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## Power and Politics in Fisheries Co-management

*Programmes in Southern Africa*

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*Publication date:*  
2010

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Wilson, D. C., Ahmed, M., Delaney, A., Donda, S., Kapasa, C. K., Malasha, I., Muyangali, K., Njaya, F., Olesen , T., Poiosse, E., & Raakjær, J. (2010). *Power and Politics in Fisheries Co-management: Programmes in Southern Africa*. Innovative Fisheries Management Publication No. 224

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# **Power and Politics in Fisheries Co-management Programmes in Southern Africa**

Innovative Fisheries Management Publication No. 224

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## ***Introduction***

One of the most important set of experiments with the scaling up of natural resource management institutions in Africa has involved fisheries co-management programmes. Fisheries co-management is an arrangement where responsibility for resource management is shared between the government and user groups. This arrangement can run from the government making decisions based on a minimal exchange of information with fishers to government delegating authority and the fishers keeping them informed about progress (Sen and Raakjær-Nielsen 1996). This approach has been used extensively in Africa, most often tending toward the minimal exchange pole, as part of the overall trend toward community-based natural resource management. The idea is that co-management will release fishers' knowledge and cooperation toward the sustaining of fish stocks. These things are sometimes achieved. Especially when mobilized on larger scales, however, co-management programmes depend for their success on how they are embedded in the realities of economic competition and political power at both local and regional levels.

Fisheries are a shared, migratory resource and small-scale approaches often have limited impact on resource conservation. Because of this, some co-management programmes have attempted to address conservation on large water bodies. In this paper we examine one such programme in each of Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. These have all taken the form of replicating around the water body village management committees (VMCs) that are nested within district level committees. These programmes were initiated by government fisheries agencies working with NGOs or donors. The ones examined here also utilized traditional authorities in variable and sometimes important roles. Examining the implications of the different combinations of institutions that are involved in these programmes can yield insight into how power and politics influence outcomes when the trying to carry out community based resource management across large scales.

The research reported on here is one product of the ten-year (1993-2003) Worldwide Collaborative Research Project on Fisheries Co-management (WCRPFC). The WCRPFC did empirical research on fisheries co-management in both Asia and Africa. During the first five years, Phase I of the project focused on descriptive case studies co-management experiences. It produced a large number of research products, culminating in an edited volume reviewing global experiences with co-management (Wilson et al., 2003) and a policy brief (Raakjær-Nielsen et al., 2004). In Africa Phase II was characterized by a coordinated attempt to test a particular set of hypotheses generated by the qualitative research in Phase I. This paper reports the qualitative analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews done with participants of large scale co-management programmes on the Mweru-Luapula system in Zambia, Lake Malombe in Malawi, and the Atlantic Ocean in Mozambique.

The paper begins with a review of fisheries co-management. This section draws mainly on the descriptive studies done in Phase I of the WCRPFC, many of which are available as grey literature. It also draws on published work of other scholars. Then we turn to a report of the Phase II activities. These activities were launched by a workshop held in 2000 which formulated a set of general hypotheses to be examined in the three countries. The second half of the paper reports on the methods used to examine these hypotheses and the main results.

## ***Background on Fisheries Co-management in Africa***

Most co-management arrangements on the African continent have been introduced and driven by governments, often as a result of NGO or donor initiatives, and remain largely top-down

(Hara and Raakjær Nielsen, 2003). The motivation from the government's perspective has been access to information at the local level (Wilson, 2003a), particularly to aid enforcement (Haraldsdottir, 2000). In Western and Southern Africa the national-level legal frameworks began in the late 1990s to shift toward supporting co-management. Legislation in those years moved forward in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire and Benin (Raakjær-Nielsen and Sverdrup-Jensen, 1999). In general the organization of government fisheries management and research services has not reflected any move towards co-management (Donda, 2001; Hara and Raakjær-Nielsen, 2003).

Only limited empowerment of the local fishing population can be observed in existing co-management efforts (Hara and Raakjær-Nielsen, 2003). It is too simple to argue that the top-down implementation of co-management in Africa is attributed to a lack of political will, the situation is more complex. In fact, local co-management groups themselves often place great emphasis on their role as enforcers of government rules. Debates between local committees and government officers about the level of appropriate policing authority are common. Community-based organizations doing enforcement work related to issues including and beyond resource management is hardly an alien model in Africa. On Lake Victoria, for example, beach leaders, political parties and local voluntary crime fighters, all of whom make some rules but who are mainly enforcement groups for wider institutions, are a much more common model of local organization than autonomous resource management groups (Wilson, 2002).

One of the most commonly heard criticisms of the community based natural resource management has been the treatment of rural communities as homogeneous (Wilson, 2003b). Within fishing communities' particular fishing rights or techniques are rarely the basis of a local identity (Magrath, 1989). Fishery conflicts usually express other kinds of divisions such as ethnicity (Malasha, 2002), gender (Medard and Wilson, 1996), colonial domination (Malasha, 2002) and class (Malasha, 2002). This last category includes the very common conflicts between large scale and small scale fishing boats and operations (Platteau, 1989; Poesse, 2002; Sene, 1985). Questions of security and net theft are also significant problems and can be the main rationale for local organizing (Wilson, 2002).

Perhaps the most common basis of fisheries conflicts in rural Africa is seasonal and longer term migration (Atti-Mama, 1999; Donda, 2001; Konan, 1999; Nieland et al., 1996). Migration can catalyse or exacerbate conflicts based on other categories (Jul-Larsen and Malasha, 1999; Malasha, 2002) or on resource depletion (Donda and Njaya, 2002; Konan, 1999). It is important to note that while conflicts may be based on these many different conflicting needs and identities, they are most commonly expressed as conflicts about "traditional" fishing rights and very often "destructive" fishing techniques rather than as direct criticism of the other group. Recent research by Jul-Larsen et al. (2002) on African inland waters led them to argue that where freshwater system water levels fluctuate, as is very common in Africa, an increase in numbers of users may actually do little or no long-term damage to the resource, in contrast with the much more dangerous introduction of new technology or access to large scale markets. Hence, aquatic resources acting as a fall back for poor people suffering, e.g. a failed agricultural season, is not in conflict with resource conservation. These findings raise important questions for fisheries co-management which too often seems most effective when motivated by a desire to exclude outsiders from the resource.

Wilson (2003a) argues that community motivations for participation in co-management usually stem from one of two things: a) a desire for the resources that co-management programmes, particularly those involving donors and NGOs often provide; and b) conflicts that the community needs help resolving because of declining resources, new fishers coming

into new areas, the introduction of more intensive techniques, or conflicts over space for gears. In these common cases, conflict provides the motivation for community participation and can mean more active and authentic interest in the programmes. This is a well known partial explanation used, for example, to explain the success of certain co-management programmes in Malawi (Donda, 2001; Hara et al., 2002) and Mozambique (Poisson, 2002). Other scholars have suggested that conflicts undermine co-management. Community homogeneity is, in fact, classically supposed to contribute to the success of local management (Ostrom, 1990). Internal divisions have made decision-making difficult, been reflected in perverse incentives behind compliance with management measures (Nyikahadzoi, 2002), and made it difficult to initiate co-management (Medard et al., 2002).

Closely related to the conflict problem is the appropriate relationship between fisheries co-management institutions and local elites. These elites cannot be avoided and they are often the ones that make co-management legitimate and even possible in communities.

The term “traditional authorities” (TA) covers many different local institutions, but they are mainly chiefs or kings holding offices based in ethnic groups. Village headmen often, but not always, report to TAs. Involvement of TAs in resource management in colonial times was integrated in or even created by the British under “indirect rule”. On independence natural resource management of fisheries was usually formally shifted to the central governments (Hviding and Jul-Larsen, 1995), but there are many examples of resistance to this and the TAs have had a considerable resurgence in recent years in local fisheries management in both Southern (Kapasa, 2004; Lopes and Gervasio, 1999) and Western (Atti-Mama, 1999) Africa. In Mozambique despite efforts from politicians, the traditional institutions are “de facto” the most respected authorities in the community, much more so than the formal government authorities (Lopes and Gervasio, 1999). In Zambia the experience has been that fisheries co-management programmes that involve TAs continue to function when NGO support has been withdrawn, while those that ignore the TAs do not. A different outcome, however, was experienced in Malawi where a co-management programme that involved TAs directly in the management committee was less successful as one only composed by elected fishers (Hara et al., 2002).

The role of TAs in fisheries co-management is often problematic. Their authority is commonly contested, and the relationship between the TAs and the central governments is often strained. They may not have an interest in preserving fish stocks (Allison et al. 2001). Some TAs are weak and ineffective, and observers have argued that even strong ones make their best contribution when part of a wider governance framework (Scudder and Connelly, 1985). TAs often grant access to the fishery to both local people and migrants from outside. Granting such access is a source of revenue in the form of both cash and fish levies that remain in their personal control (Jul-Larsen and Malasha, 1999; Hara et al., 2002; Lopes and Gervasio, 1999; Nieland et al., 1996). Co-management arrangements have challenged these privileges. The degree to which TAs are accountable to the people they represent is highly variable, but often low. Weak accountability has led to a number of documented abuses within decentralized natural resource management programmes (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999; Ribot, 1998; Ribot, 2002).

Tensions with local elites are not restricted to the TAs. In Zambia, local governments have powers to place levies on fish that are the focus of complaints similar to those around the TAs about transparency in the use of funds (Kapasa, 2004). Haraldsdottir (2000) argues that the village fishing committees in Malawi are often made up of wealthy boat owners and that women especially are excluded. Lopes and Gervasio (1999) make a similar critique of co-management in Mozambique. In their comparison of the more successful Lake Chiuta co-

management programme with the less successful Lake Malombe programme, Hara et al. (2002) and Donda (2001) point to the fact that on Lake Malombe crew members turnover is high, gear and boat owners do not go fishing and the catch share system leaves the crew with no conservation incentive. On Lake Chiuta the gear owners also fish, which has resulted in stronger peer monitoring. Lake Malombe has a high percentage of non-fishers on the co-management committees while this is not the case on Lake Chiuta.

In finding ways to address these tensions around the local elites, several scholars have focussed on the make-up of the local co-management committees. Suggested remedies usually involve calls for inclusiveness, accountability and transparency.

### ***Summary of WCRPFC Phase II Research***

The Phase II WCRPFC research was launched at workshop in Cape Town in 2000. At the workshop, the following three hypotheses were identified for investigation in respect to large-scale co-management efforts in Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia. Participating in the workshop were the Departments of Fisheries in Malawi and Zambia, and the National Institute for Development of Small Scale Fisheries in Mozambique. The hypotheses were identified through participatory reflections on the Phase I cases studies. This broad participation resulted in strong buy-in and commitment to the Phase II field work from the participants and motivated extensive interviewing. While lacking in Popperian clarity, the hypotheses functioned well as a research guide.

- 1. If co-management programmes involve traditional authorities and government departments, that are seen to be trustworthy, transparent in their operations, and operating cooperatively and equitably, the programmes will be stronger.*
- 2. Having a greater mixture of stakeholders represented in management committees will lead to stronger co-management.*
- 3. More in-migration in fishing areas will lead to stronger co-management.*

During 2001 and 2002 in each country semi-structured interviews were carried out in local languages by people working for the institutions mentioned above. Analysis of the interviews was carried out following simple instructions using a word processor to group responses in categories based on the concepts named in the hypotheses. In Mozambique (Gervasio and Hele, 2002) the research was carried out in two areas where village management committees<sup>1</sup> (VMC) were operating along the Atlantic coast. They interviewed a total of 16 fishers, 8 women's group leaders, 6 traditional authorities, 10 government officials as well as 8 other key informants. In Zambia (Kapasa, 2002) research was also carried out in two areas, both with several operating village management committees. One of these was on Lake Mweru and the other was on the Luapula River. This work involved a series of group interviews with a total of 91 VMC members, 17 women's club members and 43 fishing association members. Fifteen other key informants were also interviewed. In Malawi they decided to focus their research on the "negative case" of Lake Malombe to contrast with the heavily studied and more successful co-management programme on Lake Chiuta. This also included both individual and group interviews with 105 people including 12 gill net fishers, 12 beach seine fishers, eight local leaders, two beach seine operators, 30 VMC members, 14 association members and 24 fish traders and/or processors, and three fisheries extension agents.

#### *Summary of Results for Hypothesis 1*

This hypothesis was supported in all three countries. Different elite groups are critical to the performance of the programmes but opportunistic behaviour is weakening the co-management programmes. Most VMCs confiscate catch and gear when they uncover violations of management measures. Some VMCs distribute these funds in the village or support small

community development efforts. However, we found a wide perception that government officers, TAs and VMC members were benefiting directly from the confiscation of fish and gears. This was particularly clear in Malawi, but was found as well in Zambia.

In Mozambique the TAs were found to be relatively weak in relation to the fishing gear owners, but they still play an important cultural role and respondents felt that committees whose members include traditional leaders had a greater local influence and that fishing regulations were more often respected. Fishing crew are invited to meetings, but do not share in the discussions about management because that is under the control of the fishing gear owners. Many people are concerned about what goes on between VMC executives and patrol team members and this is linked to the participation of wealthier fishers.

In Zambia the TAs are the dominant local elites, and their participation has both supporters and detractors in the community (Kapasa et al., 2005). Critics of TAs in the communities accuse them of abusing power to gain fish for themselves and government officers working in co-management report that the commitment of the TAs is highly varied. Fisheries fees collected by County Councils are also a contentious issue in Zambia (Kapasa et al. *this volume*). The Department of Fisheries also comes in for strong criticism, some of which is focussed on their support for co-management. Some respondents felt that the DoF had failed to manage the fisheries resources and now was just trying to delegate their responsibilities to the public. They are also widely accused of corruption.

The Malawi research indicated that there is a wide gap between the TAs and the Department of Fisheries (DoF) and the active fishers. The VMCs are seen by many fishers to be an arm of the DoF cooperating with the wealthier gear owners and the TAs. The TAs and headmen are also accused of allowing outsiders to use inappropriate gears in exchange for beach fees paid to them personally (Hara et al., 2002).

#### *Summary of Results for Hypothesis 2*

Hypothesis 2 was generally not supported; many respondents indicated that VMCs work better when they are primarily made up of fishers. This is highly variable. VMC membership is almost always formally selected through village elections, but such elections reflect, and to some degree mask, local power relations. The VMC can be one of several, if not many, village committees operating in cooperation with government agencies responsible for health, education, other forms of conservation, etc. People who are leaders in the VMC are often leaders on the others as well and this may contribute to the perception that fewer fishers on VMCs makes them less effective. Some VMCs operate under rules designed to increase the gender or occupational diversity of membership, others do not. In Zambia, some respondents felt that TAs were actively blocking the participation of other groups and a majority of non-VMC members interviewed felt that women were the main group excluded. This problem was expressed both by a lack of attendance at the meetings and by decision making dynamics when they did attend. In many villages decision making is dominated by the village headman who often reports to the TA. While issues may be discussed in an open forum or by a council of elders, and decisions formalized by a consensus, the headman is often the one making final decisions.

In Malawi and Mozambique the VMC leadership is mainly boat and gear owners. But in Malawi respondents said that a common problem with all the VMCs was that they actually spent very little time even talking to the common fishers and this was seen as undermining co-management efforts.

#### *Summary of Results for Hypothesis 3*

Hypothesis 3 was generally not supported. It is true that in some cases stronger support for co-management comes from fishers using co-management to keep migrants out. An extensive debate in Mozambique led to an official upper limit on the number of in-migrants to be allowed at each fishing centre during the main migration season as well as the imposition of a fee. More commonly, however, the greater disruption and controversy in migration-heavy weakens the programme. In Malawi migration by fishers using *nkacha* nets had been a driving force behind the initiation of the co-management effort on Lake Chiuta but this has also led to strong opposition from TAs and headmen who profit from fees from migrants (Hara et al., 2002) and businessmen who provide services to migrants.. In Zambia and Malawi these disruptions relate to “destructive” gears that are used by migrants, but the how destructiveness of any particular gear is often highly contentious and non-migrants may want to adopt these gears as well.

## **Conclusion**

These findings suggest how complex the problem of elite capture is. African fisheries are in almost all cases characterized by economic stratification among fishers, both between owners and crew and between those using larger and small types of gear. When trying to scale up community based management programmes the backing of traditional authorities and government officers is critical. Many examples have been found of the opportunistic use of co-management arrangements by all these kinds of elites. This research suggests that the questions of transparency and corruption are perhaps the main lever through which the problem of elite capture can be and should be addressed.

One of the remedies suggested in the literature, broad representations on the local management committees, was not found to be very effective. While there are general problems of exclusion, particularly based on gender, opening up the committees to non-fishers is a questionable strategy. The most important link between exclusion and effectiveness of local management seems to be the way exclusion of the fishers, especially the crew and those with smaller fishing enterprises, from real decision making reduces co-management effectiveness. They are the group who have the local knowledge and on whose cooperation conservation is most dependent.

Finally, this research shows that migratory fishers and their control is a real dilemma. On the one hand, in the common case of fluctuating water levels, simply adding more small scale fishers does not seem to have a dangerous impact on the resource. Control of fishing times, areas, gears and techniques is more important. Cooperation and local support of co-management programmes, on the other hand, is often based on the exclusion of migrants. But this is also divisive within the community because the incoming migrants present an opportunity to many community members. Where water levels are steadier, however, there may be a much stronger case for limiting entry. In fisheries management in Africa the need is not just for institutions that pay attention to the local power and conflicting interests as they manage fisheries. The need is for institutions that pay close attention to such relations as they create, facilitate and scale up the management institutions themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The term VMC is the one in use in Zambia. Malawi and Mozambique have their own terms, Beach Village Committees and Local Co-management Committees respectively. We use the Zambian term throughout for the sake of readability.