



The politics of expertise in participatory forestry: a case from Tanzania[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 February 2014

Received in revised form 20 November 2014

Accepted 21 November 2014

Available online 23 December 2014

Keywords:

Expertise
Participation
Politics
Knowledge
Access
Tanzania
Forests

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we show how the framing of a community-based forest management (CBFM) intervention implies the professionalization of forest management and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge in a village in Tanzania. We describe how the framing of CBFM in technical and procedural terms, and the subsequent construction of expertise by implementers through training, combine with existing signifiers of social stratification to shape struggles over participation and access to benefits from forest use and management. We also describe how the perceived necessity of expertise is not questioned by village residents, only the exclusive and anti-democratic consequences of the way it comes to be reproduced. Based on our study, we call for a careful reconsideration of the framing of participatory forestry approaches as professionalization to strike a balance between the need for expertise and the costs and potential excluding effects associated with meeting this need.

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1. Introduction

Thirty years of experience with participatory natural resource management interventions have revealed mixed results; discussions of the gap between theory and practice of such participatory interventions are common, and the reality of participatory natural resource management has long been recognised as complex and messy processes that are inherently political (Williams, 2004a,b). Studies have shown how patterns of participation in and livelihood outcomes of such processes have largely mapped themselves onto existing social differences along lines of ethnicity and socio-economic status, which has led to criticism of participatory natural resource management approaches as being susceptible to elite capture (Kumar, 2002; Rantala and German, 2013; Lund and Saito-Jensen, 2013). In this paper, we seek to explore how the framing of participatory natural resource management processes, in terms of technical procedures and artefacts, may play an important part in shaping participation and access to benefits from forest use and management. Through this, we seek to illustrate how the details of design in participatory processes matter to the resulting patterns of participation and benefit distribution. We pose that framings invoking technical and procedural requirements may lend themselves more willingly to elite capture and inequitable

outcomes by favouring a domain of technicality and expertise, and by slanting the playing field of participation towards the literate and numerate and those with procedural knowledge.

Our attempt at examining what we call 'the politics of expertise' in participatory forestry draws on two large bodies of literature: The first has focused on power in participatory natural resource management, both in terms of how power is devolved in such interventions (e.g. Ribot et al., 2006) and how natural resources management takes place within a context of power dynamics, including the micro-politics of the local level (e.g. Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Kapoor, 2005; Kesby, 2005, 2007). Larson and Ribot (2007) discussed how participatory natural resource management takes place within an 'uneven playing field' of policy and practice, representing multiple and competing interests that underpin, for example, the selective allocation of licenses, quotas and permits by powerful actors within the state, as well as corrupt practice. They advocate a minimum standards approach that deliberately slants the field of access in favour of local communities by creating policies that require only these minimum protections to sustain the resource, thereby maximising community control (Larson and Ribot, 2007). The second body of literature lends from Science and Technology studies in the sense of its focus on relationships between power, knowledge and science (Jasanoff, 2004). This view starts from the premise that all knowledge is political and cannot be separated from society (Grundmann, 2009) to 'undress' science, rejecting its representation as an objective reality devoid of politics, and re-conceptualising it as a privileged knowledge system (Nader, 1996). We draw on Sheila Jasanoff's (2004) concept of coproduction between science and society, which highlights the messy, situated and

[☆] This article belongs to the Special Issue: Science and power in PFM.

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inherently socio-political practices that constitute our construction and exchange of knowledge. Yet, our focus is not on the science of forestry as such, i.e. its production and circulation, but more on its application (Goldman et al., 2011), as our interest is to examine how social power emanates from the application of principles from forestry science in participatory forestry, and how this, in turn, comes to shape participation and social outcomes.

We bring together and expand on the arguments from these two literatures by examining the role of the construction and politics of expertise to slant the playing field within the local level. We are interested in the role that expertise plays in generating such outcomes, but we also add a perspective that considers how expertise generates legitimate authority and works alongside existing power relations within the community. By focusing on the politics of expertise in the framing of CBFM interventions in projects and policy, alongside the politics of expertise and access within the local level, we bridge the ‘politics of devolution’ and ‘micro-politics of natural resource management’ literatures to show that expertise is a critical aspect of the politics of access that is constructed and managed across these levels.

The issues of technical framing and expertise have only received scant and recent attention in this literature. Nightingale (2005) analysed the politics of knowledge in community forestry in Nepal in terms of the processes of ‘professionalization’. She argued that this authorizes certain forms of knowledge (emphasizing literacy and numeracy and scientific management plans) while devaluing others. Skills and artefacts of governance become tools in the negotiation of access to decision-making and to benefits from natural resource management, as actors draw on these discourses, use them instrumentally and assert their authority through them (Nightingale, 2005). More recently, Mathews’ (2011) study of *ejido* forestry in Mexico focuses on the materiality of knowledge to examine how the knowledge claims inherent in the legislated, technical framing of forest management were a liability to resource-constrained forest bureaucrats and were contested by communities. His contribution thus casts light on the resistances that technical framings are met with.

We are inspired by these recent studies to explore, first, how the need for expertise at the village level arises as a consequence of the way participatory forest management is framed and, second, how individuals come to embody, reproduce and apply their expertise to access benefits arising from the management of the forest. Specifically, we address three questions: (1) How did CBFM frame forest management according to particular kinds of knowledge?; (2) What benefits (access to forest products, forest revenues, etc.) did the CBFM intervention give rise to?; And (3) What was the role of expertise in shaping access to the benefits rendered by CBFM? We use the concept of access, defined as the “ability to benefit from things” (Ribot and Peluso, 2003: 153). This focuses our attention on understanding who participates and benefits together with the processes of gaining and maintaining access to decision-making forums and sources of benefits. Our specific interest is then to understand the role of expertise in these and how the framing of the CBFM intervention created a need for and nurtured the creation of such expertise.

2. Study area and methods

We draw on a case study of a participatory forestry intervention in Tanzania called Community Based Forest Management (CBFM). CBFM was introduced as part of the national strategy for Participatory Forest Management in Tanzania in 1998 in the National Forestry Policy and subsequent Forest Act (2002). This followed several years of piloting and donor-funded projects around the country (Blomley et al., 2008). The aims of CBFM are three-fold: to improve forest quality through sustainable management; to improve local livelihoods using increased forest revenues; and to improve local governance through effective and accountable natural resource management institutions (Lund and Treue, 2008). CBFM is implemented through the creation of Village

Land Forest Reserves and devolution of management rights to villages, including rights to harvest and market forest produce in accordance with the stipulations in the management plan (MNRT, 2009). In practice, this usually implies that villages have autonomy to harvest and market all non-timber forest products and keep the proceeds thereof. Day to day management of the Village Land Forest Reserve takes place through the village council, which is the lowest level tier of the democratic local government (URT, 2002). Forest management competence is usually delegated by the village council to a Village Natural Resources Committee (VNRC). The village level is linked to the higher tier democratic local government – the district council – through the district forest office. Both the district and village council are democratically elected bodies that wield legislative powers. CBFM has been rapidly taken up around the country since its introduction; a review in 2009 identified over 1,400 villages (14% of registered villages in mainland Tanzania) engaged in CBFM,² making up a network of Village Land Forest Reserves covering a total area of over 2.35 million hectares (MNRT, 2009).

The study is based on an in-depth case study of village politics surrounding forest management in the village of Kiwele. Kiwele is situated in the south-west of Tanzania within 25 minutes driving distance along a dirt road from Iringa town. This site was selected due to its reputation as one of the most successful and long-standing examples of CBFM in the region. The longevity of CBFM in Kiwele enabled us to collect detailed data on accounts, training and management over several years. Specifically, J.F. Lund has worked in Kiwele and surrounding villages throughout the period 2003–2010 involving several months of field work doing interviews, surveys, and participatory observations, whereas K. Green spent 2 weeks in Kiwele in 2010, followed by 3 months in the village in 2011. Data presented in this paper forms part of broader studies carried out in Kiwele and surrounding villages implementing participatory forestry by both authors on the politics of natural resource management, particularly elite capture, power dynamics and micro-politics, over this time period (Lund, 2007; Lund and Treue, 2008; Lund and Saito-Jensen, 2013; Nielsen and Lund, 2012; Lund et al., 2014).

A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were carried out with Kiwele Village Council and VNRC members, village residents, former project and district forest office staff, regional and district officials, current and former staff at the Forestry and Beekeeping Division and academic researchers at Sokoine University of Agriculture in Morogoro, Tanzania. Alongside these interviews, a series of focus groups (numbering 10) and participatory activities (including institutional and process mapping, participatory wealth ranking and resource user processes) were carried out with different natural resource user and socio-economic groups within the village. Insights were also gained from 15 reports written by local residents. These reports provided an anonymous way for residents to provide input to the research project, and were used especially to gain further depth of understanding relating to sensitive issues within the community. Participant observations by both authors during village and VNRC meetings and elections provided valuable insights into the contentions of forest management and how they were dealt with through deliberative means. Finally, VNRC accounts and records were copied and analyzed for the period of January 2003–December 2009.

3. Results

3.1. An intervention demanding expertise

In Kiwele, CBFM was first implemented in the period 1998–2003 by a donor-financed project called MEMA,³ which operated through the

² It is important to note that not all of these villages had completed the application and initiation procedures, however.

³ MEMA stands for ‘Matumizi Endelevu ya Maliisili’ meaning sustainable use of natural resources.

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