



Complexity and uncertainty in water resource governance in Northwest Cameroon: Reconnoitring the challenges and potential of community-based water resource management

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complexities and uncertainties which exist in water resource management and governance in Northwest Cameroon. Using empirical data collected through participatory research methods with local communities in Ndu, Njinikom and Mbengwi rural districts in Northwest Cameroon, it is shown that management of water resources is challenged by factors such as uncoordinated national development policies, weak institutional frameworks, top-down management approaches to natural resource management, the paternalistic posture of authorities, the inability of water users to promptly and regularly contribute to the operation and maintenance of the water system, as well as the inadequate preservation of watersheds. In contexts like rural Cameroon one of the key ways in which to improve the supply of water for human use, whilst still conserving water resources, is to make it easier for ordinary water users to work with the other stakeholders involved in water management. Clarifying issues of jurisdiction between central and local governments is central to this process of enabling water users to be involved in the management of their own water supplies. Until the full representation and participation of ordinary citizens in policy discussions is achieved, complexity and uncertainty will overshadow the management of water resources.

1. Introduction

The relationship between social development and sustainable natural resource use in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is well documented in the literature (Binswanger-mkhize et al., 2010; Manzur, 2013). However, it has been observed that contemporary development processes and the need to satisfy human needs and wants have increasingly exerted enormous pressure on the natural environment, resulting in unprecedented levels of environmental destruction (Lockwood et al., 2010). Increasing population, rapid urbanisation, and rising incomes have combined to result in increased demand for food and other natural resources (NRs) such as oil, land and water (Khanal et al., 2014).

It has been argued that the prevailing approach to natural resources management (NRM) in some African countries (such as Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Sudan, Niger, Mali and Guinea Conakry) has often tended to be based on a centralised system, placing very little emphasis on the importance of private agents and rural

communities (Roe et al., 2009; Amungwa, 2011). In Cameroon, for example, water resources (WRs) have been formally managed by highly centralised national institutions with prescriptive roles and this has resulted in the exclusion of rural communities (Tantoh and Simatele, 2017). It is argued that water is a public good in Cameroon and the institutional framework is characterised by a top-down management system with the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources (MINEE) as the organising body with conventional sectoral approaches in the hands of many other ministries and public agencies (MINEE, 2005; Ako et al., 2010). According to Mafany and Fantong (2006), Cameroon has abundant WRs with annual average availability estimated at 21,000 m³ per capita, that is three times the world's average (7000 m³) but water still remains a scarce commodity. Ntouda et al. (2013) cite poor water management (WM) and limited exploitation of existing WRs as the main foundation of this scarcity rather than actual water paucity particularly in rural communities. Ako et al. (2010) further posit that poor management and development of WRs are the major problems of WM in

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Cameroon.

The central question in this field is how to effectively manage WRs in a way that meets the increasing needs of the rural population, while still conserving them in the local environment. The more specific question this paper asks is how to achieve this balance in a context where a series of issues (uncoordinated national development policies, weak institutional frameworks, a recent history of top-down WM approaches, a tradition of paternalism among authorities, an inability of water users to contribute to WM and watersheds that are already degraded) make it particularly difficult to do so. Also, the effect of climate change is putting pressure on WRs coupled to depreciating water infrastructure (Ntouda et al., 2013). Whilst this particular combination of factors may be unique to this case study, several of them are common around the world, and so the paper has wider relevance. Resolving all these issues simultaneously is unrealistic, so the paper argues that priority should be given to finding better ways to involve and engage local water users in WM, and that clarifying the roles of national and local governments is a pre-requisite for achieving effective user participation.

Existing research recognises the critical role played by rural communities to effectively manage their NRs. It is argued for example that participation in the form of community-based management (CBM) initiatives in common pool resources (CPRs) is a more practical way to provide potable water in rural communities in particular as it is better able to mobilise local resources, both human and material, through locally adapted or traditional forms of access and management and is capable to adopt ways and means of sustainable WM (Tantoh and Simatele, 2017). This involves the use of local knowledge, recognising local institutions and developing community partnerships. There is now a shift in policy rhetoric from the centralised system of management towards pro-community approaches in water resource management (WRM) in Cameroon (Tantoh and Simatele, 2017). This development provides an opening to learn from polycentric governance approaches which advocates multiple legitimate centres of policymaking among local, regional and national authorities as seen in Botswana and Kenya (McCord et al., 2016).

Good governance has therefore, been foregrounded as a condition for enhanced NRM (Musungafi and Chadamoyo, 2013). By governance, we imply the “interactions of different structures, processes and traditions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised and how decisions are taken, as well as how citizens or other stakeholders have their say” (Lockwood et al., 2010:987). Governance is a more wide-ranging concept than government per se; it relates to a broad social system of governing, which includes, but is not restricted to the narrower perspective of government as the main decision-making political entity. It embraces the relationship between a society and its government. There is now a preference by donor agencies, non-government actors from private and different forms of civil society organisations (CSOs) that good governance involving the participation of all stakeholders is a pre-requisite for effective community transformation (Lockwood et al., 2010; OECD, 2015). The term good governance refers to “an organisational system which is institutionally legitimate for its constituency, efficient in carrying out its purposes characterised by participatory tendencies, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law” (Lockwood et al., 2010:991; OECD, 2015:5).

It is in this context that Biswas and Tortajada (2010), advocate the development of institutional and policy frameworks through which to effectively manage and govern WRs in a bid to empower community-based organisations (CBOs) and promote water governance. This would be possible by promoting institutional arrangements that are fitted to local ecosystems rather than attempting to command NRM from afar (Ostrom, 2007). The government of Cameroon have thus, adopt the rhetoric of decentralisation and devolution, but these processes have often lacked a focus on meaningful institutional and policy changes

which would facilitate the process of empowering local communities to effectively manage their NRs (Nuesiri, 2015).

In summary therefore, it is not an exaggeration to argue that the involvement of local communities in matters that concern them is an important ingredient in the achievement of several important objectives such as community members having a greater sense of ownership of their own future and different ethnic, religious, linguistic and economic groups working towards a common community good (Mbaiwa, 2005; Stone and Nyaupane, 2014). When rural communities participate in the initiation, development, and management of their resources for example, social interaction is enhanced, they become empowered, and their capacities are improved to broaden better and deepen their specific management systems (Tan and Neo, 2009; Musavengane and Simatele, 2016). This paper examines the potential of community water supply management² (CWSM) initiatives in Northwest Cameroon. This paper also explores contemporary difficulties that affect efficient and effective CWSM systems and identifies possible community strategies that could improve WRM and community wellbeing. In what follows, this paper starts with an introduction that describes the scenario of CWSM, followed by the theories of CBM and CWSM as a response to the inability of the government to provide drinkable water to rural communities in Northwest Cameroon. The remaining sections explain the research approach used for the study. Finally, the paper analyses the potential and challenges faced by CWSM initiatives and probable local strategies that could improve WRM in Northwest Cameroon. The conclusion highlighted that an operative institutional framework that defines the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder could foster changes that could improve WM in Northwest Cameroon.

2. WRM in a Cameroonian context

Socio-economic progress in any country is largely determined by the availability of reliable quantity and quality of water and the ability of the country to harness the WR for productive uses (Nyambod and Nazmul, 2010). A common phenomenon in Cameroon is the complexity and uncertainty of potable water supply and how these variations are dealt with. Ako et al. (2010) argue that the conventional framework of WM is characterised by a top-down management system with MINEE as the organising body (Fig. 1). Due to the centrality of water in socio-economic development and the transversal nature of the WR (used for many other purposes in many other sectors), several ministerial departments and public institutions do interfere in the water sector at the regional, divisional and district levels. They include: the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER), the Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection (MINENP), the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries (MINEPIA), Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development (MINEPAT), Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation (MINATD), and Energy of Cameroon (ENEO) among others (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 show that Cameroon's water sector is highly fragmented with the organisation partitioned in several ministries, companies of state, institutes of research and non-governmental organisation (NGOs), which are responsible for various aspects of the resource. These structures perform important responsibilities such as; mobilising, managing, financing and providing technical assistance in the water sector. However, Ako et al. (2010) note that these structures work without any systematic coordination. In the current centralised WM policy for example, local populations are not associated in projects carried out in their regions. All the decisions are taken at the level of the central government and implemented on the field without taking into

² Community water supply management has been adopted within the milieu of this paper to denote that those beneficiaries who are in close proximity to water resources (i.e. all the water in the environment) should be empowered and mandated to have access to and control over the development of such resources in ways that contribute to meeting their needs and promoting sustainable development of their communities.

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