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Performance of participatory forest management in Ethiopia: institutional arrangement versus local practices

Alemayehu N. Ayana^{a*}, Nathalie Vandenabeele^b and Bas Arts^b

^aForestry Research Center, Ethiopian Environment and Forest Research Institute, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; ^bForest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands

The field of community-based natural resource management has been receiving growing scientific attention over the past two decades. Most studies, however, focus on investigating institutional designs and outcomes and pay scant attention to how community-based natural resource management arrangements are carried out in practice. Through an in-depth ethnographic case study in one of the pioneer participatory forest management (PFM) arrangements in southwest Ethiopia, this article demonstrates a significant disparity between the PFM institutional principles and actual local forest management practices. Our study confirms the usefulness of a practice-based approach to understand and explain how a newly introduced institutional arrangement is acted upon by local actors situated in their social, political and historical context. Our findings also contribute to empirical knowledge useful to instigate dialog and to critically reflect on whether and what kind of intervention is actually needed to positively influence forest management practices on the ground.

Keywords: community forest management; PFM arrangement; design principle; institutions; local practice; practice-based approach

1. Introduction

Participatory forest management (PFM) was introduced in Ethiopia around the mid-1990s as a new system of forest governance. PFM was meant to avert the persistent problems of deforestation and to deliver better social and economic outcomes compared with the former centralized command-and-control resource management approach. In the Ethiopian context, PFM is recognized as a co-governance institutional arrangement where forest management responsibilities and use rights are legally shared between a government agency and a community-based organization (CBO), such as forest user groups or forest cooperatives (Bradstock et al. 2007; Winberg 2010). The inception of PFM in Ethiopia was considered a radical departure from the centralized and technocratic forest management style to a more inclusive arrangement.

The PFM institutionalization process and its subsequent performance have proved controversial among scholars, policy-makers, practitioners and international development partners. Some claim that a major transformation has taken place consequent to PFM on the management of physical resources, institutional arrangements and livelihoods of resource-dependent communities. Proponents of PFM present performance indicators such as a decline in the deforestation rate and an increase in forest regeneration (Takahashi and Todo 2012; Tsegaye et al. 2009) and the establishment of community-based forest management organizations (Bradstock et al. 2007; Tsegaye et al. 2009).

*Corresponding author. Email: alemayehunegassa@yahoo.com

Similar studies also report positive livelihood indicators, for example, rising income level of PFM members compared with non-participant households residing in the same village (Dambala and Koch 2012; Tsegaye et al. 2009; Yemiru 2011). Critics, by contrast, argue that PFM has brought no fundamental change to the management of physical resources, institutional setup and livelihoods of resource-dependent communities after nearly two decades of experimentation. These critics contend that the PFM arrangement, which is being introduced and advanced by NGOs, has not yet been internalized by local communities, nor has it been embraced by governments as a regular forest management program (Abrar and Inoue 2012, 2013). PFM critics also point out that most of the ‘success stories’ proclaimed by the PFM proponents have a temporary character and last only as long as the NGO project lifetime (Abrar and Inoue 2012; Tsegaye et al. 2009; Winberg 2010).

Although studies drawing positive and negative conclusions about the PFM performances in Ethiopia provide useful insights, those studies exclusively emphasize the PFM institutional structure and the intervention outcomes, and pay minimal attention to how the new forest management approach is carried out in practice. Particularly, the interaction between the PFM institutional arrangement on the one hand and local forest management practices on the other remains unclear. To investigate this interaction, we conducted an in-depth case study in a local village where a new institutional arrangement, the PFM approach, has been implemented for nearly two decades.¹ This article pays attention to *practices* and how people act and react in relation to newly introduced formal institutional arrangements. It seeks to answer the following central questions: (1) How has the PFM arrangement developed in Ethiopia in general and in Agama in particular? (2) How has the PFM arrangement been acted upon by Agama’s inhabitants? and (3) To what extent has the PFM arrangement affected the Agama community’s forest practices, and vice versa?

It first introduces the theoretical approach used to answer the research questions, followed by a section concerning the research methodology. Then the performance of PFM is narrated in detail. In this section, we first illustrate the PFM institutional arrangement and subsequently investigate how the institutional arrangement is nested in the actual forest-related practices in the village. To do so, we apply a practice-based approach (PBA) as our analytical framework to understand and explain what is carried out in the field. The institutional design of the PFM project is illustrated from the viewpoints of the policy arrangement approach (PAA).

2. Theoretical framework: The practice-based approach

Much academic research and literature on PFM apply institutional approaches to analyze, understand and explain the success and failure of such initiatives (Agrawal 2001; Ostrom 1999; Quinn et al. 2007; Stellmacher 2007; Wollenberg et al. 2007). Pioneer in this field has been the Nobel Prize laureate Elinor Ostrom who, in her book *Governing the Commons* (Ostrom 1990), showed that community institutions to responsibly manage forest commons (and other common property resources, like water) can be very effective (something which had been denied or ignored by scholars of the governance of common property resources thus far; see for example Hardin 1968). However, whether such local, communal institutions are robust or not depends on a number of ‘design principles’ (DPs), which Ostrom derives from a comparison of best practices (from grazing and forest institutions in the Swiss Alps to the institutions of Zanjera irrigation systems in the Philippines). Initially, eight DPs were identified, relating to demarcating the resource, rules that fit local conditions, participatory decision-making, monitoring compliance, sanctioning of non-compliance, conflict resolution, and external recognition and nesting of the local institution. Later, this list has been extended to

cover more relevant variables that (potentially) play a role in the effectiveness of local institutions in managing natural resources sustainably (Agrawal 2001; Ostrom 2009).

Although this institutional approach and its DPs have been very inspiring theoretically and did make sense operationally in many cases, they also raised criticism (see for example Arts et al. 2013; Cleaver 2002; Li 2007; Mosse 2004; Nuijten 2005). Critics particularly address the idea that human behavior of whatever kind can best be understood by institutional logics and that policy interventions should particularly focus on changing the rules of the game or on introducing new ones. Institutional logics are based on the premise that people will follow incentives, norms and rules when these appear effective and legitimate to them (March and Olsen 1989). This premise assumes that people act upon expected positive consequences of incentives, norms and rules (the rational claim) as well as upon their cultural appropriateness (the social claim). Bourdieu (1977, 1990), however, rejects both logics of behavior, because his own anthropological research points to another logic that is at work on the ground, the logic of practice. This logic is based on the daily flow of activities that have historically and culturally been patterned and routinized in the social fields in which people are involved. The key point here is that people just *act*, generally without conscious consideration of whether an individual act is rationally preferable and/or socially acceptable. This is not to say that human behavior is therefore necessarily nonrational or nonsocial, not at all; rather, it follows internal logics that have been shaped and become (rather) stable over generations and in specific localities. From that perspective, it is no surprise that externally introduced so-called robust institutions, including those for realizing PFM, that demand ‘rational’ and ‘social’ behavior of people often do not match realities on the ground, where another logic is at work (Cleaver 2002; Mosse 2004). In other words, although (PFM) projects might be well designed in terms of general principles of robust institutions, their effectiveness still remains to be seen given the fact that people might act upon the new incentives, rules and norms differently than expected, or not at all, given their local, situational logics of action.

Inspired by Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and building upon more recent strands of practice theory (Giddens 1984; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki et al. 2001; Shove et al. 2012), we apply a PBA (see Arts et al. 2013) in this article to understand the (lack of) performance of a PFM arrangement in a specific locality. This PBA has a number of characteristics:

- The basic unit of analysis is neither the social system nor the individual agency, but the in-between ‘social practice’ where agency and structure are intertwined (Giddens 1984). Such practices are strongly rooted in local histories, cultures and settings (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2002).
- To understand human behaviors, we have to look at social practice as a whole rather than at single factors such as incentives, norms, rules, interests, resources or power (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Shove et al. 2012). Therefore, a PBA is to be considered ‘holistic’ in nature rather than ‘reductionist’ (Arts et al. 2013).
- Social practices include not only how people relate to other people, but also to things, artifacts and other forms of life in their environment (Latour 2005; Schatzki 2013). A social practice can therefore be defined as ‘an ensemble of doings, sayings and things in a specific field of activity’ (Arts et al. 2013, 9).
- Although social practices are considered to be relatively stable, through internal logics and routines, they could – from a historical perspective – have been *otherwise*; hence, ‘contingency’ is an important aspect in any PBA (Behagel 2012). This implies that they can be changed through collective action.

Table 1. Institutional and practice theories compared (adapted from Shove et al. 2012, 143).

	Institutional theories	Theories of practice
<i>Basis of action</i>	Incentives, norms, rules	Patterns, routines, conventions
<i>Policy intervention</i>	Institutional reform	Social-cultural change
<i>Scientific claims</i>	Universal	Situational

Theoretically, institutional and practice theories differ substantially (see Table 1). Methodically, however, a PBA does not necessarily exclude an institutional analysis, as both Nuijten (2005) and Van der Arend and Behagel (2011) rightly assert. First of all, rules, principles or conventions can be considered part and parcel of social practices, although they fall short in fully grasping human behavior and social patterns (Schatzki 2002; Shove et al. 2012). Secondly, we simply *need* to analyze the institutional arrangement of PFM, as introduced in the locality concerned, in order to be able to confront it with the practical logics at work in our specific case. Therefore, in this article, we first reconstruct the institutional arrangement of the PFM program concerned. To do so, we are inspired by the PAA (see Arts and Buizer 2009; Arts and Leroy 2006; Van Tatenhove, Arts, and Leroy 2000), which we applied in previous studies (see for example Alemayehu, Arts, and Wiersum 2013) and that analytically distinguishes four dimensions in institutional arrangements of any kind: (1) ideas and discourses that have shaped the institutional arrangement at hand; (2) ‘rules of the game’ that in fact form the core of the arrangement; (3) actors and their networks who are ‘the players of the game’ as mediated by the rules at hand; and (4) resources and power relations that (co)determine outcomes in terms of winners and losers of the game. After our analysis of the PFM institutional arrangement, based on these four dimensions, we confront the project design model with the daily forest-related practices in the study village.

3. Research methodology

The application of a PBA requires a method that can facilitate the production of a thick description of the setting in which the investigated project is being undertaken, and in which people (inter)act (Arts et al. 2013). For this reason, a qualitative ethnographic case study was employed to address the research questions. As Yin (1994) says, a case study is applicable to answer the *how* and *why* questions, and is particularly useful when we aim for a holistic approach that acknowledges different realities and local actors’ perspectives on strategies designed to change their very lives. A case study also enables the researcher to use multiple sources of information; this is important not only for the production of detailed information, but also to facilitate a reflexive exercise in which researchers reflect upon their own role in the production of knowledge. A case study approach thus provides a flexible environment to study complexity, details and context, and offers space to reflect upon the research strategies in order to contextualize these to the case setting.

The main dataset for this article was, therefore, generated through an in-depth case study of Agama Forest Cooperative (AFC), where one of the authors lived and participated in the local community’s daily practices for 3 months (from March to May 2012). AFC is one of the nine forest cooperatives in Gimbo district currently managing Bonga forest². Bonga forest is located in Kaffa zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Region (SNNPR) in Ethiopia (see Vandenabeele 2012 for a detailed description of the study area).

AFC, which was first established as a forest user group in 2003 and later became a cooperative, has 216 (114 male and 102 female) members and is responsible for 1200 hectares of forests (Aklilu 2011). Agama was purposively selected because: (1) it is one of the pioneer intervention sites in Ethiopia where the PFM scheme has been practiced for nearly two decades (Aklilu 2011; Winberg 2010); (2) partly due to its remote location, it has received less research attention than the other PFM intervention sites (Aklilu 2011; Dambala and Koch 2012); (3) the existing literature suggests that Agama forest is intrinsically related to the life of people living in this area: this suits our research objective to generate comprehensive information on the day-to-day practices of community members in relation to the newly introduced formal forest management scheme (Stellmacher 2007; Tsegaye et al. 2009; Yihene 2002); and (4) studies to date have focused on the project's impacts on broader areas of Bonga forest and have understated the details of how the project performs at village level.

The data collection methods were inspired by Nuijten's (2005) approach to studying natural resource management practices and encompassed sensory participant observation, interviews, free diary, transect walks and participation in forestry research activities. The semi-structured and in-depth interviewing started after the researcher had spent one month in the village selecting relevant people for interviews and reflecting upon the researcher–respondent relation. In contrast to random encounters or surveys, the interviews – as place of both data collection and data production – became therefore only one moment, albeit a privileged one, within a longer array of exchanges adding to the respondent's sense making of the interview and its objectives. Besides the field data, literature research and key informant interviews were conducted before and after the stay in the village. These key informants comprised actors from both government and nongovernmental organizations involved in designing and implementing the PFM arrangement at macro and local level. Finally, a narrative method was used to present the data. The construction of the narrative was iterative and based upon Van Bommel and van der Zouwen's (2013) reflections on the creation of a scientific narrative.

4. Performance of PFM

In this section, we first analyze the PFM institutional arrangement as designed for Ethiopia in general and for Bonga forest and Agama village in particular, following the framework of the PAA. Subsequently, we present the actual performance of this arrangement in the study village by focusing on the daily forest-related practices.

4.1. The PFM institutional arrangement

This section presents the PFM institutional arrangement, describing the discourse that motivated the implementation of PFM, procedures followed, actors and networks involved, and resources and power mobilized to establish the arrangement.

4.1.1. Discourse

The development of the PFM arrangement in Ethiopia has been greatly influenced by the growing global discourse over the past 20 years that emphasizes the durability and effectiveness of community-based institutions in natural resource management. As touched upon in Section 2, this emerging discourse is essentially anchored on the works of common pool resource (CPR) scholars such as Elinor Ostrom and Arun Agrawal, who

emphasized the robustness of community-based institutions to manage natural resources held in common, such as a village forest (Ostrom 1990; Agrawal 2001). The central proposition of these scholars is that local communities who live in close proximity to a forest possess an inherent capacity, knowledge and interest to govern their resources properly (Ostrom 1990). They presented extensive evidence from long-term studies of forests in different parts of the world suggesting that local institutions may even perform better than state initiatives (Nelson 2010). However, they added that the success of a community institution is contingent upon the fulfillment of lists of conditions or, as discussed in Section 2, what they called DPs (Ostrom 1999; Anderies, Janssen, and Ostrom 2004) (i.e. a list of conditions under which resources held in common could be expected to be governed sustainably (Li 2007)).

This discourse, to which we refer in this article as the DP discourse, has had a far-reaching impact on the process and structure of PFM in Ethiopia, including the selection of implementation sites. This is clearly reflected in the PFM implementation guideline entitled: 'The Key Steps in Establishing Participatory Forest Management: A field manual to guide practitioners in Ethiopia'. Concerning site selection, for example, NGOs who introduced PFM in Ethiopia wanted to demonstrate that local communities have an inherent knowledge and interest in managing the forest resources if responsibilities are transferred to them (Alemayehu and Wiersum 2006).³ In order to achieve this objective, these NGOs carefully selected three exemplary forest sites, of which Bonga forest was one. Farm-Africa (pioneering UK-based international NGO) introduced PFM into Bonga forest in 1996, selecting Agama as one of its target sites on the basis of two main criteria that also conform to the DP discourse. First, communities living in and around Bonga forest are renowned for their strong attachment to the local forest resources. This is important, on the one hand, to build on customary practices and demonstrate their potentials. On the other hand, the communities' attachment to the forest fits the new agenda of improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent local communities. In particular the presence of the Manja people, the marginalized occupational minority group (Pankhurst and Freeman 2001) whose livelihoods are entirely dependent on forest resources, was a good reason for selecting this forest for PFM intervention. Second, there was a heated debate at the time about deforestation threatening the existence of Bonga forest, and this justified the necessity of an alternative approach (i.e. PFM) to halt deforestation (Yihene 2002; Stellmacher 2007). Although the threat of deforestation was equally reported in relation to other forest areas, the Bonga forest case particularly attracted attention because of its rich biodiversity, including wild *Coffea arabica* and several other species of flora and fauna (Stellmacher 2007; Tsegaye et al. 2009). The presence of this rich biodiversity and economically important species like *C. arabica* galvanized a broad national and international support for PFM intervention in Bonga forest. For example, these justifications were instrumental in Farm-Africa procuring funds for its PFM project from the European Union and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

4.1.2. *Rules and procedures*

One of the basic elements of the DPs is a robust institution that can effectively restrict access to the resource and create incentives for common resource users to invest in the resource instead of overexploiting it (Ostrom et al. 1999). According to PFM advocates, this kind of institution has been a 'missing factor' in Agama as well as in other forest areas in Ethiopia (Stellmacher 2007). Consequently, strong emphasis was placed on

introducing or establishing such institutions at community level. The implementers intended to strictly follow the PFM guidelines, which were developed from the DPs and some 'best practices' from around the world, to establish the new institution in Agama village (Bradstock et al. 2007).

The key steps to establish the village-level institution were (1) screening forest users to be included in the new arrangement; (2) delineating the forest boundary to be managed; and (3) preparing a forest management agreement (FMA) detailing roles and responsibilities of parties involved in forest management. Roles and responsibilities were grouped into forest development, forest protection, forest harvesting and forest monitoring. The FMA also includes forest management plans and internal rules (bylaws) that define the day-to-day decision-making process of community organization. The FMA is considered a legally binding contract when it is signed between a community organization and a government agency. Moreover, for the binding contract to be legitimate and effective, it has to be designed by multiple actors, another requirement of the DP discourse.

4.1.3. *Actors and networks*

Another basic tenet of the PFM arrangement is the demand for a plurality of actors⁴ to be involved in forest management and decision-making. The drawbacks of the conventional forest management approach were often referred to in terms of its weakness in accommodating the views of multiple actors, particularly local communities who live in close proximity to the forest (Nelson 2010). In principle, networking is very important in the area where the actual forest management practice is taking place. That is why the DPs pay due attention to cooperation and collective action in CPR management. Consequently, the PFM arrangement is intended to bring together a multitude of actors from international to local levels and with diverse stakes and backgrounds. For example, the main actors in the Agama PFM arrangement are Farm-Africa, various branches of district government (the forestry department in the office of agriculture, cooperative promotion office, law enforcement offices and local administration office) and local communities. Of course, local communities themselves have also diverse subgroups based on preexisting social structures and claims of customary rights to the forest resources. Whereas some of the groups are indigenous to the Agama area and possess traditional use rights, others are immigrant or new settlers and have limited access rights to selected forest products. Thus, as became clear in the case study, local communities in Agama cannot be categorized as one group as they have different identities, backgrounds and motives.

4.1.4. *Resources and power*

The final important aspect of the PFM arrangement is resources and power. The critique of the conventional approach is that resources and power are centralized or exclusively held by the state and its institutions and bodies at various administrative levels. The PFM arrangement, thus, requires sharing resources and power with community organizations. The resource- and power-sharing arrangement itself has a range of variants dependent on the underlying rationales and purposes of the intervention (Nelson 2010). In the Agama case, for example, a long-term use right was given to the AFC, whereas district government maintained forest ownership and discretionary power to monitor and enforce the implementation of the new arrangement. As proof of the new resource- and power-sharing arrangement, a contractual agreement was signed between AFC and the district office of agriculture in 2003 at an official ceremony attended by various stakeholders. At this

ceremony, a map of a forest block and an official seal were handed to the AFC. The map authorized secure access rights while the seal symbolized organizational autonomy or legal identity. In addition to the access rights to a resource, recognition as a legal entity is equally important for any new organization not only to sue and to be sued in court but also to run a business enterprise, including having access to bank loans. The other resources in the PFM arrangement include knowledge, expertise and financial resources mobilized by Farm-Africa to establish the new arrangement. These resources were mainly invested in capacity building, including training and exchange visits, livelihood supports and other operational costs of establishing a community organization.

Besides a redivision of resources, the PFM arrangement also requires a reform of decision-making power among actors involved in forest management. Such power concerns the authority to create or modify, implement and enforce compliance with rules (Agrawal and Ribot 1999). The premise is that such power should be sufficiently devolved to local communities in order to achieve positive outcomes from the PFM arrangement (Nelson 2010). Following this principle, the AFC was given a new mandate to craft its internal bylaws, prepare and implement forest management plans, including forest development and protection plans, and enforce internal bylaws. For example, cooperative leaders are empowered to decide on who should guard the forest and when, resolve conflicts arising from resource use and adjudicate rule infractions according to the internal bylaws.

4.2. Institutional arrangement versus local practice

This section presents the actual performance of the PFM arrangement at micro level. It focuses on how people acted in relation to the newly introduced institutional arrangement and how they situated themselves in the unfolding practices. To illustrate these phenomena, we narrate the story of five key implementation processes and outcomes that were manifested in the field: forest re-demarcation, establishing a CBO, alternative livelihoods intervention, practicing the new mandate and the unfolding asymmetric relationships between actors.

4.2.1. Forest re-demarcation

Agama forest was first demarcated in 1987 as a part of the Bonga National Forest Priority Area (BNFPA). The BNFPA designation was driven by the then socialist government's ambitious plan to establish large tracts of cohesive forest reserves in different parts of the country. The BNFPA area incorporated private agricultural lands and communal grazing areas, and its establishment thus led to forceful evictions of hundreds of farming households. The arbitrary demarcation created hostility between local communities and the state that resulted in the destruction of the forest boundary following the downfall of the socialist government in 1991 (Yihene 2002). When Farm-Africa initiated its project in 1996, most of the boundary markers had been dismantled and parts of the state forest reserve had been converted to agricultural land. Thus, forest re-demarcation became the top priority of Farm-Africa not only to delineate the project mandate area but also to stop the ongoing forest 'destruction', according to the PFM implementation document (BFCDP 1998). Prior to launching the re-demarcation exercise, Farm-Africa conducted a problem diagnosis in order to understand the cause of the former boundary destruction. In this diagnosis, the non-consultative demarcation that disregarded the villagers' views and socioeconomic situations was identified as the main driver. Thus, in order to avoid the

past failure, a participatory re-demarcation was designed. To implement this re-demarcation, Farm-Africa entered negotiations with zonal forestry departments that resulted in the assignment by the departments of a team of technical experts to perform the re-demarcation. The technical team formed a re-demarcation committee at village level to negotiate about forest boundaries on behalf of the local community. In order to ensure broader representation, the village committee was designed to comprise different social groups in the community, including elders, women, minority groups, and leaders of traditional and religious institutions (Yihene 2002). The re-demarcation exercise was completed in 1998 with the drawing of the outer boundaries of the forest, thus fulfilling one of the requirements to implement the PFM arrangement – clearly defined forest boundaries.

Despite the participatory claim, however, field information and documentary sources showed that the re-demarcation exercise was again characterized by the same fundamental flaw of redrawing boundary lines without the full consent of the people living in and around the forest. The re-demarcation even restricted the locals' access to forest resources. In line with this, Yihene (2002) reported that the re-demarcation exercise was not thoroughly discussed among local forest users, and the new forest boundaries were drawn and endorsed by external actors with limited consent from the local communities. He observed that the re-demarcation committee selected by experts to negotiate about the forest boundary did not represent the actual resource users. He added that some of the committee members had no direct interest in the forest areas about which they were meant to negotiate with the technical team and were reluctant to challenge the experts' decisions. Yihene mentioned, for example, that the representatives of the women's group and the Manja people resided far outside the forest boundary and so had no direct stake in the re-demarcated process.

Besides the shortfall in the so-called participatory process, local communities immediately linked the re-demarcation exercise with their historical experiences under the socialist regime, which had evicted farmers living within the forest boundary as part of the villagization program. The villagization program was part of the nationwide rural transformation plan in the 1970s and 1980s designed to offer efficient rural infrastructures and social services. This historical incident was again repeated in Agama briefly after the PFM re-demarcation, which led to the expulsion of 32 households from the forest. Whereas these households still consider their eviction as a forceful intervention for forest conservation, governmental and nongovernmental staff have depicted the movement as voluntary for security reasons (after a violent murder case that happened in the village).⁵ Although different reasons have been put forward for the farmers' eviction – villagization under the socialist government and security reasons in the latter case – many villagers tend to consider forest-related interventions as visible evidence of state power that focuses on controlling resources rather than attempting to improve the living condition of people who depend on the forests. Thus, forest re-demarcation proved to be a sensitive socio-political issue rather than a neutral technical undertaking as envisioned by the project implementers.

In summary, participation in the re-demarcation exercise was target driven and more concerned with its form (the representation of different social groups) than with its content (creating a genuine platform for discussion about the matters at stake). The approach to forest re-demarcation thus became guided by the logic of past practices. Under such circumstances, one can question the extent to which villagers could recognize a mutual interest in forest management and would be willing to become the 'new managers of the forest' as envisioned in the PFM design.

4.2.2. *Establishing a community-based organization*

Establishing a CBO is another key step in the PFM implementation process. The main procedure in the CBO establishment process was to assess the forest utilization pattern in order to identify primary and secondary users who would be allowed to become members of the new organization. As happened during the re-demarcation exercise, community members were represented in the study team to gather information about the community's forest use systems, its organization and social groups (ethnicity, religion, wealth and gender composition). The study team also used participatory tools such as a historical timeline analysis and participatory mapping to investigate traditional institutions and their role with regard to resource management. Through this process, the study team identified traditional forest management institutions that recognize the customary use rights of the Kaffa and the Manja people, who are believed to be indigenous to the Agama area. These traditional institutions also allow the Kambata⁶ people, who came to Agama in 1987 as a consequence of the resettlement policy, to use some forest products, such as firewood and farming materials, but only for subsistence. However, they are not allowed to harvest economically important forest products, such as honey, coffee and spices, as they are not generally perceived as legitimate 'owners' of forest plots.

Within this complex local setting, the establishment of the new CBO has faced a daunting challenge, because the new CBO promotes an officially recognized communal arrangement in which *all* members have equal rights and responsibilities.⁷ However, the traditional arrangement was organized on the basis of individual holdings in which a few indigenous family members own adjacent forest plots that constitute the Agama forest block. Moreover, the traditional holdings are not formally recognized other than in locals' common knowledge (Stellmacher 2007). Consequently, the establishment of the new CBO spurred the already ongoing (but latent) struggle for resources, space and status between the settlers (Kambata people, the majority in terms of number), the Kaffa people (privileged by traditional institutions) and the socially disadvantaged Manja people.⁸ These discrepancies between the old and the new arrangement and the long-standing social struggle entailed serious consequences in the implementation of PFM in general and enrolling people into the new CBO in particular.

So, when Farm-Africa staff entered Agama, they encountered long-standing social confrontations rather than (the expected) forest destruction. For the villagers, problems concerning the forest were not perceived as pertaining to the forest resource itself; rather, they reflected social problems, particularly the discrepancy between the customary practices and the new institutional arrangement. The project then needed not only to come to a new understanding of the social environment, but also to mediate in the conflicts, something for which the PFM arrangement was not designed. No structural adjustments were made to the project design – although with difficulties, villagers were still formally organized in the new CBO (AFC) – and the struggle to accept the associated frame of meaning and point of view continues to the present day. A first issue is, for example, the contradiction in perceptions of sense of ownership among villagers when they compare the situation before and after the PFM project intervention. From their responses, two types of ownership can be distinguished: one sense of ownership, 'traditional ownership', relates to traditional forest user rights, which were rooted in society even before Farm-Africa came, whereas the other type, 'legal use rights', is associated with Farm-Africa's intervention. Both types are nonetheless used and referred to intermittently, depending on the interaction or situation that people face. Villagers often use the legal use rights induced through the new organization to defend

their forestland from external competitors, particularly agricultural investors, rather than to change their forest management practices. Traditional ownership, however, is still influential in guiding who should be excluded or allowed to harvest which forest products and when. For example, the new settlers who became AFC members have to get permission from the traditional forest ‘owner’ to collect some forest products, such as coffee and spices, or to hang beehives, although the PFM rule entitles the cooperative committee to deal with such issues.

4.2.3. *Alternative livelihoods*

One of the rationales for introducing the PFM arrangement was to ensure sustainable management of forest resources while improving the socioeconomic condition of forest-dependent local communities, as described in several project documents (BFCDP 1998; Farm-Africa 2004). Proponents of the PFM arrangement argue that sustainable forest management cannot be attained unless complemented by alternative livelihoods that divert or reduce dependence on forest resources. This argument was later translated into a project rationale that reads: ‘rapid population growth, compounded by increasing poverty levels, has led to continuous deforestation and degradation as people living in the surrounding areas are forced by their economic situation to exploit the forest’s resources’ (DSW 2012). Such justifications can be traced back to the neo-Malthusian explanations that ascribe forest-related problems to the economic and reproductive behaviors of forest-dependent communities (Alemayehu and Wiersum 2006). The relationship between the Malthusian explanation and the project rationale is also recognizable in the name of the PFM project itself: Bonga Integrated Participatory Forest Management and Reproductive Health Project. Thus, to tackle forest-related problems diagnosed on the basis of the neo-Malthusian assumption, Farm-Africa, together with other stakeholders, has implemented a PFM project that integrates resource conservation, birth control and livelihood development. As a livelihood development component, Farm-Africa established a tree nursery, initiated poultry and sheep husbandry and provided micro-credit to AFC members. The livelihood support also included capacity building for harvesting and marketing non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as spices and forest honey.

Although all these interventions were envisioned to transform socioeconomic situations of forest-dependent communities so as to ultimately achieve sustainable forest management, Agama villagers acted upon these objectives differently than expected. The livelihood interventions not only diverted their attention away from the basic intentions of the project, but also led the villagers to reshape development supports to their aims. One woman in Agama spoke about the impact of Farm-Africa livelihood support on her life:

We got different types of support from Farm-Africa. But still now, our society is rather careless, we don’t save or manage carefully those supportive items. Some [animals] died or by other reasons, it failed. For example, for personal reasons, we immediately sell and eat [the support we get] because of seasonal problems, not for other reason.

The objectives of livelihood interventions were altered not only by the villagers but also by the project implementers. They ‘misused’ livelihood supports as an incentive to bypass the resistance and conflict encountered in the community during PFM implementation. Through the livelihood support provided or promised, the project implementers also

strengthened their position as an ‘enlightener’ of the PFM approach, with local communities regarded as a beneficiary rather than as an equal partner. A former natural resource management expert in the district agricultural office and a part-time fieldworker for Farm-Africa explains:

Forest destruction was not the only problem in Agama [...]. At that time, the challenge was that we needed to go from individual holdings to group holdings. So farmers did not like that [...]. But Farm-Africa created awareness, more and more, and helped in farming activities to move people away from dependence on the forest. Advantages were given to the farmers, and gradually they started to participate. So the aim was to make everybody a participant, even people who did not have land in the forest.

In summary, all the actors involved in the livelihood intervention (both the villagers and project implementers) followed their own logics and presumptions about the problem and solution, so that the outcomes of their actions were actually different from the basic intentions of the PFM arrangement. Thus, the Agama PFM project, which was designed primarily to alter forest management practices, became dominated by routine development operations, such as income generation and assisting farming activities.

4.2.4. *Practicing the new mandate*

Since the signing of the FMA at the end of 2003, AFC has started to practice its new mandate. This new mandate, among other things, includes implementing forest development and protection plans and enforcing the cooperative bylaws. Soon after the AFC commenced its new mandate, the contentious issue about membership, which had already surfaced during the formation phase, erupted. Consequently, the AFC’s attention shifted from achieving the management plan to settling the internal conflict among the members. The Agama PFM performance evaluation after 3 years of implementation confirmed the intensification of internal feuding among members and unsatisfactory compliance with the new PFM rules (Abiy 2006). The evaluation report also indicated the continuation of the customary forest management practices and use patterns. Abiy reported that the PFM bylaw was not ‘properly’ followed by either committee or ordinary members, the utilization of forest products did not happen according to the plan, nor did the community forest patrolling teams perform their tasks as prescribed. Almost all the executive committee members were removed from their positions shortly after the new organization started its mandate. The then chairman recounted the confrontation at the time:

I am related to the forest from my background, I have a plot in Bushasha zone. But members doubt. I am sorry for that. In the beginning, I was a chairman, but there was a conflict about who could be a member, Kambata or only the fifty-two [indigenous] households? I said that the forest is for everyone, that not only indigenous people have the right to use it. The forest benefits everyone. But then the others were against, especially the members from Bushasha zone,⁹ and so yes, I was not a chairman anymore.

This story reflects the fragile nature of an externally introduced institutional arrangement when it encounters practical realities. The performance of the new institutional arrangement was undermined not only because it lacked roots in the community, but also because there were no ‘wings’ from the outside to sustain it. When the FMA was signed, it was clearly stated that the CBO was not a replacement for the forestry department, which was

to continue its regulatory and service delivery roles. According to the agreement, the forestry department is expected to provide technical support (including legal support) and conduct a regular performance evaluation of the PFM implementation. However, in practice, these commitments were hardly fulfilled in accordance with the plan. For example, we observed that there has been no coordination and sharing of responsibilities between different governmental departments and AFC for more than one decade of PFM implementation. The district agricultural office, which is directly responsible for overseeing the implementation of the forest management plan, has neither personnel responsible for PFM activities nor job descriptions for such positions. As a result, there have been no regular monitoring and evaluation activities, particularly regarding the status of the forest resources. For the officials in the agriculture department, the top priority is to achieve food security and ensure accelerated economic growth through agricultural intensification, as stipulated in the overarching agricultural development policy (Alemayehu, Arts, and Wiersum 2013). Although developing forest resources have great potential to realize food security and to spur local economic development, particularly in the context of the Agama area – which is endowed with natural forests and valuable NTFPs – this is not emphasized in the overarching rural and agricultural policy document.

What we observed in Agama was therefore outside the frequently stated reasons for implementation failures relating to lack of capacity or resources in community forest management regime (Abrar and Inoue 2012, 2013; Nelson and Agrawal 2008). The rupture between the institutional intention and actual practice was, rather, attributable to deep-seated structural arrangements and symbolic representation by government officials, who can sign an agreement without having any actual intention of changing their practices. This implies that crafting and signing a FMA alone is not a sufficient condition to (re)orient practices. Agreeing may be one step, but (re)orientation of actual practice (in thinking, saying and doing by all parties involved) is also required; otherwise, signing is no more than an act of representation.

4.2.5. *Asymmetric relationships between actors*

The asymmetric relationship between actors involved in the PFM arrangement started to manifest itself from the time of the FMA negotiations. Actors belonging to one of the three main parties (government, Farm-Africa and local community) who participated in the negotiations had uneven resources and power leverage at their disposal. Farm-Africa was privileged with access to donor funds and information about the PFM arrangement. Thus, although its official role was stated to be that of facilitator, Farm-Africa played a central role in the formulation and endorsement of the FMA. The government, being the *de jure* owner of the forests and forestlands, had the veto power to decide to whom the new role should be delegated. Local community *representatives* were actually involved in the negotiations in the sense of ‘take it or leave it’. This means that local communities were given little or no option other than to accept the offer proposed by external actors (government and Farm-Africa).¹⁰ Moreover, local communities’ participation was conditional on their performance – they had to be willing and able to stop forest destruction. This uneven playing field and asymmetric relations produced a situation where government and Farm-Africa played a dominant role in designing and implementing the PFM arrangement without actually empowering the local community to negotiate as an equal partner. The dominance of external actors is also evidenced by the communality of FMAs and bylaws across the PFM intervention sites in the country, with only minor modification

of, for example, fine amounts and membership fees (Mulugeta and Zelalem 2011). Reflecting the asymmetric relation, the FMA vested in the district agricultural office a discretionary power to take back the forest if the community failed to comply with the agreement and if the government needed the resource for other development priorities (Farm-Africa 2004). However, these conditional phrases (... if the community fails to comply ... if the government needs ...) have created much room for interpretation by implementing officials and have become a source of distrust from the community side. In summary, although government representatives signed the FMA to share resources and responsibilities with communities, the long-standing uneven relationships between the government and local people hardly changed.

The asymmetric relationship between actors was also observed in the livelihood intervention, which created a donor–receiver mentality between the external actors and villagers. The livelihood intervention, derived from the neo-Malthusian assumption, did not nurture participation based on equal terms. It started from the interpretation that local communities were poor and therefore, because of their material needs, they could not protect or use the forest sustainably. Then, it prescribed external intervention in the form of alternative livelihoods as the way out of ‘the poverty–forest–destruction trap’. In this simplified formula, local communities were equated to recipients of the material support that is often provided with instructions about what to do, including prescriptions about birth control. Consequently, before the actual formation of the forest user groups, the livelihood intervention reproduced the asymmetric relationship between project implementers and local communities that the PFM arrangement was meant to break. Moreover, it significantly undermined locals’ sense of ownership of the resources for which they are responsible. An AFC committee member explained what he called the ‘bad shadow’ of Farm-Africa and the attitude created among people:

The members always wait for income or benefit from Farm-Africa, in a supportive form. All benefits were received in that time [during the project period]. Still now, the members don’t say ‘the forest’ or ‘cooperative activity’, still now. [They call it] the Farm-Africa activity [...]. The people don’t believe in cooperative activity or [in] participation in cooperative activity. When that Farm-Africa left, no good sign was given [to people in Agama].

This conversation suggests that the community members were not yet convinced that participation in forest management activities served their own needs. In sum, the general notions of (degraded) forest, (poor) people and their relations – a situation perceived by project implementers as requiring action – led to practices that were different from the project’s intentions. Thus, when the coherence of a project falls apart in the unfolding practices, actors in the PFM arrangement resort to operational logics embedded in their routinized experiences rather than the proclaimed institutional principles. This shows that the PFM intervention in Agama not only followed routinized practices to establish a CBO, but also left a situation in which the new organization could do no more than reproduce habitual actions.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article examined the performance of a new institutional arrangement for PFM through a case study in a local village where this PFM approach was introduced nearly two decades ago. The PFM approach was implemented in the village on the premise that a robust institutional arrangement, consisting of locally devised institutional regimes that

help resource users to allocate benefits equitably and efficiently over long time periods, is a necessary precondition for guiding local forest practices toward the new policy goal of sustainable forest management. Despite the establishment of such a new institutional arrangement, our findings reveal that the local forest management practices have hardly been shaped by the objectives and rules of the PFM approach. The mismatch between the PFM objectives, rules and actual practices was evidenced in a number of circumstances in the study village. For example, although the PFM arrangement ‘officially’ annulled the traditional resource management system by establishing a village-level forest cooperative (i.e. the AFC), in practice the traditional institutions are still far more influential in shaping the local forest management and utilization patterns. Stellmacher and Mollinga (2009) made similar observations.

A couple of factors contributed to the stability of the traditional forest management practices and the insignificant impact of the externally introduced PFM institutional arrangement. *First*, the PFM institution was crafted on the basis of ideal-type DPs and experiences from elsewhere in the world, without paying too much attention to local reality. However, when Farm-Africa staff arrived in the village with their PFM model, they encountered complex and long-standing social, political and economic challenges that they had not anticipated during the institutional design stage. *Second*, instead of addressing those practical challenges, the PFM implementers adhered to institutional logics, even when confronted with difficulties and resistance from villagers, in order to reach the reform targets. As a result, they increasingly focused on livelihood support activities identified on the basis of their own professional logics. These livelihood supports were often accompanied by ‘enlightenment’ campaigns and prescriptions about what to do and what not to do. These operational logics were guided by the internal convictions of project implementers and were used with the intention of convincing villagers to accept the new objectives and rules. Thus, in practice, the livelihood supports and enlightenment campaign reproduced an asymmetric relationship between the project implementers and local communities that the new reform was intended to break. *Third*, although villagers did not follow the proposed institutional incentives, norms and rules, they nonetheless acted upon them, but in their own ways. Thus, although they changed their discursive expressions along with the new lexicon of the PFM approach, these discursive changes were an adaptation strategy that did not alter their customary forest management practices, but rather served to secure access rights and defend forestland from agricultural investors. The findings indicate that local actors, who are situated in a given sociopolitical and economic context, have their own agency (alongside the social field) that enables them to actively work upon institutional reform, either constructively or contrary to the reform’s goal. The *fourth* reason for the insignificant impact of the new institutional reform is the inability of local government officials to adopt their new cooperative roles with the community. Several studies in other countries reported such findings and interpreted them as indicating the resistance or reluctance of state agents to cede power or share decision-making authority with local communities (Gibson 1999; Nelson and Agrawal 2008; Nelson 2010; Alden Wily 2011). Our case study sketches a somewhat different picture. The continuation of the conventional forest management practices was not interpreted as signifying an overt resistance to change on the part of the state agents; rather, it was attributed to their deep-seated structural position and attitudes that also shaped their habitual actions (cf., Wiersum and Lekanne 1995; Kubo 2010). In the study village, local government agencies have accepted the PFM arrangement and have signed a legally binding agreement with the local community; this suggests their official commitment to fulfill the new mandate. However, the challenge arises at the

interface of the formulation and the actual implementation of the institutional provisions into concrete activities. At this interface, the overarching government policy priorities such as agricultural development override the shallow-rooted PFM agreement and rules.

The findings in this case study illustrate that the implementation of the PFM approach does not logically follow from the basic ideas as expressed in policy discourses and institutional rules, but largely depends on practical logics, which are strongly rooted in local histories, cultures and settings. Thus, even when the PFM institutions are carefully crafted and implemented, they are often unable to modify these practical logics, situational events and political–historical experiences of local actors that predominantly shape such actors’ forest use and management practices. These findings also imply that institutional arrangements, rules and procedures are not sufficient conditions to guide actions to enhance sustainable and PFM, although they might be part of a much broader ‘necessary’ set of elements for sociocultural change (cf., Li 2007; Quinn et al. 2007).

This case study also illustrates the importance of the theoretical framework we adopted, which draws on the PBA and argues that institutional and practical logics are substantially different (Arts et al. 2013; Bourdieu 1990; Mosse 2004). PBA enabled us to assess PFM performance from the *logic of practice*. Assessing PFM performance from the logic of practice brought new dimensions to an institutional analysis. Whereas institutional analysis assesses whether a robust institution (that mediates human behavior) has been established and whether this institution is guiding people’s actions toward certain policy goals, the logic of practice approach illuminates what happens in the local arena when a newly introduced institutional arrangement ‘hits the ground’. And as Li (2007) suggests, such analysis has value to instigate dialog and to critically reflect on whether and what kind of intervention is actually needed to positively influence forest management practices. It also draws attention to the importance of a practice-based rather than a normative-based approach toward reforming forest governance at local level. In such a PBA, attention needs to be given to the practical logics in communities and to the realities of what people actually do and say in the context of their daily lives.

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Notes on contributors

Alemayehu N. Ayana is a researcher in forest and environmental governance in the Ethiopian Environment and Forest Research Institute, Ethiopia. His research agenda focuses on the interaction of institutional, socioeconomic, and ecological factors that influence forest conditions and forest–community relationships. He (co)produced a number of academic publications on the subject of forest and environmental governance and management of Agroforestry landscape.

Bas Arts is a professor in the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group at Wageningen University and Research Centre, the Netherlands. Currently, his professional focus is on: new modes of governance in environmental politics (mainly with regard to forests, biodiversity and climate change) and the role of private regulation and the power of nongovernmental actors in environmental politics. He has (co)produced over one hundred academic publications, including papers, book chapters, edited volumes, and research reports.

Nathalie Vandenebeele obtained an MSc in Bio-Engineering in the Erasmus study program at the University of Ghent, Belgium and University of Wageningen, The Netherlands, specializing in forest and nature conservation policy. Her research for this concerned community forest management in Ethiopia and her dissertation was entitled: 'A case study of local practices of a Participatory Forest Management project in Ethiopia: self-formation between principle and practice.'

Notes

1. The case study was conducted in Agama village, which is administratively located in Gimbo *woreda* (district) of the Kaffa zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) in Ethiopia.
2. Bonga forest is not a continuous forest block or cohesive woodland; rather, it is a non-figurative umbrella term encompassing the mosaic of primary forests covering the hills around Bonga town over a radius of about 40 km, including Agama forest (Stellmacher 2007).
3. PFM document reads: 'The principle behind PFM is that people will conserve forests if they own rights to the resource, if they gain more benefit by retaining the forest than by removing it, and if that benefit is linked directly to the existence of the forest' (Bradstock et al. 2007, 27).
4. Actors in this study refer to individuals, social groups or organizations that have a stake in the use and management of forest resources.
5. See Vandenebeele (2012, 62–68) for a detailed account of the connection between the murder case, the eviction of the villagers and the historically rooted state intervention in forest management.
6. The Kambata people migrated to Agama from the most eastern tip of the SNNPR and they speak Kambatigna (Cushitic language family). When Kaffa and Kambata people communicate, they practically always use Amharic, the lingua franca of Ethiopia.
7. Members as identified by Farm-Africa were households living around and in the forest (Farm-Africa 2004).
8. There is a distinct social distance between Kaffa and Manja; for example, the two groups do not eat together, and intermarriage is traditionally unthinkable (Yihenew 2002).
9. Bushasha zone is one of the four sub-villages of Agama, the three others being Gokesha, Kidah and Kama.
10. Some personnel worked part-time for Farm-Africa and part-time for the government, reflecting the overlapping position and stake between the two external actors.
11. Ethiopian names are not based on family or surnames and, thus, Ethiopian authors appear under their first name following the practice and logic of names in Ethiopia.

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