



Guinea pig or pioneer: Translating global environmental objectives through to local actions in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia's REDD+ pilot province



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 April 2016

Received in revised form 14 November 2016

Accepted 4 December 2016

Available online 22 December 2016

Keywords:

REDD

Environmental governance

Multi-level governance

Translation

Actor-Network Theory

Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Many difficulties have arisen from top-down approaches to the design and implementation of global environmental initiatives. The concept of translation and other analytical features of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can offer a way of conceptualising these difficulties and their practical effects. By translation, we refer to what happens in-between the formulation of international goals and the results of implementation, and more specifically, relations and negotiations within this broader process. We examine several aspects of translation in the case of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), a prominent global environmental initiative. Using an ethnographic approach, we explore local responses in Central Kalimantan province, Indonesia, to REDD+ ideas and goals that originate at international and national levels. Following selection in 2010 as the official REDD+ pilot province, Central Kalimantan became a site for the convergence of actors and projects with varied sources of funding. The study identifies a central tension that emerged between an initial vision of Central Kalimantan as a pioneer, and local concerns about being used as an experimental subject or 'guinea pig' for the testing of externally designed schemes. Results show that greater flexibility in the design of programs and initiatives is needed, to provide space for local inputs. Implementation should pay attention to how local actors are included in planning processes that inform decision-making at higher jurisdictional levels. To bring about intended changes in land use, programs like REDD+ need to extend beyond a focus on short-term projects and targets, to instead emphasise long-term investments and forms of collective action that support learning.

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1. Introduction

Practical outcomes from the implementation of global environmental initiatives vary considerably and at times thinly resemble the original goals and plans (Carrier and West, 2009). The concept of translation, by which we refer here to what happens in-between the formulation of international goals and the results of implementation, is useful for analysing these differences.

Empirical studies of such initiatives recognise translation as a process of multiple dimensions, events, and activities involving a range of actors with diverse goals and varied influence over decision-making (e.g. Jansen, 2008; Newell, 2008; Pasgaard, 2015). These studies also highlight difficulties arising from top-down approaches that neglect local particularities at the design stage (Jansen, 2008; van Helden, 2009). The concept of translation and other analytical features of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can offer a way of conceptualising these difficulties and their practical effects (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987, 2005; Law, 1992). According to ANT, to translate is, among other things, to modify or change a meaning or goal from an original or earlier source (Law, 1999). This is neither good nor bad, but a consequence of negotiations and compromises required for working with, and through, others. A more detailed

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look at translation using ANT can help inform policymaking by teasing out issues of local variability and the details of relations and negotiations within the translation process.

We explore these details in the case of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), a prominent global environmental initiative under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). REDD+ aims to encourage multiple sources of investment and deliver benefits for forests and climate through payments for environmental services in developing countries (Angelsen and McNeill, 2012; see also, Wunder, 2005). While the top-down nature of REDD+ could potentially reverse forest decentralisation trends in developing countries (Agrawal et al., 2011; Angelsen et al., 2009; Phelps et al., 2010), REDD+ has shifted from an early focus on national strategies and stand-alone projects towards far more complicated governance arrangements (Korhonen-Kurki et al., 2012; Peel et al., 2012; Skutsch and Van Laake, 2008; Sunderlin et al., 2015). These shifts can partly be viewed as an effect of translation, and a recent study describes REDD+ as ‘a heterogeneous regime of disjointed practices’:

Rather than see REDD+ as a top-down process involving hierarchically nested governance arrangements, we see it as constituted by a complex interplay of actors and practices across scales. While REDD+ may provide opportunities for international actors to reshape forest governance, it also affords space for national and subnational actors to realise their own interests. (McGregor et al., 2015, p. 140)

We are similarly concerned with how subnational and local actors have room to manoeuvre in navigating this space (Bebbington, 2000). So far, their specific roles and contributions within wider REDD+ processes, and their influence on decision-making at higher levels, are relatively underexplored in empirical studies on REDD+ (eg. Gallemore et al., 2014; Howell, 2014, 2015; McGregor et al., 2015; Myers et al., 2016; Rantala et al., 2014; Ravikumar et al., 2015). Also, despite an extensive literature on ANT, few studies directly apply the concept of translation from ANT to study REDD+ (with the exception of Pasgaard, 2015) and other topics in environmental governance (see also, Holifield, 2009; Horowitz, 2012; Rutland and Aylett, 2008). Addressing this gap, we ask, how do different actors understand and interpret REDD+ ideas and goals, and each other, as they seek to influence subnational processes and practical outcomes on the ground? Actors refer here to foreign donors, international agencies, different parts and levels of government and civil society, and communities in villages where projects are implemented, among others interested or directly involved in REDD+. We focus on Central Kalimantan province as a key site for REDD+ translation in Indonesia, following its selection as the official REDD+ pilot province in 2010. This province provides a particularly rich case study of difficulties arising from top-down approaches, as relevant to future REDD+ practice and environmental governance more generally.

2. Background

2.1. In-between plans and practical effects: the ‘problem’ of translation

The problem of translation in environmental governance scholarship is seldom explicitly defined (eg. Jansen, 2008; Newell, 2008), and many studies engage with similar issues and themes without referring to ‘translation’. A variety of theoretical perspectives are used. Political ecology approaches examine the specific contexts and power relations among the actors involved in negotiations (eg. McGregor et al., 2015; Newell, 2008; Newell and Bumpus, 2012). Network analysis approaches study the actors and their relations within wider policy development processes

(Gallemore et al., 2014; Moeliono et al., 2013; Reinecke et al., 2014). Both discourse analysis (den Besten et al., 2014; Di Gregorio, 2015; Vijge, 2015; Vijge et al., 2016), and the concept of ‘frames’ (Jansen, 2008; see also, Leach et al., 2010), explore what gets prioritised, or excluded from policy debates. Another approach is ‘boundary work’, which examines how actors with different worldviews and competencies relate to each other in negotiations (Clark et al., 2016; Leimona et al., 2015; see also, Wæraas and Nielsen, 2015). These studies identify issues of local variability, participation, and accountability within multi-level environmental governance situations. Building on these studies, there are advantages in using the concept of translation from ANT for exploring different aspects of the translation process in concrete detail (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986, 1987; Law, 1984).

Recent comparative studies on REDD+ point to considerable variation in national strategies and disparities in the practical effects and achievements of project implementation (Dunlop and Corbera, 2016; Fischer et al., 2016; Sunderlin et al., 2015). Although REDD+ debates encompass broad-ranging concerns (eg. poverty reduction and rights), there is less overall focus on the underlying causes and drivers of deforestation (Di Gregorio, 2015). Similar variability is evident in earlier Payment for Environmental Services (PES) initiatives with comparable logic and aims. For example, in the case of Mexico’s national PES program, the market-based ideals preferred by foreign donors over time were merged with national government concerns for poverty alleviation and later implemented through community forestry initiatives (Shapiro-Garza, 2013), while in Nicaragua a less strongly state-articulated PES approach evolved (Van Hecken et al., 2015). Comparative studies on decentralisation reforms in developing countries also reveal locally variable results within complex negotiations of power and access to resources (Batterbury and Fernando, 2006; Ribot et al., 2006). These empirical findings point to a key aspect of the translation problem—namely, that the principles or model being applied do not exist in practice: ‘the actors who implement, obstruct or manipulate it are central to [its] construction’ (Larson and Lewis-Mendoza, 2012). When policy and economic reform is viewed as a technical problem whose practical outcomes can be understood by analysing the model itself, this can obscure the dimensions of power and politics that are contextual to the model’s construction, which require nuanced interpretations (Carrier and West, 2009).

Although multiple actors engage with such processes, they do not participate in equal ways (Sikor, 2013). Also, it is important to be mindful not only of what counts as ‘local’ on the side of implementation, but who defines or counts this, and how and why, with what assumptions, and what practical effects (Holmgren, 2013; Lane and Morrison, 2006; Li, 2002). For example, how ‘community’ is defined can ignore issues of inequality and diversity in the way that local populations and entities are embedded in wider contexts (Ojha et al., 2016). Empirical studies on REDD+ show how local actors can experience limitations in negotiating their interests, and how conflicts among actors, including competition within the state, and among NGOs, can be difficult to resolve (Beymer-Farris and Bassett, 2012; Howell, 2015; Mulyani and Jepson, 2015; Pasgaard, 2015; Wilson Rowe, 2015). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between actor roles, and how different actors relate to each other within a broad process of social change and decentralised natural resources governance, as we explore in the context of Indonesia (Bebbington et al., 2006; Hadiz and Robison, 2013; McCarthy, 2004; Palmer and Engel, 2007; Resosudarmo, 2004).

Effective, democratic participation in decision-making can help to improve REDD+ legitimacy and social outcomes (Agrawal et al., 2011; Chhatre et al., 2012). However, the quality of participation partly depends on the broad influence of politics, and the relative

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