



Inter-sectoral determinants of forest policy: the power of deforesting actors in post-2012 Brazil[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Typically, forest policy-analysis focuses on the forest industry; however, this article argues that analysis should take into consideration non-forest economic-political sectors, creating an inter-sectoral analysis of pathways. An analysis of Brazil's recent forest governance changes allows to outline the political dynamics, thrust and ideas that most influence the use of forests in a political economy whose overall developmental and environmental policies are defined primarily by agribusiness. The Brazilian Congress passed a New Forest Code in 2012, greatly relaxing the previous Code from 1965. The law-changing project was an illustration of the tension between the large landholders-lobby, and the new sustainability demands of various sorts of "green economy" proponents. The recent framing of forests by the agribusiness lobby and the Minister of Agriculture are assessed to explain why and how the understanding and pathway of sustainability in relation to forest and other land uses has changed since 2012. Studies on the major impacts of the post-2012 forest laws are also reviewed. A novel approach is taken, uniting an analysis of large-scale agriculture, tree plantation companies, and socio-environmentalists. It is shown how the New Forest Code and other measures that have brought together the agricultural and forestry frontiers, policies and vocabularies in Brazil have made their united analysis necessary. Brazil provides an important case to study how some parts of the "brown economy" and "green capitalism" pathways are supporting each other in practice, and how the forest industry has become a key actor in this alliance, to the detriment of "socio-environmentalism".

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1. Introduction

Typically, forest policy-analysis focuses on the forest industry; however, this article argues that it is essential to look at the most powerful groups of land users in order to understand how forest policies actually unfold. I analyze Brazil's recent forest governance changes. The focus on Brazil allows me to outline the political dynamics, thrust and ideas that most influence the use of forests in a political economy whose overall developmental and environmental policies are defined primarily by agribusiness. This approach responds to demands within forestry research to include non-forest sectors in the analysis of forest futures (e.g. [Beland Lindahl and Westholm, 2011](#)). It also responds to the argument made in the STEPS' Pathways approach that we need to analyze critically alternative understandings of sustainability ([Scoones, 2015](#)).

The Pathways approach treats sustainability and development as essentially political processes that can be analyzed as tensions, or struggles, between competing pathways to sustainability ([Leach et al., 2010: 157](#)). The STEPS Pathways approach ([Leach et al., 2010](#)) offers a stepwise

approach to explore different Pathways. How and what problems are framed, and by whom, are key questions. The current article has two goals: 1) to examine how sustainability is framed by the key actors within the dominant forest use policy in post-2012 Brazil; and 2) to discuss some of the impacts of the different pathways to Sustainability,¹ as assessed by the academic literature. I add to the Pathways-approach by suggesting that inter-sectoral, or inter-capitalist, analysis of power relations in political economy is essential if we are to understand how truly unsustainable practices – such as illegal deforestation – are able to expand and become the dominant pathway (of land and forest use policy).

In Brazil, forests have traditionally been relegated to an inferior position in economic decision-making ([Miller, 2007](#); [Puppim de Oliveira, 2008](#)). In recent years, this process has continued and even gained a greater hold in the form of expanding large-scale agriculture, mining, energy, and infrastructural projects ([Fearnside, 2008](#)) – deregulating the Forest Code in 2012 being a defining point in this process ([Ferreira et al., 2014](#)). I argue that this development is driven by an alliance of actors that is promoting what I call a "brown economy". This pathway is

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¹ [Leach et al. \(2007: 18\)](#) differentiate Sustainability (with a capital S) from sustainability as "the capability of maintaining specified values of human wellbeing, social equity and environmental quality over indefinite periods of time".

currently suppressing alternative pathways promoted by local forest-dependent groups.

In order to gain support for reducing forest protection, argue Soares-Filho et al. (2014: 364), the group that I call the brown economy proponents (principally the agribusiness lobby), started their problem formulation by claiming that “forest restoration conflicts with agricultural production” (a narrative which Soares-Filho et al., 2014 and Oliveira and Hecht, 2016, among others, argue to be unfounded). This framing of the existing challenges in forest policy and the needs for change was successful – and can thus be considered dominant – as the Forest Code was relaxed. According to many academic studies, the representation of forest cover maintenance as a huge burden on agricultural producers was a key to changing the Forest Code and to pursuing other measures supporting agribusiness.²

I also examine a pathway that I call “green capitalism”, which pursues sustainability primarily via a deeper commoditization and monetization of “natural resources”, for example by internalizing the externalities of Economics as “environmental services” (see Moore, 2015; Baletti, 2014). Brazil provides an important case to study how some parts of the “brown economy” and “green capitalism” pathways are supporting each other in practice, and how the forest industry has become a key actor in this alliance. In practice this is expressed through tree plantations becoming more valuable and replacing natural forests. Conversion from primary or secondary natural forests to tree plantation is a topic seldom addressed in the study of (Brazilian) forest policy. Scholars studying these phenomena typically analyze and write about them as disparate and non-related issues. However, current political and land use dynamics create stronger links between these sectors.

2. Theoretical framework and methods

Herein, I use an analytical framework drawing on frame analysis (Perri 6, 2005; Schön and Rein, 1994; Beland Lindahl, 2008) and the STEPS Pathways approach (Leach et al., 2010). Pathways to sustainability can be briefly defined as possible trajectories for knowledge, interventions and change that prioritize different goals, values and functions (Leach et al., 2010). According to Leach et al. (2010), issues and problems can be framed in diverse ways by different actors. Frames operate on two levels: a) perception – how we see the world, and b) physical action bias which guides, or delimits, physical action with material consequences (see Perri 6, 2005).

Frames are not free-floating. Hence, the content of any framing ought to be interpreted in its historical and political context. Consequently, the first part of the analysis (Section 3), focuses on the historical roots and key political dynamics of Brazilian forest-use. This is followed by a brief exploration of the range of actors and pathways that figure in the Brazilian forest policy/land use debate (Section 4). Based on this exploration, a dominant pathway is identified and explored further in Section 5. The analysis in Section 5 is divided into assessing: a) problem formulation (the issues that are mentioned as future challenges to sustainability in the policy); b) policy goals; c) the framing of implementation procedures; and d) outcomes (how are these described in the policy documents).

The research is primarily based on document analysis and academic literature. The most obvious material for a study of Brazilian forest policy is the New Forest Code (Federal Law 12.727, 2012), and the subsequent Provisory Measures, decrees and actions at federal and state levels that have exemplified and operationalized it. I also consider the public discourses of key forest use actors, focusing on the forest-use narratives of the Minister of Agriculture Kátia Abreu. The reason for this choice of data is that the narratives of these key individuals can reveal

how forests are being framed in contemporary Brazil by some of the people in public office with most power in defining land use policies. Op-ed articles, public speeches, and other not so obvious data sources in Portuguese are used to bring to light the underlying understanding of forests by the key actors.³

The document analysis is guided by the framework presented in Fig. 1 of Beland Lindahl et al. (2015). The analysis is supplemented by experiences gained through participant observation and field research since 2003 on the causes of forest cover changes and the expansion of forestry, mining, energy projects and agriculture in several parts of Brazil. The participant observation was conducted, for example, among Amazonian traditional cultural groups and indigenous people and their movements and associations, and within landless movements and forestry, agribusiness and mining companies operating in Brazil. These field research experiences were essential in developing the heuristic tools (brown economy, green capitalism, socio-environmentalism) that help in capturing the peculiarities of the Brazilian context, and provide information about power relations that goes beyond what would be possible solely through document analysis.

3. Brazil's contemporary forest policy context

Brazil has a globally unique forest cover (Soares-Filho et al., 2014). It also has a dominant government-industry alliance with big ambitions to be, for example: the world's top producer of food, feed, fiber and fuel from soybean (Oliveira, 2016), sugarcane (McKay et al., 2015) and tree plantations (Kröger, 2016); a key producer of many nonrenewable minerals (Gudynas, 2015); and a champion of hydropower as an alternative to fossil fuels. As all the above large-scale extractivist⁴ land uses impact the sustainability of forest use (Baletti, 2014; Ferreira et al., 2014), studying them is essential.

I look at how natural forests of different types, particularly those in the central plains (*Cerrado*) and in the Amazon (but also elsewhere), have been framed (e.g. in the narratives of Minister Abreu cited in Watts 2014). Interestingly, these forests have been described as a threat to productivity and economy in the socio-political and economic-environmental paradigm of Brazil, which has been labeled as neo-developmentalism. This is a new model of social welfare distribution, based on large-scale resource extraction that has been called neo-extractivism in Latin America (Gudynas, 2015); neo-developmentalism is the Brazilian version of this model (Kröger, 2012). By increasing extraction and directing some of the revenues to populations that are in need, neo-developmentalism unites the desires of resource-extracting elites for greater extraction with the wishes of large groups of the poor to gain access to social welfare. This new political economic and social paradigm has had severe impacts on forest use practices. For example Baletti (2014: 6) argues that neo-extractivism's “leftist rhetoric combined with a real reduction in poverty levels has justified and built support for an economic model rooted in intensified exploitation of natural and agricultural resources”.

3.1. Forests in the eyes of typical actors within the “brown economy”, “green capitalism”, and “socio-environmentalism” pathways

The “brown economy” is a concept that builds on Gudynas' (2015) description of the new Latin American Left governments as “Brown Lefts”, which are neither very red (undertaking deep pro-poor structural or systemic reforms, e.g. massive land distribution to the landless) nor very green (environmentally friendly), but which support extractivist

³ For example, I analyzed the forest-use narratives of the current Minister of Agriculture's op-ed articles in Brazil's top newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*.

⁴ By “extractivist” I refer here to an ideology and practice that seeks to extract as much of a resource as possible from an area in as short a time as possible. During the commodity super-cycle of 2007–2014, extractivist stances forged the extractivisms of different countries – there are also variations in degrees and styles of extractivism (Gudynas, 2015).

² For example, Stickler et al. (2013: 1) argue that “The perceived economic burden of BFC [the pre-2012 Brazilian Forest Code] compliance on soya bean and beef producers (US\$3–5.6 billion in net present value of the land) may in part explain the massive, successful campaign launched by the farm lobby to change the BFC”.

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