



A political ecology of scaling: Struggles over power, land and authority



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ABSTRACT

This paper integrates insights from political ecology with a politics of scaling to discuss the construction and transformation of scalar topographies as part of the politics and power dynamics of natural resource management. The paper details two case studies from Community Based Natural Resource Management in the forest and wildlife sectors of Tanzania to: (1) analyse the devolution of power from the state to the local level; and (2) investigate the constant renegotiations and scalar transformations by actors across multiple levels in attempts to manipulate the governance system. The paper highlights the sociospatial aspects of the struggles and politics of natural resource management, and emphasises that whilst these processes of scalar negotiation and struggle are distinct between the two examples, they both revolve around the same political struggle over power. This indicates an important structuration element of power and scale as they are shaped by both the structural configuration of power within each sector alongside the agency of different actors across multiple levels.

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1. Introduction

For over thirty years, Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) strategies have focused on bringing local people into decision-making about the natural world, channelling benefits from different uses of the environment to these people, and incentivising sustainable management of natural resources (Adams and Hulme, 2001a,b). CBNRM became the “darling of funding agencies” (Shackleton et al., 2010: 2) but mixed results, unexpected outcomes and a degree of disillusionment have followed (Büscher and Dressler, 2007; Hutton et al., 2005). This area of research has moved beyond concerns with purely the financial benefits amassed through CBNRM to recognise the imperative importance of considering power dynamics and the complexities of natural resource governance with a focus on issues of rights, equity and justice (Shackleton et al., 2010). This has been a popular area of research within political ecology, which has sought particularly to untangle the politics and complexities of CBNRM in reality, centred on “the politics of struggles over the control of, and access to natural resources” (Jones, 2006: 483).

At the very core of CBNRM is the devolution of power to the local level for natural resource management, and a large body of literature has been devoted to understanding the ways in which power is devolved, the restrictions placed upon this devolution

and the realities of community level management (see Dressler et al., 2010; McShane et al., 2011; Frost and Bond, 2008; Murombedzi, 1999; Fabricius et al., 2004). Importantly, key research areas that have emerged from this body of literature include the micro-politics of the local level, particularly with reference to the distribution of power and benefits from CBNRM, and the socio-political-economic context of power devolution in CBNRM (Sikor and Nguyen, 2007). There is a politics not just to what powers are devolved in CBNRM, but also to how these powers are taken up at the local level and integrated into an existing landscape of natural resource management, local governance and the power systems that these both involve.

This paper adopts a scalar perspective, focusing on the scalar configurations produced by CBNRM, and the processes of struggle taking place around these, to add depth of insight into the politics and power dynamics within two examples of CBNRM in Tanzania. I argue that this scalar perspective makes an important contribution by considering how the power dynamics of CBNRM are socio-spatial. Partly, this is valuable through acknowledging that CBNRM is essentially scalar and, additionally, a scalar analysis helps to add new depth and reveal hidden politics of CBNRM. These are evident through the scale-related politics that emerge through the patterns of winners and losers produced through the configurations in place in CBNRM, and, also, the strategies (including scalar practices) and political agendas pursued by actors to maintain, reconfigure and resist these configurations. By focusing on the struggles taking place within CBNRM, the examples discussed here also contribute to our thinking around scale by examining how power dynamics

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are both shaped by and, in turn, shape CBNRM scales (the structuration of scale as discussed by Smith, 1992). As I go on to discuss, a political ecology of scaling lens does hold potential for anticipating conflict and struggles within natural resource management. However, it is also important to acknowledge that scale is not the only or the key explanation of the complexities of CBNRM, and that it should sit alongside the contribution made by literatures such as elite capture, actor-network theory and institutional analyses, which all contribute to illuminating the politics and power dynamic of natural resource management (see also Zulu, 2009).

A defining element of the scale literature is the idea that space is socially constructed, and scales are created through the compartmentalisation of this space according to power systems (Lefebvre, 1974; Brenner, 2001). This view defines scales as “hierarchies of socioeconomic organisation” (Neumann, 2009: 400). Comprising more than spatial extent, scales are spaces of human–environment interaction in which processes take place, and they constitute geographies of power, representing both the socio-political identity of actors and the organisational structures in which these actors operate (Brenner, 2001). According to Marston (2000: 221), a general acceptance of the socially constructed nature of scale has provided three widely-agreed essential features; firstly that scale is not an external fact or ontological given, but “a way of framing conceptions of reality”; second that the construction of these scalar frames is not a rhetorical act, but is “tangible and ha[s] material consequence[s]” in everyday life and social structures; finally it is widely agreed that these framings of reality are not accepted and stable, but actively contested, often contradictory and under constant re-organisation. I use these three features of scale to explore the scalar politics within CBNRM in Tanzania, investigating the non-containerised nature of scales, the power dynamics introduced by scalar configurations in CBNRM, and the ways in which actors are involved in re-shaping this scalar landscape, re-scaling power within CBNRM governance and forging new links between levels, creating what Neumann (2009: 404) refers to as “new relational socioenvironmental spatialities”.

Scale has long been a central theme of enquiry across human geography, and is recognised as potentially making an important contribution to political ecology by contributing to analyses that weave together socio-ecological processes and by placing power at the centre of the dynamics shaping access to and control over environmental resources and space (see Neumann, 2009; Zimmerer, 2000). The utility of integrating political ecology and scalar perspectives lies in adding to our understanding of the workings of power and its realities in CBNRM: political ecology speaks to scalar theory in terms of the politics and power struggles within multi-level environmental governance particularly in the context of neoliberalisation (which tends to hide socio-ecological politics and spatial aspects), whilst scalar analysis can assist political ecologists in gaining further explanatory power into the realities of environmental governance (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003).

Political ecology’s CBNRM literature has done much to highlight that the complexities of community conservation are socio-political, and to set a clear agenda for an examination of power. This agenda, however, needs to be more explicitly connected to the scale literature (Zulu, 2009; Neumann, 2009). If we accept that the complexities of CBNRM are socio-political, and the need for examination of the workings of power, then the socio-spatial aspects of power are fundamental to this, leading Bryant and Bailey (1997) to argue that the two core themes in political ecology are power and scale.

CBNRM is essentially scalar; through the re-definition of state–society relations, shifting power geometries between the national and local levels, simultaneous re-scaling of governance to the local

and global levels (Bulkeley, 2005; Purcell and Brown, 2005), and re-definition of natural resource governance, altering perceptions and understandings of resources across different levels of governance (see Purcell and Brown, 2005), CBNRM modifies existing and produces new scalar configurations, re-ordering social space in line with modified systems of power and redefining ecological space in terms of natural resource management. These socio-spatial aspects of power, involving hierarchisation and re-hierarchisation amongst spatial units (Brenner, 2001) remain critically lacking in our examination of CBNRM, and it is to this gap that this paper is orientated.

2. The politics of scaling

“Sociospatial processes change the importance and role of certain geographical scales, reassert the important of others and, on occasion, create entirely new scales... The continuous reorganisation of spatial scales is an integral part of social strategies to combat and defend control over limited resources and/or a struggle for empowerment”

[Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003: 913]

Scale is a sociospatial expression of power (see also Leitner and Miller, 2007), and the differentiation of space is infused with power relations and processes of political struggle (Zulu, 2009). Scales are not fixed, therefore, but are spaces of constant conflict and re-shaping, and power relations are at the heart of creating and re-creating the scalar configuration.

The fluid nature of scales and their constant construction and reorganisation has become a major theme and point of critique of early studies (Marston et al., 2005; Smith, 1990). Smith (1992: 74) made a crucial contribution to the theorisation of scale when he argued that “the scale of struggle and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin”, calling for a structuration element to scalar theory in which structure and agency are mutually constitutive “with agents enacting and transforming structures through their actions and structures enabling and constraining human actions” (Leitner and Miller, 2007: 118). Fraser (2010: 335), similarly considers the strategies employed by actors using the term ‘scalecraft’, involving “skills in negotiating spaces of engagement” to consider how scales do not represent things in themselves with inherent qualities, but rather strategies that are pursued by (and benefit) social groups with particular spatial and environmental agendas” (Purcell and Brown, 2005: 279). Scales are, therefore, both socially constructed and continually negotiated around that structure. Scalar outcomes are not just the result of the characteristics of the scalar configuration itself, but are also shaped by the priorities and actions of those empowered by such scalar arrangements (Zulu, 2009; Purcell and Brown, 2005). Here, I focus specifically on how human agency is spatialized to examine how CBNRM projects take place and evolve in reality.

A politics of scaling, examines “situations whereby actors, directly or indirectly, attempt to shift the levels of study, assessment, deliberation and decision-making authority to the level and scale which most suits them, that is, where they can exercise power more effectively” (Lebel et al., 2008: 129). The focus is, therefore, on processes amongst and between scales (Brenner, 2001) and scalar structurations of space through processes of hierarchisation (Bulkeley, 2005). This view conceptualises scale as the “product of material processes and power”, and is critical to moving beyond static views that restrict scale to conceptualisations of nested containers (Rangan and Kull, 2009: 30). It incorporates the ideas not only of struggle and transformation as strategic acts initiated for control over nature, but of a strategic re-organisation of scales as resistance to the distribution of power because these configurations always benefit some, whilst disadvantaging others (Swyngedouw

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