Powerful stakeholders as drivers of community forestry — Results of an international study

Carsten Schusser *, Max Krott, Mbolo C. Yufanyi Movuh, Jacqueline Logmani, Rosan R. Devkota, Ahmad Maryudi, Manjola Salla, Ngo Duy Bach

Department of Forest and Nature Conservation Policy, Georg-August University Goettingen, Buesgenweg 3, 37077 Goettingen, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Community forestry is a complex collective action by forest users that takes place within a broader network of multiple actors at local, national and international levels. This paper looks at all relevant actors and tests the hypothesis of whether they have a significant influence on the outcomes of community forestry. The empirical basis comprises 57 cases of community forestry in four developing and one developed country. The cases were selected to represent a variety of political conditions and best practices, defined as success in the achievement of high outcomes. The actors were theoretically defined, and we identified political, economic and societal actors. Additionally, their power and interests were theoretically defined and observed in the field studies. The group of powerful actors desires specific outcomes for the local users of the community forests. As far as the ecological outcomes, some 40% of the powerful actors prefer sustained forest stands, and 20% also find biodiversity to be important. With regard to the economic contribution to the local users, 25% of powerful actors support only a subsistence level for the local users, and 25% prefer higher economic contributions. Within the social outcomes, 40% of powerful actors accept devolution of some information and decision rights to the local users, but only 2% would grant them full empowerment. The interests of the powerful actors were compared with the outcomes achieved in practice. A comparison shows that within each outcome there is a congruence of 82–90% between the interests of powerful actors and the outcomes for local users. We interpret these findings as empirical evidence that powerful actors have a significant influence on the outcomes of community forestry for the local users.

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1. Focussing on actors' power

"The world is driven by different factor and if you like it or not someone is always more important than others [sic]."[1]

Decentralisation approaches started at the end of the 1970s, when policy makers and scientists realised that the centrally-managed government systems had failed to stop continuing deforestation (McDermott and Schreckenberg, 2009; Devkota, 2010). The term "community forestry" came into use in the 1970s, when the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation initiated activities and programmes related to rural communities and their forest-related activities. Since then, community-based management concepts, in particular community forestry programmes, have been established in many countries around the globe (Agrawal, 2007).

Shackleton et al. (2002) characterise the paradigm shift in which there is a move away from state-centred control and toward an approach in which local people play a much more active role. This requires devolution of power to local users, even at the community level (Ostrom, 1999; Acharya, 2002; Lachapelle et al., 2004; Nygren, 2005). This can be achieved formally, in a situation in which "governments grant control" or informally, "in the absence of formal rights" (Poteete and Ostrom, 2004) where the absence of formal rights can also be seen as the absence of governmental control.

Devolution of power does not imply the disappearance of multiple actors with forest interests. Instead, it is a challenge to their interest in reaping benefits from the forest. A comparative analysis by Shackleton et al (2002) shows that multiple actors still wield a strong influence in community forestry. Traditional leaders, local government, NGOs, donors and the private sector intervene in the collective actions of community forestry. As a consequence, the local forest users often do not benefit significantly in terms of empowerment or of livelihood improvement (Maryudi, 2011; Devkota, 2010; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2001:192). Shackleton et al. (2002) conclude: "The way in which local people realize [sic] the benefits of devolution differs widely, and negative trade-offs, mostly felt by the poor, are common". Agrawal and Gibson (1999, p. 629) suggested that it would be "more fruitful" to

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focus on "internal and external institutions that shape the decision-making process" and that it is important to know what the multiple interests of the actors are, and how they make decisions regarding natural resource conservation. Shackleton et al. (2002, p. 1) suggest the same: "More powerful actors in communities tend to manipulate devolution outcomes to suit themselves".

Based on these findings, the article examines whether the influence of powerful actors on community forestry is dominant enough to drive the outcomes more often than not. If actors' power is the decisive factor, it is not necessary to know the details of their interventions. Instead of analysing complex influences it would be sufficient to identify the power of the actors and their interests. From these two factors alone it should be possible to predict the outcomes of community forestry. The direct power analysis will add to detailed findings by Shackleton et al. (2002) about influences of different actors, a general framework which links the outcome of community forestry directly to the power of actors. The advantage of such a rigid framework is its simplicity, which makes quantification and comparative research much easier (Schusser, 2012c). Additionally, the focus on power adds scientific value, because the power factor, often stated theoretically, will be empirically measured and tested (Krott et al, 2013).

In focussing on power, we formulate the hypothesis that "the interests and power of relevant actors determine the outcomes of community forestry." The test requires a theoretical concept underlying this hypothesis and empirical data to test it.

The theoretical concept has to clarify the independent variable "interests and power of relevant actors" and the dependent variable "outcomes of community forestry". The paper first introduces briefly our concept of actors with regard to community forestry, and of their interests and power. Then we present our concept of outcomes of community forestry. Finally we discuss the results from testing the hypothesis with data from five selected countries.

2. Theoretical concept of powerful actors within community forestry

2.1. Theory-based actor classification

Many investigations have looked at community forestry and identified different actors as important players. But none of this research has defined its actors explicitly and theoretically. Poteete and Ostrom (2004, p. 216) mention that "Inconsistent terminology […] may obscure consistent patterns or suggest a pattern where none exists." Apart from that, this inconsistency makes it impossible to compare actors identified within different studies. To overcome this problem, this article uses a theoretical actor definition as well as a theoretical actor classification model proposed by Schusser et al. (submitted for publication). As Schusser points out, the implicit theoretical common basis of much research dealing with actors is that actors are assumed to be entities that have the possibility of influencing processes in order to achieve their own goals (Jansen and Schubert, 1995; Kooiman, 1993; Maynitz, 1993; Rhodes, 1997; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2001; Shackleton et al., 2002; Maynitz, 2004; Schimank, 2005; Hermans and Thissen, 2009; Schneider, 2009). Furthermore, Böcher and Töller (2012), and Blum and Schubert (2011) go one step further and attribute the term "goal" to an actor's distinct interest. Based on this, Schusser defines an actor as any entity that has a distinct interest and the possibility of influencing a policy. With this definition, the "relevant" actors covered by our hypothesis are easy to determine: in the cases we study all actors who are relevant and who have a distinct interest in a specific instance of community forestry.

This definition allows for different possibilities for what an actor can be, e.g., an individual person, like a sawmill owner, or a composite actor, like a government institution. It associates the term "actor" strictly to a specific type of policy, e.g., policy on community forestry, only if it is possible for the actor to influence it. Interests in community forestry

and sources of power may shift over time. Therefore, relevant actors are not static throughout time. It can happen that, during some periods in the development of a community forestry project, specific actors become irrelevant due to a change in their interests.

It should be underscored that linking interests directly to the influence on community forestry excludes all actors from our list who have an interest but lack the ability to influence community forestry. This selection is justified by a limited aim, i.e., describing the drivers of community forestry. Projects interested in evaluating broad effects or justifications for community forestry will need to enlarge the group of relevant actors.

Applying this definition, Schusser et al. (submitted for publication) arrives at the actor classification in Table 1. The three categories, political, economic and social, are derived from the role an actor plays within the political, economic or social subsystem (Luhmann 1986, p. 216). Basic roles within the political system are politicians, public administration, boards, donors and associations. Political theory describes their tasks and their legitimation. In addition, the traditional leaders are identified. They are not part of the formal political system but, at an informal level, they still play their traditional roles in many countries and will be classified as politicians.

Within the economic system, the study discriminates between the forest user group representative and other user group representatives, entrepreneurs and consultants. They all conduct primarily economic activities related to the forest. The entrepreneurs are identified by any economic activity. Therefore this type of actor comprises multiple producers and consumers of forest goods and services. The forest user group representative is the actor who manages the community forest. He acts formally on behalf of the forest users.

Finally, the social actors are the research institutions and the media. They define their key tasks as being independent from the political system. All actors exist on different geographical levels (regional, national and international levels).

For this study, the forests users' ability to carry out collective action, in particular community-based forest management is seen as an outcome of community forestry. Therefore, the forest user is not forgotten as an actor; on the contrary, the forest user is analysed more in detail in the outcome evaluation, with regard to empowerment and livelihood improvements.

2.2. Actor-centred power

The actor-centred power approach is defined by Krott et al. (2013) as a social relationship between actors in which one actor can alter the behaviour of another actor without recognising the latter's will. Actor-centred power is linked to actors directly. They play the role of potentate or subordinate, depending on their power sources and the specific issue at hand. The most powerful actors can be identified by accumulating their roles as potentates. This can be done within the framework of a power network, discriminating a group of powerful actors from a group of weak ones (Devkota, 2010; Maryudi, 2011). The model does not assume that the powerful actors are always most powerful because in specific relations they might be forced to the subordinate side. Actor-centred power specifies the following three elements of the general term "power":

- Coercion: altering the behaviour of another actor by force
- Incentives: altering the behaviour of another actor by providing advantages (or disadvantages)
- Dominant information (when building up power): alteration of another actor's behaviour due to his accepting information without verifying it.

Power is assumed only if behaviour is altered by force, (dis-)incentives or unverified information. These particularities allow the separation of power from other social relations that alter the