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Chapter 14

VILLAGE LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AT THE MARGINS OF NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF VDCs IN NGAMILAND, BOTSWANA

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ABSTRACT

Institutions exercise authority through rules and regulations that determine who is eligible for what and how. In Botswana the institutional landscape consists of the public sector, private enterprises, non-government and community based organisations. These institutions affect people's pursuance of natural resource-based livelihoods activities such as those related to access to water, land, veldt products, fish, wildlife, grazing grounds, grass thatch and reeds. Informal and formal village level institutions (VLIs) in contemporary Botswana are increasingly becoming important "bridging institutions" mediating access to resources and opportunities between public and private sectors. This chapter uses a case study of Village Development Committees (VDCs) in Ngamiland District in northwestern Botswana to assess the extent to which they mediate access to a range of resources especially in rural and remote areas. VDCs in Ngamiland tend to be multipurpose institutions adapting to the emerging challenges of a changing society. Although they are a non-statutory institution, and have no mandate to determine who has access and control over natural resources, VDCs play an indirect advocacy role for the provision of water, facilitate diversification of the local economy, and promote natural resources conservation, good solid waste disposal practices and buffer between top and down decision-making. The extent to which they are able to advocate for resource access effectively depends on the existence of other supportive or complementary resource systems both at local and district levels.

INTRODUCTION: VILLAGE LEVEL INSTITUTIONS (VLIs) IN CONTEMPORARY BOTSWANA

In general, community livelihood resources can be measured by the presence (or absence) of various forms of capital such as human capital (population, labour potential, knowledge and skills within population), physical capital (machines, building, roads and other forms of physical infrastructure), natural capital (biodiversity, air, water, forests, wildlife etc), social capital (obligations and expectations, support networks that sanctions

or constrain certain kinds of behaviour), institutional capital (public, private and NGO sector institutions) and financial capital (savings and access to credit from financial institutions (Tietenburg, 1992; Ellis, 2000)). Institutions are legitimised and gain public acceptance through legal and statutory mechanisms. Institutions exercise authority through rules and regulations that determine who is eligible for what and how. Grief (1994, p43) defines institutions as consisting of two interconnected elements, cultural beliefs (how individuals expect others to behave in various contingencies) and organizations (endogenous human constructs that alter the rules of the game).

The institutional landscape in Botswana consists of the public sector (central, district and local), private enterprises (producing goods and services for profit through market exchange mechanisms) and non-government organizations (NGOs)/ community based organizations (CBOs). Institutions mediate access to livelihoods resources. They are mechanisms through which communities and groups cope with or adapt to shocks and stresses. Since Botswana gained independence from British colonial rule, there has been a proliferation of informal and formal village level institutions (VLIs). These include those organized around religion, philanthropy, and cultural affiliations, social and economic development. In a global and technological world, state institutions face daunting institutional capacity challenges especially in relation to poverty prevention and reduction in rural communities. The Botswana poverty map (CSO, 2008) for example, reveals a headcount poverty rate in Ngamiland that is severe (40%), and when disaggregated by gender and household headship, the depth and severity is also apparent. Globalization, while increasing opportunities for economic growth, also increases risks such as economic downturns, chronic unemployment and hence, poverty. The Botswana National Settlement Policy (NSP) (1998) categorises population distribution in terms of the primary, secondary and tertiary settlement. Given the uneven nature of development outcomes in Botswana as illustrated by prevalence of poverty, VLIs are increasingly becoming important 'bridging institutions', mediating access to resources and opportunities between public and private sectors. They thus, also play, significant roles not only in facilitating access to resources, but also in building local capacity and empowerment by protecting individual and collective rights.

There are two categories of village level institutions (VLIs) in contemporary Botswana. The first category consists of traditional/indigenous pre-colonial village level institutions comprising the customary court (*kgotla*), chieftaincy (*bogosi*) and village wards. Chieftainship in the context of Tswana customary law is an ascribed status. Village wards are spatial groupings of households in the village in accordance to some criteria (social or historical). In large villages such as Maun, there are 15 wards; typically, each ward has several households, a village development committee and a headman (*kgosana*). As a loan word, a *kgotla* in 'anglicized' Setswana (the language of the people of Botswana), means court and can also refer to a place where meetings are held, ranging from a few individuals under a shade canopy to a gathering of hundreds of people in a permanent structure (*leobo*) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kgotla>).

The second category of VLIs are post-colonial institutions which include *inter alia*, Village Development Committees (VDCs), Village Health Teams (VHT), Village Trust Committees (VTCs), Village Literacy Committees (VLC), Village Conservation Committees, Farmers Committees (FCs) and Village Extension Teams (VETs). In 1968, a Presidential Directive authorized VDCs to implement self-initiated projects by securing funding from government and mobilising other sources (community contribution in kind, from private sector as well as from non-government organizations). VDCs in Botswana therefore are more or less as old as the country's post colonial liberal democracy, and

together with the *kgotla*, not only do they have a pervasive influence in village everyday life, but also do demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability over time (Ngwenya, 2008).

In 1968, a Presidential Directive was issued for the creation of VDCs which defined a VDC as the main institution charged with responsibility for community development activities within a village through participatory decision-making (Government of Botswana, 2001). VDCs are the lowest structures within the hierarchy of the district administration institutional framework (Ngwenya, 2008). In 2004, Ngamiland had 55 functioning VDCs in gazetted villages and Ngami Sub-District 30, whereas Okavango Sub-District had 25. Maun, the district capital, had 15 VDCs and Gumare, the Okavango sub-district capital, had two. Since Maun has 15 VDCs, an umbrella VDC has been set up, consisting of 15 members who are Chairpersons in their respective VDCs. The VDC Handbook stipulates that where a minimum of five VDCs exists, an umbrella committee must be established.

A village in the context of Botswana is defined as a traditional settlement with a minimum population of 500 people settled on tribal land (Government of Botswana, 2001). This chapter uses a case study of Village Development Committees (VDCs) in Ngamiland District in northwestern Botswana to assess the extent to which they mediate access to a range of resources and services for village communities. The chapter is based on fieldwork conducted to collect data from VDCs in six sites, namely, Gudigwa, Seronga, Sehitwa, Shorobe, Maun and Gumare. Data were collected through focus group seminars conducted in July and August 2004. Each group seminar was conducted by a facilitator who asked semi-structured questions from an interview schedule and two scribes who recorded the process. A pre-test of the focus groups schedule was conducted in Tubu and Chanoga. The seminars were held with the VDC executive group (the secretary, chairperson and treasurer) and additional members (2-3). Where possible, the longest-serving members of the VDC were included. In Maun, five focus group seminars were conducted with the following randomly selected ward VDCs - Boyei, Thito, Kubung, Boseja and Matlapana. These constituted one third of the 15 VDCs in Maun. Gumare has two VDCs, and one focus group seminar was conducted with the Gumare South VDC. In total, eleven focus groups were completed. The average focus group size was six persons, with executive members constituting more than half of these.

Data were also collected from primary sources, including, VDC minutes, *kgotla* meetings and workshops, working documents and workshop or seminar reports on VDCs, and from secondary sources such as central- and district-level government departments and non-governmental organisations. Other secondary sources included published books, articles, census data, and policy and program documents.

VDC STRUCTURE, ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A VDC typically has 10 members who are elected at the *kgotla*. There are five executive members and five additional members. In addition, there are a number of ex-officio members (people who, by virtue of their social positions, are automatically members of the VDCs). These are drawn from a pool that includes, but is not limited to, the village Headman, Councillors, local business persons, social workers and extension workers. Only the 10 elected members have the power to vote. The VDC Executive Committee consists of the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary, Vice Secretary and

the Treasurer. Ex-officio members do not have any executive powers. In theory ex-officio members are proxy watch-dogs whose function is to safeguard or propagate the government's development agenda. In practice, VDCs run their daily activities independently, and have much leeway in setting their development agenda. They make use of the officially sanctioned space to be pro-active, and more often than not, use the opportunity to redefine the official script in response to community contingencies.

Eligible members should be able to read and write at least one official language (either English or Setswana), have completed at least Standard 7 or its equivalent, be 18 years of age or above, be the residents of the village or ward, and be nominated and seconded by people who qualify to vote (Botswana Government, 2001). Prior to 2001, completion of Standard 7 or its equivalent was not insisted upon, but new regulations required that eligible members must have Standard 7 qualification as a minimum. The new regulations also require VDCs to be elected through secret ballot at the *kgotla*. Prior to the development of this new requirement, the committee was popularly elected through an open ballot at a *kgotla*. However, the secret ballot practice has not been widely embraced. The tenure of office of VDC members was, and still is, two years. Individuals have the option to be re-elected as many times as feasible.

Official functions of the VDCs include, but are not limited to, identifying, discussing, formulating and prioritizing community development requests, and finding solutions to identified problems. They solicit external assistance, either directly or indirectly through partnerships with the government, non-governmental and private organizations, and from the community. They also provide forum for contact between village leaders, politicians, district authorities, and a range of social interest groups for purposes of either obtaining information or material support. The VDCs use the *kgotla* as a forum for presenting, discussing, approving and implementing all village development projects. Other VDCs may represent associated settlements. These settlements do not have the population threshold required for them to be officially recognized as gazetted villages. Where it is not possible to have direct representation in primary or secondary settlements, residents of rural localities often set up what is known as an 'Action VDC' or 'unofficial VDC' (van Hoof *et al.*, 1991). "Action VDCs" perform the same functions as VDCs in gazetted villages, but under the direct supervision of the "parent" VDC in the primary or secondary settlement.

VDCS MEDIATING ACCESS TO NATURAL RESOURCES

A range of institutions affect people's livelihoods, and pursuance of natural resource-based livelihoods activities such as those related to access to water, land, veldt products, fish, wildlife, grazing grounds, grass thatch and reeds, is mediated by social relations and institutions. As a non-statutory institution, VDCs have no mandate to determine who has access and control over natural resources. This mandate lies with specific government departments, such as the Tswana Land Board, Agricultural Resources Board, Department of Water Affairs, Fisheries Division, Department of Environmental Affairs, Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Department of Tourism, Department of Forestry and Range Resources. In the sub-sections below, the brokerage-cum-facilitating role of VDCs is assessed.

Access to Water

VDCs play an indirect advocacy role for the provision of water in several ways. This role includes approaching either the District Council Water Unit to request for the installation of standpipes in various strategic parts of the village in order to maximise access, or to re-open standpipes which have been cut off for one reason or another. Usually, closing connections is done without consulting or informing village residents, and households are often left without water. VDCs may also request that the number of standpipes be increased in certain areas. Some VDCs organize the village to maintain standpipes and other facilities, such as boreholes and wells, by constructing structures around them so as to prevent water contamination, competing use or damage by animals. The maintenance of community infrastructure (physical capital), although it generally goes unnoticed in official circles, inculcates a sense of civic responsibility.

Botswana is a very dry country with limited water supply. The climate of Ngamiland is semi-arid to arid, with isolated low and erratic convection rains averaging between 450-600mm per annum. The government's development challenge is to make this scarce resource accessible and affordable to ordinary Botswana. Given the scarcity of water in the country, the government has engaged in major dam construction, pipeline infrastructure and borehole drilling throughout the country. The task of pioneering new water resources was undertaken through District Councils and the Department of Water Affairs. The Botswana Government has committed itself to a policy that every citizen should have access to safe and clean water at all times. The country's Vision 2016 states that by the year 2016, Botswana must have a national water development and distribution strategy that will make water affordable and accessible to all, including those who live in small and remote settlements. Universal provision of water is regarded as a key factor underpinning sustainability of social development interventions (education and health).

Water is a basic need for development and investment, and as such a prerequisite for poverty alleviation and improved standard of living. It is a key resource in any plan for implementing sustainable development. Virtually all officially recognized (gazetted) villages in Botswana have a water supply scheme (Kelekwang & Gowera, 2003). In urban villages, water supply is the responsibility of the Department of Water Affairs. The Department of Water Resources (DWR) supplies all the 17 main villages in Botswana, including district headquarters such as Maun and Gumare. The Water Utilities Corporation provides water in urban areas while the District Council Water Unit is responsible for the water supply in rural villages. The Land Board allocates land for drilling boreholes, whereas the issuing of water rights is the responsibility of the Water Apportionment Board (Arntzen *et al.*, 1999).

In 1991, the National Water Master Plan was developed which sets out the overall framework for the water sector. The framework specifies a number of institutions involved in the activities of the water sector, including: Departments of Water Affairs and Geological Survey, National Conservation Strategy, Water Utilities Corporation, Ministry of Local Government and Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry of Mineral Resources and Water Affairs is responsible for the overall policy direction of the sector. Large-scale developments to improve the supply of water have been completed in major villages. These include the construction of dams, water treatment plants and pipe connections to supply and distribution points. Available data indicate that nearly all Botswana, regardless of economic status, have access to safe and clean water. According to the 2001 population census, 98% were reported to have access. In the rural areas, 77% of the population had

access to standpipes or boreholes whereas this figure was 100% in the urban areas (CSO, 2002).

There are several sources of water for communities in Ngamiland. These are piped out-door stand-pipes, piped indoors, communal stand-pipes, bowser/tanker, well, borehole, river/stream, dam/pan, rainwater tank and spring water. Boreholes and hand-dug wells are usually the sources of groundwater in remote rural villages, cattle-posts and agricultural settlements (*masimo*). A survey undertaken in the Sehitwa area revealed that 65% of the owners of boreholes and hand-dug wells had obtained them through the Land Board, whereas 22% and 10% had obtained them through inheritance and purchasing, respectively. The remaining owners (3%) had obtained the boreholes and wells through other means (Fidzani, 1998). According to the Department of Waters Affairs Report (2002/2003 April-September), there are 98 stand-pipes and 496 private connections in Sehitwa.

All gazetted settlements in Ngamiland are entitled to a supply of drinking water by the District Council Water Unit. Villages along the Panhandle are supplied with treated surface water from treatment plants at Mohembo-east, Shakawe and Sepopa. In other areas, groundwater from individual boreholes or well-fields is the main source of household water. The other challenge is presented by unrecognized settlement. In Ngamiland, the thousands of people living in small, scattered, ungazetted settlements are responsible for their own water supply, usually sourced from privately owned boreholes, from rivers and hand-dug open wells or by hauling water from major villages or towns (Kgomotso & Swatuk, 2006). This situation may give rise not only to health problems due to the consumption of untreated water, but also may result in environmental problems as a result of pollution caused by inappropriate water abstraction. During the Okavango Delta management Plan (ODMP) consultative kgotla meetings, lack of a reticulated water supply was raised as one of the main problems people face (Bendsen, 2005). For example, in small settlements where there are no standpipes children are exposed to crocodiles when they fetch water from the river. Although pollution of drinking water was in some cases blamed on elephants since drinking water sources were shared between people and wildlife (Vanderpost, 2009), according to the Minister of Mineral Resources and Water Affairs, only 20% of the water supply to citizens by the Department of Water Affairs (DWA) meets the Botswana standard of quality water. Poor water quality is a general problem country wide, in Maun, the Ngamiland district capital, residents are supplied with Grade III water (personal communication, DWA Officer, 13/05/2010). The water from some boreholes in the Delta area has been found to have high total dissolved solids (TDS), salinity, fluoride concentration, arsenic, and ion content.

Also, in addition to poor water quality, unreliability of supply persists, and, coupled with operational break-downs, operator absenteeism, inadequate skills and so on further exacerbates poor access. Furthermore, the introduction of water tariffs in the country threatens access in rural and impoverished communities. A follow-up study by Ngwenya and Kgathi (2007) study in Etsha 6, Gudigwa, Sehitwa, Seronga and Shorobe, found that water supply in these villages was unreliable, with shortages ranging from occasional, chronic and severe up to 70% of the time to up to two weeks. Consequently, residents travelled distances between 10 km and 15 km, took up to 6 hours to collect water from the nearby alternative sources. Poor supply (due to low pressure) also means that households spent an average of 20 minutes to collect water from standpipes and sometimes an additional 40 minutes waiting in the queue following drying up of communal taps (Ngwenya & Kgathi, 2007). The authors also found that water contamination at point use and storage was a major concern by water managers. There are therefore major challenges

supplying water not only to small, scattered communities (non-gazetted), but also in gazetted villages in Ngamiland (Mazwimavi & Mmopelwa, 2006). The shortage is exacerbated by the fact that humans and animals often compete for the same source at standpipes. Women, the elderly, children under five years and people with poor health or have immune suppressed systems are largely negatively affected by poor supply and use of untreated water (Ngwenya & Kgathi, 2007).

Without adequate access to water rural communities/households in Ngamiland are exposed to unhygienic living conditions leading to higher incidences of water-borne diseases and malnutrition. More than any other social group, young children and persons with compromised immune systems, are vulnerable to the risks posed by contaminated water. While water is central to development, inadequate water supply in Botswana rural communities cannot maximize on its benefits such as the improvement of their health and livelihoods.

Access to Land

With regard to access to land, as a general practice, Land Boards do not consult village-level committees on the allocation of commercial, residential or farming plots on communal land. VDC members apply for residential plots like everyone else and this process goes through designated land over-seers. As an institution, however, VDCs apply for land for community projects, and these are generally approved. There are exceptions, however, for example when the Subordinate Land Board may drag its feet on the issue for one reason or another. Also, when there are unoccupied spaces in between housing compounds, the Land Board usually consults with the VDC to establish ownership of the space in question. In Gudigwa, the VDC indicated that sometimes they give potential investors a chance to scout an area and indicate available and more suitable sites for business activities. Once the VDC and the chief endorse a location, a formal application can be filed with the Land Board, which is usually approved. Again, although they do not have a statutory or common law right to do so, in facilitating/promoting the diversification of the local economy at micro level, VDCs influence, directly or indirectly, household choices regarding sustaining the well-being of members.

Environmental Protection and Conservation

Control of Bush Fires and Veldt Products

Some VDCs participate actively in controlling forest and bush fires. As a village-level institution, they are most likely to receive “intelligence” information about those who cause fires, especially if they are village residents. This information is passed to Tribal Police (TP) for further investigation. The TP are village-based as opposed to central government based Botswana Police Service. The Matlapana VDC made firebreaks from Samedupe to Legothwane. Matlapana VDCs work with Tshomarelang Tikologo, an environmental NGO based in Gaborone, to make fire breaks and build walls around standpipes. In Sehitwa, the VDC pays someone to alert residents of the outbreak of fires and helps organize people to extinguish them. Some VDCs also intervene by providing material relief to households victimized by domestic fires. VDCs hold kgotla meetings where discussions are held about preventing forest fires. Some VDCs work collaboratively village Conservation Committees to make decisions regarding appropriate

time for harvesting grass and reeds, and on the prevention of their over-harvesting. In Gudigwa, the VDC discourages grass-harvesters from leaving piles of harvested grass in the bush as waste, as this may contribute to fire hazards. These tasks/decisions were previously the prerogative of the kgosi through the kgotla consultative process.

Waste Management and Sanitation

Resource limitations and capacity constraints in Ngamiland district make it difficult to adequately provide waste disposal services to all recognized villages in the Okavango region. In addition, there are unrecognized settlements which do not qualify for government services but are also generating waste, potentially with negative environmental implications. Some VDCs contribute indirectly in solid waste management. They help the District Council to identify strategic locations for rubbish drums in various wards. In Sehitwa and Shorobe, not only have the VDCs identified a dumpsite, but they also helped hire and supervise local donkey cart owners to collect and carry the rubbish from the village to a dumpsite. The District Council pays the garbage collector, and the VDC supervises him to make sure that he does his job regularly.

VDCS AND COMMUNITY TRUST/ TOURISM

Although VDCs have little control over direct access to natural resources, some community based natural resource management (CBNRM) constitutions in Ngamiland either provide for the VDC chairperson and secretary or co-opt the entire VDC, to be ex officio members of their Village Trust Committees (VTCs) or Boards of Trustees. In this institutional arrangement, VDCs become indirectly involved in natural resource management as provided for by CBNRM CBO constitutions. In Gudigwa, some older members of the VDC are also on the Board of Trustees of the Bukhakwe Cultural Association, which runs the Gudigwa tourist camp, and hence they are directly involved in natural resource management. These experienced VDC members are influential and have become skilled negotiators with respect to access to key natural resources and services, such as land for farming, grazing and commercial ventures. VDCs therefore redeploy their official status as important community brokers, negotiators and advocates for increased access to natural resources (land, veldt products, reeds, grass, poles and so on), in partnership with other village-level institutions (including CBNRM CBOs) and government departments.

VDCS RELATIONS WITH NATURAL RESOURCES NGOS

Levels of trust and reciprocity are important elements that influence the performance of VDCs. When asked whether or not VDCs trust their constituency (that is, the villagers), the response was overwhelmingly positive. Cited indicators of trustworthiness included the fact that Sexaxa (an associated locality) and Matlapana (the “parent” VDC) communities work together for common goals which is an indication of trust between residents of the two localities and the VDC. The fact that some members of the VDC have been re-elected also proves that there is a spirit of good-will.

When District institutions have implementation problems, in order to address these, some government departments, for instance the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), partner with natural resources management NOGs such as Kalahari

Conservation Society (KCS) to address specific issues. Sometimes the confrontational approach of NGOs (such as Survival International) in dealing with sensitive matters makes government departments either ignore the issue or maintain an outright hostile stance. It is not surprising that VDCs (with the exception of Gudigwa) did not identify NGOs as the most important institutions in their villages. In Gudigwa, Conservation International was the most active, doing field work in promoting cultural tourism; while ACORD in Gumare was acknowledged for having organized skills training workshops. This situation, however, has changed dramatically with the collapse of ACORD and the departure of Conservation International.

Overall, VDCs have limited (if any) working relations with natural resources management NGOs and the private sector. NGOs often have limited funding and their presence is scattered (most of them are concentrated in the urban centres and or cover tertiary settlements along the railway line or where good tarred roads have been provided). Although Ngamiland District is one of the most hard-hit by HIV/AIDS, AIDS service NGOs are concentrated in urban centres and along the eastern corridor. VDCs are trying to establish HIV/AIDS counselling centres in their villages, but competition for resources means that they are often outdone by primary and secondary settlements where there are more people. VDCs therefore work with, and coordinate the work of, the Village Extension Teams (VETs), Village Health Committees (VHCs), and established health facilities. Private sector institutions tend to serve upper- and middle-income groups, which themselves tend to be upwardly mobile.

VDCS RELATIONS WITH OTHER VILLAGE LEVEL INSTITUTIONS

There is a plethora of formal and informal village-level institutions. These include, but are not limited to, Crime Prevention Committees, Village Health Teams (VHT), Parent-Teacher Associations, and traditional women's organizations (the Botswana Christian Council (BCC) and Young Women Christian Association (YWCA)), and Village extension services (literacy, forestry, Livestock Assistants, Agricultural Demonstrators, Problem Animal Control (PAC)). Supportive relations could be assessed between VDCs and other village-level institutions, and between VDCs and district-level institutions. Some institutions were rated as more important than others. Professional service delivery systems, such as education and health VLIs, tend to keep VDCs at arm's length although most of them rely on VDC houses for accommodation, often failing to pay rent on time.

Communities generally tend to rate institutional performance as either low or high in terms of its importance. Poor institutional relations breed general distrust of agencies that provide resources. The Land Board was rated low because of a lack of consultation and transparency, and for poor relations with the chiefs, who are viewed culturally as legitimate custodians of land. Village extension services (literacy, forestry, Livestock Assistants, Agricultural Demonstrators, Problem Animal Control (PAC) and Community Development Officers (CDOs), although they exist in the villages, also appear to have poor relations with VDCs. Their services were acknowledged in Sehitwa and Gudigwa. One would have expected, for instance, the PAC to be prominent in Seronga since the Department of Wildlife and National Parks has an office there. In Maun, water committees were set up to work with VDCs to help maintain standpipes, or distribute water through bowsers where there is a shortage.

VDCS AND THE KGOTLA

Chiefs remain the ultimate symbols of identity and freedom in the context of a plural society in Botswana. Despite post-independence changes in the power of chiefs, they still remain a central vehicle for public input into the democratic process. In focus groups, VDCs were unanimous in their acknowledgement of the centrality of the *kgotla* in community life. VDCs hold the *kgotla* with high regard, and the chief consults them on development activities in the village. There are meetings that the chief calls independently of VDCs, and there are those that VDCs call on behalf of the community at the *kgotla*. If the VDC is regarded as a “village parliament” then the *kgotla* becomes the open forum for public debate.

CONCLUSION

VDCs are subsets of the second rank of local institutions and the lowest level in development administration hierarchy which came into existence through a Presidential Directive. They are non-statutory local community structures with authority to implement government sanctioned policies and programmes. They consist of non-salaried members. Especially in rural and remote areas, VDCs in Ngamiland tend to be multipurpose and flexible institutions adapting to the emerging demands of a changing society. The extent to which they are able to advocate for resource access effectively depends on the existence of other supportive or complementary resource systems. Supportive relations should be assessed between VDCs and other village-level institutions, and between VDCs and district-level institutions. There are inherent trade-offs in both levels of institutional relations. VDCs cannot address access to the natural resources needs of their communities single-handedly. However, they have played mostly advocacy roles. The extent to which they are able to advocate for resource access effectively depends on the existence of other supportive or complementary resource control institutions (Land board, Department of Water Affair and so on). VDCs have no formal powers but when livelihood dynamics are hit by external shocks, it is they who will have the mandate to negotiate for local benefits. Despite their lack of formal authority the actions of these local institutions mitigate the omnipotent power of the nation state. They are a negotiating buffer between top and down, where most information and decision-making is very much top-down but in some issues influence does go the other way and the local will is felt and made tangible in national policy. They are certainly an emerging institution which bridges the gap between “traditional” institutions and the modern and rather centralized system of government. This chapter recommends that VDCs should be given more recognition.

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