

# Enabling Equitable Collective Action and Policy Change for Poverty Reduction and Improved Natural Resource Management in the Eastern African Highlands

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite increased awareness of the institutional foundations of development and natural resource management, development and conservation interventions continue to be carried out with an uncritical view of equity issues. The shortcomings lie not only with practitioners, but within research as well. Research on the institutional dimensions of development and NRM continues to emphasize problems rather than solutions. This research tries to address these shortcomings by integrating institutional analysis (for problem identification and targeting of interventions) with institutional interventions (for development of “good practice”).

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted under the rubric of the African Highlands Initiative (AHI), an eco-regional program of the CGIAR, which aims to improve livelihoods and arrest natural resource degradation in the intensively cultivated highlands of eastern and central Africa. AHI works with interdisciplinary teams of scientists and development partners to field test new approaches and synthesize results regionally. Unlike watershed management programs that focus primarily on soil and water conservation, AHI fosters an approach to integrate all components of the production system and landscape. This requires that tradeoffs and synergies between diverse goals be made explicit and managed. It also acknowledges that NRM is inherently political: decisions about which management goals to foster lead to unequal benefits and often favor some groups at the expense of others.

This study reports on findings from the institutional research associated with integrated social, biophysical, and institutional interventions. The primary objective was to develop and document successful approaches for facilitating equitable collective action processes and negotiated NRM solutions.

The research was conducted in four sites, two in Ethiopia and two in Uganda. All are highland micro-watersheds characterized by smallholder farming systems, high population density, clear evidence of natural resource degradation, and their representativeness of larger highland areas within each country. These sites have each served for 5–10 years as benchmark sites for the AHI. Each site is home to one or more ethnic groups with a long history of occupation of the area and limited in-migration from other groups or areas.

In each site, the research began with a situation analysis, using focus group discussions to identify local and external institutions and the participants, beneficiaries, and nature of benefits derived from each. Household interviews were then used to quantify levels and variation in household

assets and participation or involvement with local and external institutions. Second, site and national stakeholder workshops were conducted to share findings and determine action research priorities. The workshops shared feedback from the situation analysis, identified and prioritized NRM issues requiring collective action and changes in institutional practice, and developed preliminary action plans for prioritized topics. Third, site teams conducted action research—both local and higher-level—to test strategies to support solutions to identified problems. The final step was to evaluate outcomes and impacts from the action research intervention through a participatory methodology.

## FINDINGS

Local communities were found to have a rich array of collective action institutions, which in turn provide a variety of economic and social support functions. While some of these were seen to support some groups more than others, most forms of collective action were found to play largely positive roles. However, practices of formal support agencies were found to be biased by wealth, gender, levels of political influence, and other factors, exacerbating inequities over time.

Local forms of collective action seldom emphasize common solutions to felt NRM problems, other than provision of inputs (labor, capital, land). Action research findings have illustrated the potential for improving livelihoods and fostering more sustainable use of natural resources by catalyzing collective action on NRM where it is absent. Effective collective action seems to require use of both informal negotiation support processes and formal bylaw reforms and enforcement. Negotiated solutions and bylaw reforms create stakeholder buy-in, which reduces ambiguity and makes people feel more accountable to other parties when brought to account for their actions. A combination of formal and informal mechanisms seems to be needed to revitalize natural resource governance and related livelihood and environmental service outcomes. External agents (such as NGOs or local government) also have an important role to play, including information provision, community mobilization, facilitation, advocacy, monitoring, and negotiation support.

Strategies to improve NRM at farm and landscape levels proved to be more effective when more equitable decision-making processes were used that explicitly acknowledge diverse “stakes.” However, given the divergence of these stakes, bylaws also played a fundamental role in holding each party accountable to resolutions reached through negotiations.



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Adapting bylaws to local conditions and stakeholder priorities also induced marked livelihood improvements by enabling collective action and technology adoption. However, participatory bylaw negotiations did not reduce the need for bylaw enforcement. Rather, participation made offenders feel more responsible to agreements once accused, increasing the effectiveness of informal efforts to increase compliance.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Collective action serves critical development and social support functions in local communities. External institutions should seek to build upon local institutions that contribute most to livelihood goals, in particular for women and poorer households. Part of this effort should be oriented toward linking technology dissemination with low-risk forms of credit and diversification of assets of the poor.
- External development institutions often unintentionally increase existing inequities by working only with active community members and failing to establish mechanisms for equitable access to project benefits. Innovations to identify and overcome these biases and socially-disaggregated monitoring of interventions are sorely needed.
- Local forms of collective action emphasize enhancing buying power and “safety net” functions, leaving many common NRM problems unaddressed. External support for “horizontal” negotiations among local resource users is needed to support collective solutions to NRM problems that remain unaddressed despite their negative livelihood consequences.
- Extension and development organizations must consider the political dimensions of NRM. There are winners and losers from any given development intervention, and there are diverse interests and stakes on any given issue. Organizations must therefore learn to foster more equitable solutions to development and NRM challenges through stakeholder identification, negotiation support, and socially-disaggregated monitoring of interventions.
- NGOs, local government, and other development actors need to get involved in natural resource policy formulation and implementation processes. Their facilitation skills are important for fostering more equitable and participatory natural resource governance processes since there are close links between negotiation support, technological innovation, and rules and regulations on NRM.
- Fostering collective action to address felt community needs requires informal negotiation support, formal bylaw reforms, and forms of enforcement adapted to local social realities. Participatory bylaw reforms create stakeholder buy-in, which reduces the cost of enforcement and reduces ambiguity. Neither formal nor informal mechanisms would be fully effective without the other.
- The external agent, whether an NGO, community-based organization, or local government, can help bear the transaction costs of organizing collective action by providing information and mobilizing communities. Since rules restrict certain land use behaviors seen to harm other stakeholders, technological alternatives can also help landowners to bear the livelihood costs of good governance.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Policymakers must seek ways to build upon the strengths of local institutions and the crucial social support functions they provide, in particular for women, the poor, and other marginalized groups. They must also seek ways to facilitate the participation of poorer households by assisting them in bridging the assets gap that hinders their ability to invest.
- Many national natural resource policies exist, although many are not followed. Participatory bylaw reforms suggest an interest in improved natural resource governance among local residents. More attention should be paid to building the “soft skills” and

processes required to create community buy-in to good governance, and to enforcement mechanisms that are effective, while providing alternatives (technologies, cost sharing among stakeholders) where policies restrict livelihoods options.

- The partitioning of mandates between research, extension, and law enforcement agencies causes these issues to be treated separately and important synergies to be lost. Mechanisms and incentives for institutional cooperation toward more equitable and negotiated solutions to NRM are needed to harvest the potential of technology-governance synergies.
- Local residents can formulate NRM bylaws that address their own felt needs, but bylaw enforcement by communities themselves is more of a challenge. Communities want local government to play a role in the enforcement of bylaws. This should be taken into account in the process of local government reforms in the region so that participatory governance processes can be institutionalized in the region.
- Empirical research on the institutional aspects of development has advanced understanding of the pitfalls of development practice and the characteristics of local institutions. Two fundamental gaps remain. The first is ensuring widespread access to lessons learned among development practitioners to improve their practice. The second is the need to move beyond the identification of problems to the identification of viable solutions (“good practice”) through the coupling of empirical and action-oriented research.

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