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**Contesting Institutional Engineering for Decentralised  
Governance of Local Natural Resources in Malawi**

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## **Abstract**

In line with 1993/94 political changes from autocratic to democratic rule and the re-adopted decentralized system of governance in Malawi, centralized natural resources management has been replaced by decentralized approaches. At policy level, this is supported by the adoption of the Decentralization Policy and the enactment of the Local Government Act in 1998. The current approach to natural resources governance in Malawi is in line with the global paradigmatic shift in the theory and practice of governance since early 1980s that underscores the need for popular political participation. In natural resources governance in particular, decentralized governance is driven by the popular understanding that community based natural resources management (CBNRM) presents the best alternative for governing local resources and achieving resource sustainability. Decentralized natural resources governance, however, required transfer of responsibility and control over resources to local institutions, which were either not available or too weak to take over this role. This called for formulation of new institutions. Using Domasi and Njala irrigation schemes, government irrigation schemes subjected to management devolution in Malawi, this study explores the processes and effects of institutional engineering for decentralized natural resources governance in Malawi. The study findings, employing both qualitative (interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions) and quantitative (household survey) methods of data collection, reveal that presence of democratic structures have not translated into democratic institutions and resource equity. The major reason for this outcome is that institutional engineering was not only externally-driven, but also pre-demonized informal institutions, painting them alien to democratic governance. On the contrary, this paper demonstrate that in order to achieve democratic natural resources governance in Malawi, rather than being left out, informal institutions should be allowed to evolve together with formal institutions.

**Keywords:** *decentralised governance, natural resources, popular participation, informal institutions, Malawi*