

Participatory forestry under decentralization policies: the case of Lilongwe Forestry Project, Malawi

by Margaret Mhango Sikwese

Forestry and Horticulture Department, Bunda College of Agriculture, Malawi

Introduction

The rights that local communities hold as regards the forest resources that they participate in managing are a crucial factor that determines their participation in forestry activities at the time of project execution, and especially after the project has been phased out. This paper presents a case study of the Lilongwe Forestry Project.

The project area

The Lilongwe Forestry Project (LFP) is located in Lilongwe District in central Malawi. Lilongwe District is the capital city of Malawi and has an area of 6 159 km². According to the 1998 census, the district has a population of 1 346 360 people, of whom 905 889 are in rural areas, and a growth rate of 2.9 percent. For administrative purposes, the district is subdivided into four Area Control Units (ACUs): ACU 1 (Lilongwe East); ACU 2 (Lilongwe South and West); ACU 3 (Lilongwe North); and ACU 4 (Lilongwe City). The project covers three ACUs: 1, 2, and 3.

The vegetation of the district comprises mainly miombo woodlands of *Brachystegia*, *Julbernardia* and *Isoberlinia* tree species, within the legume family *Cesalpiniaceae*. Approximately 80 percent of the forest cover in the district is located within the Dzalanyama and Thuma forest reserves (which are gazetted and which cover 989.34 km² and 163.95 km², respectively). Located within Dzalanyama Forest Reserve are a timber plantation (2 003 ha) and a fuelwood plantation (3 119 ha). The most common tree species in the plantation include *Pinus patula* and *Eucalyptus* spp. Apart from these forest reserves, there are also some trees on customary land that are classified in the following categories of forest areas: the graveyard woodlands; the village forest areas (VFAs); and scattered relic woodlands on customary lands. In the early 1990s, the rate of land transformation to agriculture was estimated to be 3.5 percent per year. The rate should now be decreasing, as there are no more forests into which to expand agriculture.

Land tenure in Lilongwe District

Land tenure in Lilongwe's forest areas is summarized in Table 1.

The project activities

LFP commenced in 1995/1996 and is funded by the African Development Bank and the Government of Malawi. LFP is a community-based reforestation project involving people living in the district's rural areas. The four components of the project are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the LFP project addresses a number of issues apart from forestry.

The Lilongwe Forestry Project in context

Community forestry in Malawi

Malawi joined the advocates of community forestry in the late 1970s. The Government of Malawi, through the Forestry Department (FD) mounted a number of efforts to address the problem of deforestation. In addition to the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector also assisted in the efforts. The community forestry projects are summarized in Table 3.

In addition to the efforts of the government and NGOs in community forestry, the private sector also plays a role. Carlsberg (Malawi) Brewery Limited launched a nationwide promotion, the Carlsberg Malawi Brewery Tree Planting Promotion, to assist the government in afforestation efforts through the National Tree Planting Programme. The same company, in collaboration with the government and other NGOs, launched another programme after the first programme was phased out. The second was called The Green Pack and was aimed at tobacco estate farmers.

These forestry efforts were participatory forestry projects using the community forestry approach.

TABLE 1 • Forest areas and their institutional basis in Lilongwe District, Malawi

FOREST AREAS	INSTITUTIONS WITH RESPECT TO USE	
Forest reserves	Public land	Rights held by the state
Village forest areas	Traditional customary land	Rights held by the traditional village chief
Woodlots, trees in people's gardens	Traditional customary land	Private rights held by individuals
Forest resources on unallocated customary land	Traditional customary land	Rights held by the traditional village chief
Graveyards	Traditional customary land	Rights held by the traditional village chief

TABLE 2 • Components and activities of the Lilongwe Forestry Project, Malawi

PROJECT COMPONENT	ACTIVITIES
Community forestry development	Seedling production (nurseries), tree planting (woodlot establishment), agroforestry (alley and intercropping)
Forest protection and management	Enhancing protection and management of the remaining areas of both plantation and indigenous forests, both within the forest reserves and on customary land
Infrastructure development	Water supply improvements, construction of buildings and roads, communication (for fire protection purposes)
Management and institutional development	Forestry Department staff improvement: training, monitoring and evaluation and consulting services

TABLE 3 • Community forestry efforts in Malawi

GOVERNMENT PROJECTS	NGOs
Wood Energy Project	Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR)
The Natural Resources Management Component of the Government of Malawi/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 5th Country Programme (1993–1996)	World Vision International (WVI)
Malawi Agricultural Research and Extension Programme (MARE)	The Promotion of Soil Conservation and Rural Production (PROSCARP) Project
The Co-management of Forest Resources (Environmental Support Programme)	The Malawi Agroforestry and Extension (MAFE) Project

However, they were not achieving their objectives. Deforestation continued to be rampant in the country, and people, especially smallholder farmers in rural areas, continued to face shortages of fuelwood and other forest resources. The common denominator among all of the projects was that they were addressing the problem of a shortage of forest resources by providing seedlings and other technical inputs. It was assumed that people were failing to plant trees because they did not have seedlings. What was not considered or learned from previous projects was that all the technical inputs were also being provided, and tree seedlings were being planted by the millions, but still no substantial change was noted as regards forest cover and availability of forest resources. Trees were planted and then they would die because of lack of care. What was it that led people to participate in planting trees but then to fail to participate in ensuring that the trees would grow and provide them with much-needed forest products?

Participatory forestry under LFP

The observation should have sent a signal to project proponents that, apart from lack of inputs and financial resources, other factors were affecting communities' participation in forestry activities. Participatory forestry is not only about communities raising seedlings and planting them. Project achievements need not be measured in terms of the number of seeds supplied, the number of tree seedlings raised or the number of trees planted. If a participatory forestry project is to be sustainable, other issues – such as the rights of those communities as regards the seedlings raised or the trees planted – need to be taken into account. Much more important is the issue of the land on which the trees are planted (ownership or tenure). According to Fortmann and Nhira (1992), land tenure and tree tenure are not synonymous. One can own a tree and not the land on which it is growing and, vice versa, one can own the land and not the trees growing on it. Hence, the “bundle of rights” that a person holds, *vis-à-vis* land and trees is a very important factor in ensuring that person participates in forestry activities, from raising seedlings to benefiting from the use of the trees planted.

It is with these issues in mind that this paper articulates the rights, responsibilities, returns and relationships (the “4Rs”, as developed by Vira *et al.*, 1998) that exist in a participatory forestry project, such as LFP, and how these in turn affect communities' participation in forestry activities in particular, and in development activities in general.

The policy framework

As a concept, decentralization refers to the shift in the locus of power from the centre towards the periphery. It does not imply that all the power resides at the periphery. The centre still sets broad policy guidelines and goals and is responsible for coordinating among decentralized units, in addition to supplying certain key goods and services (Carney, 1995). Decentralization includes elements of politics (who benefits?), organizational aspects (structural changes) and bureaucratic reorientation (changes in tasks, roles, attitudes and behaviour patterns) (Hobley, 1995, citing Sanwal, 1987).

Among other things, the decentralization policy in Malawi:

- devolves administration and political authority to the district level;
- integrates government agencies at the district and local levels into one administrative unit;
- divests the centre of implementation responsibilities and transfers these to the various levels of government;
- promotes popular participation in the governance and development of districts.

This has necessitated the formation of district assemblies to ensure that all the activities are well coordinated at the district level.

For the FD, whose policy (GoM, 1996) also encourages communities' participation in forestry activities, the decentralization policy was not at all in contradiction. Community forestry would be better executed in an environment where people's participation is encouraged in all sectors and at all levels. Ideally, the decentralization policy would thus create an enabling environment for the FD to achieve its objectives.

Under the decentralization policy, district assemblies are encouraged to form action committees at various levels: area, ward and village. For forestry issues, the villages are supposed to form Village Natural Resource Committees (VNRMCs). These committees



are responsible for all natural resources in the villages. Currently, under LFP, they are responsible for the VFAs. However, there is no clear mechanism of ownership and control. The FD, the traditional village chief and the VNRMC all have to make decisions regarding the same VFA.

The FD's structure had to change to reflect the changes in policy. The department was supposed to have more technical staff for extension services to replace the numerous guards, who were not needed in large numbers because the communities would perform some of the policing functions. However, this has not yet happened.

The decentralization policy calls for the integration of government agencies at the district level. However, because of other problems, integration of the agencies did not take place until recently. The district assemblies are not yet fully functional because of the need for civic education.

The FD's role in working with the communities varies according to the type of forest in question, i.e. whether it is a forest reserve (on public land) or a VFA or another type of forest (on customary land). According to policy, the FD has the duty to oversee the activities in all forest areas, even on customary land. For this reasons it performs policing activities, especially where commercial forestry activities are concerned. However, this role is more emphasized in forest reserves than in the other areas.

Rights: do the communities have the rights to participate in forestry activities?

To assist in understanding the situation of the local communities as regards rights to the forest resources, a summary of the property rights regimes is presented in Table 4.

The FD inventoried and produced management plans for the forest reserves, but these have not yet been put to use. Currently, the FD makes all the decisions, as already indicated, because it holds the ownership rights to the reserves. Local communities can only have access and withdrawal rights, which are granted by the FD.

The FD inventoried the VFAs and conducted resource assessments. The aim of the assessments was to determine how much resource was available and to formulate plans for management and benefit sharing between the FD and the communities. Draft VFA management plans have been produced, but most of them have not yet been approved by the Director of Forestry Services. When the director approves the management, the FD and the local communities enter into a Forest Management Agreement, which stipulates that the communities now "own" the forest (Forest Act 1997).

The problem with this arrangement is that, so far, the director has approved only a few VFA management plans. In principle, this means that most of the village communities do not actually have rights to the forest resource, as they thought they did (as indicated in Table 4). The FD owns the VFAs. The FD has the collective-choice property rights, which include management, exclusion and alienation. The communities therefore have only operational rights, i.e. those of access and withdrawal. The difference between collective-choice rights and operational rights is the difference between participating in the definition of future rights to be exercised and simply exercising the rights (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992). This creates confusion, as the FD staff perform functions that are not expected of them by the communities, such as regulating the use of forest products that have been collected from the VFAs. Even after they have signed

**TABLE 4 • Property rights regime
in Lilongwe Forestry Project areas, Malawi**

BUNDLE OF RIGHTS	FOREST RESERVE	VILLAGE FOREST AREA
Access and withdrawal	FD, local communities	Local communities
Management	FD	Local communities (through village chief)
Exclusion	FD	Local communities (through traditional village chief and VNRMC)
Alienation	FD	Local communities (through village chief)

an agreement with the FD, communities will only get usufruct rights and not ownership rights.

As a result, communities are not sure of their rights and tend to be sceptical of the FD. Cases of the irresponsible felling of trees tend to be on the rise in some parts of the district. The people still feel that the FD is in control and that they will not benefit at all if they participate in forestry activities.

Responsibilities: what do the local communities participate in?

With the aforementioned rights come responsibilities. Decentralization is often seen as a panacea for the management of environmental resources because of its microlevel ownership and decision-making. However, experience shows that decentralization is neither a prerequisite for nor a guarantee of sound development and environmental management. This is because community involvement in the management of natural resources requires real power and rights to play a responsible role. The stakeholders in forest management will therefore be responsible for what they know they have the power and rights to do.

As regards forest reserves, a form of co-management between the FD and the local communities was arranged. The FD is responsible for coordinating the activities that occur in the forest reserves, as well as for guarding those reserves. The communities are involved in management activities in the forests, such as construction of firebreaks. As for forests that are on customary land, the FD is responsible for providing technical expertise and inputs such as seeds, polyethylene tubes and boreholes for the provision of healthy water, as well as water for watering the tree nurseries. As already mentioned, the FD is also involved in controlling the commercial use of forest products from the customary land.

Through the traditional village chief and the VNRMC (the village chief is a committee member), the communities are responsible for management activities in the forests. All decisions regarding access and withdrawal, as well as exclusion, are made by the VNRMC, despite the existence of cases of conflict between the village chief and the committees because, otherwise, chiefs may make decisions on the basis that they are custodians of the customary land and all that is standing on it.

Returns: what benefits do the local communities receive?

For participatory forestry to work, the local communities have to be assured that they will benefit from the forest resources in which they have invested

their energy and time. In this case, the local communities are ensured of access to the forest reserves when they buy concessions to get timber. As for fuelwood, they are allowed to collect only dead wood. They are also allowed to collect non-wood forest products, such as mushrooms and wild fruits, and they receive tree seeds, polyethylene tubes and technical expertise from the FD. Of great importance to the communities is the improved access to clean water. Many of the communities were attracted to the project because of the boreholes and watering cans that it was providing.

The local communities also have access to the forests that are on customary land. This is obtained after they have sought permission from the VNRMC or the chief. So long as the need for the forest resource is not commercial, they have access to the resource without a licence.

The local communities have also benefited through training in the raising and selling of fruit tree seedlings as part of income-generating activities. Their livelihoods have improved, but not to a large extent because there is not a very large market for these products.

LFP management provided training on forestry protection and management to the communities, especially to those that live close to the forest reserves. This training was not confined to Lilongwe District. Communities in other districts, such as Ntcheu, Dedza, Mchinji and Salima, which border on the Lilongwe forest reserve, were also trained.

Relationships: can there be participatory forestry after LFP?

The relationship that exists between the FD and the communities is that of dependency. The local communities are dependent on the FD to provide them with the various inputs that they do not have and cannot easily afford. There is no problem in the fact that external organizations provide inputs that the communities are lacking. The problem lies in the fact that the communities become accustomed to free inputs and may have problems once the project has



been phased out and there are no longer any free inputs. Reforestation efforts may come to a halt as inputs are no longer available and the incentive for participation is no longer present. According to some FD officials, some communities have shown the ability to sustain their participation in forestry activities even after the project has been phased out. The project was to be phased out in December 2001, although a two-year extension period is possible as a result of other administrative factors.

Beyond the Lilongwe Forestry Project

The FD is currently in the process of preparing replication of the project efforts to other districts in Malawi. The districts targeted include Ntchisi, Dowa and Nkhata-Bay. These districts have been selected mainly because they have not previously been targeted for forestry projects. In most cases, projects focus on areas where there are Mozambican refugees, on the basis that these are the most badly deforested areas. This approach, however, is being reviewed. The FD wants to adopt the approach that "prevention is better than a cure". There are forests in these districts, and the FD wants to protect them before they are cut down carelessly.

A number of lessons have been learned from LFP, and the FD has even gone further, making amendments where bottlenecks to project implementation were found, although there are still areas that need to be addressed.

■ As already mentioned, there was no clear definition as to who had the rights to ownership and control of forests on customary land. There were the FD, the traditional village chief and the VNRMC. The FD reviewed the National Forest Policy (1996) and produced a draft supplement on community forest management. This addresses the issues of formal transfer of forest tenure and management from the government to the communities, which is effected on conclusion of a Forest Management Agreement. Previously, such agreements were signed by the Director, but they are now to be signed by the district assembly so

that there are no unnecessary delays. This can work well if the FD ensures civic education so that the communities understand this. There is also need for a provision to transfer ownership rights to those communities that have proved that they can manage and protect their VFAs well for a number of years.

■ The Land Policy, which also presented problems in forest management, has now been reviewed and provides for the classification of unallocated customary land as public land, for the exclusive use of members of the traditional authority within which that land falls. In addition, all customary landholders, whether communities, families or individuals, are encouraged to register their landholdings as private customary estates, with land tenure rights that preserve the advantages of customary ownership but also ensure security of tenure. If implemented, this will ensure that communities have a sense of security and participate wholly in forestry activities without fear of not benefiting from them.

■ LFP is a multifaceted project. It has addressed a number of issues in addition to reforestation and protection of forest areas. Some components ensured the provision of clean water and improved infrastructure, as well as staff training. In this way, the project was better executed. For the local communities, it provided incentives to people who otherwise would not have been interested in forestry activities. Training of forestry staff has ensured that they will work well with the communities, because participatory forestry is a new concept and is yet to be mastered by the FD staff.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study about LFP, a participatory forestry project that is being implemented while Malawi is in the process of implementing the decentralization policy. While people's participation in forestry activities is for their own good, there are some impediments to their efforts to participate. If the implementers of the project concentrate on the quantitative aspects normally sought in project reports (e.g. number of villages involved, number of seeds distributed, number of seedlings raised, number of trees planted), the aim of participatory forest projects, which is to ensure that the livelihoods of local communities are improved through access to forest resources, may well be missed. This paper has outlined the conditions of rights, responsibilities, returns and relationships under LFP.



References

- Carney, D.** 1995. *Management and supply in agriculture: is decentralisation the answer?* Natural Resource Perspectives Paper No. 4. Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- Fortmann, L. & Nhira, C.** 1992. *Local management of trees and woodland resources in Zimbabwe: a tenurial niche approach.* Oxford Forestry Institute (OFI) Occasional Paper No. 43. Oxford, UK, OFI.
- GoM** (Government of Malawi). 1996. *The National Forest Policy.* Lilongwe, Malawi, Ministry of Natural Resources.
- GoM.** 1997. *The Forest Act 1997.* Lilongwe, Malawi, Ministry of Natural Resources.
- GoM.** 1998. *The National Decentralisation Policy.* Lilongwe, Malawi, Decentralisation Secretariat.
- GoM.** 2001. *Community-based forest management: a supplement to the national forest policy of Malawi (1996).* Lilongwe, Malawi.
- Hobley, M.** 1995. *Institutional changes within the forestry sector: centralised decentralisation?* Rural Development Forestry Network Paper. ODI.
- Luhanga, J.M., Semu, L., Ng'ong'ola, D.H., Neils, K. & Minde, I.J.** 1997. *The socio-economic study on the development of a community forestry project in the Lilongwe Forestry Project area.* Bunda, Malawi, Agricultural Policy Research Unit, Bunda College of Agriculture, University of Malawi.
- National Statistical Office.** 2000. *The 1998 Malawi population and housing census: report of final census results.*
- Nyirenda, R.W., Silungwe, R. & Munthali, S.M.** 1998. *Mid-term review of the Lilongwe Forestry Project.*
- Schlager, E. & Ostrom, E.** 1992. Property rights regimes and natural resources: a conceptual analysis. *Land Economics*, 68(3): 249–262.
- Vira, B., Dubois, O., Daniels, S.E. & Walker, G.B.** 1998. Institutional pluralism in forestry: considerations of analytical and operational tools. *Unasylva*, 194(49): 35–42.