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# Exploring local communities' perceptions towards forest ecosystems and co-management programmes: A case of Malawi

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## Abstract

Central to forest co-management programmes, is the involvement of local communities in the sustainable management and utilization of forest ecosystems. As such local people's knowledge and perceptions of trends in forest ecosystems are important in designing and implementing effective forest co-management programmes. Therefore, this study used focus group discussions, key informant interviews and a survey of 155 households from communities living around Zomba-Malosa and Ntchisi forest reserve to explore how local people perceive the trends in forest ecosystems and its impacts on their wellbeing. The study further explores how local communities perceive the forest co-management programs currently being implemented in their area, with regards to its impacts on forest conditions and welfare. The study shows that communities perceive a decline in forest ecosystems and biodiversity and a decline in the availability and accessibility of forest resources such as firewood, timber, and poles. The results also show that communities are aware of the multiple objectives of the program and that its success depends on the active participation of multiple stakeholders including local communities. However, communities perceive a limited political will among authorities to actively involve them in the management of the program. The study also reveals that local people expect the programme to enhance community participation in decision making; improve access to and availability of forest resources; and improve community infrastructure. Finally, the study shows that the communities perceive the current wellbeing impacts of the forest co-management program as minimal, however they are willing to pay to participate in the programs activities in order to safeguard the perceived future benefits of a conserved forest ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Local people, co, management, welfare, forest conditions

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