



Who benefits from fisheries co-management? A case study in Lake Chiuta, Malawi



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ABSTRACT

The fisheries management policy shift towards resource user participation in Malawi in the early 1990s resulted in mixed benefits among small-scale fishers, with many applauding the changes. This paper considers the impacts of these policy changes on government and within the fishing communities around Lake Chiuta whose fisheries co-management experience is considered successful. Benefits to the communities range from gaining government support in excluding non-local fishers using destructive fishing gear to increased household incomes and improved livelihoods, while benefits to government range from taking credit for establishing a sustainable fishery and co-management arrangements to reduced resource management costs. Community costs include financial resources and time spent by resource user representative organisations in enforcing fishing regulations. These findings enable a more balanced assessment of neoliberal claims about the benefits of delegating management responsibilities and downloading costs of management onto fishing communities and organisations.

1. Introduction: the setting and the fishery

Lake Chiuta is a small lake fed by a number of affluent streams with a total surface area of about 200 km² located in southern Malawi. It is shared between Malawi and Mozambique, where 20% of the lake is located [1]. There are two main islands on the lake named Big Chiuta and Small Chiuta which are inhabited by fishers during fishing operations and 52 villages around the periphery of the lake.

The lake supports a multi-species fishery characterised by small-scale artisanal fishers who fish both for subsistence and commercial purposes. The fishing technology is still traditional, with the use of gillnets, longlines and fish traps. According to the 2014 census of fishers and fishing crafts, there were only four planked boats, not all motorised and 136 dugout canoes [2]. The absence of motorised fishing boats in the lake is due to the nature of the lake, the fishery and the distances the fishers have to cover to get to the fishing grounds. The fishing grounds are not far from the shores and in some places, there is submerged aquatic vegetation that makes the use of motorised boats impossible. The southern part of the lake is more or less permanently covered with emergent vegetation penetrable by canoes but not larger craft. Because of these physical characteristics, Lake Chiuta is not appropriate for large-scale fishing and the fishery is wholly small-scale artisanal.

A fish trap fishery dominates by far the fishing activities in the lake, followed by gillnetting and long lining. Of late, a new fishery has

developed in the lake called *nchomanga*, in which 3–5 hooks are attached to one string and set using weights and floats individually. There are currently about 150 fishers on the lake, and the great majority of fishers own their own gear and fish singly in their own boats. There are very few crew members at present (about 30%).

Thus Lake Chiuta exemplifies a small-scale fishery where key ecological conditions have historically reduced incentives for over-fishing and allowed a sustainable local fishery to persist. This paper considers the circumstances leading to the development of co-management on the lake as a revealing example of the key role of government in co-management [3], which is often considered to be mostly community-based management. The importance of government actions taken to protect the local fishery, as well as the ongoing government role in the fishery importantly demonstrate that the neoliberal ideal of drastically reducing the role of government and delegating almost all responsibilities and costs to local actors is a naïve conception in circumstances such as this, and doubtless in others.

2. Methods

This paper is based on a study carried out between 2013 and 2014 by the author as principal investigator. A combination of primary and secondary information sources were used, involving literature reviews of either published or grey literature and a series of field interviews, focus groups, and observations. A total of 124 questionnaires were

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administered in 4 selected villages and 8 focus group discussions were done, 2 in each village. The questionnaires were administered with assistance from 8 hired research assistants. Each study village was allocated to one research assistant. The focus group discussions were conducted by the author and two research assistants. The observations were done during the focus group discussions while the facilitation of the discussions was done by one of the research assistants. The paper also builds upon past research by the author and others which have documented the history of this fishery [4–7].

3. Policy shift in natural resource management

Fisheries management policy changes in the neoliberal era in many fishing nations, especially in developing countries, have resulted in greater resource user participation. Government agencies are often motivated to move in this direction because of dwindling fish stocks and the desire to reduce operational management costs [8]. Natural resource management policy shifts in Malawi started in the late 1980s, with shifts in the sectoral environmental management policies and strategies, in particular the involvement of resource users in resource management. This was a result of concerns about environmental degradation that were going to bring negative consequences for economic development in the near future [6]. Environmental degradation then became a serious policy issue in Malawi in the 1990s, with the government becoming increasingly concerned about the deterioration of the country's natural resources and the environment, a scenario that still exists today. A major environmental and developmental challenge was and still is, how to narrow the gap between the degradation of the natural resources and the environment on one hand and sustainable production and economic growth on the other. Resource user community involvement in management of the natural resources and the environment was envisaged as the most probable solution to the problem.

Through a comprehensive participatory process involving the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities and government organisations, the government of Malawi prepared a National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), launched in December 1994. The NEAP described the environmental situation in the country and outlined environmental strategies, measures and programmes necessary for promoting the conservation, management and sustainable utilisation of natural resources. To enable the effective implementation of NEAP, the National Environmental Policy (NEP) was prepared and approved in 1996 [9].

The NEP aimed at (a) promoting the efficient utilisation and management of natural resources, (b) facilitating the rehabilitation and management of essential ecosystems and ecological processes, (c) enhancing public awareness of the importance of sound environmental management, and (d) promoting cooperation between government, local communities and women's groups, non-governmental organisations and the private sector in the management and sustainable utilisation of the natural resources and the environment [9]. Thereafter, sectoral environmental policies and strategies were revised with reference to the NEP. Realising the important role resource users can play in the management of natural resources, most sectoral policies put great emphasis on community participation.

The Department of Fisheries (DoF), in revising its sectoral policy, stated that its overall objective was “to manage fish resources for sustainable utilisation and conservation of aquatic biodiversity”. Of interest to this paper is one of their fisheries policy guiding principles that “*the involvement of the private sector and local communities is critical to improved management, conservation and sustainable utilisation of Malawi's fisheries resources*” [10]. This guiding principle recognises the importance of community involvement through co-management or resource user participation in fisheries management. Among its policy strategies, DoF's strategy number 7 aspired to “*give local communities adequate responsibility for the management of*

fisheries resources and strengthen the local management capacity”. In order to effectively implement the fisheries policy, strategy number 10 was to “*enact a Fisheries Conservation and Management Act to provide the necessary legal framework for achieving the objectives and implementing the strategies outlined in the policy*”.

The Fisheries Conservation and Management Act passed through parliament in 1997, thereby enabling DoF to effectively implement its policy and management strategies. These arrangements set up an enabling environment for the successful implementation of co-management in the fisheries sector in Malawi.

This policy direction was also occurring at the national level. As part of the process of consolidating democracy and as a strategy for realising the country's development goal of poverty reduction, the Malawi Government expressed its desire to decentralise political and administrative authority to the district level [11]. As a result of this, the late 1990s saw the Government of Malawi change its policy of centralised administration and management to decentralised management and administration. The National Decentralisation Policy was finally approved by parliament in October 1998 (*ibid*, p2). To enable the effective implementation of the National Decentralisation Policy, a new Local Government Act was passed in Parliament in 1998. The implementation of this decentralisation policy was designed to start by the end of 1999.

The National Decentralisation Policy aims at (a) devolving administration and political authority to the district level, (b) integrating governmental agencies at the district and local levels into one administrative unit, through the process of organisational integration, manpower absorption, composite budgeting and provision of funds for the decentralised services, (c) diverting the centre of implementation responsibilities and transferring these to the districts, (d) assigning functions and responsibilities to the various levels of government, and (e) promoting popular participation in the governance and development of districts.

4. The convergence of neoliberal and co-management discourses

Neoliberal approaches to natural resource management in Malawi started in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the same time that the Government of Malawi started having the concerns described above. These concerns cut across all the natural resource sectors in the country, including fisheries. This also coincided with the realisation described above that natural resource management cannot effectively be implemented by the regulatory authorities without the involvement of the resource users [12]. These trends triggered an important discourse in natural resource management in Malawi that fish resource management cannot be done by only looking at the biological attributes of the resources but must also include the economic and socio-cultural attributes of the fisheries. The end result of this discourse was the introduction of fisheries co-management or participatory fisheries management which also spanned the forestry sector at about the same time. Thus neoliberal and co-management discourses overlapped, and became mutually reinforcing.

Scholars like Pinkerton [13] have argued that North American co-management agreements between governments and fishing interests have arisen out of crises caused by rumoured or real stock depletion or from political pressure resulting from claims that the government's ability to manage is insufficient to handle specific problems. This observation describes the beginning of co-management in Malawi, which was introduced on a pilot scale in Lake Malombe, about 10 km from Lake Malawi and connected to it by the Shire River. However, the development of co-management on Lake Chiuta was initiated by the inability of local fishers to legally control entry into the fishery of non-local seine net fishers, with an anticipated crisis of overfishing and aquatic environment degradation. Thus a demand for government intervention to protect a fishery in a situation where there was no

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