

Has Decentralisation of Forest Resources to Local Governments Really Taken off on the Ground? Experiences From Chongwe District in Central Zambia

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Received: July 26, 2013 Accepted: September 10, 2013 Online Published: September 24, 2013

doi:10.5539/jsd.v6n10p57

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/jsd.v6n10p57>

Abstract

This paper questions the extent to which decentralisation of forest resources to local governments has really taken off on the ground in Zambia. Using the experiences of Chongwe District in Central Zambia, the paper examines the nature of powers over forest resources devolved to local governments, how this power is used, the outcomes of the use of this power and the challenges faced in the devolution process. Interviews were conducted with policy makers, district administration officials and members of two selected forest dependent communities in Chongwe. The results of the study show that decentralisation largely remains at policy rhetorical level and has hardly impacted on actual natural resources management practice on the ground. It shows that progress in decentralising forest resources to local governments is conditional on a number of factors including the prevailing political will of the authority devolving power, the capacity of local governments and the institutional context within which it is being implemented.

Keywords: decentralisation, devolution, local government, decision making, natural resources

1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen a shift in natural resources management thinking with many scholars and conservation practitioners advocating the involvement of local governments and other local level actors in the management of forests and other resources. This shift is in line with the ascendancy of a global discourse of participatory resource governance which has challenged governments and conservationists to adopt new resource management strategies that allow the active participation of local communities in resource governance. This participation is envisioned in the form of decentralized resource management in which local governments, assumed to be the governance level closest to the people, are empowered to make natural resource management decisions. The Brundtland Commission, for example, notes that sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective participation in decision making and strengthening of local democracy (WCED, 1987). In Agenda 21, local governments are identified as the most appropriate local level institution to represent the collective in sustainable development (UN, 1991). This is premised on the understanding that local governments better understand local conditions and make decisions that reflect local needs and result in equitable, efficient, accountable and participatory governance which gives marginalised groups greater access to power and resources (CIFOR, 2006; Anderson et al., 2004; Anderson & Ostrom, 2007; Barrow et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2010). In this regard, decentralization is seen as a way of empowering local communities and fostering equity, transparency and accountability in resource management (Ribot et al., 2010; Benjamin, 2004).

While in theory, the merits of devolving forest resources management to local governments are compelling, a lot of questions remain about the process of transferring power over forests to local governments. As Kothari et al. (2013) aptly note, with the winds of change sweeping through global natural resource policy towards more inclusive and participatory processes, it is necessary to assess how these changes are impacting actual practice on the ground. In Zambia, in particular, while the 1990s saw major policy changes aimed at devolving forest management to local governments there is little documentation on how these changes are being translated into practice and whether decentralization policies have increased local governments' control over forest management decisions. Further, the nature of powers devolved to local governments and how this power is used

remains to be understood. This paper examines the question of how natural resources decentralization is being translated into practice in Zambia. It examines the extent to which decentralization has resulted into genuine devolution of power and control over these resources and how this power is used by its recipients.

2. Decentralisation and Natural Resources

The management and protection of environmental resources such as forests continues to be one of the most pressing concerns in both academic and policy debates. Academics and conservation practitioners grapple with the question of who should be included in the decision making process surrounding the use and management of these resources (and how this should be done). This question has attracted different responses over the course of history. Traditionally, over much of the 20th century, resource management in many developing countries was characterized by highly centralized resource management systems in which the control of resources was concentrated in central government bureaucracies with little or no involvement of local governments and communities living in proximity to natural resource sites (Adams & Hulme, 2001; Siurua, 2008; Campbell, 2000). However, in an apparent departure from such natural resources management approaches, the past three decades have witnessed a proliferation of literature calling for the re-organisation of decision-making structures to ensure a decentralized approach to the management of natural resources (UN, 1992; UNEP, 2007; Barr et al., 2006; Mery et al., 2010; Child & Lyman, 2005).

The notion of decentralisation as a political process was extended to environmental and natural resources such as forests, as global discourses on rural development and conservation began to emphasise decentralisation and local empowerment. Within this discourse, older models of natural resource governance where decision-making was dominated by the state and adopted in a top down approach were no longer viewed as acceptable (Mery et al., 2005; Berkes, 2004). Moreover, as a paradigm for resource governance, decentralization has gained ascendancy in natural resources policy with the failure of these top-down approaches to arrest resource degradation and improve the natural resource base in developing countries. Weak law enforcement capacity, financial and technical resource constraints in central government bureaucracies and local resistance against state led conservation all conspired to render such approaches ineffective and unattractive (Label et al., 2008).

Decentralization is a word that is very familiar and often used without question. However, there are multiple conceptions of what it really implies. Many authors make a distinction between two major forms of decentralisation, namely, ‘de-concentration’ and ‘devolution’ (Barr et al., 2006; Larson et al., 2010; Edmund & Wollenberg, 2003). De-concentration, often referred to as administrative decentralisation, describes the transfer of administrative responsibilities from central government to lower-level agencies or departments of the state (Barr et al., 2006). For example, in a hierarchical state structure, administrative responsibilities may be transferred to provincial or district governments. However, this form of decentralisation still has the tendency of concentrating authority and power in the hands of central authorities to which these lower units remain accountable (Barr et al., 2006; Larson et al., 2010).

According to Barr et al. (2006), if decentralisation is taken as de-concentration, then there is nothing new about it. In the past three decades, states all over the world have been engaged in policy reforms that have carried the label of ‘decentralisation’ without transferring any real power to locally accountable bodies (Barr et al., 2006). Barry et al. (2010) note that what is new about the current trends in decentralisation is ‘democratic decentralisation’ or ‘devolution’ through the creation of autonomous local governments or other locally accountable bodies, as well as a discourse promoting participation in decision making, participatory democracy, pluralism and rights (see also Edge & McAllister, 2009). Barry et al. (2010:33) define devolution or democratic decentralisation as “the transfer of power and resources from central government to authorities representative of and accountable to local populations”. Similarly, in the context of natural resources management, Edmunds and Wollenberg (2003:17) note that devolution can be thought of as a “process that shifts the decision-making space related to natural resources from centralised government to local communities or local governments”. The decision-making space is thought of as multi-dimensional and encompasses the ability to control decisions about the extent and quality of forest resources, livelihoods and income, and political processes related to forest management (Edmunds & Wollenberg, 2003). In this conceptualisation, decentralisation is aimed at expanding the arena of public participation in the process of natural resource governance in order to meet local needs and aspirations (Barr et al., 2006). This is premised on the assumption that decisions closer to local people should be more equitable, efficient, participatory and accountable and environmentally sustainable (Barry et al., 2010). These elements are viewed as the central tenets of decentralized resource governance (Child & Lyman, 2005; Hobley, 1996; Gibbs, 2000; Batterbury & Simon, 2006). In this vein, decentralising power to low levels of decision making is viewed as having the potential to support and facilitate the empowerment and active

participation of women, local governments, local communities and marginalized and vulnerable groups (UNEP, 2007).

From the reviewed literature, it is evident that the growing support for decentralization has triggered natural resources reforms in many developing countries leading to central governments transferring decision making power over a range of environmental issues to local governments and other local level bodies. By the year 2007, UNEP notes that 80% of developing countries were experimenting with some form of decentralization. Further, UNEP notes that in virtually all countries, responsibility for local environmental issues such as air, water pollution, waste management and land management belongs to local governments and municipalities. However, while it is evident that there is a major global shift towards decentralized resources management, so far, the studies that have examined the actual process of translating devolution into practice show mixed results in terms of its impacts on resource protection and local participation. For example, Movuh (2013) shows that in Cameroun, although decentralization has potential to allow communities capture livelihood benefits from forests, the devolution process appears to be slow, long, complex and expensive, making it difficult for communities to participate in its implementation. In some countries such as Tanzania, on the other hand, it is argued that increasingly, areas of forests are coming under local management, and when they do, they appear to be regenerating and recovering (German et al., 2010). Yet still, in some countries, such as Zambia, there is a dearth of empirical data on how decentralization policy rhetoric is being translated into practice, what outcomes are being achieved and the challenges faced in the process. In this regard, this research seeks to make an important contribution to understanding the natural resources decentralization process in Zambia.

2.1 Devolving Forest Resources Management in the Zambian Context

State forest management in Zambia has its roots in the colonial period when the colonial government passed ordinances for the purpose of establishing and guiding the management of forests and wildlife. The paradigm of forest management that was adopted under these ordinances was a highly centralised approach which placed forests and woodlands under the control of state bureaucracies and excluded other actors such as communities living in proximity to these reserves. The colonial government set up two types of government protected areas called ‘Forest Reserves’ and ‘Protected Forest Areas’. The two played different functions and had different levels of restrictions. The ‘Forest Reserves’ were principally established for the preservation of forest resources and protection of water catchment areas, while the ‘Protected Forest Areas’ were set up to fulfil both environmental protection and productive functions (e.g. timber production). In these gazetted forests, persons were prohibited from settling or carrying out any livelihood activities without a licence. The ordinance, clearly stipulated that prohibitions included “felling, cutting, taking, working, burning or removing any forest product” (NRG, 1946:1241). It was also forbidden to graze livestock in the reserve, to break up land for cultivation or even to enter a reserve with a cutting tool without a licence.

After Zambia’s independence, this colonial style of managing forests and woodlands continued with only changes in the names of types of protected forests under the central government. Forest Reserves were renamed ‘National Forests’ while Protected Forest Areas were renamed Local Forests. Forests outside these protected forests were classified as ‘forests in open areas’. These ‘open forest areas’ are scattered all over the country and constitute over 60% of Zambia’s forests and woodlands. Mainly, they are located in lands that are under the control of tribal chiefs (i.e. lands officially designated as ‘customary lands’ in Zambia’s Land Act (GRZ, 1995). Despite the fact that the Land Act empowers the Chiefs to administer land under customary tenure, the Forest Policy and Act do not empower them to manage and control forests on such lands. In an apparent departure from this situation, the decentralisation policy seeks to change this situation by placing forests designated as ‘local forests’ (these are state controlled forests) and ‘open forest areas’ under the control of local governments and their communities. In this vein, both Local Forests and forests on customary lands are targets of decentralisation. National Forests, on the other hand, will remain under state control.

Decentralisation of natural resources in Zambia is part of the local government reforms that started in the early 1990s in which the state seeks to devolve a range of functions and responsibilities to local governments. These reforms came with the winds of democratic change that were sweeping across Zambia in the early 1990s. With this democratic turn, over-centralised and exclusionary resource governance approaches were now being viewed as undemocratic and incompatible with the goals of participatory democracy, accountability, transparency and efficiency that underpin the notion of democratic governance (GRZ, 2004). Against this background, in 1992, the local government association successfully campaigned for the autonomy of local councils and since then, the country has embarked on major local government reforms aimed at devolving a wide range of responsibilities in various sectors such as education, agriculture, health and forests to local councils (GRZ, 2004).

In 2004, a national decentralisation policy to guide these reforms was launched. The importance of this policy is that it renders political support to efforts aimed at increasing people's participation in forest management and places the management of local forests under local governments as community representatives. The state outlined 63 functions that autonomous district councils are supposed to perform under a decentralised local government system. These functions include the management of local forests, woodlands and grazing areas. This is explicitly acknowledged in the local government act, chapter 281, section 61 (see sub-section 6 and 8) of the country's laws (GRZ, 1995). The role of the council in environment and natural resources protection is further re-affirmed by the national decentralisation policy approved by the state in 2002 and launched in 2004. It notes that councils will raise part of their own revenue and receive grants from the central treasury to perform such functions as ".....management, conservation of natural and wildlife resources" (GRZ, 2004: 21). Under the local government act and national decentralisation policy, local governments are not only mandated to play a leading role in the management of state protected Local Forests, but they are also empowered to maintain and protect forest resources (and even grazing areas) in customary areas (GRZ, 1995, 2002).

3. Description of the Study District

Located in Lusaka province, central Zambia, Chongwe District has a population of 137, 000 (ZCSO, 2010). The district has two protected forests (Munyeta and Chalimbana Forests) within its geographical boundaries. However, only one forest, Munyeta, is administered by Chongwe district while the other, because of its proximity to Lusaka district, is under the management of Lusaka district. Besides Munyeta forest reserve, over 60% of the district's forest resources are located in areas classified as 'open areas'. Although officially, forests in open areas are viewed to be resources under 'no known management' by the state, in reality, most of these are under the control and management of ethnic traditional leaders and their communities. With the change in the direction of resource policy, both protected areas and communally controlled forests are poised to be under the control of local governments.

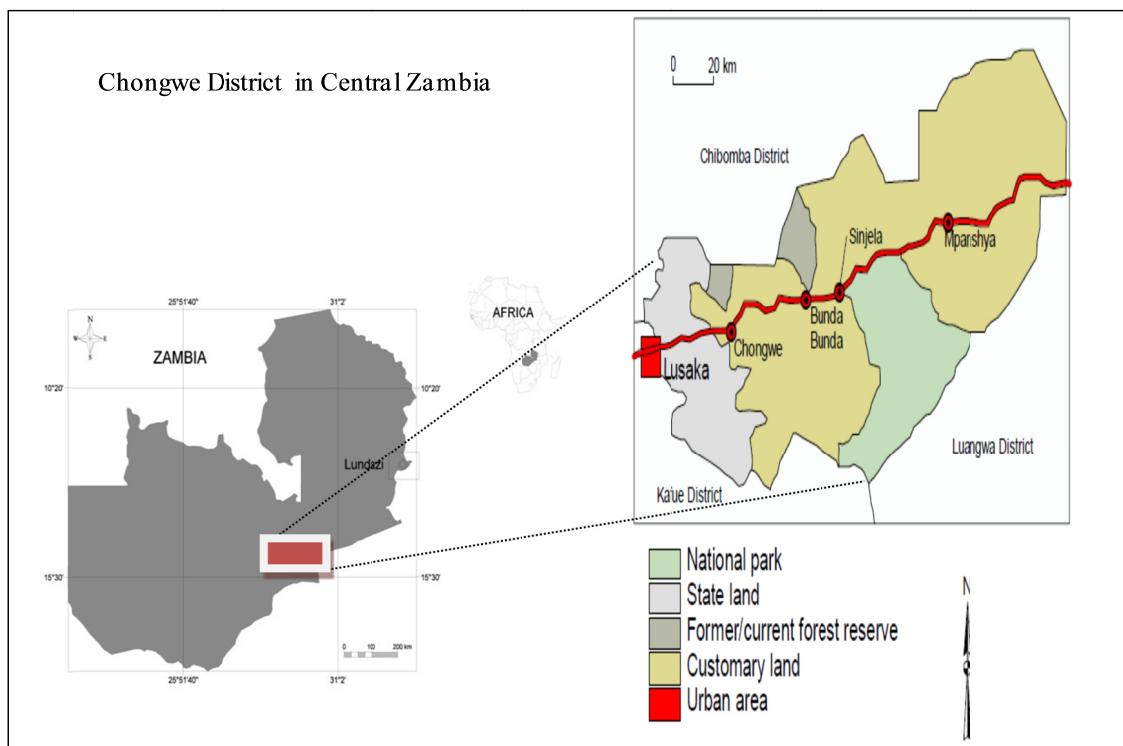


Figure 1. Location of Chongwe

Source: Chidumayo et al. (2001); Sanchez, (2007).

The district is divided into two constituencies, which are further sub-divided into 19 wards. Each constituency elects a representative (Member of Parliament) to the National Assembly and at ward level, an area councillor is elected to the District Council. In this regard, the District Council comprises 19 councillors, the two members of

Parliament and two representatives of traditional leaders (CDC, 2005). The council is the main policy and decision making body at the district level. It is led by a non-executive chairperson (referred to as Mayor in City and Municipal Councils) while the day-to-day operations are managed by a council administrative team under the leadership of a Council Secretary (referred to as Town Clerk in Municipal and City Councils). In addition to the council, the state, by a cabinet circular issued in 1995, asked each district to establish a district development coordinating committee (DDCC), which brings together all heads of government departments and representatives of parastatal companies in the district to form an advisory body to the council. The DDCC is chaired by the District Commissioner who is the overall head of all central government departments in the district.

The DDCC is also divided into several sub-committees which include the district environment and natural resources management committee. This committee is composed of environmental and natural resource experts from state departments and other organisations that are involved in natural resources management in the district. In this regard, it is the main technical advisory committee on the environment and natural resources for the DDCC. According to the District Forestry Officer (DFO), the district environmental committee has the role of providing a link between the DDCC and local communities involved in natural resources management. Consequently, it is charged, together with the district planning unit (DPU) of the council, with the responsibility of facilitating district and local environment and natural resources plans.

Besides the District Council and the Office of the District Commissioner, the district has traditional (customary) governance structures which operate outside the official political and administrative structures discussed in the preceding section. Under the customary administrative arrangements, the district is divided into four chiefdoms- Nkomesha, Bunda-Bunda and Shikabeta and Mpaisha (CDC, 2005). Each of the chiefdoms is ruled by a hereditary traditional leader referred to as Mambo (Chief), or Mukamambo (Chieftainess). The most senior traditional ruler in the district is the Mukamambo Nkomesha II (Chieftainess Nkomesha) who leads Nkomesha Chiefdom (Chidumayo, 2001). The lowest administrative level in chiefdom is the village. A village is headed by an *Induna* (headperson) who is often assisted by a village committee or council in the day to day administration of village matters.

4. Methods

This paper is framed in the context of decentralised natural resources management. While decentralisation can take a variety of forms, such as de-concentration and direct devolution of natural resources to resource user groups, this paper focuses exclusively on devolution of natural resources decision making power to elected local governance bodies at district and sub-district level. In the context of Zambia, the district council is the principal local governance body at the district level and is represented at sub-district level by Area Development Committees (ADCs). In this regard, in this study, district councils are taken as the recipients of devolved powers while the central government is viewed as the authority devolving power over natural resources. This understanding of who is the devolving authority and the recipient of devolved power takes the study to an analysis of the type of powers devolved to district councils, how this power is used and the challenges associated with the devolution process. Power, in this study, is understood in the context of decision making authority over natural resources, allowing local governments to take legal control over forests in their districts of jurisdiction, independent of central government's oversight. Devolution of power, in this regard, occurs when local governments have substantial authority to plan, tax, invest, set priorities, enforce laws and deliver services to their constituencies (see Wunsch, 1998).

Primary data for this study was collected through qualitative methods involving in-depth interviews with a variety of district and local level actors. In total, 34 interviews were conducted with central government officials, local government officers, civic leaders, traditional leaders and other district level officials involved in local governance and natural resources management. Research participants responded to questions focused on the process of devolution of natural resources management to local governments and the challenges associated with the process. In addition, local level studies were undertaken in two sites in the district. In the first site, Munyeta, interviews were conducted with two villages living in proximity to a government controlled forest reserve. In the second site, studies were conducted in two villages located in proximity to communally controlled woodland. The two villages, Shisholeka and Mtanuka, are located in an area designated as customary land. Studies in the two sites were undertaken for the purpose of assessing how decentralisation policies were impacting on both government forests and communally controlled forest areas. In total, 94 interviews were conducted with residents in the four villages involved in these local level studies. Research participants in the two local communities were asked to respond to a variety of questions related to the decentralisation of natural resources management and their involvement in the process. Apart from these interviews, two focus group discussions

were conducted in all the study villages for the purpose of cross-checking results from interviews and gaining access to the views of various groups on the decentralisation process in the study. Further, the results from interviews and focus group discussions were complimented with a review of policy and legal documents allowing for a rich qualitative analysis of the match between policy rhetoric and practice.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1 District Council Powers Over Forests and Other Natural Resources

Under the local government reforms, the Local Government Act of 1991 gives District Councils planning, taxation and legislative powers to perform the 63 devolved functions. In this vein, under local governments' legislative powers, District Councils are empowered to create bye-laws that regulate or prohibit unplanned natural resource exploitation in order to facilitate the protection and maintenance of forest resources in the district (except for protected areas designated as national forests). According to one of the legal officers at the national decentralisation secretariat, the councils also have the right to benefit from the exploitation of environmental resources in their districts. Consequently, the District Council can, for the purpose of generating revenue, impose local taxes on actors exploiting these resources as long as the taxes are not in conflict with state laws. Indeed, the results of this research show that the past twenty years have witnessed the creation of local levies by District Councils targeting a wide variety of environmental resources such as forest products (charcoal levy), fisheries, agriculture products (e.g. grain levy), mining and even sand excavation. In addition, the study finds that councils have also been empowered to establish standing order committees for the purpose of performing these functions.

For the study area, Table 1 indicates the powers of Chongwe District Council and how it is utilising these powers.

As can be seen from Table 1, although the council has a range of powers that extend to natural resource management in the district, it has only used its mandate in a limited way. Of all the six outlined areas where the council has rights over natural resource management, the council has only been able to create local taxes for forest resource products such as charcoal and establish check points for the collection of the same taxes. Although the council is empowered to actively participate in the management of both state run protected areas and communally controlled resource areas, it was evident that the council was not in any way involved in the actual management of these resources.

As earlier noted, there is only one state protected local forest in the district. At the moment, the forest is still under the control of the state forest department. In addition, interviews held with local government practitioners in the ministry of local government show that throughout the country, no district council has so far gained control of state managed local forests in their areas of jurisdiction since the local government act was passed two decades ago. The limited nature of the council's use of devolved powers in terms of natural resources management suggests that there are challenges that the council is facing in acting as a vehicle of participatory natural resource management in the district. In the following section, we examine the challenges that the council is facing in establishing control over both protected forests and communal woodlands. These include the state's willingness to cede power over protected forests to district councils, the district council's capacity to manage open forest areas and land tenure arrangements that inhibit district councils' control of open forest areas.

Table 1. Domain of powers and rights over natural resources devolved to District Councils under the Local Government Act and National Decentralisation Policy

Domain of powers	Detailed description and how the district council is using these powers
Legislative powers	Council can create bye-laws to regulate unplanned natural resource exploitation Bye-laws are subject to approval by the state District council has not used this right to regulate forest or grazing resources in the district
Planning Powers	The council has the right to develop land-use/integrated development plans, local environmental actions plans to guide exploitation of resources in the district and protect sensitive environmental sites. So far the council has developed district development plan, but no district environmental plans or local environmental action plans developed Council has had difficulties in developing land-use plans for customary areas because of conflicting legislation (i.e. between Local Government Act and the Lands Act)
Local taxation and revenue collection	Council has the right to benefit from natural resource exploitation in the district The council can create local taxes- chongwe council has charcoal levy, sandy levy and other taxes. Local levies have to be approved by the state and can be suspended by the state, if they are in conflict with state-laws In Chongwe the council has created a levy for charcoal produced in the district
Creation of community level governance bodies	Council can create local level governance bodies to act as local people's representatives and for the good governance of the district called Area Development Committees (ADCs). ADCs can participate in natural resource governance at the community level Chongwe has created ADCs in locations such as Shisholeka as multi-purpose decision making bodies. However, ADCs seem to be dysfunctional, lack funding and training and have not influenced local resource management at the community level
Law enforcement powers	Councils can maintain own law enforcement unit Chongwe district council has own council police unit.
Local budgeting powers	Council officers mount check points in the district for collection of levies from natural resource products Councils have right to make local budget for purpose of performing devolved functions -local budget is subject to approval by the state. So far, natural resources are not budgeted for, although recognised as a revenue source to fund council operations Local budget underfunded by the state

Source: Field data – interviews, policy and legal documents.

5.2 The State's Willingness to Cede Power Over Protected Forests

From interviews with local government officers and other government officials, the most important reason given by the state for not ceding control of local forests to councils is that most district councils lack the capacity (in terms of human, technical and financial resources) to manage these forests. In addition, a forest department workshop report on natural resources devolution notes that the FD was uncomfortable with the idea of transferring forest functions to district councils considering that they were in a weak state (GRZ-MTNR, 2002). However, while the state holds on to the argument that district councils have no capacity to manage protected forests because of their weak state, local government practitioners who participated in this study have different views on the devolution process. These views question the state's position and see the problem as a

matter of central government unwillingness to cede power to local governments. Box 1 presents some of the views of local government practitioners on decentralisation.

Box 1. Views of local government practitioners on devolution of functions

Council officer-planning unit

“....they (the state), have been talking about capacity, whose capacity have they been building? This is almost the twentieth year since the act was passed and they are still talking about building capacity. The decentralisation policy was also approved seven years ago and it is still about capacity. The truth is that there is no political will to do the right thing..... .”

Council officer- administration

“.. Talk about building capacity, but they have been doing the opposite, they have been taking away revenue from us, using discretionary powers to interfere in council operations and then arguing that we have no capacity...”

Ministry of local government officer

“.....there is just resistance, line departments such as forestry do not want to lose control and the issue of capacity is being used as an excuse.”

Decentralisation secretariat officer

“....before 1991 there was no problem, councils used to receive enough grants from the state, they had enough sources of revenues but all this changed when the state sold council houses and took away a lot of sources of revenue such as motor vehicle licences, fire arm licences.... Now most council are in shambles, they cannot pay their workers and they cannot deliver on services...in a way this lack of capacity has been created by the state... ”

“....the local government act is law and by this law, the councils are mandated to play an important role in the management of forest resources in their areas of jurisdiction but following the passing of the local government act, most state departments resisted the transfer of some of the devolved functions to district councils...”

These views seem to suggest two important things. First, they suggest that the state departments are hesitant to transfer devolved responsibilities to the councils because of the fear that they will lose control over devolved functions and responsibilities (and possibly economic benefits derived from performing the functions). In this vein, the local government practitioners argue that the issue of capacity is being used as a cover-up to justify the state's reluctance to cede control. According to an officer from the national decentralisation secretariat, this fear of loss of control is partly one of the main reasons why there has been resistance by bureaucrats in government ministries to properly re-align sectoral policies and legislations to the local government act and the national decentralisation policy. This failure to harmonise legal and policy frameworks, resulting in a situation where natural resource devolution is characterised by over-lapping and conflicting mandates, is now recognised as one of the most important factors limiting the introduction of a new natural resource management regime in the forestry sector in Zambia (see McConnell, 2008; Temm & Johnson, 2001). Indeed, other scholars (Enters et al., 2000; Edmund & Wollenberg, 2003; Bazaar, 2003) have observed similar situations in other countries (Nepal, Philippines and Uganda) where the national decentralisation codes or policies hand over control of forests to local governments but the state retains control of the same forests using sector based policies with diverging conceptions of devolution. In the context of Zambia, this has created confusion in that while local governments may defend their rights to manage forests in their districts, the FD still claims decision making power over local forests through unrevised forest policies and laws. In the absence of a legal framework specifically aimed at compelling the FD to hand-over forests to councils in accordance with the decentralisation policy and local government act, the situation remains complicated and highly dependent on the willingness of the devolving authority to transfer forest related functions to district councils.

Secondly, the views also seem to suggest that the state is deliberately weakening the councils in order to keep the narrative of the council's weakness running. According to these respondents, this is evidenced by the state's centralising of local taxes, the failure to provide sufficient grants for the council to fulfil its mandate and the frequent suspension of local taxes by the state. For example, the grain levy, which was suspended in 2009 by the state, created annual revenue losses of about 1.4 billion kwacha (approximately US\$ 300,000) which has not been compensated for by the state, despite promising to do so. In addition, this revenue accounted for 37% of the council's budget.

The role of the state in weakening local governments is also acknowledged by Hampwaye (2008), who argues that in the last two decades, the state has undertaken several actions that have severely eroded the financial positions of the councils. For example, he singles out a systematic reduction in government transfer of grants to

councils, sale of council houses at below market value through a presidential directive, exemption of some properties from tax and a government directive for local governments to disinvest in commercial ventures. For Chongwe, specifically, the idea that the state is weakening the council by interfering in its operations and systematically starving it of financial resources for local service delivery and resource development is explicitly expressed in its district situation analysis in which the council gives four main reasons for its current weak position (CDC, 2005: 78). These are outlined as (a) the state's removal of some of the revenue of the council following the restructuring process that began in the early 1990s; (b) reduced levies due to the economic downturn; (c) political decisions and interference by the state, such as sale of council properties; and, (d) the government's grants in lieu of rates is inadequate and comes far too late. According to one of the council administrators, due to this financial weakness, Chongwe district council has been unable to recruit staff to handle environmental matters specifically as this would 'stretch its financial capacity', as over 60% of its annual budget was already being spent on personal emoluments, leaving very little for service delivery. Further, he notes that environmental and natural resources issues are handled by the district planning unit which is also in charge of facilitating the planning and implementation of district development projects.

Overall, all these views point to a general lack of political will by the state to commit seriously to the process of devolution. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any meaningful decentralisation can be achieved in a state where the decentralising authority lacks the will to cede power and control over devolved functions and responsibilities (see also Barker & Stockdale, 2008). The state of district councils and the messy way in which the decentralisation process is being handled (after two decades of reforms) has prompted other actors to conclude that in Zambia, democratic decentralisation is, in reality, a failed project. For example, the Parliamentary Committee on local governance has called on the state to revisit this policy and notes that:

"...despite decentralisation being an initiative of the government, there is not enough political will to implement it. Your committee are of the view that if government has difficulties implementing the national decentralisation policy, they should provide another policy direction instead of leaving the local government system in its current state..." (ZNA, 2008:2).

It seems that although the state seeks to devolve natural resources management and responsibilities to the council, it has not provided councils with the means to fulfil their mandate. According to Anderson and Ostrom (2007), to act as an agent of local participation and to mobilise local actors towards collective goals, local governments must have the human, financial and technical resources required to carry out their mandate (see also Enters et al., 2000; Bazaar, 2003). In view of the district council's weaknesses, it seems that even if protected areas are turned over to the council, managing these sites will be more of a burden for Chongwe district council than an opportunity.

5.3 District's Councils' Capacity to Manage Forests in Open Areas

Apart from the council's failure to take control of protected forests, it is also evident from the results that the council has not taken up control of forests in open areas (i.e. forests on customary land). In fact, the council has no specific model or strategy tailored to the management of forest resources or grazing sites in customary areas. Ideally, the council is supposed to work with the district environment and natural resources committee to facilitate the creation of Area Development Committees (ADCs). The ADCs are democratically elected local governance structures that allow villagers in each ward to participate in the development and management of their own resources and development process (GRZ/UNDP, 2010; GRZ, 2004). With the aid of the council, the ADCs are suppose to develop community environment and natural resources plans as the basis for their participation in the management of natural resources. Although in theory, the ADCs are now officially the focal points of local collective action for the improvement of the environment and livelihoods in customary areas, the study finds that, so far, this has been mere rhetoric and there is little action to suggest that they have moved into this role in Shisholeka or Mtanuka. The ADC leaders in Shisholeka note that since the establishment of the ADC, no environmental action plans have ever been developed. Similarly, interviews with both the DPU and the chairperson of the district environmental committee show that no ADC across the district has so far developed these action plans or is actively involved in the management of forest resources in the district. So far, the ADCs in Shisholeka and Mtanuka area appear to be moribund. In the words of one of the chief officers of the council, "ADCs in the district are almost dysfunctional, they lack training and resources". This is basically because the council has been unable, on its limited resource base, to fund ADCs and to build them into influential local governance bodies. Indeed, focus group discussions held in Shisholeka show that the ADC in the area is far from being an influence, either in the development process or in the management of open forests areas. Moreover, the study finds that the ADC is not viewed as a political administrative unit that provides a forum for local people's participation in governance as assumed in the devolution policies. Instead, the results of the focus group

discussions show that the residents seem to equate the ADC with other committees established by government departments such as the neighbourhood health committee (established by the Ministry of Health) and agriculture cooperative society (under the Ministry of Agriculture). All these committees exist in this area for the purpose of promoting specific sectoral initiatives and are not viewed as holding any political administrative power.

5.4 Land Tenure Arrangements Inhibit District Council's Control of Open Forests

According to the head of the district planning unit (DPU), the district council's involvement in open areas is also limited by land tenure policies which complicate the council's or ADC's direct participation in the governance of customary resources. For example, although the Local Government Act gives the council the mandate to plan for 'open areas' and to lead in the management of forests and grazing lands, the Lands Act places the administration of these lands under customary authorities. Like any other actor, the council has to comply with national regulation regarding property rights; and this limits the extent to which the council can play a substantial role in natural resource management in open areas. In this regard, the council is faced with jurisdictional problems as its relationship with customary authorities is also not clear in either land or devolution policies. The DPU notes that this also prevents the creation of land use and zoning plans to identify natural resource sites that require conservation or restoration in these areas. In addition, ADCs also face a scenario where their authority is easily undermined by customary authorities whose control over land gives them the leverage over local level matters.

6. Conclusions

The assumption that local governments can act as the most important local level actor or institution for collective action in natural resource management is well reflected in the discourse of sustainable development (WCED, 1987; UN, 1992; Edge & McAllister, 2008). While the theoretical benefits of devolving power to local governments are compelling, decentralisation in Chongwe seems to have yielded very little dividends and has barely challenged the way natural resources are managed. This paper shows that the district council is struggling to take up its mandate and is far from being a vehicle of equitable natural resource distribution as envisaged by devolution theorists. The study shows that in the case of forest resources management in Zambia, there is a huge gap between the rhetoric in devolution policies and the practice on the ground. Here, the reality is that implementers are struggling to translate these policies into operational practice.

The research shows that progress and success in the implementation of decentralised natural resources management is conditional on several factors. These factors include the prevailing political will of the authority devolving power, the capacity of local actors who are the recipients of devolved powers, land tenure arrangements and the institutional context in which decentralisation is taking place. The willingness of the state to devolve power to local governments appears to be one of the most important determinants of whether or not any meaningful natural resources devolution can occur. Indeed, writers such as Barrow et al. (2002) and Edmund and Wollenberg (2003) have pointed out the importance of this factor (also Barker & Stockdale, 2008). In this paper, for example, the reluctance by the state to transfer control over natural resources to local governments is one of the major reasons why local governments have hardly taken up the responsibility of managing natural resources in their districts of jurisdiction. Instead of empowering local governments, as devolution theorists advocate (e.g. Anderson & Ostrom, 2000; Enters et al., 2000; Fabricus & Collins, 2007), evidence from this research suggest that the state is in fact weakening the district councils by systematically starving them of financial resources. This is being done through the non-release of state grants and interference in local taxes and other local government affairs. This shows a rather problematic relationship between local and central governments which ultimately has an impact on natural resources management.

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