Managing African Commons: Defragmenting management and Responsive Forest Governance Policy Forum

Introduction

The International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) Africa Region meeting was held in Cape Town from 9 to 11 April 2013. The meeting was organized jointly by the Defragmenting Resource Management in Africa (DARMA) project (an EU funded project under the ACP Science and Technology Programme) and the Responsive Forest Governance Initiative(RFGI) of CODESRIA, UIUC and IUCN (funded by SIDA). The objective of the meeting was to bring together multi-disciplinary researchers, academics, policy makers and users working on African commons and forest governance to present their work and discuss issues regarding integrated commons management and democratic (responsive and locally accountable) forest governance in Africa. Over eighty people from across Africa and beyond attended this three-day forum. This Policy Brief summarises the key issues emerging from the forum

Rationale

Research has shown that success in dealing with problems facing African commons management may lie in addressing fragmentation of the knowledge base, policy, legislation and institutions. Conventionally, management has been undertaken by government agencies that focus on their particular mandated sector, e.g. fisheries, agriculture or forestry, using knowledge from scientists that specialize in that sector, sometimes working with community groups to create and enforce rules developed for that sector. With the advent of the ecosystem approach to natural resource management, there is growing appreciation of the dynamic interrelatedness between all components of an ecosystem as a Social Ecological System (SES). This calls for inter- and multi-disciplinarity in sustainable management of natural resource complexes for livelihoods and development – the research theme that DARMA focused on.

Nations worldwide have introduced decentralization reforms aspiring to create representative local governments that are responsive and accountable to citizen

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needs and aspirations. Natural resources, especially forests, play an important role in these decentralizations. They provide local governments and local people with needed revenue, wealth, and subsistence – that government needs in order to function and that people need to survive. Responsive local governments can provide forest resource-dependent populations the flexibility they need to manage, adapt to and remain resilient in their changing environment. To date, however, environmental and natural resource management professionals from government and civil society have rarely worked through representative local government. This avoidance is a travesty since local governments are institutionally sustainable (being permanent) and have full geographic coverage (essential for scaling up). Environmental professionals often lack the technical and organizational capacities or capabilities to assess the potentials of democratic local government, to structure forestry decentralization to deliver equity and efficiency benefits, to meet implementation challenges, and to identify and take advantage of the opportunities it presents. There are examples of success in many countries, yet decentralization in forestry remains far from achieving its promise.

The RFGI assesses whether decentralized local government decision making of interventions in the forestry sector such as the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), Climate Change Adaptation, Payments for Environment Services (PES) and similar schemes are supporting or undermining local democracy.

Emerging issues from the forum

A number of issues emerged from the three-day policy forum. These are around: uptake and communication; policy ownership and insertion level; and governance and policy.

Communication and uptake of research in policy process

There is still evidence of poor communicationand low uptake of research by policy. This is of great concern and requiring action and innovation as it gives a sense of *déjà vu,* especially in relation to meetings and conferences like the IASC Africa regional meeting which target policy engagement as their focus. For many decadesmeetings like thisone have highlightedtheimportance of communicating effectively into the policy process, writing usable policy briefs and other appropriate materials and means of communication. The lingering question is; 'why is it that we really learned or achieved so little in this respect'? One of the reasons for poor communication and take up is probably the level and type of language used. Most presentations by scholars still came through in deep and complex language that is still used by the social and political scientists to transact their trade. The communication keynote address pointed out that thereis a huge gulf between this kind of language and the way governments speak and act. It may be argued therefore that even if the researchers can manage to link into the policy process, they normally should not be the ones writing the policy!

Policy ownership and insertion level

It is important to be clear about the nature of policy and whose policy is being referred to in policy dialogue. Policy comes at many levels, from that of community decision-makers to that of national governments and also transboundary policy. Before researchers attempt to make their research useful in the policy process therefore, there is need to understand the relations between different levels of policy and decide where research inputs are likely to be most useful and effective.This links to the issue of

the role of law in the implementation of policy - whether local by-laws, national legislation or international conventions and/or treaties. In this context, reference was made in some of the presentations about 'absence of the state', especially in far flung rural contexts.If the state is indeed absent, which we must acknowledge as being the casemore or less across great swathes of the continent, is there a role for policy at the level of the state? Reference was made to no policy; unkept policies; policy somersaults; policy fluidity; and good policies. The implication is that policy matters because the state is not entirely absent.It was argued that in some circumstances it may be necessary to bypass the notion of policy and focus more on social movements. However,sustainable progress may require thatthe social movement sooner or later define the policy goals to which it aspires, and explain how these will be achieved! As usual thereforethe policy 'industry' is confrontedby the yawning gap between theory (which we may too easily equate with policy) and reality/ practice (or lack of practice) on the ground.In general two sets of reasons were given why policy may have no effect: (i) the state may be absent, lacking the competence and/or resources to put it into practice; (ii) various forces within the state may be reluctant to implement, or may actively sabotage it - in which case a choice may be made to bypass policy and 'sponsor' or support practice through social movements.
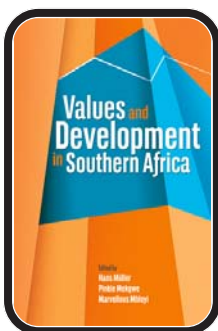
Link between governance and policy

Despite the formal decentralization of local government, the RFGI research demonstrated that natural resource governance decisions tend to be made in predominantly undemocratic ways that do not represent local aspirations and needs regarding the resources in question. Moreover, the decision-makers in both local governments as well as natural resource governance sectors tend to be upwardly accountable rather than responsive to local needs. Higher-level organizations design and implement interventions through non-representative institutions with many adverse impacts – such as social fragmentation, elite capture, and the reinforcemtn of undemocratic local institutions – on local citizenship in natural resource governance. Thus for decentralization to result in substantive democracy, it is necessary that discretionary authority be devolved to local governments in order to make them responsive and accountable to the constituencies that they represent. Most forestry and project profesionals are not aware of these simple facts – they do not understand basic principals of representation and democracy. Various references were made to the need for policy to reco-

gnise and facilitate subsidiarity; for national policy to tolerate and promote local policy; and for policy to be built on, and give effect to, a genuine commitment to decentralization. A practical policy recommendation is for policy to to support local demoratic decision making on natural resource use, monitoring and management roles of local resource users. It was stressed that governments must walk the walk of their democratic decentralization and local participation policies, not just talk the talk.

Conclusion

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the policy deliberations at the meeting. 1) A lot of (mostly well-intentioned) policy for natural resource governance, aimed at empowering the local level and poor/ disadvantaged people in NRM, has failed to achieve its intended objectives, and has instead only empowered elites or reinforced existing power structures and relations. (2) Researchers remain largely unsuccessful in communicating their findings and recommendations intelligibly and effectively to policy makers.

Ownership of policy and the level at which policy applies are key issues for improved communications and uptake of policy. Also the nature and process of policy are perhaps even more important to get right if we want to make sure that policy content is effective.