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By  
Ephraim Chifamba

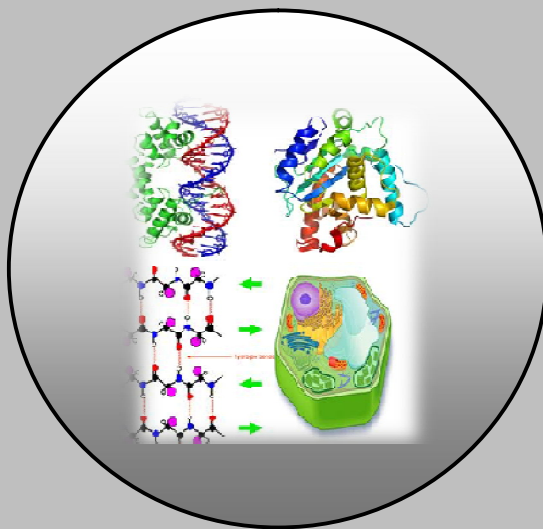
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# **Democratic Decentralization and the Politics of Power Dynamics in Natural Resources Management in Gokwe, Zimbabwe**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Decentralization which assumes that authority and resources are devolved to elected bodies is a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe. In order to increase environmental management efficiency, equity and justice for the local people, many environmentalists have advocated for decentralization, which empowers local actors to make environmental management decisions, rules and regulations. Decentralization is considered a means of institutionalizing and scaling up popular participation. While the objectives and the principles of decentralization are well known, there are still controversial ideas on its potential and effectiveness in the conservation and management of natural resources. The research used both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The study revealed that the central government still controls the management of natural resources and there is no general shift in authority over natural resources management to local people. The study further revealed that when self-interested, non-representative, or autocratic institutions such as interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and customary authorities are chosen in the absence of overseeing representative bodies, there is a risk of strengthening their autocracy and weakening democracy. Pluralism without representation favors the most organized and powerful groups and establishing accountable representation without powers is empty. The study recommended that choosing representative and accountable local institution is a prerequisite for equity, justice, and efficiency.*

**Keywords:** Popular Participation, Local communities, Natural Resources Degradation, Rule Enforcement, Governance and Zimbabwe.

## INTRODUCTION

The need to increase community participation in natural resources has been a near-universal conclusion of national and international policy initiatives in natural resources over the last three decades (Agrawal and Robot, 1999). The validation for this range from consideration of practicality and cost effectiveness to philosophical concerns relating to equity and social justice. Democratic decentralization is currently fundamental to ideas about effective public policy, democracy and the environment. Decentralization is purported to lead to more efficient delivery of public service, equitable outcomes, and foster public participation in the management of natural resources (Bromley, 1992). Decentralization is envisaged to promote flexibility of governmental policies, capacitate local institutions and maximizes the accountability of government. Decentralization is also envisioned to promote development of programmes specifically tailored to local conditions, reduce costs and provide opportunities for new local authorities to gain skill in planning environmental management and delivery of services (Bazaara, 2002a). However, most decentralization programmes in natural resource management are characterized by some perpetuation of central government control and management rather than a clear concerted paradigm shift of authority to local people (Muhereza, 2003a).

Zimbabwe's natural resources are an essential foundation for the country's future livelihood and sustainable growth. Sustainable management of natural resources, however, is a great challenge not only to natural resource managers but also to policy makers given that the population is heavily dependent on them for firewood, timber and agriculture (Chigwenya and Chifamba, 2012). Without effective institutions to regulate resources and management practice, natural resources in the study area will be overharvested and even irreversibly destroyed. The last two decades have witnessed a paradigm shift in conservation and natural resource management (NRM) away from costly state-centered control towards approaches in which local people play a much more active role. These reforms purportedly aimed to increase resource user participation in NRM decisions and benefits by restructuring the power relations between central state and communities through the transfer of management authority to local-level organizations. Yet, the reality rarely reflects this rhetoric.

The implementation of decentralization in Gokwe has failed because of the high cost of rule enforcement. Individuals and communities have considered the rules governing the use of natural resources to be illegitimate since the desires of the government and donors do not match the desire of the community. Decentralization in the study area has also ensured a dominant role for government officials in designing and approving management plans, which are often unnecessarily complex and take an unjustifiably wide interpretation of the greater social good to the detriment of the fundamental rights of local people. Evidence indicates how starkly the rhetoric of devolution objectives and practice has diverged, and how doggedly the state has continued to direct and dominate local natural resources management.

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION: MEANING AND CONCEPTS**

Natural resources represent an important component of community assets. They strengthen the livelihoods of millions of deprived people predominantly those living in the under privileged areas, with few alternative economic opportunities. A decline in the flow below critical minima may have irreversible consequences on the livelihoods of community members. Various factors conspire to make natural resources complicated to govern and manage sustainably. For example, many large scale natural resources can be Common Property Resources (CPRs) and may pose different and complex challenges than those posed by either private or public goods. Use of natural resources can produce important externalities. The multiple spatial and sequential boundaries of natural resources along with their potential externalities rarely conform to the existing political institutions (Shackleton, 2002; Becker and Ostrom, 1995). Rapid diminution and incessant decline in the physical productivity of CPRs and disproportionate access and control of the poor on CPRs have been the major factors in displacing a large number of people from their surroundings and reducing their status to ecological refugees. In the era of globalisation, where market solutions receive primacy and are becoming a panacea for all economic and other challenges confronted by our society, the restoration of natural resources productivity poses major policy challenges (Bromley, 1992).

It has been observed that global attempts at democratisation and decentralisation of management of natural resources have resulted in creation of wider opportunities for people's contribution in governance and, also in exercising control over natural resources (Agrawal, 1996; Crawford and Ostrom, 1995). Many developing countries have made efforts to entrust natural resources management functions as part of the process of institutional reforms. The goal of these reforms is to remedy some of the negative fallouts of the top- down and centralised governance by promoting local governance structures which can help tap the understanding, and the ability of the local people and at the same time, providing those incentives (Ribot, 2002).

Diverse terms like devolution and de-concentration are used to refer to the varying forms in which decentralisation occurs. Part of the reason for this is that decentralisation takes place in many dimensions, at multiple levels, and for varied types of tasks. Decentralisation typically refers to a transfer of power from central authorities to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Saito, 2003; Agrawal, 1995). In other words, it refers to a shift in the locus of power from the centre towards the periphery (Saito, 2003; Agrawal, 1995). Beyond this, there is little consensus on the meaning of the term (Ribot, 1999; Ostrom, and others, 1994).

Generally speaking, democratic decentralisation refers to transfer of powers and functions to local level governments such as municipal governments. The difference between administrative decentralisation or de-concentration and democratic decentralisation is that in the former case, the authority is transferred from central ministries to branch offices located outside the capital (Bahl, 1999). Devolution usually refers to a broader set of transfer measures including transfer of authority to local community organisations. This may also involve establishment or revitalisation of elected bodies at a lower level.

It is often difficult to discuss decentralisation without addressing devolution since they are complementary with each other. Also, since legislative agencies depend upon executive agencies to put their decisions into action, devolution is unlikely to be effective without some accompanying decentralisation or deconcentration (Ribot, 2002).

The process of decentralisation lead to improvements in resource allocation, efficiency, accountability and equity, besides promoting social equality by bringing the state closer to people, enhance local participation, and build social capital (Ostrom, 2001; Ribot, 1999). This would develop the sustainability of the resource. In order to be effective, decentralisation should transfer meaningful powers and sufficient resources to autonomous local authorities that are representative and downwardly accountable (Ribot, 1999; 2002). Achievement of decentralisation depends, to a great extent, on the degree of articulation among local political participants, political parties, and electoral system (Nsibambi, 1997). If local institutions fail, decentralisation may also fail. It is a challenging task for the authorities to build new institutions and make them work efficiently for decentralisation (Muhereza 2003b).

There is a growing concern about the central governments strong resistance to transfer access and control over natural resources and provide sufficient administrative support to local institutions and authorities for successful decentralised decision making (Becker and Ostrom, 1995). Also, earlier optimism regarding joint action has been distorted by poor outcomes of participatory resource management projects and complex local social structures. The major issue in both theory and practice is, therefore, to develop in-depth understanding about institutional linkages which may capture the potential benefits of decentralisation management of natural resources.

Furthermore, there is also a propensity in the literature to advocate that natural resource decentralisation and devolution to local or community governance is necessarily a better alternative. It is not surprising that a primary awareness in the inclusion of marginalised groups and the promotion of democracy would privilege local actors, but it is also important to recognise its precincts. It has to be noted that only in a few cases, decentralisation has achieved both better contribution of and social justice for groups that have been customarily marginalised (Namara and Nsabagasani, 3003). The concept of community in natural resources is often assumed to be a small and stable spatial unit, a homogenous social structure having shared norms. Nevertheless, persons or groups within a community may be highly mobile, economically and socially differentiated, and have different interests and values; they are likely to be affected by frequent outside social, economic, and political forces and may be extremely conflictive (Agrawal 1995). Even though a community may be well organised and have efficient institutions for making decisions and resolving conflict, substantial institution building could be required in many cases. Often, local elites hijack initiatives such as community forestry or participatory water resource management because consideration has not been given to social equity and inclusion (Bahl, 1999). Often scholars and policy makers do not have sufficient answers to some of the basic questions (Becker and Ostrom, 1995) such as: What determines thriving decentralisation policy?

Why would some local governance institutions exploit the opportunities and succeed while others fail? What are the different patterns of incentives created by decentralised policies for local institutions, resource users and other stakeholders? To what extent, do such patterns facilitate in determining the efforts of local institutions, resource users and other stakeholders and their degree of success in managing the NRs? A suitable institutional framework can advance our understanding while studying the process of decentralisation in different settings.

### **Democratic Decentralization of Natural Resource Management in Zimbabwe**

As promoted in the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, governments and donors have adopted participatory natural resources management strategies as a way for increasing effectiveness and justice in natural resource management (Nsibambi, 1997). In Africa, community based natural resource management such as the Gestion des Terroirs in Mali; Transfrontier parks in Southern Africa and the CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe have experimented with participatory processes in which local actors have exercised natural resource management responsibilities and decision making powers (Chifamba, 2012). These experiments have highlighted that local institutions can be the basis of effective local environmental decision making.

It is vital to note that most decentralization experiments have been spatially limited and have taken place under the close surveillance, political protection, and financial support of donors. Paradigm shift to democratic decentralization reform presents the opportunity to swing from project based approach towards legally institutionalized popular participation (Crawford and Ostrom, 1995). These reforms aim at establishing the necessary institutional framework for scaling up popular participation efforts. The paradigm shift in the management of natural resources moves from externally orchestrated direct forms of democratic inclusion to representative forms of community-governance and democracy under the auspices of elected local authorities. The shift has witnessed a movement from ad hoc and experimental community mobilization and inclusion techniques to more institutionalized, more replicated, and potentially more sustainable forms of participation through local democracy (Shackleton and others, 2002; Saito, 2003).

Zimbabwe has undergone various types of decentralization reform in the management of natural resources since the advent of independence in 1980 (Mukumbi, 2003). Although some attempts towards decentralized governance in natural resource management were made during the setting up of the Lancaster House Conference in 1979, the push of the first decade after independence was clearly on centralized control and management by various arms of the central government (Chigwenya and Chifamba, 2012). The 1990s, however witnessed a significant thrust being given to decentralized management of natural resources (Chifamba, 2012). Among the factors which gave impetus to the implementation of decentralized strategies were good governance agenda, donor influence and pressure to combine more accountable and cost-effective local management of resources with the poverty alleviation agenda. Furthermore the emergence of arguments for decentralization in Zimbabwe can be linked to the disillusionment felt in the ability of centralized government to oversee the development process (Chigwenya and Chifamba, 2010).

The development paradigms that provided analytical support for centralized state began to lose ground against other approaches which supported decentralization of natural resources management. Donor support was articulated more as a practical remedy to past policy and project failures than as an ideological approach with theoretical underpinnings. Insofar as these could be teased out, they were influenced by public choice theories and the economic pressures on the Zimbabwean government in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank funded Structural Adjustment era (Mukumbi, 2003). The World Bank argued that the rationale for decentralization of natural resources management was similar to the rationale for 'liberalization, privatization and other market reforms.' The arguments in favor of decentralization were argued on the basis of political efficiency, where public goods and services were expected to be provided by the lowest level of government that could fully capture costs and benefits (Nsibambi, 1997).

The last major influence on the decentralization agenda in Zimbabwe came from the school of thought described as 'moral economy', more commonly known as 'populist'. Populism greatly influenced the policy of community management of natural resources. An important characteristic of populism was a shared vision of the past, where communities managed natural resources sustainably through their own rules. Decentralization of natural resources management was regarded as essential in allowing the management systems to survive.

Efforts to decentralize the management and governance of natural resources in Zimbabwe took different trajectories. One form of decentralization was 'administrative' through partnerships between line departments and user groups set up around a particular natural resource (Chifamba, 2012). Such initiatives were found in watershed management, forest management, water management and irrigation development and these operated under different labels, such as 'joint management', 'co-management' or 'participatory development'. These initiatives were generally state initiated partnership programmes which transferred some rights to arbitrarily limited resources to user groups. The user groups could not be remotely called autonomous and had generally insecure tenure on resources, which was further compounded by complexities of pre-existing rights and overlapping legislation (Ribot, 2002). The user groups were more accountable to the funders than to the village community. This was normally common where ever there was emphasis on heavy funding, which was neither sustainable in the long run nor conducive to honest governance in the short run. In fact, the dependence on large funds created pressures to set unrealistic targets and then bypass participatory processes in order to meet them.

The Zimbabwean government further experimented with broad based devolution of developmental and natural resources governance and this approach resulted in de-concentration of power. The process encompassed political and economic and administrative decentralization. In simple terms this meant providing a suitable legislative framework for the establishment of elected bodies of local self-government at the local level and transfer of power, functions, resources and authority from government agencies to such democratically elected local bodies.

However, the process encountered a lot of challenges because limited land tenure security of transfer of decision making powers from central government to local institutions militated against sustainability of the reforms and the willingness of the local people to believe and invest in the decentralization process.

### **An Overview of Fundamental Issues in Natural Resources and Democratic Decentralization**

Accountability, discretionary power and security are three major key issues in the decentralization process (Saito, 2003). Legislating and implementing decentralization are the first steps. In cases where secure decentralization has been implemented, support and accompanying measures from central government and other stakeholders are needed to ensure that natural resources are not overexploited, that equity is not compromised and that legislation and implementation do not work against each other. Efforts should be directed towards meeting minimum environmental standards and alleviating poverty, as well as accompanying measures for civic education and conflicts mediation. The government must play a pivotal role in advancing reforms needed to achieve effective decentralization. In practice, an end-point of decentralization entails an ongoing political struggle between local and central interests.

To evaluate whether local institutional choices will lead to effective decentralization, the fundamental question is whether the selected institutions represent and are accountable to the communities for whom they make decisions. Often they are neither locally representative nor accountable, since effective decentralization is not the only purpose of those choosing local institutions (Republic of Uganda, 1997). Central authorities rely on local institutions for implementing central agendas, legitimizing state projects, incorporating breakaway groups and regions, garnering popular support, obtaining an electoral base and cultivating patronage networks. Donor communities depend on local institutions for implementing their specific environmental, health, educational and infrastructural agendas, whether or not local people are interested. Local and national politicians and elites have interests in capturing and using local institutions and the powers being earmarked for them under current decentralization process. Faced with these powerful competing interests, locally accountable and representative institutions are usually sidelined (Republic of Uganda, 2000). Because of these countervailing forces, choosing and building on representative and accountable local institutions is a critical aspect of decentralization. According to Ostrom and others (1994), no local authority is perfectly accountable to local people. Electoral accountability can be strong or weak, depending on the electoral process. In most countries local elections take place by political party list. Thus, the elected authorities are often more accountable to their parties more than to the local communities. In places where only the party in power has the means to organize candidate lists across the country and there is no real competition among parties, these systems have little or no chance for local populations to choose their own representatives (Crook and Manor, 1998). Sometimes, even where there are elected local governments, central government and donor agencies often avoid them in favor of other kinds of local organizations.



Donors and non-governmental organizations avoid local elected bodies as being too political or as being inefficient or lacking in capacity. Furthermore, elections may not strengthen environmental accountability where natural resources are not a key local issue. Ostrom (2000) notes that when locally accountable and surrounded by a plurality of voices, elected institutions can serve as an integrative mechanism for local decision making.

Other stakeholders in the local arena are often empowered in decentralized reform. These include central government administrators or line ministries, membership organizations, donor agencies and committees. One fundamental question which should be raised is that how democratically accountable are these institutions to the local communities. The contemporary wisdom in decentralization is that for management of public resources such as forests, pasture lands, and fisheries, accountability should run from these groups through elected local bodies to the people (Bromley, 1992). Nonetheless, these non-elected organizations are often empowered as if they are themselves representative or democratic, which they are often not. Even though local government may not always be democratic, these alternative institutions have even less systematic accountability to the public at large.

Ostrom (2001) notes that councilors, headmen, chiefs and customary authorities are often targeted by central governments, donors and non-governmental organizations as appropriate local authorities in the decentralization efforts. Central governments in Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe are currently reviving these authorities as the recipients of decentralized powers. Customary authorities are rarely democratic because they inherit their positions, and their degree of local accountability depends on their personalities and local social and political settings. They may and may not be accountable to the local populations. While customary authorities are often depicted as legitimate, their acceptability may be as much a result of fear, or may come entirely from powers and backing given to them by politicians.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The field research has been carried out subsequently between July and September 2008. The interviewees consisted of 35 households living in Gokwe. The area was chosen because it is active in the domain of community-base conservation, having successfully reforested communal lands and built numerous traditional earthen dams. In an attempt to select a representative sample of village society, parameters such as gender, age and economic conditions were taken into account. The economic background has been evaluated on the basis of the average monthly income and the number of livestock owned by the household of the interviewee. Considering the difficulties which are normally encountered when interviewing women, due to social and cultural norms which hinders the interactions with those who are considered to be 'outsiders' of the community, sixty two percent of the interviewees were men. Half of the villagers interviewed were selected using random sampling technique because there were sufficiently large numbers of selected respondents. The researcher made sure that the selection was genuinely been at random in order to provide a representative cross section of the whole.

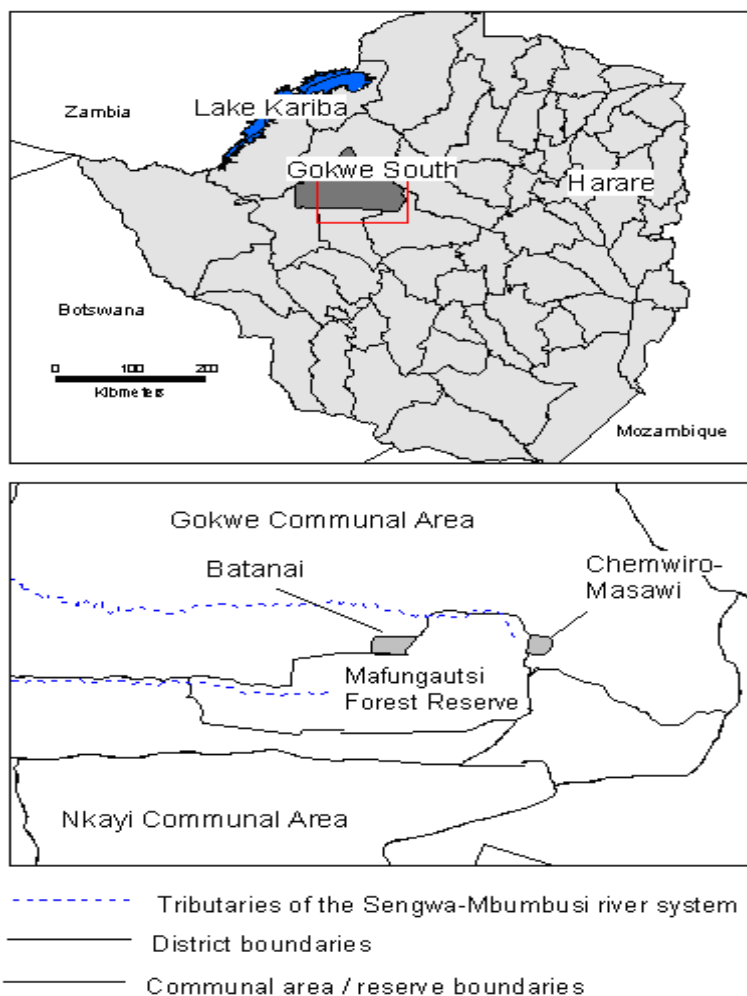
In order to reduce the pitfalls associated with the sampling method, the latter was matched with a sample of fifteen stratified sampled respondents from government, donor agencies and the local authority. These interviews were designed to gather information about the villagers' opinion about the local natural resources management process and its ways of dealing with the development of local areas, paying particular emphasis on the issues of degree of democracy in the decision making processes and inclusiveness and participation at grass-roots level.

These interviews also aimed to understand the functioning mechanisms of various stakeholders and to evaluate their contribution in terms of local livelihoods and participation in the management of natural resource in the area under study. Four group discussions were also carried out in order to complement and cross check the data previously collected in the individual interviews with members of two different randomly selected villagers. In order to facilitate the interaction between the members, the groups consisted each of 10 villagers who were not previously interviewed. The age of these villagers ranged between 32 and 68 years old, the majority of whom being men (13 out of 20). The main topic addressed in these groups was the perceptions of the villagers on decentralization and power dynamics in the management of natural resources. Questions regarding the role of the actors in the management of resources were also explored. In an attempt to compensate for the lack of cultural and linguistic background that can only come with long-term commitment in a specific community, four local interpreters belonging to the same ethnic group as the interviewees were employed. Two of them, recruited with the support of the Rural District Authority.

The interpreters were field workers with previous professional experience among villagers of Gokwe. To protect respondent privacy, the researcher ensured that interpreters assisting in translation lived in different villages from the interviewees. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in the local language. These scripts were subsequently translated into English and the two versions were compared for data triangulation.

## STUDY AREA

Gokwe is located on the northern part of the country. The area has a population of over 700 000 and the area covers approximately over 1.1 million hectares (Central Statistics Office, 2012). The study area is in agro-ecological zone 4, which receives 250-350 millimeters of yearly rainfall. Vegetation consists of bush veld and pockets of agro-montane forest and grassland vegetation. The farming systems in the study area are dry-land; rain fed and mixed crop-livestock farming as defined by Chifamba, (2012). Most households in the study area rely on both off and on farm income and over the past decade, communities' coping strategies have been characterized by intensive agriculture and reliance on the natural environment for the provision of food, fiber and fodder. Thus, decentralization was introduced in the area to enhance governance of natural resources in order to avoid environmental degradation, equity and accountability. Fig 1 shows the location of the study area.



**Map 1. Location of the Decentralized Case Study Sites in Zimbabwe.**

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite decades of tireless exertion and the adoption of several strategies to promote natural resource stewardship through decentralization, natural resources have continued to be exposed to degradation, thereby heightening the vulnerability of smallholder farmers to shocks from extreme weather events. Food insecurity and unsustainable livelihoods have accelerated environmental degradation and planning has failed to take into account multiple linkages between poverty and environmental management. Decentralization has not managed to bring positive outcomes on the livelihoods and the environment. Without urgent effort to understand the complexity of human-ecosystem dynamics and enhancing accountability, sustainability, equity and technical support, the area will further experience environmental decay and worsening household poverty.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### *Aim*

The study sought to examine the extent to which democratic decentralization has transferred control over NRM decision-making to local people, created the space to accommodate local interests and livelihood needs, and empowered resource users to benefit from and influence the outcomes of the decentralization process.

### *Objectives*

The following objectives guide discussion in this study: to assess the role of actors in the decentralization process in the study area in order find challenges bedeviling decentralization process; examine the complexities of dynamics in the decentralization process in order to identify the trade-offs; and recommend various strategies through which effective decentralization could be facilitated in Gokwe.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Benefits Derived from Decentralization in Gokwe**

Community members noted that devolution policies had yielded only limited benefits for them. In most instances, the local authority provides benefits as an incentive to encourage people to support activities that met government revenue or conservation interests rather than local livelihoods. Members noted that although access to some subsistence products improved, access to other important local resources such as fuel wood or game often continued to be restricted. In the study area, community members gained rights only to non-consumptive benefits usually derived from tourism. Valuable non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and timber were reserved for state management, often increasing officials' personal incomes, but denying local people income-earning opportunities. Trade-offs was felt most intensely by the poor. Agro-forestry species and timber favored by forestry departments were usually promoted at the expense of species valued by poor people for medicine, fodder, craft materials and wild foods. Communities were pleased to see game numbers increase, but they were also more vulnerable to crop and livestock damage by 'problem' animals. The lack of authority to make decisions locally to deal with raiding wildlife especially elephants was a major area of local discontent. Game areas or plantations were often established on land used for grazing or cropping by poorer members of communities thereby further procreating disgruntlements.

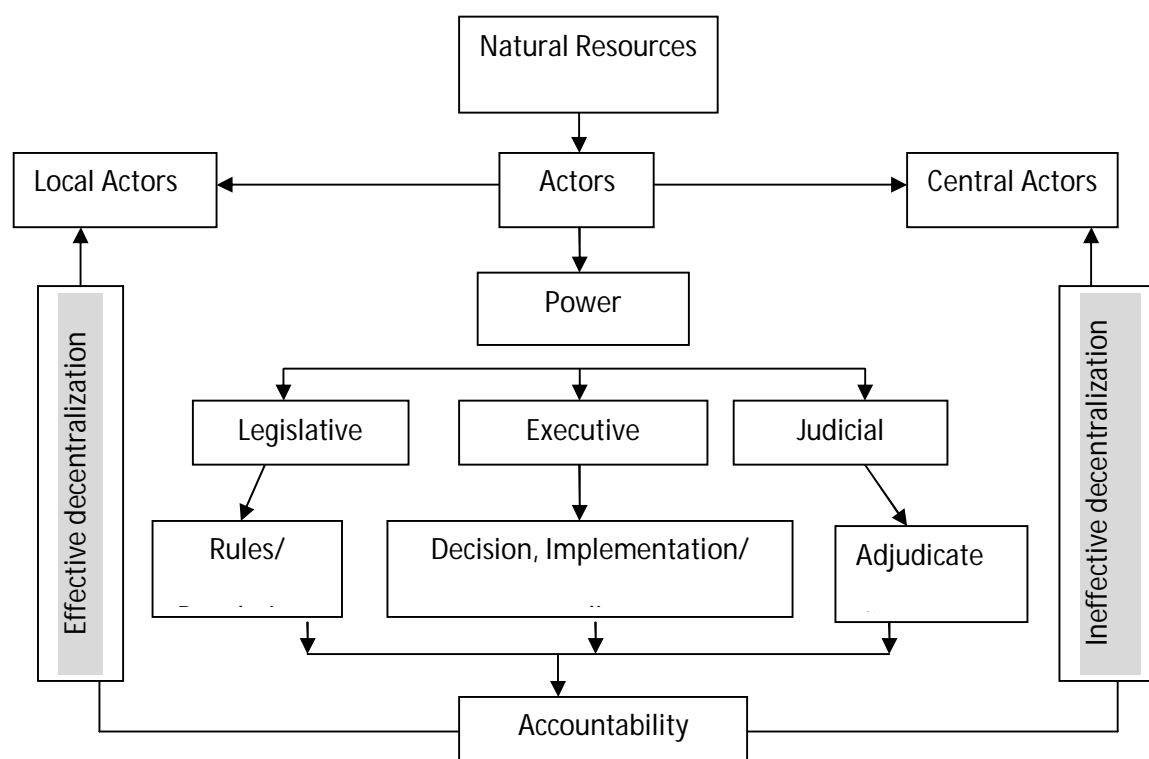
The research revealed that the financial benefits from devolved management usually fell short of local expectations. Income distribution shares were generally decided at the central level, but the government often failed to deliver on its promised share of incomes, or returns were far less than anticipated and inadequate to maintain local enthusiasm. In cases where financial benefits accrued from revenues, licenses, permits and leases, a disproportionate amount of this income was retained by the state at district or higher levels, or it was captured by local and outsider elites. In these cases dividends of between US\$ 200 were received per year from wildlife utilization and tourism and the money was shared between 20 – 35 families.

It was also noted that more than half of the income from forest products, were shared among government departments and local politicians even when they played no role in protecting the harvested products. After paying taxes, harvesting and transport costs, local communities were often left with only a third of the final sale price of forest products. Collective expenses then accounted for a further 10–20% of this local income. In some cases the 40% share of revenues from CAMPFIRE often reached communities after undue delays. The research also revealed that stakeholders other than the intended beneficiaries decided how income was to be used, i.e. for household dividends or development projects. Where development projects were supported, these often favored the better off in the community. In addition to these variable material benefits, devolution also indirectly provided other benefits in some cases. Local people previously considered poachers, criminals and squatters were now seen as legitimate resource users. Donors, NGOs, and government service providers consequently took more notice of these users and provided assistance to them, including technical, managerial and community capacity building, small enterprise development and agro-forestry support.

Devolution opened channels for communities in Gokwe to communicate their priorities to government decision-makers. By encouraging local people to join new networks and forge new relationships, devolution may have also contributed to community's organizational capacity and political capital. In some isolated cases devolution policies have managed to address equity issues and made in-roads to enhancing participation of marginalized groups and women in decision-making. In some cases, devolution policies damaged existing organizational capacity, local enterprise and equitable social relations. For example, the authority of chiefs was undermined by the introduction of village Joint Forest Management (JFM), weakening leadership and public participation in resource management. In some cases, forest protection groups run by poor women were taken over by elite men working in concert with forest department officials, limiting women's access to resources needed for their small-scale trade. Moderately equitable distribution of natural resources was threatened by entrepreneurs working with local government to seize large tracts of land for rubber, fruit trees or other plantations, leaving poor men and women with little worth managing.

### **THE ROLE OF ACTORS IN THE DECENTRALIZATION PROCESS IN GOKWE**

The research revealed that powers are exercised by those subject to actors holding decentralized power. Therefore all acts of decentralization cuts across three important elements; actors, power and accountability (Becker and Ostrom, 1995). Key actors in this study include appointed or elected officials, NGOs, chiefs, powerful individuals or cooperative bodies. Each of these actors is typically located in particular location of accountability and certain type of powers based on ideology, election, appointment, political constitutions culture and belief. It can be seen from figure 1 that effective decentralization may be realized when accountability is directed downwardly to local actors.



**Figure 1. Decentralization and accountability checks.**

In Gokwe effort was made to transfer some decision-making responsibility over natural resources from central to local level. Different organizational and institutional arrangements were used to achieve this objective. However, the case study showed that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, central authorities continued to drive the natural resources management agenda. Government departments, except where NGOs or donors played a strong role, determined the nature of the shifts in control and the types of power that were transferred. In most instances they retained key aspects of management authority, placing tight constraints on local decision-making and sometimes rendering it meaningless.

The research revealed that analogous hierarchies of customary management, local government and line department-sponsored committees existed. These institutions have imprecise or overlapping authority and responsibilities in natural resource management that is leading to conflict and struggles for power and revenues. In most cases, conflicts and resistance has deflected focus away from local users, sidelining or rendering them imperceptible. In most cases, the influence of government and local elites over joint committees is strong and community representation and input severely diluted. Non – governmental organizations, donors and the private sector further shaped outcomes by allying themselves with fastidious local groups or government officials. The following are some of the key players in the decentralization process in the study area.

### **Customary Authorities**

The research revealed that customary authorities continue to play a role in natural resource management with varying degrees of legality and power. The customary authorities asserted inconsistent power as chairpersons of sub-district natural resource management structures and deflect some community-based natural resource management benefits to building their own power base. In contrary, the segregation of customary leaders such as chiefs from conservancy committees in the study area was counterproductive, resulting in conflict and delays, until these leaders were co-opted onto the committees. Traditional authorities in Gokwe are playing an important role in reducing abuses of decentralization policies by local bureaucrats and traders, resolving conflicts and maintaining traditional forms of natural resource protection and access. The research revealed that in some cases customary institutions are also perpetuating different forms of discrimination, exclusion and prejudice, such as those that affects the rights of women and herders.

### **DONOR AGENCIES**

The research revealed that donor agencies play an important responsibility and capacity building role in the study area, thus, helping to bridge contradictory views between local people and government agencies and manages conflict within or among communities. Donor agencies are power brokers between communities and government. Donors were instrumental in driving the agenda towards greater local control. It was noted that at times, government departments use donor agencies as project implementers. Donor agencies displayed greater commitment to empowering communities than state agencies and worked better to integrate the development needs of local people with natural resource management concerns. They have helped pioneer community – based natural resource management and assisted communities to organize their management plans and lobbying to get trusts registered.

Donor agencies are offering different types of training, from legal rights to the use of fuel wood saving devices. Donor agencies are providing technical information about watershed management, soil conservation, forest management and product marketing. Donor agencies are also playing a crucial role in promoting gender equity and influencing outcomes through advocacy for poor resource users, which sometimes place them in an adversarial position with the state. The research revealed that the influence of donor agencies was not, however, always positive for local people. Donor agencies sometimes side with the state or create dependency rather than empowerment. Moreover, as local people's representatives and gatekeepers to the world, Donor agencies are pushing communities into decisions they may otherwise not have taken. Donors often attach conditions to their funding, forcing local authorities to review their policies and practices to favor local needs. Ribot, (1999) notes that donors lacked understanding of local conditions, and have developed well-intentioned programmes not suited to local contexts, with negative consequences for poor people's livelihoods. In some places an unhealthy reliance on these external funds is created, resulting in the collapse of initiatives when funders withdrew.

## **BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

The business sector is playing a key role in income generation in some decentralization initiatives. The sector is providing capital, expertise and market access. The research noted some instances where local people have benefited little from business sector involvement, particularly where the state continue to capture revenues or make decisions regarding business sector involvement. It was noted that the district officials control the tender process by which communities sell their wildlife quotas or tourism rights to business community, opening it to corruption. Efforts to ensure non - timber forest products collectors a better price for their products were thwarted by petty traders on whom collectors depended for services. Outsiders are ignoring local resource management institutions in Gokwe, with impunity, leaving many villagers without access to natural resources. Thus, the business community, in alliance with other players, can shift the balance of power away from communities and their priorities.

## **LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS**

Another category of stakeholders included those who use local natural resources without paying resource rents (stakeholders such as woodcarvers, firewood, charcoal and medicinal plant traders, and traditional healers). These powerful actors have tended to ignore local regulations and controls, undermining the authority of community institutions and appropriating the resource base at the expense of local community members. These stakeholders have posed one of the greatest threats to local natural resources, where major conflicts exist between outside entrepreneurs and local people. The government is attempting to assist the community to control this illegal use of natural resources through roadblocks, fines and seizure of products, but with little effect. In some cases, negotiated agreements were useful to give outsiders with legitimate claims access to resources.

## **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

In Gokwe, effort has been made to improve coordination amongst the various actors to help improve local people's influence over policy outcomes. Community Based Natural Resource Management forums are being used to coordinate activities amongst different stakeholders. Non – governmental organizations and other local groups have increased the ability of natural resource users to pressure government into meeting their needs, for example by pointing out shortcomings of existing programmes. The formation of umbrella user organizations have provided a channel through which people lobbied for collective priorities at national level, although these groups are not necessarily representative of users on the ground. Such activities have led to changes in provisions (but not necessarily in their implementation) regarding the gender composition of local committees.

## **DECENTRALISATION AND STAKEHOLDER POWER DYNAMICS IN GOKWE**

One of the clear lessons learnt from decentralization experiences in Gokwe is that in spite of stated government commitments to decentralization, the central government and line ministries oppose transferring apt and adequate powers to local authorities.



These institutions fear losing economic benefits, including rent-seeking opportunities, from the control they currently exercise over natural resources and the powers that define and support their political and administrative roles. More broadly their resistance can reflect indisputable, but often injudicious or unclear, concerns about maintaining standards, social and environmental well-being, and ecological stability. Environmental decentralization process in Gokwe is falling short of producing the most basic conditions necessary for community empowerment and participation. It is important to note that the transfer of power, accountable and representative local institutions is necessary elements of effective decentralization. The resistance by the government and Gokwe local authority is reflected in the transfer of limited and overly specified powers and choice of non-representative local institutions to receive those powers. In the name of decentralization, sometimes the powers over natural resources being allocated to local institutions are limited and highly controlled through excessive oversight and management planning requirements. Furthermore, in some cases powers are often transferred to a variety of institutions that are not systematically accountable to local people. Thus, in the name of decentralization, reforms are being structured in ways unlikely to deliver the presumed benefits of decentralization and public participation in natural resources management. The research further revealed that there is considerable confusion and obfuscation about what constitutes democratic decentralization, which is used to prevent democratic reforms. In practice, the basic elements of democratic decentralization and ceding of meaningful discretionary powers in the hands of locally accountable representative authorities are rarely established. Furthermore, some social problems, including elite capture and violence have been associated with decentralization. In Gokwe, more powerful groups consistently attempted to seize any increases in authority or benefits created by devolution process. Local elites took over leadership of self-initiated natural resource management committees from poorer users, and control lease agreements. Chiefs and management committees are colluding to establish themselves and new 'natural resources elites' and the local people are being used as proxies for outside commercial interests to gain access on natural resources. Men, especially the existing village leaders and those close to them, dominated committees, decision-making and training at most sites. Poorly organized communities were at the mercy of grasping local officials and outside investors. In this context, to have capacity building include ways of improving representation, accountability and transparency is important. Assistance should allow for diverse constitutional forms to exist, providing certain democratic standards are met. Promoting pluralistic processes that involve and protect disadvantaged groups will be especially important. Decisions on day-to-day management can then be left for users themselves to make once democratic decision-making is assured.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCALING UP DECENTRALISATION IN GOKWE**

Decentralization in Gokwe can benefit from a strong central authority because most powers (such as establishing the enabling legal environment for decentralization, setting national; environmental priorities and standards, establishing poverty reduction strategies, and assuring compliance with national laws) rests with central government.

The central government has roles in supporting a variety of local efforts with finance and technical service. Decentralization in Gokwe should be instrumental in shaping equity among local communities. Such inter-jurisdictional equity depends on the government's willingness to engage in redistribution of resources among users. Minimum environmental standards and local complement are a pre-requisite to decentralization. It is vital to note that no decentralization advocates are calling for the transfer of all decisions over natural resources to local populations. Subsidiary principles are one means for determining which powers can be transferred to local people without threatening the integrity of natural resources or social well being. Minimum environmental standards are a complementary means for codifying these principles in law, thus enabling the creation of local autonomy in natural resource management and use. The minimum standards approach compliments to the domain of local economy without restricting discretion within those boundaries. The minimum environmental standards approach should be used to replace the centrally directed micro-management approach currently exercised through elaborate plans and planning process. Minimum standards should specify a set of restrictions and guidelines for environmental use and management. Local government individuals operating within those restrictions do not need management plans to use or manage resources. Local representative authorities should enforce standards, make public management and use decisions, and mediate disputes among natural resource users. Stakeholders should negotiate and debate the boundaries between what is feasible and what cannot be done without the direct intervention of the central government' environmental agency. Decentralization programmes in Gokwe should have the goal of poverty alleviation and inclusion of marginalized groups. Poverty alleviation should be one of the positive outcomes of decentralization. However, a comparative study of decentralization and poverty alleviation concludes that responsiveness to the poor is quite a rare outcome, and positive outcomes are mainly associated with strong commitment by the government to promote the interest of the poor at the local level. The research revealed that local institutions need to believe in democratic devolution principles, while local people need to exert constant upward pressure on representative bodies to ensure that they practice principles of good governance. Mounting of such pressure is critical, given that some of the representative bodies are frequently dominated by elites such as customary leaders, chiefs, and businessmen who represent the dominant political party and are concerned with pursuing short term economic agendas that decentralization policies and development activities for the betterment of excluded and marginalized groups. Furthermore, local representative bodies should have the right to establish agreements for development cooperation with other public and private bodies, including the delegation of their powers to legally recognized village authorities, individuals and other professional bodies. Attention must be paid to making administrative bodies and other levels of government accountable to local governments so that they can deliver the services local people expect and demand. One strategy is to choose, build on, or create democratic local institutions, and then apply measures to ensure the accountability to all institutions in order to improve the responsiveness of all local groups and authorities to local people.

For effective democratic decentralization in Gokwe, meaningful discretionary power transfers are critical. Without discretionary powers, even the most accountable democratic local authorities can be irrelevant. Discretionary powers enable local authorities to respond flexibly to local needs and aspirations, making them relevant to their constituents. While power transfers without accountable representation can be dangerous, representation without power is empty.

The research revealed that a set of principles is needed for guiding the division of executive, legislative, and judiciary powers among levels of government. These principles should include:

- Discretionary powers must be transferred to give local institutions some independence,
- These powers must be acceptable and have value to local people,
- Commercially valuable resources-use opportunities should be matched by sufficient devolved authorities

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Various layers of local governance in Gokwe should be capacitated, authorized and empowered to resolve natural resources related conflicts, instead of passing them over to central government. Local authorities should be empowered and strengthened through training in natural resources management skills. This approach should be done at the local level to manage natural resources better and to broadly participate in making and implementing natural resource management in Gokwe. While there is an array of theoretical reasons why decentralization should be expected to improve governance, the empirical evidence in the study area has not been supportive. Along a variety of measures; from performance, participation, democratic strengthening and responsiveness to citizen demands, the empirical results of decentralization of natural resource management have been mixed at best. Rather than improving governance, decentralization has increased the opportunities for rent seeking and corruption. The purported benefits of decentralization have typically been elusive, at least in part because the institutional changes implied by the process have only rarely been implemented in practice.

The research revealed that there is wide gap between discourse and action. The negative outcomes associated with increased decentralization of natural resource management includes increased potential for elite capture, conflict over competition for new political resources opened at local level, and exclusion of local minority and disadvantaged groups such as women and children. The study revealed that government agents in Zimbabwe fear people's power and therefore block decentralization of natural resources management. By preventing meaningful transfer of powers to local elected bodies, or transferring them to local agents who are only accountable to central government, environmental agencies and other line ministries prevent decentralization from moving forward. To date the potential benefits of decentralization have not been realized because government discourse has not resulted in the enactment of necessary laws.

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