

# NESTING PARTICIPATORY FISHERIES MANAGEMENT WITHIN DISTRICT DECENTRALISATION: CASE OF MANGOCHI DISTRICT, MALAWI.

By

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## Abstract

Devolution of administrative and political authority to district level will entail nesting participatory fisheries management under decentralisation structures. Decentralisation in Malawi faces many challenges such as managerial and technical capacity of functionaries to execute the required tasks, a narrow revenue base, political commitment and the sequencing of decentralisation and empowerment. On its own, participatory fisheries management has been fraught with problems in relation to representation and power dynamics around committees meant to represent fishing communities. Decentralisation is likely to add to problems of local democratic participation in development and resource management activities. The proliferation of institutions and the resulting plurality in lines of authority is likely to increase confusion, participation fatigue and apathy in the target community. If decentralisation is to lead to promotion of sustainable livelihoods, improved resource management and poverty reduction, local institutions will have to muster sufficient funding, adequate powers and have in place mechanisms for ensuring accountability.

## Introduction

Malawi is one of an increasing number of developing countries that have launched decentralization reforms to establish and democratise local government for the purpose of improving service delivery, local development and natural resource management. Rather than empowering user communities in the name of decentralization however, governments might be transferring power to a wide range of local institutions such as committees, customary authorities and NGOs. Recognition of these other local entities means that local communities are receiving few powers and the entities have problems of legitimacy within communities. This new trend, with its plurality of approaches and multiplicity of institutions, can result in fragmented forms of authority and belonging, dampening long-term prospects for delegated authority and power for local communities. The multiplication and the strengthening of lineage-based and interest-based forms of belonging over residency-based citizenship can fragment the local arena into competing and conflicting identity and interest groups.

Policy makers and project designers argue that they choose specific local institutions based partly on the stated aims of democratisation, poverty alleviation, development, service delivery and natural resource management. Understanding the politics of choice—why decision makers choose the institutions they choose—requires an understanding of both stated and unstated objectives, the understandings of causality informing decision maker's choices, and their awareness of the effects of these choices.

## Decentralisation

Decentralization reforms are believed to result in efficiency and equity gains through proximity and representation of local communities in decision-making (Mawhood 1983; Manor 1999). Under these reforms, decision makers are supposed to be better able to decipher and respond to user needs and aspirations because they are physically close or systematically accountable to the target community (Beyene, 2000). The role that

decentralisation can play in poverty reduction through improved articulation of local needs and aspirations has therefore become an important dimension of governance and public sector reform programmes in developing countries (Bossuyt and Gould, 2000; Cheema and Bondinelli, 1983).

The general logic of decentralization is to achieve inclusiveness and opening up the public domain. It is predicated on proximity and democratic processes reducing transaction costs, producing better accountability of decision makers to the local communities, enabling them to better integrate and match decisions and resources to target group needs and aspirations (Agrawal and Ribot 1999; Ribot 2004). Ribot (2005) observes that people engage with and adhere to authorities that can make meaningful decisions and deliver needed goods and services. In this sense, providing an integrative public domain where citizens can engage in collective decision-making and action is essential for successful decentralization.

Democratic representation is when leaders are both responsive and accountable to the people (Manin, Przeworski and Stokes, 1999). Representative institutions must have the power to be responsive to local people's needs and aspirations if democratic institutions are to develop a meaningful role within the local communities (ibid.). To be responsive, leaders need powers—the discretionary power to translate needs and aspirations into policy and policy into practice (Ribot 1999,2001; Agrawal and Ribot 1999; Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). Democratically elected (downwardly accountable) target group representatives can be strengthened through 'recognition'.

Conyers (2002) points out that when transfers of power and authority are made as privileges that can be taken back by central government or other outside agencies, user representative institutions become upwardly accountable. In other words, conditional transfers orient accountability toward the conditions of maintaining the privilege. Thus in decentralizations, the means of transfer by which recognition takes place can determine the upward or downward accountability of user representative institutions, thereby shaping the character of representation.

Additionally, state recognition of interest groups (user groups, community-based organizations or non-governmental organizations) privileges these groups in decision making over what might be public resources, giving them power to include or exclude actors on the basis of their own narrow definition of interest or criteria for 'belonging'. Yet the form of belonging most commonly associated with representative democracy is residency-based citizenship. Geschiere and Boone (2003) point out that "...belonging is becoming a central issue not only through external influences and political strategies 'from above'..." but belonging under growing conditions of insecurity also "...strikes a deep chord among the user communities." Belonging can impact on the space and public domain that decentralization is supposed to provide for decision-making and public engagement.

### **Decentralisation in Malawi**

In 1998, the Government of Malawi approved a National Decentralisation Policy (Ministry of Local Government, 1998a) resultant from the Local Government Act (Malawi Government, 1998b). Decentralisation was seen as part of the process of consolidating democracy and as a strategy for realizing the country's development goal of poverty reduction. The policy proposes, among others, the devolution of administrative and political authority to District Assemblies (DAs), integration of governmental agencies at the district and local level into one administrative unit and the promotion of participation in the governance and development of districts (Ministry of Local Government, 1998a). The Act proposes the devolution of power to local political and traditional leaders who would have the responsibility of making by-laws and policies with the assistance of committees comprised of governmental and non-governmental technical support (Mkandawire, 2003).

Key to the success of the decentralization strategy would be the principle of popular representation (democratically elected representatives) in the institutional structures at district, area and village level. The policy objectives are stated as being; to create a democratic environment and institutions for governance and development at local levels, eliminate dual administrations at district level and so make public service provision more efficient, economical and cost effective; promote accountability and good governance at local level that

would enhance poverty reduction and mobilize people for socio-economic development at the local level (Environmental Affairs Department, 2001).

Under decentralisation, organisation for development is to be structured through committees at area (Area Development Committees –ADC) and village (Village Development Committee –VDC) levels under the District Assembly. While VDCs would represent a village, ADCs would comprise of all villages under a paramount chief (in Malawi, the chiefs ruling over an area are referred to as Traditional Authority)<sup>1</sup>. VDCs are supposed to identify service and development priorities at village level, which should then be passed on to the ADC. The ADC would then filter and prioritise these at area level and pass the ones selected onto the DA. The DA would assess all projects emanating from all ADCs in the district in order to approve and prioritise them for funding. In principle the VDCs and ADCs are supposed to ensure that local people participate in the identification and also implementation of development projects. The political and traditional leaders are seen as being crucial in mobilising local communities for developmental activities (Government of Malawi and UNDP, 1993). Decentralisation is thus aimed at ensuring implementation of development priorities, creating awareness and promoting participation of local communities in development activities. The objective is to improve efficiency and equity in development activities through greater participation of local dependant communities in decision-making. Equity entails improved distribution and greater retention of benefits from public and environmental resources for the communities (Crook and Manor, 1998). This administrative structure based on ADCs and VDCs is a revival of structures under the integrated development approaches of the 1970s. The emphasis on local-level target-group participation at all stages of development projects affecting them has resulted in renewed interest in reviving the ADCs and VDCs under decentralisation (Environmental Affairs Department, 2001; Government of Malawi - GoM/United Development Programme -UNDP, 1998).

The Environmental Management Act of 1996 (Malawi Government, 1996) legalises the devolution of functions of environmental and natural resources management, monitoring and planning to District Assemblies. The transfer of power, authority and resources from central government to the District Assembly and the creation of legal and institutional frameworks are key to the success of environmental and natural resources management decentralization. According to Mkandawire (2003: 38), the Act stipulates the responsibility of DAs as the coordination of activities in the protection, conservation and sustainable use of the environment. The long-term plan is that the District *State of the environment* Reports and Action Plans will become the main tools for district and national level environmental reporting and planning. Thus under the Local Government Act, all sector ministries and departments are required to transfer development and implementation activities to the district and local levels<sup>2</sup>. The assumption is that bringing together all environmental and natural resources management and development agencies under one administrative unit would improve coordination and reduce incidences of duplication of effort and inefficient use of resources. Decentralisation would thus anchor and facilitate the implementation of new approaches in environmental management that recognize the crucial role of community participation. Community participation will enable the integration of environmental concerns identified at local levels into district and then national plans. In this context, a task force was established in 2000 with a mandate to develop a strategy for integrating environmental and natural resource management into the District Development Planning (DDP) system under District Assembly structures (ibid.).

One of the key areas of the decentralization strategy is financing. Under the District Focus for Development approach (GoM/UNDP, 1998), all the money for development projects whether from government, external donors or business, in the district was supposed to be deposited into a District Development Fund, which would be under the control of the DA. Three main sources of revenue were envisaged for District Assemblies; local revenues, ceded revenues and government grants. The Local Government Finance Committee was created as a body that would handle financial relations between Central Government and District Assemblies. This would entail ensuring budgeting, financial transfers and auditing of accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> The Traditional authority administration is based on tribal authority. Under the Traditional Authority Administration system, the village (under a village headman) is the smallest administrative unit. Although ascendance to positions of tribal authority is supposed to be hereditary, the colonial government meddled in such matters. The traditional authority had to meet the approval of the government. Those out of favour could be removed. After independence, especially during the one party rule of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), this system continued. All appointments or ascensions to power were subject to confirmation and approval by the government.

<sup>2</sup> The guidelines for sectoral devolution were only released in 2001.

## Objectives and Conceptual framework of the study

However, in Malawi, decentralizing environmental management is proving difficult to conceptualise and implement at both national and local level (Mkandawire, 2003). Even internationally, the predicted improvements from decentralization are based on a complex set of assumptions, whose veracity is a politically and historically contingent empirical matter (Ribot, 2005).

This study is part of a larger international project by the Institutions and Governance Program at the World Resources Institute titled 'Institutional Choice and Recognition: Effects on the Formation and Consolidation of Local Democracy'. The project aims to assess the effects of the emerging local institutional mixes on local democratisation process and on efficiency and equity outcomes of specific interventions such as natural resource management and service delivery. It is hypothesized that 'the mix of institutions being created and supported in the name of decentralization is undermining the formation and consolidation of local democracy'. The project will explore the reasons behind the 'institutional choices'<sup>3</sup> and the effects of 'recognizing'<sup>4</sup> different local institutions on local democracy using three dimensions of democracy namely representation, citizenship, and the public domain. The study uses the concept of 'recognition' to explore the effects that the choice of 'which mix of local institutions to recognize' has on representation, legitimacy, membership, belonging, citizenship and the public domain. In other words, the research will ask why different institutional choices are being made, and focus on the effects of these choices on democracy and development. The project will further explore the degree to which the chosen institutions are representative (that is, the degree to which they are accountable to the populations in question and the degree to which these institutions are empowered and enabled to respond). For decentralizations to produce benefits in equity, efficiency, and democratisation, the expansion of the public domain through the maintenance of public powers is essential. Public powers are what citizens engage in. They are what representatives decide over. This project uses the concept of public domain to examine who has the discretionary powers and the effects of this on public identity and citizenship.

It is hoped that the project will develop a framework for analysis of local democratic consolidation and will produce institutional-choice recommendations aimed at fostering local democracy and strengthening the infrastructure for sustainable public participation in development and in natural-resource decision making.

## Methods

The basis of the study is material from my Ph.D. (Hara, 2001) research (field research conducted between 1997 and 2001) and the Worldwide Fisheries Co-management project between 1995 and 2003 (done in collaboration with IFM of Denmark and the World Fish Centre). In addition, I use my extensive knowledge of the Mangochi District fisheries and systems of administration and governance gathered through working as Fisheries Officer for Mangochi District from 1990 and 1996. For example, the Participatory Fisheries Management Programme (PFMP) was launched under my management as Fisheries Officer and as the District Fisheries Officer, I was a member of the District Development Committee. In addition, I continue to follow and retain interest in issues concerning decentralisation and user-based fisheries management in Mangochi.

In order to integrate recent developments, the following documents were consulted: The Local Government Act (1998) and the Policy on decentralisation (1998); Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning arrangements and policies for funding for decentralisation; the Environmental Affairs Department documents on decentralisation of the environment and natural resources; the Department of Fisheries Revised Act and policy on participatory fisheries management; and the Department for International Development (DFID) funded LADDER project reports.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'institutional choice' as used by Ostrom (1999:193) refers to the choices by the local individuals among available alternatives (based on costs and benefits)—she is interested in how these choices lead to institutional formation. In the project, the term refers to the choices made by governments and international organizations that impose the 'available alternatives' on local individuals—thus constraining their options. This research project chooses to explore the effects of institutional choice within a larger political economic context.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'recognition' is adopted from Kymlicka 2002; and Fraser 2000.

## **Participatory Fisheries Management Programme (PFMP)**

The Lake Malombe and Upper Shire River PFMP was conceptualised and implemented as a pilot programme for user participation following evidence of overexploitation of the Lake Malombe and the Upper Shire River fisheries in the early 1990s (Fisheries Department, 1993; Bell and Donda, 1993). Government's main objective for the participatory management regime was as a strategy to effect the recovery of the fishery in the wake of mounting problems under the centralised regime (Hara and Nielsen, 2003; Hara, 2001; Fisheries Department, 1993). For fishers, their main objective remained continued derivation of socio-economic benefits and subsisting from the fishery (Hara 2001). Following the end of the cold war in the late 1980s, donors had demanded political democracy and transparency as essential conditionalities for development aid (Hara and Nielsen, 2003). Thus the main goal for donors seems to have been influencing the introduction of the subsidiarity principle that could result in political empowerment of user communities in the management of fisheries, with the view that such a regime would result in recovery of the fishery (Hara et.al., 2002).

### **Local participation in fisheries management**

The Department of Fisheries is responsible for the administration of fisheries throughout the country. It does this through establishment of District Fisheries Offices in all districts that have natural fish resources such as Mangochi. Each district can thus be taken to be a fisheries administrative area. The institutional arrangements for the PFMP were that there would be the government side, the user community side and arrangements for formulation and review of policy. The Mangochi District Fisheries Office is the government side in this participatory management arrangement. It is directly responsible for field implementation of the various components of the programme that come under the responsibility of the Fisheries Department. At field level, the direct actors are the extension staff living in the fishing communities. These are termed 'community liaison officers'. They fall under the direct supervision of the Mangochi District Fisheries Office. At a higher level on the government side are the Fisheries Department headquarters, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Justice in Lilongwe. These were supposed to be responsible for ensuring that policy is developed and the legal underpinning of the new approach is in place.

While the government was essentially going to make use of its existing institutional and administrative set-up for the district, fisher communities did not have a ready institutional structure or set-up to enable them effectively play their role as partners the new management regime as required. To this end, the Fisheries Department helped to organize fisher communities by creating community level institutions called Beach Village Committees (BVCs), and training the committees in various skills such as committee procedures so as to enable them execute their roles and tasks.

BVCs are supposed to be democratically elected community level institutions meant to represent their communities in the institutional set-up for the new management regime. They are mainly composed of gear owners and crewmembers, although effort was made to include other interest groups like fish traders/processors and women. Village headmen were made ex-officio members of the committees in their areas of jurisdiction. As fisher representative bodies BVCs are supposed to provide two-way communication channels between the fishing communities and the Fisheries Department. In addition, they are also supposed to form a basis for granting special rights to the communities so as to turn the fishery into a communal access fishery as opposed to an open access fishery as it is now. With such special rights in place, it was also anticipated that later, the communities could progressively assume greater responsibility for management of the fishery. Users created 29 BVCs through elections. These represent 69 villages in an area with an approximate population of 100,000 inhabitants. The BVCs elected an umbrella organisation for all the committees called the Lake Malombe/Upper Shire River Fishermen's Association. Launched using donor funding (German Technical Foundation -GTZ, UNDP, Overseas Development Administration -ODA and World Bank -WB), it was envisaged that in the long term, the money for running the programme would come from gear license fees, part of which would be ploughed back from government to fishing communities as stipulated in the revised Fisheries Act.

As bodies elected by the fisher community to represent their interests, BVCs were supposed to derive their powers from the community. Most BVCs felt though that they derived their powers from government, thereby alienating themselves from their constituency – the fisher communities (Hara, 2001). The role of the Fisheries

Department as facilitator in the introduction of the participatory regime and the department's presumed bias in the election of people to BVCs and inclusion of village headmen as ex officio members of BVCs increased this thinking. Fishers alleged that the fisheries extension officers who facilitated the formation of BVCs manipulated elections so as to ensure that people they favoured were elected onto BVCs rather than those that would have been favoured by the majority of fishers. The thinking behind such manipulation by extension appears to have been to put people they felt had a strong fisheries management ethos (the Fisheries Department's primary objective) on the committees other than those who were seen as standing for alternative views that could be contrary to those of the department.

The placing of unelected village headmen on BVCs as ex-officio members of the committee has been problematic. The powers of BVCs in relation to the powers of Village Headmen communities is an area of contestation. In general, tension exists between the BVCs and their local leaders and where their roles have not been accommodating to each other, friction has been experienced (Hara, 1997). In some areas, the chiefs had more or less taken all the authority from the BVCs and were using them for their own ends (Thindwa and Bezai, pers. com, 1999). Chiefs did this by removing some members of BVCs who they felt were too independent of them and replacing them with people of their own choice. In some instances such as Kadewere village on the east banks of Lake Malombe, the village headman disbanded the elected BVC and constituted a new one composed of people personally hand-picked by himself. Without mincing words he used to literally call it 'my BVC'. It appears as if a BVC was not acceptable to the village headman, it did not matter that it was fairly and democratically elected. Its ability to function would be critically affected if it did not derive some of its authority from the village headman. The underlying problem had been regarding who had the ultimate authority and power at village level in relation to exclusionary powers to the fishery and the extraction of economic benefits from exploitation of the fishery. This contestation for power meant that fishers were often confronted with dual authority as village headmen continued to exercise their traditional authority on their own (Hara et. al., 2002; Donda, 2001) resulting in confusion as to who fishers should look to as the authority over issues of management of the fishery and how they should relate to 'their' BVCs and village headmen.

For BVCs, the confusion has been their source of authority. From whom do the new institutions derive their power? Is it from their local village headmen? Is it from the government, which facilitated their creation? Or is it from the community of users who supposedly elected them? Can BVCs ever be independent from village headmen and government? This also raises the important question of 'to whom the BVCs should be accountable'? A BVC is likely to be accountable to their source of their power and authority whether this is the village headman, the fisheries department or the community. For BVCs to play their intended role, they need some semblance of independence from the local leaders and the fisheries department and draw their authority from their constituency, the fishing communities they are supposed to represent. Thus the challenge is to work out how the three power bases (the BVCs, village headmen, and fisheries department) can accommodate each other to the benefit of improved management of fisheries.

The power relations among the three primary bases of power is therefore critical for success of participatory fisheries management. It is emphasized in this context that probably, one of the most critical aspects of participatory fisheries management is the tension around two organisational aspects; this concerns the struggle for authority and power between the supposedly democratically elected BVCs and the existing hereditary institutional powers of village headmen, while the second source of tension is attributed to the source of initiative and drive for the regime, whether this had been top-down from government or bottom-up from the users themselves (Hara et. al., 2002; Hara, 2001).

Another issue has been the classic question in democracy; 'who ought to be a member of the *demos*'? Fishing communities are constituted people that can be classified according to their roles within the fishing community, fishing gear types, production relations within fishing units, residency status, socio-economic status, political status, and also gender. For example, not everyone in the community is actively involved in fishing. There are different types of gear in use. Within fishing units, there are gear owners and crewmembers whose relations of production are a vital part of fishing activities (Hara, forthcoming). Then there are migrant fishermen (this can be both gear owners and crewmembers) who might reside in fishing villages temporarily or seasonally. The fish traders are usually not permanently resident in fishing villages. They go wherever they can get the product. The socio-economic status of people within communities matters in terms of influence one can derive from his or

her status. There are those with political status, whether hereditary or through other means. Last but not least, gender is a real issue especially in a largely Moslem community such as Lake Malombe and the Uppers Shire River. When the first BVCs were being elected gear owners and crewmembers were adamant that fish traders and women should not be included on BVCs and should take part in electing BVC members since they were not directly involved in fishing. This despite the fact the some women are gear owners<sup>5</sup>. Even then, only 30% of the BVC members were fishers (gear owners and crewmembers). The other 70% was community members with not direct role in fishing as gear owners or crewmembers. Even within the 30% of the fishers that were on BVCs, there were few if any crewmembers among them. These were mostly gear owners. The economic relations of production within fishing units and the role that crewmembers occupy in fishing operations makes them crucial for the functioning and success of fisheries management since they are the ones that take operational decision out on the fishing grounds (Hara, forthcoming; Hara and Jul Larsen 2003). The lack of or low fisher involvement continued to be the case until fresh elections were conducted in 1999. In the first six years therefore, fishers were aggrieved about the composition of BVCs and largely ignored the resolutions being passed by BVCs and the Participatory Fisheries Management Programme. They argued that BVCs were taking decisions over issues they had little knowledge about or decisions meant to punish fishers (Hara, 2001). Thus who is involved in the election of BVCs members and the composition of BVCs is critical for the legitimacy among their constituency, the fishers. It is important that 'vested interests' are involved in processes regarding local fisheries management and adequately represented on institutions meant for this such as BVCs and in future VDCs.

### **Nesting the PFMP within district administrative decentralisation**

Although Mangochi was one of the six Local Implementing Areas (LIA) where administrative decentralisation was supposed to be piloted under the UNDP driven District Focus for Development Programme (UNDP 1996; UNDP, 1998), the process has never gone as far as resulting in the establishment of the DA and other sub-district structures (ADCs and VDCs). Local government elections were conducted in 2001 amid very low voter turnout<sup>6</sup> (Ellis, Kutengule and Nyasulu, 2003; Cross and Kutengule, 2001). It is hoped that the current (2006) parliament session will announce dates for fresh local government elections to resuscitate the process.

Meanwhile, the Department of Fisheries has been running the PFMP for Lake Malombe and the Upper Shire River since 1993. The long-term plan is that fisheries management and development will fall under the DA once this becomes functional. Article 22 of the Environmental Management Act (Malawi Government, 1996) requires the DA to take charge of all decentralised services and activities including extension services. It is envisaged that the assembly will have the powers to pass fisheries by-laws in relation to management issues (for example closed seasons, closed areas, input regulations, etc.), fisheries law enforcement and revenue collection (fishing gear licensing). Key to bringing of fisheries and other environmental sectors under the DA armpit will be the Environmental District Officer who is a public officer within the DA charged with liaising with sectoral ministries. One of his main roles is integrate and bring all district environmental management and planning activities under the DA. Fisheries issues would then be nested under the DA. If this came into being, the organisational structure shown in figure 1 below can be envisaged

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<sup>5</sup> Women gear owners are culturally not able to exercise real authority over their gears. They have to act through a man. For example, they cannot go to the beach to oversee the transactions of the fish sell once it is landed. Usually, the head of the crew will act on their behalf and bring the money to them at home.

<sup>6</sup>only 14% of the eligible voters bothered to vote.

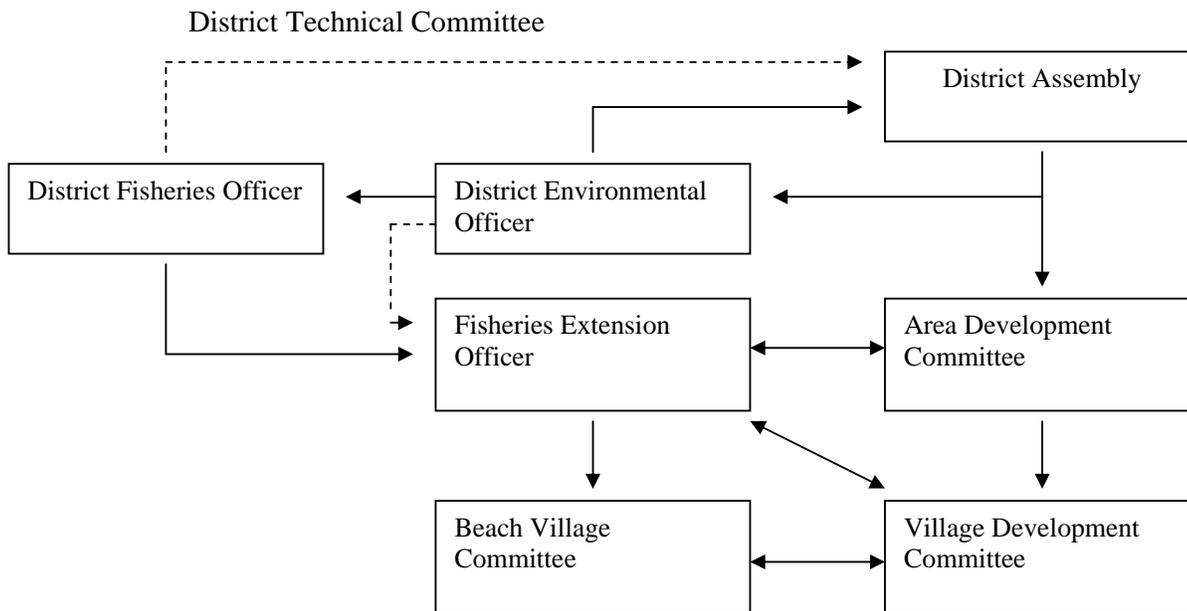


Figure 1: Organisational decision structure for Fisheries within district decentralised administration

The ADCs will fall directly under the DA. The VDCs will fall directly under the ADCs. The District Environmental Officer who is a public officer within the DA will act as liaison officer between the DA and the District Fisheries Officer. Should the District Fisheries Officer be part of the District Technical Committee to provide technical advice and backstopping for the DA, then he/she will have a link to the DA. If not, then his only link will be through the District Environmental Officer. The Fisheries extension officers who are stationed in the field will be part of ADCs and VDCs so as to provide technical knowledge to these entities. At the same time, they will continue as members of BVCs. What is not very clear is the future relationship between ADCs, VDCs and BVCs. As chairmen of VDCs and ex-officio members of BVCs this places chiefs at crucial intersections for increasing powers and also benefit extraction from the system. One danger is that the proliferation of local committees where they have to sit might overwhelm them with responsibilities. Unless the decision making process can be made more expedient, one might expect decision making to be slow, cumbersome, time consuming and expensive in this organisational structure. Consensus or agreement on decisions within the ADCs and DA is likely difficult to reach due to infighting, as each constituency will usually try to draw resources and projects to their own areas.

In the last decade, most sectors (e.g. fisheries, health, forestry, wildlife, agriculture etc.) had been implementing user-based management initiatives resulting in the proliferation of committees at the local level. Often, the same people ended up being found on so many committees because of their influential positions within the community or because of their special skills (for example those who are literate, retired civil servants etc.). In the end, their ability to perform could be rather diminished. With so many committees trying to draw participation from people for their sectoral activities, communities became fatigued with participation resulting in apathy about attending so many meetings that take them away from daily survival and livelihoods activities. One can foresee the problem of so many committees at local level unless all the sectoral committees such as BVCs are to be disbanded and incorporated into the VDCs. If development, agriculture and resource management activities can be all coordinated under one committee such as the VDC, then this is likely to help streamline procedures, processes and reduce the number of meetings that people have to attend. It could be one positive aspect of decentralisation.

### **Sectoral based versus integrated development**

One of the major issues regarding devolution is the clash between the sector based and the integrated development approach being proposed under decentralisation. While the integrated system sounds logical and is

a positive departure from the narrowly focused sectoral planning approaches, the main players have not yet come to terms with its practical implementation (Mkandawire. 2003). As Ellis, Kutengule and Nyasulu (2003:1496) point out, “the government has displayed some reluctance about distributing central functions to the district level and granting local government new powers, including tax raising powers.” The Lack of policy harmonisation among the various sectors could also make the integration of decision-making difficult. Besides, the politics of benefit extraction through the political or public position that one holds that are prevalent among both politicians and public officials means that there is great resistance to the relinquishing of the cash cow. There is likely to be reluctance for district fisheries staff to loss their direct link to their mother department and ministry and so become completely administered under the DA. This could result in the loss of benefits, allowances for fieldwork, chances of promotion, opportunities for transfer to other district stations and other benefits that come with being a civil servant under central government. It is likely therefore that the key development planning and management functions will remain with the sectoral technical staff in the government departments and NGOs.

Although some donors have shown enthusiasm for decentralisation, some remain sceptical that Malawi is not ready for such a drastic change in governance. The main issue is that the DA is likely to be lacking in managerial and technical capacity (Cross and Kutengule, 2001). The fear appears to be that resources put in the district fund will be misallocated on misappropriated due to weak systems, poor management and changes in funding priorities that are not in line with specific donor policies and requirements. Thus while there has been promise for funding for the district development fund that will drive the district administration programmes, it is most likely that government and donors will prefer funding sectors such as fisheries directly rather than through the district administration even when this comes on stream.

### **Challenges to decentralisation**

There are numerous challenges to political and administrative decentralisation in Mangochi district and Malawi in general. These are in the areas of:

- Sequencing between decentralisation and political empowerment;
- Narrow revenue base for the local assemblies;
- Political commitment;
- Local technical and management capacity to implement decentralised functions; and
- Target community apathy.

Cross and Kutengule (2001) argue that one of the major problems with decentralisation in Malawi is that the sequencing is wrong. Administrative reforms are being pursued hand-in-hand with attempts to promote political participation, yet in terms of the neo-patrimonial perspective, these are inherently inimical. Political participation requires prioritisation. The authors go on to suggest that enfranchisement and empowerment at grass roots has to drive the reform of the state machinery, not the other way round.

The other major problem is fiscal decentralization. Generally very low local level revenue raising is happening or will be possible in future. This is partly due to lack of capacity at local levels and partly the absence of information management systems to ensure that the tax base within the district boundaries can be brought within the DA’s fiscal net. More generally it is the result of the essential nature of the patrimonial elite: the aim is precisely to canalise and centralize public revenue flows rather than to allow these to fertilise potential rival centers of power (Ibid). For example, while the revised Fisheries Act of 1997 gives alludes to revenue raised from fishing gear licensing being ploughed back to communities for user-participation in fisheries management, this has never been implemented. The programme has continued to rely on donor funding rather than on revenue from taxation of fishing activities. Given that much of the funding is externally provided it might well be possible for an accord to be reached whereby donors utilize mechanisms for funding which require sectoral ministries to operate at district level (ibid.).

The other issue is that the sub-stratum of patrimonialist values that underlie the system of government have remained remarkably solid since the colonial era, through Banda’s 30 years autocracy into the era of ‘democracy’. The expectation that public office is the route of acquisition of material wealth has continued. The

politics and habits of patrimonialism are likely to be reinforced, rather than being reversed. As Cross and Kutengule (2001) argue, change would require the toppling of the powerful interests situated in the sectoral ministries and parastatals, and require the reorientation of political parties from their concerns with ensuring access at the centre to the difficult waters and uncertain waters of being held accountable at the local level. A typical example that can be drawn from the PFMP is how allowances paid to BVC members taken to community training centres for training became an issue within the committees and the fishing communities at large; The members of BVCs not selected to go for training demanded that those who went on training should bring the allowances back and share these with the rest of the BVCs members. For the community at large, BVC members were seen as being the privileged select. Fishers involved in illegal activities would tell BVC members who question such activities to shut up as they had a source of income as BVC members. Also BVC members were viewed as part of the fisheries department and therefore just an extension of the department's arm into communities.

Technical and managerial capacity is probably the biggest problem that DAs face. Decentralisation requires that the DA members and those of the structures below them such as ADC and VDA have the capabilities to carry out needs analysis of their local populations, undertaken strategic planning and manage resources under their charge. Capacity includes the attitude and expectations of DA members, the formal and informal levels of authority that they could be able to muster and the resources they maybe able to deploy in fulfilling these functions of promoting a whole range of people-centred development (Mkandawire. 2003).

The effect of the new political dispensation (democracy after 30 years of autocracy) on the willingness and ability of users to participate in development activities including fisheries management should not be taken for granted. In sectors such as forestry, there has been an increase in illegal activities since the advent of democracy. In such cases, democracy seems to have been equated with the easing of government regulations and restrictions, which were equated to the harsh dictatorship. Also, under the new political dispensation, the spirit of self-help appears to have diminished (GoM/UNDP, 1998). More and more, people want to be paid for any work that they do. It is doubtful whether people can be coerced into participating in development activities even under decentralisation. The proliferation of committees and the likely demands on peoples' time and resources for attending meetings and participating in development activities could result in increased apathy towards local participation.

## **conclusion**

Natural resources are an important source of subsistence, income, and livelihoods for rural communities in Malawi. They are also a source of wealth for central governments and local elites (see Ribot 2002, 2004; Anderson 2002). As such, natural resources are a point of conflict and cooperation between central and local authorities and among local interests, mobilizing a wide range of interested parties when natural resource power are transferred from central to local authorities. In theory, decentralisation of administrative systems and the District Focus Development approach should enhance local level democratic participation in development and natural resource management activities. With its encouragement of local level participation through ADCs and VDCs it should also complement participatory fisheries management.

The argument for decentralization is that subjects should become citizens through the acquisition of effective political rights, commencing with the establishment of accountability running through all levels of the political and administrative systems. Manor (1996) concluded that three factors are essential if decentralization is to lead to the promotion of sustainable livelihoods for the poor: elected local bodies with sufficient funding, adequate powers, and reliable mechanisms to ensure two kinds of accountability – the accountability of elected representatives to citizens, and of bureaucrats to representatives.

There is no doubt that part of the solutions to the problems in fisheries management lay in an approach that recognises that fisheries is part of a larger social, economic and political system and that solely sector based solutions are unlikely not work. Cross and Kutengule (2001) argue that the main problem in Malawi is that decentralization has been externally induced rather than being an organically generated process. For this reason, it faces inherent contradictions. The inducements for continued efforts are largely provided by donors such as World Bank and UNDP who control the pipeline for aid (80% of the development funding is donor

based) and all the perquisites, rather than for political accountability or local demands for further subsidiarity in administration.

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