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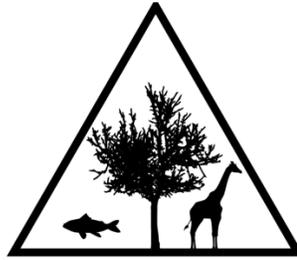
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Forestry Decentralization Policies and Community-based Forest Enterprises in Tanzania: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Forestry decentralization policies follow an inherent logic that centralized governance of forest resources cannot address the multifaceted nature of forest-related problems. It is through a diverse range of institutions and a combination of multiple partners consisting of state, non-state actors and rural communities, that such problems can be efficiently addressed. Central to decentralization policies is the argument that it envisions a triple win involving improved natural resource governance, improved rural livelihoods and improved biophysical conditions. However, an important and often overlooked consequence of these policies is that they also enable a growing commercialization of forests. In this context, increasing profits are constitutive for the governing logic. Based on a review of the state of knowledge on forestry decentralization and its impacts, and drawing on insights from Tanzania's forestry sector, this literature review discusses the background of decentralization policies in Tanzania and how they have led to a proliferation of community-based forest enterprises with potentially adverse effects on both the sustainability of the forest and local livelihoods.

Key words: Forest governance, policies & institutions, partnerships, sustainability, enterprising the forest

1. Introduction

A high rate of forest degradation has attracted global attention and led to new strategies for promoting forest management and mitigating impacts related to forest degradation. Among these strategies is that of forest governance decentralization, which builds on the premise that state forest management has failed to address multifaceted issues related to forest governance. The introduction of new policies and initiatives of forest governance decentralization can be observed all over the world. Decentralization can take various forms: democratic, where secure powers and resources are transferred to downwardly accountable and representative local authorities; administrative, with powers and resources transferred to upwardly accountable local branches of the central government; and privatization, where a transfer of powers to non-state entities takes place (Ribot 2002). In India, forest decentralization policies were formulated to account for indigenous rights to resource use (Kumar, Singh and Kerr 2015). In Indonesia, forest policies were aimed at recognizing the right to keep customary forests and the rights of forest dwellers in general (Myers, Intarinic, Siraitd and Maryudi 2017). In Bolivia, forest policies took into consideration the needs of different population groups in the country: farmers, forest indigenous dwellers, government, business, etc. (Hirsch 2017). In most developing countries these policies have been influenced by donors (Rahman, Sadath and Giessen 2016), and the goal of their implementation has been to ignite bottom-up approaches to forest management in response to the belief that top-down forest governance had failed. After the adoption of decentralization policies around the world scholars have become interested in assessing the effectiveness of changes and whether they yield different results as compared to state-controlled forest regimes (Balooni, Pulhin and Inoue 2008). Others have looked at these policies and how they impact climate change issues (Gregorio et al. 2019).

Since their onset in the late 1980s, forest decentralization policies have been framed according to a triple wins rationality, i.e. improved resource governance; improved rural livelihoods; improved forest biophysical conditions. Here, we define decentralization as "any act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy" (Ribot 2002: 4). The policies embed the logic that centralized governance of natural resources cannot address multifaceted resource-related problems (Ostrom 1990). Instead, according to this logic, it is through diversity in institutions and a combination of multiple partners (state, non-state and rural communities), that such

problems can be efficiently addressed by advancing the efficiency of resource management, while ensuring equity and justice for resource-dependent local people (Andersson and Ostrom 2008; Ostrom 2005; Rana and Chhatre 2017; Ribot 2002). Decentralized forest governance therefore follows the institutional logic of polycentricism as "multiple authorities with overlapping jurisdictions" (Andersson and Ostrom 2008: 71). Proponents of polycentric resource governance do not oppose self-governance regimes such as Ostrom (1990) proposes. However, they argue for an institutionalization of resources where forests are assigned a management regime which prevents open access and adopts different governance modes (state, community, elected government and private), as considered necessary for effective management of public forests (Andersson and Ostrom 2008; Rana and Chhatre 2017). Their premise is that through a selective mix of useful elements and strengths from each mode, "we can achieve equity and sustainability in forest governance to a greater extent" (Rana and Chhatre 2017: 40). In Tanzania, forest governance decentralization is backed by policy and legal frameworks (National Forest Policy 1998, National Forest Act, 2002, Land Act. No.4 and Village Land Act No 5 of 1999; and the local government, District authorities, Act of 1982). This forest institutional framework has created a platform for multi-scalar partners to engage in forest governance.

Several scholars have employed the political ecology lens to examine how forestry decentralization policies are unfolding on the ground, critically exploring their social and ecological consequences. Political ecology examines power in relation to diverse and multi-scalar interests over material resources (e.g. forested lands), and their implications on resource access (Robbins 2004). Here we follow Ribot and Peluso's (2003: 153) definition of access as "the ability to derive benefits from things." Thus, political ecologists devote attention to the wide range of social, political, cultural and historical aspects that constrain or enable peoples' abilities to benefit from material resources and their institutions. In particular, they document, on the one hand, tendencies of central governments to limit powers devolved to local institutions (Ribot et al. 2006) and, on the other, the reproduction of social inequalities, as local elites take advantage of power transfers in order to capture the few benefits that the policies bring (Berkes 2010; Green and Lund 2015; Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013; Persha and Andersson 2014).

Based on a review of the state of knowledge on forestry decentralization and its impacts, and drawing on insights from Tanzania's forestry sector, this literature review first looks at the background of decentralization policies in Tanzania and the rise and growth of participatory forest management, focusing on power and the available institutions for forest management. It shows how these resources have led to polycentric forest governance and complex networks of partners and institutions that

create hybrid forms of resource governance. Secondly, this review examines how these policies have led to emerging partnerships under so-called community-based forest enterprises which carry the premise that carbon trading and forest certification represent a new way of dealing with forest degradation. We argue, however, that these community-based forest enterprises can have potentially adverse effects on both the sustainability of the forest and local livelihoods. There is a need for more research to better understand the links between different partnership constellations arising from forestry decentralization and their impacts on forest and livelihood sustainability. The review therefore concludes by introducing the research carried out under the auspices of the New Partnerships for Sustainability (NEPSUS) research project, which has the goal of addressing these gaps in the research.

2.0 Debating forestry decentralization policies

2.1 Forest decentralization policies in Tanzania: The emergence of community engagement in forest management

Forest conservation in Tanzania dates back to the German occupation of East African land in 1800s (Lovett 2003; Wily 2002). The German perception of forest degradation was based on a belief that local activities were problematic and detrimental to the forest (FAO 2003; Barrow et al. 2002). According to Mgaya (2016), the Germans' main concern in relation to forest conservation was to secure their ability to exploit forests in the future, while the immediate and future livelihoods of the local people were disregarded (see also Schabel 1990).

When the British assumed political control of Tanganyika after the Germans, they were mandated by the League of Nations to respect the rights of the native population when taking over their land (Kostiainen 2012; Kihiyo 1998; Mgaya 2016). The agreement under the League of Nations provided a road map for community participation (Mgaya 2016; FAO 2003), marking a new era in forest management. This was a new era only on paper, however, as community participation was not put into practice in Tanzania and policy and legal frameworks failed to reflect the concept. Both the 1953 forest policy and the 1959 national parks ordinance were introduced in part to restrict access to the forest by indigenous people and prevent them from accessing valuable trees for commercial purposes (Voss 2001; see also Kallonga et al. 2003; Mgaya 2016).

Over 30 years later and well after independence, the United Republic of Tanzania (URT) reviewed its forest policies adopted from the British to respond to the social, economic, environmental, cultural and political changes which had taken place in the society and the nation at large. The review resulted in the "National Forest Policy 1998". This policy

for the first time provided room for local people to get involved in conservation initiatives (Kihiyo 1998) in accordance with statement number 39 of the policy: "Local communities will be encouraged to participate in forest activities". The statement further declared that forest land and tree tenure should be instituted for local communities, including both women and men (MCDI 2018b; Kistler 2009; Wily 1999). To ensure that the endeavor to increase community participation in forest management was achieved, legal backup followed four years later. The provision for community engagement in forest governance was now precise and legal, explicitly sectioned in the National Forest Act 2002 and its regulations of 2004. Forest types are classified in this act to specifically diversify management styles.

With regard to the Tanzania Forest Act 2002 and its regulations of 2004, Tanzania pursues different forms of forest management. Part II Section 4 of the Act distinguishes four different types of forest as follows: the first type is national forests, managed by the central government; the second is Local Authority Forest Reserves, reserved for the local government; the third is Village Forest Reserves and the fourth type, private forests. Furthermore, the Act provides an opportunity for communities to get involved in forest resource management under the system of "Participatory Forest Management" (PFM). The enactment of the Forest Act (2002) was followed by the passing of Forest Regulations (2004) which guided its operation.

The establishment of Village Land Forest Reserves (VLFR's) thus results from this platform. In this type of forest, the local people have been given full control of their forest resources at the grassroot level. Part five of the Forest Act, Article 22 subsection 1, authorizes the Director of Forestry to declare a national or local forest reserve on any area of land by publishing an announcement in the government Gazette. Similarly, Article 32 subsection 1 authorizes the Director to declare a VLFR or gazette a VLFR. This action, however, requires a decision on behalf of the village community to establish a VLFR. Hence, the VLFR begins in the village, where a village council in consultation with villagers through a village assembly may by resolution declare an area of village land to constitute a VLFR. They can do this by applying to the responsible minister/director through the local government authority. This is accompanied by the establishment of a committee to manage the village land forest resource and to allocate duties of managing a village land forest resource to an existing committee of the village council.

Forest decentralization is however surrounded by controversies arising from the legal frameworks that manage land and forest. One particular controversy, according to TNRF (2012), emerged because land which is termed village land, and vested to the village council, is also defined as general land (Land Act No 4. 1999). This places forests

managed by villages in a very uncertain situation as they can be declared general land if the minister deems it necessary. Veit (2010) similarly argues for the importance of secure land tenure for the sustainability of decentralized forests, something not provided by the current laws. 70% percent of the forested land in Tanzania also includes villages, some of which host VLFRs. Yet, these villages are not provided with secure land tenure, since it can at any time be declared general land. The Land Act vests all management of general land in the state. Lund, Ribot and Rutt (2018) have therefore questioned whether these decentralization policies really devolve forest management power to local people, or in fact take it away. Although the laws grant villages all the powers needed for managing their lands, and villages may on the surface seem to be the custodians of their lands, forest tenure is still vested in the central government. A similar observation in relation to the wildlife sector has been made by Kiwango, Komakech, Tarimo and Martz (2018), who point to the return of state control over the resources, while the promises of community-based management remain elusive (see also Diaw 2010). As resource governance initiatives claiming to be community-based and participatory have grown in number scholarly research around the world is increasingly being focused on acquiring a better understanding of participatory resource management, such as PFM.

2.1.1 Participatory forest management-PFM

According to Scheba and Muhtalahti (2015), community participation in forest management efforts and its popularity around the world began escalating in the beginning of the 1980s. As described above, the promotion of community participation serves a broader aim of decentralizing the management of natural resources. This has eventually led to what is globally known as Participatory Forest Management (PFM) (Schreckenberg et al. 2006) and almost 25% of global forests are now under one or another form of community tenure management in different parts of the world. PFM has been conceptualized in different ways by researchers and scholars, depending on the nature of the participation model, the institutional framework, as well as the socio-economic and political context. Thus it has been termed, for example, decentralized forest management (Treue 2008), community forest management, or devolution of forest tenure (Vyamana 2009; see also Blomley and Iddi 2009; Pazos-Almada and Bray 2018; Nielsen and Treue 2012). Although the definition of PFM varies, the key meaning is to put people at the center of all spheres of forest management. As Wily (2002: 31) argues, PFM goes beyond just involving the local community in the use of forest resources and providing legal grounds for it: "Local participation becomes a great deal more meaningful and effective when local

populations are involved not as cooperating forest users but as forest managers and even owner-managers in their own right."

In Tanzania PFM is categorized into different forms: Joint Forest Management (JFM) and Community Based Forest Management (CBFM). With JFM the state has agreed to collaborate with non-state actors in the management of state-managed forests, and it constitutes a joint management model between the state and the community that, in principle, puts the community at the very center of forest control, and therefore should translate into community control of the benefits. However, this management form has for a long time been controversial with regard to the sharing of the benefits and the final decision over resource management remaining with the state (URT 2008). CBFM is linked to VLFRs as described earlier and, the state has agreed to support the establishment and administration of community-managed forests. CBFM is solely, in theory, a community effort in which all the revenue is kept by the involved community (FAO 2018). CBFM is the most common form of PFM in Tanzania. It began early in 1990/91 with the Duru Hai Temba forest reserve, a 9000ha forest reserve which was converted into community ownership and management as a consequence of failed state control, which had caused significant degradation of the forest reserve (Blomley and Iddi 2009). Kilwa District, which is the NEPSUS research project focal area of research on participatory forest governance, consists of about 14 VLFRs with CBFM. These represent an estimated 43.6 % of the total land declared VLFRs in Tanzania.

A number of challenges have become evident due to the weaknesses of state actors in facilitating CBFM. These mainly owe to a lack of transparency and accountability and, most importantly, corruption (e.g. Brockington 2007; Lund and Treue 2008). Poor governance by state actors has a direct and indirect negative effect on the implementation of CBFM and the achievement of envisaged sustainability outcomes in forest communities (i.e. improved governance, livelihood and forest conditions). In this context, the engagement of non-state conservation advocates can arguably curb these problems through community partnerships in VLFRs. CBFM via VLFR has indeed attracted partners to join in the forest governance of village lands. In Kilwa, the Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI), a non-governmental organization based in Kilwa, has played a key role in the establishment of VLFRs by facilitating community participation in forest governance. As a means for improving revenue from forests, MCDI has furthermore brought in international partners through forest enterprises such as forest certification and carbon trade, as will be discussed further below. These partners directly and indirectly shape the village forest land governance. They aim to enhance forest revenue generation, improve forest structure, engage in livelihood support and more. However, although the initiatives claim to be community-based forest enterprises, and thus respect local institutions, all the actors involved are

coupled to their own institutional agendas. In general such partnerships therefore result in growing complexity in relation to forest management as a multiplicity of actors, including local communities, state entities, and non-state actors such as civil society actors (e.g. non-governmental organizations and community groups), businesses (e.g. timber-dealers), market regulators and donor agencies, amongst others, have to work together (Tekwe and Percy 2001). CBFM in Kilwa, while supposedly being primarily led by the community, thus entails a multiplicity of forest governance actors, led by both local and international institutions, in order to bring about forest sustainability via polycentric means.

3.0 Community-based forest enterprises and PFM in Tanzania

3.1 Forest certification and PFM- Emerging community-based forest enterprises

Community-based forest enterprises (CFEs) build on the logic of linking the private sector and market actors together in order to create opportunities for CBFM schemes to get market access and better prices for their products (Duguma et al. 2018). Forest certification[1] is one of the emerging CFEs (see Hajjar and Oldekop 2018; Humphries et al. 2012; Badini et al. 2018 and Romero et al. 2017). Some scholars have framed it as a livelihood alternative, and a strategy for a 'win-win' outcome of forest management (Humphries et al. 2018). Furthermore, when implemented within the CBFM framework, forest certification has been described as a locally controlled forestry business model, which can contribute to the prosperity of local people (see Macqueen et al. 2018). In this way CBFM becomes a social enterprise, as it aims to achieve development objectives of committed local communities through collective forest management (Duguma et al. 2018). Some analysts, however, question the financial viability, i.e. the 'economic sustainability' of CFEs (e.g. Humphries et al. 2018) as well as the 'ecological

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[1] "Forest certification is a system to give recognition to those forest managers who follow international standards and best practices of responsible management and fair treatment of local people. There are various systems around; all involve regular inspections and audits by accredited bodies to ensure the rules are properly adhered to. Products made from timber originating from certified forests can be labelled as such so consumers can make an informed choice to purchase products which has been ethically sourced. This requires that every processor of the certified product is itself certified to ensure that they are not cheating the system by mixing certified and non-certified timber; this is known as chain-of-custody certification. Certified timber products can both command a price premium and have access to markets closed to non-certified products" (MCDI 2013).

sustainability', especially with tendencies of timber CFEs harvesting more than they grow (e.g. Cubbage et al. 2015).

Critics have also shown that the potential of CFEs' timber production initiatives for poverty alleviation in the tropics significantly depends on the following: a) initial support from governments and other partners for start-up capital; b) subsidized access to training and technical assistance; c) skills for navigating complex bureaucratic systems; d) reliable access to markets etc. (Humphries et al. 2018). CFEs work in conjunction with local institutional arrangements in the domain of forest management and since CFEs are constructed under the CBFM framework, it is important to understand the co-existence of the two.

In Tanzania, a new strategy combining forest certification with CBFM was pioneered by MCDI. This was done in order to ensure the attainment of a sustainable forest structure, good forest governance and improved livelihoods. Kilwa District is the first to practice certification in Tanzania and in Kilwa District alone, 11 VLFRs are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Studies by Kalonga, Midtgaard and Eid (2015) and Mshale, Kalonga, and Kulindwa (2014) in Kilwa District on the effectiveness of forest certification have indicated a positive association between the de jure village forest governance and forest structure, good governance and improved livelihoods. Similarly, Meshack, Ahdikari and Lovett (2006) report that there are net benefits of PFM for all income classes and communities in the Ambangulu mountain forest, together with a perceived improvement of the forest as a result of CBFM and certification. The fact that forest certification operates under existing local forest policies and institutions is key, but more interesting are the criteria/principles which qualify a forest for certification. One of the criteria for forest certification is evidence of good governance and equal distribution of benefits (Mshale, Kalonga, and Kulindwa 2014; Massao 2015). Correspondingly, forest certification becomes an indicator of successful CBFM, however, not all CBFM initiatives in Kilwa District are certified by the FSC. The certificates are offered once an FSC-accredited certification body has assessed that forest management complies with the FSC Principles and Criteria (FSC 2018).[2] In Kilwa District, 11 VLFRs have been certified and up to 2017 about 185,622 ha of forest land featured in 14 villages has been certified (MCDI 2018a). The procedures to acquire FSC certification for a VLFR manifest the significant link between forest certification and community forest management (see MCDI 2015b).

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[2] See principles for forest certification: https://ic.fsc.org/en/what-is-fsc-certification/principles-criteria/fscs-10-principles

Many have challenged the much-praised sustainability outcomes of CBFM in general, and CFEs in particular (Sungusia and Lund 2016; Gross-Camp 2017). Barrow et al. (2016) are concerned with the capacity of local communities to advance their interests in relation to international markets. Gullison (2003) has discussed the low incentives and costs associated with the process of obtaining certification, explaining that the costs are higher than the revenue. Furthermore, there is a concern that communities could prefer to keep the land as general land so that they can use it for agriculture and timber as the population increases. Nevertheless, a new form of commodified forest governance has emerged through the UN moderated carbon trading mechanism Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation[3] (REDD+). While REDD+ operates within PFM institutional frameworks, it remains unclear how it is related to PFM in specific contexts.

3.2 Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and PFM

The possibility to establish PFM as provided in the Forest Policy 1998 and Forest Act of 2002 has enabled international actors to enter the domain of landscape forest management in Tanzania, for example through REDD+ initiatives. As explained by the International Institute for Environment and Development, "REDD involves some kind of incentive for changing the way forest resources are used. As such, it offers a new way of curbing CO2 emissions through paying for actions that prevent forest loss or degradation. These transfer mechanisms can include carbon trading or paying for forest management" (iied 2018). According to Scheba (2015), REDD+ has facilitated new engagement in neoliberal forest conservation, whereas other scholars argue that it represents more of a commercialization of forest conservation (Makatta, Maganga and Majule 2015). REDD+ initiatives, furthermore, have a stronger focus on improving the condition of forests by supporting their management than they have on improving the livelihoods of the adjacent communities (ibid). PFM is considered the right platform for implementing REDD+ project goals, with the community representing the right and legitimate owner of the carbon offset revenue. A study by Khatun, Gross-Camp, Corbera, Martin, Ball and Massao (2015) in Kilwa suggests that a strong PFM may offer a promising platform for REDD+, since it is the only viable option for trading carbon with the community. However, in other VLFRs, as noted by Makatta, Maganga, and Majule (2015), REDD+ has brought back state control over forests and limited rural

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[3] When adding the +, the acronym stands for: reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries; and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries.

livelihoods by restricting communities' use of forest resources. The model of PFM and REDD+ integration is however different in Kilwa. Advocated by MCDI, REDD+ in Kilwa is combined with commercial timber harvest (MCDI 2015a). Even when the REDD+ initiatives seem to have been successful, however, their sustainability is in doubt because the benefits are not clearly defined (see Lund, Sungusia, Mabele and Scheba 2017). In Eastern Asia, despite well preached efforts to integrate REDD+ strategies with community forests, there have been claims related to the lack of respect of indigenous rights, further hampering the acceptance of REDD+ initiatives (Kendra 2010). Both central and local government institutions have failed to ensure equitable benefit sharing as well as the cross-sectional coordination necessary to tackle the problem of forest degradation through such an initiative. The establishment of REDD+ in Tanzania lacked clear justification as it seemed to just replicate already existing models of PFM. However, the existence of REDD+ has facilitated the establishment of more CBFM in Kilwa District that still operate on PFM basis.

REDD+ initiatives have been widely discussed on a global scale. Some scholars see potential in it, while other see challenges, e.g. in terms of gender inequality as there has been significant marginalization of women in forest decision making. Their roles in forest management seem minimal and insignificant (Larson et al. 2018). In some countries REDD+ initiatives have increased land tenure security, while they have decreased it in others. A study by Sunderlin et al. (2018) has shown that there has been enhanced land tenure security in Cameroon and Indonesia, whereas it is declining in Brazil. Unlike in other parts of the world, in Tanzania these initiatives are preceded by an institutional setup which ensures land tenure, such as the Land Act No 4 from 1999. Where there are communication barriers and significant socio-economic gaps between households, REDD+ has compromised social safeguards and further impoverished the majority of the poor (see Poudyal et al. 2016; Chombaa, Kariuki, Lund and Sinclair 2016). Moreover, Dawsona et al. (2018) added another aspect when discovering that the initiatives tend to be external and donor-driven and pay little or no attention to indigenous welfare. This suggests that they may face great resistance in the near future (see also Lund, Sungusia, Mabele and Scheba 2017). A country's institutional setup is important for the success of REDD+, as well as for securing the livelihoods of local communities (e.g. land tenure systems and access to forest resources), improving forest governance and bettering the condition of forest structure (Ojhaa, Maraseni, Nightingale, Bhattaraid and Khatri 2019).

REDD+ and forest certification are new types of partnerships that commercialize forests and their products. REDD+ has introduced both donors (the international community), businesses, governments and local non-governmental organizations to the domain of forest conservation, while forest certification has brought international and national

timber traders to work together with village communities in the forests. Pioneered by MCDI, forest certification through the Forest Steward Council (FSC) operates in conjunction with CBFM principles to ensure forest sustainability. There are still debates concerning whether these emerging partnerships have manifested signs of forest sustainability and livelihood support. Kalonga, Midtgaard and Eid (2015) as well as Mshale, Kalonga and Kulindwa (2014) have traced a positive outcome of forest certification and sustainability, however, they failed to substantiate the same outcome for local livelihoods. In sum, both REDD+ and FSC face critique as initiatives which have so far failed to manifest sustainable results (Lund, Sungusia, Mabele and Scheba 2017; Myers et al. 2018).

4.0   Concluding Discussion

It is evident that forest conservation has been subject to different institutional and structural changes, depending on the perception of forests during particular periods of time. From colonial to post-colonial times, timber extraction remained the main commercial activity in forests. Large-scale forest degradation across the world and growing concerns with climate change, however, have led to new approaches to the commercialization of forest activities through initiatives such as the FSC, with its certification of responsible management as a way to add value to wood, and REDD+, which commercializes carbon stored in trees. As a result, a myriad of new international actors are involved in forest management.

At the same time, there has been a growing focus on increasing local community participation in forest management. Mazura and Stakhanov (2008) have argued that community participation has significantly contributed to the improvement of forest structure as well as to income diversification of local communities. This is also supported by Kalonga, Midtgaard and Eid (2015), the MCDI (2015b) as well as Pailler, Naidoo, Burgess, Freeman and Fisher (2015). Other scholars are however still debating whether or not community participation through CBFM has achieved the intended goals. Some scholarly debate argues that CBFM has been beneficial to village leaders only (see Gross-Camp 2017). Depending upon the core argument on which different scholars have focused, the benefits of CBFM as opposed to non-CBFM vary from one researcher to another. Some studies focus on whether PFM has more benefits compared to state forest governance regimes. Kajembe, Nduwamungu and Luoga (2005) as well as Kalonga, Midtgaard and Eid (2015) thus establish that there has been an improvement of forest conditions in CBFM villages, yet little is still known about the livelihoods of the villagers. Other studies, however, suggest that only wealthy households are benefiting from CBFM initiatives. A study by Sungusia and Lund (2016)

has questioned whether CBFM and its related institutional arrangements give the community any prospect of livelihood improvement in relation to the time it takes to establish and the costs involved (see also Scheba and Mustalahti 2015).

According to Blomley and Iddi (2009), CBFM has opened doors for many and various actors to engage in forest management. Gross-Camp (2017) argues that there is no significant difference between CBFM and non-CBFM forests with regard to forest condition and livelihoods. The literature has mostly examined physical issues concerning the degree to which decentralization has improved forest ecological structures, and whether this may mitigate climate change related impacts. Social issues concerning the legality of actors' presence and engagement in forest sustainability have not, however, been adequately addressed in the literature. Therefore, thorough research on the various forest actors, their configuration and impact on forest sustainability is imperative. The NEPSUS research project will address this need by contributing to the understanding of forestry decentralization policies and the evidence concerning the sustainability outcomes of such policies. It will do so on the basis of grounded case-based empirical studies that investigate the complexities and dynamics surrounding forestry decentralization policies. These studies will therefore have the potential to offer more in-depth, multi-perspectival documentation on how the policies perform in relation to sustainability outcomes (Lund et al. 2018). Among the complex issues examined are the under studied influences of: (i) distance between place of residence and reserved forests under decentralization; (ii) the abundance of forest resources between place of residence and reserved forests under decentralization; (iii) the existence of multiple partners dealing with and connected to holistic village community development; (iv) the impact of non-forest partners on social and ecological outcomes. These may in one way or another influence forest sustainability and people's livelihoods, and will be examined through a mixed methods approach – combining qualitative, quantitative and spatial methodologies – in order to enable an empirical comparison of the effects of these influences on environmental outcomes in different partnership constellations (Ponte et al. 2017).

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