
Tanzania: Community-based forest management as a way forward for conservation

Biodiversity rich and varied African ecosystems, including tropical rainforests in central and western regions, were disrupted when the European powers landed and encroached on those territories. This disruption extended to customary social structures which were subordinated to a central decision-making organisation to handle regulation and management of natural resources exploitation.

Later, independent processes in many African countries failed to change this imposed centralised model. However, Tanzania is an exception. In the 1970s, during post-independence, the government began to devolve power and control over natural resources back to local authorities for community based development. Through a process of “villagization”, the management authority was vested in elected local governments of village lands. The 1975 Villages and Ujamaa Villages Act, further supported by the 1982 Local Government Act, regulated the village system for community-based natural resource management encouraging common property a legal form of ownership.

According to 1998 data, out of a population of 30 million people, 25 million live within one of the 9,000 registered villages. Each village has a legal and institutional base, a defined perimeter boundary, and an elected village council --which acts as Trustee or “Land Manager” of communal village lands, and is the controlling authority over management decisions on water sources, grazing land and forests.

Village Forest Reserves cover more than 19 million hectares. A number of Public Land Forests and National Forest Reserves are being transferred to communities for management. The 1998 National Forest Policy promotes Village Forest Reserves and inter-jurisdictional collaborative management regimes between local communities; the 2000 draft forest bill goes even further providing delegation of authority “to the lowest possible level of local management”, further empowering the community.

The new law sets out three types of community-based forest management:

- Village Land Forest Reserves: forest land ownership is vested in the entire village community;
- Community Forest Reserves: forests owned and managed by a sub-group of the village community; and
- Village Forest Management Areas: areas of government reserves placed under community management, not ownership.

Within this pattern, the village is the “manager” of the forest, while the central government provides technical advice, liaison between central and local governments, and mediation in dispute among village forest managers, acting as a watchdog on progress.

The restoration of the deteriorated Duru-Haitemba national Forest Reserve under the community forest management approach demonstrates the success of the Tanzanian model: the state Forest Department agreed to work with the eight neighbouring communities which began to manage the forest themselves, upon discreet management areas governed by local by-laws. The communities have successfully monitored and enforced these rules with visible improvement in the forest.

The Tanzanian experience shows a promising way ahead for a conservation pattern which takes into account power relationships and control over land – it tries to decentralise management, regulation and control—while increasing citizen participation at the community level.

Article based on information from: “When there’s a Way, there’s a Will”, Report 2: Models of Community-Based Natural Resource Management, by Brian Egan, Lisa Ambus, POLIS project on Ecological Governance, University of Victoria, Canada, and the International Network of Forests and Communities, 2001 For more information see: <http://www.polisproject.org> and <http://www.forestsandcommunities.org>