



Kenya Forestry Research Institute

Community Forest Associations in Kenya: challenges and opportunities

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2009

Abstract

The introduction of Participatory Forestry Management (PFM) in Kenya from 1997 has led to the formation of community-based organizations which have come to be referred to as Community Forest Associations (CFAs). Most of the CFAs are preparing to enter into forest management agreements with the Kenya Forest Service (KFS). This will confer management roles to the community with the KFS retaining the forest resource ownership right and the right to withdraw the agreement in total or part. The CFAs are formed by individual members who join by paying a prescribed membership fee. The CFA structures are rather diverse although this is being harmonized. In forests where PFM is 10 years old, the CFAs are forming confederates, which are being referred to as Umbrella CFAs. The study involved the collection of data of the CFAs that had been formed at least 10 years. Information was obtained from the results of the Action Research in Poverty and Participation (ARPIP) program carried out in Arabuko–Sokoke Forest.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the immense contribution of our colleagues in the EMPAFORM team for this work. The EMPAFORM research team allowed the authors to use part of their data in the paper. We also acknowledge the contribution of the CFA officials and members of MEFECAP and ASFADA and KOFOA for all the information which they made available to the authors. Our thanks also go to NPC Natural forestry and the EMPAFORM (ARPIP) project for supporting the activities reported in this paper. We thank the Director of KEFRI for his support this work.

Abbreviations

PFM	Participatory Forest Management
CFA	Community Forest Association
KFS	Kenya Forest Service
ARPIP	Action Research in Poverty and Participation
EMPAFORM	Empowering Communities for Forest Management
KFWG	Kenya Forests Working Group
MEFECAP	Meru Forest Environment and Forest Protection Community Association
NACOFA	National Alliance of the Community Forest Associations
ASFADA	Arabuko Sokoke Forest Adjacent Dwellers Association
KOFOA	Kobujoi Forest Association
FAN	Forest Action Network
KEFRI	Kenya Forestry Research Institute
CBNRM	Community Based Natural Resource Management
CFM	Community Forest Management

Introduction

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) is being adopted widely in many developing countries as an alternative method of managing forestry resources (Wily 2002). PFM is increasingly being used as an approach through which to achieve the sustainability of threatened forests and conservation of biodiversity. This is done through a process of inclusion, equity, and democratization of governance of the forest resources (Amanor 2003). PFM is a multistakeholder approach where the private sector, institutions, and communities are involved in management of forests and sharing of benefits that accrue from such management processes. While PFM can be considered in the wider perspectives of Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), community forest management (CFM) is the most emphasized approach for implementing PFM in many developing countries. CFM is basically an approach towards achieving forest sustainability and biodiversity conservation with socioeconomic objectives (Kallert et al. 2000). These socio-economic objectives include equity, conflict resolution, awareness, forest production, poverty reduction, and sustainable utilization. The positive results of implementing PFM process will be demonstrated through the changed attitude of local forest-adjacent communities and hence, a change in the level of forest conservation, but such results will be highly influenced by the mode of participation adopted by the PFM implementation process.

The need to increase forest cover and reduce forest destruction and degradation has been recognized in Kenya (DRSRS and KFWG 2006). The Government has recognized the critical role to be played by forest-adjacent communities in ensuring that tree cover in the country increases from the current 2% to the recommended 10% (MENR 2007). In order to appreciate the point from which the country has to move in order to achieve its targeted forest cover, Nurse and Edwards (1993) described the former forest management system that has been practiced in Kenya over the years as demotivating for local communities and one that has made them participate in the destruction of the country's forest and tree resources. The new Forests Act (2005) is therefore a positive move for the local communities and this has already begun to act as a catalyst in their involvement in the management of the remaining forest resources (Ongugo et al. 2007). The new Forests Act (2005) encourages local communities to participate in the management of forest resources adjacent to them. Arising from this new policy and law, new institutions are emerging to implement the process of involving local communities in the management of forest

resources. These institutions are being established with the aim of co-managing forest resources with central and local government institutions such as the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the County Councils (CCs). In order for the local communities to enter into such co-management arrangements, they are legally expected to form and register Community Forest Associations (CFAs) within different forests distributed across the country (MENR 2007). Such an association will have to be vetted based on the following criteria before it can be allowed to operate: its objectives, composition of its management committee, election procedures, and the purpose for which its funds may be used. Despite all these requirements, CFAs just like any other institution may be mismanaged and eventually collapse. In addition, communities that form forest associations may not be homogeneous. They may also have varying socio-economic objectives for forming the associations. Lack of homogeneity may also affect their forest management objectives and this in effect may have an impact on the sustainability of the forest resources to which they are adjacent (Thurow 1995).

There has been a major effort to educate communities that live adjacent to major forests in Kenya (Figure 1). The effort has been geared towards enhancing their understanding of the requirements of both the new forest policy and act and how both of these new Government documents relate to their involvement in the management of forest resources. This has resulted in the formation of about 100 CFAs distributed across the country.

Formation of Community Forest Associations

According to the Forests Act (2005), section 46 (1), a member of a forest community may together with other members or persons resident in the same area register a community forest association under the Society's Act. According to section 46 (2), an association registered under section (1) may apply to the Director of Forest Service for permission to participate in the conservation and management of a state forest or a local authority forest in accordance with the provisions of the act (Ongugo et al. 2007). All of the important forest regions in Kenya, often referred to as the country's water towers, have at least one registered CFA .

Most of the forest associations (11) are located within the Mau forest ecosystem, which is the most important catchment for Lake Victoria. This is followed by the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest ecosystem which has seven forest associations with ASFADA being the most prominent. Mt. Kenya Forest has six forest associations with MEFECAP being very well established. Other forest associations in the country are found in the Cherenganyi Forest (1), Mt. Elgon (2), Kakamega (4), and other small forest ecosystems that have a combined number of 10 forest associations. According to the last annual general meeting of the National Alliance of the Community Forest Associations (NACOFA), which is the umbrella body of all the CFAs in Kenya, most of the associations had been formed as a result of campaigns by the Kenya (forest) Action Network (FAN) and the Kenya Forests Working Group (KFWG); both of which are national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in forestry governance in the country. Recently however, the Government through the newly created KFS has also been spearheading the establishment of CFAs as a way of fulfilling the requirement of the new Forests Act (2005), the implementation of which falls within the mandate of the KFS.

Challenges Facing CFAs

According to the results of a recent survey of CFAs in Kenya (Kinyanjui 2007), all the CFAs in Kenya had constitutions that were developed by consensus among all the members.

Members' contributions through registration and monthly/annual subscription fees are the main sources of funds for the CFAs; an indication that the members are committed to supporting their associations. All the CFAs surveyed faced various types of challenges. Major challenges included lack of transparency among officials, failure of some members to contribute funds, sharing of benefits, and a dictatorial tendency among some of the leaders.

These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Challenges	Characteristics
Organization Complexity	Lack of defined structure and hierarchy at local, regional, and national levels, exclusion and inclusion definitions Diversity of origins, cultures, languages, and aspirations bringing mistrust and suspicion among members Complexity of implementation in plantation forests Fair responsibility and benefit-sharing challenges
Conflict of Interests	External interference Communal rights versus individual interests Ideal social situation versus prevailing conditions Conservation versus exploitation Existing capacity versus necessary capacity Policy-makers and professional perception versus community understanding of the group's objectives Prevailing attitude versus required attitude Plantation forests—community objectives versus industry' objectives
Group Historical Problems	Overreliance on external help (from NGOs) Inadequate funding Misappropriation of funds Politician and private business interference Mediocrity and difficulties in maintaining members' enthusiasm, commitment, and efforts for the long term
Emergent Problems	An overwhelming interest in groups by a large population Unpredictable evolution of groups over time Overdependence on forest resources by even larger numbers of people than before
Capacity	Inability to follow sustainable utilization patterns

Because of these challenges, a study to try and understand how these associations operated was initiated with MEFECAP and ASFADA being purposefully sampled as representatives of all the associations in the country.

Opportunities for CFAs

- Supportive policy and law
- Goodwill and participation of community members
- Increasing number of community members joining community forest association
- Dependence of community members on forest resources for their livelihood
- The introduction of income generating activities that derive their existence of forests
- Continuous capacity building of CFAs. This ensures sustainability.

Results and Discussion

Participation by Gender among CFAs

Gender participation was considered a main factor in assessing the sustainability of CFAs. Kabutha and Humbly (1996) reported that women manage as much as 74% of Kenya's smallholding farms, implying that they hold the power to sustainable production of the country's land resources. In addition, the presence of young men and women in the membership of forest associations is vital to their success and sustainability. This is particularly important since most of the forest resources have long term benefits. Gender distribution in some of the CFAs including MEFECAP and ASFADA is shown in Figure 3.

From the figure it can be seen that women and youth are well represented in many of the CFAs. Most of the youths in Kenya are not employed and their participation in the CFAs is a way of ensuring that they are kept busy carrying out activities that are not only beneficial to them but also to the forest resource and the environment in general.

Activities that have attracted youth to the CFAs include participation in cultivation of food and cash crops in the forest, engaging in eco-tourism, and contracts to carry out silvicultural operations in the forests. Most of the CFAs have many members; for example, MEFECAP has a total of 1,500 members out of which 200 are young members and 800 are women.

Capacity-building Role

Most CFAs have people who have worked in the forestry and agriculture sectors as members. These members have knowledge of tree planting and management hence they guide other members of the CFAs in carrying out forestry-related activities. There is vast potential in the indigenous knowledge of members of CFAs since they have lived in the forests for a long time. Members of the CFAs often know the tree species in the forests, their uses, abundance, and diversity. Such knowledge is also important in education, research, and even in ecotourism.

This knowledge needs to be tapped as a way of enhancing the sustainability of the forest resources.

Benefit-sharing Role

Community involvement in forest management and environmental conservation has often been encouraged. This is based on the principle that forests provide intangible and not often direct or tangible benefits to those communities who participate in their management. This idea often does not encourage the involvement of local communities in the management of forests and other natural resources. From the study of both ASFADA and MEFECAP, it was found that tangible benefits that were available to the CFAs from the forests contributed to the cohesiveness of the CFA members (Ongugo et al. 2005). The benefits ensured the

sustainability of the groups and therefore the principle of benefit sharing needs to be strengthened and stressed in all the CFAs in the country. Further, it was evident that most CFAs had been formed with the hope that the Government will in future allow them to reap real benefits such as nonresidential cultivation within the forests and harvesting of forest products (Table 2).

Table 2: Tangible Benefits for CFAs in Various Forests

Forest	Existing Income-generating Activities
South Nandi	Tree seedlings, bee keeping, fuelwood, grass, water
Mau	Tree seedlings, <i>Prunus africana</i> bark herbal products, bee keeping
Kakamega	Tree seedlings, <i>Mondia whytei</i> and <i>Ocimum</i> spp. herbal products, bee keeping, butterfly farming, eco-tourism, artifacts
Coastal Forests	Aloe farming, tree seedlings, <i>Azadirachta indica</i> (neem) wood for carvings, butterfly farming, artifacts, farm forestry
Mt. Kenya	Tree seedlings, bee keeping, fuelwood, grass, water

When such benefits are exploited by the CFAs, there is the possibility of members gaining from employment opportunities that they provide. Such benefits would also include improved food security and enhanced survival of the trees growing in the forest.

Management Role

In plantation forests, the Forests Act provides for CFAs to enter into concession to manage forests adjacent to them. However, due to the lack of community silvicultural capacity to run these forests, many CFAs are forced to bring in collaborators, mainly from the private sector (Ongugo et al. 2004). These collaborators are better equipped in nursery techniques and plantation management. In instances where communities have established CFAs, the cultivation of food and cash crops in the forest is of paramount importance. But other forest products such as fuelwood, construction wood, and animal forage from the forest are essential. With them in mind, the leaders of the CFAs may have to train their members in silvicultural practices, forestry business, and improve knowledge on the intricate management of food/cash crops together with trees.

Conflict Resolution Role

There are several foreseeable conflict areas that might hinder the efficiency of CFAs. The Forests Act provides for corporate rights and responsibilities to the CFAs participating in forest management. However, communities that have heavily depended on the forest for a long time for livelihoods based on individual decision making on the utilization of forest resources will face conflicts when it comes to implementation of corporate decisions and agreement in the CFA situation.

Ideally, implementation of PFM requires a community with a reasonable level of economic development. This is because in their initial involvement in forest management the communities will have to give more than they can get from the forest resource. This is true

for most of the utilizable means provided for in the Forests Act (e.g. honey harvesting, ecotourism, timber production etc.). It will require them to have a long-term focus as long as benefits are concerned. On the other hand, the reality on the ground is different with the forest communities facing poverty, food insecurity, and lack of opportunities for livelihood in the larger economy. They therefore have a short-term focus on the benefits to accrue from their involvement in forest management.

Another conflict that is likely to arise in the course of implementing the PFM is on conservation versus exploitation of the forest. A major objective for involving communities in management of forest is to foster forest sustainability over time. From interviews with communities, it was clear that the motivation of most members of forest associations was the opportunity to utilize forest resources without the existing Government restrictions and only a few had perceived forest conservation as a priority. These perceptions may not augur well with conservation objectives bearing in mind that the limitations of the resource and convincing communities on striking a balance between conservation and exploitation will be hurdles that those working with these communities will have to face.

Further, the community's idea of how it should be involved in forest management seems to differ with the concept of PFM as prescribed in the Forests Act. For most of the people interviewed, participation in forest management meant participating in nonresidential cultivation as programmed and executed by the Forest Department and its representatives' involvement in the administration of the forest in the area. They also expected to decide on the way financial proceeds from the forest (especially from logging) were spent with a view that forest management would be decentralized and proceeds from forest would be reinvested in the development of the area. They showed lack of confidence in forming functioning and efficient associations capable of participating in forest management. This disparity in participation in forest management between the community and policy implementers is a major concern if the two groups (communities and policy implementers) are to move on the same footing.

Another potential source of conflict is the prevailing attitude of the community versus the attitude required if PFM implementation is to ensure forest sustainability. Communities still have the attitude that they are fully entitled to the forest land, a right they have been denied for so long and are bitter about. If the forest land could be used at their discretion, most community members would convert it to agriculture which is perceived to be a more profitable land use. It is a challenge for the CFAs to convince and to change these prevailing community attitudes towards the forests if they are to be effective.

Conclusion

The CFAs present a great opportunity to reduce the current pressure on forests by forest adjacent communities for forest products and services. However, this opportunity will not be easy to tap unless deliberate effort is directed by those involved in the implementation of the PFM process to build on the community's strongpoints of concern for using the forest resource for livelihood improvement. For communities to be reasonable contributors to sustainable forest management, they have to attain a reasonable level of socio-economic development, which will lead to the use of primary or natural resources, such as forests, for basic needs such as food, shelter, and fuel. Further, they will have to be sensitized and educated on environmental issues in order to change their attitude towards the forest from

being a primary source of products and services to that of a resource that is necessary for survival.

Communities need to be sensitized on other sources of livelihood to diversify their income bases and to participate in the wider economy of the country and allow efficient and sustainable utilization of forest resources. There is therefore a need to improve their education levels; also for tertiary training in various trades not necessarily related to forest resource exploitation, and for food security, health, water, energy, and other social services.

To achieve this, forest communities need to be mainstreamed among the vulnerable groups already identified such as women, youth, the disabled etc. This means the involvement of different Government ministries (health, education, water, development planning etc.) and development support in concrete efforts directed to forest community welfare.

Further, efficient implementation of the CFAs requires an elaborate framework and coordinated efforts rather than isolated efforts by different agencies and supporters nationwide. An implementation coordinating task force is thus needed to formulate this framework and coordinate the proposed efforts. The framework will enable good definition of the roles and responsibilities of the various groups (Government and nongovernment) involved in the implementation as well as serving as a forum for evaluation and experience sharing and coordinating the aforesaid proposed social development programs and projects.

The management of CFAs will definitely face intrinsic, complex issues and is likely to face difficulty in management. There is need to evaluate, critique, and study these emerging institutions and put in place ways to aid their effectiveness. It should be noted that in striving to involve communities in sustainable forest management, the ecological limitations of these forest resources are real and thus the success of the approaches applied is paramount.

It is recommended that:

1. The CFAs need to be supported by the Government and natural resource management agencies and donors who support PFM. They need to be trained in conflict resolution, leadership and management skills, and financial management.
2. Farm forestry and establishment of botanical gardens for medicinal plants should be encouraged so that communities directly and indirectly benefit from the forests.
3. NACOFA should be strengthened to harmonize the activities of the different CFAs and be a center of dissemination of information for the CFAs and the member communities.

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