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Actors, Powers and Environmental Accountability in Uganda's Decentralisation

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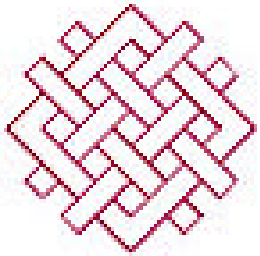

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Introduction

For over a decade, many environmentalists have increasingly come to believe that the recent decentralization reforms that have swept Third World countries are important elements in enhancing participation in environmental management and in achieving better social and environmental outcomes. Some contend that prospects for realising these outcomes are greater in those decentralization reforms where power over nature is devolved to locally accountable local authorities. If these assumptions are correct, then there is no better place to put them to empirical test other than in the case of Uganda's decentralization reform for two reasons.

First, a cursory examination of the Ugandan legal framework within which the decentralization reform is being implemented clearly shows that a lot of decision-making powers have been devolved to elected local governments [Republic of Uganda 1995; Republic of Uganda 1997]. This would seem to suggest that local governments have space within which they can make autonomous decisions regarding the environment; they have discretionary powers to make binding decisions without reference to the central government. Theoretically, the involvement of elected representatives can become a basis of constructing the "idea of a public good," which is critical for developing institutions for sustainable use of natural resources and conferring benefits to all, including poverty reduction. To put it differently, people can make meaningful decisions regarding the environment only when they are citizens. To become citizens is an experience that entails true participation, the possession of power to make binding decisions.

Secondly, Uganda is now internationally cited as one of the countries that has not only designed a participatory-oriented decentralization reform, but also shown strong commitment in implementing it, including innovating new ways of dealing with obstacles and protecting them in the law. This can clearly be seen from the fact that a non-comprehensive 1993 Local Government Act was quickly followed by other laws, including the 1995 constitution, purposely to clarify, streamline the existing laws and also to take into account unforeseen issues.

In order to grasp the outcomes of the decentralization reform in Uganda we propose to examine:

a) The actors who have received environmental powers (section 1),

b) The central-local government relations (section 2),

c) The local government relation with local population (section 3), and

d) The social and environmental outcomes (section 4).

It should be noted at this point that the Ugandan decentralization reform has been implemented in phases. Initially, only 13 districts implemented the decentralization reform on a pilot basis in 1993/1994 [Frank Muhereza, August 2001]. 14 districts followed thereafter in 1994/1995 and 12 districts in 1995/1996. In 1997, 9 new districts were created and immediately embraced the decentralization reform. As can be seen districts did not initiate the reform at the same time and implementation is bound to be uneven for technical and financial reasons and due to setbacks in northern parts of Uganda arising from civil wars. Therefore, the conclusions here are tentative as more nuanced research is needed before solid conclusions can be made.

1.0 Actors in Environmental Management

The Ugandan research on environmental accountability focused on the following resources:

a) Protected area resources, namely natural forest reserves and wild game parks/sanctuaries on government land; and

b) Forests (and woodlands) and wildlife on what is termed public or customary tenure, legally government land.

Before the decentralization reform, decision-making powers over forestry and wildlife resources were in the hands of the relevant ministries and departments. The conservation policy of these ministries entailed exclusion of all other groups with interests in those resources from participating in the decision-making process or accessing the resources [Uganda Wildlife Authority 2000 (a and b)]. In order to monopolize control over resources the forestry and wildlife departments projected the idea that all other groups such as timber merchants or peasant cultivators living around the resources had only one interest: that of cutting down the forests or hunting down all the animals.[1] From this perspective, these groups had to be excluded in the decision-

[1] This is a view that was advanced some forestry officials we interviewed.

making processes and prevented from accessing the resources. It is not surprising then to find that the relevant ministries undertook management decisions regarding protected resources. Usually this involved drawing up management plans of five to ten years but without consulting other interest groups.

Nevertheless, here and there a forestry officer, for example, could decide to allow some individuals to collect non-commercial or subsistence resources such as herbs or mushrooms from a forest reserve. Indeed, in the history of forest management people were also allowed to settle in forest reserves for a temporary period and under specific conditions (Uganda Protectorate 1957?). However, the access of these individuals to protected resources did not amount to a right that the individuals could enforce; it was a privilege that could be withdrawn anytime by the forestry officer.

Decisions regarding resources based on private lands or customary-tenure lands was in the hands of communities[2] or private owners. However, there were secondary laws related to prevention of erosion that defined the decision-making powers of private landowners and customary authorities such as clans. Big trees on these lands could be cut with the permission of the forestry officer or animals could be killed with the permission of the wildlife department. In short, harvesting of resources on these lands for commercial purposes required the permission of the forestry officer, in the case of trees, and the game department in the case of animals.

As can be seen the key actors regarding the management of the natural resources were the ministers and the associated departments. In the particular case of protected resources all other groups with interests in the natural resources had no decision-making powers: peasants (interested in herbs, mushrooms, animals, cultural trees, firewood, etc.), timber merchants (interested in wood trees). Participation in the decision-making processes was narrowly confined to a few individuals and so were the benefits. It is not surprising that when the government was unable to enforce the rules, illegal encroachments, illegal pit sawing and poaching took place without due regard to the future supplies.

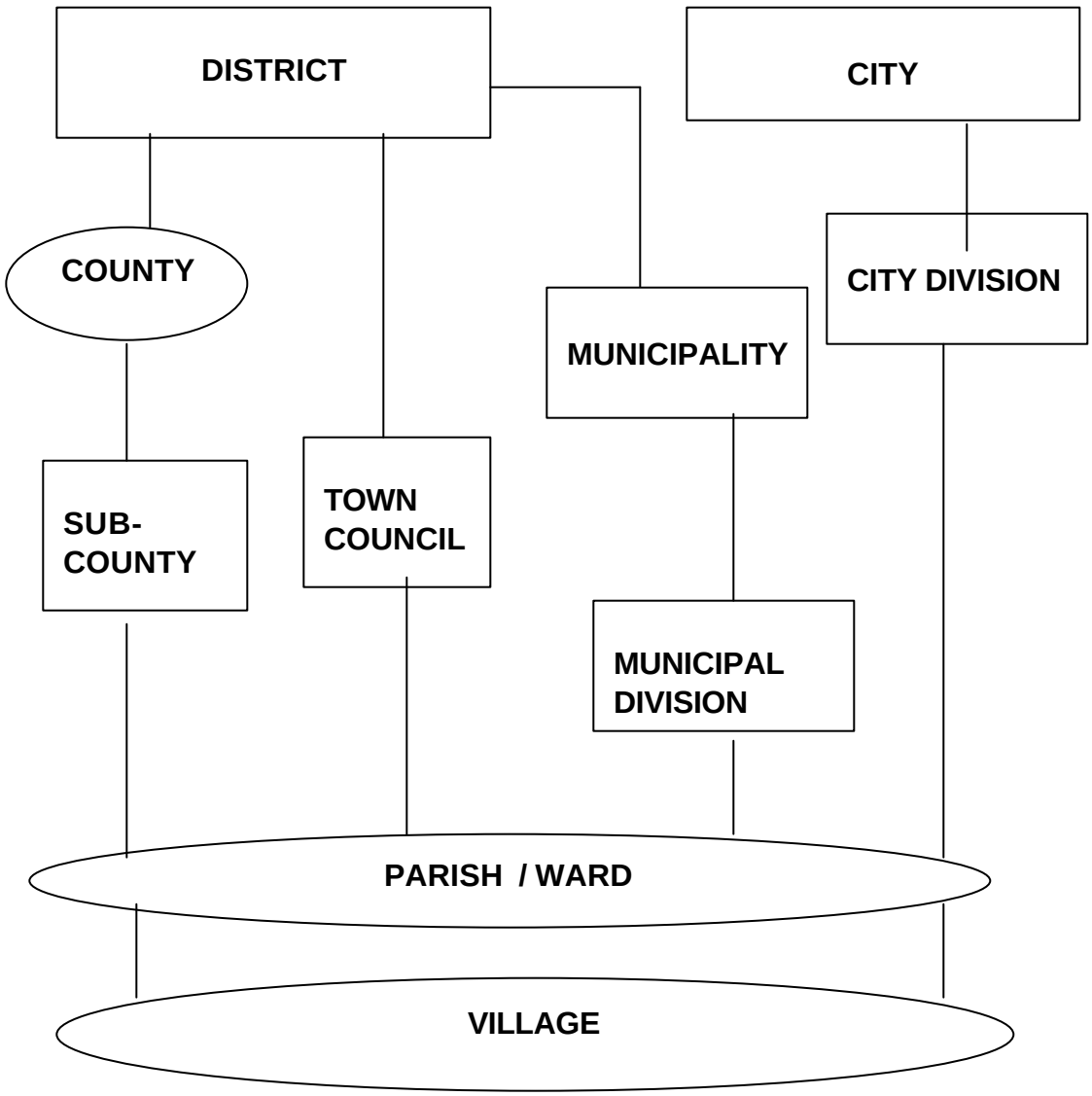
2.0 Central and Local Governments Relations

Under the decentralization reform, a range of powers has been devolved to local authorities. For purposes of clearly discerning the kinds of environmental powers devolved, we briefly describe the character of Uganda's decentralization. The Local government system is based on institutions called Local Councils. Local Councils is generic term that replaced Resistance Councils, which were institutions developed during the guerilla struggle in the 1981-86 period. In rural areas the local government structure has five levels of local councils, the lowest being the village council and the highest being the district council. In between, there are Parish, Sub-county and County councils. In urban areas, the city council is equated to a district council and the city division is equated to a sub-county council. In municipalities, local governments are the municipal councils and municipal divisions councils. In towns, local governments are town councils.

It is important to note that not all levels of the councils are deemed local governments. Local Governments are those institutions with legislative and executive functions. In rural areas these are the sub-county and the district councils. In urban areas these are the city councils and the city division councils; in the municipality these are municipal and municipal division councils and in towns these are town councils. Other levels – county, parish and village councils in rural areas and parish and ward councils in urban areas – are simply administrative. The structure of local government looks like this:

[2] The concept community is used here to donate society that is differentiated. This usage is different from that used in some branches of anthropology where community is projected as undifferentiated people with bonds of solidarity. See also Jesse C. Ribot 1999.

THE STRUCTURE OF LOCAL COUNCILS



KEY

Local Governments

Admin. Units

Local Councils at present are constituted through elections based on universal adult suffrage. Unlike in the 1960s and in other countries such as Senegal, where elections are organized around political parties, in Uganda, individuals stand on their own "merit". [3]

Despite the elaborate provisions for local participation in the decentralization statute, few decision-making powers regarding natural resource management have been devolved to local government. With regard to protected area resources (forests and wildlife) the central government retains legislative and management powers. In 1993, the year during which the first local government act was passed by parliament, the government transferred authority over protected resources to local governments. However, in 1995, government suddenly retracted those powers back to the line ministry (see explicit statement in Forestry Policy 2001). It is not clear why the government decided to re-centralise the powers. However, according to some forestry officials, the transfer of authority was done without prior preparations to ensure that local governments were psychologically, technically and financially prepared to manage them on a sustainable basis. They argue that within two years many local governments went ahead "to chop them [trees] down without a plan." However, this argument is not convincing given the fact that many officials in the forest department were involved in rackets of cutting down trees for private accumulation [IGG 1999]. That corruption was, of course, equally detrimental to the sustainability of the forest resources. Anyhow, we now examine which powers have been devolved and which ones the centre has retained.

Powers over Protected Area Resources

When the central government re-centralised the forest resources, it still was confronted with the old problem of conflicts arising because of groups that wanted to access the

[3] In the early years, the election was through lining behind preferred candidates. However, the system of lining up was found to be dangerous to voters and was abandoned in favor of secret ballot system. Furthermore, the earlier arrangement became less democratic in the higher levels of the local councils. In the old arrangement all adults 18 years and above were automatic members of the village council. These elected 9 people who became the executive committee of the local council. All the executive members of all villages formed a parish council. This council in turn elected an executive committee of 9 people. All executive members of all parishes in the sub-county formed the sub-county council. The sub-county council elected 9 people as executive committee. All executive members of the sub-county constituted the District Council. The District Council elected 9 persons who became the executive committee.

protected resources and were using illegal means to make their point. Both the forestry and wildlife departments resorted to ideas that had been afloat in international conservation circles, namely community collaborative management. A number of pilot collaborative management projects were established, for example, around Bwindi Impenetrable forest, Mt Elgon Forest Park, Budongo Forest reserve and Mabira Forest Reserve. These collaborative management schemes were justified in the name of improving participation of the local people in the management of the resources, redressing past injustices and alleviating poverty of the poor communities (Forestry Policy 2001, UWA 2000).

Under the collaborative management schemes the forest department is supposed to discuss with communities the kinds of resources that can be harvested, in what quantities and during what periods. Resource-user institutions are setup in which these communities are supposed to be represented. Government departments believe that these projects or schemes promote participation and reduce conflicts since theoretically they are bound by the collective decisions. This arrangement has been termed by some people as being a hybrid form of decentralization.

What powers do these institutions have and what are the consequences of their decisions to environment and social structure (poverty)? Our research on collaborative management arrangements around Bwindi, Mt. Elgon and Mabira forest/park/reserves reveal that the resource user committees have no decision-making powers. It is the line ministry, for example the forest department, which designs the collaborative project and invites the communities to participate in it. Representatives of the communities cannot veto or change decisions already made by the forest department. Communities may be consulted but the central government has no obligation to take into account their feelings or views. In the collaborative management experience of Uganda a series of meeting may be held to reach an agreement on what resources may be harvested, by whom and when. Such meetings are usually dominated by the central government which eventually has a say on types and amounts of resources that can be harvested. Moreover, decisions regarding lucrative timber trees remain an exclusive preserve of the forestry department.

Such commercial resources can be accessed after payment of a certain amount of fees which are beyond the means of local communities around the forests.

It should be mentioned that these institutions are still being developed on a pilot basis. It is not clear in which direction they may develop. However, it is clear for now that it is the government (forestry department or Uganda Wildlife Authority) and not the communities that initiate these institutions. These institutions are not a product of the self-organisation of the communities. These, therefore, appear more as a mechanism of the central government to legitimate its conservation policies, to ensure that its actions are beyond reproach.

Resources user institutions only represent a fraction of the groups with interests in the natural resources. Only those groups that get direct benefits from collaboration in terms of accessing certain types of resources are interested in participating in these schemes. Those groups that feel that their interests are not handled by these institutions do not respect them and are bound to engage acts of sabotage such as burning the forests, illegally harvesting forest resources, etc. Because they do not represent all interests resource-user institutions do not, therefore, meet the objectives for which they were set up, namely, reducing conflict, redressing injustices, and reducing poverty.

Moreover the relationship between the communities and the government (forestry department and the Uganda Wildlife Authority) in the memorandum of understanding is clearly against the communities. First, as mentioned before the initiative is always from the forest department that can organize a series of meetings to consult the communities and to agree on what resources can be harvested and during what periods. The findings of our research reveal that meetings are simply to legitimate what the forest department has already decided.

Second, since forests constitute a major source of livelihood for different social categories (women, youths, etc.), through the gathering of mushrooms, firewood, etc., the forest department in many instances enforces access through quotas that are clearly inadequate for the communities to survive. For example women around Mabira and Mt. Elgon reserves indicated that the amount of firewood they were allowed to collect from the forests were inadequate. In that case women were compelled to collect extra

firewood, however, illegally. In addition, the youths whose interests are never represented in the resource user institutions also harvest forest resources illegally.

Third, the imbalanced relationship between the communities is clearly revealed in the arbitration procedures. When wild animals from the game park damage peasants' crops or kill a peasant, the matter is supposed to be settled "amicably" between the Park authorities and the affected party. In reality, of course, it is the park authorities that decide on the kinds of compensation and the amount. When a peasant in found harvesting resources illegally, this is deemed a criminal case to be handled by the police and may involve imprisonment. Thus the mechanism of arbitration does not promise justice and, therefore, peasants are not bound to trust them. Yet trust is a very important element in realizing meaningful participation and the construction of the "idea of a public good."

The main point that needs to be underlined here is that resource user groups developed around protected resources are a form of de-concentration. Decision-making powers remain with the central government. Resource user institutions are simply advisory and can be closed down as and of when the line ministries deem fit.

A related example of an imbalanced relationship is related to revenue sharing schemes, which the central government assumes important in getting the communities to respect the protected resources. For example, in the forestry sector, government collects revenue from the permits it issues out to pit-sawyers and is supposed to remit forty percent of the funds collected to local governments. It appears that the revenue-sharing scheme was imposed by the central government. Given that many local governments are unable to raise enough fiscal resources to run their activities, the complaints are galore. Finally given the corruption endemic in the forest department and given that they never come to know how much money is collected, local governments are dissatisfied with the revenue scheme.

Non-Protected Resources

Local governments have some limited legislative and executive powers regarding the environment. Local Governments are allowed to manage local forest reserves of less than 100 ha. However, in the present circumstances they do not have resources to hire

forestry officials. They have to rely on those employed by the central government whose approach to the management of resources remain "commandist and top-down". In any case the bulk of these local forest reserves are mainly for water catchment areas or meant to prevent soil erosion. For practical purposes they are closed off from local populations.

Local governments can play a legislative role; the passing of bye-laws on any aspect of the environment ranging from preventing soil-erosion, burning of grass to planting of trees, provided those bye-laws do not contradict national laws. Besides, the environmental officers, the District Environment Committee and the Sub-county Environmental Committees are supposed to advise local governments on any environmental impact of their development programmes. It is not clear for now whether the Local governments remain autonomous in deciding whether to accept to refuse the advice.

Local communities access resources of insignificant nature from public land without seeking permission of local authorities or the central government. However, once the harvesting of any resource is deemed commercial, for example, producing charcoal for sale in urban areas or felling trees for commercial timber, permits have to be procured. The power to issue permits is with the forestry department and not the local government. Thus the forestry department combines both the technical and political power over forestry resources. We shall shortly demonstrate that this arrangement leads to corruption in the forestry department, social inequalities and could be leading to negative environmental consequences.

In terms of wildlife management, the role assigned to local government is one of vermin control and dealing with "problem animals". Still here local governments do not have decision-making powers let alone enough resources. If a it is discovered that a problem animal exist in a certain locality, the local government can only report to the game department which decides whether or not the animal is indeed a problem animal. The game department then decides what should happen and which mechanism can be used. This decision has to appear in the government gazette!

Local Government –Local Populations Relations

One important aspect of the decentralization reform in Uganda is the election element at regular intervals and the provision that non-performing elected representatives can be recalled. This is a radical departure from the post-1966 changes in which the central government simply appointed councilors who in turn were upwardly accountable. It is no longer possible for an elected representative to ignore the interests of the electorate.

In the past, chiefs and employees of the central government were responsible for environmental matters at the local level. These were not accountable to the local populations and did not mediate the different interests. Chiefs combined legislative, executive and judicial powers. As such they often misused those powers without check by the local populations. In the current circumstances, legislative and executive powers have been transferred to elected local authorities provided the byelaws made do not contradict national laws. The national environmental policies and laws require the local governments to ensure that environmental issues are catered for in all projects implemented in the locality. In fact they are supposed to draw out environmental action plans. The reality is that local populations are more interested in poverty alleviation than environment. Environmental action plans read more as poverty alleviation projects rather than plans to protect the environment for future generations. It is worse in instances where donors organize the communities to draw out these environmental action plans. Communities perceive the exercise as likely to lead to funding by the donors and tailor the plan in that direction.

Councilors also perpetuate this syndrome because they would like to prove to the electorate that they garner foreign resources. Many would like to enhance their popularity with the local population. In instances where the struggle for resources is intense they can side with the electorate. Many forest resources were encroached on because the local politicians were using these as a vote catching element. In addition, many local councilors lack the skills and knowledge of wider environmental concerns. In many instances, the technocrats trained in the old “commandist” perspectives drive the environmental planning processes. In a way then, although they are downwardly

accountable, local populations ability to hold councilors accountable is still circumscribed. This is where civil society organizations may become helpful to provide support to councilors in terms of education and other forms of skills for environment planning.

Social and Environmental Outcomes

Protected Areas

In social terms the collaborative management schemes have an inherent weakness of not being all-inclusive. For this reason not all interests benefit from the forest resources. When all is said and done the biggest beneficiaries of the protected resources are the economically and politically powerful. Given that the collaborative management institutions do not have powers to exclude, which powers have remained with the relevant central governments, the permission to harvest lucrative resources such as timber go to the wealthy and politically well-connected. Local rural populaces end up with resources, which in comparative terms are insignificant, and for poverty alleviation. In social class terms, the collaborative management schemes tend to favour some, those who are able to access the protected area resources. In terms of generational and gender terms, the youth and women tend to be marginalized.

Non-protected Resources

As for resources on public land, the current arrangements lead to social differentiation. One important element around which this differentiation is taking place is permits given out by the forest department and the level of land tenure security. The permit is procured by those who are relatively well off. These can use it in two ways. First, they approach charcoal producers and give them advance payment to produce the charcoal. When the charcoal producer has produced the necessary amounts he/she is paid full amount. The important point to note here is that the permit holder pays the charcoal producer at low prices. The other way the permit holder can use the permit is to hire it out to anyone who wants to trade in charcoal. The permit does not specify the number of trees that should be felled and in which part of the district. So it is possible for different

traders to use the same permit at the same time. The permit holder in this regard earns *permit rents*, the traders earn exorbitant profits and the loser is still the rural charcoal producer.

Environmental outcomes

In environmental terms, collaborative management schemes appear not to lead to sustainable environmental outcomes. These schemes lead to conflict and some social categories adopt a private rather than public goods approach to the resources. The perception of those who have directly benefited from the protected resources has changed; the expressed the need to manage resources in a sustainable manner. However there are those who have not benefited and have not changed their practices such as illegal entry into the forests reserves. It has been presumed that these schemes can have positive impact on the environment if they are all inclusive and armed with decision-making powers that gradually transform individuals in the communities into citizens who are conscious that protected resources are a public good. However, conditions necessary for this to happen have not been put in place. We assume better environmental outcomes can only result when individuals go through the participatory process for some time, a process that changes their outlook so that they are tolerant to other viewpoints and they begin to trust the institutional framework as truly being capable of taking into account their interests. The institutional framework must be able to coordinate interests of all groups in ways that all parties get some benefits, however, unequal. For example, when the institution is armed with decision-making powers, powers to decide who accesses the forests, it can tax those who cut timber, for instance, and invest the taxes in projects that benefit the rest of the groups. If negotiated with all groups, those who do not cut timber will respect the forest resources.

Conclusion

We set out to test the assumptions that when decision –making powers over the environment are devolved locally elected representatives, this increases participation and leads to better environmental outcomes. We have seen that decision-making powers over

protected area resources, such as wildlife and forests, remain squarely in the hands of the line ministries. While collaborative management schemes have been established purportedly to improve participation, lessen conflict and reduce poverty, the evidence so far reveal that these institutions lack decision-making powers and do not represent all groups with interest in the resources. In protected area resources decentralization amounts to de-concentration of powers, which powers the centre can shift anytime. On the local scenes the forestry officers have the management powers. These officials are accountable to the line ministries and not to the local population. Under these conditions it is not possible to test whether greater participation leads to better social and environmental outcomes.

On public land local populations have some say on the management of natural recourses, but subject to overriding powers of the forestry or wildlife departments Harvesting of natural resources for commercial purposes require express permission of the forestry or wildlife departments. These departments combine both technical and political powers. These powers do not have to be fused do not have to be wielded by the forestry or wildlife department. Permits can be allocated by the local government while the technical roles can be retained by the forestry department. Given that the forestry and game departments are upwardly accountable, they do not make decisions that take into account interests of the varied groups.

From the available evidence, the current resource management arrangement is not bound to lead to sustainable environmental or better social outcomes. Participation schemes as they have appeared in the history of natural resources management seem to be more about legitimizing decisions made by the central government than being about fostering behavior and consciousness about natural resources as a "public good."

Table summarising the powers and accountability relations

	Local Actors Empowered	Powers Transferred	Primary Accountability Relations
	Central Agencies	Protected areas: Legislative and management powers. Permit-allocation powers for all commercial harvesting.	Upward to president
	Local Governments	40% of pit sawing permit revenue. Problem animal control	Elections at regular intervals with independent candidates (there are no parties in Uganda) Provision that elected representatives can be recalled.
	Resource-user institutions (for conservation area "co-management")	Use rights limited by quotas that are insufficient. Advisory only.	Composed of interested parties. Accountable to the conservation service involved.

Recommendations

a) There is need to devolve powers to elected individuals representing different interests. This institution of elected individuals should be able to negotiate tradeoffs and coordinate benefits from natural resources.

b) The forest and wildlife departments should wield only technical powers. Political power to decide who should and who should access resources that are allowed by the technical departments should be transferred to the local government.

c) The local government should, then take over the collection of revenue from fees and take the bulk of it. There is need, however, for more transparency in, and accountability for fees collected in exchange for permits.

d) Civil society organizations should undertake programmes that strengthen local governments to understand the technical jargons in order for technical officials to be transformed into servants of local governments.

e) Some of the innovations by local governments attempt so far, for example, the Mukono idea of five trees planted in replacement for one tree cut, should be explored and given the necessary legal backing.

f) Local Governments should issue permits for harvesting resources but the permit should specify the amount to be harvested.

More research is needed to concretely understand who the real actors are and their counter powers, and the social and environmental outcomes.

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