

## 2. Local Institutions and Wetland Management

### KEY POINTS

- **Local community-based institutions are needed to co-ordinate wetland and upland land-use practices.**
- **Effective co-ordination can facilitate sustainable wetland management**
- **Local institutions should be participatory and inclusive**
- **For local people there should be clear, demonstrable benefits of participating in local institutional arrangements.**



**Local institutional arrangements can co-ordinate the sustainable use of wetlands, and hence improve the livelihoods of many farmers.**

### SUMMARY

Experience from the SAB project showed that local institutions, in the sense of agreed rules for resource management and organisations to enforce them, are essential for sustainable management of wetlands. This is because wetlands require coordination of land use, both within the wetland and also between the catchment and the wetland. Village Natural Resource Management Committees, which build upon existing traditional community institutions, can be established to address these issues and develop appropriate bylaws. Working with community level wetland management institutions helps identify the real world and practical issues which affect the implementation of wetland policies, and so can feed into the development and fine tuning of national level policy to make sure that it is sensitive and effective.

### 1. Wetlands in Malawi and Zambia

Wetlands play an important role in sustaining the livelihoods and improving the food security of the rural poor in many African countries, including Malawi and Zambia. However, as more and more people recognise the development benefits associated with wetland use, an emerging challenge is to develop wetland management techniques that are both economically and environmentally sustainable (See PBN1). Wetlands are often fragile ecosystems, and over-exploitation, particularly in terms of agriculture, can lead to a degradation of the resource base and a reduction in the wide range of ecosystem services they provide.

### 2. Local Institutional Arrangements: A Response to Pressure

Local community-based institutions can play an important role in bringing about adaptation and adjustment to socio-economic and environmental change in natural resource management systems. As such, they are important facilitators of environmental sustainability. Because they are formed within local communities and based on social capital (i.e. commonly held values, norms and knowledge). they are also socially sustainable solutions to natural resource management problems.

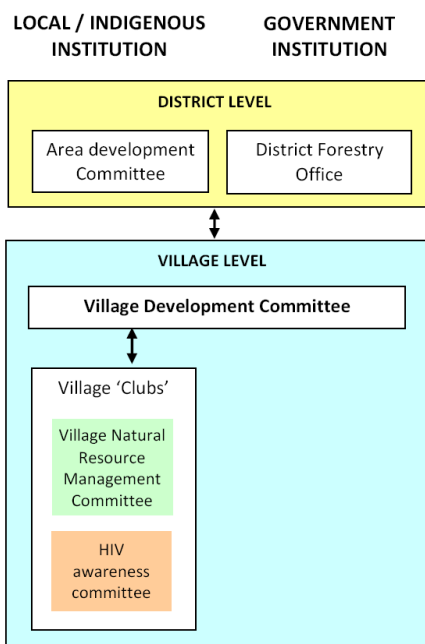
Local institutional arrangements for managing common property resources are common throughout Africa. They constitute shared formal or informal rules and understandings that relate to issues such as resource boundaries, access, land allocation and conflict resolution. They usually develop from shared cultural norms, values and strong social capital within communities. Often regarded as the 'missing link' at the people-development interface, they represent an adaptive response to pressures such as resource depletion. Through the networks, knowledge, rules and social cohesion associated with them, they mediate peoples' relationship with the environment and can help ensure long-term sustainable use.

### Traditional Village Coordination

In central Southern Africa, villages have headmen who are responsible to area chiefs or group village headmen whose authority is used to reinforce that of the village headmen. The headmen are responsible for the allocation of land under the traditional tenure arrangements which give usufructory, or use, rights to families.

## SAB and local institutions

Although the SAB project is supporting the sustainable multiple use of wetland areas through its functional landscape approach (See PBN1), it regards the development of local institutional arrangements that co-ordinate sustainable and equitable wetland use as fundamental to the success of its environmental and development objectives. The project has led the participatory development of Village Natural Resource Management Committees (VNRMCs) in each of the project sites.



## Relationship between VNRMCs and existing institutions in Simlemba District



VNRMC members displaying their land use map

To democratise this situation, governments and projects often support communities in the development of village level development committees or project committees through which decisions can be taken about desirable development activities. Sometimes there are other committees formed to address specific issues, such as water and sanitation, or marketing of produce, or the management of natural resources.

## 3. Building Local Institutions

The experience of SAB has drawn attention to particular challenges that should be considered when building institutional arrangements at the village level:

### Understanding rural communities and existing institutions

Critically, there is a need to understand the nature of rural livelihoods within each community, along with their culture, traditions and the ways in which existing institutional arrangements function. The development of local wetland management institutions should be participatory, inclusive and should build upon existing structures rather than seeking to replace them.

### Recognising the limitations of existing structures

Although traditional institutions may be the starting point for building new institutional arrangements, it is important that these are not simply replicated. They may represent embedded, institutionalised forms of unequal power relations and gender divisions. Similarly, traditional institutions (such as the village headman system) may be too busy to engage in the co-ordination of other natural resource management issues, hence separate or sub-committees may be more appropriate.

### Inclusive institutions

The local communities contain a wide diversity of people with different rural livelihood interests, hence a key challenge is to create local institutions that recognise such diversity and seek to include all members of the wetland and upland community.

### Demonstrating the benefits of institutional engagement

A growing number of people in the project areas are using wetlands for agriculture and other purposes primarily because the livelihood benefits are evident. A key challenge is to make it clear to local people that such livelihood benefits can only be sustained through participation in institutional arrangements that support sustainable wetland use.

### Agreement on practices

Local institutions should facilitate co-ordination between all wetland users, to prevent inappropriate practices and ensure everyone abides by the agreed environmentally sensitive rules. One example of this is an agreement to protect the centre of the wetland from cultivation.

### Upland-wetland linkages

There is a need to ensure local institutions facilitate co-ordination between upland and wetland activities; recognising that what is done on the uplands can affect the situation in the wetlands. For example, the creation of a buffer zone between upland and wetland, in which agriculture or bush clearance is prohibited, should be enforced.

### Co-ordination between institutions

Larger wetlands located in river valleys can span many kilometres in length, hence several communities can have a stake in their utilisation. Co-ordinating wetland use under such circumstances is challenging and requires local institutions talking to each other and reaching agreements on mutually compatible rules and guidelines.

## DEVELOPING BYLAWS

In Simlemba district (Malawi), the SAB project encouraged VNRMC members to develop bylaws for wetland use. These bylaws included:

- Designating a 5 metre buffer zone from the centre of the wetland in which no cultivation is allowed;
- Prohibiting the planting of Eucalyptus trees in wetlands;
- Prohibiting the removal of trees from the wetland;
- Ensuring livestock are always supervised in the wetland;
- Designating specific areas within the wetland for livestock grazing.



**Co-ordinating local institutions at the catchment-wide level can mean equitable access to wetland services.**

## POLICY BRIEFING NOTES AVAILABLE:

1. Valuing wetlands for livelihoods - the basis for sustainable management
2. Local institutions and wetland management
3. Wetland health assessment – monitoring sustainability
4. Wetlands and policies – diversity and networking

## Providing support

It is unrealistic to expect each community to establish new institutional arrangements for managing wetlands, in the absence of external support. The SAB project has recognised that consultation, stakeholder analysis and the provision of training and exchange visits has helped demonstrate the importance of wetland sustainability and the formation of appropriate institutional arrangements.

## 4. Further Coordination Challenges

Although co-ordinating a diverse range of stakeholders and several local institutions around one wetland is undoubtedly challenging, in the long-term it is important that institutional formation and co-ordination occurs at the catchment level. Upstream land use practices (whether in the wetland or upland) will inevitably have an impact on downstream wetland environments and their capacity to support agricultural and other livelihood activities (the implications of this have recently been reviewed in the FAO / Ramsar Study of Agriculture-Wetland Interactions (Water Report 33)). A key challenge, therefore, is the alignment of institutional goals between different communities, which may involve the more explicit incorporation of ideas of environmental responsibility, equity and justice. At the catchment level, the formation of a committee made up of representatives from each of the local institutions would develop guidelines for equity and sustainability.

## 5. Local Institutions and Feedback into Policy at Higher Levels

Experience with community level institutions involved in the management of wetlands helps identify the real world and practical issues which will affect the implementation of wetland policies, and for which policies are needed. In this way the experience with these VNRMCs and their bylaws is important for informing and fine tuning the development of national level policies relating to wetlands. This is essential to make sure that policies meet actual needs and are supported by communities so that they can be effective.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

**Wetland Action** is a not for profit NGO which provides technical support to field level organisations working on wetland and livelihoods. Its aim is to support the ecologically sound and socially sensitive use of wetlands for sustainable livelihoods. [www.wetlandaction.org](http://www.wetlandaction.org). For further details contact:

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Other partners in the SAB Project are:

- **Self Help Africa:** [www.selfhelpafrica.org](http://www.selfhelpafrica.org)
- **MALEZA:** Malawi Enterprise Association. E mail: [hmsusa@malezamw.org](mailto:hmsusa@malezamw.org)
- **NLWCCDP:** North Luangwa Wildlife Conservation and Community Development Programme. E mail: [nlwccdp@zamnet.zm](mailto:nlwccdp@zamnet.zm)

The **SAB Project** seeks to reduce poverty among wetland-dependent communities in central Southern Africa. It achieves this by developing and testing strategies for the sustainable management of seasonal wetlands, including technical measures related to land husbandry and the maintenance of a functional landscape, and by influencing policies at the NGO, national and international levels, so that the role of wetlands in poverty reduction is better recognised.

This project is one of four Demonstration Projects of the **Wetlands and Poverty Reduction Project** of **Wetlands International** which has sought to influence national and international policies to ensure that the interconnections between the world's poor and wetlands are recognized. See [www.wetlands.org](http://www.wetlands.org).