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Local views and structural determinants of poverty alleviation through payments for environmental services: Bolivian insights

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ABSTRACT

Payments for environmental services (PES) are very often considered emblematic of the neoliberal trend in natural resources and ecosystem management. Even if they have been largely criticized as contributing to the commodification of nature, their worldwide application is obvious. The explanation of their diffusion in poor countries and regions can be partially attributed to the fact that PES are promoted as a "win–win" solution, capable of improving sustainable management of natural resources as well as reducing poverty. Inscribed in a liberal conception of poverty, most of the investigations on PES concentrate on the question of access of the poor to PES schemes—as well as to wider markets—on redistribution of benefits and on poor people's income increase. Studying a Bolivian PES, we show that broadening the foregoing conceptualization of poverty to a more relational understanding allows better taking into account local views and structural determinants of poverty and therefore allows better reporting of the complexity of poverty alleviation implications of such natural resource management initiatives. It is a first and necessary step in designing PES that could increase both natural resource conservation and social justice in marginalized areas.

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1. Introduction

Payments for environmental services (PES) are a natural resource management principle that aims at internalizing positive environmental externalities. PES intend to transform environmental services (like carbon storage or water purification) into commodities for becoming objects of market transactions between sellers and buyers. PES are seen as belonging to a set of tools related to a neoliberalizing trend in environmental governance. Emphasis is placed on public–private partnerships and market-based mechanisms as efficient ways to use, conserve and allocate natural resources.

In spite of criticism about their underlying economistic vision of nature and governance (Kosoy & Corbera, 2010), PES are now widely applied. Part of their legitimacy in developing countries comes from the assumption that they can promote forest conservation, as well as poverty reduction (McAfee & Shapiro, 2010), in a "win–win" approach. The contribution of PES to poverty alleviation mostly concerns PES' ability to facilitate market access and/or revenue increase. Accordingly, research on other than material and monetary impacts of PES on poverty is rare (Greiner & Stanley, 2013).

After recalling the foundations of the neoliberal analysis of poverty and their implications for PES assessment methods, we move beyond the money metrics by analyzing a Bolivian PES called "*Acuerdos Recíprocos por el Agua (ARA)*".[1] We show that social recognition represents a central evaluation criterion of locals to participate in the ARA. We illustrate how the ARA are constructing recognition relationships and how this could lead to the transformation or reproduction of existing institutions and power structures.

2. Poverty and poverty alleviation through PES

The theoretical and conceptual anchor of neoliberalism refers to a "classical liberalism" claiming for minimal state interventions and submitting "*all human activities, values, institutions, and practices to market principles*" (p. 118) (Brown, 2011). Despite local variations in the implementation of the neoliberal paradigm, the dissemination of the neoliberal *doxa* has mutated public policy. Many States have moved from an interventionist and

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[1] Reciprocal agreements on water.

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counter-cyclical economic governance to policies that prioritize deregulation as a means of enhancing entrepreneurial activity.

Hence, poverty is seen as a condition of a residual group of ill-adapted people (Thorsen & Lie, 2006). Poor people understood in this way can only be lifted out of poverty through trickling down of economic growth and through the suppression of all alleged "premiums on laziness" introduced by the welfare state (social security benefits without counterparts, etc.). The latter are considered as reinforcing the passive acceptance of unequal and clientelist relationships preventing individuals from "*improv*[ing] *their capacities and inclinations as economic citizens*" (p. 5) (Golooba-Mutebi & Hickey, 2009). Therefore, the main strategy for alleviating poverty consists in liberalizing economic relations and creating appropriate incentives for making agents fit the market conditions (p. 6) (Dixon, 2012).

We will see how this vision of poverty runs through the debate on PES' poverty alleviation potential and why it needs to be nuanced to address both local views on poverty and structural determinants of the latter.

Engel, Pagiola, and Wunder (2008) considered the PES initiatives as having a win–win character from "*generating profits to land users while generating [environmental] positive externalities*" for society as a whole, measurable through the "*net profitability of land-uses*" (op. cit.: 670). Moreover, even if PES initiatives have not been originally designed as pro-poor but to promote conservation (Pagiola, Arcenas, & Platais, 2005), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) created in 2010 the *Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation* initiative; the latter pretends to "*provide new knowledge demonstrating how ecosystem services can reduce poverty and enhance well-being for the world's poor*" (p. 1) (ESPA (Ecosystem Services for Poverty alleviation), 2012). Since then, conservation through PES is also presented as "*an unrivaled opportunity to combat poverty*" (p. 3) (ESPA (Ecosystem Services for Poverty alleviation), 2011) because the poorest are often the most dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. PES would then help secure the livelihoods of the poor. PES are also praised for their ability to formalize and secure private property rights on land (Leimona & Lee, 2008). In a Coasian perspective, this is a crucial element within the neoliberal vision of poverty alleviation, yet private land titles facilitate access to the credit system (Pirard, 2012).

A special issue of *Land Use Policy Journal* on the social dimensions of market-based instruments[2] illustrates this neoliberal framing of poverty and social issues. Zammit (2013) focuses on the question of access of the poor to PES.[3] She investigates the *a priori* capacities of the poorest to access PES but does not question whether accessing PES schemes equates with active participation of the poor and, above all, if this actually has a positive impact on their poverty situation. By doing so, such studies tend to create a positive bias toward PES, considering PES as systematically positive for the poorest as long as they can access it. As for Hoang, Do, Pham, van Noordwijk, and Minang (2013), who analyze the distribution of benefits among PES participants in Vietnam, and Courtney, Mills, Gaskell, and Chaplin (2013), who concentrate on the indirect effects of PES on regional employment in Europe. Those studies tend to focus on the distribution of material and monetary assets, conceiving poverty and equity in distributional terms only.

Few studies went beyond this distributional framing including criteria like "*non-income-related provider social co-benefits*" (p. 6) (Greiner & Stanley, 2013), "*social status within society*" (p. 171) (German, Ruhweza, Mwesigwa, & Kalanzi, 2010) and increase in local leadership. However, the measurement of the monetary and material impacts of PES remains dominant; Caplow, Jagger, Lawlor, and Sills (2011) argue for finding "*measures that use common metrics and scales for analyzing both biophysical and welfare outcomes*" (op. cit.: 164).

2.1. Contextualized conception of poverty beyond material deprivation

The paradigm of material and monetary poverty explores poverty in terms of an individual falling below an arbitrary threshold of income, the poverty line, preventing him from acquiring goods and services considered necessary. This definition, as accurate as it is, does not take into account that if poverty means lack of resources, it is also a social construction since the lack of resources reflects the living standards and expectations within a particular society. Structuralists have focused on the influence of class or gender and their intersections on shaping poverty. Post-structuralists recognize the regulatory power of discourses and routines on the social practice and the construction of poverty. Agency[4] then interacts with those social structures (p. 111) Ifejika Speranza, Wiesmann, & Rist, 2014, leading to situations of relative well-being or poverty. Consequently, poverty is contingent, linked to social representations and individual experiences, and is embedded in value systems. These approaches justify adding qualitative perspectives and metrics of poverty assessments.

The importance of the status of the poor (Paugam, 2005) and the evaluation of who is considered by himself or others as poor—or not—is central in research on the Andean communities; especially because of the current spreading of the "*vivir bien*" concept, contributing to a postmodernist perception of well-being and poverty. "*Vivir bien*" refers to being "in a relationship" with other persons and nature, focusing on connectivity between biocenosis and biotope (Medina, 2011), or to an economy of care (León, 2008). The term poverty does not exist in the Aymara and Quechua languages (Mallard, 2014). In an emic understanding, poverty refers to not-*vivir-bien*, not being "in a relationship", being isolated, not included in webs of reciprocity that span across different spheres of life. To some extent, the "*vivir bien y no mejor*" discourse of the Bolivian government could be considered as referring to the concept of degrowth (Martínez-Alier, 2012). Poverty does not only depend on access to a quantity of material goods or services but on the quality of goods and relationships between members of a community living in a specific milieu.

Consequently, from a scientific as well as from a policy point of view, the impacts of PES schemes on poverty alleviation should be carefully analyzed, using a broader conception of poverty, including both material and relational dimensions, and being sensitive to locals' perceptions.

3. The case of the "*Acuerdos Recíprocos por el Agua*"

The PES scheme "*Acuerdos Recíprocos por el Agua*" concerns the creation of a new institution linking up- and downstream actors through a local fund, used for channeling of financial contributions from downstream water users, mainly municipal authorities and local water cooperatives of the downstream villages.[5]

Since the early 2000s, the *Natura Bolivia Foundation* (NBF), a local NGO active in the area of forest conservation in the department of Santa Cruz, eastern Bolivia, has coordinated the above mentioned actors and has also contributed financially to the local fund. The money of this fund serves to compensate farmers in the upstream communities, who previously agreed to put part of their forestland under conservation (i.e. not deforesting) and concentrate grazing in a small, enclosed portion of their land.

[2] 2013, vol. 31.

[3] Presenting a comparison of PES in various continents, they question the impact of unequal levels of wealth, knowledge and land tenure on individual access to PES.

[4] Understood as a capacity to act and react over structures, not always intentional.

[5] Municipal authority transfers part of its annual budget to the fund and cooperative members pay a supplementary fee on their water bills going directly to the fund.

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