

Quietly and beyond the glare of the newspaper headlines, across Tanzania, communities are slowly but surely claiming back their forests and putting them under local control. Already around 4.1 million hectares of forest land in over 2,300 villages are either under, or in the process of being transferred, to local communities across the country. This includes high value montane forests in the Eastern Arc Mountains biodiversity hotspot, coastal forests and mangroves and *miombo* woodlands that cover large swathes of Tanzania's sparsely populated western regions. These changes have been made possible by changes in the Tanzanian forestry laws in 2002, which, for the first time, recognise and legalise forests owned and managed by village councils and community groups.

Donors such as the Danish, Norwegian and Finnish governments as well as the World Bank have been working with the Forestry and Beekeeping Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism to support village level forestry activities. The law allows two systems of forest management. The first is where communities become owners and managers through their village councils. Forests and woodlands within the village area are declared by village governments and then registered with the local district council as 'Village Land Forest Reserves'. Once a management plan has been drawn up and approved by the district, the villagers can start actively managing their own forests. The second system covers communities living close to larger forests managed by either national or local government. Communities become joint managers by signing agreements with the government and in return for actively managing the forests, are able to share the benefits by

THE QUIET REVOLUTION

HOW RURAL TANZANIANS ARE WINNING BACK THE RIGHTS TO THEIR FORESTS

accessing honey, fuelwood, poles and timber.

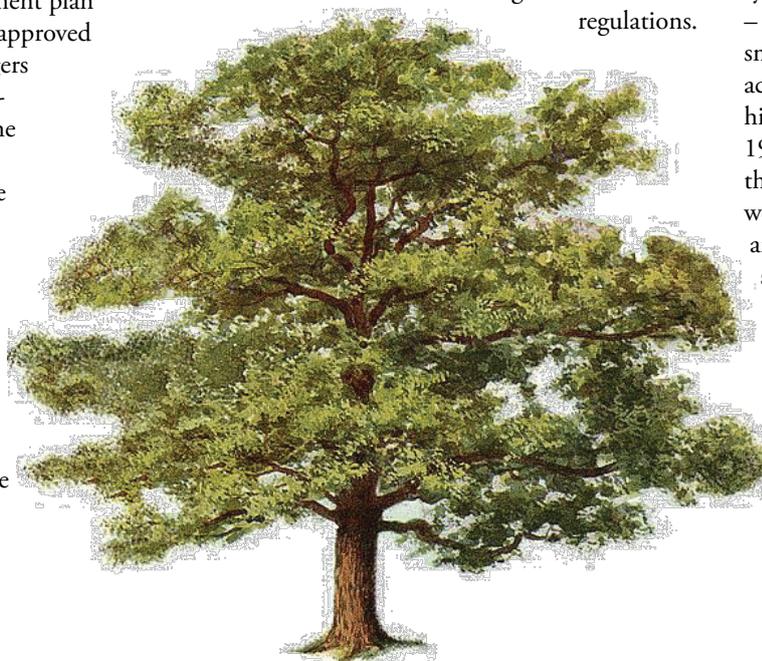
The changes in policy have been possible through Tanzania's unique system of local government. Communities in rural areas are divided into villages (of which there are over 10,500 on mainland Tanzania), which are managed by village councils. The councils are accountable to village assemblies consisting of all the adults living within the village area. This system dates back to the mid-1970s, when the socialist "*ujamaa*" programme of Tanzania's founding President Julius Nyerere gave villages a legal basis, largely as a way to fit scattered and poor rural communities into the country's socialist development agenda. Although unpopular at the time, this political initiative sowed the seeds for rural empowerment through village governments. The Local Government Act of 1982 strengthened these powers by, among other things, enabling villages to make their own local by-laws. These by-laws are legally binding and enforceable in a court of law, and provide village governments with a powerful tool with which to enforce local forest management rules and regulations.

A second factor which supported the emergence of participatory forestry is Tanzania's size and the remote location of many forested areas. Over time, the government came to realise that it was unable to manage these huge areas - and that some alternative system is needed. Pilot projects, initiated in the early 1990s in Babati and Singida districts and funded by the Swedish government, showed quite clearly that forests under village management could be restored and protected more effectively and at less cost than those under central government control.

But can we be sure that communities manage forests better? Trees grow slowly and therefore it takes time to say with certainty whether a forest is recovering. However, a number of independent reports demonstrate that forests under village management are recovering. A project in the Shinyanga district of north western Tanzania supported the re-establishment of a traditional system used by Sukuma agropastoralists for reserving dry season grazing. This management practice, known locally as "*ngitili*", provided a locally accepted system that was quickly adopted - leading to the restoration of small patches of acacia woodland across what was previously a highly eroded landscape. Between 1994 and 1999, several hundred thousand hectares of eroded land were restored through this project and 152 species of trees, 145 bird species and 21 mammal species were reintroduced across the region.

In a second study data were gathered during the past five years from the same set of 13 forest areas in five regions across eastern, central and

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northern Tanzania. The sample included forests that were managed entirely by village councils, forests that were jointly managed by communities and government, forests under exclusive government management and one control site in “open access” land owned by a village but lacking forest management objectives. Data was gathered from 20 x 20 m permanent sample plots. In the sample of 13 forests, there are increases in basal area and volume for forests managed with community involvement and declines for both of these variables in forests under government or open access management regimes.

A further indicator of strong local management is that, given the chance, villagers are both willing and able to protect their own forests. Recently, while in Kiteto, the author had the chance to visit

the Suledo forest (*see photo 1*), which is owned by nine Maasai villages and covers about 164,000 hectares. With support from the Swedish-funded Land Management Project, the villagers have been protecting and managing this forest since 1997 (*see photo 2*). At the time of the visit, villagers in Laiseri arrested illegal loggers and confiscated their equipment, vehicle and logs (*see photo 3*). These goods were then auctioned by the village committee and the funds used to support local development needs and the work of the forest management committee.

Despite this good news there are still many problems and obstacles. Perhaps the greatest is that understanding of the new forest law at village level is still very low. In some areas, the pressure to harvest trees is high and the way in which licences are issued is not

always transparent. A new report produced by the environmental watchdog, TRAFFIC, makes this clear and points out that loggers bribe village leaders, offering a pittance for the timber harvested, and are frequently protected by the local forest officer. In recent years south eastern Tanzania has seen a logging boom and one village, Migeregere, has been in the thick of it. Mr. Kipengeze makes the point: “Everyone is frustrated that the village does not have any influence in the issuing of logging licences. It always comes from the District level, and the payments to us are too small. We want to be empowered to control logging in our land, not just see people harvest the trees then leave”.

Under the Mpingo Conservation Project (*‘Mpingo’* is the Kiswahili name for ebony or blackwood) the situation is improving. Villagers are slowly learning the real value of their timber and realising that registering their own village forests, managing them sustainably and protecting them under the law will help them capture this value. Kikole village – in Kilwa District – has already found this out, as explained by Matimbanya; “We are already benefiting. We patrol the forest three times a month, and have collected fines from illegal loggers. Illegal tree felling has now been reduced in Kikole. We have also received compensation from an oil company that felled some of our trees within our village forest”. He then adds, “We now have knowledge of the forest and how we can manage it using the law. This will help us with our second village forest that we are preparing, and also we will know what to do if we want to set aside more forest in the future”.

– Tom Blomley was Senior Adviser to the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism between August 2003 and December 2007. During this time he supported the government to establish a national programme of participatory forest management.

1: Suledo Forest, Kiteto District

2: Village meeting, Suledo Forest

3: Timber and tools confiscated by Laiseri villagers in Suledo forest

