FORESTRY AND DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION IN SUB-SAHRAN AFRICA: A ROUGH DRAFT REVIEW

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Abstract

How can forestry interventions support the emergence of local democracy? How can local democracy foster sustainable and just forest management and use? Several theories (public choice, new institutionalism, neoclassical economics, collective action, common property, human rights and democracy theory) indicate that democratic decentralization can increase equity and efficiency in natural resource management and service delivery. These theories tell us improvements will follow from reduced transaction costs and the integration of local needs and aspirations into local decisions. But, because democratic decentralization reforms rarely take place—in forestry or any other sector—we do not fully understand the conditions under which democratic decentralization improves equity and efficiency or reduces poverty in forestry or any other sectors. There has been enough experimentation in small-scale projects to indicate that these decentralization theories have some merit. More attention needs to focus on why and when decentralizations take place and then to assess the multiple factors shaping their outcomes. This article explores the history of decentralization reforms in Africa and some learning on local management in the forestry sector. It examines how decentralization reforms have been fettered or promoted within the forestry sector and outlines obstacles and opportunities for legislating and implementing democratic decentralization reforms. The article then outlines an approach to the promotion of democratic environmental governance.

Introduction

Democracy is accountability of leaders to their people. Different institutions in the local arena are accountable to local people in different ways. Which institutions, authorities or categories of person represent—are accountable and responsive to—‘local’ people in forestry? Who is receiving authority or powers to manage forests under a given reform or project? The choice of local institutional interlocutors by intervening agencies—central governments, donors, large NGOs or international development agents—is important. Working through different kinds of local institutions—private, public, representative, administrative, civic—might have different kinds of equity, efficiency and democracy outcomes (Woolcock and Pritchet 2005; Ribot 2006; Ribot, Chhatre and Lankina 2008).

The choice of local actors by intervening agents reflects something about what they are trying to accomplish—democratic processes, civil society thickening, privatization. Some aim to strengthen public institutions (line ministries or elected local governments), others root for so-called civil society (indigenous authorities, NGOs, CBOs), and yet others champion private institutions (corporations or individuals). They may be motivated by an anti-government Thatcher-Regan stance with their polar view of bad corrupt government and
good civil society/private sector. Their choices may reflect a general uninformed conformity to the trends of development concerning good governance, bad government, lets go private, lets downsize the state and build up the third-sector, lets try local government via decentralization. The choices by intervening agencies may just reflect expedience in implementing their forest management intervention—they may choose the quickest or cheapest interlocutor for establishing a management plan, a participatory process, a forest plantation, a protected area or some other measurable success that they can bring home to their parent agency. Together the mix of drivers and the institutional choices being made bring us to the confused amalgam of the present plurality of local institutions.

Decentralization is a particular type of institutional choice—although many other phenomena take place in its name. It is not Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) that relies on participatory processes, committees, user groups, chiefs, NGOs, private corporations or private individuals. Rather, it is a set of legal reforms that result in the devolution of powers from central government to lower levels of government—that is to local administrative offices or to local elected government. It may be a form of CBNRM, but most CBNRM interventions are not decentralization. CBNRM is a big topic in itself—it is a means of intervention that, despite all of its shortcomings, remains very popular (Blaike 2006). This article is dedicated to examining one form of intervention that most African governments claim to be undertaking and forestry services claim to be involved with—democratic decentralization or transfers of powers to elected local governments. While transfers to local line ministries is a form of decentralization (called deconcentration), few CBNRM people would consider it CBNRM. But, democratic decentralization, where local representative authorities receive powers in the name of local citizens, can be counted among the many manifestations of CBNRM.

The distinction between CBNRM and democratic decentralization of NRM is that the latter is specifically about including whole populations—all citizens—in NRM decision making based on representative authority (see Alden Wily n.d.). Like the World Bank’s Community-driven Development (CDD), CBNRM defines community for each intervention—the user group, the ‘stakeholders’ the people near the forest, the fishers. Further, they define the mode of representation of that ‘community’ as they go—through appointed committees, elected committees, stakeholder fora, participatory processes, ‘customary’ chiefs, project personnel, etc. Democratic decentralization involves transfers to elected local government authorities. The community is defined as the citizens—those who live in the jurisdiction.

Because forestry-sector democratic decentralizations require the existence of local government, they must take place in the context of larger efforts to build local government (Alden Wily n.d.). The history of local government across Africa is one of territorial management, control and integration (Buell 1928; Mandani 1996). Introduction of local government has long roots in the management of subjects and the extraction of wealth under colonial rule. Colonial powers ventured to transfer the administrative management of the rural world to ‘customary’ authorities under what the British called ‘indirect rule’ and French called ‘association’. The Portuguese followed similar policies. Colonizers used local customary authorities as administrators for the central state in what was a locally rooted deconcentration. At independence in the middle of the last century, Africa’s fledgling new nations chose to re-centralize control, to consolidate power and only later re-launched decentralization in the 1970s. While there were rumblings about local democracy during the colonial period, it was not until the 1980s that decentralization discourse adopted the widespread enfranchising language of democracy.
decentralization took a turn toward the production of democracy and the consequent transformation of subjects into citizens.

This shift in discourse has been followed in many nations through new laws introducing or strengthening elected local authorities. In parallel to these political-administrative reforms, forestry services and forestry practitioners have also shifted both their language and practice first toward greater participation and then toward “decentralization”. Like the general administration of colonial Africa, Forestry Services also had a long history of subjugating rural Africans. Foresters were the vanguard of rural colonization in 1910 to 1916\(^1\), being the first to accompany the colonial military into Africa’s interior. Foresters have always followed the discourse and the administrative conventions of their times. They also followed the practices of their times—which was usually to continue to control and manage the rural world for extractive purposes\(^2\) even when the discourse turned to participation and later enfranchisement at the end of the 20\(^{th}\) century.\(^3\) Forestry law and practice reflects a microcosm of the broader political-administrative reforms in which it is located—although the sector often resists those reforms it at least takes on the discourse. While line ministries, such as environment, health, education or agriculture, can deconcentrate on their own, they cannot engage in democratic decentralization if the broader democratic decentralization has not been undertaken by the nation. Democratic decentralization of forestry requires the prior establishment of elected local authorities.

Decentralized and community-based forestry have faced many obstacles and disappointments. Case studies and comparative research indicates that democratic decentralization or CBNRM does little for conservation and that conservation may not be good for local livelihoods (Tacconi Saigian and Syam 2006; Blaikie 2006). Nevertheless, there are at least three sets of values that decentralization theorists and practitioners believe democratic decentralization will promote: better use and conservation of environmental values and services; improved of rural livelihoods; and local enfranchisement. These values are shared with CBNRM, are worth preserving, and will be explored in this article. Some theorists and many practitioners of CBNRM believe that the three are interlinked, but as of yet, these interlinkages remain hypothetical—or at least highly contingent on yet to be understood conditions. Nevertheless, all three values are worth pursuing—and there will be tradeoffs and positive reinforcements among them. This paper explores what we know and

\(^1\) Foresters were often the first professionals to accompany the military into Africa’s interior in the early colonial period.

\(^2\) In the colonial period it was one of management. Today it is one of participation and is moving toward representation. Stating the goal of France’s mission, French forester Bertin (1919:305) writes: “We engage ourselves, in effect, to know all the exploitable species, neglected to the present, and that should have been used for the profit of industry” (italics in original). Bertin also wants to train the ‘natives’ (using the term dressage) so as to get the most from their labor. Bertin (1919:308) states:

“The final goal toward which we must move is to cede to the natives for the most part forestry work, and the organization of small interested local businesses where collectives and black villages monitor by themselves their work and automatically augment their efficiency. But one must at least teach to the blacks to use tools and engines, quite rustic without doubt, but allowing nonetheless to improve the yield of human labor.”

\(^3\) Senegal instituted a ‘participatory’ forestry code in 1993; Ghana in the late 1980s (Ribot 1995; Wardell and Lund 2006:1894). Participatory forestry laws swept the continent by the mid 90s. Many were then later revised as participation gave way to decentralization.
then tries to disaggregate these three objectives so as to explore some minimum requirements for achieving each separately and/or together.

This article 1) reviews the history of decentralization in Africa with reference to forestry, 2) explores some of the problems associated with reforms that have been called ‘decentralization’ in the forestry sector, and 3) outlines some possible ways forward.

**Past Decentralizations in Africa—A Condensed History**

**A Short History Before Independence**

Decentralization in Africa is not new. Before French and British colonization, German colonizers in Cameroon were concerned with getting indigenous people to “…manage their own affairs” (Mveng 1985:23-40). Since 1917 there have been at least four waves of decentralization in Francophone West Africa—after both World Wars, shortly after independence and in the present decade (Buell 1928:929-30; Schumacher 1975:89-90; Cowan 1958:60; RdS 1972; Hesseling n.d.:15; RdM 1977; Ouali et al. 1994:7; Diallo 1994; Gellar 1995:48; Crook and Manor 1994; UNCDF 2000; Wardell and Lund 2006:1889). French Central Africa also decentralized just before independence (Weinstein 1972:263-6), and in some countries after independence (Gellar 1995; Therkildsen 1993; Biya 1986:51). The Anglophone and Lusophone worlds have also seen multiple pre- and post-colonial decentralizations (Ahwoi 2000:2; UNCDF 2000; Mamdani 1996; Mbassi 1995:23; Therkildsen 1993; Rondinelli et al. 1989; Buell 1928; Burke 1964; Mawhood 1983; Conyers 1984; de Valk and Wekwete 1991; Rothchild 1994; West and Kloock-Jenson 1999).

In the colonial period, decentralized government, called *association* under the French and ‘indirect rule’ by the British, was set up as a means of penetration and for the management of the rural world (Mamdani 1996). In both systems the colonial rulers used local ‘customary’ chiefs to administer the rural world. The Portuguese ‘native policy’ too created a set of colonially appointed local chiefdoms called *regerdorias* (or *regulados*) to tax, conscript labor and police (West and Klobck-Jenson 1999:456; Convery 2006). These systems were created to manage Africans under local administrative rule. As one Mozambican historian noted, this system was “designed to control peasant societies and extract surplus from them for the benefit of the state or colonial companies (Convery 2006:451). Although now condemned by history, association and indirect rule were accompanied by laudable idealist justifications (Alexandre 1970a:65-8; Buell 1928; Perham 1960). 

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4 As prescribed in Lord Lugard’s “Duel Mandate” of 1922, colonial administration was established to benefit the African peoples and the world economy (Therkildsen 1993:79). The prescription that African governance was to serve external instrumental purposes has been reproduced throughout colonial rule, through independence and into the present ‘participatory’ era. Whether the purpose be the support of world markets, agricultural production, development or natural resource management, the duel mandate sets up serious governance tensions. By foisting outside agendas on governance bodies, it undermines the local legitimacy of government. By being oriented toward mobilization of local populations for external purposes, local governance systems set up under colonialism produced subjects rather than citizens setting up systems of management and control rather than representation and enfranchisement.

5 In 1922 Yves Henry (in Chauveau 1994:31-32), the Agricultural Inspector General of French West Africa argued for a participatory model of development "To educate the peasant, give him the means to work well, then
(1936:12-14), along with many other actors at the time, praised indirect rule as a progressive form of community participation allowing self determination.6

Nevertheless, policies of indirect rule and association created an ‘institutional segregation’ in which most Africans were relegated to live in a sphere of so called ‘customary’ law (or the ‘indigent’ which was an administratively driven form of State-ordained and enforced regulation). Europeans and urban citizens, however, obeyed civil laws. In 1936 British colonial officer Lord Hailey wrote: “...the doctrine of differentiation aims at the evolution of separate institutions appropriate to African conditions and differing both in spirit and in form from those of Europeans.”7 Mamdani points out that “The emphasis on differentiation meant the forging of specifically ‘native’ institutions through which to rule subjects...” (Mamdani 1996:8). These local governing institutions were reproduced after independence.8

progressively bring to his land tenure improvements without which any program would be but in vain....” He then asked:

How does one bring together a producer association and what financial means would one put at their disposition to improve tools and cultivation. In French West Africa these associations find an excellent base in the private mutual assistance societies [société de prévoyance].... But their existence will not be assured, they will not fill their duties except under the double condition of being truly agricultural associations and of seeing the structure of the current mutual societies broken from their purely administrative organs that are suffocating them. [Since] the peasant does not understand them, his initiative will not be awaken, he will not cleanly profit except if these organizations are not extremely supple and if the administrative tutelage needed at the beginning is relaxed bit by bit, to finally disappear and be replaced by a simple power of controle.

With such plans, the administration of French West Africa created an agricultural policy it believed was based on the specificities of African peasants (Chauveau 1994:32).

6 “The basic aim of Indirect Rule is the development of an African society able to participate in the life of the modern world as a community in its own right. In territories where it is followed government does not accept the encouragement of European enterprises as a duty, but judges its value in the light of the contribution which it can make to African development. The other aspect of Indirect Rule—the preservation of African institutions where the needs of the Africans themselves do not call for their modification—is almost a natural corollary of this attitude toward European penetration....

Under Indirect Rule the land of the territory is recognized as the property of the native tribes, and, though alienation is still permitted, the ruling principle is always that such alienation must produce beneficial results to the native community and must be accompanied by adequate compensation. Neither the wholesale transference of native populations nor the curtailment of their reserves to dimensions which make them unable to gain subsistence by their accustomed economic methods are permitted under such a system. Village life on the lands protected by the ancestral spirits, work organized through traditional systems of co-operation and fitting into the accustomed rhythm of alternating effort and recreation, by methods improved perhaps, not under the strain of necessity but through the incentive of increased returns, becomes the bases of an economic development, which, if properly guided, can be integrated into the structure of an African society instead of remaining an external disintegrating force.” (Mair 1936:12-14.)

7 Quoted in Mamdani 1996:7.

8 “…although the bifurcated State created with colonialism was deracialized after independence, it was not democratized. Postindependence reform led to diverse outcomes. No nationalist government was content to reproduce the colonial legacy uncritically. Each sought to reform the bifurcated State that institutionally crystallized a State-enforced separation, of the rural from the urban and of one ethnicity from another. But in doing so each reproduced a part of that legacy, thereby creating its own variety of despotism” (Mamdani 1996:8).
In The Cameroons, neither the German, French nor British colonial administrations developed any significant form of indirect rule (Stark 1980:105-21). Mawhood (1983:179) also indicates that rule in Cameroon was largely “direct,” with minor exceptions among the Bamileke and in the North. However, starting in the teens and 1920s the French supported (and in some instances created) the institution of chieftaincy as a means of rural administration and labor management, as well as to indigenize their rule. In the mid 1940s, they shifted to a system by which chiefs were elected (Geschiere 1993:153-7; Mawhood 1983:180). In 1941 the French developed a system of appointed Municipal Notable Commissions, under the authority of a High Commissioner, creating an “indigenous” extension of central administration. They extended this system to rural areas in the mid 1950s, however, with what Mawhood (1983:180) calls “a strongly representative constitution,” calling for independent candidates and universal suffrage (with 12 of the 230 seats reserved for French Citizens—who also had to stand for election). Chiefs presented themselves and were elected, constituting 21 to 38 percent of the council seats depending on the region (Mawhood 1983:187). As part of a move away from indigenous local authorities, French Cameroon was unique among Francophone countries, having established rural elected local government by the mid 1950s.

After 1914, the British in Cameroon also focused on strengthening chieftaincy as an administrative tool (an approach we see re-emerging today in many decentralizations across the continent—including forestry sector reforms). Indeed, the British report on Cameroon to the League of Nations in 1922 quoted Lord Lugard in asserting that their goal was “to rule through the Chiefs, to endeavor to educate them in the duties of rulers, seek their co-operation and maintain their prestige.” But, while indirect rule was tried in British Cameroon, the colonial administration did not feel it had taken root as late as 1933, when they moved away from chiefs to establish administratively selected councils (Geschiere 1993:158-62). In the late 1950s, due to problems concerning migrant laborer representation, the British followed the French by insisting that the native authorities would have to be elected from then on. Elected councils were established (Geschiere 1993:158-62). Ironically, to justify their reform, the British used the adage “no taxation without representation” (Geschiere 1993:163). The Cameroons arrived at independence having some experience with local democracy.

In 1930 French West Africa’s forester Lavaudan wrote "The Colonial Forestry Problem," painting a brilliant parallel between forestry problems and the 1920s debates over the "native problem" (Buell, ). He evokes almost every dimension of the ongoing debates on Indirect Rule and Association in his call for an overarching forestry policy that treats the management of forests for "...future indigenous prosperity" as well as for “European benefit,” and "the general interest." He envisions placing ultimate control in the hands of expert foresters while carving out a limited domain of indigenous autonomy—under usufructuary laws—and creating a scheme of forest management somewhere between the European monocultural ideal and the chaos of the “primitive forest” (Lavaudan 1930:185-6).

Lavaudan speaks of tropical forests as colonial officers and anthropologists of the time speak of African communities: “Primitive forests constitute closed formations, that is to say formations in biological equilibrium, where there is no available place to accommodate foreign species.” Projecting the racism and imperialism of his time, he compares the ‘noble species’ of Africa to the oak of Europe—pointing out that no one Africa species shares all of the fine qualities of the European oak. His vision is ultimately to reduce the complexity of the
African forests to several “noble” species—perhaps eleven. But he notes that it will never reach the ideal of a European monoculture. (Lavauden 1930.)

The foresters of the colonial period, the period after independence and of today were subject to the social trends around them. They took on the language and viewed forests in terms of the political culture they were embedded in. To understand current political administration of forests, we need to understand the wider trends of decentralization that forestry departments and people living in forests are subject to.

Independence: Recentralization First

At independence, the late 1950s and early 60s for the majority of African nations, most African governments inherited a system in which local governments were tools of administrative management. Under this system so-called ‘customary’ authorities were privileged as the ‘representatives’ of the rural world and the prefets, commandants des cercles and district officers were the appointed supervising managers. The coercive abuses of the colonial state de-legitimized local governments and customary authorities. Nevertheless, colonial policy set up the infrastructure for the central state to continue managing rural affairs. They did not leave the structures as they found them, but reformed them to further strengthen central roles. For example, governments at independence de-politicized the role of local government in the Anglophone countries by deliberately playing down the role of elected councils in policy and decision making (Oyugi 2000:16). In addition, the systems relying on chiefs were uniformly discredited by new independent governments across the continent—chiefs were marginalized due to their role supporting colonial regimes (Convery 2006:451; ).

In the post colony, according to Therkildsen (1993:82), local government had two prominent features: 1) regardless of regime type, ruling groups sought to control local-level public affairs, and 2) local social groups generally avoided or disregarded sub-national political-administrative organizations. After independence governments across Africa continued to use local governments as administrative units but major functions of local governments, such as health, education and roads and local taxation, were relocated under central government control. Local governments were not acting as units of self-determination, but rather as entities for state control. Elections to local councils were also abolished or centrally controlled. The tendency toward centralization in the first two decades after independence reflected the politics of this heyday of military rule, during which time governments were trying to consolidate political power. (Therkildsen 1993:82; Oyugi 2000:13; Olowu 2001:8 [recheck]; Hagberg 2004.) Decentralization was used to expand the reach of the state, so reforms took the shape of deconcentration—extending central administration into the local arena. This was reinforced by the period’s dominance by one-party states and socialist governments, which did not create the space for elected local governments. There was little popular participation in local government. Deconcentration was designed to reinforce “verticality.” (UNCDF 2000:2.)

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9 As Tukahebwa (1998:12) points out “The local government system that evolved in Uganda was designed to serve the interest of the colonialists.”

10 At the same time, important deconcentration experiments, such as the ‘villagization’ schemes in Tanzania, were also taking place (Oyugi 2000:13). Much of the reform that took place in these early years focused on

Francophone West African governments decentralized after independence with the express purpose of introducing ‘participatory local governments.’ Governments, such as Senegal, considered to be far advanced in their decentralizations, however, maintained a system of ruling party control and administrative oversight that strangled local autonomy. Mali created elected local councils in 1979, but did not give them powers (Diallo 2000:1). 11 In Cameroon, the postcolonial order has created ‘village development committees’ (comités villageois de développement) without powers and ultimately instrumental to regional state authorities (sous-préfets and préfets) (Oyono 2002b:14-19). In 1972, the Ahidjo regime changed from a federal to a more-centralized Jacobin system, setting up provinces, divisions, sub-divisions and districts which instituted a pyramid of authority, deconcentrating central power downward. The result was the maintenance of a singular centralized decision-making structure. Civil society was not implicated in the management of the public sphere (Karlström 1999). Although declaring interest in “localism,” independent Cameroon’s 1972 reforms approached local government as instruments of central authority, actively administering them down to the ground by setting up candidatures based on party list and putting in place tight oversight and limiting their role in execution (Mahwood 1983:195-7).

Zimbabwe deconcentrated powers to local administrators in 1984, focusing on creating planning committees. There was little impact on the allocation of resources, however, producing frustration and skepticism, but leading to pressure by the Ministry for Local Government for significant re-allocation of powers to elected local authorities. In 1993, new powers were officially decentralized to elected rural district councils, but line ministries never transferred significant powers to them (Conyers 2001:2). In the late 90s, Mugabe transferred, however, the control over natural resources from local government to customary chiefs—effectively acting as administrators for central government (a kind of indirect rule) (ref.____). Nigeria began a stop and start again decentralization process in the 1970s, introducing elected local government in 1976 and 1983 (Crook and Sverrisson 2001:34). Nigeria devolved major functions such as law enforcement, maintenance of roads and bridges, rural development responsibilities, agricultural development, health, water and housing provision to elected local governments in 1976 (Rondinelli et al. 1989). In Ghana, Rawlings established ‘elected’ district assemblies in 1987, however, these assemblies had

11 ‘development’. As Oyugi (2000:13) points out, such development “is usually accompanied by a tendency towards centralization.” In practice, these reforms usually meant the sharing of development decision-making power between central ministries and their field offices. It was a focus on administrative decentralization, giving prominence to development planning involving local-level coordination of program design and implementation, being much in character with the era of integrated rural development.

11 Powers were legislated in 1988, but never implemented (Diallo 2000).
very limited powers and a large portion of their members were appointed by the central state (Rothchild 1994:4; also see Wardell and Lund 2006).

But in practice, even in Ghana and Nigeria or in the Francophone countries where democratic local government was written into the constitution or given special legal protection, “…the reforms lead to growing central government control…” (Therkildsen 1993:83; cf. Ribot 1999; Crook and Manor 1999; Mawhood 1983). Through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, decentralizations across the continent failed to produce autonomous representative local government units. They failed to devolve significant powers to local representative bodies (Mawhood 1983; Manor 1999; Crook and Manor 1999; Mamdani 1996). Surveys in the 1970s and 80s showed virtually no local-government autonomy form the central state (Oyugi 2000:17). “By the end of the 1970s, it was clear that the state institutional apparatus for decentralised development had neither promoted participation, nor promoted any meaningful economic and social advancement” (UNCDF 2000:2). One West African survey “…could not find any local government with control over its budget or any with autonomous policy making powers” (in Oyugi 2000:17). In short, the post-colonial governments failed to establish the infrastructure of local representation that would have been needed to receive decentralized powers in forestry or any other field.

After Structural Adjustment

In the 1980s and 90s, structural adjustment programs, requiring the cutting down of central government budgets and staff, forced many governments to develop decentralization reforms. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the elections in South Africa, these reforms were infused with new democratic language. As the United Nations Capital Development Fund, charged with supporting local government, emphasized, in the 1990s “political decentralisation has assumed a new meaning, away from the imposition of centralised monolithic values, towards a much more rights-based culture” (UNCDF 2000:3). Decentralization evolved in this new context of pluralist discourse emphasizing greater representation of citizens, an emphasis on state reforms toward market-based development with structural adjustment programs. Decentralization in this context was viewed as a way of supporting local governance and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to local populations (UNCDF 2000:3). Policies of decentralization were pursued for both developmental and political reasons. De Valk (1990:3-6) argues that over the years there was a shift from an emphasis on the political justifications—national stability, garnering popular support, ‘petty politicking’, etc.—during the 1950s and 1960s, to a focus on the developmental value of decentralization which characterizes the present wave of decentralization beginning in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin wall and the emergence of democracy movements across Africa, the discourse on decentralization began to highlight “democratic decentralization” as the preferred reform (Crook and Manor 1999; UNCDF 2000:1; Hagberg 2004; Mback 2004). But, as will be come clear from the discussions below, most of the

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12 For an excellent summary of the advantages and disadvantages of ‘fully decentralized systems’, see Ostrom (1999:38-9).

13 Alden Wily (2000;2001;n.d.) notes a significant and related shift in the language and orientation of community based natural resource management in East and Southern Africa. She points toward a democratizing trend in this sector.
recent reforms taking place in the name of democratic decentralization have not created the accountable representative local institutions nor devolved the powers that would constitute democratic decentralization (Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Ribot 1999). Today, some donor agencies and theorists are promoting democratic decentralization as the ideal form, involving the establishment of “…autonomous and independent units of local government…” (UNCDF 2000:4). Whenever changes have been initiated in the local government sector “…the stated objective in virtually every country [in Africa] has been to strengthen them as instruments of democratic governance and efficient and effective service provision.” Nevertheless, to date it appears that “…regardless of the design of the local government system, the prevailing centralizing tendencies on the part of central government have rendered meaningful political decentralization a myth” (Oyugi 2000:17).

Decentralization at the Dawn of the New Millennium

Decentralization reforms across Africa reached the new century with a mix of hope and frustration. Like the promise of democratization stirred by the fall of the Berlin Wall, at the dawn of the new century local empowerment and enfranchisement was insipient at best. Many reforms had been put in place but little substantive change was visible on the ground (see Kulipossa 2004; Ribot 2004; Ribot and Oyono 2005). In addition, new monkey wrenches began jumping into the gears of change. Customary chiefs began to remerge and challenge democratic decentralization with great force (Geschiere and Boone 2003; Ntsebeza 2002,2005; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999). While donors pushed ever harder for decentralization, central governments began to master the art of recentralizing while decentralizing—making everyone happy in the political sphere of state and donors while delivering few new benefits to local governments or local people (Ribot, Agrawal and Larson 2006).

Decentralization in Forestry

Dubois (1997) proposes three phases in forestry in Africa: The technocratic-colonial style management giving way to a ‘participatory’ era, the participatory era giving way to a negotiation-based ‘stake-holder’ era in the late 90s. Dubois is observing a move from an ability to participate in others projects to an ability to negotiate with some significant leverage. While this is neither democratic nor decentralized, it is a move toward greater community control. By 2000, Alden Wily (n.d.) describes forestry programs in Africa as evolving from a set of revenue- or benefit-sharing efforts toward real power sharing. This is a shift where villages go from having access to forests for use or are allowed to share some income to a situation where local communities become resource managers themselves. This shift changes the relation between communities and forest services. In the latter case the forest service gives up some of its authority and transfers it to the community. She describes an evolution within this latter shift of management to communities in which at first transfers are to user groups—interested parties in forestry—and later to multi-purpose elected governments. She cites the case of Tanzania as the vanguard in this truly democratic and decentralized form of forest management. In this context “…community-level managers may operate and also be held accountable to their constituencies” (n.d.17). In Tanzania, this is made possible by the existence of democratic local governance structures. She concludes by observing that “Where devolved governance is poorly developed, empowerment of local forest management in new legislation is demonstrably constrained…” (n.d. 18).
As Alden Wily (n.d.) observes, for there to be decentralized forestry, there needs to be decentralized government institutions. But, the new local elected government popping up across the continent have faced many constraints. They had constitutions that made their elected officials upwardly accountable to parties and budgets that made them accountable to line ministries and the legislature. They had little discretion and could hardly be said to be representative institutions. Further, most development agencies and forestry line ministries chose, even where there were elected local authorities, to work through participatory, stakeholder or CBNRM approaches. The line ministries did create and strengthen their local offices in many deconcentration efforts, but forestry, by and large, did not go through a democratic decentralization. Lund and Wardell (2006:1896) observe a move toward user groups in Ghana rather than representative authorities. Mozambique’s 1999 forest and wildlife law creates ‘fragile’ elected committees at the local level despite there being elected local governments\(^\text{14}\) (Salomão and Matose 2007). In most cases, where local governments were involved, their main role was to sign off on management plans laid down by forest services or to carry out prescribed forest management activities—a kind of new era corvée. Only in a few cases were there significant decision-making powers or revenues devolved to elected local authorities as in Uganda, Senegal and Tanzania (Oyono 2004; Ribot 2003; Alden Wily n.d.; Brockington 2007).

Dozens of studies conducted on forestry and other natural resource decentralization reforms in Africa by World Resource Institute from 2000 to 2007 show progress and retrenching in democratic decentralization\(^\text{15}\). The most striking finding is that even in the cases declared great successes, democratic decentralization of forest and other natural resource management either transfer too little power to be meaningful or transfer those powers to non-representative local authorities (Ribot 2004; Ribot, Chhatre and Lankina 2007). Neither powers without representation nor representation without powers constitutes decentralization. We do not expect improved equity, efficiency or democracy from either of these configurations. In short, democratic decentralization of natural resources of any sort is rare, making it very difficult to study. Nevertheless, there is progress in forestry decentralization despite the pulling back of each advance.

For example, under Mali’s, Senegal’s, Tanzania’s, and Uganda’s progressive decentralizations, democratically elected local governments have been established as recipients of decentralized powers (Ribot 2008; Alden Wily n.d.). In Mali, however, the environmental service refuses to transfer powers to elected local government despite requirements of the new forestry laws.\(^\text{16}\) Similarly, in Uganda, powers transferred to local institutions are limited by required restrictive management plans (Namara 2001; Bazaara 2006; Muhereza 2006). Uganda’s proposed Forestry Law of 2001 does not specify guidelines for selecting powers that will be transferred, nor the levels of local government that will receive them (ROU 2001). In Senegal, the 1998 forestry code gives rural councils powers to decide if and when their forests will be cut and the right to make and execute management plans, but the forest service has not allowed them to exercise any of the rights they were

\(^\text{14}\) Confirm that there are elected local governments that are functional in this environment.

\(^\text{15}\) See WRI working papers at http://governance.wri.org/project_description2.cfm?ProjectID=44.

given in law (Larson and Ribot 2007). In these cases the laws give local authorities the right to manage natural resources, but they are subject to restrictive requirements imposed by the central forestry agencies. Further, in Mali and Uganda many forests previously in the public domain are being privatized in the name of decentralization (Muhereza 2001; Ribot 1999b). Privatization is taking public resources away from democratic institutions and transferring them to customary and other private bodies, a move that neither supports nor follows the logic of democratic decentralization.

Management plans seem to be the most common means for forest departments to re-centralize any autonomy that might be implied by the transfer of rights to manage. The participatory and current ‘decentralized’ forestry periods have both accompanied by a proliferation of micro management plans. Forest services, with the help of donors, required village, user or project committees or their elected rural authorities to elaborate complex management plans before they would have the right to break even one small branch. These plans have tended to be overly complex and highly expensive to elaborate. The trend in the past four or five years has been to speak of ‘simplified’ management plans. But the practice has changed little. Management plans are one of the main barriers enabling continued line-ministry control by preventing rural populations from using the resources around them before they agree to labors of forest management (Wardell and Lund 2006:1894; Ribot 1995,2004; Latif 2002, 67; Etoungou 2001; Graziani and Burnham 2002; Oyono 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Salomão and Matose 2007:15). Like participatory approaches in forestry, many management planning requirements were introduced much earlier in the colonial period and just reworked with each new forestry era. Indeed, local participation in the elaboration of management plans in some places is less in recent years than during the colonial times (Wardell and Lund 2006:1894-6).  

Leaving important decisions over the allocation of valuable resources to ministerial decrees or administrative order is one of the many techniques for recentralizing, environmental legislation. This means is used in Mali, Cameroon, Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso, South Africa, Zimbabwe and elsewhere. In Mali, for example, decentralization is called for by the constitution, while decentralization of powers over natural resources is called for in environmental legislation, such as the forestry code. But, within the 1996 forestry code, the

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17 In 1919 the Minister of Colonies established "Councils of Notables" to give `natives' in the rural areas an opportunity to participate in or be consulted concerning administration. According to the Minister, the aim was the "formulation of an élite which will later be able to cooperate more closely and in a more personal manner in the economic and financial life of the colony" (quoted in Buell 1928:999). From 1936 the colonial French West African government required that the people be consulted through the medium of village chiefs about the choice of a canton chief. Proposed canton chiefs then had to be approved and appointed by the administration. (Cowan 1958:177.) Indeed, Indirect Rule was described as a form of enfranchising participation: "The basic aim of Indirect Rule is the development of an African society able to participate in the life of the modern world as a community in its own right. In territories where it is followed government does not accept the encouragement of European enterprises as a duty, but judges its value in the light of the contribution which it can make to African development. The other aspect of Indirect Rule--the preservation of African institutions where the needs of the Africans themselves do not call for their modification--is almost a natural corolary of this attitude toward European penetration... " (liberal anthropologist Lucy Mair 1936:12-14.)
powers to be devolved are left to be specified by decree of the minister responsible for forests. The procedures to resolve disputes over forestry matters will be specified by order of the state-appointed governor of each region. Hence, decentralization in the environmental sector is ultimately reserved as a discretionary matter for the ministry responsible for forests and its administrative staff. In this manner, what appears to be a constitutional guarantee is transformed into an executive branch discretion (Ribot 2004). Similarly, in Senegal, decentralization laws transfer forest management powers to the elected rural councils, the forestry laws then reiterate this transfer, but in practice, the forest service does not allow elected councils to make decisions (Ribot 2008). The organization of forestry production is left for a ministerial decree (RdS 1998).

There are many other means that foresters use to recapture control of ‘decentralized’ forestry (see Ribot and Oyono 2005; Ribot, Agrawal and Larson 2006). Rent seeking by foresters is common. The systems of control and management lend themselves to negotiation of access (Wardell and Lund 2006:1898; Blundo 2006; Oyono 2005). Selective implementation and non-implementation are also used as means of central control and of rent seeking for officials and front-line agents (Larson and Ribot 2007; Wardell and Lund 2006). Conditional transfers of funds or powers by higher-level agencies make the recipients upwardly accountable—since they can lose the transfers if they do not do as they are told (Conyers 2003).

**Emerging Discourses**

One of the confusing factors in current discourse is that everything is being called “decentralization.” So, without careful reading it is difficult to distinguish participatory approaches from co-management from democratic decentralization. The confusion adds to an institutional amalgam an analytic nightmare in which no policy or project called ‘decentralized’ can be taken at face value, but must be analyzed according to its substantive elements—its transfer of discretionary powers and empowerment of local actors downwardly accountable to the population.

In recent years, privatization seems to be gaining on decentralization. The discourse on decentralized forestry and natural resource management has been moving away from enfranchisement and toward incorporation—engagement of ‘forest dependent’ people with markets. Most forestry projects today emphasize helping local people to produce for the market. The emphasis is on building ‘community-based enterprises’. ‘Decentralized’ forest management is less about producing citizenship and enfranchising people. Such attempts to get Africans to produce for the market is also not at all new (Lugard…. 1923?). Colonial foresters were preoccupied with getting Africans to produce for the market (Geschiere 1993:154)—to supply the goods, not to reap the profits.

In most instances where CBNRM or Decentralized forestry programs allow rural people to produce for the market, they are relegated to non-timber forest products or some stumpage fees on timber (e.g. Salomão and Matosoe 2007; Oyono 2003; Delnooz 1999). I am not aware of any instances where timber concessions—that are not already cut over—are transferred to local government. This is interesting since timber concessions are widespread and there are almost always people living in the areas being cut. But, forestry services and projects seem unlikely to ever allow local people to become major operators or shareholders in timber concessions or traders further up stream. Usually, they have to make due marketing niche non-timber (e.g. non-lucrative) forest products? When will rural populations be able to engage in production, transformation, marketing and export, or are they always to be limited
to primary production? Will development agencies give them the loans they need to buy equipment, rent trucks to sell in the cities or will they be stuck selling raw materials to the next merchant who comes along? What will this new market era going to look like? What will the role of environmentalists and other development professionals be in enabling (or disabling) local people to enter and profit from the lucrative trades in timber and wildlife?

Decentralization and Outcomes

Even under constrained circumstances of incomplete decentralization, however, successful outcomes have also been observed in forestry decentralizations (see Ribot 2004). In Uganda, Muhereza (2006) observed in Rakai district that the Forest Department gave the district council the right to auction off impounded illegal timber and keep fourth percent of the revenues. This increase in income reflected increased power of decentralized bodies. In Cameroon, revenues have increased for rural communities in community forestry zones (Oyono and Nzuzi 2006; Oyono and Efoua 2006).

During the last decade a body of research on forestry and decentralization—the forms it is taking and its effects—is emerging. The first line of research has been evoked above. It concerns the conditions under which forestry decentralization takes place. Why has it taken place? Why does it most often not take place: what are the reasons for resistance and recentralization and the means of resistance and recentralization? A second line of research has addressed the conditions under which forestry decentralization affects the quality of forest management. When does it lead to deforestation? When does it lead to conservation? A third area of research concerns the conditions under which forestry decentralization results in improved livelihoods. When does deforestation lead to improved livelihoods? When does conservation lead to improved livelihoods? Another area that is not addressed directly in the literature, and which I will take up later in this paper is the relation between decentralization in forestry and the formation of local democracy. The links between forestry decentralization, ecological wellbeing, livelihoods and local democratization are complex. While theories give us some indications of why to expect some institutional arrangements to lead to some positive outcomes, the ensemble of contradictory assumptions and experiences indicate that, while theory is needed to guide interventions, so is iterative, context-based observation. In this section I will outline some of the findings of recent research.

CBNRM Lessons for Decentralization

CBNRM is much broader than decentralization and often includes decentralization. In an analysis of 69 case studies of forestry CBNRM (17 % of which are from Africa), Pagdee, Kim and Daugherty (2006:40) found that 40 cases were classified as successes and 29 as failures. As measures for success the cases used efficiency (90%) ecological sustainability (87%) and equity (65%). The study finds that secure forest tenure followed by clear boundaries were the most frequently cited variables explaining success. The other high-ranking variables are effective institutional arrangements and community interests or incentives (2006:49). They found that tenure security was closely associated with the transfer of authority (which they define as reallocation budgets) to local communities (2006:42,48). They conclude that central governments transfer of responsibilities is insufficient to generate success if they remain reluctant to transfer ‘management authority’ to local institutions (2006:48). They find that “Clear ownership is positively associated with both local responsibility and authority. However, tenure security shows an association only with local
authority. If decentralization involves only local responsibility, user tenure can remain insecure” (2006:51).

Decentralization—is it Being Established?

Andersson and Gibson (2004:3) argue that 1) most studies fail to assess the specific powers transferred to local authorities which would be critical for determining outcomes; 2) most research ignores other policies affecting the local arena that may swamp the conservation effects of decentralization; and 3) most studies do not establish the causal links between institutional arrangements and forest outcomes. Ribot (2003,2004) observes that most forestry decentralization reforms that have been studied do not result in the conditions that theorists would call ‘decentralization’—hence there is little reason to believe that they would result in the positive outcomes that theory predicts. The fact that decentralizations are not really being implemented indicates that it would be difficult to establish any causal links between decentralization and outcomes. Similar observations leads Tacconi, Saigian and Syam (2006:15) to ask whether local democratic governance is possible. Non-implementation of CBNRM and forestry decentralization is widespread (Nemarundwe 2004:285).

Decentralization—Does it Lead to Improved Forest Management?

Existing research indicates that decentralized forest management is not clearly better than central forest management for improving the quality or sustainability of forest management. Indeed, Andersson and Gibson (2004:20) find no relation between local governance and total deforestation. They show, ‘…decentralized forest governance is not inherently superior to centralized governance systems…’. But, it can work. They argue that outcomes are determined by many factors and ‘…performance of any system depends on how human institutions at multiple levels interact with a myriad of exogenous factors’ (2004:20). Tacconi, Saigian and Syam (2006:2) agree, ‘…it is impossible to state a priori whether decentralization will lead to sustainable forest management…. In fact, under certain conditions, decentralization might contribute to deforestation, or at least might not reduce it’. They attribute the assumption of improvement to a literature that ‘…pays little attention to the economic and financial benefits that may drive public and private sector decisions…’.

It is often assumed that when people profit from forests that they will conserve them. French West African Forester Aubréville (1939:487-8) wrote “The day…that all African forest formations will have an immediately realizable economic value, I am convinced that all of the difficulties that we encounter in assuring their protection will straighten out. This is why I believe that the future and even the existence of African forests are inseparable from the possibilities for their exploitation.” He goes on, “Also am I, a bit paradoxically in the eyes of some, obliged to stand up against the opinion of all who to safeguard the forest do not want to use its wood (here at least, where it still exists, is quite vast).” While this is an old assumption and is often repeated, Tacconi, Saigian and Syam (2006) argue that engaging local people in

18 Also see Wily (2003:i) who observes a lack of implementation in land administration decentralizations.
forest commerce on the grounds that engagement in profit from forests will result in better conservation and less deforestation is not an easily supported assumption.  

Decentralization—Does it Improve Local Livelihoods?

We do not know under what circumstances sustaining the forests is good for local livelihoods. Tacconi Saigian and Syam (2006:2) present data indicating that alternative land use—for agriculture, for example—can produce greater income. Certainly without allowing rural people access to the most-lucrative aspects of forestry (timber and wildlife), it is unlikely that the forests will compete against other land uses. Forests are less able to support livelihoods than are alternative land uses—such as agriculture—and it makes sense that agricultural conversion is the leading cause of tropical deforestation (Tacconi, Saigan and Syam 2006:5). Tacconi, Saigan and Syam’s arguments indicate that we need to delink livelihoods arguments from forestry arguments, recognizing that forests are not always good for local livelihoods.

Factors Influencing Decentralization and its Outcomes

The relation between decentralized forestry and environmental or livelihood outcomes is embedded in a multi-layered political economy. The vertical division of powers between center and local shapes the degrees of freedom of local institutions (see Føllesdal 1998; Rocher and Rouillard 1998; Mawhood 1983; Manor 1999). The horizontal distribution of functions and powers among different kinds of institutions in the local arena are also usually influenced by higher-level intervening agencies and can shape local decisions and outcomes (Ribot, Chhatre and Lankina 2008). The degree to which local populations can influence these higher-level authorities reflects the degree to which the society is democratic. This ‘articulation’ between lower- and higher-level institutions and local populations also shapes how higher authorities choose local institutions and the vertical and horizontal distribution of powers they hold (see Chhatre 2007—on the concept of ‘articulation’). The choices of central actors in turn influence the degree to which elected local authorities are empowered and the degree to which public space of discretion is kept open so that there is a space for democratic interaction. These choices also shape the degree to which powers are transferred to private bodies or customary authorities enclosing the public domain through privatization and desecularization of public powers. Intervening agencies in forestry often choose non-democratic local authorities as their partners (Ribot, Chhatre and Lankina 2008). Forest services also typically choose to devolve select powers: they hold onto lucrative opportunities while devolving subsistence values and the burdens of management (Ribot 2004). Blaikie (2006:1950) modulates up another level arguing that CBNRM is shaped by its “interfaces involving national politics between administrations, policy elites, and IFIs (e.g., IFIs [International Financial Institutions] and bilateral aid agencies)” (also see Ferguson 1996).

In addition, these higher-level institutions shape the accountability of local institutions. By the laws they put in place (structuring elections or establishing accessible courts) or by the implementation or lack of implementation of those very policies, they can enhance

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19 Nor its it logical to economists. If the growth rate of a forest is lower than returns elsewhere, why not cut down the total forest stock now and invest the capital in a fund that has a return greater than the forest growth rate? Why not cut it down and invest in hotels?
accountability of local government to the local population, to the central state or to nobody. Furthermore, these higher-level bodies can foster citizen engagement with local government or with central government via civic education telling people they have rights and how to exercise them (if indeed there are any rights) and instructing leaders on their roles and responsibilities. In addition, they shape the rules of forest and land use that determine economic incentives for management. For example, if conversion is forbidden as a pre-condition for local control of the forests, incentives may re-link forests and livelihoods—if the management requirements do not swamp the benefits. The result is very different from devolving total discretion. Rules of use matter. The market or use value of forests cannot save forests from destruction—and the fickle nature of markets may mean that today forests are safe but tomorrow prices go up and cutting begins. Standards and rules set at a higher level are needed (see Ribot 2004). There is no inherent reason to believe that local people will not sell off or convert forests if those are the most-lucrative options. There are only reasons to believe that collective local decisions may differ from individual local decisions or outsider decisions.20

Some case studies also suggest that local governments will perform well in some domains only if forced to by central government. Crook and Sverrisson (2001) have argued that local government will serve the poor if mandated to do so by central authorities. If not, they are not likely to serve the interests of poor and marginal populations. Bandiaky (2008) has shown that interventions in local government from above or interventions by local government are likely to exacerbate local gender inequalities if not mandated to take affirmative actions to assure greater gender representation—both making certain that women present in decision-making processes and insuring that there are mechanisms by which women’s issues are better represented in decisions. As Goetz and Hassim (2003:20-21 in Bandiaky 2008a:22) argue, it is simplistic and misleading to think that the transfer of power to local actors will solve gender inequality problems. Hence there are many roles that central authorities can and should play in ensuring that even local democratic institutions address the needs and aspirations of all local people.

The form of decentralization is also reshaped in implementation. In Zimbabwe, Nemarundwe (2004) describes how existing social stratifications influence who participates in committees and decision making and how local people use the ambiguous relation between customary and formal authorities to bring their own problems to the authorities who will be more favorable. This is very much a case of what von Benda Beckmann (19__) calls ‘forum shopping’. Bandiaky (2007) shows how decentralized forestry follows the contours of existing inequalities of local social hierarchies, transforming the intended equity outcomes into reinforced inequalities (also see Mandondo and Kozanayi 2006; Bazaara 2006; Feyissa 2006 who come to similar conclusions in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Ethiopia). Assembe Mvondo (2006:687-8) also notes that decentralization to multi-ethnic villages resulted in reproduction or reinforcement of existing social stratifications with the Baka minority having

20 There is, however, reason to believe that incentives do differ under collective management due to internalizing of externalities in decisions such that those who might want to cut the trees down may be challenged by those who want to continuously use the bark, leaves, and fruits or others who see them as aesthetically pleasing or as having functions for soil conservation or for wind protection. But, if the price of the timber is high enough, we still do not have areas on to believe that the other actors in the collective decision cannot be paid off for the loss of these ongoing functions of the tree.
little access to justice, concluding that “the decentralization of forest resources management does not bring actual horizontal equity to all local populations.” But, in a community made up solely of Baka, access to the benefits of decentralization is more equitable. Further, local people maintain access to resources in numerous ways. They continue to manipulate the authorities around them and negotiate continued access either through reciprocal relations or payments (Blaikie 2006; Nemarundwe 2004). Such negotiated access, as Nemarundwe (2004:289) points out, is “…influenced by factors such as descent, social stratification, character of person involved, and longevity of residence in the area” among many other factors (see Ribot and Peluso 2003).

Differences between those wishing for conservation and those baring the costs also reshape motives for implementation. Higher-level institutions may want conservation for higher-level values, such as biodiversity, carbon storage, or watershed regulation, yet the costs of all of these are born at the local level. Devolving responsibility for values that do not accrue to local people who bare the cost of conservation measures is not likely to lead to success unless complemented by funds so that local people have incentive to provide these services (Tacconi, Saigan and Syam 2006:6). Conservation is often viewed as something that local people will do so for the returns they will gain.21 But those returns are public while the efforts of local people are private. There is no more reason to believe that a village should pay for a bridge so a national highway can cross a river near them than to believe that they should pay for forest management for the national or global benefits of conservation. Work in natural resources seems to be viewed by higher-level actors as if it were not labor and does not need remuneration, while work on a highway would never be expected without pay—except during the times of corvée labor under colonial regimes. Again, a higher-level set of perceptions and assumptions are shaping the incentives for forest conservation. The assumption that rural people will work free for public good—with some notion of long-term payoffs—justifies a tax in labor that is part of what keeps rural people poor.

One other way that higher-level institutions have consistently shaped the scope of local institutions is through the maintenance of central control of ‘decentralized’ authorities. Many mechanisms have been used (and some recent examples discussed earlier in the article). These include the dependence on central government for funds (earmarked or conditionally transferred), staff and administrative controls, forms of oversight and tutelle, executive personnel deployed locally, imposition of ‘expert’ advice, discourses of lack of local capacity, transfers of burdens with retained central control of benefits, etc. (Ribot and Oyono 2005; Ribot, Agrawal and Larson 2006; Wardell and Lund 2006:1894; Nemarundwe 2004:287-8).22 As Wardell and Lund show, “contemporary decentralization is accompanied by increasing central government and line ministerial control, hollowing out local people’s participation and control.” The strengthening of central government and line ministries “…has provided the Forest Department [in Ghana] with the means of off-setting local people’s ability to enjoy the rights with which they have been enfranchised” (2006:1899).

21 As Wily (n.d. circa 2000:5) describes the trend in the late 90s, “…Local populations have been presented as being legitimate forest users, whose co-operation may be secured in exchange for their subsistence needs being considered; an approach greatly encouraged by the current donor-led focus upon sustainable rural livelihoods.”

22 “The trend towards decentralization and devolution of forest management responsibilities to the local governments could not be effective due to low capacity of the sector at all levels.” Ethiopia Country Report (Bekele 2001).
“Access should not be prevented, but kept illegal in order for various rents to be extracted” (2006:1900).

Assembe Mvondo (2006:687) observes within Cameroon’s autocratic national context that “decentralization of forests in Cameroon brought about a kind of reproduction, or transposition, of hegemonic political behavior from the national to the local level.” He partly attributes this to a decentralization law (1994) that does not clearly specify how different social groups should be represented in local forestry institutions nor give guidance on the sharing of forest benefits. Larson and Ribot (2007) and Ribot and Oyono (2005) show the multiple ways in which decentralization reforms are resisted by central actors threatened by their own loss of powers, embedded in their own cultures and beliefs about the forms and necessities of environmental management, faced with lucrative rent-seeking opportunities, under pressure to keep up production, etc. Governments are not giving much up. They have used decentralization as a strategy to shed burdens and responsibilities without devolving real powers or lucrative opportunities to the local arena (e.g. Nemarundwe 2004:287).

Lastly, history matters deeply. In Mozambique, local people are reluctant to engage with authorities or with rules given the long history of authoritarian rule. Rather than engaging in more participatory processes, they believe that personalized relationships and informal rules matter more than codified rules or formal processes (Salomão and Matose 2007:16). This is also founding Latin America. In Brazil, due to a history of patron-client relations, local people elect local mayors and councils dominated by elite landowners who mostly belong to opposition parties (Toni 2007). In Guatemala, the state has engaged in a long history of integrationist policies, depriving indigenous peoples of their rights. The history of the integrationist nation building in Guatemala is today an obstacle to indigenous people’s participation in forestry management with democratic local government. That history shaped their healthy mistrust of government and therefore their ability to take advantage of new local government institutions (Larson 2007). Salomão and Matose (2007:17) argue that trust is a key element for implementation of land and resource legislation. But, of course, that trust must be merited.

Analytical Misconceptions

Misconceptions in analyses are multiple. Tacconi, Saigian and Syam (2006:3) argue that studies fail to question the core assumptions of decentralization advocates that 1) democratic decentralization is an institutionalized and scaled up form of CBNRM, 2) that people will engage in conservation due to the benefits that will follow; and 3) that the benefit-driven conservation will lead to less deforestation. Good questions. The first failure, however, is definitional. No amount of research will resolve it. It is not an assumption—rather an ‘if-then’ statement: if there is institutionalized representation in the form of democratic decentralization and the representative authorities hold management responsibilities over natural resources, then it is an institutionalized form of CBNRM. As for the latter two questions, The authors show that these assumptions hold only under certain circumstances due to the presence of multiple intervening variables. Agrawal and Chhatre (2005:164) add

23 Hailey (1938:985-7) also observed that ‘conservation' forests are not advancing because they are insufficiently remunerative and Africans do not understand their value.
after their analysis of 90 cases in India, “variations in how the same factors operate and should be operationalized in different micro-contexts should make us pessimistic about the possibility of a universal theory of the commons.” Indeed there may be no generalizable theory of the commons. There may, however, be a generalizable theory of decentralization (a small subset of what happens in and around commons. Even a theory that can accommodate the fact that when the ‘conditions’ of democratic decentralization of forests are established, the ecological outcomes are far from certain.

Existing research is fraught with problems. There seems to be a widespread assumption that decentralization is the transfer of anything to anyone. Many practitioners and analysts seem to assume there are no pre-existing rules of exploitation or use. Decentralization is a particular configuration of reforms that even theoreticians believe will only work under ‘certain conditions’. Nobody believes that allowing local populations to do anything they like with the forests will result in better management. Forest villagers too have just as much motive to cut and sell trees as anyone else. Hence, the question that needs to be asked is quite simple: In the event that there are rules that protect forest values that have been agreed upon at multiple levels of social aggregation, will decentralizing both responsibility for and benefits from working within these rules result in better management/enforcement? That can be broken down further—will positive outcomes be likely when the costs are greater than the benefits? (Probably not.) Will positive outcomes be likely when the costs are lower than the benefits? (Perhaps.) Second, what some analysts are calling the conditions of democratic decentralization of forest management are the basic elements of decentralization—downwardly accountable local actors, with significant discretionary powers. If these are in place, you have democratic decentralization (Agrawal and Ribot 1999; Kulipossa 2004). But, democratic decentralization can work for specified objectives only if: 1) the appropriate powers for the context are transferred, 2) appropriate rules that set up incentives for the specified objectives to be achieved (see Larson 2003). Fines for cutting too many or protected trees are one such incentive.

In short, the analytic questions are: 1) is there democratic decentralization? Why or why not? 2) How does democratic decentralization interact with the incentives on the ground (the rules of engagement) vis-à-vis particular objectives? 3) What is the relation between decentralization, the incentive structure and observed outcomes?

What Have We Learned?

Based on these observations, we can theorize or at least make some general statements about the democracy, livelihoods and ecological outcomes of decentralized forestry. First, ecological, livelihood and democracy objectives are not always mutually reinforcing—under some circumstances they may be at odds. Second, ecological improvements for local people (linked to local livelihoods) may look very different than ecological improvements (linked to watershed, biodiversity or global change) for a more-distant or higher-scale aggregate of populations. The use of the landscape for livelihoods by the poor may also be at odds with the profit and revenue interests of local elites, national commercial interests and national governments. Each set of objectives must be taken separately and the relation among them must be negotiated in a specific context.

There are several questions that need to be asked if we are to balance these competing and converging objectives in a way that supports sustainability, rural livelihoods and democratization. What are the minimum requirements for guaranteeing ecological
sustainability (in whatever form the environment may take), local livelihoods, and local democracy? I will go over each briefly to point out some areas we still need to think through and some contradictions that immediately emerge.

(i) Ecology

What is needed to optimize (conserve or transform) the ecology for local values or for higher-scale values? We already know that to produce different values from a landscape, rules are essential, enforcement is essential. When local people agree to the rules enforcement is easier. When local people are involved with enforcement they are more likely to engaged in the project behind the rules (Agrawal 1996). In the rare instances where central government is willing to enforce the rules, elites will get away with fewer abuses. It appears that what is needed is some higher-scale agreement on the environmental values that must be protected to protect society at large and to fulfill higher-scale social needs, and then some negotiation at the local level to simultaneously protect local values or compensate local people for limits that higher-scale needs places on local-level values. Any solutions must attend to the fact that most burdens of conservation are born at the local-level while the benefits are manifest at higher scales. Conservation or even use for higher-scale or distant actors must reflect need—commerce, profit or economic growth does not always justify extraction. Is carbon storage a necessity? Is watershed regulation a necessity? Is timber extraction for national use a necessity? Is timber extraction for export and foreign exchange necessary? If so, what must be given back to make it palatable to local people? Are rural livelihoods needed (people could be moved to cities)? What is the social and political economic cost of any of these decisions?

(ii) Livelihoods

What must be done to guarantee livelihoods for local people or for higher-scale economic and use values from forests? Similarly to ecology, guarantees for what are perceived to be necessary aspects of production and reproduction of individuals, households, communities and nations must be assessed. What is more important, income from the timber trade or subsistence values of local people? When should forest use for poor people be supported, when should alternative income activities be sought? These questions are not easy to answer. Should elites get rich or forest villagers get rich when there is wealth in the forests? Clearly most national governments value timber more than subsistence values and elite wealth over enriching those who are currently politically, economically and socially marginal. Clearly the market and policy processes that produce marginality and enrich some are not processes that governments nor elites want to halt.

(iii) Local and Legislative Democracy

What are the conditions necessary to promote democratization in and for the local arena? To guarantee local democracy, the criteria are a bit easier. Local democracy is about accountability of leaders to their people. Local leaders in democracy are representative—which means responsive to local needs and downwardly accountable (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). To be responsive they must have discretionary powers that are relevant and significant to the problems faced by the people they ostensibly represent. To be accountable there must be multiple mechanisms of accountability (means of positively and negatively sanctioning leaders)—among which elections (with open candidature and universal suffrage) are one important means.
The just and sustainable balancing of ecological and livelihoods aspirations of local and higher-scale social organization requires some means to seriously negotiate between central and local values—and among the array of local values. Local representative authority is one node of negotiation—such representatives could speak on behalf of local needs and aspirations to higher-scale actors. They can modulate the relation between the local population and outside interests. Local representation, however, is not enough. The laws that define the powers of local representative authorities are hammered out in national legislatures and in line ministries—forestry departments and environmental ministries in the case of forestry. Rural representation in legislatures across Africa is weak. Deputies and members of parliaments rarely introduce legislation on behalf of the rural poor or in protection of their rights to natural resources (Veit…. ). Strong legislative representation would be necessary to establish powers in decentralized venues to make local government a viable locus for such negotiation. Representation by local government, however, is also still wildly insufficient to engage in the above negotiations.

We do know from previous studies that there are many ecological and livelihood decisions in forestry that can be devolved to local authorities without negative ecological or livelihood consequences—hence, there is plenty of room in forestry to support local democracy. For example, once it is determined at a higher scale that a certain forest can be cut for timber and the necessary techniques for cutting have been specified, the decision as to whether it should be cut, how much should be cut, when it should be cut, who should have the right to cut, who should profit from the cutting, can all be decisions made at the local level. These latter allocation decisions cannot be said to threaten the ecology (at least not more than allowing outsiders to cut the same amount timber already deemed exploitable by outside agents). Bazaara (2006) notes that forest services often devolve burdens of management without devolving lucrative opportunities. He argues that they do so by conflating technical decisions of management and use (which should be taken at a higher scale) with political decisions of allocation (which can be devolved). Hence, we know that forestry could be more supportive of the construction of local democratic authorities without negative tradeoffs on the ecological front. The tradeoffs here are on the political front between national elites, local elites and democratic processes.

Clearly, context matters. Olivier de Sardan (2004:3) outlines three contextual factors that will shape the outcomes of democratic decentralisation. Socio-political aspects will include the role of local aristocracies who claim legitimacy from prior to the colonial era; lineage-based societies and heterogeneous villages. Differences will be expected among different socio-economic contexts, such as agro-pastoral, intensive agricultural, and livestock economies. Further, these different contexts will have different fiscal potentials. Some will easily generate revenues while others will have no sources. Differences will also be expected between different socio-cultural contexts that may be homogenous or heterogeneous and which may exhibit different degrees of intern conflict or cohesion. Olivier de Sardan (2004) is setting up a research observatory to examine how uniform policies can adapt—officially or unofficially—to these diverse situations. But, his approach to enhancing implementation through research on the match between policy and context is still awaiting the implementation of decentralization in Niger. Constant research and feedback are needed to inform the negotiation processes and deliberations among local people and between local people, local elites and national elites.
Raik and Decker (2007) argue that decentralized forestry falls short in so far as it is too narrowly focused on the forestry sector. Forests are usually neither people’s dominant economic or cultural base. People spend their time worrying about farming, business, health, education, welfare, infrastructure, social cohesion, family, etc. In an evaluation of World Bank Community Driven Development projects, Ribot (2005) found that when communities were given a menu of options to invest in, natural resource management was rarely a top priority. The irony of Raik and Decker’s (2007) observation is that the development trend of 30 years ago—integrated rural development (IRD)—was all about the need to integrate across all household needs. IRD ran into problems because it was top down and too complex. Ribot (2001) has argued that well structured decentralization is the new form of integrated rural development, but this time integrated through representative authority rather than through planners or sectoral imperatives. Democratic decentralization is one means to re-integrate among priorities, allowing local representative authorities to place forests and NRM among other needs and aspirations of their communities.

Conclusion: Forestry can Shape Local Democracy

Because there are few reasons to trust that local people or local representative authorities or central commercial interests will not want to transform forests into agricultural fields or use them one way or another to produce cash, there is a need for rules that protect some agreed upon ecological values. A minimum standards approach (see Ribot 2004) to forestry is consistent with maximizing local public discretionary power. If minimum rules of use can be set that are aimed at protecting essential ecological functions (for all scales) and protecting livelihood and economic values (for all scales), then the remainder of decisions over forest management and use are at the discretion of local representatives. Of course, protecting ecological and income values must also be considered in the light of protecting other values—such as democracy and human rights (Kulipossa 2004; Petrasek, et al. 2002). No easy constrained optimization.

To arrive at minimum technical standards first requires sophisticated representative engagement from the rural world. It will also require sophisticated engagement by experts who are able to stand up to ‘forestry’ experts and other ‘environmental’ experts so as to prevent them from using ‘scientistical’ arguments to impose rules and regulations that are not merited by the ecological necessities. It will also require a significant presence of voices for human rights and local democracy to assure that local values are protected from the unequal leverage of higher-scale decision makers and commercial interests.

24 Note, however, that ‘decentralized’ forestry in Madagascar described by Raik and Decker (2007) is not decentralized—rather it is a contractual relation between the forest service and a registered local NGO. This is more closely akin to co-management approaches.

25 The idea of internalizing externalities in decisions does imply that local collective decisions will differ from individual or commercial decisions taken without community input. But, if the values are high enough, there is plenty of reason to believe a community will act just like a corporation in transforming a forest into other kinds of uses or values. There is also reason to believe that deriving more subsistence value from a forest may change the relation of a population to the forest. But, when commercial values are high, or when alternative income generating opportunities are abundant, or during very hard time, there is little to prevent even those who use the forest for subsistence or income from damaging it.
The hammering out of a minimum set of rules of forest management and use does not resolve the contradictions among different kinds and scales of objectives. Resolving these tensions is a political process. Where do these different objectives converge or conflict? When does forestry democratic decentralization ecological management, strengthen or weaken livelihoods, democracy or human rights? Clearly, from the above discussions, we do not yet know. But, setting priorities and determine which values take precedence is a decision that can be engaged—politically. When are different parties willing to give up democracy for conservation or livelihoods? When are different actors willing to give up livelihoods for conservation or democracy? When is society willing to give up conservation for livelihoods or democracy?

Whatever political decisions are made foresters have two opportunities to contribute to local democracy. First, by helping to define a realm of local discretion over forest and forest products, they help to define the local public domain. The public domain is the set of powers over which democratic decision making is exercised. Foresters can help establish this domain. Second, by choosing to locate these public powers with democratic authorities, forestry agencies, professionals, donors and NGOs are choosing democracy. In the process, foresters will help produce a public domain in which local people can engage and develop as citizens. Forestry and the great material wealth that it represents has the power to support fledgling democratic institutions across Africa.

Discretion and representation are the infrastructure of democratic environmental governance. Environmentalists, foresters and democracy advocates need to collaborate to execute ‘environmental governance infrastructure assessments’ to assure these elements are in place. They need to begin looking to see whether powers that can be devolved to local authorities are being devolved. Whether they are being devolved to local authorities who, in the long run, are likely to support just, equitable, representative social processes in the local arena. Such assessments could be used to evaluate the basic infrastructure of local representation—that is the responsiveness and accountability—of local government and forestry institutions.

References


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