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New Consumer Markets, Culture and Polycentric Adjustment Processes in Kavango Forest Management

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Abstract

Political, cultural, technological and economic transformations change forest users' incentives for natural resource utilisation, which can cause ecological degradation. Increasing pressure on the resources often leads to multiplying externalities if the institutional framework is not adapted to transformations. We assess how changes in socio-economic conditions and in particular new consumption opportunities and habits in combination with institutional weaknesses increase incentives for resource exploitation. We analyse attempts and capacities of different providers of institutional services such as the government, traditional authorities, development agencies and resource users to adapt institutions in order to avoid externalities.

This field of tension is studied in an interdisciplinary case study on forest management from the Kavango region of Northeast Namibia. In Kavango ecologically and economically important tree resources of the dry-forest savannah are under threat. Critical tree numbers are processed at an unsustainable rate mainly for commercial purposes. We observe that the process is strongly pushed by a rapidly growing cash based consumer market that incites a so far largely subsistent rural population to enter the cash economy by commodifying timber resources. This massive motion is flanked by: a) insufficient information about the ecological values of the resources, and b) a growing demand of a re-emerging timber industry operating with a post-colonial habitus. As a result price-structures do not reflect ecological costs. Attempts of institutional adaptation such as political and economic integration of traditional resource management regimes into emerging political structures largely failed. Reasons are uncertainty and scepticism in the relationships of different actors, a confusing definition of resource rights in this area of communal land-tenure, insufficient monitoring and enforcement, and the fact that existing cultural enforcement options are not fully leveraged.

Synthesizing our results we see the need for a polycentric resource governance approach which redefines the relationships among authorities and agents with overlapping jurisdictions to provide efficient incentives to consider multiscale present and future costs and benefits in resource users' decisions. In particular the integration of existing cultural management mechanisms is of crucial importance.

Keywords: Forest management, market integration, natural resource management, polycentrism, sustainable consumption

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