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Current Opinion in
Environmental
Sustainability

Editorial overview: Forest governance interventions for sustainability through information, incentives, and institutions

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Current Opinion in Environmental
Sustainability 2018, 17:1–7

1877-3435/\$ – see front matter

DOI <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.08.002>

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Introduction

An exceptionally large body of work identifies effective governance as the means to secure sustainability. It can do so across different sectors of society, at multiple scales, and in environmental and socioeconomic life-worlds [1–3]. When it comes to forests and livelihoods, governments, donors, non-government organizations, private companies, and many other national and international organizations seek to enhance sustainability goals by deploying governance interventions to conserve biodiversity, improve livelihoods, enhance social equity, and increase carbon sequestration [4–6].

Because forests are multi-functional landscapes, research focusing on them can play a central role to improve existing understandings of the plethora of governance strategies already being used [7,8]. Different ways of governing have distinct underlying logics, costs, and rates of success. When viewed comparatively, each helps some sustainability goals more than others, allows win–win outcomes in some places and times but not others, and requires varying forms and levels of resources to be adopted and implemented [9]. Researchers and decision makers alike can benefit from lessons about the means through which more effective governance can be accomplished.

The 19 reviews collected in this special issue seek precisely to elucidate what is known about different strategies of environmental governance and the degree of confidence associated with available knowledge. They have distilled knowledge from more than 1200 research articles, and collectively the interventions they assess cover more than 3 Bill. Ha. of land under protected areas, community forests, forests under certification, forest concessions, restoration, tree plantations, and private forest acquisitions, among other forms. Global in their coverage where feasible, and focusing on some of the most important areas of emerging knowledge, they present an uplifting narrative about environmental governance.

The reviews of 19 different governance interventions included in this special issue show that a small set of critical factors are repeatedly associated with successful and effective governance through diverse interventions. These include: firstly, supportive policies, adaptive management, and responsive macro-institutional frameworks; secondly, collaborative processes including stakeholder activism and consultation; thirdly, clear performance indicators and monitoring systems to assess performance; and fourthly, integrative learning from qualitative and quantitative evidence–

2 Editorial overview

resources, as well as the causal mechanisms for achieving synergistic outcomes in agricultural production, environmental conservation, and smallholder livelihoods. Much of his work focuses on empirically examining the complexity in the coupled natural-human systems in order to test and refine theories in both natural and social sciences.

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based insights as also for conceptual and rigorous causal inference techniques. These four lessons are testimony to the vigor of research on governance of terrestrial resources and can form the foundations for more effective decision making. An immense body of evidence independently supports these conclusions about each of the different types of interventions [10–13]. By examining them together in this collection, we help show the consistency in success-related factors across individual types of governance interventions.

At the same time, the collection as a whole also demonstrates how much remains to be learned to assess the relative efficacy of different mechanisms of governance, the possibilities and difficulties of generalizing from available governance examples to other times and places, and the complexities involved in causal inference from observational data — the bulk of available empirical knowledge on which we rely to learn about patterns of drivers and outcomes of governance interventions.

The next section outlines the conceptual scheme that underpins our analysis of governance strategies. It focuses on the fundamental dimensions of information, incentives, and institutions that in different combinations comprise and give shape to forest and environmental governance interventions. We highlight the logic and the assumptions needed to link governance strategies to expected effects and the links among these logics that lead to different configurations in which information, incentives and institutions are represented in realized governance efforts. The following section briefly describes and discusses the central arguments of the reviews in the special section. The final section concludes by noting some exciting advances in recent work on environmental governance and a few of the promising directions for future research on the subject, without any pretense at exhaustiveness.

A conceptual scheme for understanding environmental governance

For our review, we adopt the definition of environmental governance proposed by Lemos and Agrawal [14] who view environmental governance as ‘the set of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organizations through which political actors influence environmental actions and outcomes.’ Governance interventions, then, are efforts that seek to influence the relationship between existing social processes and governance arrangements by using new regulatory processes, mechanisms, and organizations. Information, incentives, and institutions, we suggest, are three fundamental means to design governance interventions related to natural resources, and thereby to influence outcomes of societal interest [14]. Figure 1 below represents a highly simplified representation of how governance interventions aim to change forest or other natural resource and environmental outcomes. It suggests that governance interventions seek to change business-as-usual outcomes (a) that would occur in the absence of governance interventions, or that new governance interventions change what older ones would have brought about (b).

In some interventions, those relying on forests or charged with management use information to shape outcomes, expecting that information will create and enhance awareness regarding the contributions of forests, and thereby change unsustainable behaviors [15,16]. For example, efforts to inform citizens about sustainably harvested timber, conflict-free forest products, or zero-deforestation palm oil, beef, or soybean all aim to educate and encourage consumers to shift their buying behavior in favor of more

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