



Doing more harm than good? Community based natural resource management and the neglect of local institutions in policy development



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ABSTRACT

Approaches to natural resource management emphasise the importance of involving local people and institutions in order to build capacity, limit costs, and achieve environmental sustainability. Governments worldwide, often encouraged by international donors, have formulated devolution policies and legal instruments that provide an enabling environment for devolved natural resource management. However, implementation of these policies reveals serious challenges. This article explores the effects of limited involvement of local people and institutions in policy development and implementation. An in-depth study of the Forest Policy of Malawi and Village Forest Areas in the Lilongwe district provides an example of externally driven policy development which seeks to promote local management of natural resources. The article argues that policy which has weak ownership by national government and does not adequately consider the complexity of local institutions, together with the effects of previous initiatives on them, can create a cumulative legacy through which destructive resource use practices and social conflict may be reinforced. In short, poorly developed and implemented community based natural resource management policies can do considerably more harm than good. Approaches are needed that enable the policy development process to embed an in-depth understanding of local institutions whilst incorporating flexibility to account for their location-specific nature. This demands further research on policy design to enable rigorous identification of positive and negative institutions and *ex-ante* exploration of the likely effects of different policy interventions.

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Introduction

Decentralised forms of natural resource management are seen as mechanisms for sustainability as local communities are empowered to make decisions over natural resource use (Ribot, 2002; Tacconi et al., 2006). The success of these approaches, however, depends upon the careful development of policy.

Governments have formulated devolution policies and legal instruments for natural resources, providing an enabling environment for devolved management. However, implementation of these policies has revealed a number of challenges, with many policies “reflecting rhetoric more than substance” (Shackleton et al., 2002, p. 1) while communities yield limited benefits and the state promotes its own conservation or revenue interests ahead of rural

livelihoods (ibid). In the case of the forestry sector, governments and local actors involved in devolved Community Based Forest Management (CBFM) programmes face problems which include burdensome regulatory frameworks, limited transfer of authority and overly specified powers to local organisations, choice of unrepresentative local organisations to receive the powers, lack of transparency and accountability of organisations charged with forest management, usurpation of power by local elites, and the undermining of local institutions (Ribot, 2002; Shackleton et al., 2002; Hobley, 2005; Zulu, 2009).

Institutions are defined by Pelling et al. (2008, p. 868) as “the constraints that shape social behaviour...that provide common ground for the negotiation and performance of power and influence in relationships between individuals and groups”. These constraints are commonly divided between ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ institutions. Pelling et al. (ibid, p. 869) describe informal institutions as “embedded and tacit [including] intangibles such as cultural norms, values and accepted ways of doing things” and formal institutions as “visible and subject to rational control and management through public institutional frameworks”. The ‘local institutions’ considered in this

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paper include both formal and informal institutions but predominantly the latter. Whilst by no means perfect, with the potential for abuse by power holders and disadvantages for those with the least power (Toulmin, 2008), local institutions are able to provide knowledge and capacity to help implement policy initiatives. They have the potential to “mediate external interventions into local contexts, and articulate between local and extra-local social and political processes. . . [shaping] the acquisition and distribution of these interventions in fundamental ways, thereby affecting the degree of success of such interventions” (Agrawal and Perrin, 2008, p. 2). Understanding the role that local institutions play within a community is important when considering natural resource management initiatives because of this mediating role. Furthermore, local institutions can help to shape social capital² (ibid), which in turn can improve household welfare through information sharing, collaborative working (reduction of opportunism) and improved collective decision making (Grootaert and Narayan, 2004). While the value of local institutions is recognised in devolution policies for natural resource management, incorporating them into policy development is not straightforward. Furthermore, for local institutions to act as robust mechanisms for natural resource management they may require strengthening, which necessitates a long-term context driven approach (ibid). This approach may be at odds with existing norms in policy development.

Aims

The aims of this paper are to: explore the effects of limited involvement of local people and institutions in policy development and implementation; understand the role that local institutions play in mediating policy; and, consider the consequences of omitting local institutions from policy processes. Considering the roles of local institutions and how policy can best take account of them is important at a time when governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are seeking to improve natural resource management and develop mechanisms for sustainability. They are also looking for local communities to be more involved in shaping their own futures.

Methods

The development and implementation of the Malawian Forest Policy (1996) present an appropriate opportunity to explore the relationship between local institutions and natural resource management policy development because it is an example of a donor driven process that seeks to implement international thinking on sustainable development and community managed natural resource management. The study was carried out in Lilongwe District in the Central Region of Malawi between August 2006 and May 2007. Lilongwe district was selected due to the increased pressure on woodlands because of the high population density and the exposure of local communities to a range of stakeholders through projects connected to Forest Policy implementation (e.g. Lilongwe Forest Project, Community Partnership for Sustainable Resource Management, Malawi Social Action Fund, EU Village Investment Forestry and Total Land Care). The study was interdisciplinary, combining scientific and social scientific investigation, which incorporated qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. This involved an assessment of 33 Village Forest Areas (VFAs), including key informant interviews and forest

Table 1

Numbers, sizes and proportions of VFAs in Lilongwe district and of VFAs included in baseline survey.

Size (ha)	Number of VFAs in region	Proportion of VFAs in region (%)	Number of VFAs visited
0–0.4	16	16.5	5
0.5–0.9	12	12.4	4
1.0–1.9	15	15.5	4
2.0–2.9	22	22.7	7
3.0–3.9	11	11.3	3
4.0–4.9	5	5.2	2
5.0–7.9	8	8.3	3
8.0–9.9	0	0	0
10.0–19.9	4	4.1	1
20.0–40.0	4	4.1	4
Total	97	100	33

resource assessments. These assessments were followed by in-depth research at six focus sites involving a combination of methods, including 165 semi-structured household interviews.

Lilongwe District had 449 VFAs. There are three types of VFA: natural (standing, indigenous forest), planted (usually exotics) and mixed (both standing forest and newly planted). Natural forests (of which there were 134) were chosen for the study as opposed to planted or mixed forests as the Forest Policy put emphasis on promoting the regeneration of natural forests (GoM, 1996). A selection of these natural VFAs (97) was then split by size (Table 1) and 33 were chosen to provide baseline data regarding the management and use of VFAs. A transect walk was carried out in each of the villages to produce social and resource maps and to locate and observe the VFA. As well as providing important baseline data, analysis of the 33 VFAs was used to select six focus sites for in depth study. Selection was based on their size, origin, period of establishment, governance system, benefits, level of conflicts, involvement of other stakeholders and socio-economic characteristics in order to give as wide a representation as possible. These sites enabled detailed investigation to explore the intricacies of local institutions, relationships and to understand the effects of the policy, through semi-structured household interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observation. In total 165 semi-structured household interviews were carried out across the six focus sites; in addition key informant interviews were undertaken with stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of the Forest Policy (Director of Forestry, District Forestry Officers and staff of local NGOs) as well as village heads, Village Natural Resource Management Committees (VNRMCs) and Forestry Assistants at village level.

Alongside the semi-structured household interviews, 24 focus group discussions (split by men, women and youths as separate users of forest resources) were undertaken across the six focus sites. Focus group discussions were important for gathering information relating to benefit sharing arrangements, the effectiveness of VNRMCs in forest management and how they use the authority and powers in decision making to govern resources on behalf of their constituents. In addition to the village level focus groups, a discussion was conducted with Forest Department headquarters staff using a discussion paper that summarised insights from the field work.

Forest Resource Assessments were carried out at each of the six focus sites, in order to assess the condition of the forest. The assessment provided information on species stocking density, species composition and harvested tree species. This information was used to establish the availability of forest resources to the village, information that is necessary to understand the character of the natural resource base that local institutions have to manage. Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis to aid identification of

² Putnam (1993, p. 167) defines social capital as “features of organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”. In the context of this paper, we refer to social capital as the value that these networks, norms of reciprocity and trust have for community members.

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