

## GOVERNANCE, DECENTRALIZATION AND CO-MANAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM AFRICA\*

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### ABSTRACT

Today, decentralization and democratic participation are presented as necessary conditions to achieve poverty alleviation and ensure the sustainable use of our diminishing natural resources. In small-scale fisheries, similar ideas predominate and decentralization has become the new management paradigm through the concepts of community-based and co-management. In this paper, we present the conclusions of a series of governance analyses recently completed in five African countries (Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, Malawi, and Zambia). Relying on a new analytical framework which emphasizes the different nature of governance reforms and reflects in particular the distinction between deconcentration, devolution and decentralization, these governance analyses propose to assess the various co-management programmes implemented in these countries. From these reviews, it appears that the (mainly-donor funded and often top-down) fisheries governance reforms implemented in Africa have been successful in challenging the previous (centralized) governance system. However, the reviews also suggest that, contrary to their intent of empowering primary resource users, the inabilities of local governments, deconcentrated agencies and fisherfolk to take up their newfound mandates has frequently resulted in the division of influence among local power brokers and in the instrumentalization of the co-management process. From a conceptual point of view, the analysis highlights the limits of the conventional approach to co-management and questions in particular the view that participation is the key-element to ensure successful decentralization. Instead, the document highlights the crucial importance of downward accountability as the main ‘driving belt’ ensuring an efficient representativity of the local communities, and underscores the importance of recognising the political economy dimension of co-management.

**Keywords:** Governance reform; Devolution; Accountability; Power; Traditional authorities; Africa

### INTRODUCTION

Today, decentralized governance is the overarching paradigm in development and public policy arenas. Decentralization and community involvement are presented in particular as necessary conditions for effective development [1,2]. Consequently, a large number of programmes and policy reforms promoted by international development agencies and NGOs are being carried out in many developing countries, with the explicit objective to support decentralization reforms [3]. Applied to a wide range of domains and economic sectors, these reforms have been described or labelled under a wide range of terms, such as

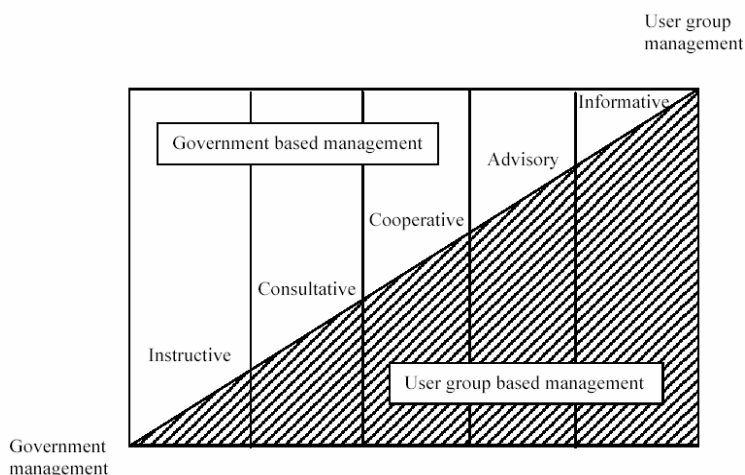
democratic decentralization, participatory development, devolution, indigenous management, user-participation, co-management, etc.

In the development literature, the arguments in favour of participation and decentralization are not simply based on economic and administrative efficiency. They are often associated with promises of progress in public accountability, environmental sustainability and empowerment of poor and vulnerable groups [2,3,4]. Amongst other things, decentralization is therefore perceived as one possible avenue to improve rural population livelihoods and even as a means for poverty alleviation. The most common argument is that decentralization is by definition a mechanism of ‘inclusion’ and ‘empowerment’ [5,1]. Because it involves bringing government closer to the governed, in both the spatial and institutional senses, decentralised governments, it is said, will be more knowledgeable about, and hence more responsive to, the needs of the poorest and marginalized people. This mechanism of inclusion is expected to lead to empowerment and pro-poor policies and outcomes [6].

In small-scale fisheries, after several decades of a strong centralized management approach, ‘decentralization’ has also become the new paradigm [7,8]. Following the view of influential scholars who advocated for governance reform, the consensus in the policy discourse is now largely in favour of fisheries management decentralization, either in the form of co-management or community-based fisheries management (CBFM) reforms [9,10]. Hardly any country in the developing world has not explicitly endorsed co-management or some form of CBFM as one of its main national fisheries policy objectives.

### THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH TO CO-MANAGEMENT: A PLEA FOR MORE PARTICIPATION

In the fisheries literature, the most frequently quoted framework used to analyze decentralization –and, in particular, its co-management form- is the framework proposed by McCay and Berkes [11,12]. The core idea of this framework (hereafter referred to as the ‘McCay-Berkes’ framework) is that co-management is characterized by various partnership arrangements distinguished from one another by the “degrees of power-sharing and integration of local and centralized management system” [13, p.466]. Depending on these different levels of power devolution, five major generic types of co-management arrangements can be defined: Intrusive, Consultative, Cooperative, Advisory, and Informative<sup>a</sup> (see Fig.1).



**Fig.1.** McCay – Berkes co-management framework (redrawn from [11])

The McCay-Berkes framework is useful to compare fisheries co-management arrangements and a large number of comparative analyses that were proposed in the literature have indeed used this framework for this purpose.<sup>b</sup> However, the classification on which it is built is merely descriptive. It does not offer any analytical ‘handles’ for identifying or assessing the underlying mechanisms associated with the changes induced by co-management reforms. Consequently, using this framework for anything other than a descriptive purpose may be misleading. In particular, because the core element which structures the framework is based on a gradient of power-sharing, using this framework as an ‘explanatory tool’ leads to considering the degree of power devolved as the key (explanatory) factor and may in particular lead analysts to associate failure(s) of co-management with too little devolution/participation.

Reviewing the literature reveals, indeed, that most co-management studies conclude that there is generally not enough participation in the ongoing fisheries reforms and regret that too little responsibility is passed down to the community. Pomeroy, for instance [7, p.135], states that “Many attempts at decentralization have not delivered a real sharing of resource management power”. One reason for this perceived failure is that “Fisheries administrators may be reluctant to relinquish their authority, or portions of it, and governments are often opposed to decentralization” [16, pp14-15]. Pomeroy is echoed by Sverdrup-Jensen and Nielsen [17, p.11], who comment, “Under the present management arrangements situation, user groups will often be patronized in possible disputes with government. The latter seems generally reluctant to devolve power and bestow legal rights and authority in fisheries management to user groups”. As Chirwa [18, p.69] points out, “The [Fisheries Department’s] position of patronage means that the local user communities are the recipients rather than the initiators of decisions. They, themselves, are managed, together with their resources, by the Fisheries Department.”

The level of devolution is, however, only one dimension to consider within the process of participation. As emphasized by Cohen and Uphoff [19], many other important criteria should also be taken into account when evaluating a governance reform, e.g. the *kind* of participation (participation in decision-making; in implementation; in benefits, in evaluation) or *how* the process occurs (the basis of participation, its form, its extent, its effects) –see Table 1. In other words, assessing the participation process –and in the present case the fisheries co-management process– through the degree of participation or the level of devolution is not sufficient. This mono-dimensional conceptualization of the process reduces governance reform to the degree of participation and does not necessarily capture the main factor(s) explaining the degree of success or failure of decentralization reforms.

**Table 1.** Cohen and Uphoff’s [19] classification of participation

Types of participation	Participation in decision-making Participation in implementation Participation in benefits Participation in evaluation
Who participates?	Local residents Local leaders Government personnel Foreign personnel
How is participation occurring?	Basis of participation Form of participation Extent of participation Effect of participation

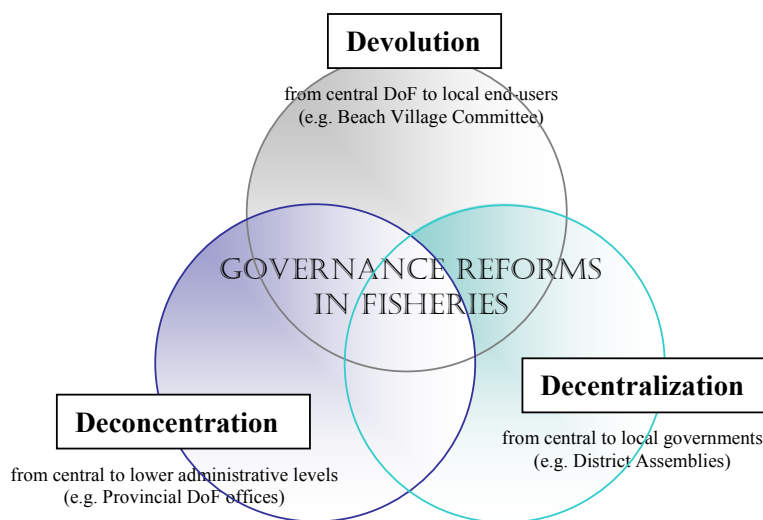
This point was confirmed empirically by Neiland and Béné [20]. These authors conducted a review of 50 case-studies of fisheries across 39 countries. Using the information provided by the literature, they analysed the management systems of these fisheries and assessed in particular the performance of each of

the 50 fisheries, using three criteria: economic efficiency, ecological sustainability, and social equity. At the same time, they categorized these fisheries by the degree of participation of their stakeholders in the decision-making process, using the degrees of power-sharing as defined by McCay and Berkes (see Fig.1). Their analysis shows that there is no tangible correlation between the level of devolution of responsibility in the fisheries and the actual performance of these fisheries. In other words, the degree of participation did not explain the performance of the system: some fisheries characterized by highly centralized management system were doing well, while other, more participatory, fisheries were unable to generate good management outcomes –and vice versa.

In fact, as Brett notes, “Maximum participation may not always be possible or efficient” [21, p.1]. Each fishery in each society has its own ‘balance point’ on the scale of management intervention and “Some fisheries are more effectively managed by governments or intergovernmental bodies [while] some are more effectively managed by local communities and non-government bodies, with various mixtures in between” [22, p.339]. Thus, advocating for a systematic strong participation by the fishery community may not be the correct approach and the issue of *how much* power is shared may be the wrong question. Instead, issues of *how* this power is shared and *who* receive(s) this power may be more important.

### THE NEED FOR A NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

From a political science perspective, a governance reform may take several forms, involve various agents and induce changes of different intensities at different levels. Broadly speaking, three main types of reforms are relevant to the discussion of co-management and governance reforms in fisheries: devolution, deconcentration and decentralization (Fig.2). *Devolution* refers to the transfer of rights and responsibilities from the government to representatives of user groups at the local level (fisher organizations or alike). *Deconcentration* involves changes in governance where the decision-making authority is transferred to lower-level units of bureaucracy or government line agency (provincial and/or district level of the Department of fisheries), while *decentralization* induces transfers of decision-making authority and financial capacities related to the fishery management to lower (provincial, district or communal) levels of government bodies. Finally, note that co-management as conventionally defined in the fishery literature refers to devolution reform.



**Fig.2.** Governance reforms in fisheries as a combination of devolution, deconcentration and decentralization. Each of these types of reforms leads to different patterns of empowerment over natural resources

## LESSONS FROM AFRICA

Drawing upon the analytical framework described above, a series of five fishery governance evaluations were conducted simultaneously in five African countries: Cameroon, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, and Zambia, with the specific objective to assess the various co-management programmes that have been – and are still being- implemented in these countries [24,25,26,27,28]<sup>c</sup>.

Synthesizing the findings of these five reports into one single message might be quite uneasy, as the overall outcomes of the co-management programmes that they reviewed are rather complex and ‘patchy’. In fact, no clear consensus seems to emerge. Some analysts would certainly prefer to emphasize the few success stories that have occurred amongst those co-management projects, but a more rigorous assessment would also highlight some of the less successful outcomes of these co-management experiences. Ultimately, however, the core issue is about governance and the central question remains the same: has co-management, as it has been implemented so far in Africa, improved the governance of small-scale fisheries for the benefit of the fisherfolk?

From the information collected by the five reports, it seems that the answer to this question is: “not necessarily”. While one can hardly dispute that the new governance system introduced by co-management was genuinely intended at improving the governance in fisheries, in practice, however, the outcome has not systematically been positive. In the majority of the co-management programme reviewed by the five documents, the reforms –most of which had been donor-driven and top-down in implementation- failed to effectively *improve* governance. Instead, they simply *modified* the status quo by altering the distribution of power and responsibility between the main fisheries stakeholders.

In particular, an interesting result that emerged from the five reviews is the fact that deconcentration is predominant over devolution in the majority of the co-management programmes that were evaluated. If one accepts that the 5 countries included in this review provide a reasonable representative ‘sub-sample’ of the rest of African fisheries, it seems therefore that in many countries, the establishment of fishery co-management has led to a partial redistribution of power toward the local (provincial/district) levels of the Department of Fishery (DoF). Overall this finding means that, although co-management has been recurrently presented in the literature as the way to devolve power towards the end-users of the fisheries, in reality the ‘balance’ is still very much in favour of some form of government control –essentially through the DoF. What the reviews of the five countries showed, however, is that this control is becoming increasingly deconcentrated, probably as a result of the continuous pressure imposed by the donors on the governments to show some forms of “good governance”.

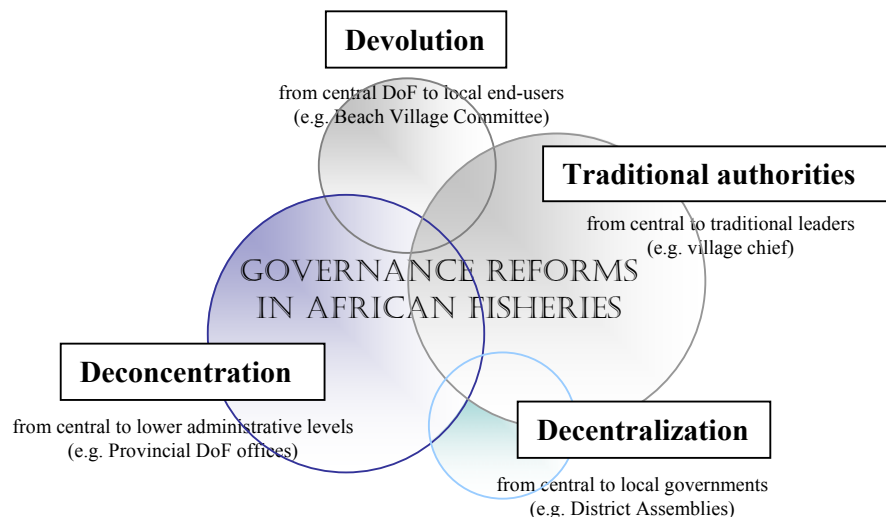
The DoFs have not been the only stakeholders that benefited from the reforms. In the ‘fluid’ context of rapid institutional changes created by the co-management reforms, the traditional local authorities (village chiefs and alike) have also been usually quite successful at moving forward their own agenda. The institutional ‘paths’ through which these traditional authorities have managed to enter into the new landscape are, however, varied and complex. In some cases, this resulted indirectly from constitutional or legislative changes induced by the decentralization reforms that were implemented independently from (but sometimes simultaneously with) the co-management reform. This has been the case for instance when traditional authorities were included *de jure* in the decentralization process (as in Niger), thus allowing these traditional leaders to regain or reinforce their past influence. In other cases, this resulted from their own capacities to interfere and ‘capture’ part of the financial and/or political power that was being delegated through the co-management process, using their own existing influence and network, or sometimes by establishing strategic alliance with other local elites or the local DoF staff.

The last important result highlighted by the reports concerns decentralization. Although decentralization reforms have been widely promoted in a large majority of countries in Africa (with the notable exception

of Nigeria), the reports showed very little evidence of any positive interactions between small-scale fisheries and the new local government bodies that were created through these decentralization reforms. At ‘worst’, there is no effective integration of the small-scale fisheries in the agenda of the local authorities; at ‘best’ the only relationship between small-scale fisheries and decentralised institutions is through the taxes levied by the local governments –or some of their decentralized agencies- with the explicit objective to extract some of the rent generated by the fishery sector.

In this context, it should not come as a surprise to hear that the real beneficiaries of the co-management reforms have rarely been the actual end-users of the resources, i.e. the small-scale fishers and fish processors. In fact as evidenced through the five reports but also some of the older literature, e.g. [29,30], many of these fishers (in particular migrant fishers) have often been excluded from the new co-management arrangements. Instead, the reforms opened ‘opportunity windows’ for other actors (mainly at the local level) to reshape the institutional landscape in ways that allow them to reinforce their own socio-political, institutional or economic power, often at the detriment of the legitimate end-users of the resource. This ‘instrumentalization’ of the co-management (as initially described by Viswanathan et al. [8], is not really surprising, as it simply reproduces the social process frequently described in political economy through which one group of actors (usually the most powerful, local elite) shape the institutional landscape to create a new status quo favourable to their own interests.

Revisiting the framework presented in Fig.2 with these different conclusions leads us to a modified representation of the governance reforms as they have effectively been taking place in small-scale fisheries in Africa (Fig.3). At the present time, it seem fair to say that the bulk of the power still remains with the DoF, but has been partially delegated to lower levels of the hierarchy. This new arrangement is beneficial to the top level of the administration as it successfully transfers the load of the monitoring and enforcement to the lower-level representatives (local staff), while maintaining the main responsibilities and power at the top level through strong upward accountability mechanisms. The other major beneficiaries of these reforms are the traditional local leaders who have received another large part of this ‘decentralized’ power through *de jure* decentralization legislation or through *de facto* coercion or collusion with the local DoF staff. Finally, the real ‘losers’ are the end-users (fisherfolk) who have gained only partial control over the resources.



**Fig.3.** Share of power in fisheries co-management. In Africa the bulk of the new power remains with the DoF but has been partially transferred to the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy. Another major player is the local traditional leaders.

## LESSONS

### **Moving beyond the co-management paradigm**

One of the most fundamental (and urgent) challenges for the academic and donor communities in the next few years will be to move beyond the current co-management narrative, recognizing that the existing model (crystallized in the McCay-Berkes framework) does not provide an adequate framework to tackle the more fundamental issues impeding the sector in its attempts to move toward improved governance. “More participation” is not the panacea. In fact, such a view tends to reduce the issues to an overly simplistic one-dimensional problem, while governance reforms in fisheries are in reality a much more complex, multi-dimensional process.

### **Participation, yes but more importantly accountability**

Ensuring or enhancing the participation of the end-users and other legitimate stakeholders in the decision making process is important -as correctly pointed out many years ago by Berkes, Pomeroy, Ostrom, and others [31,32,33]. The involvement of these end-users is expected, in particular, to increase their sense of responsibility and ownership, thus facilitating the self-enforcement of the management system and, in principle, the ‘sustainability’ and equity of the system. However, as highlighted by many experts, e.g. [34,35,21,36], participation without downward accountability is not effective. The involvement of every individual fisher in the decision making-process (that is, direct democracy) is not possible as it would increase *ad infinitum* the transaction costs of the political process. One has therefore to rely on indirect democracy, using representatives of the different stakeholder groups. What recent political and social sciences research on decentralization has shown, however, is that, any direct devolution of power to these representatives is likely to become a source of misuse and abuse, unless these representatives are strongly downwardly accountable to the rest of the community [37,38,39,40].

### **Focusing on implementation issues**

Co-management –and more broadly governance reforms- are high on the agenda of most African countries. It would therefore be misleading to present the failure of co-management reforms as the consequence of lack of official political will. Co-management failure comes essentially from implementation failures. There is therefore an urgent need for academics to turn their attention toward the context-specific nature of co-management implementation [41]. While this has been highlighted many times, there is no ‘one sizes fits all’ solution and the success (or failure) of a co-management programme will essentially depend on local details: the integrity of the local DoF staff and traditional leaders, the balance between the different ethnic and/or socio-cultural groups of fishers (e.g. migrant versus indigenous), the presence of local NGOs, and in particular the pre-reform relationship between all these different groups and individuals. Note that very little in these failures/successes has to do with the resource itself. Most of the issues are institutional.

### **Recognizing the political economy of co-management reforms**

In direct relation to the point above, it is crucial to recognize that the socio-institutional landscapes where governance reforms in general and co-management in particular are implemented are not ‘empty’. These landscapes are in fact the result of a constantly evolving political process that reflects the current distribution of power between different actors (essentially at local level) and their control over the resources. The introduction of co-management has been perceived –and instrumentalized- by these different actors as a new opportunity to continue to shape the socio-institutional landscape in a way that allows them to pursue or even increase their political, social or economic power. In this continuous (open or more subtle) struggle, the poorest and most marginalized of the fishing community have generally been the losers as they usually enter the game with some disadvantages.

The recognition of this political economy dimension has strong implications for the way co-management should be planned and implemented. In particular it means that a good understanding of the current ‘landscape’ and of the current interactions between the different groups likely to be directly or indirectly involved (or excluded) by co-management is essential before the first step of the reform is actually initiated. This preliminary analysis should help predict the changes that are likely to occur following the reform, and thus provide appropriate guidance and recommendations on how to limit the ‘unexpected’ and/or negative effects.

### **The ‘unavoidable’ traditional leaders**

Although this is not exclusive to Africa -as many Pacific fisheries also seem to be in the same situation- African small-scale fisheries are largely still under the strong influence of the local traditional leaders. While co-management could have been one way to reduce this influence (if one wished to do so), field data reveal that it has in fact been rather the opposite. Because co-management projects were usually poorly prepared to face this issue<sup>d</sup>, these traditional leaders have usually been one of the groups that systematically managed to strengthen their local power during the establishment of co-management arrangements. This situation means that a large part of the success (or failure) of these co-management reforms depends on the *bon-vouloir* of these traditional leaders. In particular trying to ignore or bypass these traditional leaders would almost systematically prompt some retaliation.

The influence of these traditional leaders is not, however, necessarily always negative. In some cases, they have been key players ensuring the success of co-managements projects. When this happens, it is, however, essentially the consequence of their own integrity and commitment, rather than the consequence of the co-management arrangement itself. Until clear downward accountability mechanisms are embedded into the process, co-management projects will always depend on the personal commitment and capacities of a few key actors, leaving the overall project’ fate –and its impact on the whole community- entirely in the hand of these few leading actors.

### **Reconsidering the balance between decentralization and devolution**

As evidenced in the five reports considered here, but also through other sources, e.g. [42,43], fishery co-management projects have so far suffered from poor, or even inexistent, relationships with the broader decentralized governance structures. Several reasons may be brought forward to explain this situation. Historically fishery co-management has been promoted –at least in its early stages- independently from decentralization [31,44,16]. The fishery literature is also known to be usually remarkably sectoral in its analysis and links to rural development or other domains (e.g. water management, agriculture) are generally poor [45,46]. On the other ‘side’ of the equation, small-scale fisheries are usually not considered as an important or relevant sector by planners and decision-makers. This situation has certainly contributed to the current rent-seeking predatory behaviour adopted by many local government agencies vis-à-vis the small-scale fisheries.

This predatory relationship can be avoided. A more equitable relationship is possible where both parties (the fishery and the local government) could benefit from one another through a much strongly integrated approach. Better supported small-scale fisheries could clearly contribute to local economic development, thus supporting more effectively the objectives of the local government through revenue generation, but also –perhaps more appropriately- through employment (labour buffer), food security and economic empowerment of women. Ironically local levels of decision making are known to be much more effective to ensure integrated planning than higher (national) levels. Local government should therefore be in a good position to integrate and account for the aspirations and needs of the small-scale fisherfolks. It is therefore the responsibility of the fisheries stakeholders (starting with the DoFs) to make this integration effective for the benefit of the resources and the end-users.



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>a</sup> Note that Kesteven [14], in his commentary on Sen and Nielsen's 1996 article [15], remarks that the typology proposed in the framework is not based on different degrees of power-sharing as stated by its different 'co-authors', but based on the direction of information flow.

<sup>b</sup> See, for instance, the many papers on fishery co-management in the Proceedings of the Bi-Annual Conferences of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, available on-line at <http://www.indiana.edu/~iascp/past.html>

<sup>c</sup> Those reports are part of the international research programme "Food security and poverty alleviation through improved valuation and governance of river fisheries in Africa" funded by BMZ.

<sup>d</sup> We recall that this issue of traditional leader was totally absent from the initial McCay-Berkes framework. Interestingly, it has emerged in the African literature, see, e.g. [17,30].