

# **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED FOREST AREAS IN EAST AFRICA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES.**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is a move in East Africa from centralized and state-driven forest management regimes towards decentralized and mainly community-based regimes. The paper points out some of the opportunities and challenges. Structural changes in forest policies are seen as a contributing reason that decentralization is more in tune with the prevailing ethos of governance. Similarly, economic and political crises have now discredited service delivery systems based on central bureaucracy, forcing theorists of development administration to shift their focus from hierarchy and control to participation and empowerment. Moreover, the accelerating retrenchment during the 1990s, often to comply with structural adjustment policies, occurred together with the realization that centrist management strategies need reformulation. Erosion of the legitimacy of local institutions has been cited in the paper as one of the challenges. Local institutions have no real authority to decide on the management of forest resources. Another challenge is with regard to the stratified communities. In all stratified communities, interests of some actors are represented only inadequately. Lack of political will at the centre to give powers to communities and grassroots organizations is also a challenge to community based forest management initiatives in the region. It is also important that benefits must be significant if the community is to go to the trouble of establishing and enforcing the rules about resource use. This begs the question on whether community based forest management programmes/projects in East Africa have sufficient value to stimulate community participation. This remains a puzzle. The paper concludes by pointing out that “Rural communities in the region are undergoing rapid social, economic, and political change, as the development and modernization process spreads and deepens”. Even if effective and viable user groups exist or can be put in place today, will they survive and persist in the face of modernization pressures? Much more need to be known about the institutional context in which users now find themselves and the type of support that will increase the probability of sustainable management of our forest resources.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The last years of the last century offered an exciting new strategies for forest resources management and supporting institutional innovations in East Africa and elsewhere. There is a clear move from centralized and state driven forest management regimes of the colonial and post colonial period towards decentralized, and mainly community based regimes, with government and non-government agencies accordingly reshaping their own functions away from direct management functions toward supporting technical and advisory roles (Campbell *et al.*, 1999). However, local management is not a panacea for success. The authors as well as Cunnigham (1995) have visited a number of the sites in the region where “successful” community – based forest management initiatives are claimed. Contrary to what has been published, several of these do not appear to be ecologically, economically or socially sustainable.

Devolution of authority over forest resource management, and the redefinition of rights and responsibilities, is now relatively advanced in Tanzania, with Duru-Haitemba village forest reserve as a case in point (Kajembe and Mgoo, 1999). The Duru-Haitemba initiative has been hailed as a success in many fora, and has provided a useful example to many other countries in the region.

This paper attempts to discuss opportunities and challenges for community participation in the management of protected forest areas in East Africa.

## **2. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

### **2.1 Opportunities**

#### **2.1.1 Changes in forest policies**

Structural changes in forest policies in East Africa can be seen as a contributing reason that decentralization is more in tune with the prevailing ethos of governance. For example the Tanzania National Forest Policy of 1998 clearly states that involvement of local

communities and other stake holders in conservation and management will be encouraged through joint management agreements (URT, 1998). On the other hand decentralization has been a controversial political issue in Kenya. Shortly after independence the Kenya African National Union (KANU) under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta, successfully dismantled the autonomy of provincial administration. Centralizing policies were defended in the name of national unity, the need for rapid development and more effective service delivery (Agrawal *et al.*, 1999). On the other hand Kenya just like the other two sister countries in East Africa: Uganda and Tanzania, is plagued by present and potential fiscal crises – among them increasing population, rising demands of forest products and services, higher debt service burdens and central budget deficits. These fiscal pressures, have led to a cautious attitude about expanding central government and have created incentive for willingness to devolve power to local authorities. As Agrawal *et al.*, (1999) argues, although central governments may often need and wish to intervene in local affairs to address local institutional weaknesses, it would be best to design reform programmes that gradually relax central controls as local governments meet a progression of defined and verifiable performance criteria.

### **2.1.2 Economic and Political crises**

The economic and political crises of 1970s and 1980s have now discredited service delivery systems based on central bureaucracy, forcing theorists of development administration to shift their focus from hierarchy and control to participation and empowerment (Brett, 1996). They once assumed that expert officials answering to donors would bring “modern” services and systems to passive populations whose “traditional values” meant that they could not understand decisions made on their behalf. These hierarchical systems, however, did not lead to progress but to inefficiency, autocracy and corruption.

Non-liberal theorists responded by calling for privatization and competitive markets, which could increase efficiency, but also imposed heavy costs on the poor though reduced subsidies, and increased unemployment (Brett, 1996). Radical theorists, once

supporters of state provision, also had to acknowledge its inefficiency and corruption in the hands of non-accountable elites. However, they believed that capitalist markets encouraged exploitation and marginalized the poor, so they rejected both state and private “top-down” delivery systems. They attributed poverty to “powerlessness” rather than traditional values, and demanded the creation of “participatory” organizational systems driven by poor people’s values and needs rather than those of “western experts”. Perhaps the most influential voice has been that of Chambers (1983). These, they thought, would reduce external dependence, and increase equity, accountability and “economic discipline” (Korten, 1987).

Support for participation has now moved into mainstream donor and private-sector agencies. Thus the UNDP’s 1993 Human Development Report talks of “revolution in our thinking... that makes people’s participation the central objective in all parts of life” (UNDP, 1993) and the World Bank is formally committed “to support government efforts to promote a more enabling environment for participatory development within client countries” (World Bank, 1994).

A reform agenda now exists in East Africa that transcends the old left – right divide, and brings together previously opposed political forces to search for new forms of organization that do not depend upon the passivity of people, but attempt to integrate their creativity into the decision making.

There are many opportunities in the region for decentralizing the management of forest resources in particular. The accelerating retrenchment during the 1990s, often to comply with Structural Adjustment Policies, has occurred together with the realization that centralist management strategies need reformulation (Ostrom, 1996). As Agrawal *et al.*, (1999) laments, decentralization is necessary if civil society is to emerge in countries that have been under a highly centralized administration. Decentralization changes the structures for participation and makes available to citizens multiple channels through which to access and shape governance and the exercise of power. The hope behind decentralization efforts in forest resources management in East Africa can therefore be

summarized: if governments decentralize, citizens will participate. This relationship between decentralization and participation underpins all efforts to dispense power. The idioms of awareness – building, social mobilization, and empowerment may have different meanings. Each aims, however, at strengthening the link between administrative decentralization and citizen participation (Agrawal, *et al.*, 1999).

## **2.2 Challenges**

### **2.2.1 Erosion of the legitimacy of local institutions**

The colonial period marked the beginning of major changes in forest management in the region through the introduction of state structures. It seems the forest managements undermined local people's capacity for sustainable forest management. The colonial legacy has left local communities with little rights over the resources they purportedly own. It is argued that the stringent regulations of the colonial governments in East Africa have had negative effects; such as discouraging tree planting and conservation by the local people. The colonial governments in the region also created various institutions which were tasked with enforcement of regulations. In Tanzania for example, the Forest Ordinance of 1957, gave authority to the Forest Department to manage forest resources in the country, and enforce the act. Although the act is under review, but the “command and control” philosophy still prevail and in most cases the management of forest resources has remained in the hands of the state and not with local communities. In short, local institutions have no real authority to decide on the management of those resources.

Kajembe and Kessy (1999) argues that the emergence of the colonial state marked a major challenge to traditional forms of governance. The top-down colonial model was introduced for the prime purpose of serving the interests of the colonial administration. Independence marked the end of colonial state but there was little change in the attitudes towards local institutions. In Tanzania for example as from 1967 new organizational structures were imposed at the local level in line with the socialistic ideology of sharing everything including forest resources. The state sought to introduce village governments

which were modeled along the Marxist. Leninist Principles. The organizational structure was designed to represent a bottom – up approach to development, but was in essence a conduit for channeling propaganda and development ideas from the state to the local level. The village governments in Tanzania largely failed as a result of lack of local legitimacy, institutional overlap with the persisting traditional structures, and differing interpretation by individuals and groups to suit their own ends. In terms of development discourse, the institutional reforms failed because of their inability to be flexible.

### **2.2.2 Inadequate Representation of the Interests of some Members**

Experience from International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) sites in East Africa clearly revealed that communities are stratified. In all stratified communities, interests of some actors are represented only inadequately. Because of the presence of hierarchies and problems of representation and accountability in all communities studied, it is important to create structures of representation and accountability that can undermine existing asymmetries and prevent new ones from becoming entrenched. In this sense, decentralization in forest resource management in the region cannot ever be taken as an accomplished fact but only as a process in the making.

Another challenge is on the part of the political leadership at the macro level. There has been a lack of political will at the centre to give powers to communities and grassroots organizations because this entail reduction of their own powers, as Smoke (1993) argues in the case of Kenya. In Tanzania, the decentralization exercise of 1972 was seen as more of deconcentration than devolution due to the same reason (Conyers, 1981). Deconcentration involves merely the shifting of workload from the central government to the staff located in offices outside the national capital (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989). Whereas devolution is generally understood as “the most extensive form of decentralization involving creating or strengthening independent levels and units of government though the direct assignment of decision – making responsibility” (Samoff, 1990).

### **2.2.3 Inadequate Valuation of Forest Resources**

It appears that benefits must be significant if a community is to go to the trouble of establishing and enforcing rules about resource use (Campbell *et al.*, 1999). In addition, the benefits must be greater than those that would be obtained from a competing land use.

It is clear from Duru-Haitemba, Babati, Tanzania and Butto-Buvuma, Uganda cases that one of the key components of a successful community-based forest resources management scheme is that the benefits are substantial (Kajembe and Mgoo, 1999; Banana and Gombya-Ssembajjwe, 1999). This begs the question as whether the community – based forest management projects initiated in East Africa have sufficient value to stimulate community participation. This remains a puzzle to most projects in the region (Cunnigham, 1995).

It can be speculated that the sum total of all marketed, subsistence and service value of community based forest resource projects in the region may be substantial, though there have been no serious attempts to calculate this in detail, and it is unclear whether non-market values would provide sufficient incentive for people to participate in community based forest management programmes/projects.

### **2.2.4 Ecological Constraints**

Cunnigham, (1995) argued persuasively that if biodiversity conservation is a goal, local control is less likely to achieve this goal in areas where arable potential is high. Thus in areas of good soils and high rainfall such as Kilimanjaro mountain in Tanzania and Kenya, where closed canopy forests are found, local people are more likely to want to convert the forests to arable production. Under these ecological conditions, state control needs to be strong if biodiversity and habitat conservation are of primary concern. Miombo Woodlands which covers about 90% of Tanzania forest resources for example, with poor soils and lower rainfall, would be more amenable to local control than closed canopy forests. Species characteristics are also important in deciding where local control

will succeed. High diversity systems like those of Kilimanjaro mountain in Tanzania and Kenya and those of Budongo in Uganda are more costly to manage than low – diversity systems such as those of miombo woodlands.

Also high diversity systems have higher diversity of products, each of which may require a different management strategy (Cunnigham, 1995). Where use involves wood extraction, local empowerment is more likely to be sustainable in those systems dominated by species that coppice than in systems where coppicing is infrequent (Saxena, 1997). Many of the Savanna species coppice, more so in the Savannas of nutrient-poor soils (e.g. miombo) than in the savannas of nutrient-rich soils (e.g. acacia savannas).

### **3. CONCLUSION**

What then is the potential for Community Based Forest Management Programmes/Projects in East Africa beyond the contemporary rhetorics? We suggest that one needs to consider institutional, economic and ecological factors when answering this question.

A range of supporting activities are needed to support community-based forest management initiatives in the region, including policy reforms, developing enabling legislations, capacity building at the most local level, and refined planning processes that support local-level, community based forest management decision-making and implementation.

The most important institutional change required relate to the local communities themselves, and the ways and means in which they identifies and manages themselves so as to be able to organize, regulate, sustainable community based forest management schemes. We need adaptive institutions, that can evolve as needs change.



There is no doubt at all that the local use values of forest resources have been seriously under estimated and even misunderstood until recently. However, caution is urged with respect to the economic determinism that has come to permeate every consideration of natural resource management. Economic utility does represent an important incentive. However, where community-based forest management authority has been well established, it is frequently apparent that less tangible socio-cultural or simple tenurial interests (“it is ours”) play equally as important roles in sustained community management. The economic/direct product values of forest resources may be outweighed by the value to local people of “authority” of gaining control.

Similarly an individual will continually weigh the costs and benefits. Anything increasing rewards and reducing costs will favour continuance of the management group and the likelihood of success; conversely, as the costs increase compared to benefits, a group is likely to collapse. Therefore, we cannot take participation as automatic, inevitable, and forever.

Furthermore, the use patterns of people change. Rural communities in the region are undergoing rapid social, economic, and political change, as the development and modernization process spreads and deepens. Even if effective and viable user groups exist or can be put in place today, will they survive and persist in the face of modernization pressures?

We do not argue that devolution of control and decision making to local users is a panacea that will ensure the conservation, sustainable use, and ongoing social and economic benefits from the forest resources. We believe that there is strong evidence that it may well be a crucial first step. However, much more need to be known about the institutional context in which users now find themselves, and the type of support (technical, economic, institutional, or political) that will increase the probability of sustainable management of our forest resources and ensure equitable distribution of benefits from these resources.

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