



Creating political capital to promote devolution in the forestry sector—a case study of the forest communities in Banyumas district, Central Java, Indonesia

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Abstract

Devolution has become a major policy trend in the forestry sector of developing countries. Using the case of Banyumas district in Central Java as an example, we examine the challenges of implementing devolution policies at the local level. Applying a theoretical framework based on the concepts of social and political capital, we analyze the strategies used by proponents supporting implementing a community-based forestry system in this district and opponents against it. The proponents include the forest communities, a local non-governmental organization (NGO) and national NGOs. Our analysis showed that they effectively combined their social capital with other resources to create political capital, e.g. by mobilizing the villagers and by lobbying. As a consequence, the central level State Forest Corporation (SFC) approved the implementation of a community-based forest system that met the interests of the local communities. Representatives of the SFC at the district level and members of an illegal logging network opposed this approval and also created political capital to avoid the loss of authority and income opportunities. Assessing the influence of the political frame conditions, we find that the reformation policies implemented after the fall of the Suharto regime increased the possibilities of the proponents to create political capital while depreciating the traditional political capital of the opponents due to, for example, the decline of the military's influence in the political arena.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, devolution of forest management to local communities has become a major policy

trend in developing countries. The term devolution is used here to refer to the transfer of responsibility and authority over natural resources from the state to non-governmental bodies at the local level (Meinzen-Dick and Knox, 2001, p. 42). Devolution policies aim to address institutional problems that have been identified as major reasons behind the degradation and misuse of forest resources in developing countries, such as state property and centralized management of forest resources, corruption in the forestry

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administration, lack of effective monitoring, and enforcement and deficient incentives for the local communities (McCarthy, 2000a; Ligon and Narain, 1999; Wibowo and Byron, 1999). Different mechanisms have been identified in the relevant literature on the subject by which devolution can lead to a more sustainable forest management in terms of equity, efficiency and environmental sustainability: the creation of incentives by a fair and democratic distribution of benefits; the creation of accountability; the reduction of transaction costs; the mobilization of local knowledge; the strengthening of local institutions for sustainable resource management; and—in view of a low state capacity—the limitation of the role of the state to the provision of enabling frame conditions and the protection of public interests (compare Ribot, 2002; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2001; Birner and Wittmer, 2000; World Bank, 1997). However, the empirical evidence on the effects of devolution in the forestry sector has been mixed (Banerjee, 1997; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2001; Ribot, 2002), which implies a need for more theoretical and empirical research on devolution.

Focusing on the optimal levels and forms of devolution, normative analyses of devolution can draw on the economic theory of federalism (Braden and Proost, 1997), transaction costs economics (Ostrom et al., 1993; Birner and Wittmer, 2000), property rights and collective action theory (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2001), and theories of democracy (compare Ribot, 2002). Considering the fact that devolution is associated with a considerable shift in political and administrative power, there is also a need to study why and under which conditions local communities will eventually receive more rights to forest resources. As such studies on the political feasibility of devolution are still scarce (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001, pp. 75–76), our paper focuses on these questions, using a case study from Indonesia as an empirical example. As theoretical basis of our analysis, we combine the concept of social capital, which has been widely applied in studies on natural resource management, with the concept of political capital, which is derived from political resource theory (Birner and Wittmer, 2003).

Under Suharto's 'New Order' regime from 1966 to 1998, Indonesia's forest management was char-

acterized by centralized management and a strong focus on exploiting the country's forest resources in the pursuit of macro-economic objectives such as obtaining foreign exchange and promoting growth. This policy fitted well into the political strategy of Suharto's regime, which justified its rather authoritarian and centralized way of government by the economic growth it was able to promote. With the onset of the economic crisis, this legitimization eroded and the reform movement increasingly criticized the prevalence of corruption, collusion and nepotism in the 'New Order' regime (McCarthy, 2000a). After the fall of Suharto, a far-reaching policy of decentralization and devolution was implemented (Law 22/1999 on Regional Governance and Law 25/1999 on Fiscal Balancing). The forestry legislation was reformed with the aim to stipulate a larger participation of local communities in forest management (Forestry Law 41/1999, Article 4). The transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime, however, was also accompanied by reduced law enforcement which contributed to rapidly increasing deforestation rates. At the national level, the annual deforestation rate during the reform period reached 2.5 million hectares per year as compared to an annual average of 1.6 million hectares prior to the reform period (Kompas, 2002).

In response to this crisis in the forestry sector, the State Forest Corporation (SFC), which is in charge of managing all production forest and most protection forest on Java, issued the policy of community-based forest management (CBFM) (SFC, 2000). According to this policy, forest villagers are entitled to plan CBFM activities together with SFC and other stakeholders and receive a share of the benefits (SFC, 2001). The forest farmer communities in the Banyumas district of Central Java played a pioneering role in implementing this devolution policy. Therefore, we analyzed the political strategies of these communities and their opponents in order to identify factors and conditions that influence the political feasibility of devolution.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section presents the conceptual framework; the research area and methods are outlined in Section 3; Section 4 deals with the problems of forest management in Banyumas district and describes

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