

Review

Fifteen years of delegated protected area management in West and Central Africa: five recommendations to guide maturity

PAUL SCHOLTE

Abstract Delegated protected area management (transferring management responsibilities from a public to a private partner) has been promoted to give impetus to ailing protected areas in West and Central Africa. Since their inception in 2005, the number of partnerships has increased to 20 protected areas covering c. 250,000 km², an area similar to that of the UK. A review of the lessons learnt from these first 15 years shows that delegated management has improved day-to-day management of these protected areas. There remain, however, challenges with funding and with the capacity of national managerial staff, and also concerns regarding human rights. Based on an analysis of these challenges, I develop five recommendations to guide more mature delegated management: governments should (1) ensure an enabling legal–procedural environment; and (2) prepare delegated management contracts systematically; (3) private partners should render themselves dispensable through capacity building of national managerial staff and by initiating sustainable financing mechanisms; (4) governments and private partners alike should respect human rights and build coalitions with communities; (5) governments, private partners and funders should strive to delegate non-core management tasks, such as tourist guiding and reception, community development and research, to specialized locally-based individuals and organizations. Although these recommendations have a specific West–Central African perspective, they have relevance for the increasing number of delegated management initiatives elsewhere in Africa and beyond.

Keywords Capacity development, Central Africa, collaborative management, co-management, delegated management, public–private partnerships, sustainable funding, West Africa

Introduction

West and Central Africa have been confronted with a long-term decline of large mammal populations in their national parks (Craigie et al., 2010; Scholte, 2021b). Among the drivers of these declines are low levels of funding, generally < 10% of estimated needs (Lindsey et al., 2018), highly centralized management (Scholte et al., 2018), and instability as a result of insecurity and poor governance (Bauer et al., 2021).

Delegated management has been proposed as an instrument to secure additional funding, improve day-to-day protected area management and provide upscaled anti-poaching measures in unstable areas (Hatchwell, 2014; Baghai et al., 2018; Scholte et al., 2018). Delegated management involves the transfer of management responsibilities from a public partner (generally a government body) to another partner (generally an international NGO; Baghai et al., 2018; Scholte et al., 2021a). These partnerships, sometimes also called public–private partnerships, are characterized by a contractual base, a public partner that delegates all or some of its prerogatives, and a private partner having autonomy over all finances (Scholte et al., 2021a).

African Parks, a South-Africa based NGO, pioneered delegated management in Africa, and in 2003 started managing degraded protected areas in southern Africa, aiming to rehabilitate them and render them economically viable. In 2004, African Parks took an interest in Central Africa when joining a consortium of conservation organizations assisting Garamba National Park, a World Heritage Site in danger in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In 2005 the delegated management contract of Garamba National Park was negotiated between African Parks and the DRC government, with the ‘encouragement of the EU’, subsequently the main donor to the Park (Kalpers & Arranz, 2015). In the same year the DRC government also subcontracted the management of Virunga National Park, another World Heritage Site in danger. Delegated management in Central Africa took off with the signature of partnerships in Chad, Republic of the Congo and Rwanda in 2010 (Fig. 1). Benin and Niger were the first West African countries with delegated management, with contracts signed in 2017–2020. This brought the total number of protected areas with delegated management to 20 in seven

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Received 29 November 2020. Revision requested 5 February 2021.

Accepted 24 May 2021. First published online 25 April 2022.

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Oryx, 2022, 56(6), 908–916 © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Fauna & Flora International doi:10.1017/S0030605321000752
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605321000752> Published online by Cambridge University Press

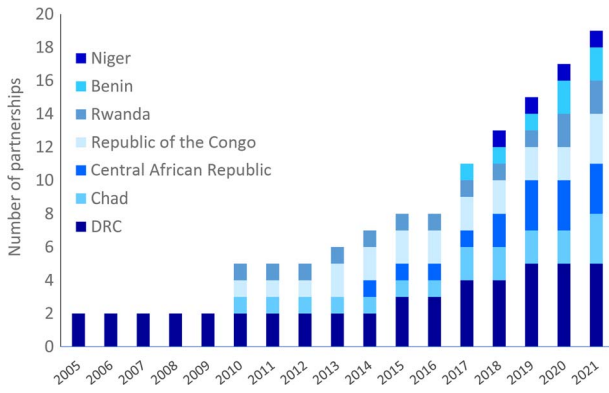


FIG. 1 Number of delegated management partnerships in West and Central Africa, per country, from 2005–2021.

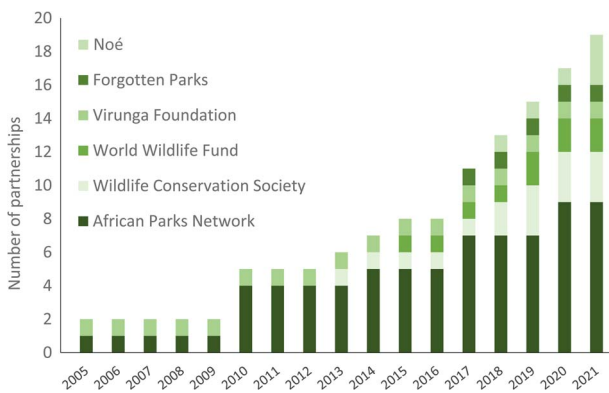


FIG. 2 Number of delegated management partnerships in West and Central Africa, per private partner, from 2005–2021.

countries, with six private partners covering c. 250,000 km², similar to the area of the UK (Figs 2 & 3, Table 1).

From its inception, delegated management was debated in conservation circles in West and Central Africa, as well as internationally, with concerns that foreigners were taking control of prestigious protected areas (Servant, 2020). First-hand experiences gradually helped to improve understanding among those directly involved, as did the efforts of regional organizations. This is true in particular for the Central African Forest Commission, which developed best practice guidelines clarifying the role of governments in the identification and preparation of delegated management partnerships, as well as in their contracting, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation phases (COMIFAC, 2018). In addition, an expanding number of partnerships shared experiences, such as ways to deal with the exclusively governmental responsibility of anti-poaching, greatly improving understanding among conservationists (Scholte et al., 2021a). This understanding has been further supported by the work of Baghai et al. (2018), who provided a continent-wide overview of conservation partnership models, including technical and financial project support, co-management and delegated management. There are,

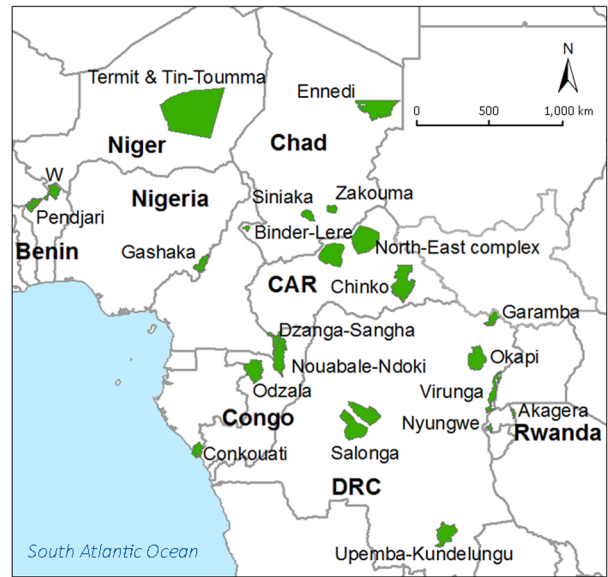


FIG. 3 Map of West and Central Africa with the 20 protected areas that currently have delegated management agreements (CAR, Central African Republic; Congo, Republic of the Congo; DRC, Democratic Republic of the Congo). See Table 1 for details.

however, important regional differences that affect the management of African protected areas. West and Central African countries, with the exception of Rwanda, lack a wildlife tourism industry and are characterized by limited capitalization of wildlife commodities (Bauer et al., 2021). In West and Central Africa, institutional funding provided by international public development agencies (official development assistance) is predominantly channelled via national governments to private partners targeting the most prestigious protected areas, often World Heritage Sites (Scholte et al., 2018).

Social scientists studying the militarization of conservation (Duffy et al., 2019) have taken a particular interest in delegated management partnerships in West and Central Africa. Their various concerns include violence by, and poor human rights standards of, protected area personnel. These matters may not be unique to delegated management, with human rights abuses in conservation first linked to technical and financial projects (Buzzfeed, 2019–2020). Delegated management is, however, of specific concern in this matter because of its active role in law enforcement, and with its reliance on international aid it is highly vulnerable to such criticism.

Influential publications such as *The Economist* and *Le Monde* have taken an interest in delegated management, with perspectives ranging from supportive to critical, thereby focusing on the so-called militarized model from the North (Anon., 2020; Servant, 2020; Tilouine, 2020). Such criticism should not be rejected or ignored (see also the response of African Parks, 2020) but considered as a stimulus to address outstanding problems.

TABLE 1 The 20 protected areas in West and Central Africa that currently have delegated management agreements, with the characteristics of each area and details of the agreements.

Protected area (by country)	Area (km ²)	IUCN category ¹	World Heritage Site?	Private partner ²	Contract year ³	Contract duration (years)	Management body/lead	Governance oversight	Governmental investments & contributions, sustainable funding details ⁴
Benin									
Pendjari	2,750	II	Yes	AP	2017	10	Management unit & conseil de gestion (lead by technical & private partners, & communities)	Comité de suivi (public partner)	Government of Benin contributes ≥ USD 1 million/year per protected area. Additional funding through FSOA ² (c. EUR 0.25 million/year per protected area)
	2,050	VI							
W	5,020	II	Yes	AP	2020	10	Management unit & conseil de gestion (technical & private representatives)	Comité de suivi (public partner)	Government of Benin contributes ≥ USD 1 million/year per protected area. Additional funding through FSOA ² (c. EUR 0.25 million/year per protected area)
	2,600	VI							
Central African Republic									
Chinko	15,027	VI	No	Chinko project AP	2014	50	AP	None	
	18,392 ⁵				2020	25			
Dzangha-Sanga	1,220	II	Yes	WWF	2019	5	Management unit	Comité de suivi	Partial funding through FTNS (c. EUR 1 million/year)
	3,159	VI							
North-East complex	40,724 ⁶	II, VI	Yes	WCS	2018	25	Direction/WCS	Board	
Chad									
Binder-Léré	1,3507 ⁷	II, IV	No	Noé	2021	15	Management unit	Board	
Ennedi	24,412	VI	WH	AP	2017	15	Direction/AP	Board	
Zakouma + since 2017 Siniaka-Minia	3,100	II	No	AP	2010	20	Foundation	Board	
	4,260	IV			2017	10	AP	Board	
Republic of the Congo									
Conkouati-Douli	5,050	II	No	Noé	2021	20	Management unit	Board	
Nouabale-Ndoki	4,230	II	Yes	WCS	2013	25	Foundation	Board	Partial funding through FTNS (c. EUR 1 million/year)
Odzala-Kokoua	13,546	II	No	AP	2010	25	Foundation	Board	
	13,546	II			2020	25			
	350	IV							
Democratic Republic of the Congo									
Garamba	5,133	II	Yes	AP	2005	5	AP Foundation	Board	
	9,663	VI			2011*	3			
Okapi	13,700	IV	Yes	WCS	2016	10			
Salonga	33,618	II	Yes	WWF	2015	3	Management unit	Coordination committee	

TABLE 1 (Cont.)

Protected area (by country)	Area (km ²)	IUCN category ¹	World Heritage Site?	Private partner ²	Contract year ³	Contract duration (years)	Management body/lead	Governance oversight	Governmental investments & contributions, sustainable funding details ⁴
Upemba-Kundelungu	24,600	II, VI	No	Forgotten Parks	2017	15		Conseil de coordination Board	
Virunga	7,880	II	Yes	VF	2005* 2011 2015	? 10 25	Foundation		
Niger Termit & Tin-Toumma ⁸	97,000	IV	No	Noé	2018	20	Management unit	Comité consultatif de gestion	
Nigeria Gashaka Gumta ⁹	6,402	II	No	ANI	2017 2019	30	Management team	Local organizing committee	
Rwanda Akagera	1,122	II	No	AP	2010	20	Non-profit business	Board	Upon contracting, Government of Rwanda constructed a c. USD 2.5 million electric fence
Nyungwe	1,019	II	No	AP	2020*				Well-equipped protected area (trails, visitor center, canopy walk) upon contracting

¹Hunting zones are here considered as IUCN category VI (Scholte, 2021).

²AP, African Parks; ANI, Africa Nature Investors Foundation Ltd; WWF, World Wide Fund for Nature; WCS, World Conservation Society; VF, Virunga Foundation; FSOA, Fondation des Savanes Ouest-Africaines; FTNS, Fondation de Tri-Sangha.

³Year contracts were signed (*contracts not seen), the newer contracts superseding older ones (Chinko, Garamba, Virunga, Zakouma).

⁴For details of private funding, see Scholte et al. (2021a).

⁵The 18,392 km² area of Chinko may be enlarged, pending 3 years of studies, to include all neighbouring hunting zones totalling 17,819 km² and, following a change in status of other hunting zones, an additional 9,990 km², bringing the total to 46,201 km².

⁶The North-East complex of protected areas in the Central African Republic (40,724 km²) comprises those zones considered as a priority in the eponymous CAR–WCS contract (Manovo-Gounda-St. Floris National Park, Bamingui-Bangoran National Park, and Vassoko-Bollo, Koukourou-Bamingui and Zone Pilote Sangha). With increasing efficiency and funding this could be enlarged to a total of c. 67,769 km² or, potentially, after evaluation, to 113,898 km².

⁷This includes a core area of 815 km² that has been proposed as Zah-Soo National Park.

⁸There is a plan to degazette over half of the Termit & Tin-Toumma Reserve (following oil exploitation) but an area to the west could be added in compensation.

⁹Included for comparison because of its uniqueness outside francophone West–Central Africa. It is the subject of a contract said to be for technical and financial support for conservation activities, but strongly resembling the delegated management contracts discussed here.

In this review, I take a constructive position to guide more mature delegated management practices. Firstly, I present insights from recent studies that show how delegated management, although not a perfect solution, has been able to improve the day-to-day management of several West and Central African protected areas (Scholte et al., 2021a). Secondly, I describe the main challenges that need to be addressed for delegated management to become more successful. Thirdly, I make recommendations for the development of partnership models, addressing each of the main partners (i.e. governments, private partners and funding agencies).

Information sources

I cover francophone West and Central Africa, comprising countries with a common history and similar legal–political frameworks in which the state generally plays a dominant role beyond day-to-day management of public services (Brugière, 2020). I am not aware of delegated management partnerships in other West and Central African nations, but see Table 1.

Here I draw on recent reviews of delegated partnerships that have used SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to capture opinions on delegated management partnerships (Scholte et al., 2018, 2021a). This includes a SWOT analysis developed by the directors in charge of protected areas of 10 Central African countries for best practice guidelines on delegated management (COMIFAC, 2018; Scholte et al., 2018). This public–partner perspective has been further developed by integrating the results of external evaluations of delegated management partnerships (Scholte et al., 2021a). Below, I reformulate these identified strengths as the successes of delegated protected area management partnerships and subsequently regroup identified weaknesses and threats and present them as challenges (Baghai et al., 2018; Scholte et al., 2018, 2021a). I address these challenges through five recommendations that also integrate the opportunities reported by Scholte et al. (2021a).

Delegated management successes

The successes of delegated management partnerships can be summarized as (1) increased effectiveness of protected area management through improved use of funds and equipment and accountability in their use; (2) an increased ability to raise and administer short- and medium-term funding, allowing upscaling of infrastructures and equipment as well as their maintenance, recruitment of qualified staff, and related matters; (3) strengthened conservation status and promotion of a protected area for tourism and other economic uses; and (4) enhanced development of a protected area's surroundings by securing employment and

implementing social infrastructure such as clinics and water points (Baghai et al., 2018; Scholte et al., 2018, 2021a; Brugière, 2020). These successes are remarkable given the generally poor governance, and operational difficulties, in most West and Central African countries, further exacerbated by the remoteness in which delegated management operates (Bauer et al., 2021).

Challenges of delegated protected area management partnerships

These successes notwithstanding, various challenges have been identified (Scholte et al., 2018, 2021a). These include the legal and procedural environment in which delegated management operates, the contribution of delegated management in assuring funding, and the role of capacity development, confidence building and communication, as well as concerns about perceived green militarization. Below, I discuss the main insights related to these challenges, on which I then base my recommendations.

Legal and procedural environment

Governmental agency personnel have frequently emphasized how a lack of legal provisions can block delegated management partnerships in some countries and limit their wider use in others (COMIFAC, 2018). Surprisingly, countries such as Cameroon, with a history of leasing trophy hunting zones to private partners, have not used that experience and have remained reluctant to move towards delegated management. The DRC (RDC, 2014) and Rwanda (Government of Rwanda, 2016) are the only countries that have legislation that caters for delegated management. However, both countries dealt with delegated management before having this legislation in place (Fig. 1). For a long time, law enforcement, considered the exclusive responsibility of the state, was seen as incompatible with delegated management in West and Central Africa. Recently, there have been efforts to bridge this impasse by having staff with governmental contracts within the organization of protected areas. This allows them to bear arms and arrest suspects while remaining under the management of the private partner (Scholte et al., 2021a).

Several partnerships, such as those in Zakouma National Park (Chad) and Odzala-Kokoua National Park (Republic of the Congo), have struggled to identify an appropriate model that would allow a nationally registered entity to act as a management body. Examples do, however, exist, such as the trusts common in Anglo-Saxon countries, foundations and non-profit bodies such as the Akagera Management Company in Rwanda.

All delegated management contracts in West and Central Africa are between central governments and international

NGOs. Through decentralization initiatives, local governments are increasingly enabled to take on responsibilities, including the management of protected areas. Expertise in this area is limited, however, and delegated management would allow decentralized governments to enhance their expertise through collaboration with experienced international or national private partners (Scholte et al., 2021a).

Funding

In addition to improved operational management, general expectations of delegated management include raising increased funding, a bottleneck for most protected areas (Balmford et al., 2003). Although there is widespread recognition of the capacity of private partners to administer funds, the funding that underlies most delegated management partnerships is usually seen as short-term project funding, not different from typical technical and financial support (Baghai et al., 2018). Among the 20 protected areas with delegated management in West and Central Africa, only Akagera and Nyungwe National Park in Rwanda have revenues, albeit dominated by income from tourism, which cover most of their management costs (Scholte et al., 2018). Whereas previously expectations were based on achieving financial independence for protected areas, the dominant theme has become managing protected areas as businesses, with international public funding complemented by philanthropic donations. However, the dependence on international public development assistance funding in West and Central Africa brings additional responsibilities. The EU, which accounts for approximately one-third of the funding for the protected areas considered here (Scholte et al., 2018), justifies the funding as being for both conservation and security (EU, 2019). This has given EU-funded projects, notably those in zones of instability and border areas (Chinko in the Central African Republic, Garamba and Virunga), responsibilities that go beyond conservation, which raises additional questions about the capacity of the private conservation partners.

An alternative source of funding is so-called sustainable funding, generally through annual contributions from conservation trust funds, where the capital is based on inputs from official development assistance or private funding (Doinjashvili et al., 2020). At the time of writing, four of the 20 protected areas considered here have such trust funds, independent from the private partner, that covers up to half of their management costs (Table 1; Scholte et al., 2021a). Four DRC World Heritage Sites with delegated management have a trust fund in preparation. The World Wide Fund for Nature has been the only private partner to initiate a long-term funding mechanism when it was still a project implementer in Dzanga-Sangha (Central African Republic), a park it is now managing. Sustainable funding has its time limits, however, and with present low

interest rates the prospect that these contributions may increase in the short- to medium-term are limited (Doinjashvili et al., 2020). The concept of a nation state is that it is an entity that will persist and has a permanent tax base; this suggests that one should not rely on delegated management partnerships, nor on sustainable funding mechanisms, for periods longer than several decades (H. Prins, pers. comm., 2021).

Capacity development

It is not surprising that the development of national capacities in protected area management has been at the forefront of discussions on partnerships (Baghai et al., 2018; Scholte et al., 2018). In several parks with large multi-donor programmes, the number of expatriate staff can be considerable (> 20) but there are generally few plans in place for developing the competence and capacity of national management staff preparing to take over their responsibilities. A good example, however, is Garamba, which has a training plan that outlines how middle-level national staff could be trained to take over. The number of expatriate staff tends to increase with project funding, often targeting community development, carrying the risk of delegated management being strongly dependent on short-term funding and creating a vicious circle of dependency on expatriate expertise.

Confidence and contracting conditions

One of the main factors of success identified has been the level of confidence between public and private partners, in particular among the individuals most involved (Scholte et al., 2021a). Sources of conflict are often a result of poor communication and lack of transparency, not only between public and private partners but also with the wider public, resulting in the partnership being the sole responsibility of the protected area authority as the signer of the contract, and not of the state as a whole.

Mutual expectations are not always clearly expressed in contracts at the start of delegated management initiatives. This is also the case for the greatest asset of parks, wildlife, which has seldom been monitored and evaluated systematically and independently. Such monitoring facilitates a more objective evaluation of the effectiveness of protected area management, and also prevents any inappropriate claims of increases in wildlife following a change in management.

However, even when expectations are clearly expressed in the contract, they are not always implemented. A striking example are evaluations of partnerships, which were written into all the 17 contracts I have seen (Table 1). Of the partnerships considered here, some 13 evaluations should have been conducted, although I am aware to date of only five (Scholte et al., 2021a).

Militarization and community relations

National stakeholders are almost unanimous in praising private partners for the law enforcement they have undertaken, with only a few hinting at green militarization (Scholte et al., 2018). This law enforcement has, however, been strongly criticized by some academics. Marijnen (2017), for example, described how a network of policymakers within the European Commission renders militarized conservation-related violence and controversy around Virunga National Park invisible by framing these matters as solely caused by economic factors and motivations. With increasing attention to possible human rights abuses by protected area authorities (Buzzfeed, 2019–2020), this and related critiques should be taken as a warning to bring conservation in line with international expectations for the respect of human rights.

Although delegated management partnerships are often praised for the resources made available for the development of community infrastructure (e.g. schools, clinics, water points), maintaining good personal relations with communities is considered much weaker (Scholte et al., 2021a). The contracting of the private partner has sometimes caused a break with well-established teams that had built decade-long relations with local communities. In addition, private partners have to manage a high turnover of expatriate staff who initially are often wildlife-oriented, and only later show more interest in community engagement.

Five recommendations

To address the challenges described above, I present five recommendations to guide more mature delegated management.

Recommendation (1), addressing governments Create an enabling delegated management environment and diversify its models, through (1) developing legislation for public-private partnerships where necessary; (2) building upon experience with the lease of trophy hunting zones to develop a more diverse set of delegated management partnership models; and (3) developing the possibility for appropriate management bodies (trusts, foundations, non-profit businesses) and adapting legislation where necessary.

Recommendation (2), addressing governments Ensure leadership in setting goals for management modes and subsequent contracting, by: (1) identifying appropriate types of management within the protected area network; (2) exhibiting transparency and consistency in the contracting phase through public tender of the protected area delegated management, thereby limiting any perceived cronyism and allowing other stakeholders to participate in the decision process (such as when the council of ministers in Rwanda was consulted prior to contracting Nyungwe National

Park); (3) describing expected results in contracts and quantifying them, where appropriate, as the basis for evaluations; (4) working proactively to prepare for the follow-up to delegated management, even if it seems far into the future. With respect to (1), in addition to the overall delegated management outsourcing (the African Parks model), specific protected area services (tourism, community development, research) can be outsourced for one or several protected areas together. The identification process is an opportunity to reach out to stakeholders from local authorities and communities to integrate their opinions into the identification process and extend ownership beyond the protected area service. This diversification of delegated management models may include protected areas under the responsibility of local or provincial authorities (Scholte et al., 2021a).

Recommendation (3), addressing private partners Make yourself dispensable through capacity development and ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of the protected area, by (1) preparing national staff to take over management tasks through systematic capacity development programmes; (2) initiating and participating in the development of sustainable financing mechanisms with trust funds and other funding sources (e.g. payment for ecosystem services); (3) cooperating with and where possible supporting related initiatives and local organizations, such as the incubator programme of African Parks, which aims to scale up its conservation impact by mentoring other organizations; (4) building on the gains of previous management, especially to further community relations that are often the product of long interactions.

Recommendation (4), addressing governments and private partners Respect human rights and build coalitions with communities by: (1) signing up and reporting to human right declarations, and developing mechanisms to hold protected area personnel accountable for their actions; (2) building genuine coalitions with communities, not only by providing support to social infrastructure and employment of local people, but also by consultation with community leaders in decision-making processes; (3) exhibiting transparency with respect to funding sources and finances of supported protected areas (a good example is the annual report of African Parks, 2011, which shows the costs of the various protected area services), and rendering delegated management contracts available upon reasonable request; (4) implementing the contracts as prescribed, including the contractually programmed evaluations (if not possible, partners should agree on mutually acceptable modifications).

Recommendation (5), addressing governments, private partners and funding agencies One should do the work one is expert at, by (1) focusing on the core tasks of delegated

protected area management, and avoid forcing delegated management partnerships into a project implementation body that masks the core tasks of protected area management; (2) keeping the core function of protected area management separate from project implementation, especially with regard to management and financial administration; (3) striving to outsource parts of non-core protected area management tasks, such as tourist guiding and reception, community development, medical services and research, to specialized, preferably local, based individuals and organizations, for efficiency, diversification and sustainability.

Discussion

Comparing the Garamba (DRC, African Parks) contract from 2005, the first in West and Central Africa, with the contract for Odzala-Kokoua (Republic of the Congo, African Parks) from 2020, one notices the learning that delegated management in West and Central Africa has undergone (Table 1). Most of this learning has, however, been on the side of the private partner, in particular African Parks, and masks the lagging behind of the development of delegated management partnerships from a governmental perspective. After 15 years, one should expect from the public side more direction, a clearer expression of expectations, as well as more coherence, not to aim at homogeneous partnerships but for increased effectiveness, sustainability and ownership beyond the authorities in charge of protected areas (Scholte et al., 2018; Table 1).

In addition to this asymmetric learning, discussions to improve delegated management have generally centred on the role of the private partners. This holds especially with respect to the need for capacity building, of which the underperformance has been attributed mainly to the lack of initiatives by the private partner (Baghai et al., 2018; Scholte et al., 2018). Attention is needed to the neglected role of the public partners in this and other domains, without which governmental agencies will, consciously or unconsciously, continue playing a passive role without the necessary constructive pressure on private partners (but note the best practices of COMIFAC, 2018).

Institutional donors have played a role in these discussions often without realizing that with high expectations from funding delegated management partnerships, they overload them with non-core conservation tasks, potentially hindering any future handing-over to national staff. Although delegated management started in Southern Africa with degraded game reserves, it has so far mostly dealt with prestigious World Heritage Sites in West and Central Africa (Scholte et al., 2018; Table 1). Undoubtedly the lure of institutional funding, in particular from the EU, has played a role in this (Scholte et al., 2018). More mature delegated management should play a role in other

categories of protected areas as well, including those under the responsibility of decentralized entities such as districts and provinces (Scholte et al., 2021a). I also see potential for the involvement of national private partners and NGOs. Finally, one may expect delegated management to play an increasing role in other regions in Africa, and elsewhere, for which, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, experiences from West and Central Africa, with its low frequency of tourism, have become increasingly relevant (Bauer et al., 2021).

Acknowledgements This article took shape through stimulating feedback from Djafarou Tiomoko, Bertrand Chardonnet, Jean-Pierre d'Huart, Arnaud Greth, David Brugière, two reviewers and the Editor. I thank the hospitality and shared insights on delegated management from the staff of Pendjari (Benin), Dzanga-Sangha (Central African Republic), Nouabalé-Ndoki (Republic of the Congo), Zakouma (Chad), Garamba, Virunga (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Akagera (Rwanda). Serge Kamgang prepared Fig. 3. The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Conflicts of interest None.

Ethical standards The research abides the *Oryx* guidelines on ethical standards.

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