



How institutions and beliefs affect environmental discourse: Evidence from an eight-country survey on REDD +



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the adoption of discourses on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) across different national contexts. It draws on institutional theories to develop and test a number of hypotheses on the role of shared beliefs and politico-economic institutions in determining the discursive choices of policy actors. The results show that win-win ecological modernization discourse, embraced by powerful government agencies and international actors, dominates national REDD+ policy arenas. This discourse is challenged primarily by a minority reformist civic environmentalist discourse put forward primarily by domestic NGOs. We find evidence that countries with a less democratic political system and large-scale primary sector investments facilitate the adoption of reconciliatory ecological modernization discourse, which may not directly challenge the drivers of deforestation. Policy actors who believe in and are engaged in market-based approaches to REDD+ are much more likely to adopt ecological modernization discourses, compared to policy actors who work on community development and livelihoods issues.

1. Introduction

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) was first proposed in 2005 as a way to link anti-deforestation and climate change mitigation efforts. While there have been numerous approaches to this basic idea, REDD+ can generally be seen as a financial mechanism aimed at directing results-based payments to areas undertaking forestry projects that reduce carbon emissions, particularly where these areas were previously subject to significant deforestation (Campbell, 2009).

Studies analysing REDD+ have often asked whether the initiative has the potential to spark transformative policy changes to improve forest protection in tropical forest countries (Brockhaus and Angelsen, 2012). A number of researchers studying REDD+ have investigated the formation of discourse coalitions with sufficient power to change business-as-usual, or, more broadly, status-quo, policies (den Besten et al., 2014; Di Gregorio et al., 2015; Vijge et al., 2016).

What we know less about, however, is how discursive practices are constrained and enabled by broader social contexts (Foucault, 1972).

To address this gap, this paper investigates how institutions and belief systems affect environmental discourses on REDD+. Discourses about appropriate policy responses to environmental problems often form the backdrop for mobilization and activism around environmental concerns (Hajer, 1995). The studies cited in the previous paragraph, for example, document an absence of dominant reformist or radical discourse coalitions that could generate transformative, or fundamental, change in forest governance, but, because of limited attention to the interaction between broader structures and specific discourses on REDD+, we lack a systematic account of why such frames fail to emerge or spread widely. We argue that developing such an account requires a multilevel approach that integrates institutional path dependence at the national level and belief systems at the organizational level to explain patterns in the adoption of three broader environmental governance discourses (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Bäckstrand and Löwbrand, 2006; Di Gregorio, 2012; Schmidt, 2008). These broader discourses, or meta-discourses, are the discourses of ecological modernization, civic environmentalism and green governmentality described by Bäckstrand and Löwbrand (2006).

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Belief systems, discourses, and institutions, often have been used in isolation as alternative explanations in accounts of policy change (Schmidt, 2008). However, these mechanisms are complementary and sometimes overlap (Bulkeley, 2000; Winkel et al., 2011). In formulating a discursive response to novel policy initiatives, such as REDD+, organizations draw on prevalent broad and overarching environmental meta-discourses (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006), selecting appropriate positions based on a combination of their own values and beliefs (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and the broader institutional context (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Schmidt, 2008).

To test these claims, we assess whether political institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; North et al., 2009), combined with shared beliefs, help predict organizations' adoption of meta-discourses. More specifically we investigate: (1) whether and to what extent organizations rely on the three meta-discourses in forming micro-discourses on REDD+; (2) whether and how political institutions and politico-economic conditions affect organizations' discursive orientation; and (3) how shared beliefs systems affect organizations' discursive orientation.

We use a unique dataset based on a survey conducted with policy actors engaged in the national REDD+ policy domain in eight countries (Brazil, Cameroon, Indonesia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Tanzania, and Vietnam), carried out between 2010 and 2013 as part of the Global Comparative Study on REDD+ (GCS-REDD) (Brockhaus and Di Gregorio, 2012). Our work builds on recent comparative analysis on climate change and forest mitigation that goes beyond case-study research to integrate evidence from multiple countries (Di Gregorio et al., 2015; Gallemlere and Munroe, 2013; Gupta et al., 2013; Korhonen-Kurki et al., 2014; Minang et al., 2014; Vijge et al., 2016). The paper develops a theoretical framework that uses cognitive and institutional factors to explain patterns of adoption of environmental meta-discourses. Further, the research provides new evidence about national-level REDD+ discursive practices, in the countries implementing these policies.

We begin by presenting our theoretical framework, explaining how it applies to climate change and forests policy processes and deriving hypotheses connecting institutions and beliefs to discursive practices. This is followed by a discussion of our data collection and analytical methods. Utilizing survey responses we then model clusters of opinion statements with latent class regression to simultaneously identify meta-discourses representing different discursive orientations (or clusters) that subsume similar positions on REDD+ (micro-discourses). The model allows us to simultaneously assess the extent to which broad national-level institutions, and organizational beliefs explain the distribution of these meta-discourses across our eight REDD+ countries. We close by considering the implications of our findings for REDD+ policy and policy studies more broadly.

2. Theoretical framework

We draw on different neo-institutional traditions, from (boundedly) rational choice, to sociological and discursive institutionalism, to help us analyse the determinants and distribution of environmental meta-discourses in the climate and forests policy domain (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006; Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Schmidt, 2008). We begin with New Institutional Economics, which suggests institutional path dependence is a key obstacle to policy change (North, 1990; Peters et al., 2005). On this account, institutions, understood as the “rules of the game” (North, 1990: 4), facilitate cooperation among boundedly rational individuals and are changed or maintained as a result of the relative bargaining power of different social groups (Williamson, 1975). More recent work in this tradition adds that values and beliefs also influence boundedly rational beings, in particular in policy domains where uncertainty is high (North, 2005). Constructivist institutional theories go further, arguing that institutions are in fact produced by discourses (Hajer, 1995). In other words, on the constructivist account,

institutions might be altered not only due to changes in bargaining power among actors, but also due to changes in meanings and beliefs. Because constructivist discursive approaches risk blurring action and structure, many studies address two-way interactions between discourse and institutions and suggest that analytically policy change should be assessed from both ideational and institutional perspectives (Hay, 2008; Phillips et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2008, 2010).

While exhibiting considerable differences, these accounts all suggest policy transformations are a product of complex interactions between path-dependent institutions; agents wishing to utilize, co-opt, or transform existing institutional conditions; and discursive practices adopted in the advocacy process itself (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Brockhaus and Angelsen, 2012). While these reciprocal connections are complex, the processes in question change at different rates (Padgett and Powell, 2012, 2–3), providing an opportunity for analytic leverage. Our primary process of interest – policy actors' adoption of a discursive orientation vis-à-vis REDD+ – takes place at the organizational level. From the perspective of organizational leaders, it is always necessary to adapt as political circumstances and agendas change. Organizational leaders rarely successfully innovate their own discourses separate from broader debates on environmental policy (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006). Instead, meta-discourses frame audiences' interpretations of forest and climate issues, such that truly novel interventions may be misunderstood, actively repressed, or simply ignored (Foucault, 1972). While such broad discursive frames might not be entirely consonant with organizations' values and beliefs, as long as they are somewhat compatible, there is an incentive to adopt such discourses in order to build coalitions for advocacy or implementation (Di Gregorio, 2012). The relative stability of meta-discourses at a global scale, in the short run, suggests that we should observe organizations' positions on REDD+ (micro-discourses) to cluster around the three meta-discourses that have emerged from countless discursive acts over time.

REDD+ discursive practices are informed by actors' values and beliefs (Bulkeley, 2000; Di Gregorio, 2012). While social learning might be expected to change beliefs at the organizational level over time, in the short term we can consider deep core beliefs – the “broadest and most stable among the beliefs” and policy core beliefs – the normative commitments and understanding of causal linkages in a given policy subsystem – to be relatively fixed (Weible et al., 2009: 122). Policy core beliefs include priorities such as the importance of economic growth versus environmental protection, the appropriate division of authority between government and markets, and core value priorities of a subsystems such as the need to address inequalities and poverty or to facilitate growth in order to achieve sustainability (Sabatier, 1997). Secondary policy beliefs, such as deciding what position to take with regard to a novel policy issue like REDD+, tend to have a more rapid temporal pace as they are informed by more immediate strategic concerns as new issues arise on the organization's agenda (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

Organizational leaders' discursive positions and beliefs are also necessarily constrained by institutional conditions (Arts and Buizer, 2009), including political institutional conditions at the national level, such as the degree of democratic control of the polity, and the broader political economic context, including factors like the political dominance of specific economic sectors in society. While over the long term dominant organizations' discursive practices may become institutionalized (Hajer, 1995), these broad institutional factors may be taken as relatively fixed in the short term (North, 1990). That is to say, while there is certainly a complex range of factors affecting the adoption of meta-discourses, we can get leverage on the role of at least some of those factors, including political institutions and politico-economic conditions, and policy core beliefs, which are unlikely to be endogenous in the short term. Fig. 1 summarizes the main elements of our model.

Next, we discuss the each elements in more detail. First we discuss the three meta-discourses, and then the institutional and the belief-

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