



Politics of scale and community-based forest management in southern Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This article uses insights from theory on the social production of scale and multiple social and natural science methods to interrogate village-scale community-based forest management (CBFM) in southern Malawi, focusing on boundary demarcation, rule formulation and scaling, and dynamics of external facilitation. Examination of political agendas of those who pursued, gained from, or protested particular scalar CBFM arrangements uncovered otherwise hidden scalar politics, whose outcomes impeded more than they advanced CBFM goals. I argue that clarifying the scalar politics and configuration of forest governance arrangements can lead to a more nuanced understanding of CBFM challenges and create new opportunities for addressing them. Containerized, single-level CBFM institutions mismatched interacting social, ecological and institutional scalar configurations and relations, and confounded CBFM. Unequal international-donor/national and national/community scalar relations were as important as intra-community dynamics in explaining performance of CBFM. They constructed CBFM on a shaky foundation that put institutional and personal agendas and short-term goals over long-term socioecological sustainability. The politics of rescaling forest rules from village to (broader) Traditional Authority level alienated them from communities and undermined enforcement. Diverse motivations behind a scale-related strategy that separated usufruct from territorial rights in allocating forests mostly undermined socioecological CBFM goals. While scale is not *the* key or only explanation of CBFM performance, negotiated scaling offered a proactive way to anticipate scale-related conflicts in particular settings, and for communities to create institutional forms that minimize such conflicts at local or intermediate scale levels. Findings support strong, well-resourced states and caution against donor-driven quick fixes.

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1. Introduction

This article uses insights from theory on the social production of scale to interrogate village-level community-based forest management (CBFM) in southern Malawi. It examines impacts of sociospatial configurations and scale-related (scalar) politics by focusing on how scale is constructed and expressed under CBFM – who pursues or gains from particular scalar arrangements and relations, what the motivations and strategies are, and who resists, why and how. It focuses on three locally important conditions for CBFM performance: boundary demarcation, rule formulation, and dynamics of external facilitation. It also explores a practical way to anticipate and defuse potentially damaging scalar politics around CBFM.

Definitions of scale are many and contested, but scale is considered central in understanding the mutually constitutive nature of social and ecological systems and space (e.g. Brenner, 2001). I adopt the ‘composite’ definition of scale provided by Gibson et al. (2000, p. 219): “the temporal, spatial, quantitative or analytical dimensions used to measure or study a phenomenon.” Howitt’s (2003) understanding of spatial scale, which is my focus in this pa-

per, highlights three dimensions: size or spatial extent, level and relation. Levels are “locations on a scale” (Gibson et al., 2000, p.219).¹ Levels also capture agency as “differences in powers and capacities, opportunities and constraints, among nested spaces” (Leitner and Miller, 2007, p. 119). Relation captures linkages between levels. Most of the scale literature reduces spatial scale to one dimension – level, e.g. village, district, national, regional, and global. Although I use scale and level interchangeably to recognize common usage, it is important to consider the other dimensions of scale when examining how it comes about, is mobilized or operates (see Lebel et al., 2008).

For better or worse, community natural resources management (CNRM) approaches now drive conservation policies in most African countries (FAO, 2007). By devolving management authority and resource rights to local ‘communities,’ CNRM approaches are expected to yield more penetrating, inclusive, locally-relevant, inexpensive, and efficient environmental governance; and ecological and social improvements in a more equitable manner, than top-down approaches (Agrawal, 2005). Phrases like “misplaced optimism” (Campbell et al., 2001, p. 589) or “discursive appeal”

¹ Thus, household, village, district, nation and the globe are levels on a political scale.

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beyond proven merits (Blaikie, 2006, p. 1952) characterize assessment of early efforts. Shackleton et al. (2002) and Campbell and Shackleton (2001) together evaluated 27 CNRM cases in Africa and found that success was at best relative but rare. Kellert et al. (2000, p. 705) report that “CNRM rarely resulted in more equitable distribution of power and economic benefits, reduced conflict, . . . protection of biological diversity, or sustainable resource use” in Kenya and Nepal. For Malawi, explanations of CNRM failure include elite capture of CBFM and its benefits; Department of Forestry (DoF) capacity limitations; weak local conservation institutions, weak or corrupt traditional leadership; tensions between modern and traditional leadership, and between competing livelihood demands; and low forest-resource value (Kayambazinthu, 1999; Jere et al., 2000; Blaikie, 2006; Zulu, 2008). Rare successes include community production of fruit juice from tamarind and baobab trees in Mwanza District (Mauambeta et al., 2007).

Yet despite the fundamentally scalar nature of CNRM—altering the form and scale of conservation from centralized government at national level to ‘community’ management at village level—inadequate attention has been given to scale-based relations and configurations, or how scalar issues may affect the success or failure of CBFM. Scale is treated traditionally as ontologically pregiven and hierarchical spatial containers, politically neutral, and unproblematic. CNRM proponents often assume that “organization, policies, and action at the local scale are inherently more likely to have desired social and ecological effects than activities organized at other scales,” an assumption called the local trap (Brown and Purcell, 2005, p. 607). This assumption is erroneous empirically and theoretically given the poor CNRM record.

Literature on the social production of scale posits scale as socially produced, both fluid and fixed, contested, and the product of political struggle mediated by unequal relations of power (e.g. Smith, 1992; Delaney and Leitner, 1997; Brenner, 1998; Cox, 1998).² Instead of prejudging, a politics-of-scale approach attempts to explain outcomes of a scalar arrangement by examining the political motivations and strategies of social actors who construct, alter, or are empowered by the scalar arrangement, and the nature of associated political struggles (Purcell and Brown, 2005). Politics of scale occur when “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. . . where they can exercise power more effectively” (Lebel et al., 2008). Social actors, through discourses, policies, practices, and historical events that alter or produce scale, or privilege some levels or scales over others, can purposely or unintentionally change decision-making, access to resources, power relations, institutions, livelihoods and the physical environment (Zimmerer, 2000; Geores, 2003; Purcell and Brown, 2005; Batterbury and Fernando, 2006).

I argue that clarifying the scalar politics and configuration of forest governance arrangements can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that CBFM faces, and create new opportunities for addressing them. A politics-of-scale focus provided a lens that explicitly uncovered otherwise hidden scalar politics and diverse social and ecological outcomes, which mostly impeded more than they advanced CBFM goals. Although scalar outcomes are contingent and explanations of CBFM performance not always scale-driven, a process of negotiated scaling can provide a proactive mechanism to anticipate hidden, scale-related conflicts and offer communities opportunities to choose or create institutional forms to minimize them, at least at local or intermediate scales.

The study uses theory on politics of scale and data from multiple social and natural science research methods collected mostly in

2003 in 58 villages within a lapsed (1986–2002) Blantyre City Fuelwood Project in southern Malawi. It also draws on personal observations of Malawi forestry since the 1990s. Below, I review literature and studies on the politics of scale in socioecological analysis. After a brief background of the study site and description of methods, I clarify scalar configurations around CBFM. Then I examine main CBFM actors, associated power relations, motivations, and the form and impact of scalar politics on CBFM. I also summarize scalar underpinnings of common explanations of CBFM failure in Malawi. I then explore the notion of negotiated scaling, discuss the results, and conclude.

2. Politics of scale and socioecological analysis

The central argument of the social production of scale literature is that scale is socially constructed, and its focus is on the roles of diverse actors in struggles that produce scale (Leitner and Miller, 2007). Although particular agendas deem particular scales or levels superior, none comes with characteristics that predetermine outcomes of its interaction with other levels or scales (Swyngedouw, 1997). This literature best fits Manson's (2008) notion of a scale continuum from fixed to constructed, and Smith's (1992) positing of scale as both *fluid* (malleable) and *fixed*, capturing the dialectic between scale as structure and as agency under which actors continually make, unmake, and remake scale and scalar relations. The traditional fixed notion fails to capture intertwined ecological and social systems whose boundaries are often fuzzy and porous (Cumming et al., 2006), involves local-trap assumptions (Brown and Purcell, 2005), and subordinates local agency to broader-level ‘causal’ factors and solutions (Marston et al., 2005). Human agency is rarely spatialized to examine “the sociospatial organizations in which natural resources management projects might take hold” (Cormier-Salem and Bassett, 2007, p. 105).

An actor-oriented focus on scale as a spatial strategy and product of struggle is important in socioecological analysis. Swyngedouw characterizes scale as “the embodiment of and the arena through which social relations of empowerment and disempowerment operate. . . sociospatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated” (Swyngedouw, 1997, p. 140, 144). In a CNRM study in S.E. Asia, Lebel et al. (2008) found that actors produced scale through bounding, representing, and justifying groups; using and understanding resources; and classifying, zoning, and administering spaces. Scale-related politics often produce winners and losers. The powerful “attempt to control the dominated by confining the latter and their activities to a manageable scale,” while marginalized groups “attempt to liberate themselves from these imposed scale constraints by harnessing powers and instrumentalities at other scales” (Jonas 1994, p. 258). Thus, local forest users have used Scott's “everyday weapons of the weak” to resist nationalization of their resources in the name of conservation in Asia and Africa (e.g. Scott, 1985; Peluso, 1992; Neumann, 1998). Expressing scale in area terms, Smith uses the notion of “jumping” scale to describe these attempts at liberty (Smith, 1992, p. 66). Alternatively, Cox (1998) posits actors building vital sociospatial relations within local and often enduring, *network-like* “spaces of dependence” on which they rely for social and livelihood survival. Village-level CBFM institutions disrupt many spaces of dependence.

A few authors have begun to use the politics-of-scale focus in socioecological analysis. Lebel et al. (2008) found that scalar relations between upstream and low-stream users were a major source of conflict in the community management of watershed ecosystem services in Southeast Asia. Purcell and Brown (2005) found that intra-group and scale-based power and ideological struggles between two factions of a rural cooperative in Rondônia,

² For reviews of this literature, see Marston, 2000; Paasi, 2004; Marston et al., 2005.

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