



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Forest management plans for community forests should be improved to form a meaningful basis for practical, day-to-day forest management activities. The development of forest management plans and annual community forest work plans requires enhanced support from the DoF.
- Community forests need improved funding models to support the FMCs in carrying out their activities. Where possible, community forests should be linked more closely with conservancies, which will require closer collaboration among the relevant support agencies and government departments.
- The DoF should consider appointing FMC members as salaried honorary forest officers in line with the Forest Act, in order to contribute to the financial sustainability of FMCs.
- More research is needed to assess the socio-economic benefits derived from community forests and to capture lessons from well-functioning FMCs. Sustainable harvest levels and the growth responses of key timber species and non-timber resources should be assessed to support improved forest management planning.

Community Forests in Namibia: Ensuring Sustainable Local-level Forest Management

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community forests in Namibia are central to promoting sustainable and participatory forest governance and enhancing livelihoods in communal land areas. Significant support from the government and the donor community has helped to establish community forests and promote more sustainable harvesting practices. However, community forests still face a number of challenges, and it is particularly important that sustainable funding models be developed that are less dependent on donors. Stronger partnerships between community forests and conservancies appear to be one way in which their viability may be enhanced.

INTRODUCTION

Namibia is the most arid country south of the Sahara. While the Namib Desert extends over much of the western region of the country, precipitation levels vary widely across Namibia. Most of the country's territory (65%) is covered by sparsely wooded savannah, while denser woodlands occur in the wettest regions in the north-east, accounting for about 20% of total land cover.²

Although Namibia is not a forest-rich country, the woodland savannah plays an important ecological and socio-economic role, supplying wood and timber for a variety of uses, as well as non-timber forest products. Namibia's woodland savannah forms part of Southern Africa's extensive dryland forests, which are increasingly being recognised as a valuable yet threatened ecosystem that plays a key role in supporting livelihoods in the region.³ Improved governance of Namibia's forest resources

therefore promises not only ecological benefits but also a direct, beneficial impact on local livelihoods, particularly for the rural poor.

NAMIBIA'S FORESTRY GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Prior to independence in 1990, Namibia's dry woodlands were not under any systematic management, nor had any forest reserves been proclaimed, despite the fact that forestry governance legislation had been in place since at least 1925.⁴ In the more densely wooded north-eastern regions, unsustainable harvesting took place throughout the pre-independence period.

In the early 1990s the government of the newly independent Namibia placed great emphasis on a more sustainable and equitable approach to the exploitation of natural resources. This also applied to the forestry sector, with the establishment of a Directorate of Forestry (DoF) shortly after independence to manage and develop Namibia's forest sector. A forest policy was promulgated in 1992, followed by the development of a 10-year strategic plan, which was published in 1996. The strategic plan laid the basis for greater involvement by local communities in forestry governance, particularly through the establishment of community forests. In the 1990s work also started on updating Namibia's forestry legislation, culminating in the promulgation of the Forest Act in 2001.

Communal land in Namibia covers 26 million hectares, representing 36% of total land cover. About 7.5 million hectares of communal land is forested.⁵ Pre-independence, Namibia's traditional natural resource governance practices were undermined by colonial policies, racially discriminatory legislation, poaching and environmental stress (such as drought). This led to the breakdown of traditional community resource governance practices and widespread ecological degradation. A more formal approach to community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) was initiated in the 1980s as a response to drought and poaching, with an initial focus on rebuilding wildlife numbers and ensuring that local communities derived direct benefits from wildlife resources.⁶ The subsequent establishment of conservancies on communal land

has been supported by both communities and the government, resulting in the significant recovery of wildlife and improved livelihoods in many communal land areas.

Community forests were intended to extend Namibia's experience with CBNRM to the area of forest governance. The Forest Act of 2001 specifies that community forests can be established through a written agreement between the minister responsible for forestry and the representatives of those who have rights over the relevant area of communal land, provided that the consent of the chief or traditional authority is secured. Local representatives are required to set up a management authority to organise governance and day-to-day forest management activities in the community forest. The *Community Forestry Guidelines* published by the DoF specifies that members of the management authority should be democratically elected and engage regularly with community members. The management authority for community forests typically takes the form of a Forest Management Committee (FMC).

The Forest Act further gives the community the right to manage and use forest produce and other natural resources, and to graze livestock. The exploitation of these resources must be based on a management plan developed by local stakeholders in collaboration with the DoF to ensure the sustainable use of available resources. The management authority of a community forest may dispose of forest produce from the community forest and permit community members to graze livestock and carry out agricultural activities or any other lawful activities.⁷

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY FOREST RESERVES

The first community forests were proclaimed in 2006, when 13 community forests were established. In 2012 a further 19 community forests were gazetted. Namibia's community forests now cover an area of 2.55 million hectares.⁸ The *Community Forestry Guidelines* provides a detailed overview of the steps required before and after the gazetting of a community forest. It recognises that in many areas of Namibia, forest resources are limited

and the benefits from community forests cannot compete with the potential income from game management, livestock or agriculture. It therefore proposes that in most cases an incremental approach to community forestry is pursued, following a less burdensome management process. After the establishment of a community forest, the FMC is expected to lead an implementation and monitoring phase, which includes the development of a forest resource inventory and needs assessment, followed by the development of an integrated forest management plan. Subsequent phases include the implementation of the management plan and ongoing monitoring, updating and capacity-building activities.

The forest management plan for each community forest should provide estimates of sustainable harvest levels for a range of available resources (timber, firewood, poles, etc.) as well as a harvesting schedule. These estimates should then be elaborated on in the annual work plans developed by the FMC in co-operation with the DoF. In practice, however, harvest levels have come to be set through block permits issued by the DoF, despite the fact that neither the Forestry Act nor the guidelines describe this system. It has been argued that block permits were developed by the DoF when it became apparent that the forest management plans would take a long time to complete and annual work plans were either absent or poorly developed.⁹

The quality of forest management plans remains a concern, as these plans are central to the effective management of community forests. FMC and DoF staff members concede that in many cases forest management plans are either absent or incomplete.¹⁰ Often the forest inventory report is used as a management plan, and estimates of allowable harvest levels are either not specified or vague. In effect, the use of block permits ensures that much of the decision-making on the use of forestry resources remains with the DoF rather than the relevant FMC. For example, commercial harvesters who have been issued a permit by FMCs to harvest in community forests are still required to secure transport and marketing permits from the DoF.

Despite the fact that the DoF plays a central role in determining harvest levels in community forests, the implementation of CBNRM approaches

in Namibia's forestry sector has increased local communities' sense of ownership of forest resources and promoted more sustainable forest governance practices. A review of management practices in the Kwandu and Okongo community forests notes that the communities manage these forest resources carefully.¹¹ While data on forest cover and reforestation in community forests is limited, an assessment of development funding for community forests noted that large-scale deforestation through commercially oriented illegal logging had decreased significantly in community forest areas. The assessment added, however, that the theft of wood could not be entirely controlled due to the large areas that required monitoring and the limited capacity of FMCs.¹²

The potential of community forests to generate revenue differs according to the geographic and social dynamics of specific sites. More densely wooded areas naturally have a higher revenue potential. The availability of non-timber products can also provide local communities with revenue. In certain community forests, harvesting of the devil's claw plant (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) can contribute significantly to local incomes, as there is a high demand for this product from international pharmaceutical companies. Nevertheless, community forests have generally proven to have less revenue potential than conservancies, which generate funds primarily through tourism and hunting. The socio-economic benefits of community forests lie primarily in their ability to enhance rural livelihoods by providing fuel wood, building materials, grazing, medicinal plants and other resources, rather than generating sufficient revenues for significant poverty alleviation.

There has been significant donor support for the establishment of community forests since the 1990s, but it is essential that a more self-sustaining finance model is developed. Increased revenues may also allow the more consistent remuneration of FMC members, thereby helping to address the high staff turnover in many FMCs.

CONCLUSION

CBNRM approaches to resource governance have helped to increase the participation and buy-in of

local communities in resource governance activities. These approaches do not entail government departments' simply ceding responsibility and decision-making powers to local communities. Rather, they require a new form of partnership in which both local communities and the government co-operate effectively to protect ecosystems and enhance their contribution to livelihoods. Donors have typically played a key role in supporting the establishment of CBNRM initiatives, but if their long-term viability is to be assured, greater effort must be made to establish and support economically self-sustaining governance structures at the community level. The establishment of community forests in Namibia reflects many of these broader trends. Improved partnerships, more sustainable financing models and improved management planning are central to ensuring that community forestry in Namibia flourishes.

ENDNOTES

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