The Role of Governance in Sustainable Land Management Malawian Experiences

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Abstract

This article focusses on Sustainable land Management as a complex subject, that is highly dependent on governance structure and how effective they are, at all levels in government right down to the village level. Due to this requirement the governance issues plays the centre role especially the governance at the village level where it all happens. SLM encompasses issues like policies, land tenure issues, hence the need to use governance as an entry point. Although the governance at all levels is important the key is *local governance* which has gained the most significant role in solving the current situation in Malawi. It was approached from the revitalization and recognition of the traditional leadership ie the Village Headman, the Group Village Headmen, right through to the Traditional Authority. This is then blended with the Local Government structures ie the Village Development Committee, Area Development Committee with their sub-committees, of particular interest is the Village Natural Resources Management Committee (VNRMCs). This gave the local structure the legitimacy and confidence to effectively take control and management of the land and its natural resources. This was reinforced with the local by-laws that are linked and aligned to the District Council by-laws. This resulted in large significant areas coming under SLM.

Background: Conceptulising the Problem:

The land degradation on the Shire basin can be attributed to a number of drivers which are described in a number of documents, like the NUDP/GOM 2010, but this paper would like to interrogate the underlying causes to the driver of this land degradation. The degradation is directly attributed to factors like cutting down of trees for firewood and charcoal, brickmaking , opening up land for cropping etc. On the other hand it is attributed to burning of the forestry area or grazing land, the cropping of steep unsuitable land for cropping , the cropping along river fringes or not observing the stipulated buffers zones along the rivers. But if one further examines these actions it reveals another scenario, a scenario that brings in a time factor ie the post multi-party democracy date of 1994. Of which before this date there was hardly any significant land degradation. When further examined, it reveals another story of a breakdown of the rule of law at this time in the Malawian history. From that period onwards there has been rapid increase in the utilization of the natural resources even in areas that were traditionally protected like forest reserves , national parks in addition to the customary land resources. This further reveals another dimension to the problem that of traditional leadership ie village headman, Group Village Headman, Traditional Authorities, loosing their powers with the introduction of the parallel structures under the Ministry of Local Government ie the Village Development Committee (VDC), Area Development Committee(ADC) etc. A further examination of these issues reveals the fact that the traditional leadership presented the system with a kind of a permanent and stable leadership that is passed down from generation to generation. It was noted also that these Village Headman (VH) are actually in charge of clans ie related households, hence they derived their authority from within the family structures and social cohesion. Whereas on the other hand the local government structures are composed of leadership that is elected every 5 years and are looking after larger areas which go beyond the family structures, secondly these are people who are not born leaders neither are they groomed to it, they are just short-term populist who unfortunately also look for short-term benefits.

On this realization one began to question whether the approaches that are being used currentl are in essence addressing the really issues in land degradation. With this background we began to question whether the problem we are faced with is physical or social. It was therefore in this line of thinking that governance was identified as a key issue in land degradation especially local governance in its essence as a socio-political issue, and hence the solutions to the current land degradation problems might be lying within this sphere ie the socio-political. It therefore became essential to define what governance is.

Therefore in an attempt to have a common understanding I would like to first define governance and local governance, by borrowing from the UN-REDD. They describe governance as comprising of a complex processes and relationships as well as instituttions as seen in Figure 1. These allow the citizenry and groups to articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and to mediate their differences. Alternately governance is described as " A system of values, practices, policies and institutions by which a society manages its affairs". Whereas local governance is the devolved management of the affairs of a society from the centre to smaller and smaller units like village heads and or clans to manage their on affairs. It is recognized by this organization that Governance forms the core of a Society and the absence of it leads to disintegration of a society

and its systems, simply "Things Fall Apart". In Malawi there is two parallel structures exist in which the management of affairs of societies take place that is the Traditional structure and the Local Government structures as already mentioned above. This undoubtedly leads to some confusion in the governance of the societies.
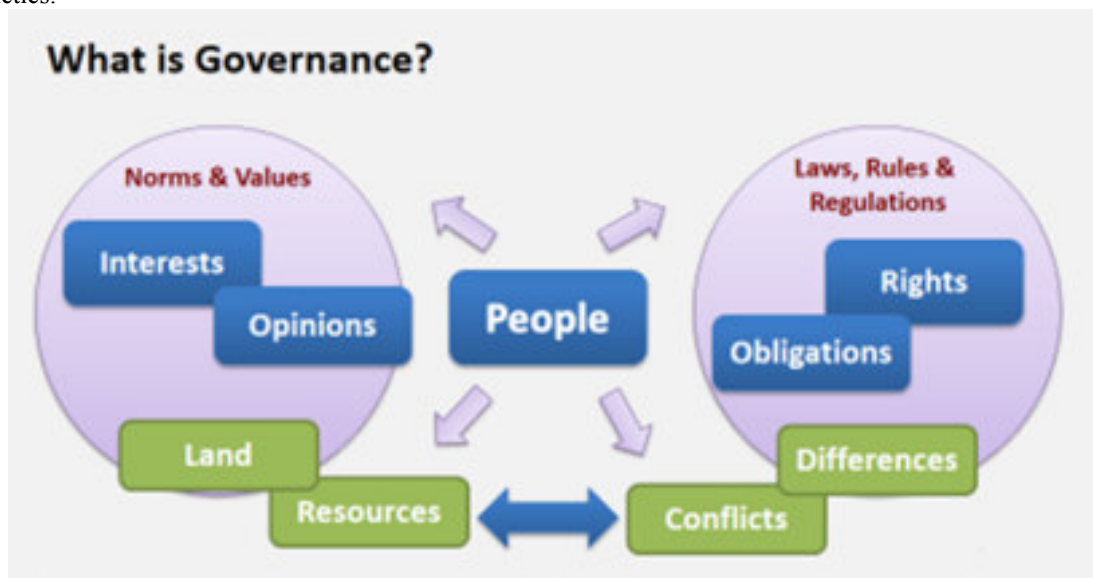

Figure 1: Governance model

The project then took a decision to organize and /or revitalize the community governance structures in order to establish appropriate governance structures at the community level. Hence, the community was then organized and allowed to participate in the following ways to form strong governance structures in their areas and leading to a better management of the natural resources in their areas. Initially community meetings were organized at village headmen level or group village headman as determined by the communities themselves. In these meetings it was brought to their realization why it was important for them to look after the land and its natural resources since it formed the basis for their livelihoods and that it was in their interest to make sure the land and the natural resources are used properly by this current generation and should be passed on to the next generations in a good state. It was then pointed out in these meetings how and why it was important for each community to organize itself into a local governance structure. They then organized themselves underneath the VH or the GVH and to form governance structures. On achieving this first step effectively they were then advised to form or revive the Village Natural Resources Management Committee (VNRMCs) which had been lying low in the past few years. It was within these village governance structctures that these communities defined their common interests and common goals on realization that they were bound together by the same land and its natural resources. They were then made to take into cognizance that it is only through cooperation and not competition that will make them achieve their common goals and move away from the tragedy of the commons scenario. This is easily demonstrated by the Figure 2 below, which displays the disadvantages of competition versus the advantages of cooperation. It is through strong VNRMCs that they could move to the next stage ie. bushfire control which are viewed as an entry point to the rationale management of their natural reaources, since bushfires indiscriminately destroy everything on its, good or bad. Through a village concented approach they could tackle this bushfire menace that happens annually between May and November.
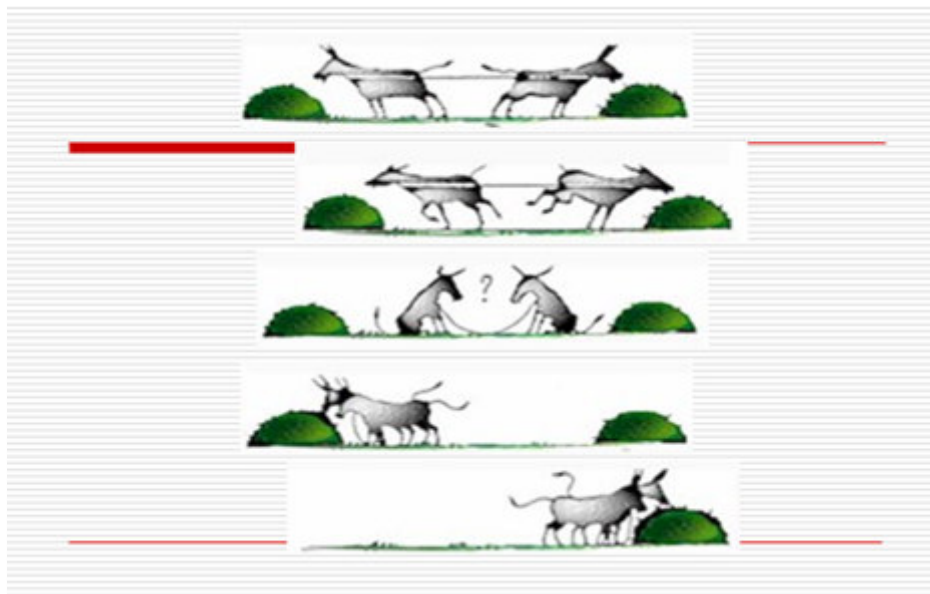
Figure 2. Cooperation versus competion

Intervention Sequencing

When the communities had got the governance structures working we then developed with them a sequence of events or a pathway for a systematic way of working with these communities. On the long run our preferred entry point as a project was the Group village Headman, due to its size in terms of the number of people we would be attending to was large and the area under rehabilitation was also reasonably large allowing us significant gains in terms of the area under SLM activities. On the average a GVH in the districts that we were working in represented about 3000ha to 5000ha, but where the villages were not comfortable in working together as a GVH we still dealt with the smaller units of Village Headman or two or three of them working together. These smaller areas were about 300ha to about 1000ha. The community mobilization was then followed by the bushfire control or management measures which involved these communities forming a bushfire committee as a subcommittee of the VNRMCs, but this could also be done by the VNRMC itself if it so wished. The message was that since they had a common understanding that the bushfires were started by members of their community it is therefore opportune that they should develop mechanisms of stopping them as well as putting them off if they started within their area. This was simply agreeing to police each's actions or watching your brother's back and not allowing him/her to faulter. This picked on well within the communities and then they were advised to complement this with stopping mice hunting and bee honey hunting using fire as a tool, as well as anybody within the community from starting any fires unnecessarily.

They were then taught how to make firebreaks around the perimeter of their entire land resource of the village or the GVH, to keep fires from the outside communities out. In addition it was necessary to rationally divide their land resource into 8 to 10 blocks by additional firebreaks. This allowed the community flexibility to be able to put out the fire within these blocks in case if it was started accidentally within their boundaries. The same blocks would then be used as utilization blocks of resources by the village or GVH to regulate use. For example a block or two could be used in a year for harvesting for timber, firewood etc.

Having successfully implementing the bushfire management regime at the community level, the community was encouraged to allow the natural regeneration of forests from the root stock as well as introducing a coppice management regime for specific intended uses of the coppice, for instance for production of poles as many as 10 coppices would be left to compete for light hence resulting in tall slender poles for roofing etc. In essence this allowed a formerly deforested area to have trees of about 2.5 to 3metres within a a three year period depending on the species in question. It was observed that the Miombo woodland species would send out coppices of 1 to 1.5 metres height in a season depending on the species due to the established root stock as oppsed to planting seedlings. Most tree seedlings would only grow upto 40 or 50 cm a season for what is consider fast growing tree species, hence it was therefore more viable to combat deforestation with natural regeneration than seedlings. It was crucial that this came after the successful establishment of a bushfire control regime since the fires would still destroy the coppices and seedlings while in the green-stick stage during the dry season of each year.

It was therefore observed that by successfully instituting a governance structure in a community, instituting a bushfire control measures and allowing natural forest regeneration 60-70% of what needed to be

done to rehabilitate a degraded deforested area would have been achieved by this stage. This would have increased the ground cover of an area from a mere 10-15% cover to about 70% ground cover and in turn encouraged water infiltration/seepage while reducing surface water runoff and subsequently soil erosion. This in turn increased the resilience of a community to natural disasters like flooding . This was then complemented by the development of community by-laws within the District Council By-laws.

        This was then followed by what we called complimentary activities like tree planting where there is no tree root stock for natural forest regeneration, gully reclamation, ridge alignment in the cropped lands to reduced sheet erosion. The implications of this process with the communities were as follows : empowered the communities , allowed them to make decisions , implement them and to own the success etc. It also taught the communities to focus on a common goal and work towards it. It certainly brought confidence within the community that they could do things on their own. Although this worked in Malawi so well , we are not claiming that it is universal, each situation would need to be assessed to identify the key/ root challenges to be able to design a strategy around the the root causes of the degradation. Figures 3 and 4 show the achieved results using this pathway within 24 months, areas where re-forested and streams began to flow throughout the year.

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