



**JOURNAL OF GOVERNANCE
AND DEVELOPMENT**

<https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jgd>

How to cite this article:

Mwambanga, E. G., & Lameck W. (2021). The performance of decentralized forest management: The study of Rufiji District Council in Tanzania. *Journal of Governance and Development*, 17(2), 103-119. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jgd2021.17.2.6>

**THE PERFORMANCE OF DECENTRALIZED FOREST
MANAGEMENT: THE STUDY OF RUFJI DISTRICT
COUNCIL IN TANZANIA**

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Received: 10/3/2022 Revised: 7/9/2022 Accepted: 8/9/2022 Published: 31/7/2021

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the forest management services in Tanzania were decentralized to local government for the purpose of increasing its efficiency but the current evaluations show that the delivery of the services does not meet the standards and expectations set at the beginning. The goal of this article is to explore the performance of decentralised forest management and the extent to which institutional nexus: formal rules, policies, guidelines, and informal social rules affect the behaviour of local government officials involved in forest management at different levels. Based on the nature of this research, the qualitative approach was adopted with Rufiji district council as a case study. The actual research began with data collection through documentary reviews and in-depth interviews with 80 forest management officials at different levels and harvesters. The research shows that the number of institutional factors such as legal and policy

framework, accountability framework and social rules particularly corruption affects the behaviour of forest officials, the community and other stakeholders involved in forest management at Rufiji district council.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Forest Management, Formal rules and social rules, Rufiji District Council.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, Tanzania government adopted decentralization reforms in forest management. The decentralization involved the transfer of power and authority of decision making concerning forest management services to local government. The assumption was that decentralization would increase proximity between citizens and their representative which could in turn increase local democracy through involving local community and forest harvesters in the planning and decision making in the utilization of forest services. Second the proximity between government and citizens could increase efficiency in the allocation of forest resources. This implies that the preferences of the local community in forest services would be taken into account in the process of planning and the actual delivery of the forest services. Third, the decentralization was expected to increase cost efficiency with the assumption that higher cost could be minimized through increased accountability of forest officials to local community which consume forest services (Lameck, 2017).

On the other hand, the decentralization came with institutional arrangement and rules to govern its delivery. The institutions defines the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders and the accountability arrangement but also rules and regulations defines what is allowed or not allowed in forest management (Blomley & Idd, 2009). Despite these reforms, the literature shows that the current performance of forest services does not meet the standards and expectations set at the beginning of the reforms. Over the last decade, the forests have become under increasing pressure from unsustainable human activities including: illegal timber harvesting; shifting cultivation (slash and burn) farming system; pole cutting and forest fires. The commercial demand of timber and charcoal are the

main factors explaining the situation. The illegal harvesting of wood has extended even to the local and national forest reserves due to inadequate human and financial capacities of the forest department to control the situation (URT, 2020).

Following that, dissatisfaction with forest management services has increased. In most cases, villagers living adjacent to particular forest areas have been at logger head with officials responsible for the forest services. In some areas, this has led to hostilities between the local community and the forest management officials. Such a trend as experienced in some parts of the country raises doubt on the effectiveness of a decentralized forest management system. The question is what goes wrong? Why decentralized forest management in Tanzania does not realize the intended goal? How the existing formal and social rules can explain this puzzle? To answer this question, the subsequent sections discuss the concept of decentralization, the analytical frame, methodology, the formal and informal institutions for the forest management and the extent to which these institutions shape the behaviour of officials involved in forest management.

THE CONCEPT OF DECENTRALISATION

The concept of decentralization has been defined as the assignment of public functions to local entities and structures, systems, resources, and processes that support implementing specific public-sector goals of positively influencing the political, social and economic context (Smoke, 2015). Other authors like Rondinelli (1999) define it as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public service delivery from central government to subordinate, quasi-independent government organizations or the private sector. In some countries, decentralization is used as a procedure or a tool to share power and divide responsibilities among central and the local political and administrative units. It aims at empowering locals and enhancing the living standards and conditions of all segments of the public through providing better public services but also support services to fulfil the interests and needs of different groups living within the local political and administrative units (Yussof et al., 2016). The concept of decentralization has been attributed to number of dimension. The commonly known dimensions includes administrative, fiscal, political and market decentralization (Ozmen, 2014).

To begin with, administrative decentralization implies the redistribution of authority, responsibility and financial resources for providing public services among different levels of government. It essentially transfers responsibility for planning, financing, and managing some public functions from the central government or agencies, to various units, subordinates, or levels of government (Ozmen, 2014).

Fiscal decentralization on the other hand, involves the transfer of decision making on finances from central government to local government. For fiscal decentralization to be effective there should be a sound decentralized financial management system with transparency in allocation, predictability in terms of the amount available to local institutions and local autonomy of decision making on utilization of available financial resources (UNDP, 2005).

Finally, political decentralization entails the transfer of decision making on local political intuitions and local election to local government. Therefore, political decentralization offers an opportunity for local government to create their own local political institutions and elect their own local council (UNDP, 2005). Overall, decentralization gives power to the people to determine their form of government, representation, policies and services. It can be summed up that political decentralization ought to affect local government officials' degree of autonomy positively. Further, while intended to transfer power or authority, decentralization policies can also sometimes superficially do that, contrary to what it is all about. Apart from that, if fiscal management is passed over to the local government without the administrative capacity to administer taxes, it negatively impacts local budgets. It increases their dependence on the central government.

Theory

The theory on decentralization predicts the number of goals to be realized by any decentralization project. Central to this assumption is that, the preferences of citizens are heterogeneous and heterogeneity of their preferences can be reflected in the public service delivery by local governments because they are in a better position to incorporate the differentiated needs in their policies and services than central government. Besides, being closer to people, it is claimed that local authorities can more easily identify people's needs, and thus supply

the appropriate form and level of public services (Fjeldstad, 2001). Therefore, if local governments are disposed of the information about the preferences; if they have the authority to decide on the functions and services to offer; and if they can raise the necessary taxes or spend allocated budgets as they wish, it enables them to translate preferences of the local population into policies and services (Brueckner 2004; Lameck, 2017). On the other hand, the empirical literature shows that in developing countries decentralization is incomplete. The countries claiming to have decentralization, experience central government rules and regulations which limits the discretion of local government to allocate the mix of policies and services and their content.

Furthermore, the literature by Dick-Sageo (2020), Doh 2017, and Mbate (2017) confirms that the failure of decentralization is attributed by institutional factors which constrain the allocation of resources. The institutions can be subsumed into two categories: the formal institutions which includes the rules, policies, guidelines, and regulations; informal institutions which includes social rules and norms (March & Olsen, 1987; Powell & Dimaggio, 1991; Hall & Taylor, 1996). Institutions structure the courses of actions of actors but also institutions demarcate the boundaries of behaviour through the definition of roles, obligations and prohibitions. They define what is appropriate, permitted or forbidden. Institutions also give meaning to human action. Actors are assumed to pursue their interests, but the existing institutions shape the way actors define their interests and preferences (Hulst & Van Montfort, 2011). The formal institutions touch upon the policy sector or service in question; the presence of resources which are relevant for the actors involved in order to fulfill their respective roles; and the informal institutions, i.e. the social norms, values and rules give meaning to reality and guide the behaviour and interaction of actors, in the realm of politics, administration and society. These three independent variables are assumed to result in the behaviour and interactions of actors in the field in question; the behaviour of actors and their interactions eventually determine the quality of the service delivery in question.

METHODOLOGY

This paper asks: Why decentralized forest management in Tanzania does not realize the intended goal? How the existing formal and social

rules can explain this puzzle? To answer this question the research adopted qualitative approach with a case study design. The choice of approach and the design was guided by the research question under investigation which aims to explore the failure the reasons for the failure of decentralized forest management services. Rufiji as one of the district in Pwani Region in Tanzania which has existed for years. The district is popular for farming activities and tumbler trading but the recent evolution shows that the district is experiencing a serious problem of illegal harvesting of forest products to extent of putting the forest business in danger. To this end, a sample of 60 respondents was selected purposely from different categories of forest management officials including district council officials, the village and the harvesters of forest. The Interview and documentary were used as tools for data collection. The number of documents reviewed includes the guidelines for decentralized forest management, quarterly and annual reports for the forest management, minutes of meeting and the calendar for the forest management activities. The completion of documentary review was followed with an in-depth interview with 60 local government officials, village officials and community members. Data from documentary review was analysed by using content analysis and the interview transcripts were analysed through thematic approach from which the findings were categorized according to themes.

FINDINGS

Rufiji District Council – General features

Rufiji is one of the six districts of the Pwani Region of Tanzania. It is bordered to the north by the Kisarawe and Mkuranga Districts, to the east by the Indian Ocean, to the south by the Lindi Region and to the east by the Morogoro Region. The district name comes from the Rufiji River which runs through the district. According to the 2012 Tanzania National Census, the population of the Rufiji District was 203,102. The economy of Rufiji district is predominantly based on subsistence agriculture and fishing. In the absence of large scale farming, the farming practice is dominated by small holders. It is estimated that 95% of the inhabitants are farmers and fishers. Main cash crops are cashew nuts, cotton and sesame. Food crops are maize,

paddy, cassava, beans and different types of fruits. About 5% of the population is employee in central government, council and private organizations. In Rufiji district, a total arable land covers an area of 4,824.38 sq/km. But only 800sqkm (80,000 ha) of the arable land is being under cultivation. The estimated area for major food crops in the district are Cassava 16,845.5 hectare, Paddy 16,213.4 hectare and Maize 15,526 hectares. The main cash crops like cashew nuts 4150 hectares and sesame 3088.5 hectares. The most predominant crops are cassava, rice and maize respectively. Furthermore, the district is also good producers of fruit and vegetables which fruits covers 14,295.4and vegetable crops 4367.5 hectares (URT, 2016).

With respect to forest management, the forestry sector in Rufiji District is well described in the forest Action Plan through Bibliographical analysis. In Rufiji, the Forest refers to woodland, coastal forest and mangroves in the tidal of forest in the Delta. Rufiji district has forests that harbour unique diverse flora and fauna which show much endemism. They provide a variety of forest products such as fruits, medicine, logs, wood fuel, honey and beeswax, fibres to support the surrounding communities; as well as environmental functions such as mitigating climate change especially its contribution to carbon sink, soil and water conservation. It can be noted that more than 60% of the revenue collected by Rufiji District comes from the forests (URT, 2020).

Institutional Arrangement for Forest Management at the Village Level

The research shows that Village Assemblies (VC), Village Natural Resources Committees (VNRCs) and Community Forest Management Groups (CFMG) are essential institutions at the lowest level responsible for the decentralized forest management. The Village Natural Resources Committees (VNRCs) and Community Forest Management Groups (CFMG) are the two institutions recognized by the Village Council and registered by the District Council that has the management authority for a Community Forest Reserve. At the higher distinct level there is a Forest Management Unit (FMU) which is a subdivision within a forest management created for purposes of management. There is also a joint village forest management committee (JVPMC) that is made up of different villages that are managing a single forest in a CBFM.

Apart from VCs and VNRCs, there are also Community Forest Management Groups (CFMGs) recognized by the Village Council and registered with the District Council that has the management authority for a community forest reserve, Forest Management Unit (FMU), a subdivision within a forest created for management purposes and a joint village forest management committee (JVPMC) which is made up of different villages managing a single forest in a CBFM. The study also found that the institutions tasked with decentralized forest management are in some sort of a blame game, painting each other as incompetent.

Institutional Arrangement at the District Level

The study found that under the institutional arrangement for the decentralized forest management, the district forest office and TFS, in collaboration with village committees, are jointly responsible for decentralized forest management. At the top, the district commissioner is the chairperson of the harvesting committee, which also involves village chairpersons and village executive officers (VEOs) as members and representations of their respective villages. The study found that policy actions at the district level include the Charcoal Regulations of 2006 and 2007. According to these regulations, the district, through the Forest Department Office, is responsible for monitoring, managing, and supervising all issues related to charcoal business at the community level. It is also required to create a “District Harvesting Committee” that oversees all procedures before and after the extraction of forest resources. This includes specifying areas for forest product harvesting, issuing permits, and registering all individuals or companies involved in the charcoal business. The ultimate goal of these regulations is to limit the over-extraction of forest resources at the community level.

Furthermore, the study found that policy actions at the district level includes the Charcoal Regulations of 2006 and 2007. According to these regulations, the district, through the Forest Department Office, is responsible for monitoring, managing, and supervising all issues related to charcoal business at the community level. It is also required to create a “District Harvesting Committee” that oversees all procedures before and after the extraction of forest resources. This includes specifying areas for forest product harvesting, issuing

permits, and registering all individuals or companies involved in the charcoal business. The ultimate goal of these regulations is to limit the over-extraction of forest resources at the community level. However, most responses pointed that there is some sort of abuse of position by the district apparatus.

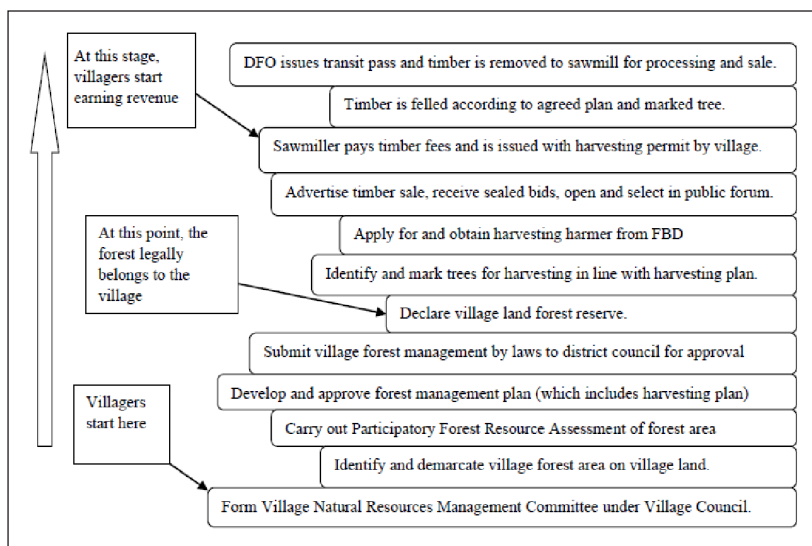
Institutional Arrangement for the Forest Management

The regional authority does not involve in day-to-day activities about decentralization in forest management. They are essentially administrators who, among other things, facilitate and assist local governments in undertaking and discharging their responsibilities by providing and securing the enabling environment for the successful performance of their duties and functions. Therefore, all issues about decentralization of forest management performed at the district level and the lower levels are done under the supervision of the regional authority. At the national level, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT) and Tanzania Forest Services (TFS) are responsible for the decentralized forest management services. The ministry is tasked with the overall supervision of forest management. It is responsible for issuing directives in line with policies and legal frameworks relating to the forest in the country.

On the part of the ministry, the study found that it had undertaken various initiatives aimed at the decentralization of forest management. Multiple programs were launched from the early 1990s to the late 2000s to strengthen the region's conservation and forest management. Such programs include Rufiji Environment Management Project (REMP), Coastal Forests Management Program (CFMP), and Mama Misitu (MNRT, 2012). The guidelines about village forest management were first published in 2006 titled "the 2006 Guidelines for Participatory Forest Assessment and Management Planning" and another in 2007 called "Guidelines for Community Based Forest Management." After that, in 2013, the Ministry, under its Policy and Planning Department, issued a guideline on village land forests that can be harvested for the benefit of rural communities and sustainability. The guidelines have established twelve steps that must be undertaken, from selecting a village forest to harvesting the products.

Figure 1

The Ministry Guideline on Harvesting of Village Land Forest



Source: Adapted and modified from MNRT, Guidelines for Harvesting in Village Land Forest Reserves (2013).

At the same national level, an agency called Tanzania Forest Services (TFS) was established to solely deal with forestry. The agency is semi-autonomous and is mandated to sustainably manage national forest and bee resources by ensuring the sustainable supply of various forest and bee products and services, a stable ecosystem, and maintaining biological diversity. During this research study, some respondents came from TFS.

Institutions for the Forest Management Services and the Community Awareness

The research shows that respondents from villages are aware of the institutional arrangements within their respective localities, i.e., villages. They narrated the roles and responsibilities of village forest committees, village assembly and the village council and how these organs operate. As one respondent from the local community pointed out that;

“The harvesting arrangements are made in collaboration between the villages, the council and the TFS. Before the commencing of every harvesting season, we normally go to a meeting with the district commissioner where each village with a forest provides information on the condition of their forest, the availability of trees and their species and advises whether the particular trees are ready for harvest or not.” (Interviewee R.2.3)

Some were not very much aware of other institutional arrangements, especially from TFS, since they perceive it as merely a government agency with greater authority over their forests. For them, they did not feel to be equal partners in this arrangement. This finding is in line with Lund (2008), who narrates the presence of village land area, where decentralization of forest natural resources to the forest committees elected every five years by the village general assembly takes place regularly. Accordingly, these committees are granted executive rights to implement a management plan and undertaking activities such as patrols and arrests, fire control, tree planting and collection of forest fees, and they are answerable to the village council. In contrast, their record on activities and finances are read at the quarterly village assembly.

Existing Institution and the Current Needs

The research shows the existing institutions which are incompatible with the current needs. Some respondents believed that decentralized forest management is affected by laws and policies that are incompatible with the ever-changing socioeconomic development of communities found adjacent to forests. One respondent pointed out that;

“The policymakers must embrace the reality that socioeconomic factors are affected by the ever-changing social dynamics. For instance, most youths were not born or were minors during the passing of legal and policy directives; currently, they are the ones who are told to abide by archaic directives not suitable to their way of life and their economic struggles.” (Interviewee R.4.1)

The existing institutional framework limits effective coordination of forest services. For example one respondent raised a very critical observation as he pointed that;

“... interestingly, there is lack of integration and sharing of responsibilities and plans among the key actors of forest services. For instance, the forest is a subset of land; hence there could have been deliberate efforts to share knowledge or plans with the ministry responsible ... same as farms on land, which means even the ministry of agriculture is a stakeholder in the forest. However, unfortunate, the situation is different. There is a lack of policy integration; hence, it is difficult to achieve optimum results in decentralized forest management since other stakeholders or factors are not contained.”
(Interviewee R.6.2)

Another respondent pointed to the issue of failure of policy practicability that, according to him, it is caused by lack of willingness from the stakeholders.

“...the policy calls for coordination among all stakeholders involved. However, such words have failed to translate into reality; other stakeholders are not sincere in this; they are still affected by the hangover of the previous policy regime. They are not practically ready to cede to the new policy demands.” (Interviewee R.5.3)

The Existing Institutions and the Power of Central Government

The research shows that the ministry and TFS consolidate all significant decisions affecting the decentralized forest management on the hands on central government, leaving other stakeholders as mere participants. That being the case, some respondents believed that both the ministry and TFS have failed to fulfil the spirit behind the decentralization of forest management.

“Most arrangements between the Ministry and TFS are done in closed-door meetings while the impacts are felt in the field. There is no connection on that..” (Interviewee R.5.2)

This situation defeats the purpose of decentralization since it retains the top-down model that was supposed to have been abandoned. One among the respondents commented that;

“...the new approach was brought to change the failed old strategy and increase collaboration among all stakeholders involved. However, it is sad that the ministry and, to some extent, TFS retain all the powers. They are responsible for the final approval of VLFRs, and unfortunately, they also control forest revenues, leaving a chunk of it to the local governments responsible.”
(Interviewee R.5.1)

Corruption and the Utilization of Forest Resources

The study found possible instances of corruption or unfair treatment that gave some traders priorities, hence an apparent failure concerning decentralized forest management. Some respondents blame village leaders, including VEOs, for allowing the unauthorized harvesting of forest products in their respective areas. And in some instances, they allege that although harvesters possess valid licenses, they are issued with forged permits and receipts. As one respondent pointed that;

“There were conflicting decisions on management and harvesting of forest products. It looked like some were giving special preference hence there was a blanket order that took away mandate to issue licenses, permits and receipts from the VCs/VNLRs to the DFO.” (Interviewee R.5.2)

On their part, respondents from a section of local leaders are pointing their fingers, especially at the DFO office, blaming them for issuing licenses without considering the situation or reality on the ground. This situation creates a climate of distrust and poor coordination among actors hence hampers the realization of the performance of decentralized forest management in Rufiji.

Villagers also accuse some of their leaders of being dishonest towards allowing harvesters access to forest products. This is being aided by the fact that there is a lack of efficient mechanisms to counter unauthorized harvesting from TFS and DFO offices. There are not enough officers to patrol as per respondents.

Further, there is a sense of distrust among the villagers towards TFS due to a perception that they are being denied the utilisation and management of their resources. They depend on such forests to cater for their daily domestic and economic needs; hence some perceive their inclusion as a denying mechanism.

The study noted that villagers are side-lined from participating in district harvesting committees where they are represented by VCs and VEOs only, who are there to witness the selection, i.e. merely, they lack the powers to interfere with selection. Accordingly, this negatively impacts the process since approved harvesters' names are superimposed on villagers who see them as foreigners who have come to exploit their God's given wealth.

Discrepancy between Policy and Practice

Some respondents believed that there is a disconnect between what transpires in the field, i.e., in forests and adjacent villages and the main offices of TFS and DFO. They pointed out that some decisions on the ground are not in line with the whole idea of decentralization, as some officers take matters into their own hands without the approval of the main office. This observation is in line with Kaufman (1967), who points that even if, to a great extent, administration of forests has been delegated to the field units, the central office must retain sufficient control to ensure balance and consistency. He emphasizes that administrative management is a subject of continuous attention by the line officers and the specialists in operation, personnel and fiscal control.

Participation of Community in Forest Management

Local democracy is an aspect of decentralization that can highlight the level of decision-making ability of the citizens. The decentralization of forest management in the Rufiji district has failed to enable most citizens (beneficiaries) to have such power. Even their participation (through their leaders) in the district harvesting committee is superficial. Some respondents pointed out that villagers' inclusion in the management of forests around their localities is minimal. One villager said that;

“there is a lack of appreciation of local knowledge on forest management. They [central government

and TFS] arrange everything and impose them to us. Villagers in areas adjacent to forests are just part of an already designed mechanism and that they are merely participating...” (Interviewee R.1.3)

Furthermore, such a lack of involvement cannot make the government (central) accountable. Even though Pateman (1970) provides that lower or smaller units of representation facilitate the participation of the maximum number of individual citizens in public decisions, such is not the case in the decentralization of forest management as observed in the Rufiji district. For instance, when elected village leaders had the power to issue licenses and permits (which, as per the law, must follow village regulations), the DFO revoked the same. Even though there was mixed opinion on the decision of DFO, yet theoretically, it showed that local democracy is not observed since the decision made by higher levels have erased their decisions. Findings also show that despite respondents' awareness of the importance of local communities' participation in decentralized forest management, the participation is not at the desired level. It ought to take note that local participation ensures protection, regulation of access and utilization of forest, and activities to rehabilitate or develop the productive capacity of the forest. Technically local participation is a win-win situation since it enables villagers to have power over their natural resources. The findings are in line with MNRT (2007), which provides that, among other things, management in CBFM includes all aspects of forest management, such as forest protection, regulation of access and use of the forest, and actions to rehabilitate or develop the productive capacity of the forest. It includes not just the practical responsibilities of management but also the authority to make decisions that guide those operations (MNRT, 2007). CBFM is a power-sharing strategy. It builds upon the national policy to enable local participation in forest management and the fundamental need to bring control and oversight to more practical local levels. It aims to secure forests through sharing the right to control and manage them, not just the right to use or benefit from them. Therefore, CBFM targets communities not as passive beneficiaries but as forest managers (MNRT, 2007).

Moreover, the findings are also in line with Beymar-Farris and Bassett (2011). They criticize the Joint Management Agreements at the heart of the Rufiji case as an example of an unequal balance of power between government's institutions and local communities. Rufiji farmers are

restricted from accessing reserve areas for cultivation, limiting their livelihood options. The writers further provide those villagers have also stated that the Forestry and Beekeeping Division bears the sole responsibility for distributing licenses for logging mangrove poles. This has created the impression that the role of villagers as co-managers of forests is not taken seriously.

Sungusia, Eliezeri et al. (2020) similarly reveal that participating communities are compelled to depend on professional foresters to meet technical requirements such as detailed inventory and management planning. Even where approved management and harvest plans exist, participating communities cannot implement them without the consent of professional foresters.

CONCLUSION

The overall conclusion is that the decentralized forest management at Rufiji district council does not perform to the required standards. The stakeholders/beneficiaries of forest management including the (villagers perceive it as a myth since they are not adequately involved in the process of the utilization of forest resources. One of the indicators came out is lack of adequate knowledge on the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders but also lack of accountability of the officials who are in charge of forest services at Rufiji District. Apart from that the research shows that the stakeholders use illegal harvesting of forest resources because of cumbersome procedures which are favourable to them. Therefore, the decentralized forest management does not function effectively because the stakeholders are full involved in the process of planning and the actual harvesting of the forest resources. Second, the decentralized forest management does not realize efficiency: both allocative and cost efficiency because the officials involved in the allocation of resources undermine the importance of local knowledge and the preferences of the community ignored as a result. Third the decentralization does not achieve the cost efficiency because the stakeholders do not have power to hold the forest management officials accountable for their decisions. The number of factors can explain these anomalies. To begin with is the existing formal rules which define the roles of actors while leaving a little room the role of community and the procedures for holding accountable the officials from the district council. Finally, it is the existing social rules which although they are not written, they have

greater influence in the behaviour of the officials and the community in forest management. As a result, the corruption become pervasive in the timber trading and both officials and the local community share the same conviction of corrupt values and norms

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

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