



Why and how to measure forest governance at local level: A set of indicators[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 September 2012
Received in revised form 18 July 2013
Accepted 19 July 2013
Available online 12 September 2013

Keywords:

Forest governance
Forest policy
Assessment
Scale
Local level
Indicators

ABSTRACT

The methodologies and operational instruments for the assessment of forest governance are still under development. While there are some advanced initiatives focused on forest governance assessment at international/national scale, there are relatively few at local level. However, assessments of local forest governance would be useful for both policy-makers and practitioners. The paper presents and discusses an original set of indicators to measure the quality of forest governance at local administrative/spatial level and the method used to develop them. A draft list of indicators (mainly process-oriented) has been formulated with respect to seven governance key-dimensions (sustainability, efficiency, effectiveness, participation, transparency, accountability and capacity). This draft list has been tested in two pilot applications (data collection by means of questionnaires). The indicators, which include both dichotomous and continuous variables, can be standardized in a few composite indicators to provide concise information about governance performance. Despite some methodological limitations that need to be further explored, the final set of 78 indicators appears to be a simple and practicable assessment tool, that can be used either for external or internal evaluations. Additional tests are needed to consolidate the tool.

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1. Introduction

Forestry, like other sectors dealing with natural resources management (e.g. Bodin and Crona, 2009; Beunen and Opdam, 2011), is stimulated by the debate on new forms of governance, i.e. on new ways for mutual interactions of public and private actors in taking and implementing policy decisions regarding collective problems (see e.g. Kjaer, 2004; Arts and van Tatenhove, 2006; Kleinschmit et al., 2009; UNDP, 2009; Hufty, 2010; Broekhoven et al., 2012). In the last 10–15 years, innovative forest governance modes – focused on decentralization, market-related tools and participatory approaches – have been introduced at various levels, from international to local, with the aim of promoting the sustainable management of forests in a globally changing scenario (Buttoud, 2006; Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012; Hogl and Pülzl, 2013). These new types of forest governance, which are confronting an increasing number of new or persistent forest challenges,² are

typically multi-actor, multi-sector and multi-level (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006; Rametsteiner, 2009). These three characteristics are the result of interactions, relationships and networks that involve power relations, negotiations and decisions among respectively: i) the multitude of forest actors/stakeholders; ii) different sectors of economy and society; and iii) international, national and local levels (e.g. Arts and van Tatenhove, 2006; UNDP, 2009; Andonova and Mitchell, 2010; Buizer et al., 2011).

In the field of public policy and institutional analysis, the multi-level³ category of governance is assuming special relevance (Cash et al., 2006; Howlett et al., 2010) due to a number of factors. First of all, the increasing difficulties (see the UNFF, the post-Kyoto and Rio + 20 negotiations) or even failures of international efforts to develop a binding global forest regime and the consequent increasing attention placed by many international organizations and government agencies on fostering regional, national and local forest institutions and processes in many countries in order to promote their own, domestic good forest governance (Cashore et al., 2010; Howlett et al., 2010). Secondly, the increasing implementation of the principle of subsidiarity by means of decentralization processes (Marshall, 2008; Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012; Howlett et al., 2010; Berkes, 2010), which are considered – if associated

[☆] This article belongs to the Special Issue: Assessing Forest Governance.

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² The economic, social and environmental importance of forests, and consequently the forest agenda, are changing (Hogl and Pülzl, 2013). New or persistent challenges are governance and policy reforms, poverty alleviation, forest degradation, illegal logging, water cycle regulation, biodiversity protection, carbon sequestration, etc. As an example, see the Governance Research Agenda for FLEGT (EFI/Tropenbos International, 2013).

³ The concept was initially introduced in the EU context to refer to the multi-level character of both European institutions and EU member states (Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012; EC, 2001; Kjaer, 2004). Later, it was used to show interconnections between domestic and international politics.

to appropriately designed local institutions (Ostrom, 1990) – proper mechanisms “to promote fair and just allocation of forest rights and resources for forest dependent communities and indigenous peoples” (Cashore et al., 2010 – p. 451). Thirdly, the changing role of public forest agencies that are facing a “de-institutionalization” process (Veenman et al., 2009). On the one hand, public forest agencies are expanding their mandate from solely forest management to more complex concerns and functions that imply capacity of “interactions with a wide range of stakeholders and interests” at all levels, and on the other, they are facing “institutional erosion” due to “growing financial limitations, a process of downsizing, and a loss of presence in the field” (Pacheco and Kaimowitz, 1998 – cit. in Cashore et al., 2010 – p. 471). In order to react to these dynamics, national State forest institutions in many European countries, for example, are reforming themselves in order to increase their profit making without losing their capacity to manage forests for multiple uses in the interests of the whole society, while giving proper assurances of economic effectiveness and efficiency (Krott and Stevanov, 2008).

In a governance network (e.g. Jordan and Schout, 2006) public forestry administrations are only one type of stakeholder that play a key-role, for example, in designing and implementing National Forest Programs, which are recognized “as an important procedural framework for promoting good forest governance and, thus, sustainable forest management” (Sepp and Mann, 2012 – p. 184). Indeed, forest institutions have to adapt to the changing social and political scenarios by adopting strategies and interventions for networking, mediating and coordinating new sets of interactions (see e.g. Poteete and Ostrom, 2004; Cashore et al., 2010). If there is a lack of coordination between forest institutions and other actors, and in particular if multi-level governance is not properly arranged, public forest institutions are likely to become the “weak link” in the forest policy chain, regardless of whether they operate at a local or national level (Howlett et al., 2010).

The weakening of such institutions and the increasing number and variety of interactions needed among forest stakeholders to face the new or persistent social, economic and environmental challenges, together with the complex nature of new policy tools⁴ are contributing to a growing attention towards the topic of good governance. It is widely accepted that this concept, which primarily refers to the integrity of institutions and enforcement of rules that govern the forest sector, is nowadays informed by a number of basic general principles such as participation, transparency, accountability, efficiency etc. (e.g. Cashore, 2009a, 2009b; Rametsteiner, 2009; PROFOR/FAO, 2011). Opting for such good governance principles is a challenging task for public, private or mixed organizations at every level, from global to local.

Therefore, instruments to measure genuine good governance performance, which might contribute towards the adoption of new approaches and provide information in support of public policy decisions, are becoming priorities in the forest policy agenda. They include methodologies and operational instruments to assess forest governance quality, which are commonly based on a systematic evaluation of (mainly) national institutions' performance. But local governance assessments are also likely to have significant applications in forestry, as in other sectors, since they can be used to inform policy (at both local and national levels), build capacity and empower the community (UNDP, 2009). There is an increasing requirement for such methodologies: i) to reflect the current societal demands (e.g. transparency, participation, environmental and social responsibility); ii) to measure the concrete effects of changes on natural resources and human well-being; iii) to concisely and clearly communicate the quality of governance to policy-makers.

A number of initiatives to develop methodologies and operational instruments to assess forest governance are currently under development, but while there are some advanced initiatives focused on forest

governance assessment at an international and national scale (Hyden et al., 2008; Saunders and Reeve, 2010; Secco et al., 2011; Maidell et al., 2012), there are few at a local level. In particular, 22 assessment tools for local (decentralized) governance measurement have been collected and cataloged by UNDP (2009), but none of them is specifically focused on the forest sector.

All the existing methodologies, either at an international/national or local level, are based on sets of indicators, even if their approaches and objectives may differ significantly. Some of them are comprehensive governance assessment methodologies based on multiple stakeholders' perspectives, others are specific governance assessments based on single stakeholder's perspectives (such as citizens), and others are self-assessments carried out by local government institutions to measure their own performance (Hyden et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009). Given that no well-consolidated systems yet exist of simple, practicable and actionable indicators for measuring forest governance at a local level, and given the importance of monitoring and evaluation for implementing emerging complex policy instruments (such as PES and REDD+) (e.g. Saunders and Reeve, 2010; Pettenella and Broto, 2012), this paper presents the method and indicators we have developed for assessing the quality of forest governance at the spatial and administrative level where abstract policy goals are implemented in practice by means of projects and management choices (i.e. the local level).

The theoretical background of our research is presented first (Section 2). We start from the growing relevance assigned to the good governance concept and then move to the potential usefulness of assessment methods applied to forest governance in orienting forest policy reforms. As part of the theoretical background, we also briefly discuss the issue of scale, which is connected with multi-level governance and its arrangements, as well as with each single governance level from global to local. This issue is analyzed with respect to some of the methodological challenges of assessments. On the basis of these considerations, we then state the research problem (Section 3) and explain in detail the method used to develop our set of indicators (Section 4). The last part of the paper (Section 5), lists the set of proposed indicators, which have been tested in two pilot applications. The discussion focuses on methodological challenges, e.g. unsolved limitations, possible future advances and necessary improvements of our method and indicators, with respect to the current forest policy and governance debate.

2. Conceptual framework

Below, we describe the reasons at the basis of our proposal: first of all, we explain why we need assessment of forest governance and what we mean by good governance in the context of our paper; secondly, we clarify why scale matters in forest governance assessment.

2.1. Why we need assessment of forest governance

The governance concept is far from being sufficiently clarified and is “just as contested as sustainable development” (Arts and Buizer, 2009). In the forest policy domain, the concept of good governance basically refers to “the integrity of institutions and processes that govern forests in their countries” (GFI, 2009 – p. 1) and it is linked with the promotion of policy and institutional reforms in accordance with a number of basic principles (GFI, 2009; WB-ARD, 2009; Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012). Even if good governance⁵ has different contents and meanings depending on historical, institutional and cultural contexts, its basic principles are very similar world-wide: effectiveness, efficiency,

⁵ In the economic development domain, good governance is mainly conceptualized as “the standards adopted by Western liberal democracies” (e.g. Hyden et al., 2008 – p. 9) and often criticized (e.g. Nanda, 2006); in this case, its basic principles are typically used at global, regional and national levels for comparative analytical purposes (e.g. for country rankings and donors informing about investments' stability and expected economic growth).

⁴ Based on public-private partnerships, public-social partnerships and/or co-management (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006) such as Payments for Ecosystem Services, REDD + projects, Community-based Forest Management, etc.

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