

Collective Action for Equitable Natural Resource Management in Eastern African Highlands



Despite an increased awareness of the institutional foundations of development and natural resource management, development interventions continue to have a strong technological bias. Development and conservation interventions continue to be carried out with an uncritical view to equity or the possible negative repercussions on certain social groups, or on environmental sustainability. Local institutions (rules and structures) remain largely invisible to outside actors. However, the shortcomings lie not only with practitioners, but also within research which, on the institutional dimensions of development and NRM, continues to emphasize problems rather than solutions. One way of addressing these shortcomings is by integrating institutional analysis for problem identification and targeting of interventions with action research in the form of institutional interventions for development of good practice.

SOURCE:

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Findings from Institutional and Action Research in the Highlands of Ethiopia and Uganda

Local communities were found to have a rich array of collective action institutions, which in turn provided a variety of economic and social support functions. While some of these were seen to support some groups more than others, most forms of collective action were found to have played largely positive roles in livelihoods. Practices of formal support agencies were found to be biased by wealth, gender, and levels of political influence, exacerbating inequities over time. Action research on methodological innovations to overcome these biases and to build upon the strengths of local institutions was needed.

Action Research

In action research, hypotheses are tested through a real-time experiment, with research designed to test and assess the actions or interventions. This involves putting ideas into action, analyzing process and outcomes, and adapting the program as the research unfolds. As with other research approaches, there are many techniques used in action research, but process documentation is a fundamental element, that provides continuous reflection on what is happening.

Local forms of collective action seldom emphasized common solutions to felt NRM problems other than provision of inputs (land, labor, capital). Efforts are needed to strengthen the institutional foundations for community-based NRM. Action research findings have illustrated the potential for improving livelihoods and fostering the more sustainable use of natural resources by catalyzing collective action on NRM where it is absent. Effective collective action seems to require use of both informal negotiation support processes and formal by-law reforms and enforcement. Participatory by-law reforms create stakeholder buy-in, which reduces ambiguity and makes people feel more accountable to other parties for their actions.

The combination of formal and informal mechanisms seems to be needed to revitalize natural resource governance and related livelihood and environmental service outcomes. External agents, be they non-government organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, or local government, have also been instrumental in bearing the transaction costs of organizing collective action.



Involving people in situation analysis is recommended over a top-down approach in determining interventions.

These roles included information provision, community mobilization, facilitation, advocacy, monitoring, and negotiation support.

Strategies to improve NRM at farm and landscape levels were more effective when more equitable decision-making processes were used to explicitly acknowledge diverse stakes. However, given the diversity of these stakes, by-laws also played a fundamental role in holding each party accountable to resolutions reached through negotiations.

Adapting by-laws to local conditions and stakeholder priorities also induced marked livelihood improvements by enabling collective action and technology adoption. However, participatory by-law negotiations did not reduce the need for by-law enforcement. Rather, participation made people more responsible for agreements, increasing the effectiveness of informal efforts to increase compliance. Improved governance of natural resources is, therefore, a process that involves overcoming past expectations and behaviors, and gradually learning the value of trust.

Implications for Practitioners

- Collective action serves critical development and social support functions in local communities. External institutions should seek ways to build upon local institutions that are highly valued or contribute most to livelihood goals, in particular, for women and poorer households. Part of this effort should be oriented toward finding ways to minimize the effect of

Co-Management of Mt. Elgon National Park

Through a series of government declarations, the Benets (Ndorobo) of Uganda lost legal rights to own and use the land that they had inhabited for 200 years inside Mount Elgon. The livelihood changes induced by resettlement and other factors only increased pressure on Mt. Elgon's resources, compromising both livelihood and conservation objectives.

Benet elders, with the support of Action Aid and Land Alliance, formed a legal entity, the Benet Lobby Group. With the help of the Benet Settlers Association, they worked at all levels to raise awareness of their situation, and won a court case against the government in 2005.

The Kapchorwa District Landcare Chapter (KADLACC) worked to bring an intervention that would end the impasse between the two parties. The intervention strategy included:

- a participatory action research methodology to identify interest groups;
- focus group discussions with the stakeholder groups;
- stakeholder meetings;
- communicating to the authorities to acquire technologies;
- district-level meetings on livelihood and conservation issues;
- development of an action plan around agreements; and
- informal discussions with community members, and multi-stakeholder meetings.

The reconciliation process was jump-started through technology sharing between the Benets and the authorities. A trust-building process enabled both parties to understand that conservation of biodiversity was a bottom line that would not be compromised.

Though still in its early stages, a number of lessons have emerged to shape further interventions. These include the following:

- KADLACC has provided a forum for both parties to engage positively, despite a history of conflict. Support for local champions to facilitate multi-stakeholder NRM processes has been instrumental in managing conflict.
- Dialogue has created opportunities for rapprochement and greater mutual understanding despite a tense situation.
- Collective action among diverse stakeholders to address NRM issues has promoted dialogue and fostered greater access by communities to the natural resources in contention.
- Parallel multi-stakeholder processes at diverse levels have helped bridge the gap between policy intent and realities on the ground by creating dialogue among diverse interest groups at each level.

wealth on the potential for wealth accumulation by linking technology dissemination with low-risk forms of credit and diversification of assets of the poor.

- External development institutions often unintentionally increase existing inequities (based on gender, wealth, age, or ethnicity) by working only with active community members and failing to establish mechanisms for equitable access to project benefits. Methodological innovations to overcome these biases and socially disaggregated monitoring of interventions (by gender and stake, and including non-participants of any activity) are needed to capture such biases early on and identify ways in which they can be overcome.
- Local forms of collective action emphasize enhancing buying power and safety net functions, leaving many common NRM problems unaddressed. External support for horizontal negotiations among local resource users is needed to support collective solutions to NRM problems that remain unaddressed, despite their negative livelihood consequences.
- Extension and development organizations must consider the political dimensions of NRM in terms of winners and losers from any given development intervention, as well as the existence of diverse interests and stakes on any given issue. They must then learn to work explicitly with these political dynamics to foster more equitable solutions to development and NRM challenges through stakeholder identification, negotiation support (to identify socially optimal NRM solutions and mechanisms for equitable benefits capture), and socially disaggregated monitoring of interventions.
- There is also an urgent need for NGOs, local government and other development actors to get involved in natural resource policy formulation and implementation processes. This is due to the intimate association between negotiation support, technological innovation, rules and regulations on NRM, and the urgent need to engage their facilitation skills in fostering more equitable and participatory natural resource governance processes.



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- Fostering collective action where it is absent in addressing felt community needs requires informal negotiation support, formal by-law reforms, and forms of enforcement adapted to local social realities. Participatory by-law reforms create stakeholder buy-in, which reduces the cost of enforcement and reduces ambiguity. Neither formal nor informal mechanisms would be fully effective without the other.
- The external agent, whether an NGO, community-based organization or local government, often bears the transaction costs of organizing collective action. The role of these actors involves both information provision and time spent in organizing and facilitating community events.

Policy Implications

- Policymakers must seek ways to build upon the strengths of local institutions and the crucial social support functions they provide, in particular for women, the poor, and other marginalized groups. They must also seek ways to facilitate the participation of poorer households by assisting them in bridging the assets gap that hinders their ability to invest.
- Many national natural resource policies exist, although a good deal is not followed. Participatory by-law reforms suggest an interest in improved natural resource governance among local residents. More attention should be paid to building the “soft skills” and processes required to create community buy-in to good governance, and to enforcement mechanisms that are effective, while providing alternatives (technologies, cost sharing among stakeholders) where policies restrict livelihoods options.
- The partitioning of mandates between research, extension, and law enforcement agencies causes these issues to be treated separately and important synergies to be lost. Mechanisms and incentives for institutional cooperation toward more equitable and negotiated solutions to NRM are needed to harvest the potential of technology-governance synergies.
- Local residents can formulate NRM by-laws that address their own felt needs, but by-law enforcement by communities themselves is more of a challenge. Communities want local government to play a role in the enforcement of by-laws which should be taken into account in the process of local government reforms in the region so that participatory governance processes can be institutionalized.
- Empirical research on the institutional aspects of development has advanced understanding of the pitfalls of development practice and the characteristics of local institutions. Nonetheless, two fundamental gaps remain. The first is ensuring widespread access to lessons learned among development practitioners to improve their practice. The second is the need to move beyond the identification of problems to the identification of viable solutions (“good practice”) through the coupling of empirical and action-oriented research.

Suggested Readings

- German, L. and A. Stroud. 2007. *A Framework for the Integration of Diverse Learning Approaches: Operationalizing Agricultural Research and Development (R&D) Linkages in Eastern Africa*. *World Development* 35 (5): 792-814.
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- Lubell, M., M. Schneider, J.T. Scholz and M. Mete. 2002. *Watershed Partnerships and the Emergence of Collective Action Institutions*. *American Journal of Political Science* 46(1):148-163.

Sourcebook on **Resources, Rights, and Cooperation**, produced by the CGIAR Program on Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI)