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Messiness of forest governance: How technical approaches suppress politics in REDD+ and conservation projects

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ABSTRACT

Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) was originally conceived to address the global problem of climate change by reducing deforestation and forest degradation at national and subnational levels in developing countries. Since its inception, REDD+ proponents have increasingly had to adapt global ideas to local demands, as the rollout process was met with on-the-ground realities, including suspicion and protest. As is typical in aid or 'development' projects conceived in the global North, most of the solutions advanced to improve REDD+ tend to focus on addressing issues of justice (or 'fairness') in distributive terms, rather than addressing more inherently political objections to REDD+ such as those based on rights or social justice. Using data collected from over 700 interviews in five countries with both REDD+ and non-REDD+ cases, we argue that the failure to incorporate political notions of justice into conservation projects such as REDD+ results in 'messiness' within governance systems, which is a symptom of injustice and illegitimacy. We find that, first, conservation, payment for ecosystem services, and REDD+ project proponents viewed problems through a technical rather than political lens, leading to solutions that focused on procedures, such as 'benefit distribution.' Second, focusing on the technical aspects of interventions came at the expense of political solutions such as the representation of local people's concerns and recognition of their rights. Third, the lack of attention to representation and recognition justices resulted in illegitimacy. This led to messiness in the governance systems, which was often addressed in technical terms, thereby perpetuating the problem. If messiness is not appreciated and addressed from appropriate notions of justice, projects such as REDD+ are destined to fail.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, important new global conventions and initiatives such as Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals have been launched to address climate change and development. These initiatives advance international strategies for addressing global problems that have profoundly localised effects. They are therefore likely to generate friction among actors operating at multiple levels with myriad different interests, concerns, and perspectives (Sanders et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2016). In this contribution, we focus on conservation, payment for ecosystem services (PES) and REDD+. With climate change increasingly on global agendas, there is a growing morass of actors involved in large-scale initiatives to align land and forest use with climate mitigation goals. Therefore, examining the ways in which actors interact with one another, and the logics with which arguments are framed, is especially prudent in order to better understand on-the-ground outcomes of emerging programs that aspire to improve environmental, social, and governance outcomes.

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In this contribution, we seek to understand more clearly what appears to be a fundamental contradiction: global actors continue to apply problematic large-scale technical solutions (Sunderlin and Sills, 2012; Blom et al., 2010; DeShazo et al., 2016) to issues that are broadly recognised as deeply political (Doolittle, 2010). We explore the manifestations of this problem using data from a qualitative, nested comparative study of 54 land use change initiatives in 11 subnational regions in five countries, and analyse them by linking diverging concepts relating to the 'technical' and 'political' aspects of governance with notions of environmental justice and legitimacy. We use 'legitimacy' in a sociological sense, pertaining to the extent to which others believe an institution to have the right to authority, rather than in the normative sense, which is related to the right to rule (cf. Buchanan and Keohane, 2009). These cases were selected to contrast emerging initiatives to reduce deforestation with sites where conventional agricultural and extractive economic activities are causing or threatening to cause deforestation. Because the initiatives to reduce deforestation were undergirded by global environmental politics, including ambitious multilateral initiatives like REDD+, they provide an opportunity to examine theories that link multi-level governance institutions and environmental justice in an urgent context. The research was not designed with such a task in mind. Rather, the ideas and model presented here should be considered exploratory, emerging from the analysis of the cases, in light of existing theory. Our goal is to advance theoretical ideas that implore different actions by governments, NGOs, activists, and researchers, both echoing and clarifying long-standing calls by other scholars and activists.

The word 'governance' is sometimes used as a technical alternative to the more political 'reform' or 'social change' (de Alcantara, 1998), but we consider governance to be both technical and political. The case can be made that the term 'governance' proliferated throughout the global development apparatus in the 1980s and 1990s precisely because it offered a cozy alternative to the term 'politics', which international aid agencies were not permitted to discuss (Leftwich, 1994; Rose,1999). Technical perspectives of governance include apolitical and inoffensive (at least to a quorum of hegemonic powers) terminologies and logics of rules and standards. This may involve an emphasis on 'safeguards' for example, for which technical definitions exist to 'protect vulnerable populations', or 'sustainability', which some see as a technocratic diversion from land tenure rights (cf. Bending and Rosendo, 2006). Technical governance perspectives seek legitimacy in rules, and sometimes narrow considerations of fairness.

Political perspectives, on the other hand, are more elusive to definition, more contested, and legitimised through tradition, culture and power relations (Fraser, 2009; Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001). Contestations over rights, for example, exemplify political negotiation (Larson, 2011). Technical perspectives are sometimes required in order to focus complex discussions among disparate actors to come to some form of action, but in the process, political notions are often lost, or obscured deliberately, by negotiators.

Land rights and land use decisions are necessarily political in the traditional sense that they have a bearing on "who gets what" (Lasswell, 1950), but they also have profound implications for justice, as different land use decisions and decision-making processes privilege particular notions of justice. Some land use decisions, such as performance-based payments for conservation outcomes, view justice as primarily 'distributive', in that an equitable distribution of material resources is largely equated, at least implicitly, with justice (Martin et al., 2013). Other approaches to conservation, such as rights-based strategies, privilege notions of justice built around "recognition" of rights and "representation" in political spaces (Brockington et al., 2006; Ribot, 1996; Brockington et al., 2008).

Further complicating issues of justice embedded in the politics of land use are questions of scale (Fraser, 2009). As the politics of land use involve negotiations between actors from many different levels and with diverse interests - from smallholder farmers who struggle to meet their basic needs, to regional and national government officials with mixed mandates to promote both environmental conservation and economic development, to donors and environmentalists operating both locally and internationally– who should even be considered in questions of justice, whether distributive or recognition-oriented, is itself contested.

In the following section, we explore the ideas of 'rendering technical', environmental justice, and legitimacy. Following our introduction of theory, we present empirical evidence on land use changes in five countries. Through our analysis, we show how the concept of 'messiness' provides insight into how projects behave and what we might learn from them to improve effectiveness, efficiency and equity in attempts to address global climate change through forest conservation.

2. Theory

2.1. Rendering technical and anti-politics

We use Li's (2007a,b) turn of phrase 'rendering technical' to describe the ways in which the political is made technical (see also Colchester, 1994; Ferguson, 1994). Li (2007a), p.263 identifies six ways in which actors are brought together in an assemblage, which we specify here to mean a project aiming to reduce carbon emissions from, or conserve, forests. She shows that such assemblages feature the following: 1) forging alignments, 2) rendering technical, 3) authorising knowledge, 4) managing failures, 5) anti-politics, and 6) reassembling. These processes are conducted by a range of actors, and from divergent perspectives. Rendering technical involves investigating, mapping, classifying, and documenting local communities, sometimes using 'participatory processes' that make assumptions about who should participate, where boundaries should be drawn, and the nature of the problem being one that can be solved through technical means (Li, 2007b, 2011). Milne and Adams (2012) show an analysis of how REDD + projects in Cambodia are made anti-political through rendering technical in order to set clear boundaries and limit participation in the project decision-making processes, thereby affecting suggested evaluation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency and equity (the so-called 3Es, focussing on benefit-sharing following Stern (2006), which considers equity in highly technical and distributional terms. See Angelsen (2008, 2009)). The aspects of rendering technical and anti-politics are key for de-politicising the context that the project aims to address and through authorising knowledge (of climate change or markets for example). Anti-politics is therefore the process of separating direct technical objectives, such as conserving forests or increasing carbon sequestration, from social transformation and political change (Bebbington, 2005; Büscher, 2010).

We see analyses of rendering technical and anti-politics in the works of Ferguson (1994) who critiques technical approaches in the 'deployment of development' and Li (2007b) who explores "expert" interventions that attempt to improve the welfare of the poor through "development". Bernstein (1996) addresses the political nature of markets by calling for a deeper exploration into "real markets". Sikor and Pham (2005) and Bourdieu (2005) show that just as markets are not simply economic agreements among actors, land use decisions are highly political and cannot function without politicised relations. Rules around these projects and markets are highly technical, guided as they are by complex international laws, conventions and treaties. REDD+ is also highly technical in its conceptualisation (ie. carbon stock and markets, mapping, jurisdictional approaches, benefit sharing) and language (ie. trade-offs, decarbonisation, biomass, additionality, biotrade) (UN-REDD, 2015).

The process of bringing diverse interests together on a global scale requires making some 'trade-offs' (to use a technical term) in order to come to consensus around the points on which actors can agree. These trade-offs result in critiques of global agreements as 'watered down' or