



## Decentralization and forest-related conflicts in Latin America<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Forestry decentralization and devolution reforms involve the transfer of rights, resources and responsibilities related to the governance of forest resources. One of the consequences of these reforms is a reconfiguration of the patterns of interactions between multiple governance actors, which may create friction as actors with different interests shift positions within the governance structure. These shifts may imply important differences with regards to access to power, information, and flows of benefits from forest resources. In this paper, we explore how forestry decentralization affects the propensity for forest-related conflict among forest governance actors. We draw on qualitative field research from the North Atlantic Autonomous Region of Nicaragua to develop a set of hypotheses about the effect of decentralization on conflict. We argue that decentralization generates conflict and that lack of transparency and accountability in reform processes further contributes to more conflict. We hypothesize that over time, under effective decentralization reforms, increases in both transparency and accountability will lead to a decline in conflict. We then test these hypotheses with empirical data from interviews with local governance actors in Bolivia and Peru, two countries with contrasting degrees of forestry sector decentralization. The quantitative analysis finds that there is no clear relationship between decentralization, transparency or accountability and the prevalence of conflict. These findings lead us to conclude that the prevalence of conflict alone is not a particularly instructive indicator of forest governance performance and suggest that future research should pursue a better understanding of how decentralization may alter the nature of conflicts.

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### 1. Introduction

The extent to which decentralization affects forest-related conflicts remains a puzzle. Natural resource decentralization and devolution policies are purportedly aimed at increasing community participation in decisions about resources affecting local livelihoods. Such policies have been implemented in response to local demands or at the urging of international donors (Resosudarmo, 2005; Oyono, 2004; Conyers, 2003), and are aimed at variety of goals, such as reducing costs (Colfer, 2005), increasing revenues (Pacheco, 2003), increasing governmental control over local user groups (Becker, 2001; Contreras, 2003) or sometimes to promote local democracy and rights (Larson et al., 2010). Conflict over forests has been characterized as a driver of deforestation (de Jong et al., 2005), but the relationship between varying governance structures and forest conflicts has not been studied a great deal (e.g., Duran et al., 2010). A review of research on forest conflict by De Koning et al. (2008) suggests that decentralization may contribute both to social stability and to inter and intra-community conflicts. As decentralization initiatives move forward in many

countries, important research questions emerge. This paper analyzes the extent to which decentralization affects the likelihood of forest conflicts and the degree to which local institutional arrangements moderate that relationship.

Forestry decentralization reforms involve the transfer of rights, resources, and responsibilities related to the governance of forest resources to lower levels of government. These policies are widespread in the developing world. In Latin America, virtually all countries have embarked on some combination of natural resource decentralization and devolution reforms, although the targets vary from country to country and policy to policy (Andersson, 2003). In Bolivia and Guatemala, reforms targeted municipal governments, while in Peru and in Nicaragua's autonomous regions reforms sought to strengthen the role of regional governments (Larson, 2003, 2010; Pacheco and Kaimovitz, 1998; Andersson et al., 2006). In other countries in the region, most notably Mexico, reforms have meant the expansion of rights of forest user-group communities (Bray et al., 2005), and in a number of countries, including Bolivia and Nicaragua, national governments have recognized traditional land rights of indigenous groups.

To the extent that decentralization is a response to conflict or local demands, one might expect a decline in conflict with the implementation of new policies. Conflict, however, is prevalent in all reform processes (Knight, 1992; North, 1990). Policy reform can introduce uncertainty in the governance process and cause actors to perceive

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rules as unclear. Confusion over rights, resources, and responsibilities can, in turn, lead to a surge in conflicts among different stakeholders (Tyler, 1999; Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006). Decentralization may shift competition over resources from the national to the local arena. At the same time, conflicts are not always undesirable: certain kinds of conflict are often a natural ingredient in processes of social change (McMichael, 2011; Wright and Baray, 2012).

Given the impact conflict may have on peoples' lives and livelihoods, it is important for scholars to understand more fully the role of conflict in response to policy reform. Yet there have been very few empirically based analyses that focus on the impact of decentralization on conflict in forest and natural resources systems. This article explores this relationship by combining drawing on field observations from two different empirical settings.

First, we conduct a qualitative analysis of how decentralization policies in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) of Nicaragua have affected on conflicts related to forests. Based on this case study, we hypothesize that (1) the initial effect of decentralization on the prevalence of conflict is ambiguous, but that over time, changes in (2) transparency and (3) accountability (with effective decentralization) are associated with the prevalence of conflicts. Second, we employ interview data in a large number of local governments in Bolivia and Peru to test these hypotheses. We choose to compare local governments in these two countries because of their contrasting governance structures for forestry: Bolivia has had a relatively decentralized regime since 1996 while Peru has maintained a relatively centralized decision-making structure.

Our analysis finds that there is no clear relationship between decentralization and the prevalence of conflict. And although both accountability and transparency seem to have improved after Bolivia's decentralization, these changes are do not seem associated with a general decline in conflict. These mixed results highlight the importance of further research into the relationship between decentralization and conflict and suggest that the nature of conflict may deserve more attention.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The next section presents a brief review of the previous research, followed by the Nicaraguan case study and a description of our main hypotheses. We then test these hypotheses empirically using observations from Peru and Bolivia. After presenting our findings, we close with a discussion of the implications for policy and future research on decentralization and forestry-related conflicts.

## 2. Research insights into forest decentralization and conflict

There is little systematic research that specifically examines the relationship between decentralization and forest conflicts. Two perspectives prevail: on the one hand, the assumption that decentralization will reduce conflict by addressing existing concerns or demands and promoting good governance, and on the other, that conflict is "deeply embedded in processes of decentralization" (Suzuki, 2005: 40). Similarly, there is little study of the relationship between accountability and transparency and conflict. There is, however, evidence that lack of accountability and transparency contributes to conflict and the assumption that improvements should, then, be associated with its reduction (Djogo and Syaf, 2003; Suzuki, 2005).

In some cases, decentralization policies are designed to reduce resource-related conflicts, but most research on the topic demonstrates how decentralization has actually increased or exacerbated it. Peluso (2002) has argued that, particularly in countries with a history of violence, decentralization can exacerbate local conflict, shifting it from the vertical (population versus the state) to the horizontal (community versus community). Tyler (1999) found that policy change, such as piecemeal or partial decentralization reforms, can generate or aggravate natural resource conflict. In Zimbabwe, decentralization led to conflicts over decentralized resources, such as

revenues from CAMPFIRE, a wildlife management project; increased tribal tension because of a history of discrimination; and confusion due to the proliferation of institutions such that it was unclear who was responsible for what (Conyers, 2003). In a comparison of two decentralization reforms in Cambodia and the Philippines, Suzuki (2005: 35) found that "NRM-related decentralization exacerbates existing conflicts and triggers new ones ... primarily through such dynamics as indeterminate and insufficient reforms, haste, local power vacuums and the disproportionate involvement and influence of local interest groups."

A study of pre- and post-reform conflict in 27 villages in Indonesia found a dramatic increase in forest-related conflicts after decentralization (Sudana, 2009). Nevertheless, the author points out that not all conflict is "bad." For example, the lack of conflict prior to reforms was partly due to the discouragement of protest by the military, and the promises of change empowered communities to exercise their right to freedom of expression. Another study found that women's participation in decision-making institutions was unlikely to occur without conflict (Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006). These studies suggest that the nature of conflict may be a more important arena of study than its prevalence in forest-related decentralization.

Accountability and transparency are central elements of "good governance" and are often mentioned as lacking in research on partial or failed decentralization processes (Ribot, 2002, 2004). Whether governance is centralized or decentralized, lack of transparency, corruption and lack of accountability are associated with conflicts primarily between governments and local actors. It is argued that decentralized systems will permit improvements, in part because local governments are closer to local control and scrutiny (World Bank, 2000). Hence even if decentralization generates conflict in the early stages of reform, it is reasonable to assume that effective decentralization – one that leads to improvements in accountability and transparency – should also lead to a decrease in conflict over time.

## 3. A case in point: Nicaragua's North Atlantic Autonomous Region

The experience of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) of Nicaragua (Larson, 2010; Larson and Mendoza-Lewis, 2009; Larson and Soto, in press) demonstrates how decentralization and devolution policies lead to new conflicts due to the proliferation of additional, and newly empowered, actors participating in natural resource decisions. The prevalence of conflict cannot be said to have increased, however, since the reforms began in response to armed conflict. Lack of transparency and accountability of these new entities are key factors behind post-reform conflicts over resources, particularly forests.

The Caribbean coast of Nicaragua has long been seen by the central government in Managua as the source of a free supply of public lands and resources. Only a small part of the region was titled to its historic indigenous residents until recently, and the central government granted land rights and resource concessions to outsiders without regard to indigenous rights. After the Sandinista revolution in 1979, many indigenous peoples joined the counterrevolutionary struggle or fled to Honduras. Peace negotiations between indigenous leaders and the Sandinista government brought about the first fundamental policy changes in the region's formal governance institutions. In 1987, indigenous rights were recognized in the new Nicaraguan Constitution and the Autonomy Statute was passed, resulting in the establishment, in 1990, of the first elected autonomous regional councils. In 1996 the first municipal governments were elected. After a renowned international court case between the Awas Tingni community and the Nicaraguan government over an illegal logging concession (see Anaya and Grossman, 2002), a law was passed in 2002 recognizing communal authorities and establishing the framework for land titling and the creation of multi-community territorial

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