Transnational self-help networks and community forestry: A theoretical framework☆

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ABSTRACT

Global forest governance is generally analyzed as highly fragmented, meaning that it involves a multiplicity of actors and institutions. This fragmentation may be one explanation of the proliferation of multiple discourses around forest governance produced by some dominant actors. In this context, community forestry organizations are seeking, through their association in the form of transnational self-help networks, to promote alternative discourses around their own model of communitarian governance. These recent experiences question the traditional concepts and approaches that only consider community forestry organizations at the local scale.

Based on a transnational political sociology perspective and on concrete experiences from Mesoamerica, this paper aims to present an innovative analytical framework to understand how transnational self-help networks of community forestry contribute to transform norms of forest governance through their discourses. It aims in particular to capture the mechanisms leading to the translation of norms between scales and the production of discourse coalitions within the network. The goal is finally to consider transnational self-help networks of community forestry as full-fledged actors within global forest governance, with the capacity to transform the nature of key norms of governance, particularly those directly affecting their own model.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, forests are the object of increasing attempts to address the issue of deforestation at the international scale, especially in the context of rising efforts to fight climate change. The lack of a structured international regime may be one potential explanation for the proliferation of multiple discourses around forest governance emerging from these global arenas that reflect the power of some actors involved in the issue (Howlett et al., 2010; Giessen, 2013). In this global context, community forestry actors, organized around a model of self-managed resource governance at the local scale, are facing different transformations to incorporate new global challenges such as climate change, and to maintain their model in front of increasingly centralized decision-making processes (Young et al., 2006; Armitage, 2008).

With regard to the Mesoamerican region, one of the most innovative experiences may be the recent creation of transnational self-help networks by community forestry organizations themselves, such as the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB). This network was created in 2010 to defend community forestry in front of States and other international actors. This new type of self-managed networks aims at presenting the model of community forest governance as a viable solution to key contemporary issues such as deforestation and

climate change. However, beyond just promoting a governance model, transnational action also appears as a way to actively participate in the global processes of discourses and norm production around forest resources.

These recent developments go beyond the static vision of community forestry organizations, according to which they would be limited to local action. Indeed, these actors are far from standing on the fringe of the current globalization dynamics of forest governance, either through their integration into transnational protest movements or through the creation of their own networks. However, this rescaling process raises several questions: how do these actors, traditionally rooted in local contexts, manage to organize and build alternative discourses around forest governance on such a scale? To what extent are these discourses the expression of translated norms of forest governance?

This paper aims to answer these questions through the presentation of a theoretical framework based on the relatively new field of transnational political sociology. More precisely, it aims to consider transnational self-help networks as new actors of global forest governance, and to understand their role in the transformation of norms of forest governance. In a first part, the context of fragmented global forest governance and its possible impact on local community forestry organizations will be presented. In a second part, concrete experiences of community forestry networks in Mesoamerica will be presented to illustrate the new concept of transnational self-help networks developed in this paper. Finally, a theoretical framework mainly based on the sociology of translation will be set to better understand the discursive strategies

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☆ This article belongs to the Special Issue: Community Forestry.
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and scale mobilization implemented by some key actors within the networks, as a new way to transform community forestry norms of governance in a context of globalization.

2. Community forestry in a context of fragmented global forest governance

At the global scale, more than one billion people depend directly or indirectly on forests to sustain their livelihood, out of which 18% are managed by communities.[1] These activities can range from exploitation for timber production, agroforestry to processing of products. Community forestry really started to be taken into consideration in the 1970s, with the introduction by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of forestry programs in collaboration with rural populations, and the rising recognition of the importance of forests for human development. This governance model gradually increased in developing countries through decentralization programs, from 200 million hectares (ha) in 1980 to 450 million in 2000.[2] In general, community forestry can be defined as: "the exercise by local people of power or influence over decisions regarding management of forests, including the rules of access and the disposition of products" (McDermott and Schreckenberg, 2009: 158).

In the 1990s, some authors tried to overcome the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968) to highlight the possibilities of creating self-organizing systems between individuals at the local scale in order to sustainably manage resources (Ostrom, 1990). They thus provided an explanation of the conditions for the emergence and perpetuation of these community systems at the local scale, as a third way between the state and the market, around key principles such as autonomy, horizontality or reciprocity (Ostrom, 1990). However, despite their number and important contribution to the improvement of basic services to the populations, these organizations often remain invisible or little recognized beyond the local scale.

In addition, they are part of a wider context of global forest governance, which could have a significant impact back at the local scale. Indeed, it is important to mention both the fragmented nature of this global forest governance, which has no formal international regime (Giessen, 2013), and its conflictive aspect regarding the definition of norms of governance by multiple actors (fight against climate change, biodiversity conservation…). Several authors then prefer talking about a "regime-complex" to describe the diversity of institutions and initiatives around global forest governance, developed to address the limitations of interstate governance and the failure as for the adoption of an international convention (Howlett et al., 2010; Keohane and Victor, 2011). Thus, "it is a patchwork of international institutions that are different in their character (organizations and implicit and explicit norms and goals), constituencies (public and private), spatial scope (from bilateral to global), and subject matter (from specific policy fields to universal concerns)" (Biermann et al., 2009: 4).

Moreover, the multidimensional nature of forest governance has encouraged its connection to other international regimes, such as biodiversity and climate change, which benefit from a more structured regulatory framework (McDermott et al., 2010). For example, under the international climate change regime was launched in 2008 the UN-REDD Programme (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation). This program aims to fight deforestation by creating a financial value for the carbon stored in forests. It is essentially built on a market-based approach around the concept of payment for ecosystemic services, and a distributive conception of equity around the principle of efficiency. However, this type of global program is facing some problems of mismatch between local realities and international conceptions (Cashore et al., 2012). As an example, REDD programs are

blamed for leading to a recentralization of forest governance at the national scale, and to an exacerbation of social inequalities between local actors (Agrawal et al., 2010). Disagreements about norms and paradigms induced by these global programs may be one explanation for the proliferation of transnational protests, mainly directed against the lack of local communities' inclusion in decision-making processes.

This fragmentation of global forest governance represents both an opportunity and a constraint for local communities. On one hand, it represents an opportunity in the sense that the transition from a hierarchical system of global governance to a horizontal network system enables civil society actors to get more weight and easy access to the international arenas of decision-making (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Bulkeley, 2005). But on the other hand, it also represents an important constraint in terms of the high number of actors in potential competition for the construction of discourses and norms about resource governance. Several studies do mention the role of dominant coalitions of actors in the construction and evolution of discourses structuring global forest governance. One central element of discourse construction is the "framing", defined as "strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (Khagram et al., 2002: 12). These framing strategies can involve different scalar dynamics, for example to define the resource as local or global in function of the goal pursued. As a consequence, the way some problem will be constructed will then influence the possible institutional change or norm transformation. It can be mentioned for example the role of environmental NGOs in the construction of a discourse on sustainable development and illegal logging, or the role of indigenous communities in the production of a discourse on biodiversity access and property rights (Arts and Buizer, 2009).

Therefore, many authors point to the need for community systems to organize at other scales than the local one, in order to adapt to these contemporary changes and acquire a role in international mechanisms of discourses and norm construction (Young et al., 2006; Armitage, 2008). Community organizations are indeed inserted into multi-level processes that involve various changes in their modes of governance. These processes particularly encourage going beyond self-management limits (low technical and financial resources) through the establishment of partnerships between organizations at national and transnational scales (Dedeurwaerdere, 2005). Precisely in response to these changes, various local, national and regional initiatives have emerged to consolidate the efforts of community organizations to promote and strengthen their model of governance, such as the recent Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB). These processes justify the development of an innovative conceptual framework to link community forestry and transnational action.

3. Transnational self-help networks of community forestry: a conceptual construction from empirical evidence

This section aims to provide a conceptual perspective on transnational self-help networks from recent experiences of community forestry organizations in Mesoamerica. The distinctive features of these networks, which are composed only of community organizations, and the significant jump between scales that they are experiencing, invite to adopt a new conceptual perspective on the role that these networks are assuming in a context of globalization.

3.1. The emergence of transnational community forestry networks: a Mesoamerican perspective

The study of the Mesoamerican region is particularly interesting to highlight recent changes in the forms of governance of community forestry organizations. Indeed, this region appears emblematic of the development of self-help networks and protest movements against international programs. Whereas Mesoamerica represents only 2.2% of