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Dispossession and disenchantment: The micropolitics of marine conservation in southeastern Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Advocates of marine biodiversity conservation have intensified their calls for the rapid expansion of marine protected areas (MPAs) across the globe, while researchers continue to examine why some people in affected communities support MPAs and others oppose them. Drawing on an ethnographic study of dispossession and the micropolitics of marine conservation in southeastern Tanzania, this paper examines the local dynamics pertaining to the Mnazi Bay-Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park (MBREMP) in rural Mtwara on Tanzania's border with Mozambique. In-depth interviews with 160 individuals and eight focus group discussions with 48 participants were conducted in four sea-bordering villages. By analyzing the narratives of people living in the MBREMP's catchment area regarding their lived experiences with the MBREMP, the paper highlights inter-village and intra-village similarities and differences in the perceived significance and social impact of the MBREMP. Through narratives, people revealed their feelings of angst, disempowerment and vulnerability, emanating from their awareness of the state-directed dispossession they had experienced. The MBREMP's gendered impact was evident as women frequently blamed the park rangers for making their lives difficult through unreasonable and coercive restrictive practices. The paper argues that to achieve the laudable global goals of marine biodiversity conservation, it is imperative that the social complexities of the local context, livelihood concerns, gender relations, social hierarchies and the diverse perspectives of residents are ethnographically documented and integrated into policies leading to the practice of good governance of MPAs.

1. Introduction

The last few years have seen a groundswell of enthusiasm and urgency among advocates of marine biodiversity conservation to significantly scale up the number and size of marine protected areas [1,2]. This upsurge of renewed enthusiasm is prompted by the large-scale damage of coral reefs, degradation of marine habitat, loss of marine biodiversity, the collapse of many global fisheries [3–5] and "a sense of impending apocalypse" [6,7]. The benefits derived from establishing networks of marine protected areas (MPAs) for marine life and for human populations, have been commonly framed in the optimistic, rhetorically powerful language of "win-win" [8,9]. These benefits consist of increased local biodiversity, improved fisheries, establishment of alternative livelihoods for coastal populations, sustainable resource utilization, poverty reduction through eco-tourism, and ultimately community empowerment and well-being [10]. Consequently, "the proposition that MPAs both *can* and *should* lead to win-win outcomes for conservation and development…is becoming the dominant paradigm" [11]. This is not to suggest that those who support the scale-up of conventional MPAs around the world are unaware of the difficulties involved in realizing the objectives of biodiversity conservation, nor that they are incognizant of the possibility of "win-win" scenarios becoming unpleasant, physically violent situations. Yet, the enthusiasm for MPAs as the mainstream tool in marine biodiversity conservation and fisheries management overrides these concerns [1,3,12].

While some studies have demonstrated how MPAs can be used as useful management tools in maintaining marine biodiversity, and supporting the well-being of coastal populations [13,14] others have provided empirical evidence to reveal the substantial challenges and difficulties in successfully implementing MPAs in different parts of the world [15–18]. There have been repeated calls to pay as much attention to the social impacts of MPAs as given to the biological impacts to actualize the "win-win" scenario [19–24], and to make the goal of 10% aerial coverage by 2020 an achievable reality. Few studies that have systematically documented the negative effects of MPAs on local communities, have highlighted the nature and magnitude of opposition to MPAs among fishers and marine resources users from coastal communities in different parts of the world. These studies have shed light on the socioeconomic dynamics that have led to tensions, hostility and

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violent confrontations between those representing the MPAs, and those who believe that their livelihoods are negatively affected by the conservation efforts [5,18,22,25–33]. Poor planning, overambitious goals, top-down governance structures and management styles, lack of engagement with local populations, physical displacement and forced relocation of local populations, violent approaches to enforcement/infringements of regulations, lack of trust and poor communication are identified as among the many reasons why MPAs do not represent "win-win" scenarios [34].

Drawing on an ethnographic study of dispossession and the micropolitics of marine conservation in southeastern Tanzania, this paper examines the local dynamics pertaining to the Mnazi Bay-Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park (MBREMP) in rural Mtwara on Tanzania's border with Mozambique. By analyzing the narratives of people living in the MBREMP's catchment area, regarding their lived experiences with the MBREMP, it seeks to highlight inter-village and intra-village similarities and differences in the perceived significance and social impact of the marine park. The paper seeks to shed light on the "social diversity within the community" or alternatively, "internal differentiation" as it relates to marine conservation [35]. It aims to contribute to the recent literature on factors associated with the success and failures of MPAs as key instruments in marine biodiversity conservation. The paper provides context-specific ethnographic insights into why some residents of fishing villages in coastal Tanzania support marine parks, while others oppose them. In the sections that follow, some key concepts and propositions that are central to this paper are presented followed by a description of the research setting and the methodology used to gather and analyze the data. The middle section hones in on the empirical data, which are mostly narrative segments from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). This is followed by a discussion of the key concerns emanating from the data analysis, and a conclusion in which the empirical and policy-related significance of the study findings are highlighted. The paper's overall proposition underscores the need to pay more attention to the local-level human dimensions and social complexities within coastal communities. While these are widely acknowledged and deemed integral to the recent call for the scaling-up of MPAs around the globe [1,12,14], such discourse demands moving beyond the rhetoric of community engagement. To achieve the laudable global goals of marine biodiversity conservation, it is imperative that the social complexities of the local context, livelihood concerns, gender relations, social hierarchies and the diverse perspectives of residents are ethnographically documented, analyzed, and emergent insights incorporated into revised policies and guidelines leading to the practice of good governance of MPAs.

2. The essence of opposition to MPAs

Local communities have often opposed MPAs in the East African context where there has been historical conflict between local social norms of marine use governance and government-backed national-level management systems [18,35,36]. Walley's [33] ethnographic study of the early years of the Mafia Island Marine Park (MIMP) in Tanzania revealed that the local residents' overall response to the MIMP was marked by antagonism. More recently, Moshy, Bryceson and Mwaipopo [32] found that people appreciated the benefits of conservation in the MIMP in principle, especially a reduction in dynamite fishing, but condemned the non-inclusive manner in which the MIMP was implemented. Similarly, during the MBREMP's initial phase, residents of some villages threatened to use physical violence against the park officials and NGO representatives and in effect undermined the park's viability [30,37,38].

In addition to the many context-specific reasons, there are several other reasons that contribute to tensions and sometimes violent opposition to MPAs in different parts of the world. These include (a) affected communities' anger at being left out of the MPA planning process, (b) the lack of adequate compensation for loss of access to fishing grounds, marine resources and livelihoods in general, (c) not respecting or valuing local traditional or practical knowledge, (d) government corruption, (e) incompetence and lack of accountability leading communities to feel betrayed by those at the helm of the MPA, and (f) an overall sense of injustice meted out to those whose livelihoods and cultural identities depend on the ocean, all leading to "frustration, stress, feelings of persecution, anger and betrayal" (5) among opponents. As Christie et al. [13] have demonstrated, "conflict and controversy are a predictable part of MPA design and implementation… [and] conflict is associated with the generation and equitable distribution of benefits derived from an MPA."

3. Methodology

The MBREMP was gazetted in 2000 with an area of approximately 650 km^2 of which some 430 km^2 is sea and 220 km^2 is land. It covers 45 km of coast, including coral reefs, sand dunes, mangroves, wetlands, coastal lagoons, three main islands, the Ruvuma River estuary, and 17 villages with a total population of around 44,000 [39,40]. The park's general management plan includes the ideal of "collaborative management through community participation" as one of its key highlights. Activities prohibited inside the MBREMP include dynamite fishing, use of beach seine nets, monofilament nets, mangrove cutting for commercial sale, mining of live coral, and poaching of turtles or turtle eggs.

Most of the people who live in the region self-identify as Makonde – the dominant and largest ethnic group in the Mtwara region. They speak KiMakonde and KiSwahili. The majority of the coastal villagers are poor, economically, socially and educationally disadvantaged, and heavily dependent on subsistence farming and marine-related and coastal activities, especially subsistence fishing [27,40]. The data presented in this paper were gathered in four sea-bordering villages – Msimbati, Mtandi, Nalingu and Mkubiru – inside the MBREMP's catchment area over a period of five months – from August 2014 to December 2014. At the time of data collection, most villagers in the study villages were living in thatched mud houses. While two of the four study villages had wired electricity, most households in these villages could not afford to pay for installation and recurring costs. Many households in all four villages had invested in solar panels.

A total of 160 individuals were selected through a purposive sampling approach until the sample quota was achieved – 20 women and 20 men in each of the four villages – and interviewed with the help of a male and a female research assistant. Additionally, eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted – 4 women's groups and 4 men's groups – with 6 participants in each of the FGDs. A brief life history of each participant was obtained through the interview, which lasted between 45 and 75 min. Participants were interviewed on topics such as, what life was like 10–15 years ago compared to the present, and their opinions regarding quality of life, food security, outmigration risks and benefits, marine park risks and benefits, and their thoughts on how livelihoods could be improved locally. FGDs lasted between an hour and 90 min and discussed participants' disposition toward the marine park and food security-related concerns. All interviews and FGDs were recorded using a digital audio-recorder and transcribed verbatim. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all the study participants and the consent was audio-recorded before proceeding with the interviews and FGDs. The transcribed interviews and FGDs resulted in hundreds of pages of narratives and text data/transcripts written in Kiswahili, which were reviewed independently by the author and two research assistants for main themes and ideas. Key themes included dynamite fishing, dispossession, displacement, restrictions, injustice, food security, participation, violence, and suffering. Relevant quotes were identified in the transcribed text and translated into English.

4. Marine conservation and good intentions

In the study villages, a small number of people forcefully argued in

MBREMP's favor, and highlighted its many benefits. A 60-year-old woman from Msimbati who was a vocal advocate of the MBREMP, explained how she and a few other women from her village had benefitted from the WWF-sponsored alternative livelihoods programs, including a village cooperative bank (VICOBA). As the participant put it: "We have flourished. Now I can borrow up to Tsh 500,000 ($230) for my business or for some emergency." She acknowledged the training that she and thirty other women in the village had received in managing the VICOBA, using different fish preservation curing processes, and building an aquatic fish farm and an apiary. She repeatedly emphasized how the MBREMP had transformed her life and how grateful she was to the MBREMP and the WWF.

Another male research participant, who was in his mid-70s, mentioned very little about how he had personally benefitted from the MBREMP, but emphasized the project's national significance. He insisted that it was incumbent upon Tanzanian citizens to support the marine park not only because it was a government project, but also because the government had implemented it with good intentions. He alluded to the fact that the government was cognizant of the illegal poaching, illegal trade in sea cucumbers, and the predatory practices of foreign fishing vessels in Tanzanian waters, and suggested that the government had implemented the marine park as an anti-poaching intervention. He specifically mentioned China and Singapore to illustrate his point further and said:

> They have finished all the food from their ocean. Now they want to enrich themselves and prosper by using up the resources from our ocean. So, the government decided to establish this marine park to prevent people from other countries from taking away our precious marine resources. The government's intentions are good.

He elaborated on his explanation saying that the government was keen to help the villagers by attracting foreign tourists to the marine park, who would contribute to the local cash economy. Moreover, villagers would also get a share of the benefits from the MBREMP's fee collection. He insisted:

> People here don't understand the significance of the marine park project; they complain that the government is preventing them from accessing the ocean and the marine resources, including the mangroves, but that's not the government's intention; the government wants to protect the resources for our future generations, so we should cooperate.

In the above quote, the narrator sees himself as not only more knowledgeable about the rationale behind the MBREMP, but hints at the urgent need to educate his fellow villagers about the marine park's significance and benefits, and the government's good intentions. As will become apparent later in the paper, only a few others shared his sentiments about the MBREMP and the government's intentions.

Another participant from Mkubiru village, who was in his mid-60s, had previously worked in Dar es Salaam at a tourist hotel attached to one of the marine reserves. He acknowledged in his interview that he found it difficult to criticize the marine park because of his previous exposure to marine conservation and international tourism. He praised it instead and said:

> The marine park people came here to distribute big nets to help us catch big fish… I have one of those nets, they gave them to us for free, and if we had formed groups, they were willing to give several more nets, ropes, boats and outboard motors. In my view, they have done a very good thing by helping people in this village to engage in alternative fishing methods and lead a good life.

In the above quote, the narrator highlights the park rangers' good intentions and their gestures to help local residents to engage in sustainable fishing methods and thereby improve their living conditions. This participant's previous exposure to marine conservation and tourism was an important factor in his understanding of the marine park's principles and his positive stance on the restrictions in the park's catchment area. Additionally, he had personally benefitted from the fishing gear distributed by the marine park representatives in his village, which made it difficult for him to criticize the project.

Such words in support of the government, the marine park and the park rangers, as expressed by those quoted above were exceptional among the study participants. As will become evident in the next section, a large majority of the study participants spoke about the marine park mostly in negative terms. They elaborated on their statements with lengthy explanations and provided examples of their lived experiences to underscore their disenchantment. The next section provides examples of the oppositional discourses in the study villages.

4.1. Dispossession and disenchantment

As many scholars have pointed out, MPAs often fail to meet the "win-win" criteria because of the dissonance between the goals of those advocating MPAs and the expectations of people who are directly affected by MPAs. Agardy, di Sciara and Christie [15] suggest that insufficient involvement of local stakeholders in the planning process is "a far-too-common-phenomena that dooms many an MPA to failure" and that community consultations often involve too few people, are unrepresentative, and/or happen too late in the process. Therefore, scholars have suggested that in order to mitigate the possibility of an MPA becoming a conflict zone rather than a domain of cooperation and collaboration, it is important to involve the local community into the planning process right from the start [28]. In MBREMP's case, some members of the local communities were certainly involved in the initial stages of the planning and implementation process. However, the process, did not meet people's expectations of transparency and fairness. One male participant recalled: "Initially they said that this is a collaborative project, but matters turned out to be very different once they implemented the project."

Several participants were critical of the MBREMP officials for not holding an open meeting in their respective villages to inform the villagers about the marine park's details, including the different restrictions. They alleged that about 10 ~15 people from different villages had met with the representatives from the Marine Parks and Reserves Unit (MPRU), and "secretly" signed the paperwork, which the MPRU took as evidence that all the villagers had agreed to support the marine park. At the time, many villagers were unsure about the MBREMP's scope and restrictions. Several study participants were critical of their leaders who had gone to the original "secret" meeting with the MPRU representatives claiming to represent the villagers, for having misrepresented the villagers. As one male participant put it:

> Our leaders betrayed us; they were in the government's hands and we did not have the strength to oppose the decision. Even if we had opposed the project, they would have coaxed us into accepting the project, because ultimately, it's the government's decision to implement the marine park here.

On a similar note, one FGD participant emphatically stated: "We did not cooperate with them of our own volition, we were "forced" to cooperate." Another older FGD participant summarized his sentiments: "This is a top-down project; decisions are made in Dar es Salaam, and it's very difficult for us ordinary citizens to go against the government's decision. They forced the project on us, without informing us adequately." Such narratives of powerlessness reflect the underlying power politics in MPAs, the community-level hierarchies of power, the consequences of alleged coercion instead of consultation, cooperation, and collaboration, and the micropolitics of trust, even at the community level, that are significant in MPA governance.

Complaints against the MBREMP representatives for making false promises to the villagers and not sharing the revenues from the gate fees to improve the village infrastructure were commonplace in the study villages. To be sure, due to the incipient nature of tourism in the

MBREMP, the revenue collected through the gate fees was negligible, especially when compared to collections from the MIMP. According to some participants who had participated in the initial consultation meetings, they felt misled by the "false" information that was given to them. A female FGD participant elaborated:

> They had said that they will be putting marker buoys to indicate the boundaries of the protected areas so that everyone knows the borders, but if you go to the ocean today, you will not see a single marker buoy across the entire ocean. Now they say that there is no need to put any marker buoys because they are protecting the entire ocean.

Many others were concerned that the MBREMP representatives had not told the villagers that once the marine park was implemented, they would not be able to sell their farmland inside the marine park's boundaries, directly to a buyer. The prerogative to make decisions on land sales would remain with MBREMP officials. Participants alleged that the MBREMP officials deliberately quote a very high price for the land inside the marine park as a strategy to prevent any land sales.

4.2. Double standards

An older male participant in one of the FGDs summed up his feelings by stating that if the marine park was a private enterprise, the villagers would have "driven it away long time ago," but they felt powerless because it was a government project. In this participant's opinion, rather than bringing in the promised conservation-related development, the MBREMP stood as a bulwark against people's access to the ocean and their farms, and effectively their livelihoods. Many other participants admitted that while they wished that the MBREMP would be closed, they knew that they did not have the power to stop or to seriously challenge the project or its governance. They expressed their sense of frustration with the MBREMP by highlighting the double-standards, hypocrisy and corruption they had experienced in their dealings with the marine park officials. One young participant explained:

> They confiscate our nets, but then they sell those nets to others, so what's the point in saying that they are confiscating our nets because they are illegal? And what's the point in them telling us that if we pay Tsh 20,000 ($10), they'll let us take back our net and our boat? It doesn't make any sense.

In addition to allegations of double-standards and corruption against the MBREMP personnel reflected in the above quote, the people of Msimbati and Mtandi were cynical about the MBREMP's presence in the rural Mtwara region for an additional reason. Notably, the discovery of large deposits of recoverable natural gas inside the marine park had transformed the landscape and MBREMP's profile [42]. The natural gas development activities (drilling, extraction, wells, and the laying of an underground pipeline to transport the gas to Dar es Salaam) had overshadowed the MBREMP's presence in the area. The high-visibility of the gas-project's infrastructure and related activities inside the marine park had led many residents to question the rational behind MBREMP's restrictions on the local people's ocean-related activities. They questioned the MBREMP's decision to allow the gas companies to engage in gas exploration and extraction activities inside an area that is regarded as a highly sensitive protected marine environment. There was a great deal of discussion on this topic, amid palpable anger, during one of the FGDs in Msimbati. One fisher who expressed exasperation with the MBREMP's "double-standards," had this to say:

> Their main goal is to have control over our land and give it to the gas company. The marine park is only a pretext. Their goal is to grab the entire land in Msimbati for the gas project. If they could, they would evacuate everyone from Msimbiti and relocate us somewhere far away because they have found a lot of gas here and they want to drill many more gas wells inside the marine park.

The above narrator's interpretation that the marine park is only an excuse to enable gas companies to carry out their enclaving practices/extraction activities in an unhindered manner, was prompted by the dramatic scale-up and high visibility of the gas project that local residents have witnessed since 2012. Periodic visits by prominent politicians and journalists to the gas project, and discussions about the gas project in the Tanzanian Parliament, also added to people's conviction that the gas project was far more important to the government than the marine park.

As previously noted, many villagers were unhappy with the MBREMP's presence in their respective villages because of the restrictions on their marine extraction activities, and also because they were prevented from selling their plots of land even during a family emergency. Moreover, many villagers had been dispossessed of their farmlands and their coconut trees and cashew trees that were originally planted along the coast by their ancestors. The gas project's presence in the same region represented a double disappointment; it had compounded their predicament, as many more village residents lost their farmlands and trees to the gas project for little recompense. Those who had lost their livelihood assets to the gas project did not make a distinction between the gas project and the marine park; they conflated these two projects as representations of state power and domination.

4.3. A "violent village"

The MBREMP's engagement with the people of Nalingu village was strained right from the project's inception. It was marked by miscommunication, distrust, non-cooperation, villagers' outright refusal to follow the MBREMP's regulations, and physical violence [38,41]. One participant in the men's FGD in Nalingu explained the essence of the confrontation:

> They started confiscating our fishing gear and beating us. So, the confrontation between the villagers and the marine park people began because people did not understand the marine park's "real" goals. The marine park representatives should have explained to us properly that their real goal was to request cooperation from the villagers to protect the ocean. But that did not happen. People were angry and resorted to violence.

Embedded in the above quote is a common theme found in the narratives of several other participants – of broken promises and feelings of betrayal. Yet, this narrator also highlights a key ingredient that the marine park representatives had missed during their initial contact with the villagers – the need for more engagement and education about marine conservation and more generally, the MPA's broad objectives and governance strategy. Nalingu's reputation as a "violent village" where the marine park rangers and NGO representatives "dare not enter" persisted for several years [37].

Significantly, the marine park-related violence in Nalingu had occurred not only between the villagers and the security personnel protecting the MBREMP's interests, but also between a small minority of villagers who supported the marine park, and the majority who opposed it. One 70-year-old participant who had been trained by the MPRU to serve as the park ranger for Nalingu village, narrated how a group of young men had attacked him because he was enforcing the MBREMP's regulations. He recalled the emotionally poignant incident:

> They said that I was interfering with their livelihoods. They even wrote a letter to me saying that I should stop supporting the marine park, or else they will force me out of the village. I have lived in Nalingu since 1967; I stood my ground. Five days later they forced their way into my house late in the night, and threw battery acid on my face. My neighbor rushed me to the village dispensary, but by then the acid had completely damaged my left eye.

No arrests were made in relation to the violence against the park ranger who had paid a heavy price for implementing the MBREMP's mandate and regulations.

In the neighboring village of Mkubiru, the relationship between the villagers and the MBREMP representatives was similarly strained albeit not marked by overt physical violence. One participant from Mkubiru village, who was political active in the region, had this to say:

> They should have provided us with alternative livelihood opportunities first and then implemented the project. It's true that what they have planned is good and beautiful, but they should have educated us better on what they wanted to do with the ocean. Instead, they have hurt us by confiscating our fishing gear, and apprehending us for using illegal fishing gear.

The above segment from the interview suggests that, while some villagers appreciated the rationale behind the MBREMP's implementation in the rural Mtwara region, they were disappointed with the way the project had unfolded in their villages. Significantly, however, as with one of the previous narrators, in the above quote, the narrator reemphasizes the crux of the problem – that the MBREMP representatives should have consulted with the villagers earlier on and educated them about the conservation strategy. In other words, the MBREMP was clearly a top-down project, rushed through to implementation for reasons of expediency [30].

4.4. Gendered suffering

Women participants across the four study villages were especially very vocal and frank in voicing their disenchantment with the MBREMP. They narrated evocative stories to call attention to their experiences of emotional distress and hurt associated with the marine park. They had harsh words for the officials and accused them of oppressing the villagers and preventing the citizens from claiming their basic rights. They commonly used the term *"wametutenga"* to suggest that the marine park had separated them from the ocean and their ancestral land. Others used the expression "*wametunyenga nyenga*" – literally "they have dominated us, coerced us, and violated us." And still others expressed their frustration with having been betrayed by the marine park officials. One of the women participants said:

> If we go to collect firewood from our own plot of land inside the marine park, the park rangers confiscate the firewood and tell us to go back home, empty handed. I have a plot of land inside the marine park that I want to sell, but the marine park people tell me that they will decide whether to sell [lease] the land or not and to whom and for what purpose. This marine park has made our life very difficult; we have lost our peace of mind.

The above quote reveals the kind of aggravation and despair that women experience in their encounters with the marine park rangers at multiple levels and in many forms. Additionally, the narrator's assertion that the on-going dispossession of their lands, harassment related to the collection of firewood for cooking purposes, and the insecurities that cumulatively affect their emotional well-being, reveal the complexities of the social impact of the MPA on local residents, especially on women. In a context where the MPA is seen as prohibition rather than a conservation strategy based on collaboration and community-based consultations, the idiom of "no peace of mind" was a common refrain in women's narratives of distress. As such, they called attention to the marine park's impact not only on their physical well-being, but also their emotional health. Accordingly, one woman expressed her frustration with the marine park as follows:

> I don't trust the marine park. The marine park people should leave this village. Then everything will be all right as before. Because of them, we don't get what we want from the ocean; they have constricted us (*wametubana*), they have held us in a tight grip, squeezed our ribs and left us breathless. They should allow us to go back to our normal way of life…they should not continue to constrict us till we are completely breathless.

In the above quote, the narrator reveals women's lack of trust in the marine park's style of governance, and their desperation; their emotional burdens and psychosocial distress, including depression, anxiety, outrage, and the hurt they associate with the MBREMP staff who they believe have deprived them of their emotional well-being; their peace of mind. Moreover, they believe that the marine park has intensified their immiseration, marginalization, disempowerment, vulnerability, and metaphorically held them in a vice-like-grip that has left them breathless – without access to their farmlands, ocean, and alternative livelihoods. For these women, the marine park at once revealed their structural vulnerability and epitomized their individual depression and collective suffering.

Women participants repeatedly expressed their feelings of betrayal of trust by the MBREMP officials and the effect that has had on their self-esteem, dignity, physical integrity and more broadly, their mental health. One participant explained: "They have hurt us; their impositions have led to oppression/unjust acts of exploitation/hurt (*kupandikiza zulma*). Our life is just like that; if they keep confiscating our nets, firewood, land and coconut and cashew trees, it will increase our marginalization (*kudidimia*)."

Relatedly, during individual interviews and FGDs, women used food insecurity as an idiom of distress in relation to the marine park in multiple ways. One participant expressed her frustration with the disruption to her livelihood by stating: "If we go to the ocean, the marine park people shoo us away; if our men go to fish in the ocean, they confiscate their nets. Our food is in the ocean and we are not allowed to access it."

Another participant's response in relation to food security was imbued with ethical and moral concerns: "This project has come to embarrass/humiliate (*kudhalilisha*) us and to rob us of our dignity. It has embarrassed us with regard to food, and it has made us feel like we are thieves [stealing fish from the ocean] …We are people of the coast!

In the above quotes, the narrators use food insecurity as one of the idioms of distress. They also used it as a metaphor to express their deep sense of disempowerment and humiliation resulting from the marine park's restrictions on their access to the ocean for food. While the restrictions on people's access to the ocean may have limited the access to their main source of animal protein and culturally valued food (fish), the task of ascertaining the immediate and long-term impacts of these restrictions on people's subsistence patterns, food security and nutritional intake – especially on young children, poses many challenges [43,44].

5. Discussion

The diverse narratives examined in this paper reflect people's lived experiences with the MBREMP. They shed light on the complex historical, structural, social relational and contextual factors that influence people's disposition toward MPAs. People's understandings of, and responses to, the marine park, have evolved over the years. They are continuously changing in response to new experiences. Many Msimbati residents, for example, who had initially supported the MBREMP in the belief that the project would bring them multiple benefits, changed their minds once they found the governance style unacceptable and the regulations antithetical to their well-being. In contrast, Nalingu residents, who had violently opposed the MBREMP for several years, suspended their opposition in due course. Moreover, the narratives reveal that the MBREMP's impact has not been uniformly felt by people living in the catchment villages. Those who continued to support the MBREMP after more than a decade of its existence, substantiated their position by giving examples of how they had personally benefitted from the project. A few others emphasized the project's national significance,

the government's foresight and the good intentions behind the project. Others who resented the MBREMP's presence in their villages, highlighted how the project had hurt them personally and posed an existential threat to their very survival, and cultural norms because of the restrictions on fishing, fishing gears, access to the mangroves, and the sale of their ancestral farmlands.

The varied perceptions among villagers and their responses toward the MBREMP, underscore the limitations that inhere in treating communities as homogeneous entities in regard to perceptions, interests and actions pertaining to marine conservation. Thus, Nalingu was characteristically associated with physical violence, whereas the neighboring village of Mkubiru, was not. Fishers in Mkubiru frequently defied the MBREMP's restrictions, but did not engage in any form of direct physical violence. To be sure, as Ferse et al. [23] have noted, "people are embedded in dependencies and hierarchies, holding different positions and views, and therefore also respond differently to policies and incentives…" In the present case, a small minority of the villagers, both men and women, residing in the MBREMP's catchment area were supportive of the project and lauded the good intentions behind it. A few others who were not dependent on the ocean for their livelihood, were indifferent to the project, or even supported the project because it did not affect them directly or undermine their livelihoods [37]. Those who vehemently opposed the marine park, were mainly artisanal fishers; those who were directly or indirectly dependent on the ocean for their livelihood; and those who were prevented from selling their plots of land that were inside the park.

The dearth of support for the MBREMP could be traced to the lack of transparency and full consultation during the project's initial stages. In their narratives, people repeatedly expressed their deep sense of betrayal not only by the MBREMP officials, but also by their own leaders who had "secretly" signed them off to the MBREMP. In due course, when the MBREMP representatives informed the local villagers that the entire ocean was now protected, those whose cultural identity and livelihoods were primarily dependent on the ocean were dismayed by the park officials' reversal of trust. From the villagers' perspective, MBREMP's presence in their area was akin to what scholars have described as blue grabbing or ocean grabbing, i.e., the "dispossession or appropriation of use, control or access to ocean spaces or resources from prior resource users, rights holders or inhabitants" [45]. The scenario described in this paper strongly suggests that the process of state-mediated dispossession (i.e., divesting properties and traditional means of livelihood) had got underway soon after the MBREMP was implemented in 2000. The enforcement of restrictions was done in a swift manner, often resulting in confiscation of fishing gears and beatings, amid anger and confusion among local residents. The official narrative regarding the rationale behind the MBREMP's implementation was not only to protect the marine environment from poaching, unsustainable and destructive fishing practices, but also to usher in development in the region through eco-tourism. However, the alternative narratives told by most people who participated in this study, and especially women, highlighted the MBREMP's harmful effects on their livelihoods and everyday lives. Participants' characterization of the MBREMP as a pretext – a ploy – to cover the government's alleged intention to usurp and give their farmlands to the gas company to drill more gas wells, is also at the core of the mistrust. In other words, from the residents' perspective, the MBREMP acted as a secured spatial enclave – a production site protected for the benefit of the gas company, so that it could continue its drilling operations in an unhindered manner. Consequently, people's narratives were replete with feelings of disempowerment and betrayal by the MBREMP and the government.

In the study villages, the processes of dispossession were visible in the form of "no-fishing zones, limitations on utilization of invertebrate and mangrove resources, restrictions on fishing gear, confiscation of fishing gear, appropriation of near-shore areas, fencing of beaches, and lack of benefit-sharing of official fees collected" [25]. It was also visible in the form of the changing socio-spatial landscape because of the uprooting of thousands of intergenerational coconut trees and cashew trees to make way for the gas pipeline project. The presence of a natural gas extraction project inside the marine park has affected the everyday discourse on questions of (in)justice, transparency, and fairness in the villages. Many villagers have questioned the government's decision to allow the gas company to drill in shore and off shore gas wells, and conduct various seismic tests, even as restrictions are imposed on the local fishers from engaging in subsistence fishing and marine resource extraction in support of their livelihoods. In their narratives people revealed their feelings of angst, disempowerment and vulnerability, emanating from their awareness of the state-led dispossession they had experienced – exemplified most concretely through loss of their farmlands, coconut trees and cashew trees – in return for meagre compensation or none. Their relationship with the MBREMP exposed their structural vulnerability as they had little or no say in influencing the MBREMP's presence in their villages. They had resigned to being silenced through state-led violence and forced to accept whatever meagre compensation that was paid to them. The MBREMP's decision to prevent people from selling their plots of farmland even during a family emergency, compounded their anger and frustration.

To recapitulate, one of the participant's remark that the idea behind the marine park is "good and beautiful, but they should have educated us better" points to the serious gap in the MBREMP's mandate and local residents' expectations in return for supporting the conservation efforts. Finally, the study clearly brought to the fore, the significance of gender issues in marine conservation. It highlighted the project's impact on women's emotional well-being as many women blamed the marine park for depriving them of their peace of mind. They were allegedly troubled by the constant harassment from the park rangers, who prevented them from fishing in their traditional fishing waters and collecting firewood from their farms.

6. Conclusion

Even as advocates of marine conservation are intensifying their calls for the rapid expansion of MPAs to meet the ambitious targets of global coverage, the question, why some people in affected communities support MPAs, while others oppose them, warrants an answer that is at once attentive to macrolevel political factors, governance structures, local histories, cultural contexts, and everyday micro-politics [26,31]. This paper has offered an ethnographic representation of some of the problems that are inherent in MPAs that promise collaboration and community participation at the policy level, but in practice, are implemented in a top-down manner with minimal community engagement. By engaging with different villagers' voices from the MBREMP's catchment area, the paper has illustrated the diversity and internal differences in the lived experiences and the overall social response to the MBREMP. As such, this paper corroborates the findings of other scholars who have highlighted the various challenges associated with the MBREMP [27,29,30,37].

Overall, the study revealed that most of the villagers across the four study villages vehemently disowned the MBREMP. They were keen to distance themselves from the project and wanted to have nothing to do with it because it belongs to the government, effectively defeating the rhetoric in the MBREMP's masterplan that it is a collaborative project. Yet, they had realized that they could do very little to stop the project because it was implemented by the government. Women attributed their loss of "peace of mind" to the MBREMP's harsh restrictions on their traditional livelihoods, which impacted their physical and emotional well-being.

Thus, far from being a win-win project, the MBREMP has become a no-win project that many residents in the project's catchment villages believe reflects social exclusion and coercion. From the villagers' viewpoint, the MBREMP is yet another representation of the state's top-down imposition of a project that is antithetical to their well-being. The assertion that the local communities did not voluntarily accept the

project but were “forced” to accept it is a recipe for an MPA that may perhaps become a biological success in the long run but clearly remains an immediate social failure [22]. As Chuenpagdee et al. [28] have rightly cautioned: “When MPAs do not deliver what they intend to do, the damage may already be beyond repair.” The MBREMP offers a clear case in point. It corroborates the proposition that without the local community's support MPAs are “likely to fail, if not immediately, then farther down the line” [46].

The scenario described in this paper raises critical questions regarding the way forward in ameliorating the MBREMP's challenging situation and its relationship with the local communities. Clearly, given the top-down manner in which the MBREMP was implemented, it is unlikely that it will become a win-win project or at least a collaborative project in the immediate future without a radical restructuring of the existing governance processes. The way the MBREMP was planned and implemented, and the violence that followed, underscores the need for context-appropriate conflict resolution/grievance mechanisms to be put in place well before the actual implementation of an MPA. Doing so will ensure that a sense of fairness and social justice can prevail in the affected communities. Furthermore, programs aimed at educating local residents on a range of issues related to marine conservation and the general ethos of an MPA, including restrictions and obligations, need to be implemented more proactively and on an on-going basis. Statements from some of the study participants, such as “They should have educated us better about the project” point to the importance of incremental environmental education preceding the MPA's actual implementation.

In conclusion, good governance is key to the successful management of any MPA and it does not come easily and cheaply [4]. The recent call for a code of conduct for marine conservation [47] emphasizes the importance of socially just governance for sustainable marine conservation. For the MBREMP to become a socially just and acceptable project, its representatives must reassess their steps and make a conscious, determined effort to put some remedial measures, and formal conflict resolution mechanism in place, through working closely and transparently with local communities, while also acknowledging internal diversities. Replacing the long-standing mistrust with trust, transparency and inclusiveness, would be an important step forward in ameliorating the on-going tensions associated with the MBREMP. Representatives from the MBREMP must, for example, justify to the local residents, why potentially hazardous gas extraction activities are being carried out inside the marine park, while local residents are prevented from even fishing in their traditional waters for sustenance. Similarly, it would also be incumbent on the MBREMP representatives’ part to address allegations of corruption and arbitrary practices, such as confiscating people's fishing gears but returning them against an off-the-record payment, and turning a blind eye to those who use dynamites for fishing, despite complaints from concerned local fishers. To this end, there is a need for more ethnographically-grounded, policy-oriented, social science research that is attentive to context-specific micropolitics of marine biodiversity conservation, issues of social, environmental and distributive justice, gender relations, and the importance of food security and livelihoods, that will lead to a better understanding of the various stakeholders’ perspectives.

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