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Editorial: Change in forest governance in developing countries. In search of sustainable governance arrangements

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Deforestation, forest degradation, biodiversity loss and rural poverty have long been important concerns in forest management in developing countries. Many of these countries lack appropriate forest legislation, regulation and incentives to promote sustainable forest governance practices. Also, many developing countries have inadequate funding and human resources for setting up and implementing forest management plans, and lack mechanisms to ensure stakeholder involvement in forest planning and development. Therefore, the search for governance arrangements that are better suited to meet the challenges of sustainable forest use in developing countries remains an important issue.

Since the mid 1980s, the majority of national governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have launched decentralization initiatives in natural resource management. Since then, decentralisation has become a prominent feature of forest governance (Ribot et al. 2006: 1864). The expectation is that, given the right conditions, decentralized governance is superior to centralized

governance regarding the improvement of the quality of public management and the responsiveness to people's needs. It would subsequently lead to enhanced and more equitable development. Moves to decentralise forest governance were impelled partly by international donor organisations who sought better forest governance from recipient countries. In addition to external pressures, decentralisation was also spurred by domestic demands for a greater recognition of local communities' needs for forest products and their role in managing local forests for multiple purposes (Cronkleton et al. 2008). Concomitantly, forest research on local participation, resource management, and governance helped provide some justification for decentralization reforms (Dietz et al. 2003). Over the past two decades, decentralization reforms resulted in a significant increase of forest governance by local communities and organizations (Molnar et al. 2004). In addition, we can observe a number of further trends and changes in forest governance (Agrawal et al. 2008). Civil society organizations and market actors play an increasingly dominant role, for example, through certification initiatives and changing consumer preferences. Another example concerns the substantial role of logging companies in forest concessions, typically for selective logging in tropical forests.

Today, changes in forest governance are for the most part related to non-hierarchical governing involving stakeholders and actors from different levels in formal and informal processes of cooperation and interactions from local to global level (Lemos and Agrawal 2006). Like in other sectors, forest governance not only refers to governmental regulation and law enforcement for sustainable management but also involves the political, organizational, and cultural frameworks through which diverse interests in natural and cultural resources are coordinated and controlled. The changes in forest governance are associated with the emergence of new institutional arrangements to cope with complex challenges in the forest sector. The aim of this special feature is to take a look at changes in forest governance and actor constellations, and factors that lead to sustainable governance arrangements in the countries of the South. We collected three articles that, from different angles, address these issues.

The article "Learning on Governance in Forest Ecosystems: Lessons from Recent Research" by Catherine Tucker aims to explore the conditions under which forest governance is likely to produce sustainable outcomes. Efforts by governments as well as non-governmental organizations and environmental activists to improve forest governance have produced mixed results. At the same time, forestry research around the world has found a range of variation in governance outcomes. Drawing on existing research on forest governance, the author suggests a number of factors that may be conducive for successful forest governance. These factors include secure forest rights; a fit between the local context and the larger institutional context; effective monitoring and rule enforcement; governance arrangements that are able to adapt to social, economic, political, and forest-change processes; partnerships and deliberative processes. Overall, the author points out that 'there are no panaceas' in ensuring sustainable

forest governance. Rather ‘context matters’ for the way in which variables interact and influence outcomes in complex social-ecological systems. The author concludes that much more systematic research is needed to understand the ways in which context influences the effects of a variable on forest governance and its outcomes.

The contribution by Balooni and colleagues called “Curse or blessing? Local Elites in Joint Forest Management in India’s Shiwaliks”, also aims to shed light on the factors that explain the outcomes of forest governance. Here, the focus is on the local level and on the Joint Forest Management (JFM) policy in India. Existing research indicates that local-level outcomes are shaped by a plethora of factors, including characteristics of the ecosystem, the users, and institutional arrangements. The authors address power struggles and the role of local elites in shaping the processes and outcomes of local forest governance, which they feel have received limited attention, so far. Empirically, the paper studies a JFM program implemented in two villages in the Shiwalik hills in the state of Haryana, India. In both villages, the level of success of institution building for JFM has been different. The analysis reveals that these differences cannot be attributed to the institutional reform itself, but instead appear to be caused by differences in the role of local elites. These exert a tremendous influence over the opportunities for newly created village institutions to assert their authority and defend their interests against a variety of actors in the power struggle over the processes and outcomes of JFM. In particular, the ability of key people to manage external actors – drawing upon them when needed to advance local priorities, and fending them off when seeking to avoid unwanted interference – seems important. The authors suggest that these abilities depend on the elites’ social capital which brings about different levels of bonding and bridging ties in the two cases, and contributes to the success or failure of institutional reform. In line with Catherine Tuckers’ reasoning that ‘context matters’, the analysis reveals how, in a hierarchical society like India, the traditional domination by local elites are shaping processes and outcomes of forest governance.

The papers by Tucker and Balooni et al. address, in different respects, non-state political processes at various subnational levels. In contrast to that, the third paper of this special issue, “Blanket strategy: A response of environmental groups to the globalizing forest industry”, focuses on the non-state sphere that goes beyond the national level. David Gritten and Blas Mola-Yudego analyze strategies used by the Environmental Non-Government Organizations (ENGOS) in different forest conflicts involving forest industries. In recent years, the forest industry has come under increased scrutiny regarding its operating practices, including for example, accusations of illegal logging and pollution caused by pulp mills. As a consequence, the industry has become the target of ENGO campaigns. A new development pointed out by Gritten and Mola-Yudego is that the ENGOS do not approach governments, but focus directly on corporations. This strategy reflects the recent trend of globalization in the industry. ENGOS need to respond to this trend if they want to achieve their aims. One response which is explored

in this paper is a so-called ‘blanket strategy’. It involves forming of networks, or use of existing ones, with peer-organizations in other countries where the target forest company has its partners, in order to present a common front in their campaigns. This way, many countries of the South now become involved in these kinds of quarrels. The authors scrutinize 14 cases of forest conflicts in different geographical regions with regard to the different actors and their relations. They find a correlation between the location of the ENGOs campaigning against a forestry company and the site of the target’s partners (i.e. financiers, customers, and shareholders). This increases the salience of the campaign for many of the stakeholders connected to the target company. And, since the company’s partners may not wish to be linked with a company involved in questionable practices, they as well may press the target company to change its operations. The paper sheds light on the increasingly global nature of the strategies of ENGOs which gives rise to new forms of involvement of developing countries in international politics.

Overall, the three articles reveal – at different sub- and supranational levels – the changing loci of forest governance, and the changing role for various actors in forest governance, from community and civil society to market actors. Research on the factors that are conducive for sustainable forest governance is necessary to address today’s forest governance challenges in developing countries.

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