



Guest editorial

Studying conflicts, proposing solutions – Towards multi-level approaches to the analyses of forest conflicts



1. Introduction

The purpose of this issue has been to analyze how forest conflicts can be fruitfully studied, theoretically and empirically, in order to gain comparative insights from different parts of the world and different forest zones, and to draw implications for conflict management. This conclusion builds primarily on the individual contributions to the Special Issue. We start with presenting theoretical insights based on the structural–functional approach, the institutional approach and the one focusing on perceptions, discourses and frames. We continue with lessons learnt from the comparative assessment and conclude by discussing implications for conflict management and future research.

1.1. Understanding conflicts from structural–functional perspectives

Within the framework of a structural–functional approach, conflicts can be seen as the cause and outcome of processes of structural change. This macro-level perspective, which has its roots in the thinking of Émile Durkheim and Auguste Comte, focuses on social structures and manifest, latent or dysfunctional societal functions, which shape social behavior (Parsons, 1961). From this traditional perspective forestry related conflicts can be viewed as negative, threatening reliable and stable structures or functions and should thus be avoided.

As a reaction to this traditional view other scholars have emphasized that even though conflicts may have negative effects they may also work as a medium for social change, contributing to the improvement of social relations, democratic processes and the content and quality of decisions (Dahrendorf, 1969; Walker and Daniels, 1997; Mouffe, 2000; Castro and Nielsen, 2001; Yasmi et al., 2009). Rather than seeking to avoid conflict, efforts should instead be put on the effective management of conflicts in order to achieve change, moving beyond the dichotomous understanding of conflicts as either functional or dysfunctional (Buckles, 1999; Yasmi et al., 2009). Research however shows that collaboration between different interests is not enough for change to occur. Social change is to a large extent dependent on the will of strong economic interests to align with e.g. marginalized or economically weaker groups (Buckles, 1999; Sandström and Widmark, 2007; Saarikoski et al., 2013).

In terms of forest related research the structural–functional approach with its macro-level focus has for a long time played a minor role compared to reductionist meso- and micro-level approaches.

With the revival of systems thinking and studies using e.g. a complex adaptive systems (CAS) framework to understand natural resource conflicts, the structural–functional approach has gained a ground again although the policy relevance and impact of these studies hitherto have been rather limited (Wellstead and Howlett, 2012).

The structural–functional approach is useful in identifying manifest or latent drivers of conflict such as socio-economic development and environmental pressure. It can be applied in single case studies but is particularly useful in comparative assessments of drivers of conflicts. There are several examples of this approach in this special issue: the comparative assessment of conflicts between local actors and external actors (e.g. logging and mining companies, plantation estates and conservation agencies) in a South East Asian context (Yasmi et al., 2012) and the quantitative review of the representation of forest conflicts across the world (Gritten et al., 2012). The former points at underlying fundamental causes to conflict, such as rapid economic development, concerns over food security at national and international levels, conservation policies that are exclusionary of local land management as well as poor coordination between societal levels (Yasmi et al., 2012). The latter study identifies geographical components of forest conflicts through the use of the contested resource periphery theory (Gritten et al., 2012).

In addition, the structural–functional approach helps to understand how structural factors affect the pervasiveness of conflicts or the absence thereof. Kröger (2013) uses it to analyze mobilization – or lack thereof – in a situation of land use change in the Eastern Amazon, Brazil, while, Ravikumar et al. (2012) look at how structural change in governance affects conflicts in a context of economic inequities, the weakness of the state and governance related failures (e.g. corruption and marginalization) in Latin America. Kröger (2013) finds that land use change does not automatically trigger conflicts, and Ravikumar et al. (2012) state that although decentralization includes transfer of rights, resources and governance responsibilities, such changes may give rise to both stability and conflict. According to Kröger (2013) the absence of conflict may be explained by a combination of individual and structural factors such as inter-personal relationships and the nature of local conflict cultures. The lack of clear relationships between decentralization reforms and the prevalence of conflicts in Nicaragua, Bolivia and Peru also points to the need to incorporate structural factors in future research such as how decentralization reforms affect power relations between different groups to be able to handle and manage potential conflicts (Ravikumar et al., 2012).

To conclude, a structural functional approach contributes to defining and analyzing the variation in forest conflict depending on structural

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aspects such as existing inequalities, exclusionary economic development and international policy regimes (e.g. conservation policies). It may also reveal and explore functional aspects such as contested tenure and lack of land use planning and coordination among state agencies, which only can be handled and potentially solved through the development of new institutional solutions.

1.2. Understanding conflicts from a neo-institutionalist approach

Since the discussion of 'bringing the institutions back in' and the revival of institutionalism in the 1980s within sociology, political science and policy analysis, this theoretical approach has also become prevalent in research on forest conflicts. It emphasizes the need to analyze the influence of cognitive norms, rules and routines on organizational and human behavior, in addition to formal and regulative institutions (March and Olsen, 1995). It brings additional perspectives to analyses of the changing role of the state, under the heading of 'from government to governance', including the role of public as well as private actors and power sharing in decision-making (Pierre and Peters, 2000) and what this might imply in creating or mitigating forest conflicts. Institutional factors may also explain why states or other actors respond differently to e.g. common challenges concerning economic as well as environmental issues such as climate change (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). Furthermore, a neo-institutionalist approach identifies the need to analyze the institutional structuring on the macro as well as the meso- and micro-societal levels, including political, economic as well as social institutions. Hence, tensions between globalization on the one hand and regionalization and decentralization of power within forest governance on the other can be examined (Colfer and Capistrano, 2005).

It is by now widely acknowledged that institutional factors both shape and are being shaped by conflicts and their management. The neo-institutional approach may thus be used to develop governance and management mechanisms to deal with conflicts. Not surprisingly, institutional approaches dominate among the contributions to this special issue, varying from the study of forest policy development at the European level to those examining forest conflicts at multiple societal levels including local communities ranging from Sweden to Nepal, India and Latin America. The role of property rights, in particular in relation to institutional change such as forest governance reforms or the instigation of protected areas provides recurrent analytical themes as covered by this issue.

Indeed, forest policy change appears as one of the most important drivers and consequences of conflicts according to several studies in this special issue. For example, recent forest policy processes in Europe have revealed conflicts concerning both substance, and procedures between the member states of the European Union (Edwards and Kleinschmit, 2013–this issue). In terms of substance the conflict concerns the traditional alignment between forest production and biodiversity protection interests. The procedural aspects however involve issues of power division and to what extent forest policy should be an issue of national or European concerns. In a similar way the analysis of the contested issue of commercial berry harvesting on private land in Sweden, shows that institutional aspects play an important role in the development of the conflict – and potentially also in its solution – i.e. how extraction of non-timber forest products might be regulated, either through top-down steering or through voluntary measures (Sténs and Sandström, 2012).

Institutional change, with the explicit purpose to solve conflicts, such as the Forest Rights Act in India (Bose, 2013–this issue), could however also produce new problems. It is therefore necessary to understand the inherent complexity that is inbuilt into most forest conflicts. For example, the study of increasing levels of forestry conflicts in the Terai, Nepal, demonstrates how such conflicts are related to multiple interests at multiple levels. The focus of the conflicts which often concern issues of land and forest control, is therefore about

relations between 'global–state–community' levels, but also driven by other factors such as ethnicity (Satyal Pravat and Humphreys, 2012). The management of conflicts in practice thus requires comprehensive understanding of their multiple institutional dimensions at several interconnected levels of time and space, addressing issues of path dependency such as the historic legacy of the state and historically determined inequalities in access to and control over forest resources (Bose, 2013–this issue; Satyal Pravat and Humphreys, 2012).

Institutional change may however not only reveal but also contribute to the camouflage of conflicts. Hubo and Krott (2012) depict how an administrative reform in the German federal state of Lower Saxony obscured the public administration's concerns for nature conservation due to its weak recognition in relation to the forest sector. Since the visibility of conflicting concerns is a crucial factor for the possibility to balance those contradicting interests this reform had far-reaching consequences for the public administration's possibility to reduce the prevailing conflict between the nature conservation and the forest sectors. Specifically, the presence of independent expertise and its integration into consideration procedures proved vital for the potential to solve this type of conflict. The authors therefore recommend combining different organizational patterns of public administration that allow for multiple conceptual and strategic competences at various levels in order to incorporate and balance different interest and needs into decision-making.

Several articles in this special issue show that it is necessary to take into account broader societal structures to understand why conflicts occur and how they may be managed. In particular, Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl (2013) show, in their comparative study of nature conservation conflicts in areas with and without commercial forestry that enabling binding as well as voluntary institutions but also favorable discourses shaped actors' ideas about available policy options. In addition, mobilization and strategic alliance building were found to be important explanatory factors to understand the emergence of conflicts and the potential for new solutions to conflict management.

To conclude, a neo-institutional approach to the analysis of forest conflict is prominent within this special issue, confirming our statement in the introduction that institutional analysis is an important contribution to the understanding of conflicts and conflict management. It should be noted, however, that the definition of 'institutions' in this special issue is a matter of many interpretations, and that the cause-and-effect mechanisms involved in this research approach are quite diverse. As Raitio (2013–this issue) delineates in her contribution on institutions and conflict management, at least four different branches of neo-institutionalism can be distinguished (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Schmidt, 2008; Arts, 2012). These include rational choice, historical institutionalism, sociological as well as a relatively new branch, discursive institutionalism, which lends insight into the role of ideas and discourse in conflicts and linking this to institutional change (Raitio, 2013–this issue; Schmidt, 2008). Moreover, institutions may also be studied through other theoretical approaches that are often not defined as institutionalism, such as governance or regulation theories. The general strength in this approach lies in its focus on political, economic or social institutions, involving studies of the relationship between institutions and political agency, performance and change, which enables us to identify possibilities to improve political systems (March and Olsen, 1995).

1.3. Understanding conflicts through a perceptual–ideational approach

Besides studying oppressive or unclear structures and institutions, previous conflict literature has traditionally conceptualized natural resource and environmental conflicts in terms of knowledge disputes, competing distributive interests (who gets what when and how), incompatible values and dysfunctional personal relationships (Moore, 1996; Priscoli, 1997). This view has been challenged by theorists who maintain that environmental controversies are essentially discursive

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