Representation without accountability in forestry: experiences from the Social Responsibility Agreement in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Emerging forest policy initiatives aim to strengthen community engagement in forest governance by implementing interventions through democratic institutions. In Ghana, the Social Responsibility Agreement (SRA) is a forest management scheme that entails devolution of decision-making powers on benefit sharing from commercial logging to local authorities to represent local interest. This paper explores how democratic representation is manifested under the choice of local leaders in the context of the SRA by focusing on: choice of local leaders, responsiveness (how represented and desired interests compare), and accountability (feedback and sanction mechanisms).
A joint representative body comprised of the chief and the customary structure, and the elected local government leaders represented the communities. The authority of the customary structure is reinforced by cultural and historical settings; enabling chiefs to capture decision making powers and dominate activities in the representation processes. Devoid of popular consultation, the leaders largely assume local priorities relying mainly on their nearness to the local population. To some extent, and for multiple reasons, the concluded SRAs under this study succeeded in providing social amenities to the people but due to accountability failures, the scheme was weak in engaging the local population in the negotiation of benefits from commercial forest exploitation. The question remains open as to whether greater accountability – that is, more-democratic representation – would produce greater responsiveness and a more efficient and equitable match between what leaders have to offer and the services people ultimately receive.

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1. Introduction

Predominantly, emerging policy initiatives in tropical forestry propose that to ensure effective management of the world's forest resources, it is imperative for forest management schemes to consider the input of local communities as a fundamental requirement (Brown et al., 2002; Macqueen, 2011). Besides the proximity argument that the nearness of rural population to the resource makes them the best placed to regulate local drivers of deforestation and forest degradation (Cronkleton et al., 2011; Macqueen, 2011), the main thrust of proponents' argument is that, commercial forestry has failed to direct benefits to rural populations and enhance forest conditions thus necessitating a new paradigm of forest governance which centers on rural people's participation in sharing forest benefits (Rebugio et al., 2010). Beginning from the late 1980s, governments particularly those in Africa, Asia and Southern America, have attempted to promote local representation and democratization by devolving aspects of forest management powers to locally accountable local authorities (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999;

Bossyut, 2013). These policies are based on the premise that by implementing interventions through locally accountable local leaders, public affairs get closer and become more transparent to local people (Manor, 1999), which promotes more local engagement in implementation (Ribot and Larson, 2005). Mostly, elected local government institutions are promoted as appropriate for advancing these aims, and in practice, much of these transfers are made to customary authorities (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999; Romeo, 1996). The paper argues that neither elected local government institutions nor customary authorities can be considered to be inherently democratic.

In Ghana, the Social Responsibility Agreement (SRA) is a collaborative forest management scheme that entails devolution of decision-making powers to local authorities to represent the interest of local population in benefit sharing. The SRA is a social benefit scheme established to commit timber contractors to provide social amenities to communities within timber concession areas (TRMA, Act 547: s3e). Timber harvesting rights are spelled out in a contractual arrangement which is awarded through a competitive bidding process: 'No person shall harvest timber from any land… unless he holds timber rights in the form of a Timber Utilization Contract entered into in respect of the area of land concerned' (TRMA, Act 547: s1). The winner of the bid is required

by law to satisfy the requirement of the SRA by undertaking to spend 5% of the value of stumpage fee to provide social amenities to communities and inhabitants of the timber utilization areas (L.I 1721: s13. 12b). The Social Responsibility Agreement has been implemented in Ghana over a decade and many Agreements have been negotiated. The evidence is that both customary and elected local government authorities have been involved as representatives of communities (Ayine, 2008; Marfo, 2001, 2004). By analyzing two concluded cases, the paper responds to the following questions. Which local authorities were recognized by project officials and the local population to negotiate the SRA on behalf of the people and why? To what extent did the representatives respond and account (or were sanctioned) in the SRA negotiation process? To what extent did the locals engage with authorities receiving negotiation powers? To what extent were the local people able to influence SRA decisions?

The choice and recognition framework (Ribot et al., 2008) is employed as the analytic tool to examine the choice of local leaders serving as interlocutors of decision-making powers at the local arena, and the effect of the select authorities on responsive and accountable representation, and empowered citizenship. Choice refers to decisions made by central authorities and higher-level agencies as to which institutions at the local arena they should work with, and local authorities become recognized when they receive powers to function. Democratic representation occurs when recognized leaders are responsive to the needs of their people and are accountable to them (Manin et al., 1999; Ribot et al., 2008). Responsive leaders articulate the interests of their people (Ribot, 2004), and accountability implies constituents have the ability to sanction their leaders in response to their actions (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Citizenship is the ability to be politically engaged and shape the fate of the public polity in which one is involved (Ribot, 2011).

Four main arguments with respect to the choice of local leaders and the effect on democratic representation and empowered citizenship are advanced by this paper. One, on the basis of belief in tradition (customary practice) and already existing representative structures, the SRA process recognized both the elected local government and customary authorities to represent the interest of the people in the negotiation process. Two, in the absence of popular consultation, representatives learned local priorities through everyday interactions with the people. The evidence suggests that to some extent, the expressed interests of community members were reflected in the represented interests. Three, the findings suggest that accountability was weak. Only the elite and few privileged people had knowledge about the negotiated agreements, and there was no indication that the people made efforts to demand leaders to justify their actions. The paper argues that the cases depicted responsive representation to some extent despite that the SRA was weak in promoting accountable representation. Four, factors including inadequate knowledge of the SRA processes and local rights, and perception that the SRA package provides little incentive for engagement discouraged local participation and weakened the capacity of the people to influence the SRA decisions.

The next section describes the analytical framework for the study. This is followed by a description of the research context with a description of the policy on collaborative forest management in Ghana and the role of the Social Responsibility Agreement. Then, the research location and methodology is presented followed by the results section in which the research questions are addressed. The article is completed with a discussion of these results and reflection on their significance.

2. Analytical framework

The paper employs the choice and recognition framework (Ribot et al., 2008) as the analytic tool to examine the choice of local leaders receiving decision-making powers at the local arena, and the effect of the select authorities on responsive and accountable representation, and empowered citizenship. Choice refers to decisions made by central

governments and higher-level agencies as to which authorities or institutions at the local arena they should work with and therefore transfer power or offer support (Ribot et al., 2008). A range of local authorities including elected leaders, customary leaders, NGOs, churches, and private individuals could be the target of the choice. Targeted authorities become recognized when they receive powers to function. Power refers to resources and domains of decision-making over which citizens can interact and attempt to influence public decisions (Ribot et al., 2008). It is around meaningful (relevant) discretionary powers that recognized authorities are able to represent the people responsively and inspire the people to engage as citizens (Ribot and Larson, 2005; Ribot et al., 2008). To be discretionary, the transferred powers should be free from external or central control (Ribot and Larson, 2005; Ribot et al., 2008). The main concept in discretion is choice, so an individual with discretionary power should have the freedom to select between several options when need be (Mensah, 1998).

Representation as a concept has received much scholarly attention (Eulau and Karps, 1977; Pitkin, 1967; Ribot, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2002; Wellstead et al., 2003). Pitkin (1967) describes four distinct but interconnected dimensions of representation, arguing that for individuals (or institutions) to be representative, they must achieve some minimum on all the dimensions of representation: formal; descriptive; substantive and symbolic representation. Formal representation denotes the institutional rules and procedures through which representatives are chosen. The rules and procedures entail sanction mechanisms designed to ensure that representatives conform to the desires of the represented. Descriptive representation incorporates functional and social representation which looks into occupational correspondence and social characteristics between the representatives and the represented (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2002). Substantive representation denotes the resemblance between the actions of the representatives and the interest of the represented. Symbolic representation depicts the effective representation of the feelings of the represented. It illustrates the power of the representatives to invoke feelings in the represented. Together the four dimensions constitute a coherent whole with strong causal relations existing among them, but many studies treat the different dimensions as alternative and valid terms (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2002).

Eulau and Karps (1977) argue that in order to make Pitkin' (1967) approach to representation useful, the concept should be perceived as a compositional phenomenon since representation does not refer to one particular target of political activity but to several targets. The multidimensional nature of representation complicates the concept, it is possible for a representative to be responsive to constituents with respect to constituents' policy needs and at the same time being unresponsive to their substantive needs. Therefore, it is important to know the focus of representation under a given context, because 'even if attention is given only to policy responsiveness, research cannot simply neglect some of the classical questions of representational theory, such as the issue of representing the district's will as against its interest, or the issue of the focus of representation' (Eulau and Karps, 1977: 248). In representing a constituency, representatives might perceive a geographic area such as a district, a functional grouping such as ethnic group, or individual persons as foci for the representation process, and therefore the relationship between the compositional nature of representation and the focus of representation complicates the concept (Eulau and Karps, 1977).

In current times, the focus on the substantive interest of constituents described earlier by Pitkin (1967) is gaining more weight. Wellstead et al. (2003) advise that, the focus of representation should be on the substantive needs of constituents. They argue against descriptive representation with the view that resemblances in the socio-economic characteristics between representatives and constituents do not necessarily enhance representative-constituent relation. They propose that the focus of representation should be on the articulation of constituents' substantive needs, asserting there should be a 'shift of emphasis from