



Notions of justice in payments for ecosystem services: Insights from China's Sloping Land Conversion Program in Yunnan Province



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ABSTRACT

China's Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) pays millions of farmers to convert cropland in upper watersheds to tree plantations. It is considered one of the world's largest payments for ecosystem services (PES) scheme for its reliance on financial incentives. This paper examines the outcomes of the SLCP by way of a case study from the Yangliu watershed in Yunnan province. It focuses on the notions of justice embedded in state policy and held by villagers and local state officials in order to understand the observed outcomes in terms of people's participation in the implementation of the SLCP, land use changes and livelihood effects. Villagers, local state officials, and state policy share a primary concern about distributive justice despite significant differences in their specific notions. The shared concern underlies the villagers' positive reactions to the SLCP, which among other factors, have led to the intended expansion of tree plantations and a livelihood transition in Yangliu since 2003. The insights from Yangliu suggest the need to consider justice for a fuller understanding of the dynamics and outcomes of the SLCP and other PES schemes worldwide as the notions of justice applied by the involved actors may influence land use and livelihood dynamics in addition to the other factors considered in research this far.

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Introduction

In 2000, the Chinese government launched the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP), which uses public payments to promote the conversion of cropland on steep slopes to forest and is the largest and best-funded afforestation program in China (Xu et al., 2004; Li, 2004; Bennett, 2008). Also known as the Grain for Green Program, it is a landmark in Chinese forest policy because it makes novel use of financial instruments to provide land managers with monetary incentives. As such, it can be considered to represent a type of state-led payments for ecosystem services (PES) scheme (Bennett, 2008; Liu et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2009; Kolinjivadi and Sunderland, 2012). Its key rationale reflects one of the defining principles of PES: the use of financial incentives to encourage upper watershed land use that generates beneficial consequences for people downstream (Landell-Mills and Porras, 2002; Pagiola et al.,

2005; Wunder, 2005; Engel et al., 2008). The SLCP is even considered one of the world's largest PES scheme in terms of the number of land managers, the area of implementation, and the amount of finance involved (Li, 2004; Xu et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2008).

The SLCP has attracted significant criticism from researchers in China and abroad. Studies of the program's formulation and institutional arrangements highlight its top-down implementation and point out that this is a significant departure from the principle of voluntariness inherent in PES and may endanger its ambitious reforestation goals (Xu et al., 2004; Bennett, 2008; Yeh, 2009; Yin and Yin, 2010; He et al., 2014). Other analyses have revealed that the SLCP has had negative consequences for local livelihoods: local incomes have declined due to the shift from agriculture to forestry (Uchida et al., 2007; Li et al., 2011), and people living in remote upper watersheds have few livelihood options after converting to tree plantations (Chen et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2009), bringing into question the program's ability to engender a sustained land use transition. However, recent research conducted after some revisions of the program's implementation modalities has qualified the initial insights into local livelihood outcomes, noting that it may actually generate positive income effects and thereby contribute to reforestation and economic development under certain conditions (Liu et al., 2008; Hogarth et al., 2012; He, 2014).

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Ideas of justice, we note, have been central to this research, even though they have remained largely implicit. Conceptions of procedural justice have informed existing studies of program formulation and implementation, leading to the conclusion that top-down implementation conflicts with key principles of participation, which may limit the program's success. Distributive justice is at the core of analyses of the program's impacts on local livelihoods, underlying conclusions that the initial payments were insufficient to cover local losses, and that current payments contribute to local incomes. An underlying hypothesis is that farmers may revert back to cropland if the payments do not cover their losses, or if they are not consulted in implementation; if payments cover losses and farmers have a say, the villagers may maintain the tree plantations.

In this paper we go a step further to examine the notions of justice embedded in state policy and those held by villagers and local state officials (cf. Sikor, 2013). We argue that it is not enough to explain the program's successes and failures with regard to local people's role in its implementation, the level of compensation they receive, or broader livelihood dynamics. Nor does it suffice to point out distributive and procedural injustices in the abstract (cf. McDermott et al., 2013). Instead, we pay explicit attention to involved actors' notions of justice as a way to explain their reactions to the state program and to develop a better understanding of how the SLCP contributes to local livelihoods and reforestation in some places and fails to do so in others. This empirical approach to justice analysis connects villagers' role in implementation, the payments made under the program, and their effects on livelihoods with another important factor influencing the program's success or failure: the compatibility of the notions of justice embedded in state policy and informing state officials' practices in implementation with villagers' ideas about what is just or unjust (cf. Whiteman, 2009; Martin et al., 2014).

The theoretical objective of our paper is to demonstrate the need to expand the analysis of PES by considering aspects of justice. The outcomes and nature of PES schemes do not simply depend on 'getting the price right' so that payment levels exceed opportunity costs (Pascual et al., 2010). Nor are they solely determined by the affected people's participation in their design and implementation via certain procedures or the crafting of suitable institutional arrangements (Vatn, 2010). Instead, the dynamics of PES on the ground are partially conditioned by the notions of justice embedded in their design, actualized in their implementation, and held by the involved actors (Sikor et al., 2013, 2014). Even though these notions may be hard to discern in practice, they are as influential on the outcomes of PES schemes as other similarly intangible factors, such as socially constructed knowledge about upstream-downstream linkages (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004).

We use an in-depth case study from the Yangliu watershed in Yunnan Province to examine the influence of notions of justice on the SLCP and on PES schemes more generally. A single case study obviously cannot yield a general explanation for why the SLCP or PES schemes succeed or fail, yet we expect this in-depth investigation to reveal the significance of justice as an element of the environmental and social dynamics effected by these interventions. Our analysis of the SLCP in Yangliu poses two key questions: first, what are the local outcomes of the SLCP in terms of local people's participation in its implementation, land use changes, and effects on livelihoods; and second, how do the notions of justice embedded in state policy and held by villagers and local state officials influence the observed local outcomes?

The paper has six sections. Following the introduction we present the empirical approach to justice that informs our research. Next, we introduce the study site and summarize our research methods. Then we discuss the outcomes of the SLCP at the study

site in terms of local people's role in its implementation, land use changes, and livelihood dynamics, and relate the observed outcomes to the notions of justice held by villagers and local state officials and contained in state policy. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for understanding the outcomes and dynamics of China's SLCP and PES schemes worldwide.

Applying an environmental justice lens to PES

The approach to justice taken in this paper follows those of Martinez-Alier (2002), Schlosberg (2007), Walker (2011), and Sikor (2013), who demonstrate how multiple notions of justice inform environmental practices and politics in the global South. They do not attempt to derive universal principles of justice in a deductive manner or develop abstract templates for external evaluations of justice. Instead, they rather seek to understand the notions of justice asserted by people, examining how some of these gain support and come to be considered legitimate. The authors neither assert the existence of universally shared notions of justice nor seek to weigh the relative validity of competing notions in an objective, detached manner. Their emphasis is on understanding the notions of environmental justice that are important to people and analyzing how they affect what people do and want.

This empirical approach considers notions of environmental justice in the three dimensions of distribution, participation, and recognition (Sikor, 2013). Distributive justice refers to the ability of different actors to enjoy environmental benefits, avoid environmental harm, and take on a fair share of management responsibilities. Participation, or procedural justice, considers how decisions about environmental management are made. It includes attention to people's roles in decision-making and the rules governing it. Recognition involves acknowledging people's distinct identities and histories and is at the core of many indigenous peoples' claims. It calls for respect for social and cultural differences such as different visions of the environment and desirable environmental management.

The empirical approach to justice does not assume that all claims of justice are equally legitimate and influential (Walker, 2011; Sikor, 2013). They are not equally legitimate, as only some claims receive support in public discourse as being morally right whereas others encounter opposition; and they are not equally influential, as some claims are always more visible while other voices find it difficult to get heard. In other words, people assert notions of justice against a background of differences in wealth, power, identity, etc. and rarely operate on a level playing field when making claims to justice. The notions of environmental justice that are considered legitimate and influential reflect the influence of unequal power relations and the specific political economic context (Schroeder et al., 2008; Zeitoun and McLaughlin, 2013).

The empirical approach can be applied to critically interrogate the dynamics of PES by comparing the notions of justice underlying state policy with those held by villagers and local state officials (cf. Sikor et al., 2014). Such a comparison is congruent with Whiteman's analysis of the relations between multinational companies and indigenous peoples (Whiteman, 2009), the examination of the relations between global and local norms in biodiversity conservation in Martin et al. (2014), and the framework for the analysis of project rationales laid out in McDermott et al. (2013). Each application compares the notions of environmental justice asserted by different actors: companies versus indigenous peoples, global conservation organizations versus local people, one project versus another, and in our case, Chinese policymakers and policy implementers versus rural villagers. The underlying premise is that the compatibility between notions or the lack thereof is a central social dynamic.

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