Beyond committees: Hybrid forest governance for equity and sustainability

Pushpendra Rana [a,*], Ashwini Chhatre [b]

[a] Postdoctoral Research Scholar, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois, W-511, Turner Hall, 1102 S. Goodwin Ave., Urbana, IL 61801, USA
[b] Senior Research Fellow and Visiting Professor, 4105 AC4 Level 1, Indian School of Business, Hyderabad, India 500 032

ABSTRACT

The overwhelming emphasis on 'user committees' under decentralized forestry management in recent times may further reinforce the segmentation of forest governance space regarding management strategies. This segmentation has appeared in the form of artificial boundaries such as "state-managed," "community-managed, "private concessions" etc. Each of these governance modes, on its own, does not have all the strengths and capabilities needed for effective forest governance, especially public forests. These open access forests have multiple and overlapping uses, scale-determined production of goods and services, and high costs of excluding free-riding individuals. The paper shows that by selectively mixing useful elements from each of the modes of governance, we can achieve equity and sustainability in forest governance to a greater extent. These hybrid forms of governance mechanisms ensure accountable and transparent decision-making, include diverse and local perspectives, and co-produce innovative ideas to solve the complex and multi-scaler forestry problems. We demonstrate this through an experiment in the Indian Himalayas, where the unique strengths of each mode - state (authority, scientific expertise), community (local knowledge), elected governments (democratic space and deliberations) - were selectively combined to address the principal weaknesses of the existing policy for the distribution of subsidized timber trees from public forests to local households. The paper calls for unpacking hybridity in forest governance through greater conceptual exploration of relational spaces in which different actors interact and negotiate environmental aspects, and co-produce innovative solutions to complex, scaler and interdependent problems. The study is highly relevant in the context that majority of forests in the developing world are state-owned and managed and any introduction of elements of hybrid forms through state-mode can potentially improve social and ecological outcomes.

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1. Introduction

A decentralized approach to forest governance has great potential to deal with forest management problems in the context of the perceived failure of top-down state policies (Andersson and Ostrom, 2008; Lebel, 2006). The forestry sector has been experiencing some form of decentralization in >60 countries of the world, which reflects its importance in principle and practice for forest governance (WRI, 2003). The formation of 'user committees[1]' is a critical component of a decentralization strategy. These committees consist of local forest users and are organized for planning and carrying out specific project objectives. They are believed to amplify the voice and influence of forest users at the local level, thereby shaping better project outcomes (Manor, 2004).

In recent times, there has been a strong plea from the community organizations, scholars and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to transfer discretionary powers and mandates to user committees (Ostrom, 1990; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Johnson, 2006). We argue that the involvement of user committees is essential, but over-emphasis on this single-mode may further reinforce the segmentation, compartmentalization, and territoriality in forest management. The segmentation[2] in governance space in forestry has become quite evident in recent decades with an artificial separation between "community-managed," "state-managed," "private-concession" etc., with each of these separations implementing its unique set of management strategies to deal with natural resource management problems.

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: prana5@illinois.edu (P. Rana), ashwini_chhatre@isb.edu (A. Chhatre).

[1] These committees can have a varying number of members depending upon the activities assigned to them under the decentralized forest governance. Usually, a group of 15–20 forest users around a particular livelihood or project activity depicts a user committee. These committees are assigned certain jobs and responsibilities by the higher level of government to achieve benefits of local participation in forest governance for equitable and sustainable outcomes.

[2] Segmentation is a case where strategic counterpoints for political expediency have become paradigmatic categories, where 'community' has come to stand for much that is good and also for the opposite of what is supposed to be wrong with the state.

This segmentation has potential negative impacts, as no single mode (state, community or elected government) has all the strengths and capabilities needed for effective forest governance, especially in the case of public forests. Ostrom et al. (2007) called for going beyond panaceas - single-governance type that offers cure-all solutions - in dealing with environmental problems. They argued that resource-governance cannot be explained by a small set of simple models as they fail to account for differential preferences of users, distinct characteristics of resource and resource units, and variable management regimes (Ostrom et al. 2007; Meinzen-Dick, 2007; Scott, 1998). Moreover, large and heterogeneous groups fail to achieve collective action to solve difficult common-property resource problems mainly because of their failure to develop trust and sharing mechanisms due to divergent interests among users (Poteete and Ostrom, 2004; Ostrom, 1992a).

Under such conditions, we argue that hybrid forms of institutional arrangements that combine useful elements from each mode of governance in a selective manner can be more productive in achieving equitable and sustainable forest management. For example, a state can harness community strengths that may exist in some sub-groups in a large group through an overall agreement, which can then be monitored and enforced by state or local communities (Singleton and Taylor, 1992). Hybrid mode of governance is a form of collaboration between state agencies, communities and market actors that emerge in different types of mechanisms such as co-management, public-private partnership and private-social partnership (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). Hybrid modes of governance promote diverse and local perspectives, allow co-production of innovative ideas and ensure a system of checks and balances in forest governance (Sarkki, 2011; Armitage et al. 2012; Albrecht, 2013; Baviskar, 2001).

In spite of positive reviews, there are limited studies on how and what kind of hybrid forms work in practice. Neither, there are any practical examples available that can throw light on how and under what conditions hybridity may perform better than a single mode of governance. Using an illustration from Indian Himalayas, we argue that we need to take the prospect of hybridity - hybrid forms of governance - seriously and unpack the ways it may help in forest management. Specifically, we show how strengths from state bureaucracy, elected government and communities, can be combined in innovative ways in practice to solve the complex problem of distribution of subsidized timber trees from public forests to local households.

2. Segmentation in forest governance and hybrid-forms

2.1. Segmentation in forest governance initiatives

Segmentation in the forest governance started in full swing when state governments, on their own, began managing and controlling forests, excluding a large section of local communities in the process. The top-down approach was promoted by governments citing needs for revenue generation through scientific forestry, regulation of resource usage, sustenance of environmental goods and services, and for preservation and conservation of forests (Guha, 1989; Baviskar 2001; Grove, 1995; Armitage et al. 2012; Grainger, 1993). Presently, state governments own about 86% of the world's forests (FAO, 2005).

State institutions do have an important role to play especially at higher spatial scales of resource governance as they have more resources and authority to plan, coordinate and implement policies across large populations and areas (Meinzen-Dick, 2007). Moreover, in the presence of higher socio-cultural and economic heterogeneity, state institutions can mediate and enforce rules to ensure an equitable and sustainable flow of governance outcomes (Poteete and Ostrom, 2004; Meinzen-Dick, 2007).

In recent decades, user committees[3] are perceived by donors, policy makers, and NGOs as an alternative to the state mode of governance.

Several scholars believe that user committees promote responsible decision making, involve people and localities that are left behind in management and communicate the societal needs and preferences adequately to the state officials (Ostrom, 1990; Aoki, 2001; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Johnson, 2006). Non-state actors such as NGOs and community organizations have incessantly called for empowering user committees and entrust them with real powers. For example, in Joint Forest Management in India, many scholars and NGOs pressurized the forest department to remove forest guard from the position of member secretary of the group. They argued that these committees have to depend on local forest guard for making plans and for the inflow of funds that deprive them of their discretion and ability to take independent decisions (Mohanty, 2004; Sarin, 2001).

All the above arguments against the involvement of bureaucracy in community management look good and convincing. However, we argue that an exclusive focus on user committees has a danger of expediting the process of segmentation in the forest management, which may lead to inequitable and unsustainable management outcomes.

2.2. Inability of single constituency to achieve effective forest governance

Public forests have characteristics that make their governance difficult and complex. First, these forests are open-access, subtractable like private goods, and costs associated with excluding free-riders are quite high (Hardin, 1968). Larger group size, presence of heterogeneity, and different user and resource characteristics considerably impact the outcomes of community-based institutions (Poteete and Ostrom, 2004; Ostrom, 1992a). Second, forests are complex natural systems where various socio-ecological processes determine goods and services at multiple scales. For example, soil and water conservation activities require management at the level of watershed instead of a single unit of a forest. Third, the public forests involve overlapping interests with trade-offs between different types of resource usages that further complicate the sustainable use and extraction of forest resources (Arnold and Bird, 1999; Chhatre and Agrawal, 2009).

Scholars have stated clearly that no single mode of governance or actor can solve problems that involve multiple dimensions, scales and interdependencies (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). For example, many scholars criticize state management of forests due to its overwhelming stress on maximizing revenues through production forestry. Such management largely ignores local knowledge and participation of people and also, reflects a poor understanding of tropical ecology. The ill effects appeared in the form of large-scale degradation of forest and water resources, reduction of biodiversity with the overwhelming spread of tree monocultures with a loss of forest-based livelihoods (Baviskar, 2001; Guha, 1989, Gadgil and Guha, 1995). Local elected governments are also highly prone to elite capture and lack real power and independent decision-making (Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Ribot, 2003). Moreover, these governments have little success in offering a platform for holistic environmental planning since these residency-based units of planning are inadequate for creating resource-based user groups, which may require use and management of resources extending beyond the boundaries of these governments (Véron, 2001). Similarly, in spite of considerable hype around user committees, its actual outcomes around the world have been mixed (Andersson and Ostrom, 2008; Pacheco, 2007; Blair, 2000). These committees are highly prone to elite-capture, with influential individuals or groups disproportionately benefit from such management (Platteau, 2004; Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Manor, 2004). Elites predominantly dominate the leadership positions of these committees and distort the aggregation of real needs and preferences of the communities and their communication to officials (Ban and Rao, 2009). On the other hand, poor mostly fail in shaping the discourses and decisions related to forests and other resources on which they depend for their livelihoods (Medina et al., 2009).

Bowler et al. (2010) found a lack of evidence on whether community-based forest management (CFM) benefits biodiversity conservation

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[3] Communities, as per an estimate, govern about 200 million hectares of forests in addition to what they managed in the 1980s (Agrawal et al. 2008; White and Martin, 2002)