Power relationships: Their effect on the governance of community forestry in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of unequal power relationships on the governance of community forestry groups (CFGs) in the Philippines. Devolution of power has long been considered to be a 'magic bullet' in the governance of CFGs. However, poor governance which involves unequal power relationships between state agencies, forest user groups and rural people, produces unequal access in decision-making, sharing of authority and responsibility. This engenders local resistance from those who feel excluded and marginalised in the process. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence', we examine how unequal power relationships between State and local agencies have facilitated destruction of mature and newly planted timber plantations. Studies of a harvesting and a reforestation project found that the adverse effects of poor governance occurred at two tiers, first at an upper level between the government and CFGs, and second, at a lower level between CFG's and local people. Poor governance at upper levels has triggered both symbolic and physical violence on and from people who remained marginal to the benefits of harvesting and reforestation. We conclude that a key requirement for sustainable community-managed forests is to expand benefit sharing to non-CFG local people. Our findings highlight the importance of lower-tier levels of governance within CFGs and between CFGs and local people.

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1. Introduction

As a broad paradigm, 'good governance' is widely reported as being critical to the success of community forestry in rural areas of developing countries. Community forestry is a generic term for the devolution of power from the State to local resident groups, (i.e., CFGs) to manage government-owned forest and land. Land and tree tenure arrangements may vary but the overriding principle is that devolving power to local resident groups will provide an incentive for sustainable forest management (Baynes et al., 2015a). As an ideal and normative goal, good governance, both from governments to CFGs and within CFGs themselves, aims to redress unequal power relations by supporting equity in decision-making and control over access to forest resources (Dressler et al., 2010). In contrast, poor governance produces and reinforces unequal power relationships between state agencies, forest user groups and rural people and leads to unequal and inequitable distribution of costs and benefits. Poor rural people who are at the margins of decision-making

in CFGs, lose access-and-use rights and perceive a loss of control over their livelihoods. Resistance emerges and manifests with time (Brown and Corbera, 2003). Hence, governance itself is more about the power to make, implement and enforce decisions, rather than just the formal arrangements about how decisions are supposed to be made (Fisher, 2003; Mayers et al., 2013). However, much of the literature concerned with community forestry governance tends to focus more on the relationship between governments and CFGs and less on the power sharing between CFGs, their members and local people and how this influences local people's access and use of forests (e.g., see Hodgdon, 2010; Schusser, 2013).

Smallholder farmers in developing countries are riddled with insecurities (Heim, 1990) and so are less able or willing to manage CFG affairs beyond local power relations and structures. Affluent members typically acquire a disproportionate amount of resources (Chhetri et al., 2012). The benefits to poorer members are thus reduced and the incentive for them to sustainably manage the forest resource is lessened (Thanh and Sikor, 2006; Coleman 2011; Paudel, 2012), social conflict increases, becomes protracted and difficult to manage (Corbera et al., 2007). Lower-tier governance and power relationships are therefore important to the success of community forestry.

The principal opportunity for addressing lower-tier governance and power relationships lies with powerful social actors. Such

actors include government land management agencies with the ability to influence the behaviour of another 'regardless of the latter's will' (Schusser, 2013). Typically, governments only partially decentralise or devolve power to CFGs, retaining key powers themselves (Cronkleton et al., 2012). Power devolution can then become 'a matter of half-hearted paper legality' (Egbe, 2001) and governments also recentralise control over forests by requiring lower level officials to be directly accountable to their superiors (Pulhin and Dressler, 2009). An unfortunate result is that when governments retain power, it disempowers weaker actors and discourages equitable lower level governance. As noted by Colfer (2011), in a supportive environment, local people are demonstrably capable of monitoring and sanctioning members of their own group, and adapting their behaviour, provided they see that it is in their interests to do so. Given the crucial importance of lower-tier governance to CFGs, how might it be improved?

This paper examines the effect of unequal power relationships between central government, local officials, CFGs and local people, on the governance of reforestation and timber harvesting on the island of Biliran in the Philippines. We investigated governance as actions which were imposed by DENR head office in Manila on local DENR officials and then downwards to CFG leaders, their members and local people. Our particular focus was the reactions of local people in support of, or against governance which was imposed on them. This investigation occurred as part of research conducted by Australian Centre for Industrial and Agricultural Research (ACIAR) Project ASEM/2010/050 'Improving watershed rehabilitation outcomes in the Philippines using a systems approach'. We present the conceptual approach to the research, the background to the CFGs and the context and methodology of the investigation. We then describe how governance problems affected the success of reforestation and harvesting projects. Finally, we discuss ways in which governance may be improved and the implications of our research for community forestry in other developing countries.

2. Theoretical background: Bourdieu on power relationships

Social theory developed by the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu resonates with researchers who deal with the power relationships between social actors. Bourdieu suggested that cultural practices are central to struggles for power and dominance in social relations, including politics and economics, in contrasting institutional contexts (Vogt, 1980). The interpretive power of his theories has seen them re-interpreted and published as compilations (e.g., see Wacquant, 2005; Sapiro, 2010) and as the conceptual basis for recent empirical research involving the social relations and societal dynamics of natural resources management (see Raedeke et al., 2003; Ojha et al., 2009; Caine, 2013), ethics, (see Pellandini-Simányi, 2014) and industrial relations (see Sallaz, 2010).

Bourdieu's research was particularly focused on how the established order's social dominance over less powerful social actors, with all of its injustices, was so often perceived by these less powerful actors as acceptable and natural. In different contexts including education, democratic politics and even employer-employee relationships, he used the concepts of *habitus, field, symbolic capital, symbolic power* and *symbolic violence* to explain the origins of dominance, control and power in society.

In this context, habitus refers to the internalised mental structures (dispositions) which guide people or group attitudes, values, perceptions and actions. More specifically, habitus amounts to our social dispositions which subconsciously influence us to act, think and feel in particular ways and which, in time, become taken for granted. Such dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are regularised without being consciously coordinated

or governed by direct rule (Bourdieu, 1991). This suggests that the dispositions constituting habitus are acquired through inculcation and acculturation within and to particular social groups, their norms and their structures. This expands, for example, our understanding of a workplace to include the experiences and meanings which workers bring to it (Sallaz, 2010).

An individual's social practices and perceptions are not necessarily the direct product of habitus per se but rather the co-production of the relationship between habitus and the specific social contexts, or fields, within which individual actions take place (Bourdieu, 1991). Fields are the social and political setting in which people negotiate, engage and compete around specific issues and resources (Sapiro, 2010). Crucial for our paper, is that fields ought best to be seen as dynamic but structured social spaces in which actors' positions are influenced by the distribution of various types of resources (or in Bourdieu's language, 'capital') (Rupp and de Lange, 1989). As such, social fields are sites of struggles in which actors negotiate and compete over access to and use of different resources. To use a game analogy, the field represents the socio-political game itself, with moves and counter-moves defining the process and outcome of the game (Raedeke et al., 2003).

We draw on Bourdieu's use of symbolic capital as one resource which people use to generate some type of social advantage. By symbolic capital Bourdieu referred to the social process by which prestige and or honour are accumulated over time and space and how this, in turn, influences the likelihood of preferential treatment in difficult social situations. Bourdieu (1979a,b), for example, described the symbolic capital which was so influential in determining access to higher education in France as being partly inherited (e.g., family expectations) and derived from the educational system itself, and how this favoured socially advantaged students. Using symbolic capital in social power struggles in which actors vie for resources becomes an exercise of symbolic power (Emirbayer and Williams, 2005; Raedeke et al., 2003).

When symbolic power is used against people in less powerful, marginal positions, it becomes an exercise of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence, as opposed to corporeal or physical violence, is expressed as 'a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition' (Bourdieu, 2001 p. 1–2). For example, Bourdieu (1997a, reprinted in Sapiro, (2010) described the social and political significance of job insecurity caused by casualisation of the workforce—and how the significance of this was communicated and acted upon—as being a form of symbolic violence designed to achieve workers' obedience and submission over time. Similarly, middle-order employees who control the flow of data both upwards and downwards in an organisation, commit symbolic violence against both their employers and their clients when they block or delay transactions Bourdieu (1997b, reprinted in Wacquant, 2005). In the first example, the symbolic nature of the violence is that it manifests itself as insecurity, not immediate physical violence. Similarly, delays in processing transactions do not constitute physical violence, but the effects (and cost) are no less real.

In the context of community forestry, Ojha et al. (2009) defined symbolic violence as occurring when claims to superior knowledge are used to legitimise closure in deliberation on forest governance practices. Ojha (2006) and Ojha et al. (2009) used the concepts of symbolic power and symbolic violence to illustrate how governments impose governance on CFGs, including:

1 Imposing policies which have been designed at a national level, at a local level without modification for local priorities and conditions;
2 Using a top-down, non-participatory management style; and