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Bram Büscher[a]; Elna de Beer[b]
[a] Institute of Social Studies, [b] Golder Associates Africa Midrand, GAA Matuka Close, Gauteng, South Africa

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The contemporary paradox of long-term planning for social-ecological change and its effects on the discourse-practice divide: evidence from Southern Africa

Bram Büscher[a]* and Elna de Beer[b]

[a]*Institute of Social Studies, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands; also Department of Geography, Environmental Management & Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg;* [b]*Golder Associates Africa Midrand, GAA Matuka Close, Gauteng, South Africa*

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The Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project between South Africa and Lesotho aims to bring about positive social-ecological change in and around the Maloti-Drakensberg mountain ecosystem. To this effect, the project has developed a long-term planning strategy that has to co-ordinate all involved actors – and their actions – until 2028. The paper describes and analyses the run-up to the strategy. By combining critical 'outside' research with practical 'inside' experience, the paper argues that governing contemporary social-ecological change is severely challenged by two main fundamental paradoxes: the fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures on interventions; and related to this, an increasing gap between discourse and practice. In turn, we argue that these challenges manifested particularly in pressures of 'all-inclusiveness', the relation between natural and social scientists and issues of 'selection' and 'sidetracking'. We conclude that combining 'critical outside' and 'practical inside' experiences can open up spaces for engaging these challenges.

Keywords: transfrontier conservation; neoliberalism; South Africa; Lesotho; socio-ecological change

1. Introduction

> Early in the roll-out of MDTP [Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project] – Phase 1, it was recognised that this transfrontier collaboration around the Maloti Drakensberg Mountains would need to be continued in the long-term, to have any chance of actually achieving the Project Development Objectives. (MDTP 2008, p. 14)

Since the early 1980s, individuals and institutions involved in the Maloti-Drakensberg region between South Africa and Lesotho have engaged in planning activities aimed at managing the area's rapid social-ecological changes. A 'fragile' mountain ecosystem, the Maloti-Drakensberg area is characterised by its massive escarpment, indigenous biodiversity, important freshwater resources and the diverse peoples that live in and (partly) depend on the ecosystem. As such, the stakes in the area are high: people and biodiversity depend on each other and, as a result, many have advocated that some

*Corresponding author. Email: buscher@iss.nl

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balance should be found between human development and ecological conservation. Evidently, this balance would need to be long-term, as recognised in the quote above. The quote also indicates that this is going to be extremely difficult. Short-term pressures, often exacerbated by 'root causes', have severely hampered the effective implementation of the transfrontier collaboration during the first donor-funded implementation phase of the 'Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project' (MDTP) and even the planning processes themselves from the early 1980s onwards.

The first official five-year phase of the MDTP lasted from 2003 to early 2008. Arguably, its main outcome is a long-term 20-year planning strategy that has to co-ordinate 'all actors' – and their actions – until 2028 to achieve the two main project objectives: (1) conservation of the region's biodiversity and (2) community development through nature-based tourism. Although it cannot predict the success of this planning strategy for the future, the paper describes and critically analyses the run-up to the strategy. In so doing, it combines critical 'outside' research with practical 'inside' experience. This combination of 'positionalities' fits in well with a renewed attention in development studies on critical *engagement* with conservation and development interventions (Quarles van Ufford *et al*. 2003, Mosse 2004, 2005, Büscher and Wolmer 2007). Although both authors placed themselves in the 'witches' brew' (Li 2007), namely the interrogation of intervention rationalities through situated practices, the level of involvement of the second author as a (former) member of the South African MDTP Project Co-ordination Unit can bring extra clout to the critical understanding of the intervention. An explicit aim of the paper is to bring the different viewpoints (critical outside and experience from the inside) to the fore.

After introducing the MDTP, the paper will argue that governing contemporary social-ecological change is severely challenged by two fundamental paradoxes: first, the fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures on conservation/development interventions; and second, increasing tensions between discourse and practice. This is then taken as a starting point to empirically illustrate the mutual influence discourse and practice have on each other and how professionals within a large intervention deal with this in the framework of long-term conservation and development planning. The paper concludes with some critical reflections that could be of importance to future phases of the MDTP and similar interventions.

2. Planning for social-ecological change in the Maloti-Drakensberg area

The MDPT looks back on a long history. What started out in the late 1970s as a resource manager's initiative to manage wildfires in state forests in the area from Cathedral Peak in the north of KwaZulu-Natal to Bushman's Nek in the Central Drakensberg,[1] grew into an international conservation and development initiative in the 1990s, which aimed at addressing multiple social-ecological issues through a framework of collaboration between Lesotho and South Africa. Concerns about the threat of unsustainable land use practices to the 'fragile' mountain ecosystem and the consequence thereof to the livelihoods dependent on this ecosystem were used as motivation for sustained intervention by both governments over many years.

The Giant's Castle Declaration, signed on 13 September 1997 by representatives from Lesotho and South Africa, ushered in the preparatory phase that shaped Phase 1 of the MDTP. Leading up to the Declaration, stakeholders from the area and representatives from the World Bank reviewed research and work done in the 15 years that preceded the signing of the declaration and endorsed ''the concept of a

Transfrontier Conservation and Development Area embracing the Lesotho Maloti Highlands and the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg mountains in South Africa'' in recognition of

> the grandeur and magnificence of the Lesotho Highlands and the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg; the rich and unique biodiversity of these mountains; the singularity of their geological history; their importance as a source of water; the unparalleled richness of their cultural history and rock art; their potential as a major tourism focus for Southern Africa and the desirability of a cohesive land use plan; joint management and control to initiate sustainable development and alleviate poverty in the area. (Natal Parks Board 1997)

A Steering Committee, funded by the World Bank commissioned various studies of the area and 13 voluminous consultants reports were used to refine the design of project activities in 2000 in preparation of a funding application to the Global Environment Facility (GEF).[2] These studies confirmed that the area encompassed distinct landscape, biological diversity and was high in endemism. Excessive livestock grazing, crop cultivation on steep slopes, uncontrolled burning, alien plant invading species and human encroachments were recognised as some of the major threats to the mountain range (World Bank 2001, p. 2).

The project design took a regional approach to conservation and development to ''harness the potential of a transfrontier ecosystem'' (Idem: 2) and formulated the main objective of the MDTP as to ''conserve the globally significant biodiversity of the Maloti Drakensberg mountains'' (see also Figure 1). The secondary objective of the project – to contribute to community development primarily through nature-based tourism – also encompassed a regional approach in ''that a common tourist area will enhance the attraction for visitors considerably, and in that joint management in a number of areas can capture economies of scale'' (Idem: 2). Although the project appraisal process recognised the considerable legal, social, institutional and economic differences between Lesotho and South Africa, the design was rationalised into eight components,[3] which became the foundation for the implementation of Phase 1.

The Bilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Lesotho and South Africa signed on 11 June 2001 formalised transfrontier collaboration, and respective Project Co-ordination Committees[4] (PCC) were responsible for the implementation of the project within each country. Technical support teams, called Project Co-ordination Units (PCU) were set up in each country and were responsible for the operationalisation of Phase 1 of the MDTP (the period 2003–2008). Differences in the conceptualisation of the intervention between the two PCUs proved distinct, with Lesotho leaning towards a 'Community Based Natural Resource Management' (CBNRM) approach that underlines anthropocentric arguments and the emancipation of poor rural communities vis-à-vis conservation, and South Africa focusing on 'Bioregional Conservation Planning' (BCP) which centres mostly on biocentric arguments and emphasises technical expertise in the protection of biodiversity (Büscher 2010).

According to the former KZN Wildlife staff member responsible for obtaining funding for the MDTP in the late 1990s, (already in the preparatory phase) ''it was envisaged that we had to throw a planning domain over everything ... to mitigate the threat to the area''.[5] Moreover, it was accepted at project inception that the MDTP would have a longer-term view than the five years set for Phase 1. Halfway

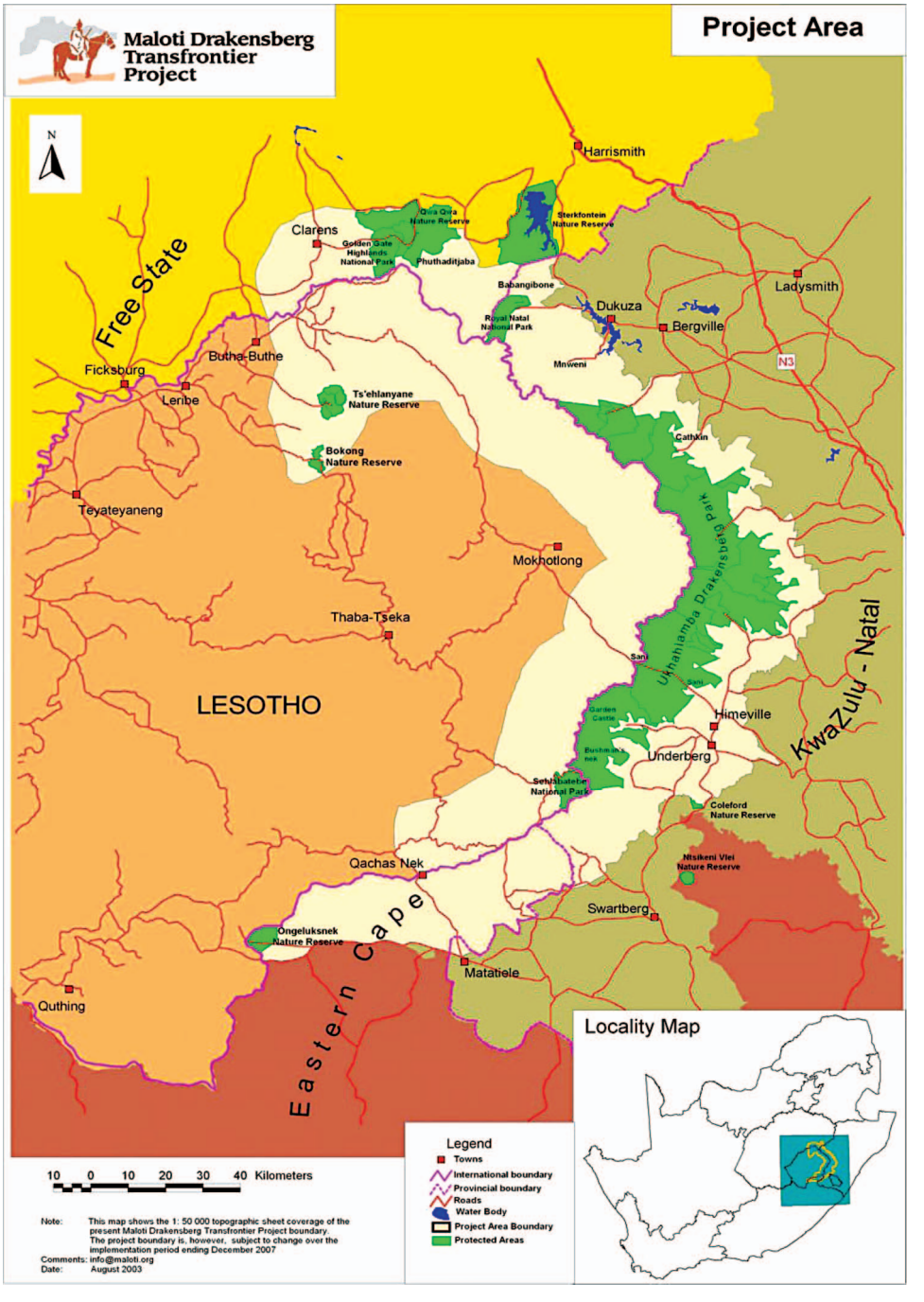

Figure 1. A locality map of the Maloti Drakensberg TFCA.
Source: MDTP.

through the project, however, it became clear that the respective PCUs employed different planning approaches to the long-term strategy, which resulted in the countries 'drifting apart in their implementation of the project'. In response,

the World Bank Mid-Term Review decided that "the best way to revitalise transfrontier collaboration is by appointing one person to drive the process" (MDTP 2005, p. 9). This recommendation did not have the intended results and the two PCUs eventually took responsibility for the development of a 20-Year Conservation and Development Strategy for the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area (MDTFCA) themselves.

Despite major complexities and difficulties between main stakeholders during the first phase of the project, it was recognised that "long-term planning and collaboration" is required to "mitigate the risk of unsustainable land management practices" and balance this with local livelihood needs (MDTP 2008 pp iii, 28, 38, 106).[6] The Strategy emphasised several "fundamental systemic issues" as drivers of the natural and cultural heritage loss of the MDTFCA (MDTP 2008, p. 22) that should be taken into consideration in planning for social-ecological change: poverty, population pressures, governance failures, market forces, lack of awareness of how 'inappropriate' land use (management) leads to biodiversity and cultural heritage loss, a transforming society in Lesotho and South Africa and climate change. To tackle these challenges, the 20-year strategy was premised on a vision, a 'purpose statement' and six so-called 'strategic outcomes', ultimately to be achieved by 2028. The vision for the MDTFCA was formulated as "conserving the MDTFCAs natural and cultural heritage for the people of the region and beyond" (MDTP 2008, p. iii) while the 'purpose statement' reads as "effective co-operation among capacitated partners secures the MDTFCAs priority natural and cultural heritage and supports sustainable livelihoods" (MDTP 2008, p. iii). The following strategic outcomes (Ibid) direct the 5-year action planning process for Phase 2, which is currently underway:

(1) An enabling environment for effective conservation action, including community and political support, is established and maintained;
(2) All natural and cultural heritage priorities are secured and effectively managed in a formal protected area network;
(3) Natural heritage is safeguarded through effective implementation of incentives and regulatory mechanisms;
(4) Integrated and appropriate management secures natural heritage including ecosystem services.
(5) Cultural heritage is celebrated and priorities are conserved through formal protection, regulatory mechanisms and effective management practices;
(6) Livelihoods and quality of life are improved and sustained, including through tourism. (MDTP 2008, p. iii)

Obviously, these are ambitious goals and their success cannot be predicted in this paper. Rather, the aim is to reflect on past experiences with planning that might give leads towards the future. Both 'inside' experience and 'outside' research showed that the planning process thus far embarked upon by both PCUs was characterised by intense complexities, ranging from issues such as the fragile political legitimisation of the project, disparity amongst stakeholders and 'target communities', professional differences between the PCUs, issues related to the sovereignty of the countries and the looming end of project due dates. The next two sections illustrate some of the complexities in more depth, by elaborating on and illustrating two of the key paradoxes that thus far have characterised planning for social-ecological change in the MDTP.

3. Two paradoxes in governing social-ecological change

Critical 'outside' research by the first author (Büscher 2009, 2010) established that, so far, governing social-ecological change in the Maloti-Drakensberg intervention has been hampered by severe challenges. Two of these are fundamental paradoxes with regard to planning: first, the fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures on conservation/development interventions; and second (and related), an increasing gap between discourse and practice.

3.1. The fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures

The influence of the political ideology of neoliberalism on conservation and development interventions should be seen in the framework of a centuries-long history of capitalist expansion in general. However, it is clear from the literature that contemporary globalisation and developments in information and communication technology have intensified neoliberal pressures tremendously (Sonnenfeld and Mol 2002). One way to define neoliberalism is as a self-regulatory, devolved system of governance that – amongst others – emphasises the market, commercialisation and competition as regulatory principles for behaviour (Harvey 2005). As such, it seems to have become superficially compatible to development oriented conservation, discursively stressing the importance of all-inclusiveness of a wide variety of actors and especially 'communities' (McCarthy 2005).

The neoliberal turn in community conservation from this angle of devolved governance entails the weaving of a regulatory system whereby access to and benefits from 'natural resources' are likened to a market. New relationships between actors are fashioned neoliberal style, encapsulated in chains that link production and purchase of a particular 'environmental service'. Biodiversity becomes a product, communities become managers and all of us become clients. It is therefore no understatement that the tendency ''to commodify nature and market its services is a massive transformation of the human-environment relationship and of the political economy of regions and landscapes'' (Liverman 2004, p. 734).

During its first phase, the MDTP also started experimenting with neoliberal models of conservation and development, for example, through the introduction of the 'payments for environmental services' concept, but this was more so by South Africa than by Lesotho. According to the consultancy report produced for the MDTP in South Africa:

> Payment for environmental services provides an incentive for directing landowners towards environment management actions that address priority environmental services, such as water security. As a payment system directly links buyers and producers of environmental services, it build relationships between people who are economically linked and allows market based transactions to take place, reducing the need for further state regulation. Furthermore it focuses on measurable deliverables and consequently sharpens the performance of conservation actors (public, private or communal). (Diederichs *et al.* 2004, p. 5)

In short, 'stakeholders' should be captured in market chains, thereby directing and 'sharpening' their behaviour such that they rationally do what is 'right' for them and the environment, making 'state regulation' redundant.

The MDTP long-term transfrontier strategy document describes how the project subsequently took the report further:

> An initial baseline study determined the initial feasibility of establishing a trade system around the water production and use patterns associated with the Maloti Drakensberg region. In effect, it suggested that there was scope for investigating and piloting this trade system. In this regard, a consultancy was appointed in 2006 to do just this. They are still in the process of rolling out this pilot phase, the results of which will only be available in December 2007. (MDTP 2008, p. 38)

Notwithstanding the results of the pilot project, it is clear that 'payments for environmental services' has become a priority for the long-term planning of the social-ecological change processes in the Maloti-Drakensberg area, as exemplified in the transfrontier strategy document:

> Both countries recognise the vital role that environmental economics tools play in (i) placing a monetary value on ecosystem goods and services (where their lack of monetary value in the past has meant they are treated as ''free resources'' often resulting in overutilisation), and (ii) in defining how such values can assist decision-makers in mainstreaming ecosystem goods and services into accounting and other business practices. The tools are vital to determine the value of biodiversity to the economy and to people's lives. In addition, some monitoring of the status of these goods and services needs to be implemented in order to inform policy, strategy and action around the pricing and trade of these goods and services. (MDTP 2008, p. 106)

Obviously, much can and has been said about whether the neoliberalisation of nature will actually achieve its stated goal of conservation. Recent critical literature has argued that it often entrenches and increases social inequality with regard to (access to and benefits from) nature and despite occasional short-term success, further reinforces the dynamics that were responsible for environmental degradation in the long run (such as economic growth) (McCarthy and Prudham 2004, McCarthy 2005, Igoe and Brockington 2007, Castree 2008a, 2008b). Büscher (2009, 2010) notes similar points with regard to the Maloti-Drakensberg project.

However, the paradoxical point that concerns us here is not so much whether payments for environmental services achieve their stated goals but rather that market dynamics are prone to stimulate short-term economic dynamics rather than the long-term political commitments that are so necessary for long-term planning (Kovel 2002). The 'stakeholder all-inclusiveness' inherent in contemporary governance for social-ecological change often leads to fierce competition between various actors over rights and resources (Corbera *et al*. 2007), and this has already been the case in the MDTP (Büscher 2009, 2010). Stimulating privatisation tendencies with regard to resources through payments for environmental services will no doubt only reinforce these pressures, all of which lead to short-term competitive dynamics rather than long-term co-operative investments.

3.2. The increasing gap between discourse and practice

One of the major advocated virtues of planning is to reduce the 'gap' between rhetoric and reality.[7] Paradoxically, however, neoliberal pressures seem to have the opposite effect of increasing the gap between discourse and practice (Büscher and Dressler 2007). The basic reason for this gap is that the necessity for all-inclusiveness

(and thus the legitimation of an intervention) forces planners and implementers to talk in broad, conceptually vague terms that most 'stakeholders' can agree with (Mosse, 2005). Yet, as Mosse (2004, p. 663) argues: "ideas that make for 'good policy' – policy which legitimises and mobilises political and practical support – are not those which provide good guides to action".

This gap between rhetoric and reality has long been an object of study in the anthropology of development. If indeed "conceptual and discursive systems link up with social institutions and processes without even approximately determining the form or defining the logic of the outcome" (Ferguson 1994, p. 275), we must ask ourselves why we are increasingly giving greater emphasis on this discursive process, for example, through elaborate planning schemes. Ferguson himself suggests that it makes bureaucratic and institutional sense from a planner's point of view to leave out political realities in the discourse of a development plan, but that this necessarily leads to more emphasis on the bureaucratic process instead of engaging what is happening 'on the ground'.

The logical consequence is a widening gap between policy and practice – something that has also hampered the MDTP (Büscher 2009). In fact, from a critical perspective it could indeed be argued that one of the reasons why the South African PCU challenged the project implementation document presented to them at the start of the MDTP and preferred to focus on long-term planning, is indeed that this is a safer political strategy than navigating the hazards of local, 'on the ground' implementation (Büscher 2010). However, by itself this would be too simple an explanation for the focus on long-term planning. Even if political expediency stimulates a tendency towards discourse, it still remains important to not lose sight of the situated difficulties and complexities regarding discourse and practice that any planning exercise for social-ecological change has to deal with. Highlighting such complexities is the purpose of the next section.

4. Consequences for long-term planning

In order to better understand and frame the above paradoxes and their consequences for both practical action and knowledge production, this section follows the suggestion by Proctor (1998) to combine the philosophical traditions of critical realism and pragmatism with regard to analysing conservation and development issues. He concludes that

> critical realism is a sort of acknowledgement that direct access to a preordered reality is impossible and that knowledge is always fallible and incomplete, coupled with an optimism that this admission need pose no fatal blow to the project of finding better explanations for reality. (Proctor 1998, p. 361)

In other words, this combination allows for both 'critical outside' and 'experienced inside' views to bring their perspectives to the fore without running the risk of the analysis being hampered by the opposing arguments regarding the 'construction of nature' (Proctor 1998). Therefore, the point of this section is to empirically illustrate the effects of the paradoxes described in the previous section and show how professionals within a large intervention deal with this. As such, the section aims to contribute to debates about the mutual influence discourse and practice (or action and knowledge) have on each other in the context of long-term planning for social-ecological change.

Although a large intervention such as the MDTP provides many possible 'pointers' for illustration, we have (pragmatically) opted to provide several 'empirical snippets' that illustrate three issues that we consider pertinent in the light of the two paradoxes within the MDTP intervention. The first issue is the reality of a multitude of different actors in long-term planning, especially related to the pressures of 'all-inclusiveness' in conservation and development as described above. Both in the process of planning and in the implementation of plans, the behaviour and roles of relevant actors are crucially important. As such, this issue overarches and frames the other two. The second issue deals with the human-nature divide inherent in every planning project for social-ecological change. It is human mediators who decide how to interpret 'nature', the 'human-nature' relationship and how to plan for these. In the MDTP, this issue was particularly poignant through the role of natural and social scientists in the process of long-term planning and their conceptual understanding of each other. The third and final issue deals with selection and sidetracking – two general tendencies that implementation of plans are generally prone to according to Olivier de Sardan (2005) and which also affected the MDTP.

4.1. Issue one: including 'all actors' in long-term planning?

The governance reality of a long-term planning project with the reach of the MDTP is distinctively shaped by the multitude of actors involved, the main ones of which have been mentioned above. Within this constellation of actors and their continuously integrating and fragmenting perspectives, actions, goals, etc. (see Rosenau 1997), the MDTP planners have developed various 'coping mechanisms' and practical strategies in their pursuance of actor alignment, one notable strategy being the distinctly neoliberal conservation strategy of 'payments for environmental services' (PES). Obviously, any strategy is highly political, but here we will focus on the pragmatic rather than the political nature of having to deal with a multitude of actors in long-term planning.

One practical consequence of participating in the MDTP has the significant reality that long-term planning for social-ecological change is 'messy' and it forces the interpretation of divergent realities. Mosse (2004) refers to this as

> the constant work of 'translation' (of policy goals into practical interests; practical interests back into policy goals) which requires skilled brokers to read the meaning of the project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholders ... which in itself destabilises and militate against coherence. (p. 647)

One example relates to the PES strategy, which was pursued as a practical strategy, as the socio-ecological dynamics of the MDTP area were considered better and more sustainably manageable when turned into market relations. While problematic from various angles, we wish to stress here that this led to a very 'messy' interpretation of constructing communities as the culprits of the old 'unsustainable' system *and* the beneficiaries of the new, 'sustainable' PES system. Both of these assertions, however, are hard to maintain in practice where there are a myriad of different dynamics, not least that pressures from industry and tourism were responsible for environmental degradation and that future benefits for communities in market set-ups always turn out to be ambiguous.

Another example concerns the MDTPs experience with environmental education, which illustrates how continuous translation and brokering in practice leads to

complex discourse-practice questions for both professionals and outside researchers. One of the objectives of the MDTP was to institute appropriate environmental education processes to enable a wide range of stakeholders to understand, engage with and act upon issues associated with biodiversity and cultural heritage. Faced with the same expectation as many other conservation and environmental education processes to 'get the message across' and not really knowing what the message was, the MDTP appointed a consortium that consisted of environmental education specialists from Isikhungusethu Environmental Services (Pty) Ltd (IES) and the Wildlife Society of South Africa (WESSA) in May 2005. This process did not come without its own challenges of 'translation' as the approaches to the development of the environmental programmes were distinctly different from the MDTPs strong project management and planning approach. For the social-ecologist on the MDTP South African PCU (the second author), an approach that emphasised process and evolutionary growth in knowledge made pragmatic sense. Concepts such as Open Process Framework (UNEP) which supported a 'plan as you do' approach that ''moved beyond the simplistic transfer of knowledge as the basis of social change'' (Taylor 2006, pp. 1–4) significantly challenged the MDTP and World Bank's ''planning before you do'' approach. This was evident in the lengthy discussions between the Consortium, the social-ecologist and the World Bank Task Team Leader (TTL) during May 2005 where substantial evidence was required by the TTL that the Open Process would deliver the quantitatively measured outputs and impact required.

On the other hand, the MDTP Implementing Agencies[8] resisted intervention into existing environmental education programmes and significant time and effort had to be spent explaining that the approach adopted by the MDTP supported learning processes that were 'responsive, flexible and participatory'. The development of the environmental education programme subsequently unfolded over a period of 18 months with all the Implementing Agencies participating (not without challenges) in a process that shaped the content of the programme supporting reflexivity in terms of evaluating[9] what was done and considering alternatives available within the context.

From a World Bank/MDTP project management perspective, the process was monitored in terms of delivery of reports (on time) and expenditure targets with limited contextual understanding of the process and the actual learning process taking place within the Implementing Agencies. A presentation to the project co-ordination committee in February 2006 by the Consortium and the social-ecologist reflected on the understanding, growth and capacity development taking place within the Implementing Agencies' staff and how that shaped the development of the MDTP Training Plan (as a result of the Open Process). Although there was encouraging support from the PCC in February 2006, it was only after the development of the environmental education material and when the training plan started rolling out in 2007 out that a PCC member remarked in passing ''Now I see how all of this comes together''. Table 1 tries to emphasise the 'process of translation' between discourse/planning of the World Bank/MDTP and actual practice of the environmental education subproject (in this case the open process), with the 'translator' (the second author) brokering in between trying to get 'all stakeholders' 'facing the same direction'.

The main 'insider lesson learned' from the process captured above is that the divide between discourse and practice comes with its own set of assumptions and

Table 1. Translating 'Planning' into 'Open Process' (MDTP Environmental Education Programme).

'Planning': MDTP/World Bank Contract deliverables	'Open Process': MDTP EE Programme deliverables
• Inception Report • Status Report • Stakeholder Analysis • EE Best Practice Programme • Material development and translation • Close Out Report	• Inception Report • Status and Stakeholder Analysis produced contextual profiles of user groups • Community representatives (through learnerships) from selected areas in the Drakensberg involved in development of programme • Implementing Agencies involved through a task team • Issues related to biodiversity and cultural heritage were built into programme after contextual discussion with Implementing Agencies • Develop toolkit and materials contextual to Implementing Agencies • Piloting the EE materials throughout the region • Foundation for the MDTP training Plan • Integration into existing Implementing Agency EE Programmes. • Materials available through SHARENET – external network

risks, and social change is not simply a matter of applying a single paradigm. The challenge in translation is not to get trapped by political correctness and rhetoric that could inhibit project processes, resulting in providing a false sense of security that progress is made. Taylor warns that this could create "an appearance of change but [that] the underlying development orientation often continues, and ironically, the most substantive change often only occurs in the language" (1998, p. 4).

This fits in well with more critical outside experience with the MDTP that the necessity of continuous brokering and translating often led to a focus on discourse rather than practice (Büscher 2009). Indeed, the challenge is not to get trapped by political correctness and rhetoric, but in a context whereby short-term time pressures and the necessity for stakeholder involvement still reign supreme, this seems very hard indeed. Many actors are 'seduced' or even forced into speaking neoliberal 'devspeak' that seemingly turns complex issues into simple (market) solutions, while they know that 'in practice things do not work this way', something often said in interviews. However, even though actual social change remains hard – or even impossible – to achieve in this way (Büscher 2010), it would be wrong to dismiss the practices of professionals out of hand (as some academics tend to do). As the example above has shown, professionals do try to widen the boundaries of the discursive and practical spaces they have in pursuing long-term environmental planning objectives. Unfortunately, if indeed these nuances in practice increasingly get lost within legitimating discourses, it actually reduces these spaces rather than stimulates their further expansion.

4.2. Issue two: engaging natural and social science

When dealing with planning for social-ecological change, both the 'social' and the ecological perspectives have to be taken into account. Rosenau makes an analytically

useful distinction between *political* and *environmental* contexts that shape the way humans deal with the environment (Rosenau 1997, pp. 192–204). Under the *environmental* rubric he distinguishes between the scientific, temporal and disaster contexts. These take environmental dynamics as the central principle upon which action should be based: the scientific context entails environmental processes and dynamics, how humans impact on these and how we can or should understand and deal with them. The temporal context relates the issue of how long-term environmental trends clash with short-term human preoccupations and, finally, the disaster context posits the special instance whereby the temporal context changes shrinks dramatically and the political context is overtaken by environmental dynamics. The set of political contextual factors therefore:

> involves the conditions under which environmental developments and problems are perceived, framed, addressed, and managed at every level of politics. For even as the scientific and temporal dimensions of the physical environment shape political structures, so is it the case that the latter operate as crucial determinants of how environmental opportunities are seized and environmental constraints heeded, ignored, or otherwise handled. In addition to the situation-specific variables that infuse dynamism into environmental issues, in other words, there is a larger political context, a set of structural constraints within which the interaction of human and nonhuman dynamics occurs. (Rosenau 1997, p. 201)

Obviously, a myriad of examples could be mentioned here where the tension between the political and the environmental contexts play a role in the MDTP. One of the most important ways in which this came to the fore in the MDTP planning process was the clash between social- and natural science-educated actors. For example, as a participant in the MDTP it has not always been clear whether the natural science oriented actors in the project accepted the social realities out of political pragmatism in an attempt to mitigate the risk to biodiversity or whether there is actual understanding of the relevance and application of social science in biodiversity conservation (see also Quinlan and Scogings 2004, Brosius 2006). The same can be said for the social science practitioners in the project about their engagement with biodiversity conservation and the 'friendly' banter between colleagues many times reflected unease with the distinctly different approaches of the disciplines in engaging with the same issues. Much can be read into the well-known Shakespearian adage that "many a true word is spoken in jest".

The Phase 2 action planning process of the MDTP 20-year strategy currently in progress shows two distinct approaches running parallel. The biocentric approach linked to the conservation management strategic outcomes[10] reflect 'hard' scientific approaches of data collection that support biodiversity conservation, expert driven 'best practice' and little recognition for the relevance of social science approaches in achieving the aims of biodiversity conservation. The anthropocentric approach linked to the cultural heritage outcome[11] reflect 'soft' scientific approaches of recognising local knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) through community participation in the development of strategies and management plans aimed at the protection of cultural heritage. Many professionals within the MDTP feel it is refreshing to see both approaches captured in one long-term planning process, but the way in which this was done simultaneously also perpetuates the divide between natural and social science.

Within the MDTP planning context where the mechanisms of argument (and planning) of natural scientists are 'biodiversity loss', 'land transformation',

'irreplacability of habitats', 'endangered species', 'human encroachment' and 'unequivocal climate change', the demand for behaviour change of the people in the region as paramount to achieve the objectives of the MDTP 20-year strategy creates a sense of 'urgency' that if something is not done immediately, the future of the region is doomed. Although the argument has merit, the process to affect the required behaviour change takes place within a human environment, translating into the complexities of building trust and relationships over a long period of time. For example, in the Upper uThukela (one of the MDTP's highest priority areas), a staff officer from Bergwatch (an NGO who has been actively engaged with local communities in conservation activities in this area for many years) has coined the phrase "for the first year we see you, only after that we hear you ...". This reflects the practice within these rural communities of literally allowing an outsider (in this case MDTP members tasked with the intervention to affect behaviour change within communities) to be seen within the community for an extended period of time in order to establish a trust relationship. Once the relationship is formed, only then is the outsider trusted to such an extent that their voice (and therefore the message of intervention) is heard and listened to. This places natural and social sciences practically at opposing ends (i.e. urgency versus time required to build relationships) and can lead to inertia or as the reality within the MDTP and its Implementing Agencies has shown, the disciplines continue to work apart and only collaborate when their own process or the institutional system demands collaboration. The relationship between natural and social scientists is much more intricate than this attempt to illustrate it, yet the point remains that collaboration between the sciences is critical if the objectives of the MDTP are to be achieved.

From outside research experience, this characterisation related to the scientific backgrounds of the actors holds true. In interviews, several natural science trained PCU members mentioned that they felt that protecting biodiversity is a highly urgent issue and that something 'must be done now'. Therefore, social and political processes often frustrate them because they take a long time with seemingly little concrete action. Moreover, in their engagement with social scientists, many professionals trained in natural science showed signs of the frustrations mentioned by Brosius (2006). First, social researchers often align themselves with local people who they feel provide rich and textured accounts of human-nature interaction but are often seen by conservationists as a nuisance and not useful for generalised policy (cf. Campbell 2005). Second, is the incommensurability of research agendas whereby conservationists are ultimately interested in data that supports biodiversity conservation whereas social scientists are often more interested in a myriad of different data, not all of which are directly useful for biodiversity conservation. Therefore, it is clear that fruitful engagement often starts with people coming together about particular issues, in particular places and taking the time to learn each others' way of thinking and associated vocabulary (West and Brockington 2006, Büscher and Wolmer 2007), something that even long-term planning processes do not often seem to be able to effectively incorporate or facilitate.

4.3. Issue three: selection and sidetracking

On the level of discourse, the MDTP planners have constantly had to strategically manoeuvre their ideas for long-term planning through the continuously convergent and divergent interests of 'stakeholders'. Even though many actors have aligned

themselves with the 'common vision' of the MDTP 20-year strategy, the assumption that all agree on the pursuance of the common goal would, of course, be naïve. Although the MDTP 20-year strategy is presented as a coherent whole, accepting that the process towards adoption of the strategy in 2007 was flawed by the practical realities of consensus-seeking in a diverse and disparate environment, the caution that it is impossible to align actors in regional and local governance to pursue one common goal (i.e. the objectives of the MDTP) must be heeded (Büscher and Dressler 2007). In fact, at the end of the first phase in early 2008, the 5-year action planning process for the following phase (2008–2012) attempted to bring together the planning frameworks of the key conservation agencies, but was under threat due to lack of continuity in actor involvement and maintained support.

This acknowledgement links with what Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2005) wrote about development (and conservation) interventions in general and how supposed 'target populations' react to plans:

> two very general principles seem to be deducible from the infinite variety of concrete behaviour displayed by populations in the face of various types of development operations: the principle of selection and the principle of sidetracking. (p. 144)

Selection means that the intervention 'package' that is usually portrayed as 'coherent' is never adopted as such by the target population/area, but is picked apart to a greater or lesser extent. Sidetracking occurs when the reasons why the target population adopts part of the intervention package are often different from the objectives of the project staff – leading to different outcomes than those foreseen, planned or hoped for, etc.

As stated previously, the existing principles of selection and sidetracking can be illustrated by looking back at the start of the current phase of the MDTP. The planners had expected that the proposal could be implemented as they had planned, yet the South African PCU challenged the plans and changed the envisioned project considerably.[12] This same PCU now faces the identical challenge of getting their plans accepted and implemented by a sizeable number of crucial 'stakeholders' until 2028. The next short illustration from the first phase might give a hint as to what the future implementers could encounter.

Under the MDTP money was earmarked into different expenditure categories. Two important ones were 'consultants', which included all PCU staff and externally hired consultants, and 'works', which were material projects. Therefore, a major sidetracking issue was that when the MDTP started, the new PCU put a higher priority upon long-term planning, and thereby left the 'works' category under-spent. As the project progressed, however, it had become clear that several crucial stakeholders, such as the national Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, thought that there was an overemphasis on planning through consultants and not enough on works. They then unilaterally decided to force the project to fund a project in the Golden Gate National Park, where fossilised dinosaur eggs had been found and which could use some promotion. The idea behind this was to establish an anchor tourism project to make Golden Gate a more attractive tourism destination with jobs as a spin-off for the 'local community'. The 'Golden Gate Dinosaur Project' then led to R5 million being taken out of a budget to pull the procurement percentages required by the Grant Agreement in line with what the World Bank wanted and to reflect that a works project of some significance would take place. Ironically, according to World Bank procurement principles in the end the

budget allocation was not 'works' but 'consultants' – an already over-extended category. As a result, the procurement process remained contentious until virtually the end of the project.

The point here is that the initial start of the MDTP itself led to arguments about its operationalisation, with different actors promoting notably different strategies. These differences only became a major source of tension within the project later on, but as the example above shows, it did so in a rather harsh manner – by forcing a sizeable change in budget allocation. Obviously, with many actors continuously seeking funds for their own initiatives, ideas and conservation/development 'solutions', the funds that are necessary for the implementation of any plan are always under much pressure from sidetracking and selection, simply because they provide an umbrella (financial) under which many actors can pursue their divergent goals.[13] Yet, these very issues of sidetracking and selection can also provide an interesting entry-point for critical outside research. According to Olivier de Sardan (2005, p. 205): ''doing 'follow-up' on sidetracking provides an excellent opportunity for collaboration between anthropology and development institutions''. Obviously, much critical research already examines where discourse and practice differ, but joint practitioner/researcher follow-ups on these might provide new avenues for critical understanding.

5. Conclusion

For a project with humble beginnings in the 1980s that grew into a transfrontier conservation and development initiative characterised by intense complexities, planning for social-ecological change in the MDTFCA, now covering an area of approximately 55,000 km^2 (Zunckel 2007, p. 2), over the next 20 years will be faced with severe challenges. This paper has addressed some of these and particularly aimed to draw attention to two fundamental paradoxes in long-term planning for social-ecological change: the fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures on conservation/development interventions and the increasing gap between discourse and practice. While illustrating these, however, the paper also tried to show how the interactive writing between 'outside' researchers and 'inside' professionals can add to theory (critical understanding) and practice of development interventions.

The most important conclusion is that open-minded practitioner and academic collaboration can create spaces: first, by 'understanding' intervention realities on different levels (critical realist and pragmatist levels); second, by shedding illusions that we grow into, for example, by our training, and which become entrenched in ways of doing and thinking; and third, through continuous focus on locally appropriate pragmatic solutions rather than 'globally enforced' one-size-fits-all solutions. Finally, it could perhaps be added that critical understanding through insider-outsider collaboration might create space for acceptance that sometimes 'solutions' do not exist. It can happen that professionals have to accept that they worsen an already complex situation and the best intervention strategy is not to intervene at all.

Another conclusion is that critical understanding and pragmatism need one another to create meaning and that to a large degree they should be seen as part of the same process. Both the professional project interactions as well as a large part of critical research activity is steeped in 'intangible human-shaping experiences'[14]

(relationships between people) that shape the image of processes like the MDTP and for which little regard is often given. Interventions – and frequently academic research as well – are increasingly about the outputs/objectives being achieved on paper (literally and figuratively). Obviously, as one cannot step outside social relations, we will always be caught between a rock and a hard place, and in the end the practical (professional or research) reality is that something has to be done with the rock and the hard place. A good place to start is to accept and more openly discuss these realities within which we work.

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Notes

1. Personal communication Bill Bainbridge (former Natal Parks Board), 3 January 2008.
2. Co-ordinated through the World Bank, which acted as Implementing Agency for the MDTP on behalf of the GEF. We like to thank a reviewer for pointing out that similar detailed multi-disciplinary land-use potential, hydrological, biological and social science studies were conducted over a large portion of the MDTP area in the later 1980s, resulting in the proposal to protect the area under the auspices of a Managed Protected Area; see Bainbridge *et al*. 1991.
3. These components are: (1) Project Management and transfrontier collaboration; (2) Conservation Planning; (3) Protected Area Planning; (4) Conservation Management inside Protected Areas; (5) Conservation Management outside Protected Areas; (6) Community Involvement; (7) Nature-based Tourism; (8) Institutional Development.
4. The PCC in Lesotho was composed of the following agencies: Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture supported by Departments responsible for Finance and Development Planning, Forestry and Land Reclamation, Agriculture, Local Government and Foreign Affairs. The PCC in South Africa harboured the national Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, South African National Parks, Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, Free State Department of Tourism, Environmental and Economic Affairs and the Eastern Cape Department of Environment and Economic Affairs.
5. Personal communication, Trevor Sandwith, 9 January 2008.
6. The 20-year strategy was ratified by the Bilateral Steering Committee and accepted on 3 August 2007.
7. The word 'gap' in the paper is not used in an absolute sense as though rhetoric and reality can ever truly overlap or that rhetoric cannot be a particular kind of reality (or, in Mosse's 2004 terms, that policy cannot be a particular type of practice). Rather, it is to indicate the inherent differences of the ways in which the intervention frames and represents the realities in which they want to intervene and – vice versa – how these 'realities' respond or adhere to these representations.
8. Government agencies in the provinces in which the MDTP was active.
9. A good example here was the representatives of SANParks and DTEEA 'upsetting the apple cart' by rejecting the final draft of the enviro picture game because they could 'not see the Free State' province in the picture.
10. MDTP (2008). The biocentric approach linked to the conservation management outcomes:

    - All natural and cultural heritage priorities are secured and effectively managed in a formal protected area network;
    - Natural heritage is safeguarded through effective implementation of incentives and regulatory mechanisms;
    - Integrated and appropriate management secures natural heritage including ecosystem services.

11. MDTP (2008). The anthropocentric approach linked to the cultural heritage management outcome:

    - Cultural heritage is celebrated and priorities are conserved through formal protection, regulatory mechanisms and effective management practices.

12. Some of the major changes in project design were the integration of two of the components namely Conservation Management inside and outside Protected Areas respectively became one component and the component for Eco-Tourism was changed to Sustainable Livelihoods.
13. While the above example focused on the selection and sidetracking from the viewpoint of the implementing agencies, this was also clear among the supposed (local) beneficiaries. For examples, see Büscher (2010).
14. Borrowed from Jim Taylor (WESSA).

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