

From US with Love: Community Participation, Stakeholder Partnership, and the Exacerbation of Inequality in Rural Jamaica

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines and argues against the neoliberal assumption that local community participation in market-based nature conservation projects is democratic and leads to community empowerment through economic development. It does so by analyzing the formation of Local Forest Management Committees, instigated by one of the largest US-based environmentalist NGOs – the Nature Conservancy – and its partnering local environmental NGOs for conserving the tropical forests of Cockpit Country, Jamaica. The paper dissects, specifically, the notion of “stakeholder partnership,” frequently invoked in neoliberal conservation projects in the global south. Such flattening neoliberal terminologies imply a democratic platform, where different groups can express their political agendas and negotiate their differences with equal power. The language of “stakeholder partnership” flattens, this paper argues, the hierarchical set of power relations both inherited and exacerbated by free market-based conservation projects.

Keywords: local community participation, stakeholder partnership, neoliberal nature conservation, rural Jamaica.

Introduction

It is in fact problematic to trace back ideologies of “democratization through community participation” in rural Jamaica directly to the influence of the US, as my title suggests. Ideas are generated and disseminated in rather complex ways with the participation of multiple actors. Hence the effort to link them to a powerful “elsewhere” in a simplistic manner might be misleading. However, ideas also do come from somewhere. The cultural, political and economic influence of the US has been increasingly hegemonic in Jamaica, especially after the latter’s independence from the UK in 1962 (Thomas 2002, 2004; Robotham 1998, 2006). This influence skyrocketed in the 1980s and 1990s, as neoliberal globalization rendered Jamaica’s borders porous in an unprecedented way, even though Jamaica’s neoliberalization process cannot be reduced to a US imposition (Trouillot 1992; Robotham 2001,

2003). Nevertheless, considering one of the largest US-based environmentalist NGOs – the Nature Conservancy (TNC) – and examining its practices on the ground to establish a nature conservation project in Jamaica, I want to argue, reveal a great deal about the ways in which lauded neoliberal notions of democratic decentralization, community participation and devolution of responsibilities to local entities are put into work.

The practices of TNC have been emblematic of how the dissemination and implementation of neoliberal ideologies through nature conservation projects materialize in the global south. While TNC’s origins go back to early 1950s, it is not until 1973 that TNC assumes its corporate character. Under the leadership of Pat Noonan from 1973 to 1980, TNC decidedly established partnerships with large US corporations,

and assumed a decentralized organizational structure to buy and sell parts of nature, now turned into real estate, for conservation purposes. As Noonan himself put it: “corporations and environmentalists were butting heads, but we knew the free-enterprise system was a fantastic motivator” (cited in Luke 1995:13). Thus, since the mid 1970s, the dawn of neoliberalism, TNC has been purposefully treating nature as real estate, and implementing market-based conservation projects in the global south, while diffusing this so-called fantastic motivator – alongside the system of private property – to rural areas, where many other forms of property and exchange relations had previously prevailed. As of 2010, TNC is implementing numerous conservation projects in more than thirty countries in South and Central America, the Caribbean, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region (Nature Conservancy 2011b). Since all ecological projects are inevitably social projects (Smith 1984; Harvey 1996; Coronil 1997; Castree 2001), and since the question of nature conservation sits firmly in the contested economic geography of land and resource use, TNC’s treatment of nature as private real estate has had enormous repercussions in the global south, including Jamaica.

In this paper, I examine the practices of TNC and partnering local environmental organizations in Cockpit Country in order to interrogate the neoliberal notion that democratic participation of local communities in conservation projects leads to community empowerment through economic development. I will primarily focus on the principles, plans and practices of Local Forest Management Committees (LFMCs) in Cockpit Country as TNC played a major role in their design and implementation. Most of the local-level information I analyze in this article comes from my fieldwork in Cockpit Country in the summer of 2008. During this time, I attended a series of LFMC meetings, each organized in a different village in Cockpit Country, which provided me with the opportunity to converse with many inhabitants of the area about their expectations from the conservation project and economic development. I also had informal conversations with the representatives of TNC and local environmentalist groups as well as with the staff of the Jamaica

Forestry Department about rural poverty in Jamaica, conservation of Cockpit Country and the ways in which these two intersect. Most of the documents I examine here on community participation in Cockpit Country’s conservation and LFMCs are derived from my archival research at the University of West Indies at Mona, conducted during the same year before my visit to Cockpit Country.

But before delving into the conundrums of community participation and the formation of LFMCs, let us draw the general contours of the environmental conflict in Cockpit Country, which prompted the instigation of TNC-led conservation project in the first place.

Tumultuous Cockpit

Cockpit Country is the largest tropical forest in central west Jamaica with rich biodiversity, home to many Caribbean endemic species. In fact, 27 of the island’s 28 endemic bird species dwell in Cockpit Country, which inspired the local environmentalist groups to call it “an island within an island” (Eyre 1995; Smith 1995; Windsor Research Center 2008).¹ Nevertheless, it is not “an island within an island” solely from an environmentalist perspective. It is also Jamaica’s last remaining major deposit of bauxite, which accounts for over half of the country’s annual exports, following tourism as the second biggest economic sector in Jamaica (Cockpit Country CAP 2006).²

The environmental conflict that triggered efforts towards nature conservation in the area materialized in 2006 when the Jamaican government extended the bauxite prospecting license of Alcoa, the third largest bauxite mining company in the world (The Economist 2007), to mine the tropical forests of Cockpit Country. Jamaican environmentalist NGOs – led by the Jamaica Environment Trust and Windsor Research Center – immediately launched a campaign in response, calling for the forest’s conservation by

1 Windsor Research Center is one of Jamaican environmentalist NGOs and the main local partner of the Nature Conservancy in the conservation of Cockpit Country. It focuses on conservation research and its staff works tirelessly on the ground for the conservation of Cockpit Country.

2 CAP stands for the Conservation Action Plan, collaboratively formed by the Jamaica Forestry Department, the Nature Conservancy, and partnering local NGOs, mainly funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

stressing its uniqueness and its potential to become a UNESCO World Heritage site. In 2007, a conservation “partnership” – note the preferred term – was established under the Local Forest Management Committee (LFMC) by TNC, local environmental NGOs, and the Jamaica Forestry Department, funded, to a large extent, by United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

What makes environmental politics interesting in Cockpit Country is the confrontation of big actors over a relatively small area. Indeed, several conflicting interests at a variety of shifting geographical scales – from local to global – are internalized in the process, which shapes this seemingly “out-of-the-way-place” (Tsing 1993) in such a way that renders the global-local dichotomy hollow (cf. West 2006; Dirlik 2001; Swyngedouw 1997; Latour 1993). To begin with, bauxite is the largest export of Jamaica, therefore an immediate concern at the nation-state level. Bauxite is the main ore of alumina in aluminum production, widely used in transportation and construction businesses, as well as in chief sectors of the military-industrial complex (Padel and Das 2006:55). Due to the fundamental role of the latter in the global economy, the demand for aluminum ranks second worldwide after steel, and its global production exceeds any other metal except iron (Hetherington et al. 2007). The Jamaican mining sector is dominated by bauxite and alumina, which provide nearly 97 percent of the sector’s value (Torres 1999:18.1). Jamaican bauxite production fluctuates around 10 percent of the total worldwide bauxite production, which makes it a fundamental economic asset for Jamaica (Bray 2010:10). It thus constitutes one of the few commodities, which Jamaica could exchange as a relatively influential supplier in the global market.

Cockpit Country also internalizes broader tensions that flow in from larger geographical scales than the salience of bauxite for the national economy would imply. Alcoa, for instance, is a U. S.-based multinational company while the demand for bauxite comes increasingly from China³ (Padel and

Das 2006:61). Furthermore, local environmentalist NGOs are financed by and working with North American institutions with global influence, such as TNC, USAID and the McArthur Foundation. The tourism sector, which is dominated by Spanish, North American as well as Jamaican capital, supports nature conservation against the incursion of mining interests in Cockpit Country, despite the tourism sector’s predatory environmental practices on the north coast of Jamaica. This is the case, because the water resources of high-end tourist resorts in Montego Bay depend on the five rivers running through the forest that could be contaminated by mining (Jamaica Environmental Advocacy Network 2007). In fact, Cockpit Country supplies 40 percent of the island’s fresh-water resources, which makes it the largest single supplier in Jamaica (Cockpit Country CAP 2006). Besides, the area provides an ideal investment opportunity for heritage tourism and eco-tourism, as it is rich in cultural history as well as in biodiversity. Runaway slaves defeated the British there in 1739, establishing long-standing Maroon communities (Patterson 1967, 1969, 1970), which have increasingly attracted numerous tourists. This tumultuous cockpit, then, is considerably shaped by the juggernaut of capitalist competition between the bauxite industry and the tourist-industry-backed conservation initiatives over access to nature for their own particular and conflicting socio-ecological projects. In short, any analysis of Cockpit Country’s contested political ecology should engage with the processes emanating from the conflicting interests of manifold actors, which flow into this particular locality from without.

Community Participation and Stakeholder Partnership

The conservation of Cockpit Country’s tropical forests, however, is not simply determined by political-economic conflict over market expansion between big capitalist actors, where the local is subordinate to the dominating forces of the global. One of the most

3 China’s massive urbanization and infrastructural development in the last decade is the primary factor behind its large demand for bauxite. The process of urbanization in China creates one of the few reli-

able markets around the world, where raw materials such as bauxite are continuously demanded. Along the similar lines, David Harvey, for one, notes that China absorbed nearly half the world’s cement output since 2000 (Harvey 2008:29).

advertised aims of TNC in establishing LFMCs is to augment the “community participation” of Cockpit Country’s villagers in the conservation project to counter the bauxite mining threat in the area. To this end, TNC organizes three LFMC meetings in three alternating villages every two months to bring together the conservation stakeholders with the villagers. These meetings typically take place at the church or the school of the village with the participation of around 30 people. This number is relatively low since TNC helps people from nearby villages to join the meeting, by carrying them on free busses to the village where the LFMC meeting is organized that particular time. The low turn-out was at first intriguing to me since all of the people I talked to in many villages around Cockpit Country were against bauxite mining in the area and very vocal about the need to protect the forest. In addition to what one might call people’s high environmental consciousness, one of the reasons behind such popular opposition to bauxite mining in rural Jamaica is the long-standing experience with displacement due to bauxite mining since the early 1950s. During my fieldwork, I met two families in Cockpit Country who were displaced from the parish of St. Ann and talked to several others who had a relative or a friend who had experienced displacement due to bauxite mining in different parts of the island. Many people also mentioned, as a reason to oppose mining, the fact that bauxite mining does not create jobs for the villagers. Additionally, on different occasions many villagers raised concerns about the loss of markets for their produce due to cheap agricultural imports from the US. These grievances, I thought, would motivate people to participate in LFMC meetings, where the main discussion revolved more around creating business opportunities for the villagers than conserving the forest.

However, as I participated in more meetings and talked to more people, it seemed to me that the conservationists and villagers were talking about different kinds of economic opportunities. As I will discuss in the following pages, villagers’ small scale farming was seen as a threat to the forest by the conservationists, who were aiming to stop what they called “encroachment” on the forest, “poor farming practices” and “peasant deforestation.” Therefore, the business opportunities

TNC and its partners pushed forth were more about converting peasants into petty-entrepreneurs in tourist and export industries, whereas the peasants were interested in opportunities that would – in the words of one peasant I talked to – “give the market back” to the peasants. Consequently, TNC’s aim to establish a partnership between local communities, NGOs, and tourism investors while wedding “environmentally friendly business practices” to nature conservation did not seem to get across well to the peasants.

My analysis of this process does not, however, seek to assess whether or not the communities of Cockpit Country are successfully incorporated in the conservation partnership, but problematizes what exactly the local communities are encouraged to participate in. The literature on local community participation in conservation projects is rich and has addressed such questions as how conservation practitioners can better assist and facilitate local participatory practices (Mahanty and Russel 2002) and how to create “authentic comanagement arrangements” that would augment community participation in conservation projects (Pinkerton et al. 2008). Along similar lines, how to incorporate “culturally appropriate requirements of legitimacy and accountability” (Brown and Lassoie 2010) and “local knowledge of indigenous populations” into conservation projects without causing further indigenous marginalization have also been examined (Goldman 2003; Shackeroff and Campbell 2005). Analyses of what constitutes a “good participatory process” (Webler and Tuler 2006), and of various evaluation criteria of communities’ “genuine influence on decisions” (Chase et al. 2004) to “achieve more effective community involvement” (Rodriguez-Izquierdo et al. 2010) also abound (Reed 2008). Furthermore, detailed typologies of stakeholder participation have been extensively discussed. Different forms of participation and their assessment in these accounts include “planner-centered” versus “people-centered” participation (Michener 1998), “political” versus “technical” participation (Beierle 2002) and several other participatory forms based on the degree to which stakeholders engage (Lawrence 2006; Richards et al. 2004; Tippett et al. 2007; Mannigel 2008; Reed 2008).

As much as these accounts may be illuminating, albeit from a technical managerial standpoint that seeks to increase the efficiency of stakeholder participation, they leave out important issues pertaining to the underlying logic and political function of such participation. In other words, by focusing on the question of how community participation can better be handled from an instrumentalist point of view, these analyses remain at the level of providing advisory on the governance and coordination of interests involved, without critically questioning these interests and what sorts of socio-ecological projects they imply. In a word, what I call the “performance of participation” analysis conceals scrutiny of the “ends of participation.”

In lieu of discussing the performance of stakeholder partnership, I want to interrogate the logic of its existence. Why does, for instance, the notion of stakeholder partnership occupy the dominant position it does in every policy circle of environmental management? What is the political function of the discourse of stakeholder partnership and its policy implementations? Both the concept of stakeholder and partnership were constantly invoked by TNC and local NGOs in Cockpit Country during the LFMC meetings I attended, and they are widely reflected in project documents. But, who is considered to hold a stake in the conservation of Cockpit Country? Who considers? What is the nature of the partnership among the stakeholders (cf. DeKoninck 2007; Fay 2007)? Are these terms simply invoked in the discourses of “win-win” scenarios, mobilized to justify conservation efforts that may be detrimental to the inhabitants of the area? In which ways are the diverse interests of the villagers, typically small-scale peasants, incorporated into conservation partnership? How is the asymmetry of power among the stakeholders reconciled in decision making? The language of stakeholdership actually comes from the corporate governance literature (DeKoninck 2007), and its lurking in neoliberal conservation discourses is neither an accident nor without a specific function.

Clues for answering some of these questions can be excavated from the documents distributed at the LFMC meetings. According to Cockpit Country Stakeholders Group, the stakeholders of the conser-

vation project include small-scale peasants, schools, churches, and community organizations at the local level. They are joined by powerful national organizations such as Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association as well as international organizations such as BirdLife International and TNC (Cockpit Country Stakeholders Group 2006). It is, therefore, hardly an exaggeration to presume that there will be some conflict of interests between so-called stakeholders due to the asymmetry of power among them, even if they all strive for a unitary end with a single purpose, which is by no means the case. Precisely by virtue of this asymmetry of power among the social actors involved in this project, the neoliberal discourse of “stakeholder partnership” begs close scrutiny. It lies at the heart of the question of who will have power to access nature and to what ends, hence is of utmost importance for understanding this conflictual process.

In this context, focusing the analysis solely on one geographical scale, be it local, national or global, would render partial and misleading results, of the sort that is captured in the “blind men and the elephant” folktale. Multiple actors operating at fluid and shifting geographical scales shape the process of nature conservation in Cockpit Country. Capitalist competition – between Jamaica’s two most dominant industries with clear links to global capital – over access to the tropical forests of Cockpit Country inevitably sets the stage on which conservation efforts materialize. Nevertheless, to claim that the process of nature conservation in Cockpit Country is solely *determined* by the class power of bauxite and tourism industries misses a crucial part of the picture. Without analyzing the formation of LFMCs on the local level and their function in the formation of neoliberal environmental governance, it is difficult to reflect upon what transpires in Cockpit Country. At this point we should take a closer look at the configuration of LFMCs, which mediate how this complex process *takes place* at the local level.

Formation of the Local Forest Management Committees (LFMCs)

Neoliberal globalization, increasingly hegemonic since the early 1970s, privileges export economies, privatization, and trade liberalization for flexible

accumulation, over any state-led development project centered on the notion of protecting national markets (Harvey 1989, 2005; Peet and Watts 1993; Smith 2002, 2005; Hartwick and Peet 2003). Jamaica's neoliberalization can be traced back to the first loan agreement signed between the Jamaican Government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1977 (Weis 2004). Three structural adjustment programs ensued and complemented the initial agreement, financed by the IMF, the World Bank and USAID between 1981 and 1985 (World Bank Report 2001). Under strict austerity programs, Jamaica's public sector shrank considerably, leading to public sector layoffs, privatization, decline in the provision of basic social services, and rapid price inflation coupled with multiple currency devaluations (Gordon et al. 1997; Carrier 2004, Weis 2006; Robotham 2006). Jamaica's neoliberalization process accelerated throughout the 1990s and 2000s, soaring its unemployment rate to 14.5 percent, increasing its foreign debt to 11.55 billion dollars, with a debt-to-GDP ratio of almost 130 percent at the end of 2009 (CIA World Factbook 2010).

The emergence of LFMCs in Jamaica should be grounded in this neoliberal context as part of a larger, widespread shift from state-led conservation projects towards ones privileging decentralized, participatory approaches in the 1990s (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Agrawal 2005; Agrawal and Lemos 2006; Buscher and Dressler 2007). With financial and political support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Jamaica updated its Forest Act in 1996, paving the way towards the first five-year National Forest Management and Conservation Plan, ratified by the Jamaican government in 2001 (Headley 2003). The new Forest Act underscores "stakeholder partnership" and "community participation" as key strategies in national forest management. It also specifies establishing LFMCs as a future goal in order to set up the institutional framework to facilitate decentralization and delegation of decision making to local entities, as well as to form public-private partnerships (Jamaica Forestry Department 2000). In early 2000, the Forestry Department decided to test the LFMC concept in

Buff Bay with a pilot project. Having been encouraged by its relative success, a second LFMC was formed in Northern Rio Minho in 2004, and a third one in response to then-emerging bauxite mining threat in Cockpit Country in 2007.

The political motivation behind the formation of LFMCs is to decentralize decision-making in natural resource management and to facilitate devolution of responsibilities to local entities by including diverse stakeholders of nature conservation in the governance process. Membership, according to the Forest Act, is open to "all community groups, organizations, NGOs and private sector entities, whose members are willing to participate" (Geoghegan and Bennett 2003). In other words, LFMCs serve as flexible institutions to encourage and organize public-private partnerships for conservation purposes. Their activities are also supposed to facilitate the participation of local community institutions, such as churches and schools, individual small peasants and private landowners, as well as larger private companies, willing to invest in "environmentally friendly business practices."

According to the Conservation Action Plan (CAP), which every LFMC constitutes with respect to their specific needs, some of the relevant objectives of LFMC in Cockpit Country are as follows:

To develop and implement an effective mechanism for *co-management* of the Cockpit Country conservation area.

To collaboratively develop and implement a long-term *funding strategy* for Cockpit Country's conservation.

To establish *self-sustaining* and effective LFMCs.

To develop an economic case for the conservation by conducting an *economic valuation* of the ecological and cultural services provided by Cockpit Country.

To develop an *Atlas* of Cockpit Country targets and *threats* in order to *quantify* them and guide and refine conservation actions.

To provide sufficient incentives for *private landowners*, such as offering tax exemptions or direct payments, to set aside *at least 40 hectares [100 acres]*

of forest as a reserve [Windsor Research Center 2008, emphasis added]⁴

Although TNC refers to the CAP simply as a “blueprint to guide biodiversity conservation,” it does more than that (Nature Conservancy 2011a). As it is often the case in other neoliberal conservation projects, here the emphasis is on creating conditions for financial self-reliance by commodifying nature and by establishing decentralized co-management of this process in public-private partnerships (West 2005; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Brockington et al. 2008). This is a strategic move, in other words, to turn Cockpit Country from a relational historical geography of use values into an absolute space of conservation with clear boundaries, now seen as a fixed economic asset in terms of its “ecological and cultural services” exchangeable in the global market. That is to say, the process of nature conservation in Cockpit Country cannot be sustained, under the coercive laws of neoliberal political economy, without alienating use values in favour of exchange values; without thus relegating its qualities of being a relational space of subsistence to a quantified, commodified and reified absolute space of “nature.” Nature as such, however, can only survive insofar as it is subsumed in the circulation of exchange value i.e., money.

This brings to mind what Marx said about money becoming the *real community* under capitalism. The development of money, he portends, smashes previously existing communities and their manifold ways of being by subjecting them under the single logic of exchange value. “Where money is not itself the community, it must dissolve the community” (Marx 1973:224). In this sense, money “becomes the *real community* since it is the general substance of survival for all [wage labour and capital], and at the same time the social product of all” (225–226). One might add nature into this picture. Neoliberal nature conservation projects, while vigorously aimed at “local community participation,” rely on the commodification of nature, hence subsuming it in the circulation of money i.e., *the real community*. *The real community* as such, if not “the local community,” becomes a

quintessential participant of the neoliberal conservation projects, a participant *par excellence*.

Community Livelihood Development Projects

In *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, David Harvey proposes to evaluate environmentalist movements, or more broadly, socio-ecological projects “not for what they have to say about the environment or nature, but for what it is they say about political-economic organization” (1996:176). In this respect, let us look at what TNC and its partners call “community livelihood development projects” in Cockpit Country. These projects seek to mitigate deforestation and biodiversity loss in the area by providing economic opportunities for the villagers, opportunities that lie outside the forest.

According to documents provided at the LFMC meetings I attended, LFMCs are composed of two units: the “environment protection unit” and the “business unit” (Small Business Association of Jamaica 2008). As aforementioned, the LFMC meetings are more about creating environmentally friendly economic opportunities for the villagers than the ways in which the forest can actually be protected. Therefore, in all of the meetings I attended, Small Business Association of Jamaica was at the center stage. This association is one of the stakeholders of Cockpit Country, mainly funded by USAID in the conservation project, and works closely with TNC. Its representatives organize presentations and workshops at the LFMC meetings for training villagers on “business planning and marketing,” “customer service” and the ropes in “hospitality business” as part of an effort to create “sustainable community livelihood development projects” (Small Business Association of Jamaica 2008).

LFMC’s main role in these projects, the villagers are told, is to function as an intermediary to lease property from property owners, hence facilitating the process of establishing businesses. In the summer of 2008, the primary agenda at the LFMC meetings was to turn the LFMC from an “unincorporated association” organizing informal meetings for the conservation of Cockpit Country, into a “limited company” so that it would become a proper actor

⁴ This document can be reached online at <http://cockpitcountry.com/LFMP/CAPCC.html> (Accessed on May, 10, 2010)

functioning in the free market. This would then facilitate the conservation of Cockpit Country by restricting the market only to “environmentally friendly business practices,” while enabling the economic uplift of local communities by creating jobs.

According to the “business selection criteria” for “community livelihood development projects,” the most important condition for obtaining assistance is that the participants need to be both residents of Cockpit Country and members of the LFMC. Membership in LFMC is voluntary. However, it requires the payment of monthly membership fees, which discourages the already-marginalized poor from participating. The proposed business of the participants should also “demonstrate sustainable resource use and good environmental practice” while employing at least “two persons from the communities of Cockpit Country.” Although the business criteria document promises to support any business proposal that fits these criteria, in the end, it abruptly declares that “the businesses selected should serve tourism or export industries” (Small Business Association of Jamaica 2008).

Both the conservation project and LFMCs are recent developments in progress, and at this early stage it is only possible to make inferences about their outcomes. It is difficult, in other words, to analyze the objective consequences of the integrated conservation and development practices, as they have not yet fully unfolded. Nevertheless, some of the policies advocated by TNC at the LFMC meetings as well as those reflected in conservation documents such as CAP are instructive about the direction conservationists are going. To begin with, the majority of the residents of the area are poor, small-scale peasants (Barker 1998; Miller 1998), who are increasingly forced to go into the forest to find arable land, and are therefore seen as threats to conservation (Windsor Research Center 2008; Cockpit Country CAP 2006; USAID 2010). TNC’s website ranks “small-scale agriculture” and “poor farming practices” as the second gravest threat to the conservation of Cockpit Country after bauxite mining (Nature Conservancy 2011a). The production of inhabitants around the conservation area as threats is not unique to Cockpit Country (see West 2005, 2006) and relies on a strategic overlook of the

historically formed material circumstances under which peasants are producing their livelihoods.

One such condition in Cockpit Country is the lack of suitable land for agriculture. The unavailability of arable land in and around Cockpit Country is such a problem that the angle of steep and inaccessible slopes peasants utilize for farming may exceed 40 degrees, making food production extremely demanding (Barker 1998; Harrison 1998). Recent estimates also suggest that more than half of the Jamaican rural population live below the national poverty line (Weis 2000:300). According to the Jamaica Human Development Report, 72 percent of the poor in Jamaica live in rural areas and agriculture is their main source of employment (Planning Institute of Jamaica 2005:4). The concentration of poverty in the island’s rural interior is due to a long history of colonial and post-colonial land-use matrix. The monopolization of fertile coastal plains by plantations since the 17th Century, which were largely replaced by high-end tourist resorts in 1970s, constantly pushes peasants into the rugged interior to find available land, which is often covered with forests (Mintz 1989; Besson 1998; Weis 2006). According to the World Bank report of 1993, 3 percent of landowners controlled 62 percent of arable land, dominating most of the fertile coastal plains, whereas 80 percent of all peasants possessed less than 20 percent, concentrated in the hilly terrain of inner Jamaica (cited in Weis 2000:302; see also Weis 2004). Therefore, the problems of so-called “peasant deforestation,” and “poor farming practices,” which TNC refers to as an obstacle to conservation, are indeed problems of landlessness and extreme rural poverty, rooted in the historical consolidation of colonialism, plantation slavery and global capitalism.

Examining the conservation documents, and the development projects that were presented to villagers at the LFMC meetings, one can infer that the solution of TNC and LFMC to this problem is to convert peasants into market actors as petty-entrepreneurs in tourist and export industries. Even if this highly ambitious project of producing neoliberal subjects is successful, moving peasants away from food production will have its own local and national consequences, as Jamaica is rendered highly dependent on food imports from the US by neoliberal impositions on

the country to cease agricultural subsidies and to open its borders for trade liberalization. As a matter of fact, the US Department of Agriculture calls the Caribbean the “world’s most food import dependent region” (Weis 2007:112). It is not unrealistic, therefore, to expect that should the TNC-led conservation project succeed in inhibiting local food production to mitigate deforestation, the unequal food trade relation between Jamaica and the US, as well as the former’s soaring agrot-trade deficit – the product of three decades of trade liberalization – would be intensified.⁵

The poverty of small-scale peasantry, which springs from landlessness in and around Cockpit Country, is in effect further intensified by the TNC-led conservation project. The main reason behind this is the fact that the logic of conservation practices privileges private landowners, especially those who own large tracts of land in and around the forest. For instance, as I have already mentioned, the CAP sets forth an objective of providing private landowners with tax exemptions or direct payments, if they own and are ready to set aside at least 40 hectares (100 acres) of land as a forest reserve. The implications of this set-aside program go well beyond the obvious inequality it generates by giving big landowners an opportunity to profit from setting aside their land as a forest reserve, while small-scale peasantry cannot enjoy such a treat. In Cockpit Country, a relatively large amount of land is concentrated in the hands of big landowners, and the majority of the small-scale peasants need to lease land in order to subsist (Barker and Miller 1995). If TNC’s set-aside program proved to be more profitable for big landowners than leasing their land to small-scale peasants, then the problem of finding arable land for the peasants would be amplified, hence reproducing aforementioned problems concerning local food production while deepening economic inequality.

In addition to the set-aside program, small-scale peasantry is further marginalized by the conservation

enterprise due to the ways in which TNC and its partners organize “community livelihood development projects.” The business opportunities that TNC plans to create through LFMCs rely essentially on leasing land from property owners, thus only marginally and indirectly aiding peasants, if at all, most of whom either do not own private property, or do not have clear ownership rights to the land they occupy. “In several instances where people actually own land,” a United Nations (UN) assessment report complains, “many have been unable to utilize these lands for productive gains, as they are unable to prove ownership. Inability to prove ownership affects access to funding from established lending agencies,” of the sort the USAID and TNC represents in this case, “posing a barrier to economic improvement through working of the land” (United Nations Country Team 2010:63). Confirming this, Jamaica’s Ministry of Land and Environment declares that more than 50 percent of small-scale peasants have no clear ownership rights to their farmland (Peart 2004).

Even among those who have clear private property rights to their land, there are very few in Cockpit Country who can benefit from development projects by leasing their land to the LFMC business ventures. Due to the aforementioned scarcity of arable land, 85 percent of peasants own small plots of 5 acres (2 ha) or less. What is more, among these small-scale peasants “54% cultivate very small plots of 2 acres (0.8 ha) or less” (Barker 1998:359-360). In addition to class differences between small-scale peasants and big landowners regarding the land size they command, there is a stunning unevenness to the numbers of individual landowners in terms of gender and age. According to the 1998 Census of Agriculture, the number of male landowners is more than three times the number of their female counterparts (Rowen-Campell 2000:5). Most women who own property, especially those heading households, are also poorer than their male counterparts. If we look at the numbers of landowners by age, we see a similar disparity: the number of landowners who are older than fifty triples the number of those below thirty (Rowen-Campell 2000:5-6). Since TNC’s notion of creating “alternative livelihoods” through LFMC projects relies for the most part on leasing

⁵ Historically, Jamaica’s agro-exports always exceeded its agro-imports, hence the source of handsome profits pocketed by the planter class (Mintz 1985). However, this traditional trend was reversed as neoliberal economic policies became increasingly hegemonic. Agro-imports balanced agro-exports in the early 1990s, and by the middle of 2000s, the agro-exports amounted only to 60% of agro-imports, hence putting an extra burden on already debt-ridden Jamaican economy (See Weis 2006).

privately owned land from property owners, one can only expect further marginalization of the already marginalized through the amplification of existing inequalities pertaining to class, gender and age in Cockpit Country.

The conservation of Cockpit Country and the way LFMCs are organized bear the stamp of neoliberal environmental governance. LFMCs are, indeed, public-private partnerships that aim to find market solutions to environmental problems by attracting investment from the tourist and export industries. In this context, the idea of community participation, constantly invoked and idealized by TNC as *ipso facto* proof of democratic progress, and a prerequisite to economic development, should be taken with a grain of salt. It is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to democratically incorporate small-scale peasants with “equal voice” into a “conservation partnership” composed of powerful actors such as TNC, USAID, and the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association – the last of which has clear links to global capital and is very well represented within the Jamaican State. But there is more: the ways in which LFMCs are organized allows full participation only to *some* members of the local community, privileging older, large property-owning men. Thus, far from creating the conditions for democratic environmental governance, it creates fresh inequalities among rural Jamaicans, already deeply scarred by historical and extant inequalities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the uncritical affirmation of local community participation in neoliberal conservation projects as *ipso facto* democratic, and the twin assumption that community participation leads to community empowerment, are both misguided. Far from forming a solid base for the democratic management of natural resources or the facilitation of poverty alleviation, decentralized neoliberal conservation projects that are obsessed with “community participation” often lead to the exacerbation of existing inequalities and to the further centralization of power among diverse social actors involved in these projects. In order to understand this process, one should be wary of the homogenization effected by the notion of “the local community”

in discourses of neoliberal conservation projects, a notion which couples the *fetishization* of “community participation.” In such discourses, the incorporation of a homogenized local community – divorced from its historically formed internal tensions and inequalities – into a “conservation partnership” is treated as a panacea for any problem, reducing thus the conundrums of political economy to a question of democratic participation. This fetishization conceals larger questions. What do local communities in effect participate in? What are the ends of these projects? Which groups within these communities are in better position to take advantage of them? Who has the privilege – to put it in Mark Noonan’s language – of being “fantastically motivated” by free market-based conservation? Who is left out and marginalized? Flattening neoliberal terminologies such as “stakeholder partnership” imply a democratic platform, where different groups can express their political agendas and negotiate their differences with equal power. The language of “stakeholder partnership” flattens, in other words, the hierarchical set of power relations inherited and reproduced by market-based conservation projects. In so doing, this terminology conceals actual and potential frictions that are aggravated by rampant inequalities of power among so-called stakeholders. In which sense can a landless small-scale peasant and the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association have “equal voice” as “stakeholders?”

There is no doubt that both TNC and partnering environmentalist NGOs care about the unique socio-ecological qualities of Cockpit Country, and work for their sustenance. It can also be argued that they attempt to create alternative “community livelihood development projects” for the economic uplift of rural Jamaicans. However, as I hope to have shown, their fundamental reliance on free market-based conservation, on privately owned land for development projects, and on establishing public-private partnerships for governance processes exacerbate raging inequalities rural Jamaicans have long suffered from. In short, this integrated conservation and development project presents a typical case, where the means are fundamentally antagonistic to the ends.

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