

# Empowerment and Institutions: Managing Fisheries in Uganda

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**Summary.** — The perception of communities as homogeneous and concern over representation and accountability of structures are key critiques of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). A focus on understanding institutions that mediate access to, and control over, natural resources is seen as a way forward to improving management regimes that include local people. Experience in the implementation of integrated lake management in Uganda is drawn on to understand how institutions can be challenged to improve access to fisheries for marginalized stakeholders. Processes such as empowerment and the formation of accountable and representative structures are part of the way forward.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Managing natural resources remains a challenge in developing countries, where information is scarce, demands are often high and the resources available to improve management are limited. The shift away from centralized management has been broadly welcomed, and community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) approaches have been embraced in many countries for different types of natural resources and situations. Multiple conditions for successful management of common property resources by local users, or communities, have been identified and discussed in the literature (Agrawal, 2001; Fabricius, 2004; Oström, 1990).

While the participation of local people in natural resource management has been welcomed, CBNRM has been criticized and accused of being ineffective, both in terms of improving management and improving livelihoods (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Allison & Ellis, 2001; Blaikie, 2003; Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1999). Critiques of CBNRM challenge assumptions about communities, incentives, interests and structures. There is an emerging consensus that natural resource management efforts that involve local people should focus on facilitating negotiations and empowering the marginalized

through existing and new institutions, rather than focusing on the communities themselves (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Leach *et al.*, 1999).

This article reviews critiques of CBNRM and identifies how an institutional approach to developing and analyzing locally based natural resource management should make interventions more appropriate and effective. The analysis draws on the *environmental entitlements* approach (Leach *et al.*, 1999) to identify the types of institutional arrangements that influ-

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ence access to, and management of, lake fisheries in Uganda, both before, and as a result of, the introduction of a new approach to lake management. Fisheries co-management has been introduced in Uganda within the context of a more integrated approach to lake management, bringing together multiple sectors (such as environment, forestry, health, and community development) to co-ordinate planning and management, and improve livelihoods (ILM, 2004a, 2004b). The experience of fisheries co-management and integrated lake management (ILM) in Uganda builds on the critiques of CBNRM, by demonstrating how local people can be empowered, while recognizing diversity in terms of power, influence and assets, and enabled, to challenge institutional arrangements that impede equitable access to the benefits of fisheries resources.

The analysis confirms suggestions in the environmental entitlements literature that indirect approaches that enable people to use, and where necessary, challenge and change institutional arrangements may be more appropriate than directly trying to change institutions (Leach *et al.*, 1999). This is due to the complexity, multiplicity and diversity of institutional arrangements between and within households and communities. Such indirect approaches include empowerment, creating networks of structures for lake management, ensuring accountability, devolving rule-making powers, establishing poverty-focused access rights, managing conflict and integrating natural resource management with wider socio-economic development initiatives. The analysis of these processes confirms observations made in the literature regarding how people can claim their rights through appropriate institutions, and contributes to the further development of an institutional approach to supporting and analyzing the involvement of local people in natural resource management.

## 2. THE "FAILURES" OF CBNRM

Involving local people in the management of natural resources they use and often rely on for their livelihoods was strongly encouraged through the rhetoric of the 1980s and early 1990s, of sustainable development driven by locally derived solutions (Blaikie, 2003; Fabricius, 2004; Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1997; Ribot, 2003). CBNRM is one approach that has been adopted in many developing countries

in recognition of the failure of state and market centered approaches to natural resource management (Li, 2002). It has been a belief that the people closest to the natural resource are best placed to know how to manage the resource and have the incentives to manage in a sustainable way (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Fabricius, 2004).

CBNRM is a concept interpreted in different ways in different situations and contexts. Turner (2004, p. 5) states that "to all intents and purposes, CBNRM is management of the commons," and cites the range of sectors, from wildlife to watershed management, in which CBNRM approaches have been implemented. Experiences of CBNRM differ in terms of the roles and responsibilities of communities and other stakeholders, with co-management seen as distinct within CBNRM in terms of the level and extent of partnership between government and local people. Berkes, Mahon, McConney, Pollnac, and Pomeroy (2001) cite the differences between community-based resource management (CBRM) and co-management as being centered on the level and timing of government participation, with co-management including a more significant and active role for government than CBRM. Even within co-management, a spectrum of community participation and devolved power has been suggested (Sen & Nielsen, 1996).

In reviewing the experience of fisheries co-management in Africa, Hara and Nielsen (2003) suggest that the most common and powerful reason for introducing co-management has been the failure of governments to reduce over-exploitation, seeing co-management as a way of controlling fishing effort by establishing property rights. Controlling effort implies limiting access to fisheries, an objective questioned by Allison and Ellis (2001) and Jul-Larsen, Kolding, Overå, Nielsen, and van Zwieteren (2003), who argue that fisheries represent a vital source of livelihood for many in developing countries and that access should not be limited. Indeed, Jul-Larsen *et al.* (2003) argue that fisheries co-management in Southern Africa should primarily be concerned with the empowerment of communities and should focus on integrating fisheries regulation with wider development concerns, rather than on controlling access and conserving resources.

CBNRM and fisheries co-management initiatives aim to enable community stakeholders to manage natural resources, on their own or in partnership with government or other

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