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“Reconcile land system changes
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Empowering communities: The key to sustainable forest and wildlife management in Ethiopia

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Abstract

In recent decades, the participatory approach has been widely recognised as a key strategy for achieving the sustainable use of natural resources, including forests and wildlife. In line with this, the Ethiopian government has shown political commitment to engaging local communities in rural development projects, particularly in forest and wildlife enterprises. However, the extent to which communities are involved in decision-making processes remains unclear. This case study evaluates the involvement of forest dwellers in an externally initiated participatory forest and wildlife resource management project in Ethiopia. Data were collected using household surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation model was employed to measure the extent of community involvement across four major project phases: planning, implementation, benefit sharing, and monitoring and evaluation. For each phase, four key activities were identified where participation could be assessed and classified as either active (cooperation, empowerment) or passive (domestication, paternalism). If three out of four responses for an activity reflected active participation, it was categorised as active. Otherwise, it was deemed passive. Equal numbers of active and passive responses indicated a mixed type of participation. The findings reveal that respondents predominantly perceived their participation as passive in most project phases: 74.43 % in planning, 67.67 % in benefit sharing, and 52 % in monitoring and evaluation. The implementation phase was the exception, where active participation (55.08 %) surpassed passive participation. Overall, participation was largely limited to consultation, reflecting a typical form of passive involvement. These results highlight the need for a significant shift towards empowering local communities to play a more active role in natural resource management, particularly in decision-making processes that impact their livelihoods and the sustainability of these resources.

Keywords: Citizen participation model, community involvement , forest and wildlife, participatory approach, sustainable use