

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS! DEVOLUTION IN THE WATER REFORM PROCESS IN ZIMBABWE¹

Bevlyne Sithole, CASS, University of Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

Devolution is a buzzword that remains appealing to many development workers and officials especially those focusing on institutions and management issues at the local level. Yet the initial euphoria with the concept seems to be passing as many are beginning to pay closer attention to case studies of where devolution has occurred and to highlight problems of stakeholder participation and power sharing. This paper examines how devolution has occurred in the water reform process in Zimbabwe and challenges the presumption that devolution automatically guarantees participation by stakeholders representing various groups operating in various arenas. In the water reform process, the paper finds that in certain contexts under specific conditions devolution does not guarantee full participation by all stakeholders and is not felt by most stakeholders to be empowering.

INTRODUCTION

Many lessons on devolution have and are still derived from woodland management in Asia and more recently in east and southern Africa (Wily 1997). In Zimbabwe the scope of the discourse on devolution has now extended to wildlife management, yielding some important and fundamental insights on:

- the need to define and clarify the meaning of the term devolution;
- the need to understand dynamics among stakeholders and how different machinations of these stakeholders produce variations of what we now regard as devolution;
- to understand how devolution has come about and what is driving the need for it;

Despite all these issues, devolution remains a topical subject among advocates of local or community participation, and in many respects is being used to redefine state-community relations over natural resources. In this new perspective, devolution is seen as a means through which government and other external actors who have wielded power over local management loosen the grip on that power and allow local communities to “*decide and make plans*” on how resources that are fundamental to their livelihood systems should be managed. In other words, devolution allows the local communities especially or any other stakeholder space to take control over “*the pulse of their existence*” where in most cases, that pulse is regulated by external actors who have little or no understanding of the real struggles of survival (Songsore pers commun.). However, there is less agreement on how such involvement by local communities should proceed (Wily 1997). Experiences in wildlife and woodland management have demonstrated that devolution is not a simple process and that there are constraints and difficulties especially where different types and levels of actors are asked to redefine their roles and power to act co-operatively in natural resources management.

¹ This paper has been prepared from results of work undertaken in the Mazoe catchment with funding from USAID through the BASIS/CRISP project.

While calls for devolution abound, there are some sceptics who have begun to see devolution as a scapegoat for governments and other stakeholders abandoning their responsibilities under the guise of participation (Mukamuri and Mavedzenge 1998). Cheru (1989) found that many governments in southern Africa for example, have been forced to withdraw from local level management leaving a vacuum. In some countries this vacuum has been filled by resurgent traditional or democratic institutions (Johansson and Mlenge 1992). However, in some countries these vacuums have remained, and the absence of acknowledged authority, legitimate or otherwise, has had a detrimental effect on resource control and management. It is against this background that the governments now appear eager to devolve power to other stakeholders with no expense on themselves while in most cases retaining the “*power of veto*” over decisions taken. Many more studies undertaken in Zimbabwe, are suggesting that the cases of devolution in forestry and wildlife have been at most superficial and partial, resulting in communities rejecting calls to receive power and control over resources. For example, Dzingirai (1995) documents a vivid case study where communities are asking the state to take back its power. In a recent study, Sithole *et al.*, (1999) found that though there are presidential proclamations about extending control over resources to local people, most such initiatives are identified as government programmes not as local or people’s programmes. Despite the growing body of literature on the mistakes made in CAMPFIRE, government continues to extent this ‘*widely popular*’ policy of devolution to other resources to forestry and now to water.

In this paper we examine how devolution has occurred in the water reform process and how the various stakeholders perceive it. The paper challenges the presumption that devolution automatically increases the influence and participation of all strata in society. The paper draws on participant observations of several consultative meetings conducted over the past year between various strata of organisations involved in water management. These meetings were conducted in one of the two pilot catchments set up by the government to devolve management and allocation of water to democratically elected organisations involving multiple stakeholders.

THE WATER REFORM PROCESS IN ZIMBABWE AND THE MAZOE CATCHMENT

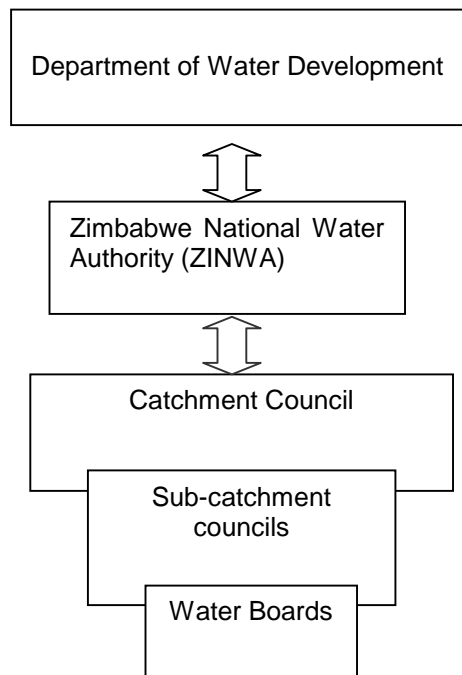
Zimbabwe has been partitioned into 7 catchment areas which fall under the control of catchment councils (Figure 1). Mazoe catchment is one of the pilot catchments extending over an area of 21 000 square kilometers and spans over an area covering three provinces, Manicaland, Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central (Figure 2). The catchment is further subdivided into sub catchment and water boards. The paper draws on data collected from consultations and fieldwork undertaken in the Mutoko and Musami sub-catchments. The Mazoe catchment council was formed in 1997 and is constituted by commercial farmers, communal farmers, district councils, mines, small- scale commercial farmers, municipalities, towns and resettlement farmers. Each of these different groups of actors is represented on the council structures. Once elected on to the different structures of the catchment councils, each of these members represent different interests, have different constituencies and as is becoming increasingly apparent, they draw on different sources for the power they wield in the council. In terms of numbers, though certain constituencies seem to have more representatives or are doubly represented, there are individuals who represent smaller constituencies but seem to have greater stake and control on the participation process in the water reform process in Zimbabwe (Chikozho in prep).

Figure 1. Catchment council boundaries in Zimbabwe.

Figure 2. The Mazoe catchment.

Over the last 2 years, the Center for Applied Social Sciences at the University of Zimbabwe has collaborated on a BASIS/CRISP funded programme to monitor the water reform process in Zimbabwe. To do this, the researchers have deliberately positioned themselves in the role of observers in the two pilot catchments, the Mazoe and the Mupfure catchment councils. In this role, the researchers have gathered a wealth of knowledge and experiences on the dynamics of and meanings of participation in artificially constructed groups, providing insights about group participation in the management of natural resources. As well, the researchers have been able to address the question of representation and constituencies as an issue related to what is the appropriate unit for effective natural resources management. A third area of focus that has emerged in these observations is the issue of power dynamics over water and how power is traded between different stakeholders in exchange for votes and support for certain decisions. In particular, observations have focused on how power is exercised by different individuals. In this paper, three consultative meetings initiated by the catchment council are used as case studies to illuminate some of these issues. Before going into the case studies it is perhaps useful to give a broad overview of the structure, roles and constituencies of the different structures which constitute at various levels management units that feed into the catchment council. The catchment council operates as the apex of a hierarchy of loosely co-ordinated structures that have elected representatives from various constituencies operating at various levels (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Catchment councils organisational chart



Catchment councils are made up of elected members from sub-catchment councils. Boundaries of the catchment are defined by the whole extent of the river system, while those of sub-

catchments are defined by sub-hydrological zones. Water boards are constituted by elected members from a defined micro-catchment. Members of catchment councils include stakeholder associations (commercial farmers, district councils, urban councils, mines, industry, communal farmers, resettlement farmers and small scale farmers) also represented. The structure is based on the assumption that management of water resources and decisions related to that management are fed from the lowest strata into the higher strata and that the flow of information between various strata is consistent and that resultant decision making involves all these levels. However, like many other strata many decisions appear top down rather than bottom up as will be highlighted by the consultation process.

Consultations over the proposed Fractional² water allocation system were initiated by the catchment council with funding from GTZ³. Over the past 2 years, the council with representatives from various levels has developed a proposed water allocation system called the fractional system to replace the priority date system. It was agreed in this council that there was a need for wide consultation and that the proposal should be discussed with the sub-catchment councils and representatives from water boards. Though support for the exercise was limited, it was hailed as an essential element of stakeholder participation, and in this paper we examine whether it was indeed so.

THREE CASES OF STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

The need for local participation in the decision making process for water was perhaps best described in the statements made by the a catchment council executive, at each of the consultative meetings: *“The Queen⁴ could not do it, the Smith government could not do it and the Mugabe government cant do it, we have to rely on ourselves and find means to realise our objectives, we must be strong and we must do it ourselves”*. Other statements made also reiterated this view, *i.e. taneta nekumirira government, tichafa takangomirira⁵”*. Another statement made by the same executive was that *“people are dying from a sickness called mahalaitis⁶”* no doubt referring to frequent requests by rural participants for more investment in water by the government and other external actors. In other statements reminiscent of the war time slogans the following statements were also made *“this is our country, our water and we want to share it equitably”*. Another statement that was repeated during the course of the meetings was the statement *“masimba kuvanhu”* which was interpreted to mean power to the communal people though in the sense that it was being used in this meetings it was meant to suggest that power to all stakeholders. However, in a situation which historically, development of water has favoured one group against the other, one wonders what kind of co-operative behaviour can evolve among the actors.

The meetings as a forum for consultation

This section presents case studies of three consultative meetings conducted by the catchment

² Fractional water allocation system is a new allocation system that has been proposed to replace the old priority date system. In the new system, allocation of water is given on the basis of the application and will be granted in relation to total available water in the catchment.

³ Though the funding from GTZ is low it did ensure some level of local consultation and is therefore welcomed, though the outcome of the funding has opened a can of worms regarding the relationship between the executive and lower strata in the catchment hierarchy.

⁴ The Queen refers to Queen Elisabeth and Britain who were the colonial powers of Zimbabwe

⁵ “ we are tired of waiting for the government, we will die waiting”

⁶ Mahalaaitis is an anglicised form of a Shona word mahala which means without working for something, or free.

council. The meetings were conducted in both English and Shona, though there was no consistent translation throughout. The document that was used in the consultation was written in English and few if any of the participants had seen the proposal prior to the meeting. A number of the participants seemed barely literate and struggled to read through the document during the meeting. The participants were asked to take the papers back to their communities and committees to explain the documents. This request was made even though it appeared as if the majority of the participants were having a difficult time understanding the issues raised in the document and some appeared to have difficulties reading the documents.⁷ Translations were often not accurate and in many meetings it seemed that Shona could have been used as a dominant language as most commercial farmers were able to communicate easily in this language. The use of English, and the subsequent pressures to respond to statements made in English made most of the arguments presented by the rural participants incoherent and in most cases these were ignored and were not followed through. Thus one respondent commented that “*kutaura kwedu kuriitasekuti tinekakuvhunduka vunduka mukati musafunge kuti kusaziva kana kuti udofo, ndiko kutaurirana kwacho kwatirikuda ikoko*”⁸.

The duration of the meetings varied between one and half hours to three hours. Many participants at all the meetings felt that this was insufficient time for anyone to claim that they had consulted with the all stakeholders, instead a period of three to five days would have been ideal to allow for people to rise above their nervousness, incomprehension, suspicions and participate fully in the meetings. For logistical reasons this was not possible (see Footnote 1:ref to GTZ funding). Thus most participants noted that “*these half-backed attempts at consultations are what disillusion participants because they yield nothing and people go away feeling that they have been bamboozled*”. Conditions for participation gave an unfair advantage to those with own transport. Most rural participants were preoccupied with issues of transport and per diems and hence some meetings ended much earlier than anticipated.

No notes were taken at the meetings and there was no evidence that some of the discussions were being recorded. The discussion was dominated by the defence of what was presented and though there were assurances by the catchment council secretariat that corrections would be made to the proposal and discussed again with the sub-catchment councils it was not clear how this could be achieved. Thus as one elderly rural participant stated, “*how can you fight with what is written, they just want to know if we can read*”. “They” in this statement refers to the catchment council and their secretariat. Consequently, one must question this notion that the allocation system that is being proposed would be truly reflective of the views of the various stakeholders.

The proposed fractional allocation system

The meetings were intended to consult with lower strata in the catchment councils about the proposed fractional water allocation system described in the foregoing section. This system has been tried in the upper and middle Mazoe catchment with some success. Now the Mazoe catchment council wants to apply it on a wider scale in the whole catchment, for a larger area and to include more users of different types who have different priorities. But there are some

⁷ CASS undertook to translate the document for the communal people.

⁸ Our responses seem confused and muddled, do not take this as a sign of ignorance, this is part of the consultation process that you say you want with us”

fundamental problems related to the proposal:

- The proposal is not viewed as home-grown by the lower structures of the catchment councils as suggested in this statement “*imi mataura gwara renyu, njani mvura iyi, regai kutitenderedza musoro, mozoti oh oh tinonetsa*”⁹. The important issue to note is how the participants who are part of the catchment council bureaucracy isolate themselves from the proposal, which essentially should have developed from below, with their consistent input. Throughout the discussions it was obvious that the lower structures of the catchment do not identify at all with the proposals.
- The way water especially excess water will be allocated seems to still favour those with infrastructure namely the white commercial farmers and the state who previously had monopoly over water anyway, therefore, rural farmers representing waterboards and sub-catchment councils do not see what and how they are going to be involved in the consultative process. As one participant from Goromonzi district council stated, “*such consultations involve rural people so that we hear first hand how they are giving each other water so that when we question it, they will say, but you were there, how can you fight such a system?*”
- There are differences in the types of water sources available to different groups. While commercial farmers are discussing dams and impoundment, communal farmers are largely concerned with borehole, spring and river water, and most, which can be accessed with little or no investment. Rights to water from different sources need to be conceptualised for different uses and for use at different scales. One question asked in the Nyagui meeting was, “*ko mvura yamunoti titorere mapermits ndeyaniko muridzi wayo, titsamburireika?*”¹⁰
- Existing relations between communal and commercial farmers are not accommodative of each other’s requirements for water. For example some of the existing farm dams did not have spillways and commercial farmers were said to be unwilling to share water in times of droughts. The main issue raised with regards to sharing water in the proposed system was therefore the degree to which the commercial farmers were willing to open their spillways and share stored water.
- The case study used to test the system (Mazoe river board) was not a familiar case to most participants and represented different contextual features to those found in most sub-catchments and waterboards. Rural participants could not imagine how such a system as that presented by the secretariat would operate in their own areas. And as stated by one elderly participant; “*kuti useke munhu achimhanya hunge wamuona achimhanya*”¹¹. Because the fractional system was tested in a largely commercial setting, many participants doubted its applicability in other settings where the stakeholder group was more differentiated in both interests and resource endowments.
- Though the area covering the catchment was shown on maps and described, many rural participants felt that the defined catchment area constituted many socio-religious boundaries where relations between local leaders were not always cordial. Implementation of such a system was therefore likely to face many problems.

⁹ “you have presented your thoughts, whose water is this? You must not come here to confuse us, then say we are being difficult”

¹⁰ “this water that you say we must get permits for whose water is it anyway, explain that to us if you can”

¹¹ “to laugh at a running person, you must have seen them running” a metaphor suggesting that you cant agree to something that you cant even visualise.

NYAGUI CATCHMENT COUNCIL MEETING (06/10/99)

Participants at this meeting were a mixed bag comprising commercial farmers, representatives of water boards and catchment councils, district council and government officials and representatives of the chiefs in the area. Participation was largely skewed towards the commercial farmers and the few government and district council representatives. Rural participants attended the meeting but their participation was limited to seeking clarification and generally trying to understand what their role in the meeting was.

The main issues for the white commercial farmers were those concerning security of tenure over stored water and how the proposed water allocation system would impact investment in agriculture. The response to this concern was that access to bigger dams would guarantee requested allocations as well as surpluses that may exist in the catchment. In the words of one district council official, the issue of security and storage was fundamental in the discussion of equity in the new system. As far as he and other participants were concerned, *“the new and proposed system changes nothing, those with dams or money to build dams still have a comparative advantage over those in communal areas who have no hope in hell of ever building and sustaining one”*. Another participant echoed this concern and stated that *“tingati tiri kuchinja mutemo tichiudzokorera neimwe nzira, ndiyoka cosmetic change inotaurwa, izvozwi tavakuti anedhamu ngaapuhwe mvura yasara, ko chanchinja chii, where is the change¹²”*. Thus many rural participants wanted to know who was going to pay for storage in communal areas or if indeed they had rights to use storage in dams on commercial farms adjacent to them. The answer was that *“no one would build dams except yourselves, don’t wait for the government, they have failed to do this over many generations and will not start now”*. This pronouncement seemed to take the wind out of the whole discussion, which showed the participation and involvement of rural communities in water allocation to be as futile as it was irrelevant

Communal participants were concerned to differentiate between different sources of water. While most understood the reasoning behind wanting to allocate and manage water in dams few understood the reasoning for wanting to do this for small weirs, boreholes, pools or water that seeps out of the mountain? In the words of the moderator of the meeting, *“water is water, no distinction is made about which source, it is use that will determine whether that water should be paid for or not”*. Another issue highlighted by the rural participants was the issue of *‘fundamental human rights to subsistence water’* especially in periods of shortage when they face unnecessary hardships while neighbours have water in their dams. Thus *“mvura haina murombo, haina mupfumi, akabata mvura ndiye aomesa rwizi¹³”*. At this point case studies of conflicts between commercial farmers and rural communities were highlighted where downstream people faced hardships while commercial farmers *“sat on their water, advantage iri kumunhu anedhamu¹⁴”*. Many participants wanted to know whether any provisions had been made in the new act to allow access by local communities to some of this water for subsistence purposes for them and their livestock. There are fundamental differences between different types of stakeholders about the nature of their understanding and need for certain types of rights to water. In the rural context, studies have shown, that water which is more rigorously controlled

¹² We may say we are changing the system, yet we are bringing it back in another way, this is cosmetic change, now we say those with dams must be given surplus water, what has changed then, where is the change”

¹³ “water should be available to all, rich or poor, but the person who compounds the water is the one who makes the river dry”

¹⁴ the person with the dam has the advantage

and even privatised becomes less stringently controlled during drought periods as with traditional rights there is accommodation of any human being's basic right to domestic water and water for livestock. This is a different case with commercial farms whose view of resources is that what is private is private and should be fenced against outsiders.

Most of the rural participants in this meeting were representatives of the water boards or the sub catchment councils and yet stated that *"tandouyawo, nyaya yacho taisaizivaba¹⁵"*. When there was some discrepancy in the translations, one councillor pointed out that there was evidence that the catchment council were themselves not yet clear about the proposal they were trying to discuss with people and therefore the councillor recommended that *"they should go back and straighten out the differences before seeking to close the gaps that exist between the catchment council and other lower structures"*

NYADIRI SUB-CATCHMENT CONSULTATIVE MEETING (13-10-99)

This meeting was very well attended and was dominated by the presence of traditional leaders. There were three chiefs and 15 headman, 2 councillors and 13 members of the various water boards that constitute the Nyadiri sub-catchment. There were no women represented in the groups. In general, people have been elected to water boards and sub-catchment councils though it is acknowledged that local traditional authorities should be involved, they have not been consistently involved in the process. Most chiefs expressed the sentiment that they did not understand why they were invited. The chiefs stated that *"most people did not know about permits, the meeting was the first time they were being told about such issues or indeed being asked to get involved. As far as water is concerned most people follow the ways of their forefathers and are not aware that this or that use is illegal"*. Even when it became evident that in the new reform process more stakeholders would have to be involved, the participants perceived it as a knowledge sharing mission with the state, not a process of consultation. One chief stated that *"zvandirikuona chirikunetsa ndechekuti, mutemo kwangakusina, hurumende yavakuda kuti munhu wese azive mutemo, kuti tizvinzwisise zvichanetsa. Zvavakunzi permit permit isu tavakuti kokagarden kangu, tsanagurai kuti kushandisa kwacho ndekupi¹⁶"*. None of the other meetings had the same representation of chiefs in the consultation meeting raising the question, who was the consultation targeted at?

The purpose of the meeting and the 'so called' involvement in the water reform process came as a surprise to chiefs. One chief stated that *"when you are ignorant you appear to be difficult because you slow down discussion, I believe that he who wants a store applies to the district council for space to build, you don't apply if you don't have money"* suggesting that those that have a stake or a greater interest in water should be involved in the consultations rather than everyone. However, a representative from the catchment council countered this suggestion, by stating that *"in a church if a priest focuses on infidelity, it does not imply that the whole congregation is involved, therefore the consultations should involve everyone even those that appear not to have any interest in using water commercially now but may do so in the future, we want to plan a framework for sharing for the future"*. In support of this statement another chief

¹⁵ we have come to the meeting but we did not know what the meeting was going to be about

¹⁶ what I see as a problem is that there were no rules, but now the government wants us to know these rules, so that we understand what will be difficult in the future, they are now talking about permits, but our concern is for our tiny gardens, you must explain to us for what kind of use these rules apply"

stated that *“the main drawback that I see in this discussion is that many of us are finding it impossible to plan for what we don’t have, hatidi kupfungudza jongosi kusati kwanaya, confliction yatomuka pano, lets continue with this discussion and see where it leads us, munhu kutenga bhutsu aziva size yake¹⁷”*. Many of the chiefs in the meeting could not and would not believe that water could be shared and that they could be part of the decision-making system. Thus for example, one chief noted that *“hatigovane chiri kumhanya, tinoronga sei pasina mvura¹⁸”*. Other participants were not sure how they could be expected to discuss a water allocation system when they could not see the water. Thus, many insisted that the meeting should focus on provision of water bodies to marginalised areas before expecting people to participate as equals in decisions about how water should be allocated. Discussing the proposed water allocation system was therefore seen as *“we are wasting time discussing what should happen tomorrow when we have nothing and are unlikely to see these plans, this is like buying maternity dresses for women who were not even pregnant, you should build dams in communal areas first before we come to this sort of discussion”*. Thus to most participants in this group, the discussions were therefore at best too abstract and at most and by and large meaningless and irrelevant. One of the important chiefs in the area questioned the meaning of consultation if the purpose of the meeting was to *“sell an alien allocation system”* which no one understood and or felt able to judge. The respondent stated that *“imi munoda kutitenderedza misoro nezvinhu zvamunoziva, munoziva kuti mvura ino patsanurwa sei, mozouya kuzotibunza isu, tisiri munyaya yacho, ungamidze mwana zita asati avepo¹⁹”*.

Another aspect highlighted in the discussions was the polarity in views about the way such a proposed allocation system would influence existing societal relations and provide disincentives for expansion in agriculture especially in the rural areas. Thus for example one participant observed that the proposed water allocation system would make people with small-scale projects like gardens or small irrigation schemes abandon them rather than pay fees for water. People’s willingness to pay for water is an issue that will need to be addressed especially where traditionally water was regarded as a free good. One responded stated that *“iyu mvura yotorera magwaroyo, irikugadzirwa nani, ndiyani muridzi wayo, mvura yaNyadire ingarwirwe here, ndingatora permit mvura irikuerera hayo²⁰”*. Water comes from God, no one has a right to control its use, suggesting that there should be an allocation system would surely mean that conflicts will increase.

The representatives of the water board also seemed to not understand the proportional allocation system even though they are according to the strata represented on sub-catchment councils and the catchment councils themselves. Their ignorance about the proposed system was noted by the traditional leaders who suggested that if people who were more closely associated with the process could not understand their role in the decision making what was the hope for users who don’t participate in meetings. Thus one of the respondents stated that *“if water user board members and sub catchment council members are also asking questions about water reform, we*

¹⁷ ‘‘we don’t want to yoke the bull before the rains come, there is conflict here , lets continue with the discussion to see where it leads us , for a person to buy shoes they must know their size’’

¹⁸ we cant share whats running, how do we plan or manage what is not there

¹⁹ you just want to confuse us when you know what you want, you know how water should be allocated yet you come to ask us when we are not even involved in allocation , is it possible to give a name to a child who is not even there?

²⁰ This water that you want permits for, who is making it, who is its owner, can you really fight over water in the Nyadire subcatchment, why would I want a permit for water that is flowing through?

begin to loose confidence in the programme because there should be no information gap between these board members and the Mazoe catchment council secretariat". Most chiefs expressed concern about the election process for the various structures of the council and noted that most of them were not aware of the existence of these structures in their areas.

KAIREZI SUB-CATCHMENT COUNCIL DISCUSSIONS (13/10/99)

The composition of the audience in the Kairezi meeting was very interesting. There were 13 white commercial farmers and twenty-four rural representatives of water boards. There were also some government departments represented at the meeting. Broadly speaking the thirteen commercial farmers seemed to be highly aggressive and impatient and wanted clarification on a number of issues. Though the farmers were representing different water boards, there seemed to have been some lobbying and prior discussion among them about which issues were to be raised at the meeting. Three issues seemed to dominate the concerns of the commercial farmers. All commercial farmers left the meeting after the tea break serve for two who are leaders of sub-catchment councils. Most of the communal area representatives stayed until the end of the meeting not because they had pressing issues that needed to be resolved, but because money for travel and lunch was only given out at the end of the meeting. Real interest by communal farmers in the meeting was very low.

Commercial farmers dominated the meeting at first asking questions about security of rights to private and existing dams, control over water in those dams and the relationship between them and their downstream neighbours. The group of white farmers seemed to be divided into those that genuinely wanted to understand the mechanics of the proposed system, and those that viewed any change what ever its source as a threat to established norms and practices. One of the issues that was emphasised by commercial farmers was that they saw this attempt at stakeholder involvement in management and allocation of water not so much as a blessing rather it was viewed as government attempt to transfer responsibility over its role to provide water to communities to white commercial farmers. Because it was clearly stipulated that the government had no money and capacity to sustainably manage water, many participants believed that being part of the stakeholder group would therefore obligate them to support or underwrite projects in their catchments especially in communal areas which they argued was a responsibility that should be shouldered by the state. They further recognised that the disparities in access to resources not just water would make it difficult to reach consensus where one group perceived itself to be disadvantaged and envious of the other group. Thus it was stated in informal discussions over tea that such inequalities would undermine effective stakeholder participation.

Commercial farmers were also concerned by what they saw as the impossible and often malfunctioning bureaucracy which made the previous system unworkable and fraught with administrative problems. The procedures of the old system and those of the new system were discussed. In this discussion, the rural participants played very little role as most of them noted that they were not acquainted with neither system. In addition doubts were expressed about whether the new system would work given the massive manpower resources needed to make it work. The issue of payment to bailiffs and other required personnel was discussed briefly though there was agreement that elected members of different council structures could not be expected to work for free. None of the participants seemed to want to shoulder the transaction cost of devolution, however empowering.

A third issue raised by the commercial farmers related to the definition of commercialisation and how small scale use 'in a communal setting' could ideally be measured in terms of water consumption. This issue was debated for a while, as communal area stakeholders were also interested in understanding what commercial use of water is. Questions were also asked on how water would be measured and what kind of water source the permit system would apply to. Any use of water for profit was regarded as commercial use, but this definition was problematic in communal area situations where sometimes commercial enterprise is not the primary aim but an outcome of disposal of surpluses. Use of water for example on small gardens on dambos and on riverine areas was discussed. The water boards suggested that monitoring all small gardens and small schemes in their area would be too much work for the returns that they would get. For example whether some farming which is intermittent and disaggregated yet deriving substantial incomes to the farmers should be considered as commercial. The water board decides and monitors commercial water use in its areas and is responsible for collecting revenue. Participants noted that, because the revenue is controlled by government and not invested back in the waterboard where it is collected, there is no incentive for such a system to work. Most participants asked the secretariat what was enabling about a system where the government makes us charge each other for resources we have invested in and are not accountable to us for the use of that revenue? For the rural participants, the proposed system is a disincentive especially to rural people who are used to government appropriating successes in any activity. Further, most participants also asked how such system as the one proposed would survive the scourge of political interference and the patronage associated with it. If however, the councils were given more control on the revenue, then this would be an incentive for all water to be managed efficiently as the benefits derived could be seen. However, white commercial farmers argued that they did not want to subsidise use by rural farmers who were also benefiting commercially.

The representatives from the water boards (rural participants), were less co-ordinated in their participation and seemed to be more concerned with issues of investment in water and access to storage in existing government or non-government dams. There was an acknowledgement that the government did not have money to finance new projects, therefore essentially the users would have finance these projects themselves. The rural participants clearly saw this as a ridiculous suggestion as they were barely able to subsist on the incomes they made in communal areas. Issues that were raised were those of title deeds and ownership of water under conditions different from those of commercial farmers. Thus for instance if a farmer decided to construct a dam, it was more difficult in a communal setting for them to keep other communal residents from accessing the water. Moreover, the threat of siltation made it very expensive to build dams in communal areas. As the catchment council did not control the revenue generated from the permit system, it was doubtful that the council would be in a position to finance more projects in communal areas.

The recent Pungwe water pipeline project²¹ and the public consultations that preceded it heightened people's awareness in the catchment that water should be let to flow to other downstream users. Therefore the issue raised in relation to this was how much of the water in our rivers can we legitimately call our water? Though there was some attempt in the meeting to

²¹ The Pungwe pipe line project supplies water to a nearby city of Mutare. The environmental impact assessments for the project emphasised the need to allow water to flow downstream to other users especially those in Mozambique.

debate this issue, it was clear that it was one of the critical areas that would need to be discussed before any management and allocation plan was approved. Transboundary resource sharing is particularly pertinent in communal areas where there are close ties between tribes living along the border with another country.

An issue raised at this consultation meeting but not at other meetings was the need to reconcile traditional as well as new ways of viewing water. Like the Nyagui consultation meeting, ownership of water and rights to water are clearly visualised differently by different stakeholders. In the Kairezi, mythical associations of water and traditional leadership involvement in water issues is quite pronounced and therefore will prove to be one of the crucial determinant for the acceptance of the proposed system. Moreover, there are many traditional irrigation systems along some of the streams, which are part of age-old systems of agriculture which people will now have to pay for. Will such sustainable systems of agriculture disappear as people refuse to pay or will people be willing to pay for these? All these issues will be arbitrated at the water board level, though in all likelihood, it appears that many communities will use what Murphree (1999) calls '*socially constructed stalemates*' to veto them.

DISCUSSION

The water reform process in Zimbabwe presents a unique case for the study of devolution where we not only witness the resurgence in the support for "catchment" as the management unit for water but also a recognition that many stakeholders need to participate in structures that allow them to discuss and deal with equity issues for themselves in relation to their resource endowment. While this example, like the CAMPFIRE programme has drawn much support in both academic and development circles, people have begun to question whether real devolution is possible. The wide variety of the use of the term in the literature testifies to the growing support for the concept, which is seldom clarified. In general the term has been mostly used interchangeably with decentralisation. Certainly, many official programmes define their efforts as devolution when in fact they are referring to a deconcentration of power from the headquarters to the field office. In Zimbabwe, for example, much of the work by Murphree (1991) and Murombedzi (1992) when dealing with the issue of devolution highlight the shift in power and functions over wildlife management from one level of government to another rather than to local communities. Similarly, Burki *et al.*, (1999), finds that in Latin America there has been a process of devolving political, fiscal and administrative powers to sub national units of government. In this context the government increases the autonomy of its regional offices thereby shifting the structure of local accountability from the central government to local government structures while preserving the heretical relationship between the central government and lower level structures. Murphree (1990) finds that, there is a bureaucratic impulse to maintain authority and not further devolve. He notes that in the case of CAMPFIRE there is very little incentive to devolve as the district councils want to maintain control and in some cases a monopoly over revenue from wildlife and pass nothing or very little to the community (see also Campbell *et al.*, 1999; Sithole and Frost 2000). Murphree suggests that policies of devolution typically produce a tendency to preserve authority and its benefits at each level in the hierarchy (1990:7). This suggests that ZINWA which will be the recipient of revenue from catchment councils is likely to want to hold on to power and influence over decisions made in the catchment to guarantee its continued access to flows of cash.

Examining the nature of participation in the devolution process

It is evident throughout the consultation process that participation by various stakeholders is not as it should be. Devolution from state to stakeholders does not necessarily lead to greater participation and empowerment of all stakeholders. As noted in the paper, different stakeholders are drawing on different power bases, some stronger than others. Ultimately however, it becomes obvious that the stakeholders with political backing are not necessarily the ones with power and in most instances are used by the other stakeholders to legitimate decisions that they neither support nor understand. In the context of the water reform process therefore, participation is not defined by active involvement in discussion and exchange of ideas but by presence in a room or as Nemarundwe (pers. comm) calls it “*the level of or seeming wakefulness of the participants*”. Certainly the government and some donors have acted together to create a framework through which power sharing can be achieved among stakeholders in the water sector. The policy of devolution as instituted by government does not explicitly allocate equal powers to all stakeholders, rather there is a covert and perhaps unwritten but obvious belief that stakeholder participation in essence means power has been shifted to those previously disadvantaged by the water policies of the past, namely the farmers in communal area or that there is equal decision making powers. But as noted in the three consultative meetings, most communal people do not understand the need to participate in this process and do not feel able to participate on an equal footing with other stakeholders who have more experience, knowledge and greater stake in how water is allocated. Thus in reality, the so called new power elites do not exercise their power and real power remains vested on those that control the dams. As noted in the meetings, even when the participants highlighted this issue, it was not addressed, as if mere presence by a particular stakeholder group was all it takes to have the so called “*consensus*” decisions on management.

It is perhaps important that one gives some background to the nature of relationships between different stakeholders to explain behaviour and interaction. In Zimbabwe, as well as in many other countries in southern Africa the relationship between different categories of stakeholders has been one of domination and acquiescence. Political history and the institutional framework has in the past and continues in the present to perpetrate these dominance/subordinate relationship between groups and sectors. Consequently, to understand the nature of participation by particular groups, one must appreciate the cause of centralism that preceded it. Age old biases over local participation are coloured by idioms and metaphors of ignorance, which essentially justify sidelining or ridiculing of views from stakeholders especially those from communal areas. In general, the local participants felt that rural stakeholders have no role in decision making about water allocation. They were convinced that the meetings were held not so much to consult but to legitimate existing inequalities between commercial farmers and communal farmers under the guise of friendship. The mistrust between rural and commercial farmers is longstanding and is as obvious in these consultations as it is in other situations where these stakeholders must work together. Is it possible to overcome decades of suspicion and resentment about unequal resource endowment to allow for the stakeholder participation envisaged in the water reform process. It is a curious paradox therefore that the government with the pilot project seeks to facilitate stakeholder participation of groups that essentially have little respect for each others’ opinions or actions as regards natural resources management. The consultation meeting for the Nyagui catchment is a case in point, where the local communal participants were refusing to be drawn to participate in a process for which they had no control and to discuss issues that they had no experience of. Institutional economists suggest that the

degree of participation by different stakeholders is determined by the perception of how much impact that participation will have on decision making (Burki *et al.*, 1999).

In a study of local participation by Sithole and Edziwa (1999), they found that despite the numerous programmes put in place by the state and NGOs to empower as well as increase actual local participation, local people still perceived themselves as powerless, ignorant and without control over the basic means of production. They also found that increased participation and devolution of power and control over resources is perceived to be coming at a time when most resources are seriously degraded or have declined. Though as Campbell *et al* (1993) find, resources are highly valued and managed sustainably, there is also an underlying sense of hopelessness about the management in place. These are case studies found under specific circumstances and perpetuated by a complex of political as well as institutional characteristics that are not easily replicable in other situations. Murphree (1999) advances an interesting concept when he writes about socially constructed vetoes in natural resources management. This concept suggests that local communities have power to deliberately obstruct, support or undermine activities and programmes which undercut their livelihoods. This notion gives us hope that devolution can be aborted if the local communities feel its not acting in their interests.

Moreover, the conditions for participation are not equal as evidenced at most meetings where the white stakeholders departed after tea or as soon as their 'burning issues' were dealt with leaving communal farmers to sit through the meeting for want of bus fares and money for lunch. In the meetings where the slogan was self-sufficiency and community spirit, it seemed obvious that such proclamations are meaningless to communal people who feel powerless to act for themselves in the same manner, as the commercial farmers are able. Even the medium of discussion was different from that in a communal area where issues are discussed in village meetings under less threatening conditions as sports club boardrooms and where everyone freely participates regardless of status or literacy.

Finding the targets of devolution

Growing literature on stakeholder involvement in natural resources management suggests that management occurs in an arena defined by multiple and often highly contested interests. For example, Murphree (1990) argues that devolution must run a gamut of relevant interests and authority modalities in the center periphery administrative hierarchy. The spectrum represented by this hierarchy runs from central government to the communal land inhabitant. Many governments at least in Africa could no longer pretend that they were managing resources on their own, local people were also involved. Consequently, there was not so much a need to emphasise the need to devolve power, but the means through which devolvement could occur. Sithole (1999) finds that control and responsibility over management decisions shifts periodically between various actors depending on the socio-economic and environmental contexts, making it difficult at any given moment to say which stakeholder is dominant and should be given control. Further she determines that it is futile to want to find one such stakeholder as this compromises the availability of choice by local people on who best represents their interests (see also Sithole and Bradley 1995). Sithole concludes that the various actors at the local level are each facing various challenges which mitigate against their choice as the ideal or sole targets of devolution. Traditional organisations are not as strong as they were in the past, while the state is facing fiscal cutbacks and is being forced to withdraw from local level

management. Calls for devolution are also occurring at a time when social structures are disintegrating, local authorities and structures are being questioned on many fronts while commercial farmers are uncertain about their future. In the light of this, there seems to be no clear target of devolution.

Stakeholders as managers of a catchment

The catchment as a unit of management though neat and convenient to the state presents problems for the stakeholders who have often operated in management units much smaller than macro-catchments. Therefore calls for the formation of alliances and relationships between various structures of governance in control of sub-catchments or micro-catchments within them create problems for stakeholders operating on the basis of different reference points and requiring to scale-up their conception of management. Another fact that makes participation by all stakeholders problematic is the nature of longstanding relations between stakeholders. It seems from the discussions that the inequality in resource endowment over water is fully recognised and resented by communal farmers primarily because there is no informal or formal arrangements for sharing water in private dams during times of crisis. Dams therefore remain a metaphor for illegal appropriation of resources that should not be monopolised. As noted in the Nyagui meeting, access to infrastructure merely guarantees that this monopoly of resources is perpetuated, hence there is no point in involving communal farmers in the discussions. This is a typical case of not seeing the water for the dam.

Rights to and control over “god given resources”

Sithole (1999) found in her studies that among rural stakeholders, water is a god given resource whose abundance is determined by regular consultation and ceremonies to the ancestors who intercede between local people and God. Water is used for various purposes under a host of social arrangements that define who, how and quantities that can be collected at a time. These social arrangements though grounded in local experiences appear to be relatively similar across many communal areas. For the communal farmers therefore, issues about water allocation can only be clarified once they and the other stakeholders agree about “whose water is it”. Communal farmers also see water as a resource that has been misappropriated by commercial farmers who have impounded rivers (even though with government permission) altering the flow of water. For the commercial farmer and other stakeholders who have built private dams, water in those dams is private and access to it can be controlled. The meaning of water to various stakeholders is therefore different. Moreover, it is also evident that there are different conceptions of rights to water and how different sources of water are used. It became clear in the meetings that local people feel powerless to participate in the allocation of a resource that they feel is a gift from God, though they recognise that if one invests in water, they have some rights to control that water but must not have exclusive rights to bar other users from accessing water for subsistence needs.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors that mitigate against devolution of control and management over natural resources to multiple stakeholders. As demonstrated at various meetings, the transaction costs for achieving genuine devolution are very high especially where local people must be included. Genuine stakeholder participation is difficult and as evidenced in the consultation meetings it is easily a mask for power dynamics that project the marginalised groups as empowered groups.

Those that are the new power elites (the communal farmers) find it hard to exercise that power, and often must sit back while real power is exercised by those that have resources. Their power merely exists in this context to reinforce existing power differences, though now commercial farmers must exercise their power more discretely. Consequently, participation by rural stakeholders remains as futile as it is irrelevant. Instead what we have in the water reform process is a framework for natural resources management which reduces government spending and accountability to water users yet maintains control over revenue generated for little effort. Genuine stakeholder participation seems impossible under the prevailing conditions for water reform in Zimbabwe.

The perception of the role of government has not changed despite devolution. Government is still seen as an entity different from the stakeholders and maintains the power of veto rendering stakeholder participation meaningless. Donor funding for participation though appreciated is seen as undermining devolution rather than advancing it especially where participants go away feeling that they have been bamboozled. Despite the overwhelming support for the policy on devolution, there is no level playing field for all stakeholders, and now the water reform process provides yet another example of hastily and ill conceived attempt at solving long standing disparities among stakeholders without any investment in the 'glue' that would make such cooperation work.

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