

*Original Research Article***Namibia's National Forest Policy on Rural Development – A Case Study of Uukolonkadhi Community Forest**

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Forest resources still play a major role in sustaining livelihoods in rural communities, most especially in developing countries. Namibia's community forests have much potential to combat rural poverty and contribute to rural development. Keeping the balance between the two chief objectives of the national forest policy; conservation and socio-economic development is of vital importance in combating both deforestation and rural poverty. Thus, this study primarily aimed to investigate the influence of Namibia's national forest policy on forest resources contribution in rural development from 2009-2013. Forestry and environmental experts and local residents were interviewed. The results show that the lack of full governmental involvement in the management of community forests resources, low, erratic and irregular rainfall are the main challenges community forestry economy is facing. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis indicates that good institutional arrangement of community forestry and active community participatory are some of the pillar strengths of the community forestry programme. The study concludes that there are several research gaps such as statistical information of forest conditions and the degree of poverty within rural communities. Motivating and supporting rural community forests management in any possible manners to give a ground to alleviate rural poverty and combat deforestation is the essential next step.

**Keywords:** Forest Policy; forestry; landscape; livelihoods; Namibian forests; poverty; rural development.

**INTRODUCTION**

Rural communities heavily depend on forest resources, most especially through community forestry, to improve their livelihoods in communal areas of Namibia (Bille et al., 2013; Parviainen, 2012). Globally, forests form livelihood security for the rural poor; some poor (1.6 billion) people worldwide rely on forests resources for their everyday lives (Parviainen, 2012).

After gaining independence in 1990, Namibia started providing unique opportunities for environmental assessment to contribute towards sustainable and economic development (Bluwstein et al., 2014; Tarr and Figueira, 1999). The forestry sector developed two policy documents after independence, namely Namibia Forestry Strategic Plan (NFSP) in 1996 and forestry policy in 2001 (Sola, 2011). One of the main aims of NFSP was the development of community level natural resources management strategy, which gives a mandate to communities to manage their own forest resources and to formulate forest management bodies and conservation mechanisms.

As a solution to the vast and ongoing deforestation in Namibia, community forestry is a new mode of forestry governance (Schusser, 2012). This programme is a management tool which, at the same time supports rural

people who heavily depend on natural resources than those who are residing in urban areas. Owing to this reason, it is therefore crucial to reinforce the management of community forests on which rural people mostly make their living from (Parviainen, 2012). Particularly, this has a great power on Namibia's stated vision 2030 and national development plan of which the main goal is to improve the life quality of Namibian people to the level of their counterparts in the developed world. This mainly, does not only guarantee sustainable economic growth, but also management rights and equal benefits of the resources (Foundjem-Tita et al., 2012).

Namibia is endowed with a variety of natural resources, but forestry is a huge concern due to degraded environments and the desert influenced climatic conditions. Moreover, it performs comparatively well in terms of landscapes and ecosystems management, thus ranking as one of the countries with the highest performance in sub-Saharan Africa at 81 out of 196 states on earth (Bertelsmann, 2012). However, whether the Namibia's national forest policy has positively or negatively contributed to rural development as part of poverty reduction strategies in the past few years is the million dollar question that requires an immediate answer, most especially in the case of community forestry.

Some studies have been carried out on the impacts of

community forests in developing countries (Dahal, 2006; Oo et al., 2012; Murphy and Lawhon, 2011; Antinori, 2005; Adhikari, 2005; El Khatib and Sisak, 2014). Nevertheless, there is a lack of reliable community level data on the influence of the Namibia’s national forest policy on rural development. Therefore, the article aims to investigate how the Namibia’s national forestry influences community forest resources distribution in order to improve rural livelihoods.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The Uukolonkadhi community forest is situated in Omusati region in the North-Central of Namibia (see Figure 1). Demographically, the North-Central Namibia is significant because it is the most populated area of the country (Newsham and Thomas, 2009). This area is part of the Kalahari and Namib sands (Kanime and Laamanen, 2003). The climate in Omusati region, as well as across the North-Central Namibia, is broadly described to be semi-arid. The region receives seasonal rainfall, which mostly falls between November and April, with January and March being the wettest months.

During the South Africa apartheid era Ovambo where Omusati region is located became “Ovamboland” following the establishment of homelands in South West Africa in

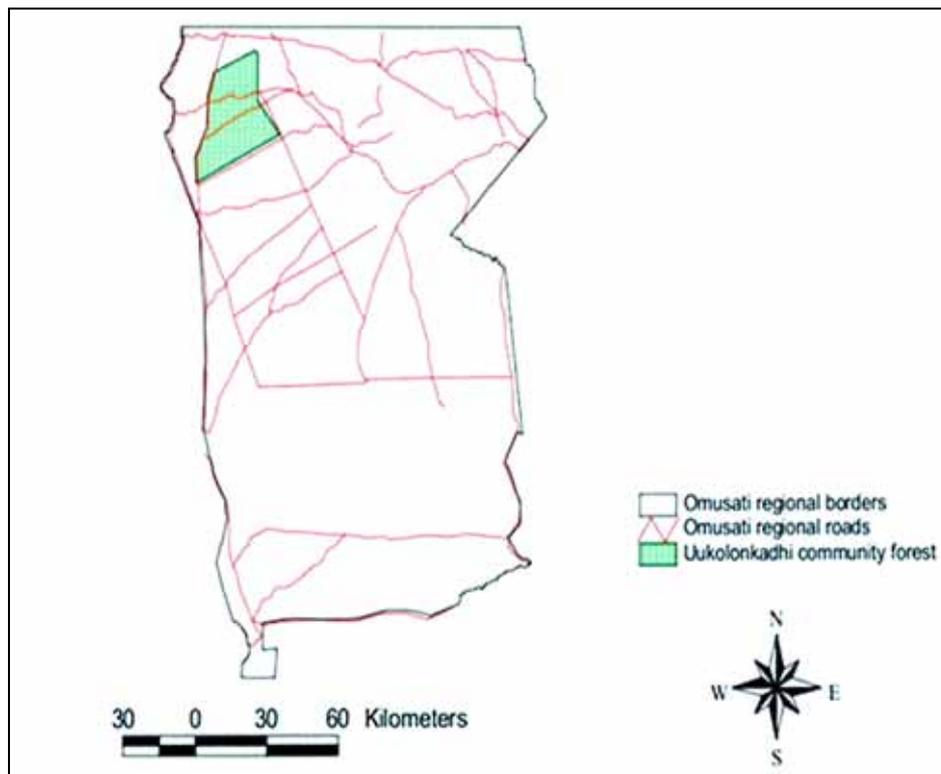
1964 (Newsham and Thomas, 2009). South West Africa was the initial name for Namibia during the South Africa colonial era. Ovamboland was subsequently spilt into the four North-Central regions namely; Oshana, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto.

The method employed for the study was households sampling within the community. The total number of 36 households was sampled (all households in the region). This involved, deriving data from respondents, basically the household heads, during more or less open-ended face-face interviews (Thomas, 2013) about the influences of the forestry policy on rural development.

To meet the research objectives, the research was based on three key questions:

1. How did the Namibia’s national forest policy contribute to rural development for Uukolonkadhi Community Forest (UCF) in the past 5 years (2009-2013)?
2. How forestry-oriented jobs have been created in UCF since 2009 -2013?
3. What are the opinions of the community, forestry and environmental experts on the amendments of the national forest policy in order to improve rural livelihoods and promote rural development and poverty reduction?

Where necessary, the questionnaires were left behind with the respondents for 2-3 days in order to prepare comprehensive answers (Brace, 2008).



**Figure 1.** The location of Uukolonkadhi community forest in Omusati region  
Source: Kanime and Laamanen, 2003

The study was conducted in the Uukolonkadhi community in Omusati region, northern Namibia (Newsham, 2009; Thomas, 2013). The study was undertaken between September and December 2013. The household interviews were facilitated by a moderator and an assistant who prepared and made appointments for the interviews. As in other studies, notes were taken by the assistant moderator (Thomas, 2013). One of the main challenges with household head interviews is timing and making respondents understand the questions and willing to share their opinions and suggestions.

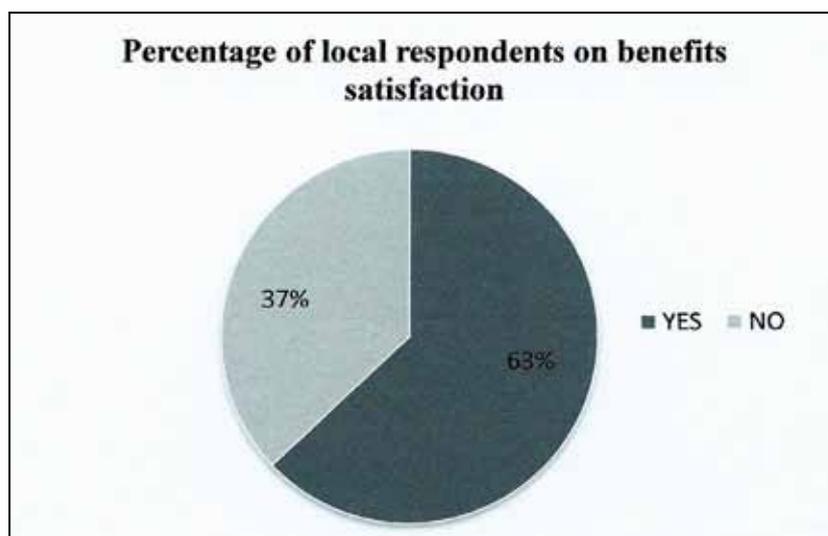
Another concern is the little knowledge and understanding of the environmental related issues among the community members (Ruppel and Ruppel-Schlichting, 2013). In order to supplement the summarised reports from household heads and to obtain an appropriately searching analysis of the findings, interviews with professional experts in the subject area were also conducted through office visits, email or over the telephone. This involved the total number of 10 forestry and environmental experts from the Ministry of Environmental and Tourism (MET), the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry (MAWF) as well as the University of Namibia. Here the research sought information about the performance of the national forest policy based on a scale from 10-100%. These professional experts were considered important for this kind of study as they possess fundamental knowledge and all the necessary documents concerning forestry and environmental protection and conservation principles. Respondent’s perceptions analysis is done alongside with data collection (Thomas, 2013). Hence, the findings from each succeeding household are analysed and compared to data from earlier households.

In exception of the households survey, the total number of 10 expert respondents (5 forest experts and 5 environmentalists) were specifically asked to give their views and estimations about to what extend the programme of community forests has fulfilled the socio-economic objective in order to improve the rural livelihoods of UCF from 2009-2013. There are few qualified forestry experts in Namibia, thus the number of the respondents to this specific questionnaire is small. It was important to specially interview these two categories of interviewees who have high level of understanding of environmental disciplines.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Conditions of the forest and context**

Out of the 36 sampled households, 32 were successfully interviewed as a result of different family daily routines and businesses. Respondents described the forest conditions of UCF to have improved in terms of stand structure and species composition in the past five years. The respondents also explained that the reason is that cutting down of trees; especially mopane species (*Colophospermum mopane*) has gone down as most of the households switched to alternative building materials like bricks instead of poles that have been the main source of houses construction in the past. According to telephone interview, UCF forest offers numerous benefits to the local peoples’ livelihood in exception of biodiversity enrichment. All the respondents (100%) expressed that there is an indisputable reliance of rural people of UCF upon forest resources for a number of reasons such as: (1) crop production, (2) livestock, (3) recreation (4) timber production



**Figure 2.** Percentage of the respondents on the satisfaction by the national forest policy in Uukolonkadhi community forest’s benefits sharing.

Source: Authors

(5) community enterprises (6) community programmes (e.g. orchards, kindergardens etc.). It is a different approach in comparison e.g. with Angola palm oil production (El Khatib and Sisak, 2014), similar to Nepal where local users used to practice indigenous knowledge to protect, manage, and harvest forest products for fulfilling their basic needs (Gurung et al., 2013).

Most of the respondents emphasized that the policy must be closely aligned with resources sustainable utilization as well as socio-economic aspects. The involvement and empowerment of the community in forest management and conservation at communal level has positive impacts on the forest conditions (MAWF, 2005; Schusser, 2012). However, still most of the respondents expressed shallow understanding of all the potential forest based enterprises.

**Community forest resources and local people benefits**

In both the industrialized and developing parts of the world, a number of evidences still demonstrate that the poor and marginalized lack access to justice, especially environmental justice (Ruppel, 2010). However, in the case of UCF more than half of the respondents within UCF expressed their gratification by the national forests policy in terms of benefits sharing (Figure 2).

Figure 1 presents satisfaction percentage of the respondents which accounts to two thirds of the interviewees. Nevertheless, a third of the respondents demonstrated that several adjustments still should be made to the national forests policy in order to improve the rural people’s livelihoods and combat poverty in rural communities of Namibia, similar in Nepal (Gurung et al., 2013).

**Sustainable utilization of forestry resources and socio-economic development**

The interviewees from each of the two categories; (a) professional forestry experts and (b) environmentalists, expressed their views on the performance of the national

policy in improving the rural livelihoods of UCF residents by the mean of ticking on the scale from 10-100% (Table 1). This is basically because there is a strong connection between the two ministries (MAWF and MET) in the management of environments and natural resources including forests bound together by the programme of Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM).

CBNRM seeks to promote the increased and active involvement of rural communities in the tourism industry (Jones, 2003). The programme of community forests is under CBNRM which is piloted by MET (MAWF, 2005; Corbett and Daniels, 1996).

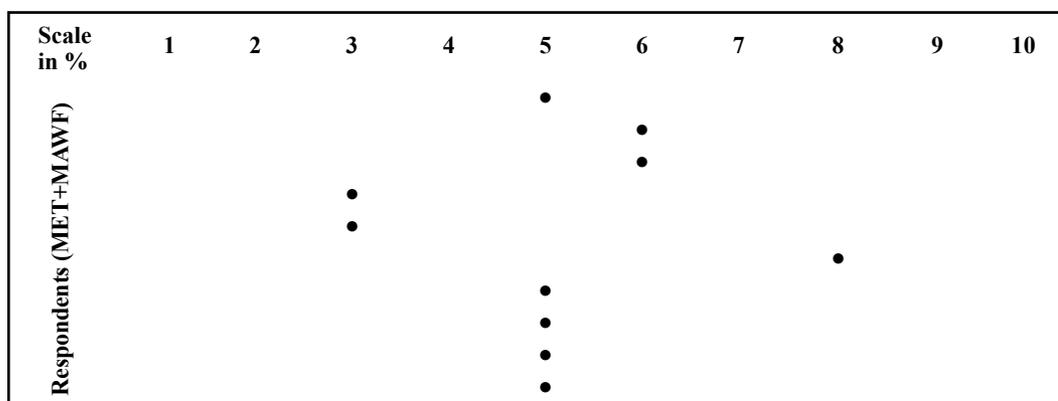
It was important to interview two categories of interviewees who have high level of understanding of environmental disciplines. The interviewees from each of the two categories (forest experts and environmentalists) expressed their views on the performance of the national policy in improving the rural livelihood of UCF residents by the mean of ticking on the scale from 1-10 (Table 1). This is basically because there is a strong connection between the two ministries (MAWF and MET) in the management of environments and natural resources including forests. The programme of community forests is under CBNRM which is piloted by MET.

The results demonstrate that the respondents irrespective of which ministry they are from, indicated that they are more than half happy with the national forest policy, although they suggested that still much needs to be done to improve rural livelihoods. In their opinions, the chief reason is that Namibia is sparsely forested; hence they believe that more focus must be on achieving the balance between conservation and utilization of the forest resources. Some respondents elaborated that the reason why forestry has a little contribution to rural livelihood is associated with little amount of forest resources in Namibia which is about 10%.

Timber production is not really a viable commercial industry in Namibia because tree planting is difficult due to

**Table 1.** The scale indicating the performance of the programme of community forests in improving rural livelihoods (2009-2013)

Source: Authors



the dry nature of the country (Hainduwa, 2013). Therefore, some respondents expressed that no change is required in the forestry policy, but rather more emphasis need to be paid to other forest related products such as Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) or indigenous natural products that are also found in Namibian forests. They further suggested that the policy should take two orientations, one on timber products and the other of NTFPs such as fruit trees, medicinal plants and plants with natural products that can be used in cosmetic industries such as Oompeke (*Ximenia americana*) and Omumbiri (*Commiphora mollis* and *Commiphora africana*) etc. These indigenous natural products have much potential of contributing to rural livelihood than the timber production (Parviainen, 2012).

**Respondents’ views on the national forests policy**

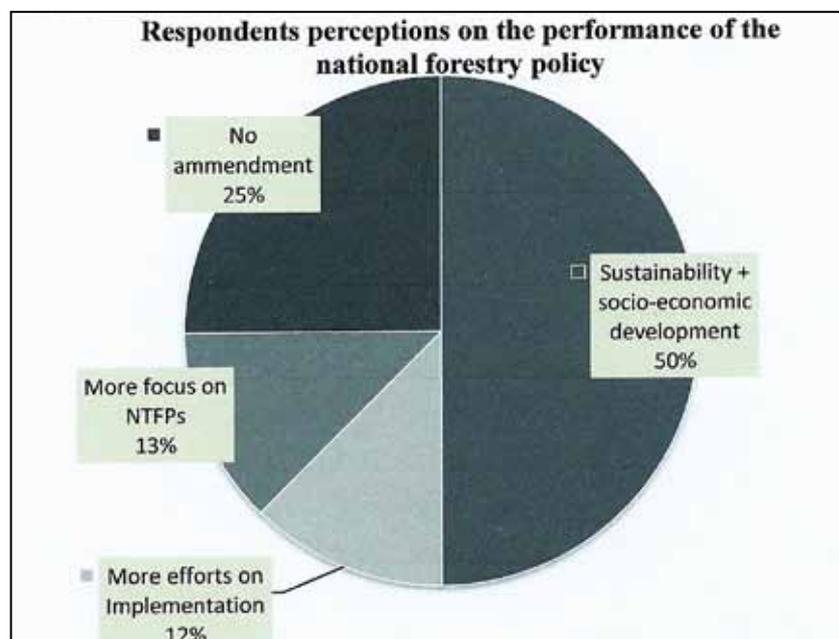
Respondents were interviewed to give their opinions on the satisfaction by the national forest policy in forest resources management and socio-economic development. The main question was whether the national policy should be amended, and if so, how. Different respondents with different level of forestry understanding gave their views (Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that most of the respondents believe that the policy should be amended. The finding indicates that half of the respondents (50%) recommended that the policy should be adjusted to focus more on the two main objectives of sustainability and socio-economic development (Sola, 2011). These respondents proposed that there are much

potentials for the rural people to progress in poverty reduction through forest resources provided that they are supported both technically and financially by the government and other possible donors. According to e-mail interview, there is a need to increase incentives for the communities. Even though forests are more important to maintain ecosystems for their environmental welfare and biodiversity (UNEP, 2012), the government should give some means to the people to be able generate income.

One quarter (25%) of the respondents expressed their 100% gratification, hence suggested no amendment option of the national forests policy at all. This group of respondents expressed their concern on the degrading ecosystems of Namibia, especially the risk of deforestation. Therefore, they believe that the policy is doing quite enough by paying more attention on the conservation of the forests. One eighth (13%) of them proposed more focus on non-timber forest products. The remaining 12% of the respondents were not specific, but expressed that the policy is not fully implemented. Therefore, they recommended that the policy needs to be wholly amended.

The policy should be amended to include socio-economic objective as these already appear on the aims of the policy and the mandate of directorate of forestry. The development forestry policy had made a provision for socio-economic, to improve the rural livelihoods by empowering local communities to manage the forests and derive benefits in terms of basic needs and opportunities for income generating. The empowerment of poor people in the



**Figure 3.** Respondents’ views on the national forest policy performance at communal level

Source: Authors

community forestry is noteworthy (Bhattarai and Dhungana, 2005). This is done through gazetting community forests, to give them legal right to manage, utilize forest resources on sustainable management and derive benefits such as basic needs, maintain resources and sources of income generating (Schusser, 2012).

### Employment and Community Development Projects

Local people can be employed for various forest management activities such as fire etc. (MAWF, 2005). According to e-mail interviews, Uukolonkadhi community forest does not offer definite permanent jobs to the local people, but instead it offers various casual jobs through community projects. Since UCF was gazetted, only about 60 jobs have been offered, but with very poor salaries. Chakanga and Kojwang (2001) confirm that Namibia's community forestry's revenue system depends on the issuance of harvesting permits, which are determined on inventories and inspections. Therefore, mostly, the only job opportunities that occur are short-term and absolutely temporary. Thus, there are no records of how many employees recruited in the community forest each year. However, the UCF supports community development projects (CDPs) such as kindergartens, churches, schools, etc. CDPs play several major roles such as:

- contributing 50% of its annual income is given to GDP
- contributing 10% of its annual income to the TAs
- improving capacity building of forest management committee members through training in different fields
- managing, protecting and ensuring sustainable utilization of forest resources.

The small number of the management staff is one of the huge challenges the community forest faces. This is because the only source of income generation for the UCF management staff is from harvesting permits and from auction of confiscated items that are illegally harvested from the forest. This has to do with illegal logging and poaching incidents. As a result, the forest management force is discouraged in carrying out their duties in forest management activities and tree cutting control. Subsequently, illegal harvesting and poaching have been happening time to time. The government puts quite less efforts in supporting the forest management committee and traditional authorities with adequate technical supports to enhance the forest management. However, the respondents expressed that the directorate of forestry occasionally facilitates some of the management activities such as patrols.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate how the Namibia's national forestry influences community forest resources distribution in order to improve rural livelihoods. Namibia is endowed with an abundance of various forest

resources, even though timber is not significant due to dry climatic conditions and erratic rainfalls. However, NTFPs are the main forest products that contribute to the economy at community level as well as at national level. Rural communities live in closeness with forest resources for every day livelihoods. At the same, they use forests for other purposes such as grazing and recreation. The forest sector through MAWF in collaboration with MET mandated local community with both management and utilization rights to achieve sustainable and socio-economic goals. These are the pillar goals of the national forest policy of Namibia. The management of forest resources in community forests is executed by forest management committee and traditional authorities who get paid based on the issuance of harvest permits. This means that they are not paid by the government. There usually lower or not at all salaries for the management staff. As a results, community forest management activities are discouraged and hence, ineffective. Consequently, there have been illegal harvesting and poaching incidents in UCF.

Several recommendations may be useful in framing and shaping the impacts of the forestry policy on the management of forestry resources at community level in improve rural livelihoods and to eradicate poverty:

- the government should improve technical supports and subsidies to encourage community forest management by forest management committee as well as for economic incentives
- short-term production goals to increase the production outputs
- spatial arrangements should be employed to make the management activities easier and effective.

The government should increase the number of qualified forest management staff. In addition, this will improve forestry research and public education about the importance forests and how to utilize them sustainably.

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