

Tropical forest governance: dealing with increasing complexity

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Forest governance is about how and to what ends forests are managed, how decisions on forests use are taken, who are involved in these decisions and what is done to enforce forest laws and policies on the ground. Good forest governance is needed to cope with critical issues like illegal logging and corruption; unclear tenure arrangements and use rights; the protection of global forest values such as biodiversity, carbon sequestration and watershed protection; and the reconciliation of global public good concerns with local livelihood needs and the goal of poverty alleviation. This article reviews the main trends in forest governance which promise to respond to these issues. There are, however, several challenges ahead, the major one being the need to deal with increasing complexity, conflicting interests and power imbalances.

From 'command and control' to 'networked governance'

Forests fulfil various functions which are valued differently by different groups of people at different levels (Figure 1).

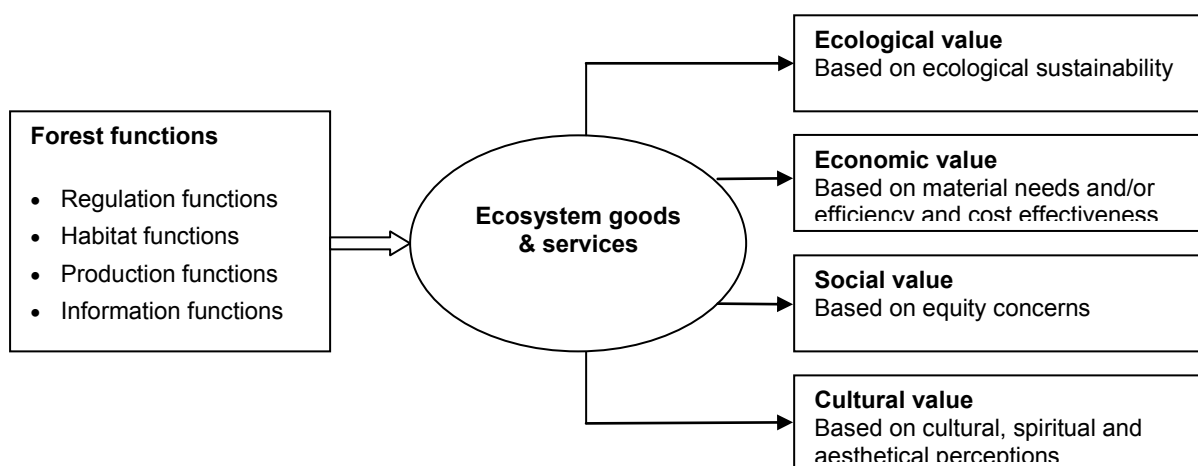


Figure 1 – Forest functions and values
Source: Adapted from De Groot *et al.* (2002).

The value that people attach to the forest largely depends on their proximity to the forest, their economic dependency and their historical, physical and cultural relationship with the forest. For people living close to the forests and depending on them for their livelihood, direct material needs and cultural and spiritual values tend to prevail. People at a larger distance (for instance the urban population) attach more value to aesthetical and recreational values, while concerns at global level tend to relate to ecological and economic values.

Traditionally, forest policies in tropical countries were hardly concerned with these diverging interests. Political decision-making was based on the premise that forest conservation and sustainable management were best secured by state custody over forests, with management being the responsibility of a professional forest service on the basis of national economic and environmental interests. Only

by the mid 1970s foresters and policymakers realised that this was a top-down strategy which neglected the specific forest-related needs of local communities and contributed little to their welfare. Consequently, the centralised conservation and forest management policies were gradually replaced by more participatory approaches with attention for the needs of local communities. It meant the first step towards the (re-)entrance of non-state actors into the forest governance arena.

In present times, there is growing recognition worldwide that no single actor alone – be it the state, NGOs or the private sector – can be held responsible for managing forests that are under increasing pressure. As a result, forest management is no longer in the exclusive hands of the central state. Policy making and implementation shifted from the traditional 'command and control' approach to a network approach, in which actors at different levels collaborate on the basis of (at least partly) shared beliefs and dependency. The term forest governance was coined to include the notion of democracy and the involvement of non-state actors in decision-making regarding the allocation and use of scarce forest resources.

Main trends in forest governance

In the evolution from 'command and control' to 'networked' forest governance, three main trends can be discerned: (i) the increasing involvement of non-state actors; (ii) multi-scalar policy processes; and (iii) growing importance of market arrangements.

The increasing involvement of non-state actors

The increasing involvement of non-state actors in forest governance fits in well with neo-liberal reforms through which the role of the state is being reduced. Neo-liberal thinking – promoted widely through Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – recommends that tasks formerly the responsibility of the state are transferred to private enterprises or carried out jointly by governments and private sector companies in public-private partnerships. This has also had an influence on the practice of forest and natural resource management.

The democratisation wave in the late twentieth century also stimulated the involvement of non-state actors in forest management, as it paved the way for a stronger participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the formulation of forest policies. Massive sponsorship of civil society building by international donors in the wake of the 'good governance' debate led to a dramatic increase in the number of CSOs in the last decade of the twentieth century. An increasing number of these have formed alliances with both national and international actors to shape forest policies and management.

Multi-scalar policy processes

Several factors have led to governance arrangements between actors operating at different geographic scales, ranging from local to global levels. Firstly, there is the worldwide trend towards decentralisation, which includes de-concentration, delegation and devolution. De-concentration is a process of downward extension of the administrative system, by which administrative authority or responsibility is transferred from the national forestry administration to the provincial or district administrative level or municipal authorities. Delegation, or the outward extension of the administrative

system, is the transfer of managerial responsibility to organisations indirectly controlled by the central government such as regional development agencies or parastatal organisations. In the case of devolution, decision-making powers are transferred from the central state to local actors, such as indigenous populations, local community organisations or organised groups of forest users. Consequently, forest governance is now being shared between central government, lower administrative levels, and CSOs.

Also globalisation – defined as the growing interconnectivity and interdependence between countries – has led to multi-level governance. Combined with advanced information and communication technologies and fast means of transportation, globalisation facilitates the rapid spread of ideas about good forest governance, sustainable forest management and corporate social responsibility. In a globalised world, it is easier than ever to establish and maintain contacts with distant partners to negotiate forest policies and undertake joint activities. As a result, actors operating at the global scale increasingly take part in forest governance at national and local levels through international treaties and partnerships with national or local governments, CSOs and local communities. These international treaties and multi-level partnerships for sustainable forest use and management often aim to reconcile local livelihood needs and global environmental concerns.

Increased importance of marketing arrangements

Due to the remote location of tropical forests and lack of infrastructure, people living in tropical forest areas were traditionally primarily engaged in subsistence-based livelihood activities in which forests played an important role. In the past decades, many of the formerly remote forest areas have been opened up due to both planned and spontaneous migration and the extension of government-planned infrastructure. As a result, forest-dwelling and adjacent communities became integrated in commercial networks, which allowed them to diversify their livelihood strategies beyond subsistence.

Two factors in particular created new market opportunities for forest products. First, commercial forest use expanded from timber to non-timber forest products and, to an increasing extent, ecological services such as water supply, CO₂ sequestration or aesthetic services in the form of ecotourism. An increasing number of international treaties (e.g. the Kyoto protocol) create financial mechanisms for the payment of ecological services. Secondly, the pressure of consumers for environmentally friendly and socially responsible production led an increasing number of private businesses to operate deliberately under the label of Corporate Social Responsibility. These enterprises engage in partnerships with (indigenous) communities for the sustainable production of forest products and other commodities in order to obtain a 'green' and socially conscious image that allows them to operate on profitable niche markets. These company-community partnerships also offer new marketing opportunities for communities living in and near tropical forests.

As a result of diversified commercial options, economic interests in forest governance are becoming increasingly important. While additional income-generating opportunities may create a stimulus to the wise use and management of forests, it also leads to an increase in illegal practices and corruption. This has added to the understanding that improved forest governance is urgently needed for safeguarding tropical forests for human benefits.

Challenges ahead

The involvement of an increasing number and wider array of actors in forest governance poses a number of challenges. Firstly, there is the need to deal with diverging interests, opinions and power positions. This asks for empowerment of the poor, both in terms of secure tenure and use rights and in terms of negotiation and governance skills. Secondly, local platforms for negotiating land-use options, use rights and obligations, and solving conflicts over natural resource use should be promoted, incorporating both traditional and modern forms of representation and leadership. Thirdly, the increasing number of actors and scales involved implies increasing transaction costs which can be lowered by forming associations, producer groups, etcetera. Last, but not least, the general principles

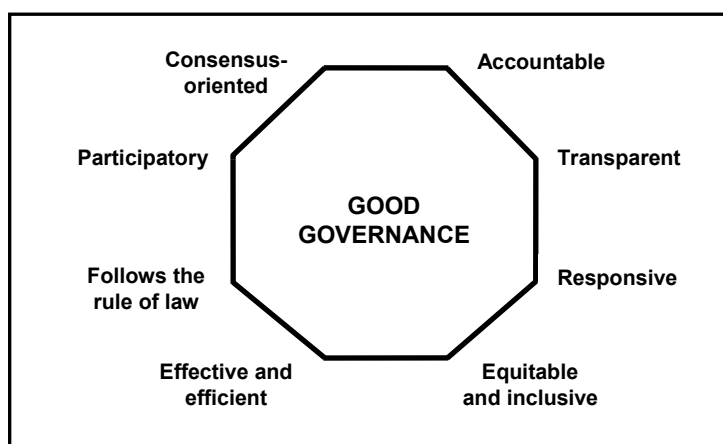


Figure 2 The characteristics of good governance.
Source: <http://www.unescap.org/huset/gg/governance.htm>

of good governance also apply to forest governance (Figure 2). In particular the devolution of authority and access to resources to local governance institutions is expected to enhance several of these principles, such as participation (of previously marginalised groups), accountability to the public and transparency, responsiveness (to the needs of all stakeholders), equity and inclusiveness. Recent studies have shown, however, that this is not always

happening due to local elite capture, poor coordination and planning, lack of local community skills and empowerment, inadequate funding and commitment from higher government officials, and a tendency to overexploitation. It is unrealistic to expect that problems like corruption and illegal forest exploitation will disappear automatically under decentralised and multi-actor governance arrangements. This requires behavioural change among both state and non-state actors.

Further reading

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