



Empirical linkages between devolved tenure systems and forest conditions: An introduction to the literature review[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A large body of literature has examined the role of devolved tenure systems in reducing deforestation and forest degradation, and/or enhancing forest regeneration and growth. My colleagues and I have conducted a careful review of this literature to identify what was accomplished and what remains to be pursued. This Special Feature (SF) is mostly devoted to publishing our review and synthesis. This introductory article begins by defining “devolved tenure and community forestry” and “forest condition,” then it describes our approach to and organization of the literature review and outlines what will be covered in the other three articles of this SF, and, finally, it highlights the main findings of our review.

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1. Introduction

Reducing CO₂ emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and increasing carbon stocks by enhancing forest regeneration and re-growth (or REDD+),¹ have attracted broad international attention (IPCC, 2013, FAO, 2010). In fact, the international community has already been creating mechanisms and incentives for developing countries to implement various REDD+ initiatives (UN REDD Program, 2016). It is widely agreed, though, that the effective implementation of REDD+ initiatives requires a broad set of policies, including institutional changes in the areas of forest tenure reform, decentralization, and community management, among others (Corbera et al., 2011, Sunderlin et al., 2014, Stevens et al., 2015). Moreover, reforming forest tenure and governance systems is increasingly viewed as a key factor in fulfilling a whole host of development and environmental goals predicated on managing forest ecosystems sustainably (FIP, 2016, FAO, 2010, MA, 2005).

Against this backdrop, it has become not only important but also imperative to assess how improved resource tenure and property rights can facilitate forest-based climate change mitigation and adaptation and the provision of other forest ecosystem services (IPCC, 2013, FAO, 2010). Therefore, pursuing this goal has been part of the Tenure and Global Climate Change (TGCC) Task Order, funded by the U.S. Agency

for International Development (USAID). Under TGCC, my colleagues and I were tasked with carrying out a careful and critical literature review of the linkages between forest condition and decentralized resource management in 2013. Our primary goal was to synthesize the empirical evidence and examine the adequacy and appropriateness of modeling approach and data and variables employed in investigating the devolution of rights and responsibilities to forest resources and the attainment of forest management objectives. I was fortunate to be selected to lead this challenging intellectual endeavor.

Our research team quickly came to the realization that indeed, a large body of literature had emerged and substantial progress been made in this arena. That is, recent efforts have improved our knowledge of the potential impacts of devolved tenure and reformed governance at both the local level (e.g., Nagendra 2007, Chhatre and Agrawal 2008, Persha et al., 2011) and the regional level (e.g., Araujo et al. 2009, Andersson et al. 2010, Larson et al., 2010). A more detailed examination of these and other studies will follow, here it suffices to point out that even though some prominent examples provide illustrations of the links between tenure content and/or security and forest outcomes, major weaknesses remain in the evidence generated (Chomitz et al., 2007, Ojanen et al., 2015). Therefore, we urge caution in universally accepting the assumption that community control of forest resources improves forest condition.

Moreover, it was discovered that preliminary attempts, including Porter-Bolland et al. (2012), Casse and Milhøj (2011), and Robinson et al. (2011), had been made to review this body of work. Nonetheless, it seems that they are limited in scope and narrow in approach. Most of the reviews and meta-analyses have taken what is given — where a

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¹ By “forest regrowth” we mean that a disturbed or degraded forest has recovered and regained growth, whereas “forest regeneration” is the renewal of forest cover by establishing young trees naturally or artificially on a logged-over or deforested site.

study is done, with what model(s) and data/variables, and what is found. Indeed, few of them have critically assessed the existing literature in terms of the appropriateness of the underlying perspectives and approaches, the quality of the data and variables, and the reliability of the analytic methods and results. Therefore, we felt that filling these knowledge gaps should be part of our review; certainly, it would be helpful and informative to deliberate what remains to be done and how to overcome the research shortcomings. It was expected that doing so would help advance the understanding of how devolved forest rights and management regimes may slow or even reverse deforestation and forest degradation, which is now of keen interest to so many governmental and non-governmental as well as international organizations (UN REDD, 2016, USAID, 2013, FAO, 2010).

Working with the Land Tenure and Property Rights Division of USAID, TGCC organized a workshop on December 19, 2013 in Washington, DC to discuss the draft of our review. We received many constructive comments and suggestions from the participants of the event as well as colleagues at MSU and other organizations. Following careful revisions in response to these comments and suggestions, our review was completed and released by USAID, right before the U.N. climate summit in September 2014 to disseminate the findings (Yin et al., 2014; hereafter, Review).

Then, my collaborators and I thought that it would be worthwhile to get it published in a peer-review journal in order to draw close attention from the broader international science, policy, and development circles to the relevant issues and potential ways to move the research agenda forward. But the Review was too long to be included in a single article. So, I approached the Editor and Publisher of *Forest Policy and Economics* with a proposal to publish it as a Special Feature (SF) by dividing it into three parts – part one to overview the evidence of empirical studies at different scales, part two to present the selected case studies and meta analyses and country experiences, and part three to discuss the knowledge gaps and ways forward. To my delight, the Editor and Publisher accepted our proposal and then the Editor conducted a peer review of our manuscript, in which anonymous reviewers were requested for additional comments and suggestions. Once again, we carefully revised our manuscript in response to the peer-review comments and suggestions, and as part of this process we updated our reference citations and made other necessary changes.

This introductory article is organized as follows. The next section is devoted to defining “devolved tenure and community forestry” and “forest condition,” and then our approach to and organization of the literature review are described in Section 3. Finally, what will be covered in other articles of this SF is outlined and our main findings are highlighted in Section 4.

2. Definitions of key concepts

2.1. Devolved tenure and community forestry

Scholars previously tended to define decentralization and devolution loosely in the context of natural resource governance. As noted by Tacconi (2007) and Andersson et al. (2004), those two concepts have been used interchangeably in the literature,² referring generally to the transfer of control over natural resources from the state to local communities and even individuals (Ribot, 2002a, Agrawal and Gupta, 2005, Bruce et al., 2010), and from central to local government (Kaimowitz et al., 1998, Larson, 2002, Andersson, 2003).

Recently, however, scholars have attempted to better define and further refine devolution from the perspective of resource tenure. For

² For ease of discourse, we will use the term devolution as much as possible hereafter. Also, note that while some scholars consider devolution as a sub-category of decentralization, involving decentralization of decision-making authority as opposed to decentralization of implementation tasks (Bruce, 2014), others take the opposite view that devolution “is too general” in comparison to decentralization (Ribot, 2002b).

instance, Larson et al. (2010) clarified that forest tenure determines who is allowed to use which resources, in what way, for how long and under what conditions, as well as who is entitled to transfer rights to others. Citing Schlager and Ostrom (1992) and Agrawal and Ostrom (2001), they expressed the commonly used concept of tenure as a “bundle of rights,” ranging from access and use rights to management, exclusion, and alienation. Depending on the exact combination of the specific rights granted to and held by a community collectively or individually within it, there can be owners, proprietors, authorized claimants, and authorized users. In practice, tenure reforms “range from tree planting agreements and benefit sharing arrangements from industrial logging, to a variety of community-based forest management schemes and full-blown titling of large territories” (Larson et al., 2010, p. 80).³

Here, three points are worth noting. First, it has been held that the transfer of resources and their control from government to communities and individuals and from central to local government would lead to more efficient, flexible, accountable, equitable, and/or participatory outcomes. Thus, both pathways are of general relevance (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001, Andersson et al., 2004, Tacconi, 2007). Second, given these distinct possibilities, it is obvious that devolution may not necessarily lead to community-based forest management (CBFM), even though CBFM is one form of devolution that has received disproportionate attention.⁴ As remarked by Agrawal et al. (2008, p. 1460), “decentralization of forest resources around the world is occurring for the most part under the general rubric of community-based conservation, where communities and their representatives gain varying degrees of collective control over forest resources.” Finally, regardless of the specific type of devolution, in most cases it is not in the form of pure community “ownership” that matters (i.e., the transfer of most rights in the bundle, in particular including the right to sell or alienate the resource), but the emergence of new forms of common-pool resource management, based around joint forest management, co-management, or participatory management arrangements (Ostrom and Nagendra, 2006, Larson and Soto, 2008, Dahal, 2015). Bartley et al. (2008, p. 164) further elaborated that devolution itself is “a process of expanding the number of levels that are authorized to make and enforce collective decisions – of increasing complexity in the nesting of institutional rules.”

Changing forest governance today is a move away from centrally administered, top-down regulatory policies that characterized much of the 19th and 20th centuries (Agrawal et al., 2008). Many government-owned forests are managed as common property for uses by local communities and community-based organizations (FAO, 2015). Devolution began in the mid- to late 1980s and had become a prominent feature of forest governance by the mid-1990s (Larson and Soto, 2008, Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001). It was driven in part by funding and technical support from bilateral, multilateral, and private donors who sought better forest governance from recipient countries. These external pressures coincided with domestic demands for a greater recognition of the needs of local and indigenous people for forest products and their role in managing forests for multiple purposes (Larson et al., 2010) and the poor outcomes of centrally managed forest systems in many cases (Sunderlin et al., 2008, Ribot, 2009, Bruce and Knox, 2009). They also worked in the same direction as governments facing budgetary pressures and attempted to reduce the financial burden of forest administration (Andersson, 2003).

³ While there exist multiple specific definitions, community based forest management generally means “the management, by communities or smallholders, of forests and agroforests they own, as well as the management of state-owned forests (some of which share customary tenure and rights under traditional laws and practice) by communities” (Molnar et al., 2011).

⁴ In the literature, CBFM may cover local user-group initiatives, indigenous reserves, and sacred forests; but it does not include private plantations, concessions, or individual tree-planting. In our view, however, the latter cases should not be ignored in any serious attempt to evaluating the impact of forest tenure and governance reforms, given the roles they have played in modifying forest conditions one way or another.

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