the community to be aware of traditional knowledge and Khwe rights, the Devil's claw harvesting project provides monetary income for a large number of households. The majority of the analysed projects focused on food production, including various gardening projects, a poultry project, and the establishment of a local bakery. Aside from the Devil's claw harvesting project, none of them could support local livelihoods.

Similar to the opinions of the school teachers, the development agents also reported that the Khwe culture hinders their work progress. In their view, and I quote one of the

government officials, “the laziness of the Khwe and their low level of schooling are the reason for repeated project failures”.

Another important finding is the lack of external initiatives addressing the human, land and cultural rights of the Khwe. Without such projects, Escobar’s notion of culturally-rooted, bottom-up development remains far-fetched.

While the romanticised image of hunters and gatherers may live on in some global collective imaginaries, contemporary foragers have far fewer options to practice the knowledge and skills that are part of their cultural identity. Currently, the dominant approach to development for the Khwe and many other hunter-gatherers is one based on livelihood transformation, which is often centred around development projects featuring agriculture and formal education. The Khwe are expected by external actors to “leave their culture” to take part in development. Development agents attributed the failures of previous initiatives, and the high drop-out rates at schools, to the Khwe and their culture.

At the end of my doctoral dissertation, I emphasise the importance of promoting diversity in monetary income sources, both natural-resource and non-natural-resource based. Similarly, there needs to be an increase in the diversity of available livelihood strategies and accommodation of the diversity of knowledge systems both in and out of school. Nurturing diversity at all levels of life is the foundation of resilience (Belay & Hosken, 2020).

Indeed, resilience, flexibility and adaptiveness are all common characteristics of the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. These characteristics, coupled with those that Barnard conceptualised under the idea of ‘the foraging mode of thought’, contribute to the survival of the Khwe. However, in order to thrive the Khwe must be allowed to remain rooted in their cultural identity, connected to their ancestral land, traditional practices and community values. Only then will it be possible to foster bottom-up, grassroots initiatives that strengthen local community capitals.

Based on the findings of my research, I would like to highlight three recommendations. The two mentioned, successful development projects were actively built on the Khwe cultural characteristics and were established through a wide collaboration of stakeholders involving the local community as an equal partner. These projects both in design, local participation and management provide positive examples for future initiatives.

Another recommendation of this study is the provision of professional development workshops for teachers working in rural areas such as the Bwabwata National Park, to provide skills and methods in culturally responsive teaching.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that there is a need among the local community to increase awareness of, and address, the issues related to their human, land and cultural rights.

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