



Why were upscaled incentive programs for forest conservation adopted? Comparing policy choices in Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru



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ABSTRACT

Forest conservation policies could potentially become a centerpiece for climate change mitigation. Incentive-based conservation policies, such as payments for environmental services (PES), are seen as promising approaches to reduce deforestation. Yet, arguably the adoption of upscaled PES programs has remained slow, and when implemented their design often diverges from the principles laid out in the theory-based PES literature. In this article, we concentrate on some political economy forces that could help explaining the gap between PES theory and practice, with respect to policy adoption, including opportunities and challenges in this process. Public policy theories grasp the adoption determinants of three large, government-led incentive programs for forest conservation in the Amazon, in Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil. We use Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework to analyze decision-making regarding program initiation, including key stakeholder interviews, to understand policy choices. We find that environmental concerns are not always the prime motives for PES programs, as political and institutional contexts limit environmental policy-makers' actions. Yet, policy choice processes become less constrained when environmental issues are closer to a government's priorities.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Amazon deforestation and policy responses

The conversion of forests to agriculture and other purposes is often associated with negative environmental externalities at multiple scales (Costanza et al., 2014). In the Amazon region, primary forests are still being converted at high rates and agricultural expansion (including pastures), land colonization and resettlement programs have been key drivers, with mining and logging sometimes facilitating access. We classify environmental policy responses into three categories, according to how they intend to affect human behavior (Börner and Vosti, 2013): (1) *disincentives* that discourage undesirable behavior through regulations, bans, protected areas, taxes and fines; (2) *incentives* encouraging conservation through subsidies, tax exemptions, certification and direct payments, and (3) *enabling measures* that may empower the effect of incentives and disincentives, such as decentralization, land-tenure reforms, or environmentally friendly technologies.

Historically, disincentive-based policies have been most commonly applied (Serroa da Motta et al., 1996). Enabling measures, often embedded into integrated conservation and development interventions, have highly context-specific, and often ambiguous effects (Weber et al., 2011; Miteva et al., 2012). More recently, governments have increasingly looked to conservation incentives, also “mirroring a growing receptivity among policy makers globally to use private incentives to achieve social-policy objectives” (Ferraro, 2011, p. 1134). Incentives have also gained momentum in the debate around international climate policy, where Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) could provide a vehicle for mitigation.

Payments for environmental services (PES) have dominated the literature and policy debates on incentive-based forest conservation in the past decade. PES initiatives in Latin America have already accumulated considerable experience on the ground (Pagiola, 2008; Kosoy et al., 2008; Corbera et al., 2009; Alix-Garcia et al., 2012; Arriagada et al., 2012; Porras et al., 2013; Costedoat et al., 2015). Much scholarly work on PES has focused on identifying criteria for efficient PES design (Jack et al. 2008; Armsworth Paul et al., 2012; Wunder et al. 2014); case-study literature also increasingly features conditions under which PES schemes may fail to fully achieve their objectives. However, we know surprisingly little about the motivations and contextual constraints

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policy-makers face when deciding whether or not to adopt incentives, and if so how to design the instruments for policy implementation in practice.

1.2. Efficiency and government-led incentive-based policies

Much of the academic PES debate is driven by discussions between optimists and pessimists. The optimists emphasize the advantages of PES as voluntary exchanges, where a well-defined environmental service is ‘bought’ by a service buyer from a service provider, who must make sure that the service is delivered (Wunder, 2005). The related literature identifies the conditions for environmentally efficient interventions and highlights optimal design principles, such as spatial targeting and differentiated payments (Pagiola et al., 2005; Wunder, 2007, 2013; Wünscher et al., 2008; Engel et al., 2008; Ferraro, 2008).

The PES critics, in turn, argue that most payment schemes do not match the above mentioned PES definition, and hence propose broader conceptualizations, highlighting the institutional dimensions of PES (Corbera et al., 2009) and how conditional transfers are embedded in social relations, values and perceptions (Muradian et al., 2010, 2013). They also discuss the role of the state in PES, questioning the benefits and the viability of payment schemes based purely on market mechanisms (Vatn, 2010). Critics tend to be more concerned with the potential negative behavioral effects of conditioning payments on conservation, such as potential crowding out of intrinsic motives for conservation (Vatn, 2010; Muradian and Rival, 2012).

Empirical assessments suggest that particularly most large-scale, government-led PES programs have yet to demonstrate substantial conservation effects, and in many cases fail to adopt efficiency-oriented design features (Wunder et al., 2008; Pagiola, 2008; Pattanayak et al., 2010; Alix-Garcia et al., 2012; Arriagada et al., 2012; Costedoat et al., 2015).

What motivations drive government policy makers when deciding whether or not to implement a PES scheme? And why do they only reluctantly adopt the principles for cost-effective PES devised by “PES optimists”? The main goal of this article is to enrich this debate with comparative case-based findings from Latin America. In this article, we will not look so much into program design issues (which is the subject of forthcoming work), but concentrate on policy adoption. We will seek to understand how these incentive programs were born, and what determined policy-makers’ choices. We find that a mechanistic understanding of environmental policies as tools to respond to well-defined market failures is oversimplifying the underlying policy process, and eventually limits scientists’ ability to provide useful advice to policy makers. A hypothesis guiding us in the following is that the political and institutional context of the policy processes leading to the adoption of PES programs represents a significant constraint for optimal PES design. This generic point has been stressed by Engel et al. (2008), but closer investigations of the political concerns and interferences into decision-making processes of incentive-based conservation policies are still widely lacking (Le Coq et al., 2012). Hopefully our study can start helping to fill this knowledge gap.

We aim to contribute to this debate by analyzing how three government-led conservation programs in countries with territories in the Amazon region were adopted by their respective national and subnational administrations. Many incentive-based forest conservation policies are currently being developed in the region, but not all of them have, at the same time, the consolidated organizational structure, the geographic and demographic scale, the degree of government involvement, and the high profile among scholars and policy makers as the selected programs. We decided on a maximum of three cases to balance the need for

detailed analysis, with the objective of learning from diverse implementation contexts. The Amazon region was chosen because of its relevance for biodiversity, carbon storage and regional climate regulation, and because of the increased relevance of incentive-based policies for the region’s governments. We focus on the characteristics of political and administrative organizations inside and outside the government, and on government leadership that led to policy adoption.

Our research is based on interviews with policy-makers directly and indirectly involved with program adoption, as well as current and former technical staff. We also analyzed official policy documents and, when possible, communications, drafts, presentations, meeting minutes, and other written materials produced as part of the decision-making processes. The sampling of respondents was based on previous knowledge by the researcher of key decision makers in the programs (reputational criteria) and on the selection of institutional positions (e.g. Program Director) whose occupiers play key roles in the programs (positional criteria), to be complemented with further names to be suggested in the initial interviews (snowball/chain referral approach). Such strategy is in line with the sampling methodology suggested by Tansey (2007) for interviewing elites. This sampling strategy works best for the kind of research proposed here, because the type of sensitive information required is seldom systematically documented, and sometimes only a very small number of insiders were able to account for the relevant processes.

“We can never confirm a theory with 100% certainty; instead we stop when we are satisfied that the found explanation is able to account for the outcome beyond any reasonable doubt” (Beach and Pedersen, 2011, p. 26). In the spirit of this insight, we are aware that the narratives provided by the respondents are their post-rationalized evaluation of the processes under study. Such statements thus already carry some analytical reasoning that usually cannot be consubstantiated empirically. Hence, although this work carefully and critically assessed the qualitative evidence collected, it is based on a subjective assessment of whether all of the relevant facets of the outcome, including rival explanations, have been accounted for adequately.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the analytical framework for the analysis. Section 3 provides a brief description of case studies and their institutional contexts, with a summary provided in Table 2. Section 4 discusses the cases in the light of the proposed theoretical framework. The conclusion identifies common trends between the programs and possibilities of further studies on the relation between public policy theory and incentive-based forest conservation programs.

2. Theoretical framework

The “multiple streams” framework, developed by Kingdon (1984), has been commonly used over the last three decades to analyze the introduction of policies in governmental agendas (Howlett, 1998; Brunner, 2008; Le Coq et al., 2012). Its basic elements are illustrated in Fig. 1 and described in Table 1. Essentially, the framework integrates “the interests, ideas, resources, and constraints of relevant actors” (Brunner, 2008, p. 501). Policy instruments are seen as an outcome of the interaction of three streams: problems, policy and politics, which coincide from time to time, creating so-called “policy windows” that can be seized by actors, or policy entrepreneurs, to push specific instruments towards the government’s agenda.

The *problem stream* “consists of various conditions that policy makers and citizens want addressed” (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 70). Problems are usually brought to the public attention through three main means: indicators and data; focusing events (such as disasters); and

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