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Title: The Contemporary Paradox of Long-term Planning for Social-Ecological Change and its Effects on the Discourse-Practice Divide: Evidence from Southern Africa

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Abstract:

The Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Project between South Africa and Lesotho aims to bring about positive social-ecological change in and around the Maloti-Drakensberg mountain ecosystem in Southern Africa. To this effect, the project has developed a long-term 20-year planning strategy that has to coordinate all involved actors – and their actions - until 2028. Although it cannot predict the success of this planning strategy for the future, the paper describes and analyses the run-up to the strategy, which itself has lasted well over two decades. By combining critical 'outside' research on with practical 'inside' experience in the project, the paper argues that governing contemporary social-ecological change is severely challenged by two main fundamental paradoxes: first, the fuelling of short-term dynamics by neoliberal pressures on conservation/development interventions; and second, the increasing gap 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.

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: 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 balance between human and conservation needs are to be found. 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 coordinate 'all actors' – and their actions - until 2028 to achieve the two main project objectives: conservation of the region's biodiversity and 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). And 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 member of the South African MDTP Project Coordination 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, the increasing gap 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

Projects with the scope of the MDTP usually stem from a history with humble beginnings. What started out in the late 1970's 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 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 fifteen years that preceded the signing of the declaration and endorsed "the concept of a Transfrontier

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[1] Personal communication Bill Bainbridge (former Natal Parks Board), 3 January 2008.

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 thirteen 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: 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 map 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.

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[2] Coordinated through the World Bank, which acted as Implementing Agency for the MDTP on behalf of the GEF.

[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
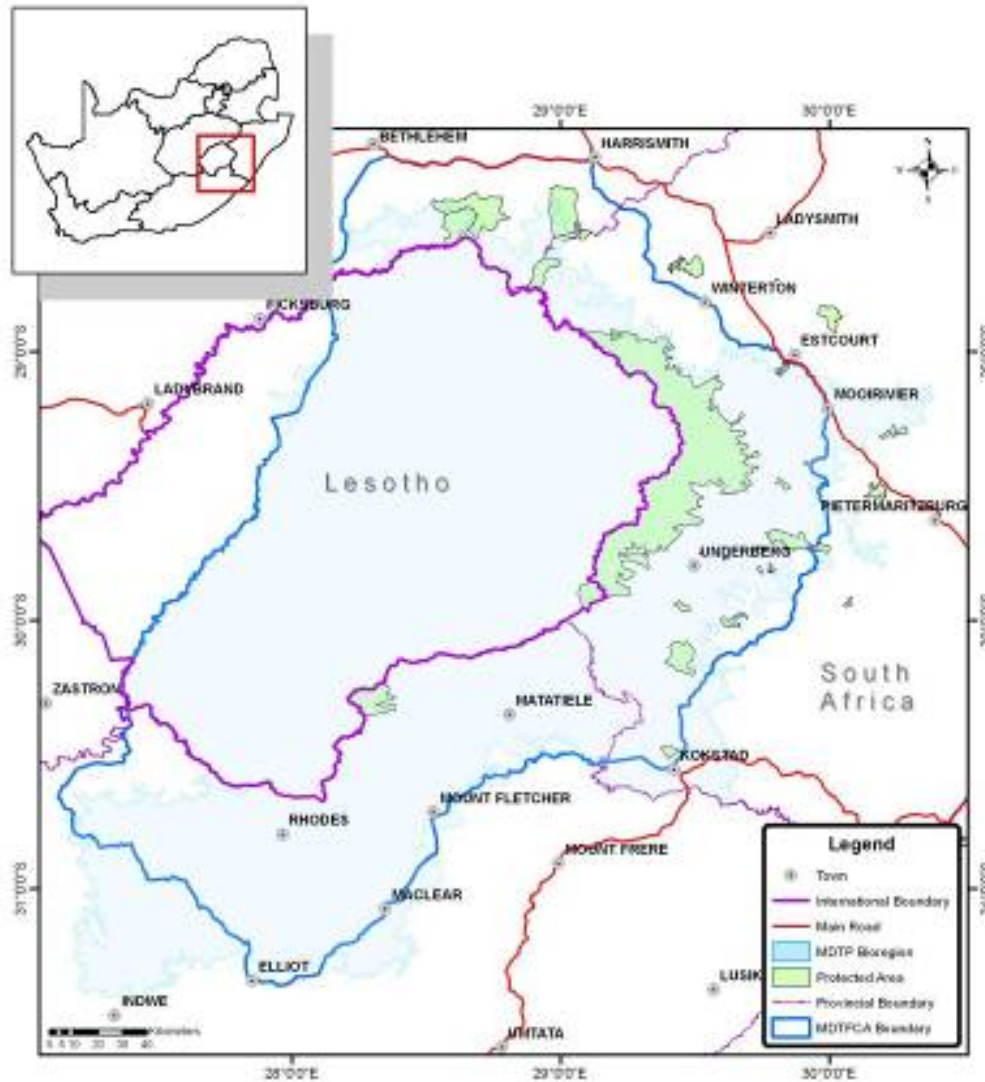
Map 1: A locality map of the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Area illustrating the extent of the area in relation to the international and other political boundaries.

The Bilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Lesotho and South Africa signed on 11 June 2001 formalised transfrontier collaboration and respective Project Coordination Committees[4] (PCC) were responsible for the implementation of the project within each country. Technical support teams, called Project Coordination Units (PCU) were set up in each country and were responsible for the

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[4] The PCC in Lesotho was composed of the following agencies: Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture (MTEC) 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 (SANParks), Ezemvelo KwaZulu Natal Wildlife (EKZNW), Free State Department of Tourism, Environmental and Economic Affairs (DTEEA) and the Eastern Cape Department of Environment and Economic Affairs.

operationalisation of Phase 1 of the MDTP (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 emphasise technical expertise in the protection of biodiversity (Büscher, submitted).

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 will have a longer term view than the five years set for Phase 1. Half-way 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'. The World Bank Mid Term Review derived that "the best way to revitalise transfrontier collaboration is by appointing one person to drive the process" (MDTP, 2005: 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 (MDTFCA – 20 Year Strategy, 2008)[6]. The Strategy emphasised several 'fundamental systemic issues' as drivers of the natural and cultural heritage loss of the MDTFCA (MDTFCA – 20 Year Strategy, 2008: 22) that should be taken into consideration in planning for social-ecological change:

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[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.

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 in 2028. The vision for the MDTFCA was formulated as "conserving the MDTFCAs natural and cultural heritage for the people of the region and beyond" [7] while the 'purpose statement reads as "effective cooperation among capacitated partners secures the MDTFCAs priority natural and cultural heritage and supports sustainable livelihoods" [8]. The following strategic outcomes[9] direct the 5-year action planning process for Phase 2 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".

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 so far embarked upon by both PCUs was characterised by intense complexities, ranging from issues such as the fragile political legitimization 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 will illustrate some of the complexities in more depth, by elaborating on and illustrating two of the key

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[7] 20-year Conservation and Development Strategy of the MDTFCA: forthcoming: p iii

[8] Idem.

[9] Idem.

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, forthcoming 2008; Büscher, under review) 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 respect 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.

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. Yet, 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 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: 734).

During its first phase, the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project also started experimenting with neoliberal models of conservation and development, for instance through the introduction of the 'payments for environmental services' concept[10]. 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 and Mander, 2004: 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: 38).

Notwithstanding the forthcoming of 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 on page 106 of 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: 106).

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[10] More so on the South African side than on the Lesotho side.

Obviously, a lot can be said, 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 respect 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) (Castree, 2007a; Castree 2007b; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; McCarthy, 2005). Büscher (submitted; 2008 forthcoming) notes similar points with respect 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 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, submitted; 2008 forthcoming). Stimulating privatisation tendencies with respect to resources through payments for environmental services will no doubt only reinforce these pressures, all of which leads to short-term competitive dynamics, rather than consensus over long-term cooperation.

The increasing gap between discourse and practice

One of the major advocated virtues of planning is to reduce the gap between rhetoric and reality. 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: 663) argues; "ideas that make for 'good policy' — policy which legitimizes and mobilizes 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: 275), we must ask ourselves why we are increasingly laying greater emphasis on this discursive process, for instance 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 which has also hampered the MDTP (Büscher, forthcoming 2008). In fact, from a critical perspective one could indeed argue 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 rather wanted 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, submitted). 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 loose sight of the situated difficulties and complexities regarding discourse and practice that any planning exercise for social-ecological change has to deal with. This is the purpose of the next section.

4. Consequences for action and knowledge production related to long-term planning

In order to better understand and frame the above paradoxes and their consequences for both practical action and knowledge production, the section follows the suggestion by Proctor (2006) to combine the philosophical traditions of critical realism and pragmatism with respect 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, 2002: 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 ripped apart by the classic natural versus social science arguments regarding the 'construction of nature' (Proctor, 2006). The point of the section, then, 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 that decide how to interpret 'nature', the 'human-nature' relationship and how to plan for these. In the MDTP, this issue was especially 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 last issue deals with selection and sidetracking – two general tendencies that implementation of plans are generally prone to according to Olivier de Sardan (2005) and also affected the MDTP.

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. In this light, Rosenau's (2001:1) definition of governance as the activity of every individual or collective that both through formal and informal means tries to create steering mechanisms, set goals, frame demands and develop policy with the intent of bringing these into practice is appropriate for the MDTP. His

contention that governance is the continuous relocation of authority, leading to a mosaic of 'spheres of authority'', whereby no one single actor has the overarching say in what transpires in reality (Rosenau 1997; 2003), is particularly relevant. This is not to say that the governmental authorities depicted in the various formal agreements of the MDTP are becoming "just one of the actors", but rather it emphasises the increasing relative visibility of non-governmental organizations, powerful individuals, communities etc in the regional governance context of the MDTP.

Within this constellation of actors and their continuously integrating and fragmenting perspectives, actions, goals, etc[11]., the MDTP planners have developed various 'coping mechanisms' and practical strategies in their pursuance of actor alignment. Obviously, these are 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 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 destabilizes and militate against coherence" (2004: 647). The following example of the MDTPs experience with Environmental Education illustrates how continuous translation and brokering in practice leads to complex discourse-practice questions for both professionals and outside researchers.

One of the key 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 as to 'get the message across' and not really knowing what the message was, the MDTP appointed a consortium consisting of environmental education specialists from Isikhungusethu Environmental Services (Pty) Ltd (IES) and the Wildlife Society of

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[11] Rosenau invented the term "fragmegration" to capture constantly diverging and converging dynamics in governance.

South Africa (WESSA) in May 2005. This process did not come without its own challenges of 'translation' as the approach 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 like 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: 1-4) challenged the MDTP and World Bank's "planning before you do" approach significantly. 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 side, the MDTP Implementing Agencies[12] resisted intervention into existing environmental education programmes and significant time and effort had to be spent on 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 eighteen 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[13] 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 PCC in February 2006 by the Consortium and the Social-Ecologist reflected on the understanding, growth and capacity 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).

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[12] Government agencies in the provinces the MDTP was active in.

[13] 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.

Although there was encouraging support from the PCC in February 2006 it was only after the development of the Environmental Education material and the Training Plan started rolling in 2007 out that a PCC member remarked in passing "Now I see how all of this comes together". The following 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'.

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 Practise 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

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 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: 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, 2008 forthcoming). 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 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, submitted), it would be wrong to dismiss the practices of professionals out of hand as many academics tend to do. As the example above has shown, professionals do try to widen the boundaries of the discursive and practical space 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, the continuing progression of which critical reflection might be able to slow down.

Second issue: engaging natural and social science
When dealing with planning for social-ecological change, one has to take into account both the 'social' and the ecological perspectives. Rosenau makes an analytically useful distinction between *political* and *environmental* contexts that shape the way humans deal with the environment (Rosenau, 1997: 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, then;

> "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: 201).

Obviously, one could mention here a myriad of examples where the tension between the political and the environmental contexts play a role in the MDTP. One of the most important way 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 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 an 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[14] 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

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[14] MDTP 20-Year Conservation and Development Strategy – 5 Year Action Plans (forthcoming) The biocentric approach linked to the conservation management outcomes:

1. All natural and cultural heritage priorities are secured and effectively managed in a formal protected area network;

2. Natural heritage is safeguarded through effective implementation of incentives and regulatory mechanisms;

3. Integrated and appropriate management secures natural heritage including ecosystem services.

to the cultural heritage outcome[15] 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 felt 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.

Strategic Outcome one of the MDTP long term strategy states that "an enabling environment for effective conservation action, including community and political support, is established and maintained"[16]. Although it can be argued that the creation of opportunities for dialogue between natural and social scientists are inherent to these processes, the polarization around these approaches is distinctly visible and can threaten the very heart of the MDTP which is for 'capacitated partners to collaborate in the protection of the natural and cultural heritage of the area'.

As a professional within the MDTP, what complicated the situation further was that the paradox of short versus long term was replayed in the relation between natural and social science educated actors. 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. There is definitely merit in this argument but it takes place in a context for example where in the Upper uThukela (one of the MDTP's highest priority areas) the principle in the rural communities is that "for the first year we see you, only after that we hear you…" translating into the complex reality of building relationships and trust between 'outsiders' (such as the MDTP and

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[15] MDTP 20-Year Conservation and Development Strategy – 5 Year Action Plans (forthcoming)   The anthropocentric approach linked to the cultural heritage management outcome:

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

[16] MDTP 20-Year Conservation and Development Strategy forthcoming, piii

its Implementing Agencies) as intervention is considered. 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, yet the point remains that collaboration between the sciences is critical if the objectives of the MDTP are to be achieved[17].

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 feel that protecting biodiversity is a highly urgent issue and that something 'must be done now'. Often, then, social and political processes frustrate them because they take long with seemingly little concrete action. Moreover, in their engagement with social scientists, many natural science trained professionals showed signs of the frustrations mentioned by Brosius (2006) that, firstly, social researchers often align themselves with local people which 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) and secondly, the incommensurability of research agenda's whereby conservationists are ultimately interested in data that supports biodiversity conservation and social scientists are often more interested in a myriad of different data, not all directly useful for biodiversity conservation. It is clear, then, that fruitful engagement often starts with people coming together around particular issues, in particular places and take 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.

Issue three: selection and sidetracking.

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[17] There is much wisdom in the words of the Protected Area Management Specialist where during a discussion on the above situation, he reflected that it is not for the 'two ideas (sciences) to become one idea, rather for the two to create a third idea (new meaning)'. Personal communication Duncan Heard, February 2008.

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'. And 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 is 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 early 2008, the 5 year action planning process for the next phase (2008-2012) attempts bringing together the planning frameworks of the key conservation agencies, but is under threat due to lack of continuity in actor involvement and maintained support.

This acknowledgement links in with what Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2005: 144) writes 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". Selection means that the intervention 'package' that is usually portrayed as 'coherent' is never adopted as such by the target population/area, but picked apart to greater or lesser extent. Sidetracking has to do with the reasons with which the target population adopts part of the intervention package often being different from the objectives of the project staff – leading to different outcomes than foreseen, planned or hoped, etc.

As stated before, the currency of the principles of selection and side-tracking can be illustrated by looking back at the start of the current phase of the MDTP. The planners then had expected that the proposal could be implemented as they had foreseen, yet the South African PCU challenged the plans and changed the envisioned project

considerably[18]. Now this same PCU faces the identical challenge of getting their plans accepted and implemented by a sizeable amount of crucial 'stakeholders' until 2028. The next short illustration from the current phase might be able to give a hint as to what the future implementers could encounter.

Money under the MDTP 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. A major sidetracking issue, then, was that when the MDTP started, the new PCU put more priority into long-term planning, and thereby left the 'works' category under spent. While time in the project went by, 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 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 spin off for the 'local community'. The 'Golden Gate Dinosaur Project' then led to R5million 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 the budget allocation according to World Bank procurement principles was not 'works' in the end but 'consultants': an already overextended category! As a result, the procurement process has been contentious and up till now not been finalized.

The point is that the very 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, did so in a rather stern way – by forcing a sizable change in budget allocation. Obviously, with many actors continuously seeking funds for their

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[18] 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.

own initiatives, ideas and conservation/development 'solutions', the funds that are necessary for the implementation of any plan are always under much pressure of side-tracking and selection, simply because they provide an (financial) umbrella under which many actors can pursue their divergent goals. Yet, these very issues of side-tracking and selection can also provide an interesting entry-point for critical outside research. According to Olivier de Sardan (2005: 205): "doing 'follow-up' on sidetracking provides an excellent opportunity for collaboration between anthropology and development institutions". Obviously, much critical research already looks at 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 1980's, 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 c. 55 000km² (Zunckel, 2007:2) over the next twenty years will be faced with severe challenges. This paper has addressed some of these and especially 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: firstly at 'understanding' intervention realities on different levels (critical realist and pragmatist levels); secondly by shedding illusions that we grow into – for instance by our training - and which become entrenched in ways of doing and thinking; and thirdly; through continuous focus on locally appropriate pragmatic solutions rather than 'globally enforced' one-size-fits-all solutions. Lastly, one could perhaps add that critical understanding through insider-outsider collaboration might create space for acceptance that sometimes 'solutions' do not exist. It can occur 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 it 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"[19] (relationships between people) that shapes the image of processes like the MDTP and for which little regard is often given. Interventions – and often 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 that this is the reality within which we work.

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[19] Borrowed from Jim Taylor.

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