
Tanzania: Improving forest management through joint management with communities

Many independent states have shown little interest in revitalizing local level systems of authority, which were purposely destroyed by past colonial regimes. The new independent governments, just like past colonial regimes do not like very much the idea of local political forces challenging its legitimacy. Thus, many forests became the property of the state, as in the case of Tanzania. This responsibility was assumed by the Tanzanian state despite other pressing problems like: governance, economic development, self reliance and political stability. As such meager resources were mostly directed towards these causes and managing forests was not accorded priority and they were left to deteriorate.

Much attention to reform management of natural resources like forests has focused on either increasing powers and responsibilities on the government or privatization. Rarely has attention focused on management of resources by communities or managing them as common property, been considered. Communities can achieve this aim with the help -rather than control- from the government. This is the idea being proposed in the new forest policy: making communities responsible for managing forest resources as common property, in Tanzania whenever possible.

Widespread people's participation in forest management, owning the forests as common property, is the current thinking towards forest management. Common property refer to a particular property rights arrangement in which a group of resources users share rights and duties toward a resource. This term therefore refers to social institutions, and not to any inherent natural or physical quality of the resource.

In this arrangement, a particular group of individuals share rights to a resource, e.g a forest. User rights are common to a specified group of individuals, not to all. Thus, common property is not access open to all but access limited to a specified group of users who hold their rights in common. When the group of individuals and property rights they share are well defined, common property should be classified as a form of shared private property. The property rights in a common-property regime can be very clearly specified, they are by definition exclusive to the co-owners (members of the user group), they are secure if they receive appropriate legal support from the government.

It can be noted that while the Tanzanian government and international agencies have overestimated their own capabilities for forest management, they have underestimated the value of local governance over those resources. Local communities who depend on forests for many commodities and services not just timber, are more sensitive to their protective functions and the wide variety of goods available from them in sustainable harvest. But when the governments overrule traditional use rights to forests, local communities and individual households are unable, and less willing to prevent destructive encroachment or overexploitation. In effect, these de jure state forests are turned into de facto open access. Environmental degradation can occur where there is an increasing lack of synchrony between the community and its natural environment, and the implied solution is to restore harmony to environment-society relations.

Restoring or awarding such rights to local groups would induce them to attend to the possibilities of sustainable long term production from the forests. Sustainability of forests depends on local rules, use patterns, and incentives created by international, regional, national and local institutions. Indeed, if ecological conditions are the same, major structural and biological differences between local patches of forests may be almost completely the consequence of human rules and use patterns.

Statements of intent on global environmental problems issued in the 1992 Earth Summit, including Agenda 21 and the Desertification Convention, strongly advocate as solutions a combination of government decentralization, devolution to local communities of responsibility of natural resources held as commons, and community participation.

According to the new forest policy, to abolish open access in public lands, covering more than 19 million hectares in Tanzania, clear ownership for all forests and trees on those lands need be defined. The allocation of forests and their management responsibility to villages, private individuals or to government will be promoted. Central, local and village governments may demarcate and establish new forest reserves.

Communities are best suited to manage and regulate resource use because of four main reasons, which are:

1. Empowering a community to manage and regulate the use of a resource will reduce the pressure on the resource because by the mere fact that it is owned by a certain community it will not be an open access. Potentially, there are many users of a resource e.g. a forest and if one group retain exclusive use of a resource there is high possibility that more sustainable practices are likely to be implemented.
2. A community living near a resource and depending on it for livelihood, and knowing that it will enjoy the benefits of the resource for a long time, is more likely to refrain from misusing it. People rooted in one locality which they call home, will use a resource more careful because if they deplete it they have nowhere else to go. They are different from a commercial corporation which is always on the move, and depletion of a resource in one place means moving to another place and continue with the same trend.
3. The limited resources of governments in terms of personnel and finance to police resources means that this task is better placed in the hands of local people which will do it for their own benefit with no burden of payment on the part of the government.
4. Traditional users of a biotic resource like a forest are more likely to have developed techniques which will enable them to use the resource sustainably. Other groups or companies with less knowledge of the resource are more likely to exploit the resource to extinction with the aim of short term gains.

Extracted from: "Forest policy changes in Tanzania: towards community participation in forest management", Vincent B.M.S. Kihyo, Sokoine University of Agriculture.