



Rethinking ‘expert’ knowledge in community forest management in Tanzania[☆]



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ABSTRACT

From the 1980s great hopes have been placed on community forest management to promote socio-economic development along with forest protection. Empirical research has shown, however, that while community forest management has often improved forest conditions, the goals of poverty alleviation and local empowerment have not been fully attained. The wide gap between theory and practice of community forest management has caused scholars to emphasise the role of power and politics in the design, practice and outcome of decentralisation. More recently, the roles of techno-bureaucratic values, practices and the authority given to ‘expert’ knowledge have been highlighted as important factors impeding its successful implementation. Building on these insights, this paper, conjoined with other contributions to this special issue, aims to examine the role of professionalisation and ‘expert’ knowledge in community-based forest management in Tanzania, particularly with regard to its economic development and local empowerment benefits. Drawing on long-term research in the Angai village land forest reserve in Liwale, Lindi Region, Tanzania, this paper illustrates how almost 20 years after the inception of community-based forest management, villagers are still waiting for the promised political and economic benefits to materialise. We argue that professionalisation and the privileged role of ‘expert’ knowledge hampered forest decentralisation. Based on our findings, we join other authors of this special issue in calling for less technically and bureaucratically demanding ways of forest management and planning to allow local communities to fully take over ownership and control of forest resources and to relieve state and non-state actors of cumbersome and overburdening development requirements.

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1. Introduction

Starting in the 1980s community forest management has gained popular support globally and especially in the developing South (Charnley and Poe, 2007; Sunderlin et al., 2008). As with community based natural resource management (CBNRM) in general, the premise underlying their wide adoption is that the involvement of local communities in the governance and management of forests will bring about socio-economic development and ecological sustainability (Agrawal, 2007; Maryudi et al., 2012). While a number of social, economic and political factors contributed to their increasing popularity (Charnley and Poe, 2007; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008), they also emerged as a response to exclusionary ‘fortress’ conservation strategies (Brockington, 2002; Lele et al., 2010), which caused social injustice and often failed to achieve conservation outcomes (Agrawal and Redford, 2009; Brockington and Igoe, 2006; Porter-Bolland et al., 2012; Sunseri, 2009). Great hopes were therefore laid in participatory strategies as

advocates argued that local authorities are able to manage natural resources in a more sustainable, efficient and equitable way (Dressler et al., 2010; Hayes and Ostrom, 2005; Ribot et al., 2010). Especially the institutionalisation of local participation via democratic decentralisation reforms was thought to promote empowerment and democracy among rural populations with positive outcomes for long-term sustainability (Ribot, 2004; Wily and Dewees, 2001).

In this context developing country governments have extended community forest management regimes to over a tenth of the world’s forests in the past decade (RRI, 2014). In a number of cases they have contributed to local livelihood benefits, the protection of forests and the transfer of political powers to local communities (Cronkleton et al., 2013; Larson and Ribot, 2007; Ribot et al., 2010). In many more instances, however, the core objectives of poverty alleviation, empowerment and improved forest conditions have not been attained (Cronkleton et al., 2013; Dressler et al., 2010; Maryudi et al., 2012; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008). In contrast, community forest management initiatives resulted in inequitable benefit sharing across local stakeholders, elite capture of benefits, and conflicts over access to natural resources that left less powerful forest users more marginalised than prior to the intervention (Charnley and Poe, 2007; Ribot et al., 2006, 2010; Schreckenberg and Luttrell, 2009; Tacconi, 2007).

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The mixed results and wide gap between theory and practice of community forest management have caused scholars to specifically examine the role of power and politics in the design, practice and outcome of this governance approach (Krott et al., 2014; Larson and Ribot, 2007; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008). Among other things, scholars have questioned the willingness of governments to transfer real powers and authority to local communities (Ribot et al., 2006, 2010). It is argued that while governments adopted decentralisation rhetoric and policy reforms, they continue pursuing strategies to increase their control over valuable natural resources (Poteete and Ribot, 2011; Ribot et al., 2006). The paradox hereby is that despite increasing local participation and recognition of communities' rights, including property rights to forests, community empowerment and greater benefits have been unattained, as the power dynamics underlying complementary access mechanisms remain unaltered (Dressler et al., 2010; Larson and Ribot, 2007). According to Larson and Ribot (2007) urban and elite biased regulatory environment and related policies systematically exclude rural communities from the wealth of natural resources. The rural poor are left to compete on an "uneven playing field of ethnic and other social inequities and economic hurdles" (Larson and Ribot, 2007:189). Thus even if communities hold secure rights to forests they are unable to access benefits because of, among other reasons, technical, financial, bureaucratic and political hurdles (Larson and Ribot, 2007).

In recent years several scholars highlighted the role of technobureaucratic values and practices (Bäckstrand, 2004; Giri and Ojha, 2011; Ojha, 2006; Ojha et al., 2009) and the authority given to expert knowledge (Giessen and Böcher, 2009; Kleinschmit et al., 2009; Nightingale and Ojha, 2013) in constraining the successful implementation of community forest management. In their view community forest management has been undergoing a form of professionalisation, which authorises and privileges professional and 'expertise' knowledge, discourses and practices over more local and indigenous forms of knowledge. This, they argue, leads to a lack of collective empowerment and socio-economic inequalities with the majority of the rural poor remaining marginalised, disempowered and excluded from considerable benefits notwithstanding their continuous inclusion (Giri and Ojha, 2011). Ojha (2006) argues that the processes of scientisation and bureaucratisation create a 'techno-bureaucratic doxa' that makes the democratic control of forest resources by citizens increasingly difficult. Similar arguments of depoliticisation, anti-politics (Ferguson, 1990) or rendering technical have also been made by scholars of international development studying the governance of natural resources (Eversole, 2012; Goldman, 2003; Kothari, 2005; Wilson, 2006).

Building on the above insights, this paper, conjoined with the other contributions to this special issue (Faye, 2015-in this issue; Green and Lund, 2015-in this issue; Rutt et al., 2015-in this issue), aims to examine the role of professionalisation in community-based forest management in Tanzania (CBFM) and what this means to two of its core objectives: economic development and local empowerment (URT, 1998, 2002). Studies of participatory forest management (PFM) in Tanzania have revealed mixed results in terms of conservation, livelihood outcomes, and governance (Blomley and Iddi, 2009). While the importance of power and politics in shaping the design and outcome of PFM in Tanzania has been researched before (Blomley et al., 2008; Brockington, 2007; Lund and Treue, 2008; Mustalahti and Lund, 2009; Nielsen and Lund, 2012), a critical discussion about the role of professionalisation and 'expert' knowledge has been missing to date. Drawing on a case study from Southeastern Tanzania, we set out to "provide an in-depth account of how the hegemonic, technobureaucratic power impede agency, willingness and incentive of local people to engage in innovations in forest management" (Giri and Ojha, 2011:3). Given that Tanzania's CBFM approach is often understood as one of the most advanced legal frameworks for the democratic decentralisation of forest management (Wily and Dewees, 2001; Ribot et al., 2010), our findings should be of great value to other countries

too. Because Tanzania is also an important 'REDD+ country',¹ bringing yet another layer of professionalisation and expertise knowledge concerned with the measuring and selling of forest carbon to rural villages (Mustalahti et al., 2012), we further hope to contribute to contemporary debates on REDD+ as well.

We structured this paper as follows. After this introduction we will outline the study area and data collection methods employed. This is then followed by a brief section on participatory forest management in Tanzania. In section four we present and discuss the results of our research. We will end the paper with a section on conclusion, where we will revisit our main arguments and provide further thoughts for future studies.

2. Study site and data collection methods

Our case study is the 139,420 ha large Angai Villages Land Forest Reserve (AVLFR), which is located in Liwale district in Lindi Region, Tanzania. Liwale is the largest of the six districts in the region and covers approximately 3.8 mio. ha. In 2012, the district had a total population of 91,380. With an average population density of 2 people per sq km, Liwale is among the most sparsely populated districts in the country (Sundström, 2010). The predominant ethnic group are Ngindo people. Other local ethnic groups include Mwera, Yao, Ndonde, Makonde and Ngoni (Johansson, 2008). Two thirds of the entire district is covered by the Selous Game Reserve (Mukama, 2010). Liwale has a mostly flat landscape characterised by sandy soils, which are deep and poor in nutrient contents (Mukama, 2010). In 2004, more than 133 tree species were identified in this area (Dondeyne et al., 2004). AVLFR is managed and owned by 24 villages (previously 13 villages) surrounding the forest. It includes the villages of Mihumo and Darajani that together have more than 3000 inhabitants and span across an area of over 29,000 ha. In the villages an area of 11,792 ha was set-aside as forest reserves, which is about 8.45% of the total AVLFR. This forest area contains large patches of dry miombo, closed dense forests, riverine and wet miombo forests with some high-value timber species including *Brachystegia* sp., *Julbernardia* sp., *Dalbergia melanoxylon* and *Pterocarpus angolensis* (Mukama et al., 2011).

This paper is part of a long-term study of the AVLFR conducted by the second author, Irmeli Mustalahti. Irmeli Mustalahti was trained in forestry and rural development. Her experience in Tanzania dates back to 1993 when she first visited the country. Since then she learnt how to converse in Swahili while working with a NGO called 4H Tanzania, shortly with the Embassy of Finland and later on carried out consulting assignments for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. She lived and researched in the Lindi Region in the course of her Bachelor and Master thesis, and came to Liwale in the year 2000 as a development consultant for the Finland-Tanzania bilateral development project called Rural Integrated Project Support (RIPS). For a period of two years her main task was to facilitate PFM activities, particularly in the Angai Forest, which later became known as the AVLFR. After that, between 2005 and 2012, Irmeli returned to the case study site annually, as an Academy of Finland funded researcher. During these years she carried out several co-financed research projects, with the support of three senior researchers, one PhD student and six Masters students, who all assisted in data collection, to study various interventions related to AVLFR. The findings of these research projects have been published in

¹ Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, plus sustainable management of forests and the conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks (REDD+) is a global climate change mitigation mechanism negotiated under the UNFCCC. Tanzania has received considerable donor funding, particularly from the Government of Norway, to establish REDD+ infrastructure and to implement pilot projects. To support REDD+ activities, the Government of Finland has initiated a comprehensive assessment and monitoring of forest resources, including carbon stocks, across the entire nation (Burgess et al., 2010). With eight non-governmental organisations having initiated pilot projects, Tanzania has recorded the highest number of sub-national REDD+ projects in any African country (Lin et al., 2012).

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