TOWARDS COMMUNITY-BASED FOREST MANAGEMENT
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:
Do reforms Lead to Improved Livelihoods for the Poor?

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Abstract

In this paper, various reforms in forest management across the countries of Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe are analysed. Management reforms are assessed in relation to devolution of authority and control over forest resources to communities. Management reforms are also assessed in relation to their impact on livelihoods for the poor. There are differences to be discerned across the three countries with respect to reforms towards community management. In Mozambique and South Africa, there is disjunction between policy that is supportive for community ownership and participatory management at the national level, respectively for both countries, and realities on the ground. Where in Mozambique, bureaucratic practices frustrate community management and in South Africa, the lack of capacity at lower levels leaves communities without as much look-in into inclusive forest policy coupled with the failure to implement national policy. In Zimbabwe on the other hand, formal forest policy has not been changed, but within existing instruments, management authority has been devolved to selected communities around few case study sites. Devolution across all the three countries is examined with reference to the authority and control that communities enjoy over the management of forest resources. In all the selected case studies across the three countries, there is minimum impact of governance reforms on livelihoods for the poor. The reforms are still in their relative infancy such that the impact on poverty and livelihoods is rather low for the communities involved. The paper will be based on a synthesis of three papers that were reviewing these issues in each of the three countries separately. In each of the countries, case studies were analysed in terms of the impact of devolution on rural people’s livelihoods. Livelihoods were assessed in relation to incomes and other benefits accruing to communities across the different case studies for each different country. Based on each country’s review process recommendations were made of matching policy with practice in order to meet the needs of communities in managing forests to improve their livelihoods.

Introduction

What promise does decentralisation and experiments in community based natural resource management have for improving livelihoods of communities living around forests in Southern Africa? In this contribution, experiences in giving authority and control over resources to communities are examined in relation to their contributions to rural livelihoods. This examination is done from three countries in Southern Africa. Three case studies to illustrate these issues are selected, one from each of the three countries, namely, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa. Before the examination is done, a brief outlay is given of the conceptual terrain surrounding issues of power and authority over resource governance that
draws from different writings. This is then followed by a presentation of material from each of the country case studies beginning with Zimbabwe, followed by Mozambique and ending with South Africa. Some common threads are then discussed in relation to how each of the country policy and practices over devolved management have progressed or failed to change state-centred management and improve surrounding communities’ livelihoods. In the conclusions, some recommendations for policy are drawn out.

**Conceptual Issues**

So much has been written regarding decentralisation that is serves little purpose to try and have any further discussion on the facets of the concepts. Suffice to elaborate the standpoint for the rest of this contribution. At the core of issues surrounding devolution is the giving of power over resources. Murphree (2000) offers the concept of ‘scale’ as a nuanced reconciliation of the top-down with the bottom up in the governance of natural resources. In other words, the Murphree model of scale considers the peculiarities of what exactly should be reconciled. This contribution provides illustration for this model by considering the diversity of arenas in which trade-offs should are crafted in the operation of natural resource policy. The study achieves this by borrowing from social psychological traditions (cf, Reason and Heron, 1995) to develop a conceptual piece that entails reconciling diverse preferences that are asserted through decisions made for others, decisions made with others and decisions made for oneself. These lens are then deployed analyse the operation of natural resource policy across three contexts provided in this paper for Southern Africa.

Privileging top-down decisions within a hierarchy through the giving of discretionary oversight for a few high level actors provides a shortcut to the red tape associated with consultative decision-making processes (Ribot, 2004). However, if expediency and less red tape are the virtues of top-down decisions of hierarchy, then arbitrariness and opacity may be their shadow, while the converse holds true for collaboration. At the same time, the notion of autonomy should not necessarily be seen as ‘splendid isolation’ since the imperatives of hierarchy also filter down and impinge on this level, and vice versa (Mandondo, 2005: 6). Equally, the tenets of collaboration may also filter into the operation of systems of hierarchy, and vice versa. In fact, in its various forms, collaboration provides the mechanism for the reconciliation of diverse interests and preferences within and across various levels of social and political organisation. Ultimately, each decision-making framework has spheres of its own efficacy, with the dilemma being to strike some measure of best fit.

The essence of these mechanisms in the implementation of natural resource policy in Southern Africa is the ambiguity of defining the appropriate scale of actors who should wield and exercise powers of policy change. More often than not, such powers reside in central nodes of authority whose authoritative reach falls way short of their capacity for implementation (see Murphree, 1990). Actors in such positions of authority generally appear averse to the alteration of such a status quo (Murphree, 1990; Murombedzi, 1992). This obviously falls far short of according with best practice in natural resource management. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, best practice presumably occurs when the upper level actors do not usurp the resourcefulness\(^1\) of ordinary people (Schilling, 1995), such as

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\(^1\) ‘Resource’ is a compound formulation in this case, and it encompasses aspects of skills, expertise, capacity and material resources to deliver on given roles.
happens through over-centralisation. Environmental justice is enhanced when powers are placed as close to the citizens as possible, with upper level actors undertaking only those roles that are beyond the scope of lower level actors (Schilling, 1995).

Decentralisation Experiences from Southern Africa

This section provides the material for the contribution by providing details of the transformative experiences from each of the case studies. Each is presented in turn, beginning with case from Zimbabwe, followed by Mozambique and then ending with the one from South Africa.

Mafungautsi, Zimbabwe

A resource-sharing project around Mafungautsi Forest was initiated in 1993-94 within the Forestry Extension Services Division (FES) of the FC. Following an initial year of rapid progress with the project, progress slowed with changes in the personnel driving it. Progressive development in the initial stages led to the formation of Resource Management Committees (RMCs) as well as training them in their roles and responsibilities. Between 1996 and 2001 there was very little progress in achieving project objectives, which were:

1. To guarantee the conservation and management of Mafungautsi Forest by involving the neighbouring communities in the decision making and profit sharing derived from sustainable forest resource development and utilisation programmes.

2. To develop appropriate models for forest grazing, access and utilisation of other forest resources leading to the conservation of Mafungautsi as a water catchment and state forest and without compromising the environmental agenda (Forestry Commission, in Matose 2006).

In practice memoranda of agreement have been entered into between the different Resource Management Committees (RMCs) and the Forestry Commission to facilitate the collaboration in management around the reserve. The agreements move beyond the provisions of the Forest Act by giving authority to community ‘representatives’ (RMCs). Under the agreements, each RMC has an “operational zone”, that is an area closest to their village which they manage and where they control resource access. Further, the agreements only cover minor forest products such as, deadwood, mushrooms, fruits, edible caterpillars, thatch and broom grass. The RMCs themselves operate under constitutions that authenticate them as recognized bodies/organisations within local governance structures. However, these agreements also categorically state that “The ownership of the forest still remains with the State and the Forestry Commission remains the legal custodian of the forest” (FC, 1997: 40). Thus ownership and use rights remain as the prerogative of the FC and also the arrangements could be revoked if the FC felt there was a general decline in the ‘conservation status of the forest’ (FC in Matose, 2006). The memoranda have aspects that pose challenges to the development of meaningful partnership arrangements between the State and various local people. The challenges arise from the limitations of the “partnership”, whereby local people have little participation in the resource-sharing scheme resulting in them continuing to pursue their access regimes as if there were no such scheme.

The creation of the RMCs was the FC’s way of operationalising the concepts of ownership and participation. However, the communities around Mafungautsi were never consulted and it was not clear how the new committee would fit into the already complex institutional
landscape (Mapedza and Mandondo, 2002). Most communities were not clear on what the role of the RMCs was and hence saw them as an extended arm of the FC. This later caused much tension. The RMCs themselves were accountable only to the FC and they did not pay due respect to the already existing traditional leadership structures. This in turn led to conflicts between traditional authorities and the RMC members. For instance, when the RMCs organised meetings, some village heads and their community members did not attend. Another problem was that the formation of the RMCs was mostly top-down.

The RMCs opened bank accounts in which to deposit the money raised by issuing permits to resource harvesters in the forest. Although it was said to belong to the communities, a FC officer was a signatory to the account. That the communities could not withdraw money without the FC’s approval demonstrated its paternalistic spirit. The setting up of the RMCs and the bank account were, according to FC rhetoric, meant to empower the local people to manage and really become owners of the resources, but in practice this was never the case. The FC remained reluctant to hand over power to the locals to make their own decisions on what were meant to be their own money and resources.

Later in the project, these various conflicts were to be solved through the introduction of good governance. However, the conflicts that continued to plague the project were not adequately addressed (Matose, 2006). No mechanisms were set up to resolve the conflicts after the introduction of the resource sharing project. The FC’s version of good governance was directed too much at introducing the resource sharing model of devolved management. The change in the institutional landscape in the form of the RMCs only aggravated the already existing tensions, when what was needed rather was an investment in longer-term conflict resolution. As a result, the chaotic relationship between the two major stakeholders never improved during the resource sharing project, and the forest continued to deteriorate as communities still accessed its resources beyond what was permitted by the project. In the end, it took a third party to break the impasse. In 1999, when CIDA support ended, CIFOR’s ACM approach was initiated in the resource sharing project, in association with the FC in order to improve and learn from the collaborative approach together with selected forest user groups from communities.

ACM is a value-adding approach whereby individuals or groups who use or manage a forest agree to act together and draw up plans for their forests. These plans are then implemented, with the recognition that they may not fulfil their intended objectives. In this process, it is important for people to learn collaboratively from the implementation, as changes in the plans are negotiated. The lack of progress in the resource sharing project was the entry point for introducing CIFOR’s ACM research project. The ACM approach was introduced to add value to the joint forest management scheme that was in place around Mafungautsi Forest between the FC (on behalf of the State) and local communities. The scheme, as explained above, had not improved collaboration between the State and local communities, as had been intended at the start in 1994. Thus, the focus of this CIFOR initiative was on developing approaches that would enhance learning and improve the existing management systems.

The main thrust of this research was to reform management practices, institutional arrangements and policies in order to promote forest management systems that would bring both human and ecological benefits. The project aimed at shifting away from blanket prescriptions for solving problems and moving towards locally based management that would be free to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances in accordance with sustainable forest management and meeting the needs of local communities. The specific purpose was to
facilitate widespread use of self-improving and equitable forest resource management systems that would build on local capacity, enable ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ stakeholder interactions, and respond positively to external pressures.

In terms of livelihoods, livestock provide much of the financial capital that was gained by participating households, and act as a buffer in the event of crop failure during which they are converted to cash for food security. Of the 70 per cent of households owning cattle, 31 per cent of these were involved in the collaborative management activities. Before the collaboration, 61 per cent of the households owned cattle of these only 4 per cent were involved in serious collection of forest products (Matose, et al, 2003).

Chipange Chetu, Mozambique

The CHIPANGE CHETU project was created in 1998, in Matchedje and Macaloge, in the Sanga District, occupying an area of 3500 to 4000 km$^2$ and with the aim to eliminate furtive hunting, wood smuggling to Tanzania and the use of poison to catch fish. The project also aimed at ensuring the transfer of authority and powers over natural resources to the local community level in order to promote local development through economic,

Traditional authorities controlled the use of natural resources before the project, but this was resulting in a free access to the resources given their weak inspection capacity. The exploration of resources was made in an uncontrolled manner and without limits. To solve this problem a local committee was created and their members trained in forest and fauna legislation, land management legislation, leadership aspects and community inspection. The process was participative and democratic and there was an election of the president, the vice, the secretary and the treasurer. Traditional leaders were given the role of committee advisors and they could not occupy other positions to avoid accumulation of powers. A complementary group was constituted integrating government and non-governmental institutions, namely, Provincial Forestry and Wildlife Services, District Agricultural Directorate, Administration of Sanga, IUCN/WWF, ACORD and OPORTUN with the mission of promoting community training, research and other activities.

The project activities have been paralysed since 2003, due to conflicts with potential operators interested in the area. overlapping authority between a traditional queen and the local committee as resulted in different treatment external investors and in internal conflicts within the community that have led to the government decision that a reorganization phase should be undertaken. This reorganization is apparently still on-going, sponsored by the Irish cooperation. A community consultation is foreseen for determining continuation of project activities. Recommendations produced by a team that made a field visit to the project defend the transformation of the project into community hunting area (coutada) for the practice of synergetic tourism, where communities could intervene as entrepreneurs. However, this suggestion was not approved by the SPFFB, which preferred its transformation into a wildlife farm (fazendas do bravio), a legal mechanisms seen as a more open and accessible model for community participation. When the conflict arose, the process of acquisition of DUAT was well advanced and the local committee had already produced its by-laws.

As a result of the training that different NGO’s have provided in the area, local communities acquired a good level of legislation knowledge. Current benefits of the project implementation consist in the production and sale of honey and sawed wood, construction of access roads and health clinics. These roads facilitate communications with areas that were
inaccessible before. Furthermore, there is now some openness in the market, and local products can be exchanged internally and in other zones. On the other hand, the community has already received payments resulting from the different activities of the project in the value of US$6180 in 2001 and USD$31000 in 2004.

Economic benefits from sport fishing, game shooting, and the like, were also expected for 2005. At the end of each year of activities each community involved must present a report indicating the application of the allocated revenues. The project has undertaken a zoning of the areas with abundance of resources. The contents of the management plan were defined in a participative way involving the community and the technicians of SPFFB. The decisions on participation in resources management are entrusted to the management committee, which is facilitated by SPFFB.

**Tsitsikamma-Covie, South Africa**

This case study came against the backdrop of policy changes within the forestry sector in order to facilitate participatory forest management (PFM) after the democratisation of political governance post-1994 in South Africa. Most of the material presented here draws from Watts and Holmes-Watts, (2006). The smooth flow of information to rural communities is likely to make them knowledgeable about the PFM for sustainable socio-economic development and biodiversity conservation. Such information about PFM would also create awareness about such people’s rights, privileges, and responsibilities. This need is expressed in the White Paper for Sustainable Forestry Development in South Africa, the National Forestry Action Program and the National Forests Act of 1998, which collectively seek to achieve sustainable forest management in South Africa (DWAF, 1996; DWAF, 1997; Government of South Africa, 1998b).

However, well-meaning the stated policy may be, the reality is such that local people around Tsitsikamma, such as the forest-margin dwelling community like Covie are unaware of the supposedly “people-centred” forest management policy. Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) officials had not operationalised the PFM policy for the Covie community ever since the initiative was implemented in the area. The Tsitsikamma Forest Station is close (29 km) to Covie yet only one household knew about forestry staff that visited Covie for PFM (Watts and Holmes-Watts, 2006). The fact that 80% of them were aware of DWAF, but are poorly informed about PFM strongly reveals that the department has not involved local people in the management of the Tsitsikamma Indigenous Forest.

The lack of active participation by the Covie people in the management of the natural resources in their vicinity contradicts the conservation laws that encourage their involvement in biodiversity conservation. There are two reasons for the mismatch between policy and practice. On the one hand, forestry officials responsible for PFM lack understanding about are required of the devolved management practice. This is exacerbated by the apparent lack of leadership from head office to implement the policy. Consequently, forest managers at the grassroots pursue PFM on their own without as much knowledge and training. On the ground managers end up focusing more on the formation of PFM forums. Once established, the forums result in endless meetings without any tangible outputs from the resolutions adopted in these meetings. A series of such meetings for one to two years without approval of natural forest-based projects proposed by local people resulted in disillusionment and disinterest in PFM. Forest managers were unwilling to call for more PFM forum meetings because
proposed projects submitted to the regional office in Knysna for approval disappeared into the hierarchy.

The second factor concerned community representation on PFM forums in the Southern Cape Forests. People who attended PFM forum meetings were not mandated by their respective communities. Consequently, they were not accountable to the communities that they represented in such meetings. As a result, local people remained uninformed about DWAF’s intentions and activities. DWAF officials on the other hand, are unaware of whether the community representatives report back to their constituencies. By contrast, local people in Tsitsikamma perceived that DWAF personnel interacted freely with businesspersons that recently relocated to the area. They maintained that such businesspeople come to PFM forums only to seek approval for their forest-based enterprises. As such, business persons benefited more from the management of protected areas in Tsitsikamma. This observation was also made by a report of a recent visit to the Southern Cape Forests by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Forestry. The report highlighted the lack of interactive community participation in the management of natural resources (Watts and Holmes-Watts, 2006: 304). A further weakness was also observed in relation to community representation in PFM forums. Communities that have 20 or 150 households have one representative each on the PFM forum, regardless. “With the exception of the Thornham Community in Tsitsikamma, all the communities lack structures or organisation for effective communication within themselves and also with outsiders. The Thornham Community has one representative on the PFM forum like other communities in the area, but the community is well-represented because this delegate reports to the community management committee that consists of about 10 people. It is this group of people that reports to the wider community. The management committee is conversant with the needs of the community and the local politics of the area; certain members of this committee have postgraduate qualifications. Consequently, there is no congenial relationship between this community and conservation authorities in Tsitsikamma because they challenge certain management decisions” (Watts and Holmes-Watts, 2006: 304).

**Impact of the Introduction of PFM**

More than half of the people in Covie indicated that the management of the indigenous forest in Tsitsikamma had deteriorated with the introduction of PFM. They pointed out that previously they were not prohibited to enter the forest in their backyard to gather wood. However, they were being denied access to these resources through increased restrictions such as permits. The local people in Tsitsikamma generally see permits to be unnecessary restrictions, and many believe that they have to pay to be issued forest utilisation permits. Nevertheless, permits for certain forest products and services are issued gratis to resident communities.

Almost all the householders in Covie stressed that they had not benefited from the management of the indigenous forest. Current natural forest products used in the community are extracted illegally and hence are not considered benefits. Only one household head had benefited from the surrounding indigenous forest and the national park through illegal harvests of products. Every household expressed negative sentiments about DWAF, expressed lack of knowledge about PFM because they were not aware of it. At the same time, local people resented DWAF for resettling their relatives to other villages and Port Elizabeth (hundreds of kilometres) to make way for plantation forestry which had resulted in the breakdown of social networks, and eroding local livelihood strategies. The significance of
social networks in enhancing livelihood strategies is discernable in Covie where the unemployed are supported by the seasonally employed or by pensioners or those that earn disability grants.

Livelihood Issues

Formal and casual employment is the most important source of income in Covie. Very few households worked for DWAF. The nearby forest is a handy source of fuelwood for all the householders in the Covie Community. However, local people would not readily supply this information in fear of retribution or increased policing by DWAF. In fact, they hardly regard forest products like wood and medicinal plants as benefits because they had ostensibly been exploiting these resources without formal access anyway. There is heightened expectation for DWAF to do more around Covie.

There is no discernable impact of the illegal use of wood for energy by the local people on the forest structure because they collect only dead, dried and fallen twigs and branches at the periphery of the forest. They also collect tree debris generated during the felling of diseased and dying trees. DWAF employees who live in the village have access to subsidised wood from their workplace. The richly endowed forest also has a great aesthetic appeal to local people and has potential for supporting eco- and cultural tourism on the community land. Tourism would go a long way in sustaining the community.

The stated needs of the Covie people reflect the basic requirements for establishing a sustainable local community capable of attracting tourists that visit Tsitsikamma. The Covie people need basic services, such as electricity, water and a school. Meeting these needs would boost the economy of the village as well as encourage the conservation of the indigenous forest. For example, it is doubtful that the Covie would ever benefit from the vibrant tourism industry along the Garden Route and especially in Tsitsikamma when there are no toilets, well-functioning water and road systems and electricity in the area. Private businesses could then invest in chalets, and other associated tourist facilities, thereby enhancing the employment prospects for the local people. Additional sources of income would improve the standard of living and lessen dependence on natural resources.

Conclusions

Returning to the broad question that we started with, it is necessary to draw out some recommendations and salient features for policy from the three experiences spanning the three countries. First, promoting greater participation through user groups/committees (sensu Manor, 2005), or is pointed out above, scaling down. Secondly, changing adverse policy environments for resource management. Third, enhancing the flow of information between government and local people. Fourth, promoting greater accountability through delegation of power to create and modify rules at the local level (sensu Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Finally, whereas these promising transformations have taken place in relation to resource governance, for local communities, what matters most is having improvements in their livelihood systems from resources. This is the area where there are mixed promises ranging from little to considerable, and there is some spurious correlation with the degree to which power and control over resources has been given towards communities. This correlation has to be weighed against the ‘value’ of the resources in question.
References


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