



Malawi Policy Brief No. 3

Making community based forest management work

1. The importance of community based forest management (CBFM) to Malawi

1.1 The need for community based forest management

Community based forest management (CBFM) for the well-being of the people of Malawi is a central theme of Government policy (Government of Malawi, 2003). It is not hard to see why. Almost 65% of Malawians live below the poverty line (Government of Malawi, 2002). A total of 86% reside in rural areas (NSO, 1998). The rural poor use trees for subsistence fuel, food, construction, medicine and income generation. Beyond agriculture, forests provide one of the only resources from which to earn a living. Recent research shows that forests contribute over 30% of rural income, even in the Mulanje area and this figure is likely to be higher elsewhere (IFMSLP, 2008).

Recent reports show the extent to which timber and non-timber forest products produced by small and medium forest enterprises contribute to income generation (ECI, 2000; Kambewa and Utila, 2008). For example, Malawi charcoal enterprises sell 231,177 metric tonnes per year, worth MK 5.78 billion (US\$ 41.3 million) with 92,800 people employed in the industry as a whole (Kambewa et al. 2007). The extent of such activities demand a functional framework for

CBFM if poverty reduction based on long-term sustainability is to be secured.

1.2 National policies in support of CBFM

Malawi's policy and legislative frameworks are very supportive of CBFM in the country. After the Earth Summit in 1992, Malawi's National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) identified deforestation as one of nine key issues with a recommended revision of the environmental and natural resource sector policies.

The resulting Malawi National Forest Policy (1996) and the Forest Act of 1997 aim to provide an enabling framework for promoting the participation of communities and the private sector in forest conservation and management. Eliminating the restrictions on harvesting forest

products by communities is a central priority (Government of Malawi, 1996). This was reinforced in 2003 when a supplement to the Forest Policy; Community Based Forest Management was launched.

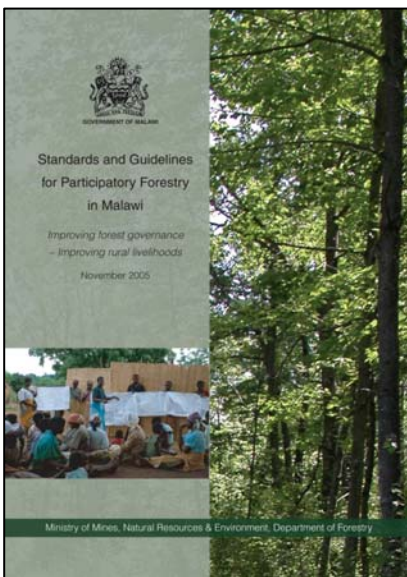
The National Forest Programme (2001) has as one of its 12 key strategies "Support for community based forest management: recognising a broad range of village institutions and developing their capabilities, along with those of extension staff, for collaborative management" (Government of Malawi, 2001).

The National Land Policy also advocates a community approach to



resource management but with a slightly stronger emphasis on customary land being exclusive to the Traditional Authority with a formalisation of the traditional supervisory roles of chief, clan leader, head person and family heads (Government of Malawi, 2000).

The Standards and Guidelines for Participatory Forestry in Malawi (2005) provide the basis for all community level forestry interventions from tree planting through to co-management of state forest reserves/plantations. This document



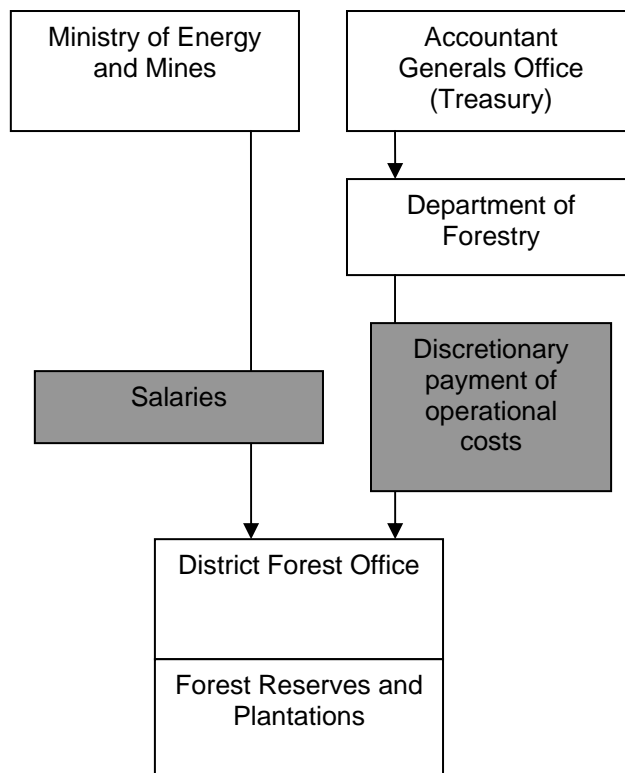
provides standards for each step of the CBFM process that should be met to ensure that quality services are provided to the communities and all forestry interventions are of a set standard. All projects where communities are involved in forest

management should be designed to this process. It is the basis of these guidelines that the EU have invested €15m to support co-management of state forest reserves through the Improved Forest Management for Sustainable Livelihoods Programme (IFMSLP).

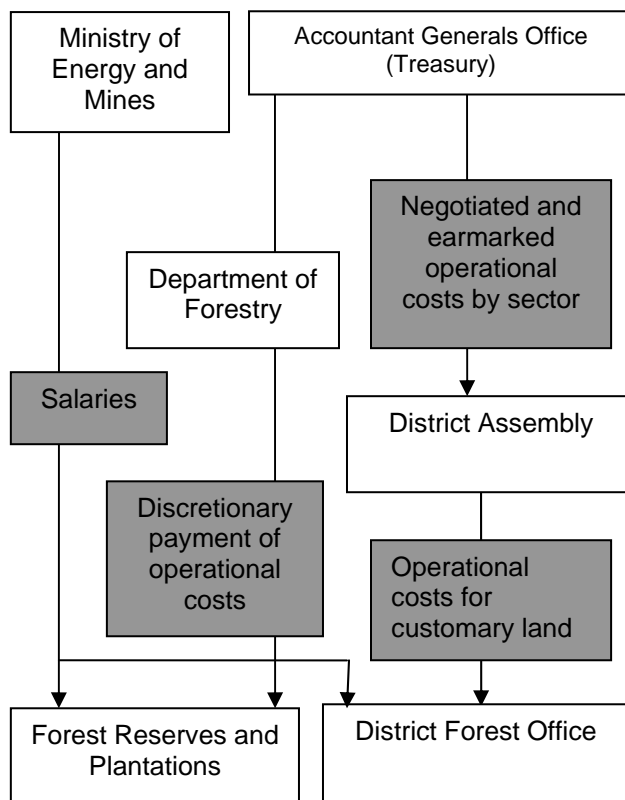
The Malawi Decentralisation Policy devolves administrative and political authority to the district level, closer to the communities in which CBFM takes place (Government of Malawi, 1998). There is now greater clarity on the functions, roles and responsibilities between the Department of Forestry and the District Assemblies. The latter are now responsible for district forest management and conservation on customary land, including the legal capacity for local level plan development and licensing (Government of Malawi, 2006). Much responsibility now rests on District Forest Office which is officially accountable to the District Assembly. However, the Forestry Department still retain the management of the Forest Reserves and Plantations (although still having its salaries paid by the Department of Forestry – see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Decentralisation of financial flows for the forest sector

Pre-2008



2008-onwards



These changes will improve the size of the operational budgets and free up the Department of Forestry to concentrate on seeing CBFM implemented at field level from 2008.

1.3 How CBFM is meant to work

According to the policies described above the State will enter into management and benefit sharing agreements with forest dependent communities on condition that they are registered as a local forest organisation (see Government of Malawi, 2007) and have approved management plans. For customary land, the prescribed community level institution with responsibility for the development of such plans is the Village Natural Resource Management Committee (VNRMC) (see Government of Malawi, 2005). For co-management of forest reserves

communities adjacent to the reserve are to establish Block Management Groups. Various community Block Management Groups are organised under the multi-stakeholder Local Forest Management Board which governs activities across the whole forest reserve (Branney, 2008).

The VNRMC, or its equivalent, have to decide on what is to be managed (e.g. a Village Forest Area on customary land) and then lay out their planned activities in a forest management plan. This plan, including a map of the area, must be prepared before forest ownership and management responsibilities are legalised by the Government under a forest management agreement.

It is the role of the District Forest Office to assist with the development of the forest management plan. The participatory forest management planning process aims to equip rural communities with the knowledge to become managers of their surrounding natural resources under the Forest Rules 2001. Clearly the District

Forest Office must have the capacity to maintain a register of Village Forest Areas and responsible VNRMCs within the district. Once registered, VNRMCs can initiate the process of developing local management rules within the management plan, harvesting fees and sanctions.

2. Why is CBFM happening so slowly?

2.1 The difference between policy intentions and practice

Despite these supportive policies, standards and guidelines a recent study reveals that many district, field level staff members and forest dependent people do not understand how to implement all this (Kafakoma, 2008).



The key district level organization (the District Forest Office) has inadequate technical and financial resources. There is a general perception by District Executive Committees that the Department of Forestry has failed to

devolve financial functions to the district level. For example, in 2007 the annual budget for one district with multiple staff and vehicles was MK 75,000 (US\$ 500). This is clearly not adequate for the scale of activity required for effective CBFM. But with decentralisation coming into effect, this situation should now improve.

While the Department of Forestry has devolved some functions on paper, in practice much is still controlled by the central Department of Forestry. At district level (customary land forest management), there is a lack of clarity and agreement on what an “approved forest management plan” means in practice, so the plans often bounce back and forward between

Village Natural Resource Management Committees and the District Forest Office, or Department of Forestry for long periods of time. These delays are compounded by a lack of clarity about who is going to take ultimate responsibility for approving such plans and signing them off. Even within the Department of Forestry itself, it is not clear which decisions can be made at district or central level. Although recent draft legislation allows communities to proceed in managing customary land forest areas without approval from the Department of Forestry except when timber is being harvested for commercial purposes – this requires a signed Forest Management Agreement with the Director of Forestry

Benefit sharing mechanisms are unclear, and the ratios for sharing profits between the forest dependent communities, district and central government authorities for co-management of state forest resources have not yet been finalised. While there are some examples of community development funds being opened and used, the general situation is that the revenue collected from sale of forest produce goes into Account Number 1 in the Treasury. Local government authorities such as the District Forest Office therefore have little motivation to develop workable solutions as they do not receive proportional operational funding commensurate with the forest revenue generated.

Seven years after the National Forest Programme came into being there are only now emerging examples of VNRMCs, the establishment of which has primarily taken place through the EU Improved Forest Management for Sustainable Livelihoods Programme (IFMSLP). As of February 2008 there were 130 registered Local Forestry Organisations. Being registered gives them the legal right of management of forest resources on customary land. As yet, there has been little roll out of registering Local Forest Organisations beyond the IFMSLP target districts. While some co-management plans for forest reserves are being developed, none have been signed by the Department of Forestry to date.

2.2 Confusion over the authority of different institutions and individuals

Before 1994, the single party regime had exerted considerable control over village affairs through chairman, youth leagues etc. The multiparty era

which began in 1994 with the loss of the Malawi Congress Party left a considerable vacuum power at community level. In some cases the new democratic environment was interpreted as a “freedom from regulations”. This was compounded by some opposition politicians campaigning on themes like; “forest reserves should belong to everyone” implying that the previous one party state had denied them the right to occupy and cultivate the idle land in the forest reserves or Village Forest Areas (Kafakoma, 2008).

Alongside new institutional requirements such as the VNRMCs, there are many other village level institutions endorsed by different Ministries and policies. In some cases there are even more than one VNRMCM in a single village seeking to control several activities such as game reserve and tree planting activities separately with little coordination between them. In addition the Forest Act is silent on the role of traditional management structures at village level comprising chiefs, clan leaders, head persons and family heads.

With emerging decentralisation processes, there are also many district level institutions that could potentially support decentralized forest management (notably the District Executive Committee and Assemblies themselves). But the efforts of these institutions are poorly coordinated. Local government authorities, including the District Forest Offices have not developed a mechanism for strengthening coordination and collaboration between village and district level institutions. Duplication of effort and implementation conflicts inevitably result.

2.3 Rushed or poorly planned processes to develop CBFM

The “Standards and guidelines for participatory forestry in Malawi” provide excellent guidance on how to ensure that relevant actors and authorities at village level are included in CBFM (Government of Malawi, 2005). For example it notes that “*if important stakeholders are not included from the outset, if benefit sharing has not been openly discussed, widely agreed and endorsed, if committee members or office bearers are not accountable to their wider membership and community, then the institution (Village Natural Resource Management Committee) will not be sustained in the long term*”.

Despite such warnings, pressure to see quick results often generates rushed processes that fail adequately to consult or reach consensus among the existing power structures at community level. A case study from Ntcheu District provides a case in point, where a VNRMC was rapidly imposed to conserve (and reforest) an area that was degraded by Mozambican refugees. Without ownership from the local clan leaders, the established forest was treated as an open access resource and destroyed. Only when the Village Forest Areas were put back under the control of local clans has afforestation happened at pace (Kafakoma, 2008).

2.4 Lack of political will and knowledge to implement CBFM

Despite the excellent forest policy and legislation that is in place for CBFM there is still a lack of political will to implement them. This lack of political will is reinforced by a lack of knowledge of how CBFM works to alleviate poverty whilst improving forest management. At all levels forestry is seen only as enforcement of the act and tree planting. Little consideration is given to the development of management plans and involvement of forest dependent communities in the management of the local forest resources. The little money that reaches the district is usually set aside for office operational costs and when there is money available for forestry activities it is “labelled” with nursery establishment or tree planting. It is often said that these are the core businesses of the forestry department. This focus hinders the implementation of CBFM.

The Department of Forestry very rarely promotes CBFM as a core tool for forestry. Large government programmes and NGO environmental programmes are allowed to solely concentrate on the typical forestry interventions mentioned above. The department allows these programmes to continue with little discussion on the appropriateness of the intervention e.g. tree

planting often takes place on land that has excellent potential for natural regeneration. Although a thorough assessment to determine the most suitable intervention is part of the PFM process, this is often ignored.

CBFM of indigenous woodland is not perceived as a tangible outcome. When woodland is being managed through CBFM by a local level institution there is the belief that you cannot see what the Department of Forestry is doing about deforestation; therefore the focus is put onto tree planting and Income Generating Activities for forest users such as goat rearing and tomato growing. These are highly visible tangible outcomes which highlight value of money spent. The need to “show off” visible outcomes frequently drives the work planning process resulting in CBFM activities being placed at the bottom of the list of priorities.

2.5 A failure to learn the lessons of success

Where CBFM is working there have usually been some common elements (e.g. Moyo and Epulani, 2001) – but these have rarely been given adequate consideration in further attempts to develop CBFM. From past success stories, eight key ingredients must be added to the enabling policy framework (see Department of Forestry, 2003):

- (i) good support for community capacity building (from donors, NGOs or the Department of Forestry);
- (ii) adequate time to conduct a careful process of community institutional strengthening;
- (iii) home grown solutions that build on institutions / power structures that already exist – especially Traditional Authorities - rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model;
- (iv) coordination between different activities in the community – even to the extent of founding a dedicated Community Based Organisation



such as BERDO in Ntcheu District that harmonises different activities both within and across multiple communities;

- (v) considerations beyond forestry;
- (vi) a proactive staff member at the District Forest Officer
- (vii) an active Traditional Authority;
- (viii) inclusion of women in planning activities.

While it may be difficult to find all of these ingredients in every area, there is a need for greater attention to the process of institutional development than is often the case. Respect for the existing institutions and especially the roles of the Traditional Authorities was a particularly important feature of success stories from Mwanza, Ntcheu and Mzimba Districts (Kafakoma, 2008). In the absence of external interventions it is often these Traditional Authorities that have managed village forest areas for generations. Where VNRMCs have marginalised such authorities they have usually failed.

3. Urgent priorities for action by the Forestry Department

3.1 Make decentralisation a reality especially with regard to finance and benefit sharing

The Department of Forestry should make the decentralization process a reality. Devolution of responsibilities to the local government authorities without the necessary financial and technical support has proved a waste of time and energy.

With new financial arrangements in place, the Department of Forestry should clearly explain the decentralized forest

management process to its staff in the district before completely handing over some of its functions to the local government authorities.

There is need to clearly stipulate (and help to set up appropriate accounts for) the benefit sharing mechanism between the forest dependent communities, local government authorities and the central Department of Forestry. Without clear benefit sharing mechanisms, the motivation for CBFM will vanish.

3.2 Steer investment towards the negotiation of and capacity building for village level roles and responsibilities

The processes by which Village Natural Resources Management Committees (or Block Management Committees) are formed are critical to effective CBFM. There should be a new and explicit emphasis on the roles of the Traditional Authorities in such processes with a flexibility to endorse alternative institutional arrangements where these are locally agreed to be preferable. The existence of a lot of village level and district level institutions focusing on forest management is advantageous at local level, but only if efforts are coordinated. Local government authorities have a particular role in ensuring that a coordinating mechanism at district and village level is developed. Efforts to develop overarching community based organisations that help to coordinate activities should be encouraged.

Effective implementation of CBFM requires transformative training, both to change attitudes in favour of CBFM and to equip staff with the participatory skills necessary to see it brought about.



3.3 Speed up the approval of management plans, and monitoring service provision

The National Forest Programme explicitly states the principal of “making use of good enough

information". There is need to speed up the process of assisting communities to develop management plans and by-laws for them to qualify as legal entities in order to effectively participate in forest management.

There is need for the Department of Forestry and local government authorities to agree on their roles in providing forest services. Obligatory reading of the Standards and Guidelines for participatory forestry in Malawi is a starting point. But there is also an urgent need to allow District Forest Offices the flexibility to endorse workable solutions without central consultation where these seem appropriate.

The local government authorities should take a lead role in monitoring service provision to forest dependent communities as stipulated in the Standards and Guidelines for Participatory Forestry in Malawi. They should also inform the people in the villages on how they can access the various services at district level that would assist them with CBFM.

3.4 Communicate the benefits of CBFM to all key decision makers

To improve the lack of political will and improve the understanding to implement CBFM the Department of Forestry needs to spread the word to all key decision makers. The Standards and Guidelines for PFM in Malawi, Registration of Local Forest Organisations and the Co-management of state reserves are all key documents/processes that have been developed over the last 2 years. However, these have only been implemented in the 12 IFMSLP Districts. Outside of these districts there is no knowledge of them.

Through IFMSLP some interesting CBFM models are being developed yet no key decision makers within government or from NGOs have visited these sites. Therefore forestry planning continues to revolve around tree planting and nursery establishment with little understanding of how improved forest management can help alleviate poverty. Sharing successful examples of CBFM in practice will provide real life examples to promote the benefits of CBFM.

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