

Participation and Stakeholder Dynamics in the Water Reform Process in Zimbabwe: The Case of the Mazoe Pilot Catchment Board

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Abstract:¹ One aspect of water reform in Zimbabwe is increased stakeholder participation in water management through catchment boards. This paper uses discourse analysis to explore relationships among different stakeholders in consultative meetings facilitated to achieve wider participation among all stakeholders. Consultation over the water allocation system provides a case for the analysis of interfaces where multiple stakeholders meet and interact. Though inclusive of a wide range of stakeholders, catchment boards are far from being democratic organisations. Water democracy without water development is difficult to achieve, while water democracy that ignores the present dualism in access to resources perpetuates differentials in participation by all stakeholders.

Introduction

In the proposed Zimbabwe Water Act to replace the Water Act of 1976, increased stakeholder participation in management through catchment boards is an important facet of the new law. Idealized notions of participation have caused a crisis of expectations between stakeholders at all levels.² Case material shows that the reluctance of state to relinquish control is widespread. For example, the delays in passing draft legislation in Thailand, the reluctance to use existing authority to empower indigenous forest protection committees in India, the ineffectiveness of most measures that favour indigenous groups in South America, and the devolution of authority to local government officials rather than to user communities in Zimbabwe.³ Increasingly, the advocates of inclusive decision making have begun to raise questions about its limits. The level of participation moves from non-participation through degrees to tokenism to full involvement.⁴ However, populist development literature suggests that there are cases where participation in decision-making has meant more actors are moving from being users choosers of services to become actors agents in broader processes of governance.⁵ However, this reversal of roles is only possible if all stakeholders are able to negotiate and bargain fairly within the catchment boards.

Increased stakeholder involvement means creating partnerships through which goals can be pursued. However, convergent interests of various stakeholders do not always mean

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i3a2.pdf>

identical interests.⁶ To form effective partnerships, one must know one's partners well.⁷ According to Uphoff et. al. (1997) the wisest course is to bring divergent views and interests into the open, where they can be dealt with under the rubric of a united organization. Differences are then framed by overarching goals on which there is agreement. In most countries there is an imbalance of power among various stakeholders, with the state often retaining most of the power.⁸ According to Bourdieu (1990), bringing together different interests is not sufficient in itself to promote cooperation. Meaningful participation in the negotiation process is impossible without some power to influence the results. Marquet (1971) defines power as an ability by one actor to impose one's views or opinions on others. To mount a credible bid to exercise power, individuals must combine with others; thus power is accumulated and exercised in the context of political organization.⁹ Further, Bratton (1994) notes that power is a scarce resource, which tends to crystallize within a limited number of organizations. Power is also something that is possessed, accumulated and imposed upon others.¹⁰ Vallereal (1992) also notes that power always implies struggle, negotiation and compromise. Without power there is no bargaining position and negotiation becomes a one-sided affair.¹¹

Stakeholder participation in water management involves a rewearing of power among multiple stakeholders who share decision-making power. In this new scheme, old elites must give up some of their power and recognize the voice of previously marginalized stakeholders. However, much research demonstrates that this rewearing of power has not occurred.¹² Often the following assumptions are made about multi-stakeholder relationships:

- Equitable power sharing exists among the stakeholders
- All stakeholders are aware of and want to exercise power
- All stakeholders consistently feel the need to participate in decision-making arenas

Despite the stated intentions of social inclusion, it has become clear that many multiple-stakeholder initiatives do not deal well with the complexity of actor differences.¹³ Stakeholders are neither homogenous in composition and concerns, nor are they necessarily harmonious in their relations. This article examines relationships among stakeholders involved in a consultative process to decide on the appropriate mechanism for sharing water in one of the two pilot catchment areas in Zimbabwe; the Mazoe Pilot Catchment.

WATER REFORM AND STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN CATCHMENT BOARDS

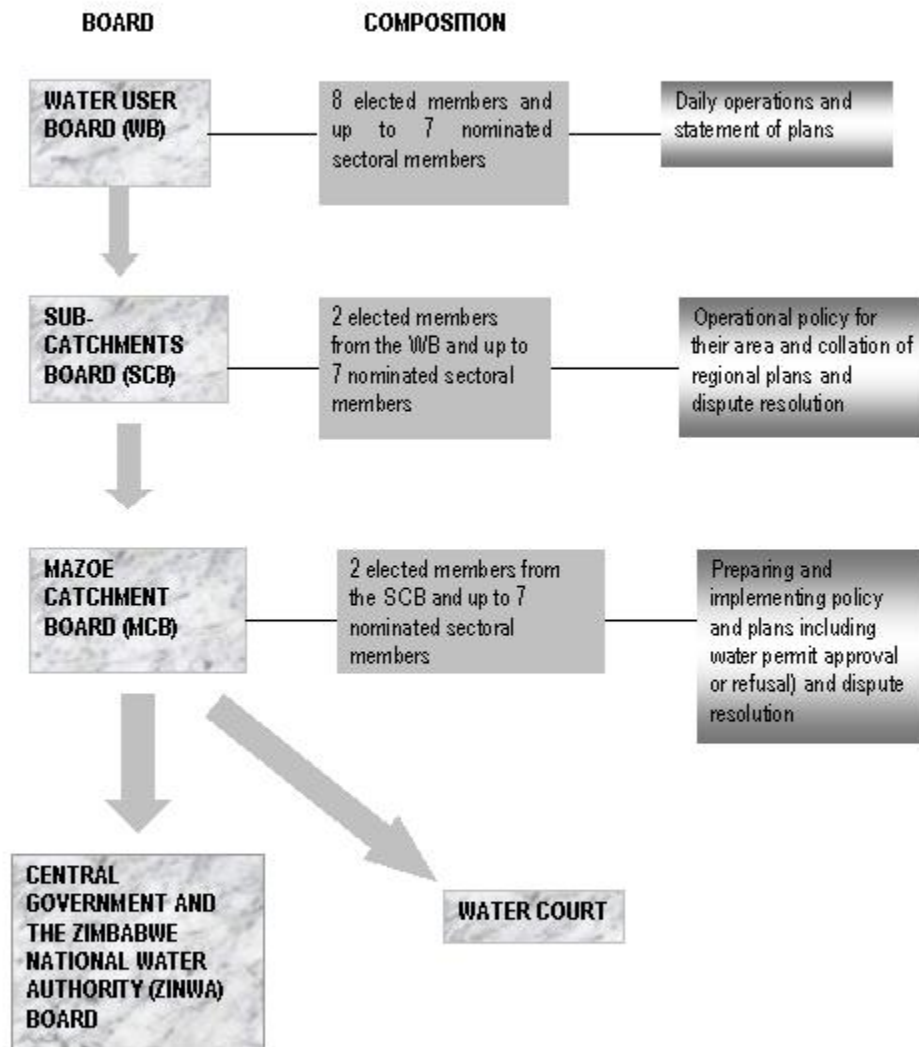
Following the avid interest by local and international researchers in collaborative management initiatives like Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), water reform in Zimbabwe has received much attention. Research has focused on many aspects of water reform; from institutional and legal aspects to politics and advocacy for reform.¹⁴ There are many more unpublished papers presented at several workshops that have been held to review the water reform process.¹⁵ According to Dougherty (1997), the Mazoe Pilot Catchment is representative of the seven catchments in Zimbabwe.

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that some of the issues highlighted in this catchment will also be faced in other catchments. Dougherty describes the Mazoe Pilot Catchment thus:

- It falls within two provinces and requires inter-provincial cooperation. Zimbabwe is divided into 8 provinces
- There is wide range of uses including large-scale and small-scale commercial agriculture, mining, urban land use and wildlife areas.
- Inter-catchment issues take on local and international implications since the Mazoe eventually flows into Mozambique.

The proposed structure for stakeholder representation in the pilot catchment is shown in Figure 1. At the local level, water user boards have been defined as areas with boundaries similar to the existing river boards. However, in some cases the boundaries have been defined on other criteria and therefore do not necessarily fit with the areas under the jurisdiction of the River Boards. The RB chairperson and deputy sit on the sub-catchment board. There are also two representatives from each sub-catchment board seated on the pilot Catchment Board. Dougherty notes that different stakeholders are “well able to work together” though relationships with a decentralised state structures such as the proposed Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) will provide backstopping support to the proposed catchment boards.¹⁶

Figure 1. The Proposed Institutional Structure for the Mazoe Catchment Board



Source: Dougherty 1997

In order to understand how the water reform process is unfolding in Zimbabwe, we must examine the relationships between the state and civil society.¹⁷ Until now, the state has been viewed as all powerful, and in control of formulating and implementing policy. However, as is the recent case in many African countries, the state is becoming weaker and withdrawing from local level management. Further more there are increased pressures for the state to engage other stakeholders in decision-making processes. In Zimbabwe, attempts at democratising management exist in the wildlife and forestry sector with varying degrees of success. Derman and Ferguson (1999) examine how water reform has been shaped by wider political and economic crises facing the country with the result that water has become the focus of wide-ranging contestations for equitable distribution of resources. The Water Act of 1976 granted water rights through the Priority Date System. Under this system, rights could be held in perpetuity. New applicants for water in catchments where there were many rights holders would therefore have little chance of getting rights. In many catchments rights are largely held by commercial farmers whose families have held these for many years. Few, if any, communal farmers held rights to water. The act provided for the formation of River Boards, but membership to these was limited to water right holders. Since water rights were held largely by commercial farmers and other commercial concerns (e.g. industry, mines, corporations, urban areas) the 1976 Act excluded new and emergent commercial users and communal area users. Therefore, the specific objectives for water reform in Zimbabwe, the promotion of stakeholder participation in the decision-making processes and the decentralization of water management institutions to the catchment and sub-catchment levels.

Though examples of democratising management exist in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the developing world, different resources seem to require different types of organisational arrangements for working with multiple-stakeholders. In Zimbabwe, CAMPFIRE worked through producer communities coordinated by district councils. Forest resources management occurred through committees under the control of the Forestry Commission that manage non-timber products from state forests. For water, these institutions have taken the form of catchment boards. The Royal Dutch Embassy funded consultancy recommended the creation of a pilot catchment authority to serve as a model for decentralised water management.¹⁸ In 1990, the Mazoe River Board petitioned the government through the Mazoe River Community Development Group (MRCDG) to be the second pilot catchment authority.¹⁹ The MRCDG group includes many stakeholders and has shown a great willingness to work with communal farmers. However, Derman and Ferguson (1999) describe the group as class based and dominated by members with commercial interests. The Water Resource Management Strategy Group (WRMSG) was asked to assist both pilot catchments and is now assisting all stakeholders that seek to form catchment board. Until the act is passed, the pilot catchment can only be involved in planning. As part of this planning process, the catchment board must decide on a fair and equitable means of distributing water from the catchment. That stakeholders in the Mazoe catchment petitioned the state to create their board suggests a high level of stakeholder involvement and interest. Consequently, the Mazoe catchment board provides an interesting case study for assessing the role of stakeholder involvement in the reform process.

In response to frequent calls for logistical support the board received a small grant from German Technical Service (GTZ) to conduct 5 sub-catchment level meetings to discuss the

Fractional Water Allocation System which the Mazoe Pilot Catchment Board wishes to adopt.²⁰ In the proposed system, allocation of water is approved on the basis of the application and only granted in relation to total available water in the catchment. These sub-catchment meetings focus on the allocation system and provide a barometer to gauge the level of participation by stakeholders both in the pilot catchment and in the broader water reform process. However, events that are described in this paper are highly context dependent and are used only as cases in which key concerns about participation in multiple stakeholder organisational arrangements can be addressed.

Bolding et al. (1997) identify decentralisation of water allocation through the involvement of local water organisations as one of the crucial elements of successful water reform. Agrawal and Ribot (1999) define decentralisation as any act in which central government formally cedes powers to stakeholders and lower level institutions. Devolving power to lower level stakeholders involves creating a realm of decision-making where a variety of lower-level stakeholders can exercise some autonomy. Agrawal and Ribot suggest that there are three distinct facets of decentralisation: stakeholders, power, and accountability. Agrawal and Ribot argue that state without an understanding of the power of various actors, the domain in which they exercise their power, and to whom they are accountable, it is impossible to learn the extent of decentralisation. According to Ribot, the frustration with top-down management has led to the privileging of civil society in decisions formerly reserved for the state. Yet it is becoming evident that participation by other actors is more than just a privilege, it is a fundamental right that determines the sustainability of different management options. Ribot also argues that political decentralisation requires a switch from decentralised administrative despotism to autonomous forms of locally accountable representative governments. However, Agrawal and Ribot find that though advocates of decentralisation often justify it on grounds of the increased participation, efficiency, or equity, most efforts fail to increase the powers of some stakeholders, particularly local communities. This paper examines the relationships among stakeholders and the shifts in power, particularly between the state and commercial farmers, commercial farmers and local communities, and local community relations with the state.

METHODOLOGY

Since 1998, the Centre for Applied Social Sciences at the University of Zimbabwe has collaborated on a BASIS/CRISP²¹ funded programme to monitor the water reform process in Zimbabwe. The study focuses on the Mazoe pilot catchment that extends over an area of 21 000 square kilometres and spans three provinces (Manicaland, Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central). This is one of a number of papers focusing on different aspects of the reform process. Program researchers attend all the meetings held by organisations at different levels of the catchment. Some of the insights from these meetings inform the discussion and conclusion of this article.²²

The dominant source of data for this article was these consultative meetings. Stakeholder groups are considered an interface where relationships are negotiated. Umans (1995) defines an interface as a critical point of intersection or linkage between different social systems or fields of social order where structural discontinuities based upon difference of normative values and

social interests are most likely found. Analysts of social interfaces attempt to reveal the dynamic and emergent nature of these interactions and show how the objectives, perceptions, priorities and relationships of various actors are influenced as a result of the encounter.²³ Typically these interacting parties are differentiated in terms of relations of power.²⁴ This paper treats the consultative meetings as interfaces where we can begin to make sense of the relationships among stakeholders in the Mazoe pilot catchment. Further, Mukamuri (1995) suggests that in these meetings, one can view dialogue as socially constructed text that results from regular negotiations and contests. Fortmann (1995) suggests that meetings of this nature are forums for discursive strategies where stories are an important “oral manifestation of local discourse seeking to define and claim resources.”²⁵ However, the public nature of group meetings may promote dissident views held by a small group while silencing the majority views.²⁶ In existing Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) literature, practitioners suggest various methods to increase group participation. However, if we understand participation at these consultative meetings as the discursive strategies that Fortmann describes, there is a danger of forestalling processes of negotiations and bargaining by simply labelling them as conflicts. Some negotiations are low visibility processes and difficult to identify. There is no attempt in this paper to expose these processes. Rather, observations are largely confined to group dynamics, individual posturing and outcomes from the consultative meetings.

The duration of these meetings varied between one and half hours to three hours. Proceedings were not fully documented and there was no evidence that discussions were recorded. All meetings were very well attended, suggesting a stakeholder participation of between 90-100% at some locations. Data was collected from 3 of the 5 planned consultative meetings. Issues raised in these three meetings are relevant to the whole consultative process within the pilot catchment and will likely have wider relevance in the general reform process with Zimbabwe’s water sector.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study ¹: Nyagui Sub- Catchment Board Meeting (October 6, 1999)

Participants at this meeting were a mixed group of white commercial farmers, representatives of water boards and catchment boards, district council and government officials, and representatives of area chiefs. Participation appeared largely skewed towards commercial farmers and a few government and district council representatives. However, many commercial farmers left the meetings at teatime. Villagers attended the meeting but their participation was largely limited to seeking clarification and trying to understand their role in the meeting. All villagers left at the end of the meeting. In the Nyagui meeting, many villagers interrupted the meeting near its end because they wanted to adjourn and catch buses to their home areas.

The main issues for commercial farmers concerned security of tenure for stored water and how the proposed water allocation system would impact their investment in agriculture. The official response to this concern was that access to bigger dams would guarantee requested allocations as well as any surpluses that may exist in the catchment. In the words of one district

council representative, the issue of security and storage remained fundamental in the discussion of equity in the new system. As far as he was concerned, “the new and proposed system changes nothing. Those with dams or money to build dams still have a comparative advantage over those in communal areas who have no hope in hell of ever building and sustaining one.” Another participant echoed this concern and stated that “we may say we are changing the system, yet we are bringing it back in another way. This is cosmetic change. Now we say those with dams must be given surplus water. What has changed then? Where is the change?” Some villagers wanted to know who would pay for water storage in communal areas or if they would have rights to use storage in dams on adjacent commercial farms. The answer was that “no one would build dams except yourselves. Don’t wait for the government. They have failed to do this over many generations and will not start now.” This pronouncement seemed to take the wind out of the whole discussion and raised the concern that perhaps the participation of villagers in water allocation and management was irrelevant.

The few villagers who actively participated were concerned to differentiate between different sources of water. While most understood the reasoning behind allocating and managing water in dams, few understood the reasoning for doing this with small weirs, boreholes, pools or springs. In the words of the moderator of the meeting, “water is water. No distinction is made about which source. It is use that will determine whether that water should be paid for or not.” Another issue highlighted by villagers was the issue of “fundamental rights to subsistence water,” especially in periods of shortage when they face unnecessary hardships while neighbours have water in their dams. Thus “water should be available to all, rich or poor, but the person who compounds the water is the one who makes the river dry.” At this point, conflicts between commercial farmers and villagers were highlighted as downstream people faced hardships while commercial farmers “sat on their water. The advantage belongs to the person who owns a dam.”

Many participants wanted to know whether any provisions had been made in the new act to allow access by villagers to some of this water for subsistence purposes. This issue points to the fundamental differences between various stakeholders and their understanding of rights to water. In the rural context, water that is usually more rigorously controlled, or even privatised becomes less, stringently controlled during drought periods. As with traditional water rights there some accommodation to any human being’s basic right to water for domestic and livestock use.²⁷ This is a different case with many commercial farmers whose view of resources is essentially that private rights remain private regardless of circumstances.

Most of the villagers active in this meeting were representatives of water boards or sub catchment boards. Yet they stated that “we have come to the meeting but we don’t know what it is about.” This unwillingness to identify with the process, what researchers later called orchestrated ignorance, was actually a strategy used by the villagers to reject the proposal. In many instances, participants stated that they could not endorse a proposal that they did not understand. Few villagers showed much interest in the discussions at these meetings. Some participants blamed their lack of participation on the use of English in the meeting. In some cases, there were clearly discrepancies in the translations, which the participants found annoying. One district councillor pointed out that it seemed the catchment board themselves were not yet clear about the proposal. Therefore the councillor recommended that “they should

go back and straighten out the differences before seeking to close the gaps that exist between the catchment board and other lower structures.”

Case Study²: Nyadiri Sub-Catchment Consultative Meeting (October 13, 1999)

The Nyadiri consultative meeting was well attended and dominated by the presence of traditional leaders. There were three chiefs and fifteen headman, two councillors and thirteen members of the various water boards that constitute the Nyadiri sub-catchment. There were no women represented in this group. Though it is widely acknowledged that local traditional authorities should be involved with water boards and sub-catchment boards, they have not been consistently involved in the process. Most chiefs expressed the sentiment that they did not understand why they were invited. The chiefs stated that “most people did not know about permits. The meeting was the first time they were being told about such issues or indeed being asked to get involved. As far as water is concerned most people follow the ways of their forefathers and are not aware that this or that use is illegal.” Even when it became evident that more stakeholders would be involved in the new reform process, the participants perceived the meeting as a knowledge-sharing mission with the state, not as a process of consultation. One chief stated that “what I see as a problem is that there were no rules, but now the government wants us to know these rules, so that we understand what will be difficult in the future. They are now talking about permits, but our concern is for our tiny gardens. You must explain to us for what kind of use these rules apply.”

The purpose of the meeting and the “so called” involvement of local communities in the water reform process came as a surprise to some of these chiefs. One chief stated that “when you are ignorant you appear to be difficult because you slow down discussion. I believe that he who wants a store applies to the district council for space to build, you don’t apply if you don’t have money.” He thereby suggested that those who have a stake or a greater interest in water should be involved in the consultations rather than entire communities. However, a representative from the catchment board countered this suggestion, by stating that “in a church if a priest focuses on infidelity, it does not imply that the whole congregation is involved. Therefore, the consultations should involve, everyone even those that appear not to have any interest in using water commercially now but may do so in the future. We want to plan a framework for sharing for the future.” In support of this position, another chief stated “the main drawback that I see in this discussion is that many of us are finding it impossible to plan for what we don’t have. We don’t want to yoke the bull before the rains come. There is conflict here. Lets continue with the discussion to see where it leads us. For a person to buy shoes they must know their size.” Many of the chiefs in the meeting would not believe that water could be shared or that they could be part of the decision-making system. Thus for example, one chief noted that “we can’t share what is flowing. How do we plan or manage what is not there?”

Thus, many participants insisted that the meeting focus on provision of water bodies to marginalised areas before expecting people to participate as equals in decisions about how water should be allocated. Discussing the proposed water allocation system was therefore seen as “wasting time discussing what should happen tomorrow when we have nothing and are unlikely to see these plans. This is like buying maternity dresses for women who were not even

pregnant. You should build dams in communal areas first before we come to this sort of discussion.” To most participants in this group, the discussions were therefore abstract and largely meaningless. One of the important chiefs in the area questioned the meaning of consultation if the purpose was to “sell an alien allocation system” which no one understood and or felt able to judge. The respondent stated that “you just want to confuse us when you know what you want. You know how water should be allocated, yet you come to ask us when we are not even involved in allocation. Is it possible to give a name to a child who is not even there?”

The discussions also highlighted the polarity in views on how the proposed allocation system would influence existing societal relations and provide disincentives for expansion of agriculture in rural areas. One participant observed that the proposed water allocation system would make people with small-scale gardens or irrigation schemes abandon them rather than pay fees for water. The willingness to pay for water is an issue that will need to be addressed, especially where water had long been regarded as a free resource. One responded stated that “This water that you want permits for, who is making it? Who is its owner? Can you really fight over water in the Nyadire sub-catchment? Why would I want a permit for water that is flowing through?” Such stakeholders clearly felt such an allocation system would surely mean an increase in conflicts over scarce resources.

Some of the members of sub-catchment boards seemed to not understand the proportional allocation system, even though they are part of the organisation that is proposing the system of sharing water (also see Figure 1). The ignorance of sub-catchment board members suggests that the centre was operating in isolation from other structures within the catchment. One of the participants stated that “if water user board members and sub catchment board members are also asking questions about water reform, we begin to loose confidence in the programme because there should be no information gap between these board members and the Mazoe catchment board secretariat.” Chiefs expressed concern about the election process for the various boards and noted that most of them were not even aware of the existence of these structures in their areas.

Case Study³: Kairezi Sub-Catchment Board Discussions (October 13, 1999)

The composition of the audience in the Kairezi consultative meeting was thirteen white commercial farmers and twenty-four representatives of rural water boards. There were also some government departments represented at the meeting. From the whispered exchanges between farmers, the facial expressions and tone of responses, some among the white commercial farmers appeared impatient. Though these farmers were representing different water boards, there seemed to have been some prior discussion among them about which issues were to be raised at the meeting. All commercial farmers left the meeting after the tea break, save for the two leaders of sub-catchment boards. Most of the villagers stayed until the end of the meeting, not because they had pressing issues that needed to be resolved, but because money for travel and lunch was only given out at the end of the meeting. Villagers seemed lost in much of the discussion. Most had never applied for, held, or felt the need for a water right.

Commercial farmers dominated the meeting initially, asking questions about security of rights to private existing dams, control over water in those dams, and the relationship with their downstream neighbours. The group of white farmers could be divided into those that wished to understand the mechanics of the proposed system and those that viewed any changes as a threat to established norms and practices. Most of the hostility in the meeting emanated from those commercial farmers with existing rights which they would lose or have to share. There were also a commercial farmers who had wanted to increase their right and some new applicants who found the discussion riveting and non-threatening. Commercial farmers viewed stakeholder involvement in management and allocation of water as a government attempt to transfer state responsibility for providing water to communities. Commercial farmers believed that being part of the stakeholder group would obligate them to support or underwrite projects in their catchments, especially in communal areas, which they perceived as a responsibility that should be shouldered by the state. They further recognized that the disparities in access to other resources would make it difficult to reach consensus. It was stated in informal discussions over tea that such existing inequalities would undermine effective stakeholder participation.

Commercial farmers also expressed concern over conditions within the state bureaucracy, which made the previous system increasingly unworkable and fraught with administrative problems. The procedures of both the old and new system were discussed. The villagers played very little role in this discussion, as most of them noted that they were not acquainted with either system. In addition, doubts were expressed about whether the new system could work given the massive manpower resources required. The issue of payment to bailiffs and other required personnel was discussed. There was agreement that elected members of different council structures could not be expected to work for free. None of the participants wanted to shoulder the transaction costs of devolution, however empowering to themselves.

Participants at this consultative meeting were also concerned that under the proposed allocation system, any activity deemed commercial would pay for water. However, this definition becomes problematic in communal areas where commercial enterprise is often not the primary aim but an outcome when surpluses are sold. Irrigated agriculture outside official irrigation schemes tends to be intermittent and disaggregated, though farmers can derive substantial incomes. Questions were also raised about the mechanics, infrastructure, manpower requirements for measuring water use in communal areas. The water boards suggested that monitoring all small gardens and schemes in their area would be too much work for the potential returns. Participants noted that the revenue is controlled by government and not invested back in the waterboard where it is collected. So there is no incentive for such a system to work. They asked the secretariat what was enabling about a system where the government makes “us charge each other for resources we have invested in but are not accountable to us for the use of that revenue?” For the villagers, the proposed system is a disincentive especially to these used to government appropriating successes in any activity. Many participants also asked how the proposed system would survive the scourge of political interference and patronage associated with it. Giving the councils more control of the revenue would become an incentive for all water to be managed efficiently as the benefits derived would be visible. However, white commercial farmers argued that they did not want to subsidise water use by communal area farmers who were also benefiting commercially.

Villagers were less co-ordinated in their participation and seemed more concerned with issues of investment in water and access to existing dams. There was acknowledgement that since the government did not have money to fund new projects, the users would have to finance these projects. Villagers clearly viewed this as a ridiculous suggestion as they were barely able to subsist on the incomes they made in communal areas. Often issues raised were title deeds and the ownership of water under conditions very different from those on commercial farms. If a communal area farmer decided to construct a dam, it would be more difficult for that farmer to keep other residents from accessing the water. Moreover, the greater threat of siltation made it very expensive to build dams in communal areas. Since catchment boards did not control revenue generated by the permit system, many doubted that the council would be in a position to finance more communal area projects.

Previously, the public consultations that preceded the Pungwe water pipeline project had heightened people's awareness in this catchment that water needed to flow to other downstream users.²⁸ Therefore the issue people raised in relation to this project was "how much of the water in our rivers can we call our water?" Though there was some attempt in the meeting to address downstream users and their rights to water, it was clear that it would remain one of the critical issues that would be debated before the approval of any management and allocation plan. Transboundary resource sharing becomes particularly pertinent in communal areas where there are such close ties between peoples living along borders with other nations.

DISCUSSION

In the introduction we questioned the feasibility of real devolution in water management. Devolution to local actors can be a mechanism of increasing stakeholder participation and power sharing in decision making.²⁹ Murphree (1990) and Murombedzi (1992) both deal with the issue of devolution in wildlife management, highlighting the shift in power over wildlife management between levels of government rather than to villagers. In this context, government increased the autonomy of its regional offices, thereby shifting the structure of local accountability from the central government to local government structures. Yet this strategy preserved the hierarchical relationship between the central government and lower level structures.³⁰ The involvement of stakeholders in the administration and management of catchments suggests that the state has indeed devolved power to the local level. However, participants in the Kairezi meeting remained wary of these new organisational structures. They suggested that the new organisational structures merely added more layers to an already malfunctioning bureaucracy. The connection of the catchment board to ZINWA and the Department of Water meant the council was viewed as an extension of government resulting in bureaucratic decentralisation.³¹ Moreover, as ZINWA will receive its revenue from catchment boards, as happened in the case of CAMPFIRE, ZINWA will probably be reluctant to devolve full control to catchment boards in order to guarantee its continued access to much needed revenue.³² For devolution to truly occur, participants must see the catchment board as a government itself rather than as a department of or an extension of the state.³³

Justifying stakeholder participation in the water reform process

The need for rural stakeholders to participate in NRM decision making has been widely emphasised.³⁴ This need was stressed at every meeting, creating a slogan to face the seemingly insurmountable odds against any co-operative behaviour among stakeholders. Participants statements often as these questioned the role of government and emphasised the need for self-sufficiency. For example, one popular statement was “The Queen could not do it, the Smith government could not do it, and the Mugabe government can’t do it. We have to rely on ourselves and find means to realise our objectives. We must be strong and we must do it ourselves.” Other statements also reiterated this view, such as “We are tired of waiting for the government. We will die waiting” or “People are dying from a sickness called mahalaitis” when referring to frequent requests by villagers for more investment in water by government and other external actors.³⁵ Other statements were more reminiscent of wartime slogans: “This is our country, our water and we want to share it equitably.” Another statement often repeated during the meetings was “masimba kuvanhu – power to the people,” used in these meetings to suggest power to all stakeholders. However, in a situation where, development of water resources has historically favoured one group over another, it is evident that much more effort is needed to define the constituent participants of these organisations.

The proposed reforms are not viewed as homegrown by many participants, suggested by the statement “You have presented your thoughts. Whose water is this? You must not come here to confuse us, then say we are being difficult.” Participants who are part of the catchment board bureaucracy tended to isolate themselves from the proposal, which should have been developed from below, with their consistent input. Throughout the discussions, it was obvious that the lower structures of the catchment do not identify at all with the proposals tabled by the catchment board. The proposed allocation is believed to continue favouring those with infrastructure, particularly white commercial farmers and the state. According to the arguments presented at different meetings, access to a storage facility guarantees access to your allotted water rights as well as any surplus available in the catchment. Villagers with no access to such storage facilities felt their participation only legitimises the proposed allocation system, though there are little benefits for themselves. As one participant noted, this is “so that we hear first hand how they are giving each other water so that when we question it, they will say, ‘but you were there, how can you fight such a system?’ ” Villagers therefore still feel isolated from the process of decision-making. Villagers could not imagine how such a proposal would operate in their own areas. One elderly participant stated “to laugh at a running person, you must have seen them running,” suggesting that you cannot agree to something you cannot even visualise. Though the area covered by the catchment was described and shown on maps, many villagers felt that the defined area included many socio-religious entities and relations between local leaders were not always cordial. Implementation of such a system was therefore likely to face many problems.

Many participants at these sessions felt that the duration of the consultative meetings was too short. A period of three to five days would have been allowed participants to rise above their nervousness, incomprehension, and suspicions, thereby participating more effectively in the meetings. However, this was not possible as funding for the meetings was only sufficient to

host one day consultations in only six of the more than thirty sub-catchments. Thus one participant noted, “These half-baked attempts at consultations are what disillusion participants because they yield nothing and people go away feeling that they have been bamboozled.” Some attendees suggested that this pretence of participation is most problematic as villagers feel cheated and rushed, therefore becoming more convinced that they should resist. The conditions for participation also gave the impression of an unfair advantage for those with their own transport. Most villagers were forced to sit through the entire meeting since per diems and transport money were only distributed at the end of each meeting. Commercial farmers not dependent on these payments often left at any point during the meeting. Some participants complained that the amounts for travel and lunch were very small, making it unattractive to participate in future consultative meetings. This raised the question of who should carry the costs of consultation. Most commercial farmers indicated that time costs were their primary concern.

Power dynamics among stakeholders

Power dynamics among these stakeholders are complex, determined by both geography and historical context. Commercial farmers exercised power through the control of water resources. The system of allocation perpetuated this power. With the new interest in stakeholder participation, political power has shifted to the rural poor who have become the new power elites. However, most of these new power elites do not yet know how to exercise their power. In reality they remain powerless because they have no access to water storage space with which they could negotiate. Instead, those commercial farmers apparently disempowered by the new reforms still retain their control over resources. They have storage space and the ability to trade that space with other stakeholders. Consequently, in the water sector stakeholders with political backing do not necessarily possess real power. In most instances, these new elites are manipulated (blatantly or covertly) into legitimating decisions that they neither understand nor support. In the context of Zimbabwe’s water reform process, participation is not defined by active involvement in discussion and the exchange of ideas but by presence in a room.

The Zimbabwe government and certain donors have together attempted to create a framework for power sharing among stakeholders in the water sector. However, the policy of devolution as instituted by the state does not explicitly allocate equal powers to all stakeholders. Rather, there is an unwritten but obvious belief that stakeholder participation means that power has been shifted to those previously disadvantaged by the water policies of the past or that the presence of communal area farmers can change the entrenched value and institutional systems that previously marginalized them. But the three consultative meetings revealed that most communal area residents do not fully understand this process and do not feel able to participate on an equal footing with other stakeholders who have more experience, knowledge and resources. Moreover, there is a difference between white commercial farmers and villagers regarding strategy and preparation for meetings. Villagers did not seem to communicate or lobby for common positions before meetings. This failure to hold informal discussions in arenas other than those financed by the state or donors seems to suggest that

participation in the so called “catchment board” is not a priority for many villagers. Further problems with villager participation raise questions about the effectiveness of a tiered system of resource management.

Moreover, villagers remain wary of both white commercial farmers and a government state that for many years systematically undermined their confidence about its ability to manage resources. The mistrust between communal and commercial farmers is longstanding. Longstanding biases against local participation are coloured by idioms and metaphors of ignorance that essentially justify the sidelining or ridiculing of views from especially those from communal area stakeholders. In a study of local participation, by Sithole and Edziwa (1999), found that despite the numerous programmes put in place by the state and NGOs to empower as well as increase actual local participation, communal area residents still perceived themselves as powerless, uninformed and without control over the basic means of production. In general, these participants felt meetings were held not to actually consult but to legitimate existing inequalities between commercial farmers and villagers under the guise of friendship. It is therefore a curious paradox that the government with the pilot project seeks to facilitate stakeholder participation amongst groups that essentially have little respect for one another’s opinions or actions on natural resource management. The consultation meeting for the Nyagui catchment is a case in point. Local communal area participants refused to participate in a process over which they had neither control over nor the experience to discuss the matter. Institutional economists have suggested that the degree of participation by different stakeholders is determined by the perception of how much impact their participation will have on real decision-making.³⁶

Using consultative meetings as foci for stakeholder interactions

The data presented here highlights some of the problems of using the consultative meeting as an arena for stakeholder participation. PRA literature suggests that with expert facilitation, group dynamics can be steered away from domineering stakeholders to allow the silent to be heard.³⁷ However, in many of the observed consultative meetings, there was little facilitation and discussions tended to be dominated by minority groups or individuals. In all the meetings, the dominant participants were either commercial farmers or representatives from district councils. Villagers were generally silent in the meetings. However, in the Kairezi meeting, the individual who dominated the discussion had a mandate to do so from other white commercial farmers rather than from his sub-catchment board. Even where white commercial farmers supposedly represented a broader rural constituency, representation appeared to be defined by their own concerns. In such cases, the participant spoke in very general terms about issues affecting communal or commercial farmers rather than directing their comments towards a specific sub-catchment area.

Most communal area residents pointed to their limited English proficiency as the reason for lack of participation. The majority at most of the meetings had a difficult time understanding the issues raised during discussions and some appeared to have difficulties reading the documents circulated at the meetings.³⁸ Yet during tea breaks or on the way to bus stops, participants who seemed neither interested nor able to read the documents were suddenly

observed having heated discussions on the very issues that should have been raised during the meetings. Another issue highlighted by these meetings was that the English-Shona translations were often inaccurate. In all meetings it seemed that Shona could have been used since most white commercial farmers were able to communicate easily in this language. The pressure to respond in English to statements made in English made most of the villagers arguments sound incoherent. Some statements quoted earlier in this paper illustrated how responses from participants were often a mix of the two languages. Thus one respondent commented that “Our responses seem confused and muddled. Do not take this as a sign of ignorance, this is part of the consultation process that you say you want with us.” The difficulties faced with language raise an important issue of communication between multiple stakeholders. Nuances and meanings are potentially misinterpreted through translation or the lack thereof.

A defence of the information presented dominated these discussions. However, there were assurances by the catchment board secretariat that corrections would be made to the proposal and discussed again with the sub-catchment boards. It was not clear how this could be achieved given the limited funding. Thus, as one elderly rural participant stated, “how can you fight with what is written? They just want to know if we can read.” This suggests that modes of communication should vary, as some tend to limit and frighten certain stakeholders. The “they” in this statement refers to the catchment board and their secretariat. It is the characteristic tendency of stakeholders to draw on their multiple identities (particularly race) to deal with differences. Further, the distinction between the secretariat and the lower structures may also suggest that the relationship between structures is still largely top down. Ignorance of the proposal shown by most villagers suggests that the council executive is working in isolation of other organizational structures rather than for or with these structures. The meetings therefore turned out to be exercises in legitimisation of what some stakeholders considered an incomprehensible proposal. That none of the participants in any of the meetings rejected the proposal outright is a surprising result. However, perhaps there was no rejection of the proposal because most participants felt powerless or were even unaware that they could veto or “throw the proposal out.”

Conclusion

As the data presented shows, there are many factors that militate against devolution of control and management over natural resources to multiple stakeholders. Participation is also difficult to achieve where there is a history of stakeholder conflict or confrontation. In all three meetings, the nature of participation by various stakeholders exposed the divides between different participants. In a few cases they revealed situations where co-operation could be possible. However, in most cases participation in a catchment board setting masks the power dynamics by projecting the marginalized groups as empowered groups. The new power elites (villagers) find it hard to exercise power and often must sit back while real power is exercised by participants (white commercial farmers) who have more resources. The power of the new elites in this context only represents a reversal of power distribution among stakeholders. Stakeholder participation is hampered by a backlog of colonial resentment that makes genuine co-operative behaviour impossible. In all meetings, the manner of the commercial farmers

suggests that they have indeed been disempowered and feel no great push to co-operate with the villagers. Under these circumstances commercial farmers must exercise their power more discretely. On the other hand, villagers hide behind masks of ignorance and impatience in order to dissociate their participation from the devolved authorities. Murphree (1999) describes such action as “socially constructed vetoes” where communities exercise their power to express disapproval of processes or actions. The water reform process in Zimbabwe currently promotes a framework for natural resources management which reduces government spending, transfers accountability to water users and yet maintains control over revenues generated for little effort. Moreover, the transaction costs for achieving genuine devolution are very high, especially where communal are residents must be included.

Participants’ perception of the state’s role in resource management have not changed. Government is still seen as an entity distinct from stakeholders which maintains the power of veto, rendering stakeholder participation meaningless. Donor funding may undermine rather than advance participation if participants especially where participants go away feeling out manoeuvred. Furthermore, continued reliance on donor financing of stakeholder participation is unlikely to result in the long-term sustainability of such a process. Despite the overwhelming support for the policy of devolution, no level playing field exists for all stakeholders. The water reform process in Zimbabwe provides yet another example of hastily and ill conceived attempts at solving long- standing disparities among stakeholders without substantive investment in the “glue” that could make such co-operation work.

Notes

1. This paper is based on work undertaken as part of the Broadening Access and Strengthening Input Market Systems/collaborative Research Support Program (BASIS/CRISP) in Zimbabwe. Several people in the project contributed comments that helped shape this paper. Project personnel (Claudious Chikozho, Sylvester Hwenha and Professor Bill Derman) have contributed insights and comments on the early drafts of the paper. Professor Campbell and Dr Dore reviewed initial drafts of the paper. Claudious Chikozho and Sylvester Hwenha attended some of the meetings with me and contributed insights on stakeholder dynamics and participation. Names of individuals who made statements cited in this paper have been protected.
2. White 1996.
3. Arnold 1998.
4. Arnstein 1969.
5. Arnstein 1969, Cornwall and Gaventa 2000.
6. Fisher 1995.
7. Weber et al. 2000.
8. Bratton 1994.
9. Bratton 1994, 233.
10. Vallareal 1992
11. Ingles e. al. 1999
12. See Murphree 1994, Guijit and Shah, 1998.

13. Guijit and Shah 1998, Edmunds and Wollenberg 2000.
14. For institutional and legal aspects see Nhira 1997; for politics and advocacy for reform see Derman and Ferguson 1999.
15. University of Zimbabwe workshop on "Water for Agriculture: Current Practices and Future Prospects" (March 11-13, Harare, Zimbabwe).
16. Dougherty 1997, 43.
17. Nhira 1997, Derman and Ferguson 1999.
18. Chatora et al. 1996, Nhira 1997, Derman and Ferguson 1999.
19. Dougherty 1997.
20. Mazoe Board (April 5, 1998)
21. BASIS/CRISP – Broadening Access and Strengthening Input Market Systems/Collaborative Research Support Programme.
22. This paper is one of several papers focusing on various aspects of the water reform process. Already published and excellent complement to this paper is Derman, B. and Ferguson, A. (1999). "Against the Flow: Activism and Advocacy in the Reform of Zimbabwe's Water Sector." *Culture and Agriculture* 21, no. 3: 3-9.
23. Long and Long 1992, Bratton 1994, Scoones and Thompson 1994.
24. Scoones and Thompson 1994.
25. Fortmann 1995, 2.
26. Goebel 1996.
27. Sithole 1999.
28. The Pungwe Pipe Line Project supplies water to a nearby city of Mutare. The environmental impact assessments for the project emphasised the need to allow water to flow downstream to other users especially those in Mozambique.
29. Ribot 1999.
30. Burkie et al. 1999.
31. Agrawal and Ribot 1999.
32. See Murphree 1990, Murombedzi 1992.
33. Mahapatra 1999.
34. Plant and Plant 1992, WECD 1989, The Ecologist 1992.
35. Mahalaaitis is an anglicised form of a Shona word mahala which means without working for something, or free.
36. Burki et al. 1999.
37. Long and Long 1992, Goebel 1999, Scoones and Thompson 1994.
38. CASS undertook to translate the document for the communal people.

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