
Zimbabwe: a different type of top-down approach

Decentralization policies regarding forest management is being considered in the last decade an alternative to the centralized model in use in most countries, which has proved to be unable to assure forest sustainability. Many countries have given municipal and provincial governments additional forest-related responsibilities, in the hope that authorities closer to the ground will understand their local conditions better, have greater capacity to monitor what goes on, and make decisions that reflect local needs.

Nevertheless, this cannot be considered something good in itself since, depending on every specific process, the outcome can be more "bottom-up" or "top-down" oriented, and decentralization may or may not serve to enhance democracy and sustainable use of forests. This will depend on how much the process leads to giving previously marginalized groups greater access to power or to reinforce the power of national elites at the local level.

In "Forging (Un)democratic Resource Governance Systems from the Relic of Zimbabwe's Colonial Past", Alois Mandondo, researcher at the University of Zimbabwe, examines the decentralization process in that country. During the British colonial period, the government made native chiefs responsible for enforcing certain environmental regulations. Nevertheless, those rules did not reflect local interests and the government used the system to further colonial objectives, often at the expense of the native population. As usual, local people lost out: native farmers were forced to cease commercial logging, reduce their cattle herds, and provide free workforce for soil conservation activities.

According to Mandondo, this type of approach is still being adopted at present. Since independence in 1980, local authorities have continued to serve the interests of the national leaders of the ruling party instead of attending those of their own communities. Although the Rural District Council Act of 1988 gave district governments the right to enact land use and conservation laws according to local circumstances, they usually prefer to adopt the law models prepared by the national government. Additionally, communities have had few opportunities to participate in creating new rules, democratically elect their representatives and generate revenues from natural resources. In sum, the decentralization scheme in force in Zimbabwe continues to be "top down"-oriented and does not benefit local communities.

Article based on information from: David Kaimowitz, 29/5/2000; e-mail: d.kaimowitz@cgiar.org ; To send comments to the author or obtain a free electronic version of the paper in English, you can write Alois Mandondo at: mandondo@africaonline.co.zw