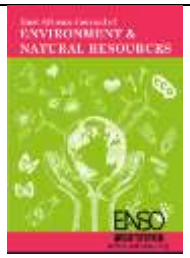

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Original Article

Assessment of Decentralized Decision-Making on Livestock Management in Miombo Woodlands of Tanga and Morogoro regions, Tanzania: Bridging Acts and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Despite legal reforms such as the Local Government (District Authorities) Act of 1982 and the Forest Act of 2002, which decentralize forest management in Tanzania's villages, the persistent degradation of Miombo woodland forests, primarily due to livestock activities, raises concerns about the effectiveness of these reforms. This study compares the provisions of these acts with on-ground realities through data from 27 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 45 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Thematic analysis using NVIVO 12 software identified four key discrepancies: decision-making structures, decision-making processes, gender involvement, and village collaboration. Findings show that villagers often unknowingly delegate legislative power to leaders, decision-making is politicized with minimal stakeholder engagement, gender inclusivity is minimal, and villages manage forests independently rather than collaboratively. These gaps have led to biased decisions, conflicts among user groups, forest encroachment, and the neglect of women's needs, exacerbating forest degradation. To address these issues, the study recommends capacity building through leadership and technical training for village councils, community education on legal rights, and improved transparency via public forums and accessible reporting. These initiatives aim to empower local communities and foster sustainable management of Miombo woodland forests.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the persistent challenges facing miombo woodland forests is degradation caused primarily by livestock grazing, which is closely linked to the activities of farmers, pastoralists, and agro-pastoralists (Ruvuga et al., 2020). This grazing leads to soil erosion, loss of vegetation, and a decline in biodiversity, undermining critical ecosystem services like carbon storage and water regulation (Chirwa et al., 2008; Ruvuga et al., 2020). These environmental impacts threaten the sustainability of the ecosystem and disrupt the livelihoods of communities at local, national, regional, and global levels by reducing agricultural productivity, worsening poverty, and contributing to climate change (Ameja et al., 2022; Mapaure & Moe, 2009). In response to these challenges, decentralized governance strategies have been adopted worldwide, empowering local communities to participate in decision-making regarding forest resource management (Ribot, 2006). The rationale behind this approach is that local communities possess in-depth knowledge of their forest ecosystems, making them more capable of implementing sustainable management practices that improve conservation outcomes while enhancing their socio-economic well-being (Hajjar et al., 2012; Resurreccion & Elmhirst, 2012; Waiswa et al., 2011).

Over the past five decades, numerous African countries, including those in East Africa, have embraced decentralization reforms through the development and implementation of legal frameworks that enhance community engagement in forest governance (Erk, 2014). These reforms reflect a growing acknowledgment of the crucial role local communities play in sustainable forest management and conservation efforts (Ribot, 2006). For example, in Kenya, the Forest Conservation and Management Act of 2016 aimed to decentralize decision-making authority to county governments, empowering them to oversee forest resources within their regions (Chisika & Yeom, 2021). Similarly, Uganda's National Forestry and Tree Planting Act of 2003 decentralized forest management responsibilities to local governments and communities, recognizing their pivotal role in sustainable forest conservation (Waiswa et al., 2011). In Tanzania, the enactment of the Local Government Act (District Authority) in 1982 and the Forest Act in 2002 granted village assemblies the power to make decisions concerning village forest resources. Notably, Section 141 of the Local Government Act emphasizes that *"A village assembly is the supreme authority on all matters of general policy-making in relation to the affairs of the village,"* highlighting the importance of decentralization reforms in promoting community involvement in forest governance (Local Government (District Authority) Act, 1982; Forest Act, 2002).

While decentralized legislative models aim to empower local communities to shape the destiny of their forests, promote conservation, and enhance their livelihoods, significant discrepancies often

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arise between these legal frameworks and their practical application (Bouda et al., 2011). Despite ambitious plans for decentralized governance emphasizing a substantial role for local communities in forest decision-making, the reality often diverges, with the documented decentralization system remaining an elusive ideal (Erk, 2014). Various factors complicate the effective implementation of these reforms, including inadequate resources, conflicting stakeholder interests, and bureaucratic obstacles (Lameck, 2011; Ribot et al., 2010). External pressures such as climate change, population growth, economic development priorities, and competing land use demands further exacerbate these discrepancies, creating a paradox where the desired benefits, like improved conservation outcomes and enhanced livelihoods, are hindered. This results in trade-offs between conservation goals and socio-economic development priorities (Hajjar et al., 2012).

Examining these discrepancies within the context of miombo woodland forests in the Tanga and Morogoro regions of Tanzania raises concerns about the efficacy of implementing decentralized decision-making as outlined in relevant acts. Despite the acts being seen as potential solutions to issues like degradation and resource conflicts, such issues persist and escalate, notably due to factors like livestock overgrazing. While existing studies have explored various aspects of miombo woodland forests, including biodiversity conservation (Lupala et al., 2015; Mtimbanjayo & Sangeda, 2018; Njana et al., 2013) and community engagement (Ruvuga et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2014), there is a gap in assessing the practical application of decentralized decision-making over these forests. This study adopts a qualitative approach to address the key question: is decentralized decision-making, as proposed in the acts, being effectively implemented in the study villages? By critically reviewing the Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982 and the Forest Act of 2002, this research aims to establish a decentralized decision-making framework for comparison with empirical findings. This approach seeks to uncover realities and complexities and recommend appropriate strategies, aligning with sustainable development goal 15 and 5, and the 2030 development agenda to enhance the sustainable management of Miombo woodland forests and empower local communities.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

This research was conducted in the Handeni, Kilosa, and Kilombero districts within the Tanga and Morogoro regions of Tanzania (Figure 2). These areas feature a varied landscape, including Miombo woodlands, bushlands, shrub thickets, swampy lowlands, river marshes, palm gardens, village cultivations, and plantations growing crops like sisal, rice, and sugarcane (Jew et al., 2016). Historically, these districts were primarily inhabited by farmers from diverse ethnic groups such as Sagara/Kaguru, Ndamba, Zigua, Luguru, Pogoro, Bondei, and Digo (Abdallah & Monela, 2007; Benjaminsen et al., 2009). However, there has been an increase in pastoralist and agro-pastoralist migrants from other regions of Tanzania, including ethnic groups like Maasai, Sukuma, Kurya, Iraq, and Barbaig (Benjaminsen et al., 2009). For this study, three villages were selected from each district: Kwamsundi, Gole, and Madebe in Handeni District; Chabima, Ulayambuyuni, and Ihombwe in Kilosa District; and Iduindembo, Utengule, and Miyomboni in Kilombero District making a total of nine study villages. The selection of these villages was purposeful, based on factors such as accessibility, the degradation of Miombo woodland forests due to livestock[1] grazing, and the presence of

[1] Livestock (for this study): Domestic animals, particularly cattle that graze in the miombo woodland forests.

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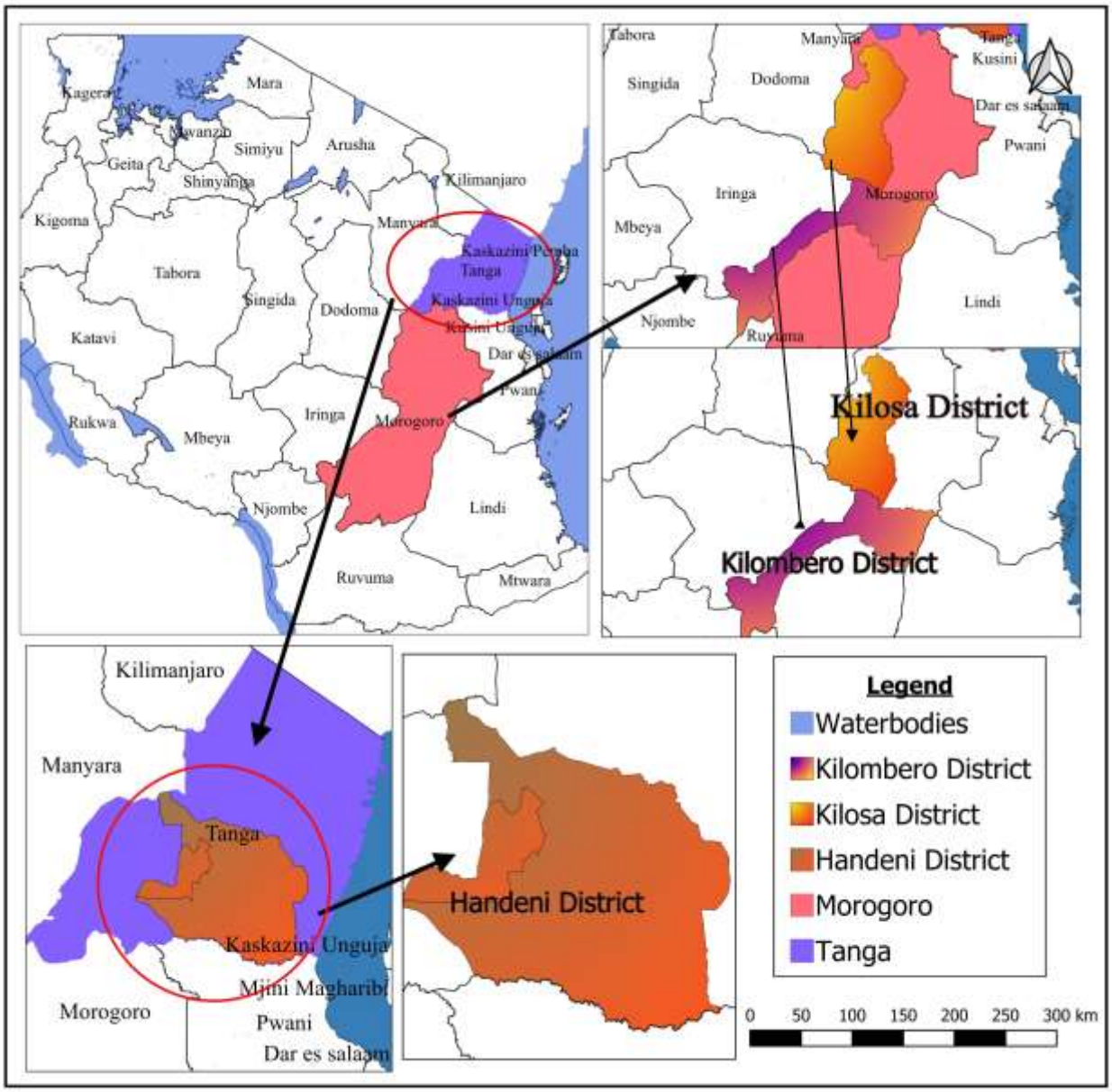
farmers[2], pastoralists[3], and agro-pastoralist[4] inhabitants.

Figure 2. Map of Tanzania showing the location of study districts (Developed by author)



Choice of qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach was essential for this study as it allowed for the collection of data without preconceived notions, facilitating an iterative analysis process that enabled a comprehensive exploration of emerging insights and new

[2] Farmers: Individuals who rely solely on crop production for sustenance and income (FAO, 2021).
[3] Pastoralists: Individuals who rely solely on livestock and their products for sustenance and income (FAO, 2021).
[4] Agro-pastoralists: Individuals who derive more than 50% of their income and sustenance from livestock, with the remainder from crop farming (FAO, 2021).

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knowledge (M. Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The limited prior research about this topic in the study area made this approach particularly appropriate, as it provided the flexibility to uncover new insights without relying on pre-existing frameworks.

Study Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional research design, with data collected between November 2022 and April 2023. Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted in a village with a similar setting to the study area to refine the methodology. The pilot revealed that grouping farmers with pastoralists and agro-pastoralists for discussions was unworkable due to their contrasting perspectives, which often led to heated debates. It also became clear that women from pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities were hesitant to share their views in the presence of men, largely due to patriarchal cultural norm that discourage women from speaking in front of men. These insights informed methodological improvements, including conducting separate focus group discussions for farmers and for pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, who were grouped together based on their shared experiences, such as owning large herds (up to 3,000 cattle), their semi-nomadic lifestyle, and the timing of their arrival in the villages. Additionally, gender-segregated sessions were implemented to ensure that women could speak freely.

Sampling Strategy

The target population for this study included farmers, pastoralists, and agro-pastoralists. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants based on specific criteria. Participants for the focus group discussions were drawn from the village register, with eligibility based on residency (a minimum of two years) and occupation (farmer, pastoralist, or agro-pastoralist). The focus groups were organized into three categories: mixed-gender farmers, female pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, and male pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. This categorization was implemented following insights gained from the pilot study.

Key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge of village events and were divided into community profile key informants and government leaders. Community profile key informants included a village chairperson, a youth representative, an elder female, and an elder male. Government leaders comprised the village executive officer, the district livestock officer, and the district forest officer.

Sample Size

The sample size was determined using the saturation principle, where no new information or themes emerge. Saturation in qualitative studies is normally achieved with 3 to 8 focus group discussions of 6 to 8 members each (Guest et al., 2017; M. Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Hennink et al., 2019). In this study, 9 focus group discussions were conducted in each district, resulting in a total of 27 focus group discussions and 173 participants across the three districts.

For key informants, saturation usually requires 4 to 15 individuals (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Muellmann et al., 2021). This study interviewed 5 key informants from each of the nine study villages (a village chairperson, a youth representative, an elder female, an elder male, and a village executive officer) and 2 key informants from each district (the district livestock officer and forest officer), totaling 45 key informants.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this study involved Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Key Informant interviews (KIs), and a literature review. The PRA included Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) where spider diagrams were utilized to visualize and compare participants' views on decision-making, effectively identifying dominant opinions and assessing the intensity of different perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during both FGDs and

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KIs, allowing for flexibility in following predetermined questions while also exploring unforeseen topics. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes, commencing with a briefing on the study's objectives and confidentiality assurances, followed by participants reviewing and signing consent forms.

The consent form specified that participation was voluntary and that individuals had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure anonymity, codes were employed instead of actual names for villages and respondents. Participants were encouraged to reach out to the research team with any concerns. All collected information was treated as confidential and accessible only to the research team, fostering trust and respect, particularly given the close-knit nature of the communities involved.

Interviews were recorded, and notes were transcribed into Microsoft Word after each village visit to minimize confusion. Following all visits, the data was consolidated into a single document and reviewed for accuracy.

For the literature review, the Forest Act of 2002 and the Local Government (District Authorities) Act of 1982 were examined to determine the prescribed decentralized legislative decision-making framework. The choice of these acts was based on their relevance to the study's focus on legal frameworks governing local governance and forest management. These acts were reviewed before analyzing the field data to establish the required decision-making processes.

Content and thematic analysis of the collected field data were conducted using NVivo 12 software. The initial coding in the content analysis established parent codes, which included decision-making structure, decision-making process, and gender inclusivity, all guided by the relevant legal acts. Thematic analysis further explored these parent codes by identifying sub-codes derived from the field data.

To uncover deeper patterns and relationships between themes, the analysis focused on examining how the sub-codes were connected, identifying interactions and influences between different aspects of decision-making. This involved looking at how certain decisions impacted gender inclusivity or how the structure of decision-making affected the overall process. By analyzing these connections, the study was able to reveal more complex insights and relationships that went beyond surface-level themes.

Relevant data were systematically assigned to corresponding codes using a description-focused strategy, and a subsequent review helped identify any overlaps or redundancies among the codes. The extracted themes ultimately formed the basis of the study's findings.

RESULTS

This section delves into the key themes essential to understanding decision-making within the context of livestock grazing in the miombo woodland forests studied. The analysis emphasizes both the structure and process of decision-making, with particular focus on the roles and inclusivity of various stakeholders, especially the involvement of gender in these processes.

Decision Making Structure

Top-Level in Decision-Making Structure

Findings revealed that villagers perceive the central government, particularly the President as the ultimate decision-maker in resolving their forest degradation issues due to livestock (Table 1). This was evident in discussions where villagers consistently expressed the need for presidential intervention, stating,

> *"We urge you (Researcher) to ensure these reports reach the President, because her intervention can quickly resolve the pastoralist encroachment issue" (Farmers FGD 2, 2022).*

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> *"We request that our plea reaches the President, since we have confidence in her ability to assist us" (Pastoralist and agro-pastoralist women FGD 7, 2023).*

> *"We are concerned that our local leaders may not be communicating the situation to the President; we beg you (Researcher) to convey this information to her and seek her assistance" (Farmers FGD 7, 2023).*

This perception contrasts with the legal framework, where Section 141 of the Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982 designates the village assembly, comprising all villagers aged 18 and above, as the supreme authority in village affairs. The Forest Act of 2002 further emphasizes this, mandating the village assembly's final approval for forest management plans (Section 14), forest bylaws (Section 34), and upgrading village forest reserves (Section 35).

Middle-Level in Decision-Making Structure

Villagers perceive that district government leaders should resolve issues that remain unresolved at the village government level before escalating them to the central government. This perception is also reinforced by district leaders, who often take a dominant role in village affairs, making critical decisions for villagers. As one district leader stated,

> *"We granted villagers the independence to establish their own bylaws, but they failed to adhere to them. We took the initiative to formulate bylaws ourselves and follow up to ensure they are implemented" (KI interview 1, 2022).*

However, this contradicts the legal framework, where section 142 of the Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982 designates the village council as the executive body responsible for implementing policies and initiatives. The village council includes the village chairperson, village executive officer, hamlet chairpersons, and other members elected by the village assembly. The Forest Act of 2002 further supports this by assigning the village council responsibilities like declaring forest reserves (Section 33) and overseeing bylaw creation (Section 37), accountable to the village assembly.

Operational unit in decision-making structure

At the village government level, villagers perceive the village council as the operational unit for making bylaws, resolving conflicts, collecting fees and fines, registering new pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, and handling illegally entered livestock, escalating unresolved issues to the district level. The village assembly expects only reports and information from the council, which they normally trust and follow. As one villager stated,

> *"In village meetings, we have repeatedly requested the village council to deal with this issue of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists encroaching forests, but they have not reported to us anything" (Farmers FGD 3, 2022).*

Contrary to this perception, the Forest Act of 2002 (Section 33) mandates the village council to establish a village land forest management committee as the operational unit for overseeing all forest matters in the village. This committee should be composed of assembly members, including a woman representative, a youth representative, and a forest expert, and is accountable to the village assembly.

In practice, few villages have active forest committees, and their functions are often unclear. Some villages reported the committee's role in granting permission and collecting fees for forest resource harvesting, while others mentioned its role in collecting fines. As one villager noted,

> *"Forest committee collect fee and we have requested the village council to prepare and present a report about the fees they've collected so far" (Farmers FGD 9, 2023).*

These findings show that villagers lack awareness of their ultimate authority in the decision-making structure. This leads to a perception that leadership

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actions are benevolent rather than obligatory, indicating a disconnect from the empowerment intended by the legislative framework.

Table 1: Decision making structure - Villagers' perceptions vs. Legal provisions

Level	Villagers' perception	Legal provision
Top level	Central government, particularly the President	Village assembly - Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982, Section 141 - Forest Act of 2002, Sections 14, 34, 35
Middle level	District leaders	Village council - Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982, Section 142 - Forest Act of 2002, Sections 33, 37
Operational unit	Village leaders	Village forest committee - Forest Act of 2002, Section 33

Decision Making Process

Stakeholder consultation and consensus

In villages, decision-making on bylaws and land use plans to address forest degradation due to livestock primarily involves the village council consulting with the village assembly through meetings. However, legal frameworks, such as Section 167 (1) of the Local Government (District Authorities) Act of 1982 and Sections 14 (1) and 37 (1) of the Forest Act of 2002, mandate broader consultations. These should include forest users and their organizations, local authorities at the vicinity of forests, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure broad support.

Village assemblies and councils making decisions are mainly composed of farmers, as they were the first settlers. Consequently, significant users of forests for livestock, such as pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, are often excluded, leading to biased decisions favoring farmers. This bias is evident in the bylaws (Table 2) and land use plans they implement.

Table 2: Bylaws with Rationales as Presented by Farmers

Bylaw	Rationale for forests conservation	Hidden rationale for farmers' benefits
Livestock grazing in any part of the village other than allocated areas requires prior approval from the village council.	To prevent irregular livestock entry feeding on regenerating miombo trees in every part of the village.	To prevent livestock incursions that damage crops and cause soil erosion and compaction on farming fields.
Grazing livestock in village forest reserves is prohibited.	To prevent livestock from sneaking into reserved forests at night.	To minimize the risk of livestock destroying farms near forest reserves.
Cattle ownership is limited to three to eight cattle.	To minimize pressure of grazing on forests.	To control livestock numbers because an excess could lead to degrading grazing areas, causing a shift to farms.
Farm expansion requires village government authorization.	To prevent encroachment on designated grazing lands that could lead to livestock encroaching forest reserves.	To prevent fellow farmers from encroaching on each other's farmlands.
Grazing must be confined to allocated areas when approved.	To avoid trampling in unallocated forest areas, leading to dormant growth.	To prevent livestock from trampling on farms on their way to water sources.

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In land use planning, some villages do not allocate grazing areas, while others allocate abandoned, unproductive areas far from water sources. Conversely, farming areas are allocated near fertile forest regions. The rationale is that pastoralists and agro-pastoralists are considered non-villagers and thus not included in planning. As one farmer questioned,

> *"Why allocate fertile lands for grazing when we are primarily farmers?"* Another added, *"We should not discuss pastoralists; they are invaders damaging our farms" (Farmers FGD 1, 2022).*

Other stakeholders not involved in decision-making include bordering villages at the vicinity of forests. None of these villages actively engage in joint decision-making, resulting in mutual blame-shifting. Common statements like, *"We advised that village to address this issue, but they have not taken action" (Farmers FGD 7, 2024),* highlight this issue.

These findings show that stakeholder involvement and consensus in decision-making is limited to the village council consulting the village assembly, which is dominated by farmers. Significant stakeholders, such as pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, as well as neighboring villages sharing forests, are often excluded.

Proposal evaluation and review

In village meetings, the council typically presents prepared proposals or ideas to the village assembly, allowing for support, rejection, or additional input. To gauge community sentiment and preferences, village leaders often conduct informal research by discussing relevant topics during social gatherings, such as markets. This helps to align proposals with the majority opinion, minimizing surprises during official meetings and ensuring decisions resonate with the broader community. One leader noted,

> *"It's important to read the environment and your people when promoting decisions. You have to give your people what they want since they chose you and you hope for their support in the future" (KI interview 8, 2023).*

Another leader expressed,

> *"A good leader must support his people rather than oppose them. We must defend our farmers' positions" (KI interview 6, 2022)*.

Once meetings conclude and decisions are made, villagers are often unclear about the next steps. Some believe bylaws are taken to parliament for approval, others think they are documented in the village register, while some feel the next steps are irrelevant as long as implementation occurs. Leaders clarified that bylaws and land use plans are sometimes shared by district leaders and later discussed at general government meetings.

This process contrasts with legal frameworks like Section 14 (2), (3), and (4) and Section 37 (2) of the Forest Act, 2002, and Section 167 (2) of the Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982. These laws mandate that upon reaching consensus, the village council formalizes the proposal and forwards it to the district council for comments and consideration. The district council then sends the proposal to the Director for evaluation before returning it to the village assembly via the village council.

Far from these legal steps, district and village leaders sometimes follow orders from higher authorities, such as district leaders, central government members, or powerful investors. In these cases, the assembly lacks the power to influence decisions. Examples include introducing plantations and tourism investors to forest areas previously used for grazing without prior village-level consultations. Village leaders align with these orders because their political futures depend on these higher-ups. One leader commented, "You would never neglect what your top leaders tell you to do. These are your bosses who can even remove you from your political position."

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These findings indicate that the council does not always follow the required steps after consulting with the assembly. They also suggest that the decision-making process is highly political, aimed at formulating decisions that garner widespread acceptance among those to whom leaders are accountable, both upward and downward.

Approval and implementation of village assembly decisions

Approval of decisions in village assemblies is often informal, with proposals automatically implemented once accepted by the majority. This practice contrasts with legal requirements outlined in Section 14 (4), (5), (6), and (7) of the Forest Act of 2002 and Section 37 (2), (4), and (5) of the Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982. These sections mandate that after bylaws and land use plans are reviewed by the district council and the director, feedback must be shared with the assembly for approval. The village council then submits the final approved copy to the district government. Additionally, these sections allow assemblies to appeal or reject the recommended comments if they are unsatisfied and adopt their own bylaws, provided they submit a copy to the district government.

Farmers, who dominate the assemblies, often implement the bylaws they set, though compliance is inconsistent. Some farmers exceed the limit of eight cattle or extend their farms into reserved forests and allocated grazing areas. When decisions are imposed from higher ups, villagers often show silent resistance, expanding their farming and grazing activities into reserved forests as a form of protest. One villager noted,

> *"We have reserved our forests for so long, then the government just gave them to foreigners. We better use them before they are taken" (Farmers interview 9, 2023).*

The exclusion of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists from decision-making results in their lack of compliance with approved decisions. They argue that limitations, such as restricting livestock numbers, are unrealistic since their livelihoods rely on larger herds. Additionally, confining livestock to allocated areas with limited pasture and water is impractical given their nomadic lifestyle. Consequently, they often forcefully enter reserved forests and farmlands, viewing the decisions as unfair and favoring farmers.

Lack of cooperation in decision-making among villages sharing forests results in non-binding decisions across villages. This leads to encroachment and ongoing conflicts between villages. The fact that grazing areas are mostly allocated at the periphery of villages bordering neighboring villages exacerbates this issue. Allocated grazing areas are sometimes left unused due to the nomadic behavior of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, tempting encroachment from neighboring villages. As a result, most grazing areas are encroached upon, prompting grazing in restricted forest areas.

These findings highlight that approval of decisions is often handled informally, not following the required legal process. This imply a breakdown in communication between district and village governments, who are supposed to work collaboratively. The approved decisions are not inclusive, leading to forests misuse and minimal implementation.

Gender differences in decision-making

Women are underrepresented in village councils across most study villages, which contradicts Section 33(2) of the Forest Act of 2002 that mandates gender balance. Despite regular attendance at assembly meetings, women have minimal influence due to perceptions that they lack knowledge of forest-related issues. In line with cultural norms of respect, women often defer to men to voice opinions during meetings, conflicting with the Local Government (District Authority) Act of

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1982, which requires the inclusion of women in assembly decisions.

This underrepresentation is concerning given women's significant role in livestock grazing. Women usually graze their livestock near their homes due to daily domestic responsibilities. They have reported issues such as delayed grass regrowth, soil erosion, compaction, and the spread of invasive species in these areas. These observations highlight the ecological consequences of their grazing practices, which are often overlooked.

The lack of women in leadership roles, such as forest committees and mixed-gender meetings, makes them hesitant to discuss sensitive issues like sexual harassment by male herders. One woman shared,

> *"When one of our fellow women was taking cattle to drink water at the river, she was physically assaulted. This incident deeply affected her, and it is a matter of shame for her husband to bring this up in the assembly" (Pastoralists and agro-pastoralists FGD 7, 2023).*

To address these issues, women recommended introducing representatives to effectively communicate their concerns, including setting grazing areas near their homes. These areas are currently allocated far away, making it difficult for them to access due to their daily activities. They also believe that having grazing areas closer would minimize harassment from male herders.

These findings indicate that the underrepresentation of women in decision-making has led to decisions that do not favor their needs, negatively impacting forest areas settlements. Increasing women's representation in the villages' councils is needed for more inclusive and effective forest management decisions.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed a significant gap in the awareness of village assemblies regarding the supreme authority they possess under legal frameworks such as the Local Government (District Authority) Act of 1982 and the Forest Act of 2002, which support decentralization in Tanzania. As a result, village assemblies often delegate decision-making authority to village leaders or higher government officials, leading to persistent blame-shifting and unresolved issues of forest degradation. These findings align with previous research by Hajjar et al. (2012), which highlighted communities' lack of clarity about their legal authority over forests in Mexico and Brazil. Similarly, Ahmad & Abu Talib (2015) found that local communities in Pakistan, despite being granted supreme authority over forests, fail to apply it due to a knowledge gap. Chirenje et al. (2013) and Ribot (2006) also noted that while decentralized structures are intended to empower communities, in many African countries, they function more as implementers rather than owners of initiatives, often due to a mentality that leaders are to be deferred to.

Challenging decentralized decision making, Bouda et al. (2011) acknowledged its potential benefits but noted that it can cause delays in the adoption and implementation of solutions. Wright et al. (2016) supported this view, suggesting that decentralized structures are only effective when combined with engagement from higher local government officials. Additionally, studies by Addison et al. (2019) and Mwakalukwa et al. (2014) challenged the belief that decentralization automatically reduces forest degradation, highlighting the need for capacity building, enhanced impact assessments, and experimental approaches to reconcile conservation and poverty reduction. Field experience from this study indicates that, despite village leaders and higher government intervention being the norm, issues persist in the study villages. Therefore, it is imperative to apply the decentralized approach as

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mandated by the acts to assess its impact on resolving forest management issues.

Lack of involvement of all stakeholders in the decision-making process has led to other groups' perspectives and ideologies being overlooked. Hempson et al. (2017) describe this as a lack of differentiation, noting that it is detrimental because effective alternative proposals and perspectives may be excluded. Gatdet, (2023) emphasized further that differentiation is crucial for effective conservation decisions, and should be robust enough to consider even disagreeable facts, needs, or obligations presented by different participant groups. In this study, lack of differentiation has led to decisions that predominantly favor farmers, who are the dominant group, resulting in conflicts and subsequent forest degradation. This aligns with findings by Abdulkadr (2019) and Solomon et al. (2007), which illustrate how farmers often perceive themselves as superior to pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in decision-making processes, leading to decisions that benefit them. Oloukoi et al. (2014) and Tofu et al. (2023) additionally highlight that political leaders, who mostly support farming activities over livestock activities, contribute to this dominance.

Decision-making process is inherently political and focused on maintaining power and catering to the majority, overlooking inclusivity. This aligns with insights from scholars like Ribot et al. (2010) and Timsina, (2003), who stressed that the ecological, economic, and social needs of forest users should be assessed within a political context due to its significant impact on the effectiveness of adopted interventions. Additionally, Lachapelle et al. (2003) supports these findings and introduces the concept of unification, highlighting the importance of establishing shared goals across all government levels involved in decision-making. When leaders at different levels pursue divergent political goals, the decision-making process becomes complex and challenging due to the absence of a common objective.

The gap in joint decision-making among forest-sharing villages aligns with findings from Forsyth & Johnson (2014) and Mfune (2014), who emphasized the necessity for a shared governance structure featuring clear rules, effective monitoring, and robust dispute resolution mechanisms. Jandreau & Berkes (2016) additionally underscored the importance of adaptive governance with inclusive decision-making to address challenges like encroachment and conflicts stemming from divergent interests.

Gender differences in decision-making processes can be analyzed through the lens of feminist theory, as articulated by scholars such as Lau (2020), Oloukoi et al. (2014) and Resurreccion & Elmhirst (2012). These scholars argue that the underrepresentation of women in decision-making reflects broader societal norms and power imbalances that marginalize women's voices and perspectives. Similarly, Rufino et al. (2013) highlight that traditional gender roles and cultural perceptions can constrain women's involvement in resource management decisions. Faizi et al. (2017) noted the issue of gender underrepresentation and recommend empowering women in decision-making as a key factor for achieving effective and sustainable forest management.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study evaluated decentralized decision-making for livestock management in the Miombo woodland forests of Tanga and Morogoro regions, Tanzania. It found significant gaps between the legal frameworks (Local Government Act of 1982, Forest Act of 2002) and their practical implementation. Four main issues were identified: villagers unknowingly delegating their decision-making power to leaders, politically influenced decision-making with limited stakeholder participation, minimal gender inclusivity with women having little influence, and villages managing forest resources independently instead of jointly. These issues have led to biased decisions, conflicts and forest encroachment.

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To address these challenges, capacity-building efforts such as training programs, workshops, and awareness campaigns should focus on improving understanding of the legal frameworks among both leaders and community members. Specifically, these initiatives should educate villagers on their decision-making rights, enhance leaders' knowledge of inclusive governance, and raise awareness about the long-term environmental and social consequences of poor decision-making practices. Inclusive decision-making should be prioritized by ensuring the participation of all relevant groups, leading to more balanced and equitable decisions. Mitigating political influence is crucial and can be achieved by establishing transparent decision-making procedures and enforcing accountability mechanisms that align decisions with ecological, economic, and social considerations.

Promoting joint forest management through inter-village committees and cooperative agreements can significantly improve resource utilization and ensure shared governance. Joint management fosters collaboration, reducing the risk of conflicts and encouraging more sustainable forest practices across villages. Empowering women through targeted leadership training, mentorship programs, and ensuring their representation in decision-making bodies can contribute to more holistic forest management approaches. Women often bring different perspectives to resource management, focusing on long-term sustainability, social welfare, and community needs, which are critical for the enduring health of the forests.

Future research should delve deeper into the extent of political influence on decision-making processes and evaluate the consistency of implementing other legislative frameworks, such as national policies and regulations, to enhance the effectiveness of forest management practices.

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