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## MORE RIGHTS OR WRONGS? DECENTRALIZATION IN UGANDA

### Directions of change

Uganda is located on the northern and western shores of Lake Victoria. It shares borders with Kenya to the east, the Sudan to the north, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west, and Rwanda and Tanzania to the south. Observers have long admired its bright equatorial landscapes, alive with an impressive array of colour, line and shape. The structure of rural Ugandan landscapes is intensively diverse and the micro-design of individual or communally managed lands is complex and site-specific. A patchwork of subsistence gardens, separated by vast fields of sugar cane and bananas, crawl over low hills rising from the dark waters of Lake Victoria and the White Nile. These landscapes become progressively drier toward the Sudanese border, as well as the Kenya border, mixing shades of brown and red with the familiar greens and blues found further south. The landscapes of south-western Uganda are an interchanging mix of arid savannah, dense equatorial rain-forest and high-potential and intensively cultivated highlands.

The landscapes of south-western Uganda have been the subject of particular preoccupation and debate. Like elsewhere in Africa, the heterogeneous appearance of Uganda's environments differ from perceptions of environmental landscapes and ideas many outsiders claim. Carswell notes that colonial agricultural officers in the Kigezi region of south-western Uganda associated the "patchwork" appearance of the landscape to poor agricultural practices. In contrast to the "disorderly appearance of many traditional Ugandan landscapes, conservationist ideas of the environment maintained that an organized landscape was the ideal representation of an appropriately managed environment.<sup>1</sup> Differences in landscape were made problematic in the minds of conservation-minded colonial officials who sought to impose uniform land use and management strategies onto socio-economically and ecologically diverse areas to realize idealized landscape structures and ecological functions.

A similar pattern repeats itself in contemporary Uganda as it continues with a reform process aimed at remaking natural resource management regimes, and by implication, en-

vironments. This process relies significantly on constructions of “right” and “wrong” in which prevailing ways of managing and relating to the environment are made wrong, and introduced institutional varieties are suggested as their right. This chapter explores changes being made to institutions for managing natural resources in Uganda, of which decentralization is arguably the most significant. It will situate the prescribed mechanisms for decentralized natural resources management with wider political and environmental factors. The experience of two district-based natural resource management projects in south-western Uganda are examined. Their experiences may inform what “rights” and “wrongs” decentralization introduces to community based natural resources management, the focus of a concluding critical assessment.

## Historical and political context

Insecurity and uncertainty have dominated Uganda’s politics for much of its post-independence life. Although the ruling National Resistance Movement<sup>2</sup> brought security to large areas since assuming power in 1986, following a protracted armed struggle in the bush, rebel activity continues in some western and northern districts. A referendum in June 2000 on the country’s political future exposed deep differences in opinion on how the country should be governed into the future, as well. The Movement has, nonetheless, pushed ahead with a reform strategy to enhance democratization

centred on popular participation in decision-making and on decentralization as a governance framework. It is too early to judge, however, the impact of these reforms on a society that is characterized by sectarian divisions. Tumushabe argues that political stability is the most legitimating factor in implementing the Movement’s socio-economic and political programmes.<sup>3</sup> As Tumushabe suggests, stability is a significant precedent to effective governance. The 1999/2000 *World Development Report* argues strongly that democratization reforms and, more specifically moves to decentralize encourage political stability, ‘Decentralization provides for political stability by providing an institutional mechanism for bringing opposition groups into a formal, rule-bound bargaining process’.<sup>4</sup> As a new political framework structured on decentralization principles establishes itself, it will be possible to assess its contribution to the country’s security and political stability. For the time being, democratization reforms have been unable to integrate opposition rebels in the west and north into formal political negotiations or to stabilize the security of these regions.

Reforms introduced by the Movement seek a return to the system of strong local government established under Uganda’s independence constitution. The independence constitution invested significant responsibilities and autonomy in local governing bodies. Changes to the Constitution made in 1967, however, limited the autonomy of local government and made Uganda a republic with one central gov-

ernment.<sup>5</sup> Local authority was further circumscribed by the Local Governments Act of the same year that substantially limited the ability of local governments to govern independently of central government.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Act mandated the Ministry of Local Government to approve the budgets of local councils, and the immediate accountability for transferred resources was to the Minister of Local Government and not to local people.<sup>7</sup> The Act coincided with constitutional changes and signified consolidation of power by the Obote government. Neither it nor the later Amin government embraced populist government principles. Rather, authority and decision-making were centralized under these regimes, who were characterized more by intimidation and coercion than by adherence to notions of “participation” and “empowerment”.

Strengthening local government structures was a priority of the Movement government even before it assumed power in 1986. A two dimensional system of democracy, one parliamentary and the other participatory, was the first point of the then rebel National Resistance Army’s Ten Point Programme, a quasi-manifesto the Army conceived in the bush to guide policy actions once they gained power.<sup>8</sup> The Movement ascribed to the belief that local government could play a leading role in national development. However, they reasoned that central government, unaccountable as it was to local constituencies, had made communities acquiescent and sedate. By devolving responsibilities and resources to communities, the

Movement reasoned they could redress feelings of alienation and mistrust in local populations and thereby integrate local communities into the life of the nation as well as secure their contribution to national development.<sup>9</sup> To this end, the Movement established a locally based system of Resistance Councils and Committees, legalized under the Resistance Councils and Committees Statute of 1987. The statute provided a framework for local government and institutionalized decentralization as a government policy.

Significant rights and responsibilities were entrusted to local governments to remedy exclusionary approaches to development and to encourage active participation of the population. Decentralization reforms advocated by the Movement recognized the shortcomings of traditional centrist development strategies employed under the earlier Obote and Amin governments. They coincided, as well, with growing international recognition that development had largely failed to assist marginal populations.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the Movement advocated an approach to development that depended significantly on people’s willingness to participate in the reformed political landscape of the nation. Participation is a primary objective of its decentralization reforms. At the launching of a local government decentralization programme in 1992, President Yoweri Museveni exhorted, “Our people will voluntarily raise money, materials and labour in support of their socio-economic development once they are confident that they will be put to

proper use and that the benefits will accrue to their area.”<sup>11</sup>

The Movement’s approach to development shares commonalities with the “new” development paradigm that, in the judgment of one sociologist, seeks to “involve the effective, organized, and institutionalized participation of large and often poor sectors of the population in the development of their own settlement and beyond.”<sup>12</sup> Others view the rhetoric contained in the “new” development paradigm skeptically. Agrawal observes,<sup>13</sup> “Development is now empowerment, and community has emerged as the key agency of development processes, becoming the site where development, greater equity, and more democratic grassroots participation can finally be united.” The development-decentralization-participation interface is indeed confused, and as both the preceding and following discussions indicate, is political as well.

## Decentralizing Uganda

Decentralization is one strategy adopted by the Movement to re-orient government toward greater democracy and active local participation in national affairs. Decentralization is legislated under the Local Governments Act of 1997, a framework act directing decentralization processes. The aim of the Act is to enable implementation of decentralization and devolution provisions provided for under Article II of the 1995 Constitution.<sup>14</sup> Its objectives include to ensure democratic participation in and con-

trol of decision-making by the people concerned as well as to establish a democratic, political and gender-sensitive administrative set-up in local government.<sup>15</sup> The Act establishes a system of local government based on the district as a unit under which there exists lower governments and administrative units. Powers and functions of government at all levels in relation to decentralized decision-making are institutionalized under the Act. The functions of local government councils include promoting democratic governance and ensuring district implementation and compliance with government policy.<sup>16</sup> Services and activities devolved to local governing bodies to fulfil this mandate include local government development planning, co-operative development, social rehabilitation, women in development and community development.<sup>17</sup> The role of the centre vis-a-vis line ministries and the Ministry of Local Government is limited to coordination, advocacy of local government, inspection, monitoring, the provision of technical advice and the supervision of training within respective sectors.<sup>18</sup>

The legislation envisions a metamorphosis in local government, an objective manifest in a preface to the Act:

An Act to amend, consolidate and streamline the existing law on Local Governments in line with the Constitution [of 1995] to give effect to the decentralization and devolution of functions, powers and services; and to provide for decentralization at all levels of Local Governments to ensure good governance and democratic participation in, and control of decision making by the people. . .<sup>19</sup>

Transforming national consciousness is a further objective of the Act, as the following pronouncements, taken from a compendium of documents and articles on the reform process, suggest

It [decentralization] requires the development of strategies and skills which will induce attitudes that play a more proactive role.<sup>20</sup>

The objectives of the decentralization policy clearly point to reactivating the populace into a more participative and development conscious orientation.<sup>21</sup>

To make decentralization sustainable will require a massive follow-up on sensitization training at all levels.<sup>22</sup>

New bureaucratic structures established at the district and sub-district levels are charged with leading this renaissance. It is envisioned that they will challenge the compliant disposition of the civil society through a more engaged political process. It is implicitly assumed that decentralization and participation are symbiotically related. At a theoretical level, decentralization encourages participation. Agrawal insists,<sup>23</sup> “decentralization changes the opportunity structures for participation and makes available to citizens multiple channels through which to access and shape governance and the exercise of power”. However, the effectiveness of decentralization without participation is arguably limited. As one observer suggests, “While decentralization has reformed the institutions of governance by entrusting powers and responsibility to local elected leaders,

civil society in Uganda remains weak.”<sup>24</sup> Importantly, decentralization both informs and is informed by ideas of local actors, including their capacity to act and their will to do so. Decentralization is one point of departure from broader political trends that negotiate, construct, deconstruct, and claim and disclaim perceptions of local actors in the process of shaping state-local relations.

Understandings of communities premised on pejorative notions of idleness and complicity raise substantial questions about the capacities of local actors to act and their interests to do so. It is popularly suggested that local actors have been made passive recipients of ineffective governance regimes and incapacitated local government structures over years of political turmoil. However, the ways in which individuals exercised autonomy over their affairs or the strategies they employed to survive and develop in a context of perpetual uncertainty and insecurity prior to the Movement’s government are rarely questioned. How did different local actors try to make a system, no matter how handicapped in terms of democracy and effective governance, to work for them? These questions remain unanswered, let alone asked, in Uganda’s reform process, even though their answers may inform ongoing local government reforms.

Instead, by depicting the civil society as passive, the reform process constructs a *tabula rasa*, not recognising either individual initiative or actor resistance, to give measure to creating the political landscape anew. Possibly, local actors

are not as inactive or as without agency as they are presented. They may play a more active role in bringing about reforms. Providing answers to questions such as these is critical to targeting more effective decentralization interventions. Assuming that local actors exercise more agency than is conventionally assumed, the efficacy of interventions centred on sensitization and awareness building at the local levels is questionable. Sensitization may imply desensitizing individuals to established individual ways of knowing and acting. Awareness building becomes an exercise in indoctrination of introduced, dominant, ways of seeing and doing.

Locating representative meanings and conceptualizations of local actors challenges negative understandings of community definition and constitution implicit in an interventionist policy orthodoxy. Demonstrating the need for continued intervention demands that communities be constructed as problems. Problems provide leverage to dominant ideologies and interests, providing a framework in which action is made purposeful and legitimate. "Progress" is confused with politics, and interests and intentions are exchanged with little consequence as the focus of intervention remains fixed on "making right". Ultimately, the making and unmaking of communities is embedded in wider political struggles that seek a mandate and measure for ruling governments. To account for why decentralization is successful in some areas and not in others, Agrawal contends that we must pay closer attention to

the politics that can both motivate or undermine decentralization initiatives. Agrawal explains,<sup>25</sup> "Political actors at the central level use decentralization as one of the means to gain a greater share in available resources at the central level." Assuming his judgment is correct, decentralization could be viewed as a strategy to legitimize to Uganda's, surely tired of years of civil unrest at the time of the Movement's struggle in the early 1980s, that this was a movement worthy of governing and theirs a struggle worth supporting.

A government pronouncement on decentralization reform characterizes decentralization as a "political" process.<sup>26</sup> Decentralization had been a prodigy policy for the Movement even before it assumed power. Politics, and more importantly, the need to stabilize the socio-political landscape following years of civil unrest, has given momentum to decentralization measures. Agrawal adds,<sup>27</sup> "Without a powerful political actor pursuing decentralization policies and using such policies to successfully secure higher access to resources, it is unlikely that meaningful decentralization can occur. Local actors seldom have the requisite resources or capacities to push for greater levels of decentralization." As Agrawal explains, decentralization is one instrument that powerful political actors use to command a greater share of resources. However, although Agrawal explains that the capacities of local actors to push for decentralization reforms is limited, it is equally important to determine how and in what situations local actors will employ the

implements of decentralization as part of their own exercise of agency as well. This may further situate decentralization in dominant political currents and illustrate the contingent and variable exchange of action and inaction between powerful local and non-local political actors.

## **Decentralizing for environment management**

The adoption of decentralization as a mechanism to promote good environmental governance in Uganda resonates strongly with international trends. These broadly assume that localizing control of environmental management to promote greater participation in sustainable environmental use" will result in more favourable environmental outcomes. Uganda's overall policy goal on environmental management, as stated in the National Environment Management Policy, relates closely to wider interests in 'sustainable' environmental management at the local levels. Its goal is

...sustainable social and economic development which maintains or enhances environmental quality and resource productivity on a long-term basis that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>28</sup>

Reforms for natural resources management signify an attempt to establish a network of local environmental bodies to persuade, sensitize, mobilize and activate local populations in line

with key policy objectives on managing of the environment. Foremost among these are greater public participation and sustainable environmental management at local levels. For example, a key principle of environmental management enshrined under the National Environment Statute of 1995, Uganda's framework legislation on environmental management, is "to encourage the maximum participation by the people of Uganda in the development of policies, plans and processes for the management of the environment."<sup>29</sup> The National Environment Management Policy identifies participation as one of the primary objectives it seeks to achieve as well.<sup>30</sup> Specific objectives for public participation provided for under the National Environment Action Plan (NEAP) for Uganda include, "to involve land and resource users in environmental planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at all levels and empower them to manage their natural resources." Additionally, it seeks to "bring resource management decisions and accountability closer to the land and resource users."<sup>31</sup>

Underlying legislative support for participation in local environmental management is a dominant conviction that environmental management is imperiled without citizen participation in natural resource management. The reforms propose establishing local institutions, such as district and local environmental committees (DECs and LECs), as well as appointing district environment officers, to foster

greater citizen participation in natural resource management. District responsibilities regarding environmental management specified under the NEAP include:

- ensuring that the environmental concerns are integrated at the district and local levels of the planning processes;
- ensuring that the local people participate in environmental planning decision-making and implementation;
- mobilizing the people and the resources to solve environmental problems; and
- ensuring that national environmental policies are implemented at the local level.<sup>32</sup>

Functions of the DEC's include compiling district environmental action plans, ensuring that environmental concerns are integrated into all plans and projects approved by the district council, as well as co-ordinating all activities of the district council relating to managing the environment and natural resources.<sup>33</sup> Establishment and monitoring of such institutions is the responsibility of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), the principle national agency for environmental management. It acts primarily as a facilitator by assisting the districts to establish DEC's and LEC's.

NEMA is mandated by NEAP "to enlist the support and participation of the local people by: (i) building local government environmental planning capacity to enable them to sustainably manage their own environment and natural resources; and (ii) assisting local

governments to develop their own environmental action plans, policies and bye-laws".<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, the boundaries of acceptable participation are clearly demarcated by the NEAP and other policies and pieces of legislation concerned with environmental management. For example, NEAP calls for the development of "guidelines on public participation in environment/natural resource management to be applied by resource managers in their development programmes and projects".<sup>35</sup> Section 44 of the revised Land Act further limits individual prerogatives in managing natural resources. Under the Act, individuals are legally bound to manage land in accordance with a host of natural resources and environmental legislation, including the National Environment Statute.<sup>36</sup>

Forms of participation introduced under the decentralization measures, however, are clearly limited to supporting a predetermined plan for managing natural resources, one inscribed in a multitude of policies and legislation to promote "sustainable" environmental practices. This raises concerns for existing individual and group strategies for managing natural resources that lie outside formally demarcated boundaries for participation. In many instances, local populations are assumed to be ignorant of appropriate ways of managing natural resources. This is perhaps not surprising when considering that individuals are understood in negative terms, and therefore are unlikely to be perceived as having "sustainable" regimes in place for managing natural re-

sources. Discrediting local practices legitimizes the establishment of new institutions for sustainable natural resource management and demonstrates the need for education and sensitization initiatives to inform local people of new management paradigms.

Education and sensitization campaigns are a significant aspect of new policy approaches for environmental and natural resource management, as elsewhere in Africa.<sup>37</sup> Encouraging public awareness of the principles of and the need for sustainable natural resource management is a primary objective of national environmental policy. Developing a national strategy for creating public awareness is one strategy the NEAP suggests to countervail “low levels of environmental education”.<sup>38</sup> NEMA is the primary actor charged under the National Environment Statute with promoting public awareness.<sup>38</sup> It accomplishes this largely through training and supervision of local institutions for environmental management. They share a greater responsibility for disseminating new sustainability and conservation minded paradigms to individuals and groups.

It is evident that to depict populations as ignorant, idle and inept serves to justify interventions, including education and awareness programmes to promote dominant interests in managing the environment. Ignorance, suggested by the onus of poverty, is implied to be an obstacle to sound natural resources management in one district state of the environment report. “It is not worthwhile for the poor community to think about conservation when he is

not sure of the next day”, the report says.<sup>40</sup> To further demonstrate the need for new public environmental education, the same report suggests that the entire social fabric poses a threat to the environment and adds that “the overall social, moral, economic and cultural heritage tends to contribute to the formation of negative views about the environment”.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a representative of a bilateral aid agency in Kampala claimed farmers manage resources in a way that limits their conservation value. He believed that to abandon natural resource management to individual strategies risked decline in local environments to inappropriate techniques.<sup>42</sup> Such alarming leaps in judgment do not fare well for location-specific strategies and knowledge to manage the environment. These face isolation and exclusion by an emerging management hegemony based on “expert” knowledge and “sustainable” strategies to manage natural resources.

Another argument used to justify new arrangements for local natural resource management is the perceived threat of environmental degradation. The introduction to the National Environment Management Policy, for example, declares:

This strain [on the environment and natural resources] has resulted in a number of problems: soil degradation is becoming more pronounced...; deforestation is widespread and the loss of biodiversity is increasing; wetlands are being drained extensively for agriculture...; fuelwood shortages have reached critical levels in some areas of the country...<sup>43</sup>

Arguments of uncontrolled environmental degradation are used religiously in the Uganda

context; their gospel is opportunistically used to legitimize a variety of opinions, policy positions and legislative reforms,<sup>44</sup> more specifically the establishment of new “participatory” regimes for managing the environment. They are further used to justify attempts to mobilize the population to take action as well as to sensitize it to conservation concerns and to raise its awareness of sustainable natural resource management. Assertions of environmental degradation in the areas of south-western Uganda, and the concomitant decline in farmer livelihoods, it suggests, are not new. Carswell<sup>45</sup> notes that fears of negative environmental change preoccupied agricultural officials in colonial Kigezi. They sought soil conservation measures and resettlement schemes to combat unwanted changes they observed in the environment. In 1935, for instance, the District Agricultural Officer warned that overpopulation was leading to soil exhaustion. Carswell explains that the officers “predicted that as yields fell there would be an increased tendency to encroach on land that should be left fallow, resulting in the momentum of soil degradation.” Testimonies of denigration and alarm were subsequently used by succeeding agricultural officers in the district to warrant intervention in local agricultural and natural resource management.

Negative perceptions of the Ugandan environment are challenged elsewhere. A study of soil research management and land use change in Kigezi found that ecological and agricultural collapse in the region has not occurred despite

decades of predictions otherwise.<sup>46</sup> As Carswell<sup>47</sup> points out, Kigezi has a very long history of human settlement and migration, with deforestation beginning more than 4,800 years ago and agriculture in and near settlements some 2,000 years ago. Deforestation, among other concerns elevated by orthodox environmentalists, is therefore, not new. Recent research comparing the Kigezi environment today to that of 1945 found that the area under cultivation has decreased and that lying fallow has increased, though the population has more than doubled. It further showed that land covered by trees has increased twofold and that soil fertility has not decreased to disastrous levels.<sup>48</sup> Conventionally, Kigezi’s overpopulation is blamed for land shortages and for encouraging cultivation of smallholdings without rest. By association, overpopulation is blamed for an increase in soil erosion and a decline in crop yields.<sup>49</sup> However, it was estimated as early as the mid-1940s that the average acreage under cultivation was less than three acres a taxpayer.<sup>50</sup> Most assessments of negative environmental change, as Lindblade *et al.* observe, lack credible supporting evidence. As Sullivan<sup>51</sup> shows, in the case of Namibia, confident assertions of environmental decline there were made without reference to “supportive natural science ‘evidence’.” In Uganda, too, judgments of negative environmental change are largely unsubstantiated beyond references to questionable scaled-up figures of environmental “degradation”<sup>52</sup> that draw on supportive local perceptions of environmental change.<sup>53</sup> However,

these are rarely situated in specific environments, with specific social groups, or at definite times, and, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, are in many cases blind to historical factors.

### **Making right, making wrong**

A fundamental aim of state sponsored reforms for natural resources management in Uganda is to form stronger partnerships with organizations focusing on sustainable management of local environments. Many ideas of natural resources management embodied in decentralization reforms complement the environmental ideology of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) working at local levels. Their ethos, characterized by faith in participation and sustainability, shares many similarities with the participatory dogma espoused in decentralization reforms aimed at improving natural resources management. New district and local environmental committees are responsible for promoting greater citizen participation in natural resources management. These act as the primary link between government-sponsored reforms in natural resource management and non-governmental environmental initiatives. Through co-ordination efforts by district and local environmental committees, local populations are transformed into amenable and active partners in sustainable environmental management.

One objective of decentralization reforms in environmental management is to formalize the

role of NGOs and CBOs in local natural resource management. Among the rights given to NGOs as part of natural resource management reforms is representation on district and local environmental committees and inclusion in district environment planning. In return, NGOs are responsible for assisting local governments to implement district and sub-county plans (NEAP undated). The challenge of introducing a new framework for managing the environment is, in part, overcome by institutionalizing the participation of NGOs and CBOs in local natural resources management. Pre-existing local organizations are useful carriers of the state's decentralization focused strategy for improved environmental management. NGOs and CBOs have an established presence in "communities" and are, therefore, a useful medium through which to communicate new rights and responsibilities conferred on communities as part of decentralization reforms. Importantly, in some situations, NGOs are familiar with both past and present natural resources management practices and are therefore in a better position to communicate prevailing management practices into forms conforming to a mandated model for "sustainable" management.

However, incorporating NGOs and CBOs into a common plan for environmental management is also risky. Ideally, NGOs and CBOs counter the limitations of state sanctioned forms of environmental management and suggest alternative ways of organizing natural resources management. By formulating uniform

and common strategies for managing local environments, variations in technique and belief, as well as differences in individual and group capacities to realize favourable returns from environmental management reforms are limited. An emphasis on similarity and agreement between governmental and non-governmental approaches to the environment underestimates the importance of difference and the need to locate multiple approaches for managing the environment for different actors and in multiple contexts. Incorporating NGOs and CBOs in government sanctioned reforms in environmental management, therefore, has many benefits as well as constraints. The “rights” and “wrongs” of incorporating NGOs and CBOs in official forms of environmental management are seen in the following examination of two environmental projects in south-western Uganda.

### ***Making right***

The Uganda Land Management Project (ULAMP) is a nascent agriculture extension project operating in four districts. Using a multi-disciplinary approach, it promotes sustainable land management practices by linking farmers to services and by providing extension services to individual farmers and farmer groups.<sup>54</sup> By improving land management practices and marketing opportunities, the project aims to improve the food security and incomes of smallholder farmers.<sup>55</sup> It promotes a participatory and collaborative extension system by establishing common interest groups (CIGs) to

address focal problems identified by farmers. These are trained in planning and receive technical assistance. The project also establishes policy co-ordination committees to provide a forum in which to plan and share ideas. It is too early to judge how effective ULAMP is, although the project builds strongly on its predecessor, the Uganda Soil Conservation and Agroforestry Pilot Project (USCAPP). USCAPP similarly sought to promote conservation practices and to improve farmers’ incomes through a participatory extension approach. An evaluation of the project concluded that it was largely successful in meeting its objectives.<sup>56</sup>

The African Highlands Initiative (AHI) is a research and policy oriented organization also working at the district level. It conducts research on natural resource issues, with a focus on the agricultural sector, to improve the food security and incomes of agricultural communities by maintaining a sustainable resource base. It accomplishes this through inter-institutional efforts in the research and development of natural resource management issues related to soil productivity and land use efficiency.<sup>57</sup> The approach AHI adopts is to link research with policy. An AHI report noted a gap between policy-making responsibilities at the local level and their research capacity. According to the report, “In Uganda, where decentralization has progressed rapidly, local policy makers are granted more authority over decisions affecting natural resources and agriculture. At the same time, they have little financial resources with which to undertake beneficial research on NRM [natural resource management]

issues.”<sup>58</sup> By conducting research on natural resources management with the participation of communities for district environment policy-making, AHI supplies research findings to local level policy-making. Operationally, it uses “benchmark location teams” to co-ordinate participatory research with communities.<sup>59</sup> These teams organize farmer groups at the sub-district level to encourage their input into research and policy-making processes. AHI also co-ordinates thematic multi-institutional groups that provide technical direction to project sites at the sub-district level.<sup>60</sup> One thematic group is a policy task force which acts as a common forum for researchers, NGOs and local district and sub-district policy-makers to coordinate policy research on natural resources management. District-level policy initiatives are linked to a regional working group on policy organized by AHI, which identifies focal areas on site that constrain agricultural development.<sup>61</sup>

Participatory approaches, such as those adopted by ULAMP and AHI, offer many advantages to policy-makers. The capacity of some individuals and groups to make new institutional arrangements work for them, and thus their capacity to realize favourable environmental outcomes, is limited. Participatory approaches can identify and give voice to marginal groups in the process of constructing new regimes for environmental management. Actively involving marginal people in forming new arrangements for environmental management increases the likelihood that their interests are represented as resource endowments and entitlements to their use are adjusted. This

depends, however, on establishing mechanisms to organize farmers into a recognizable force and identifying ways to inform them of the opportunities in which they may be heard on their own terms. Farmer groups, such as those established by ULAMP and AHI, are one way to increase the representation of “invisible” interests. Their ability to act with force, however, will be determined largely by how these groups are used. If, in fact, their *raison d’être* is to implement predetermined environmental objectives (i.e., sustainable use and conservation), their ability to justly represent less visible environmental objectives is arguably limited.

Participation may increase the likelihood that marginal peoples share in the benefits of natural resources management reforms. It may also, however, create an additional forum in which powerful groups reassert their interests and their domination over local institutional arrangements for natural resources management. It is risky, as well, to rely exclusively on opinions expressed in participatory environments, such as in farmer groups, given the substantial obstacles in local settings to communicating openly ideas and beliefs concerning how the environment should be managed. In trying to understand local perceptions of the environment, it is valuable to examine both what has been said and what has not. A monitoring system should be in place to show why different individuals have communicated certain messages and not others.

### *Making wrong*

In the case of ULAMP and AHI, their organizational strategies for promoting improved

natural resources management are premised on a belief in problem environments and problem people. ULAMP's strategy is based on understandings of negative environmental change leading to a decline in land productivity. A ULAMP consultant contended that unsustainable natural resources use is leading to significant soil fertility and land productivity problems.<sup>62</sup> Consultant reports and project assessments for ULAMP share similar perceptions of environmental decline leading to compromised farmer livelihoods.<sup>63</sup> Reports and evaluations for AHI perceive local environments negatively and conceive of livelihoods as threatened. An AHI document claimed that land productivity declines are apparent in the Kabale region of south-western Uganda. Years of intense cultivation, it explained, have left the land degraded and the forests cleared, resulting in biodiversity loss.<sup>64</sup> These assessments of negative environmental change, however, are not supported by substantiated ecological evidence. Degradation arguments are challenged elsewhere. Farley notes that pollen data collected from swamp cores at Kabale show that forest clearance in the region occurred from 2200 to 4800 years B.C.E.<sup>65</sup> Ideas about environmental decline and alarmist environment views used to understand farmer livelihoods serve a strategic purpose. For organizational strategies that envision "improved" forms of environmental management, they justify intervention in rural environmental planning.

People, too, are problematic, as a characterization report of the south-western Uganda environment argued, "Poor conservation meth-

ods of land management have depleted the life support capacity of the land."<sup>66</sup> Making the case for getting local natural resource management "right" appears to require that prevailing methods be construed as "wrong". Local practices are constructed as a menace; the local attitudes on which they are shaped are seen as anomalous to the principles of sustainability use. Participatory approaches are assumed to be capable of overcoming these weaknesses, a point belaboured in an AHI work plan. The workplan states that "by using participatory approaches, farmers should better understand the consequences of their actions and be able to see the need to change and adopt beneficial practices."<sup>67</sup> Changing attitudes and practices, therefore, is one precondition for achieving idealized environments and livelihoods. Some attitudes and practices are indeed problematic. But, by what and whose standards are they judged to be problematic? There are few environmental attitudes and practices that serve a common interest. Rather, in many cases, they serve a strategic use for individuals and groups bargaining for differentiated and more favourable environmental outcomes.

Typically, however, little effort is spent on discerning between those local attitudes and practices that are problematic and those that are beneficial for the sustainable management of natural resources. Deterministic representations of local natural resources management, informed exclusively by problematics, ignore local practices and attitudes beneficial to environments and livelihoods. A study of tradi-

tional land husbandry practices in Kabale, for example, found that there are very rich traditions of soil and water conservation and that farmers have a strong interest in conservation.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Carswell<sup>69</sup> notes that in the traditional Bakiga system of agriculture in the Kigezi region of southwestern Uganda, plots were situated along contours and strips of elephant grass were left between plots, so that ridges were formed over time, decreasing the gradient of slopes. Despite its pessimistic conclusions on the environment, the same AHI characterization study cited earlier reported that conservation methods, including intercropping, crop rotation, trash lines and wood lots on steep slopes, are widely practised in south-western Uganda.<sup>70</sup> Investing in positives such as these offers valuable returns for interventions seeking to make practices right.

### Right or wrong?

Reconceptualizing local natural resource management to include both rights and wrongs introduces an element of feasibility to a reform process characterized by its overwhelming propositions and aims. Not all environments need protecting and not all practices need changing. Importantly, aggregate assessments of farming systems and farming environments do not appreciate that some systems work better than others, that individual systems possess both weaknesses and strengths and that these systems will give rise to different natural resource limitations and strengths. Only in rare

cases will it be necessary to make significant adjustments to prevailing farming systems and only certain components of farm environments need improving.

Decentralization reforms propose to encourage more effective and sustainable patterns of natural resources management by promoting greater citizen participation in managing local environments. The establishment of local institutions for environmental management, in collaboration with NGOs, is central to the government's strategy to increase local agency in managing natural resources. However, there are numerous limitations to Uganda's strategy to promote more sustainable types of natural resource management by setting-up locally-based institutions. One, there are many perceptions of the environment as well as many different understandings of "sustainability". Leach *et al.* consider the idea of "sustainability" problematic. They argue that, "different people will have different views as to which resources or services should be given priority within overall attempts to enhance net capital."<sup>71</sup> Different people will prioritize different resources for sustainable management, as Leach *et al.* suggest. Moreover, different people will derive different benefits and costs arising from new regimes for the improved management of the environment.

Secondly, there are substantial social and environmental variations at the local levels. New institutional set-ups for environmental management typically focus on "best" environmental practices and idealized environmental

forms. Rarely do they account for social differentiation in the use of and access to environmental resources or for varying environmental conditions for different individuals and groups. Importantly, however, different actors at the community level experience widely different environmental conditions as well as differentiated rights to natural capital. Individuals and groups at the local levels will, therefore, show varied commitments to new local and district environmental committees. A young woman walking long distances to gather fuelwood may experience a negative state of the environment compared with a young man with different and more do-able responsibilities, such as ploughing the family field. The demand for more sustainable relationships to the environment and, therefore, the demand for institutional reforms will vary within communities. Only occasionally will an introduced environmental meaning and strategy for managing natural resources be equally valued and useful to different local actors. However, at present, there is an insufficient understanding of individual strengths and weaknesses in relation to specific environmental conditions and to institutional arrangements for managing natural resources at different times.

It is questionable, therefore, how comprehensively and effectively institutional reforms for environment management will respond to local vulnerabilities and needs in relation to natural resources management. Some will be more capable than others of positively applying reform implements for the sustainable man-

agement of the environment. For instance, a wealthier farmer may be more visible to the local environmental committee and, therefore, be in a better position to voice his or her environmental priorities. A poorer farmer may be uninformed of the existence of a local environmental committee and, therefore, less able to use these to their individual advantage. There are varying capacities at the local level to adopt new institutions for more beneficial environmental outcomes.

Individuals and groups will exercise agency in a variety of ways. Through their use of decentralization tools, some may extend their opportunities to realize favourable environmental outcomes while others may experience fewer benefits and greater costs from their participation in decentralization reforms. The use of institutional structures to encourage greater participation in local environment management, such as farmer groups, common interest groups or local and district environmental committees, will vary greatly. For some, these structures represent greater chances to monopolize environmental decision-making for individual gain. For others, they may represent an opportunity to gain visibility and to voice less apparent environmental needs. Others may either be ignorant of institutional structures to participate in local environmental management or may choose to ignore these altogether. To them, reforms for environmental management will have little impact on their prevailing strategies for managing the environment.

Understandably, conflict is likely to develop along multiple dimensions as participatory structures for environment management are promoted to local populations. Some individuals and groups will become stronger and others will be made more vulnerable by moves to establish new local and district environmental committees. As pointed out earlier, it may be more representative to speak in terms of winners and losers from a particular change made to institutional arrangements for natural resources management than to view their impact in aggregate terms. Identifying who has been made stronger and who weaker in relation to specific events in environmental history may reveal who may become stronger and who weaker by current reforms. The outcomes of decentralization reforms are highly unpredictable. It is important to openly acknowledge local environmental and social variations and the need to create more options useful to different actors and in different micro-environments. Although they have many limitations, governmental structures, including district and local environmental committees, as well as non-governmental structures, such as common-interest groups and farmer groups, add variety to local institutional landscapes. Even if limited in ideology and aim, they may increase the chances for some individuals and groups to participate in local environmental management. They diversify ways of managing local environments and, in certain cases, may encourage innovation and the development of

further management options. Emphasizing that there is uncertainty in local use of institutional set-ups, and actively promoting initiative and new uses of decentralization tools for varied environmental ends, are some of the many ways of improving decentralization reforms in Uganda.

Decentralization opens new pathways of governance and administration that can be used to facilitate more positive environmental outcomes for a greater number of people. Or it may be dominated by individuals wielding a greater capacity to influence environmental change to their advantage. A reform that measures progress by how similar it can make local actors in their values and management strategies is incapable of enabling stronger resource use practices in some individuals and populations who are stigmatized by real intra-community differences in values and capacities. To this end, decentralization reforms in Uganda are more effective if they introduce bargaining mechanisms to increase the capacity of marginal populations to negotiate and to benefit from changing regimes for natural resource management. Reforms must acknowledge that there are varying interests to and capacities for participating in new types of environmental management. Division and diversity lead to many risks as well as opportunities. Acknowledging difference is one way to secure more inclusive and varied types of participation from many different individuals and groups.

## Notes

1. McGregor, 1995.
2. Hereafter referred to as "the Movement".
3. Tumushabe, 1999.
4. World Bank, 1999, p. 107.
5. Byarugaba, 1998.
6. Republic of Uganda, 1993a.
7. Nsibambi, 1998.
8. Republic of Uganda, 1993c.
9. Kisakye, 1996.
10. Agrawal, 1999.
11. Republic of Uganda, 1993a: 3.
12. Wils 1999, p. 190.
13. Agrawal. 1999, p. 11.
14. Nsibambi, 1998.
15. Republic of Uganda, 1997.
16. Republic of Uganda, 1997.
17. Republic of Uganda, 1997.
18. Republic of Uganda, 1997.
19. Republic of Uganda, 1997, p. 9.
20. Republic of Uganda, 1993b, p. 35.
21. National Environment Action Plan:2.
22. Villadsen, 1996, p. 74.
23. Agrawal 1999, p. 20.
24. Makara, 1998, p. 44.
25. Agrawal, 1999, p. 36.
26. Republic of Uganda, 1993b, p. 35.
27. Agrawal 1999, p. 36.
28. Republic of Uganda, 1994, p. 3.
29. Republic of Uganda, 1995, p. 15.
30. Republic of Uganda, 1994.
31. Republic of Uganda, 1995a, p. 66.
32. Republic of Uganda 1995, p. 96.
33. Republic of Uganda, 1995.
34. Republic of Uganda, 1995, p. 96.
35. Republic of Uganda 1995a: 66.
36. Republic of Uganda, 1998.
37. Brinkerhoff and Honadle, 1996.
38. Republic of Uganda, 1995a: 65.
39. Republic of Uganda, 1995a.
40. NEMA, 1997b, p. 32.
41. NEMA, 1997b, p. 48.
42. Interview 29 February 1999, Kampala.
43. Republic of Uganda, 1994, p. 1.
44. See, for instance, AHI 1998; Gombya-Ssembajjwe and Banana, 1999; Lindblade *et al.*, 1996; NEMA, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Opio-Odongo *et al.* 1992; Republic of Uganda 1994, 1995; RSCU, 1996; Tukahirwa, 1992.
45. Farley, 1996.
46. In press.
47. Carswell, in press: 2.
48. Lindblade *et al.*, 1996.
49. Lindblade *et al.*, 1996.
50. Carswell in press.
51. Sullivan, 2000, p. 8.
52. Gombya-Ssembajjwe and Banana, 1999 (page 2), for example, use extrapolated figures of deforestation to establish a context of unsustainable forest management that are used to support their arguments for new institutional arrangements for community forestry in Uganda.
53. Lindblade *et al.*, 1996, indicate that local perceptions tend to support many views of environmental degradation in Kigezi. In Namibia, Sullivan (2000) gathered local perceptions of environmental change that support claims of desertification. However, Sullivan believes these views articulate a deeper feeling of non-involvement and non-representation in recent environmental and development initiatives. Environmental degradation, she argues, is further a way for some individuals to express their anger with other issues, particularly land and migration patterns in post-apartheid Namibia.
54. Interview 17 February 2000, Entebbe.
55. ULAMP, 1999.
56. RSCU, 1996.
57. AHI, 1998b.
58. AHI, 2000.
59. AHI, 2000.
60. AHI, 1999.
61. Interview, 6 March 2000, Nairobi.
62. Interview, 7 March 2000, Nairobi.
63. Agrisystems, 1999; RSCU, 1996; USCAPP, 1993.
64. AHI, 1999.
65. Farley, 1996.
66. AHI, 1998a, p. 13.
67. AHI 1998b: p. 42.
68. Critchley *et al.*, 1999.
69. In Press: 6.
70. AHI, 1998a.
71. Leach *et al.*, 1999, p. 242.