



Governing forest restoration: Local case studies of sloping land conversion program in Southwest China



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ABSTRACT

The Chinese government is currently implementing the world's largest forest restoration program, the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP), which uses public payments to convert marginal cropland in upper watersheds into forests, engaging millions of mountain-dwelling households. Apart from providing financial incentives, the state has also promoted local autonomy and participation in the program. This promotion represents a big shift in forest policy that grants more power to local communities and increases the involvement of local governance in decision-making. Whether the SLCP has been effectively implemented, the extent of its ecological and socioeconomic outcomes and how its performance can be improved are still unclear in the absence of adequate biophysical and socioeconomic data. To gain a holistic understanding of the SLCP's implementation and impacts, this research examines the interplay between the governance of the policy's implementation and local variations leading to the various ecological and socioeconomic outcomes observed, based on a comparative case study in two communities. It provides a novel explanation for why the SLCP, generally implemented via a top-down approach, produces better positive outcomes in one place than in the other, and argues for the significance of local institutions in shaping the policy's outcomes. This paper recommends institutional reform across the country's socio-ecological system, with the national policy-maker considering local dynamics in policy formulation and implementation and developing mechanisms of accountability and local institutions.

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1. Introduction

In the past two decades the Chinese government has launched a series of ecological restoration programs to improve degraded ecosystem functions and services and the livelihoods of environmental-service providers, most of whom live in remote areas (Li, 2004; Yin, 2009). Among these programs, the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) is the largest and highest-funded forest restoration program, using public payments to convert marginal cropland into forest and involving millions of mountain-dwelling households as core agents of its implementation (Xu et al., 2004; Bennett, 2008).¹ From when the program began in 1999 to 2008, the SLCP has spread across 25 provinces, and the state has accumulatively invested about 23.23 billion USD in

converting over 8 million ha of cropland into forestland, with the participation of 26,840,778 households (State Forestry Administration, SFA, 2010).

The SLCP program is a milestone in Chinese forest policy, which has shifted from a command-and-control approach towards applying financial instruments that provide monetary incentives to farmers for forest restoration. More innovatively, the program intends to improve local volunteerism and autonomy in the policy's implementation (State Forestry Administration, SFA, 2002; Bennett, 2008). This has attracted international interest and research. Apart from studies focusing on the top-down approach of the program's policy formulation and implementation (Xu et al., 2004; Bennett, 2008; Yin et al., 2013), the literature concentrates on the socioeconomic impacts of the program and particularly on farmers' economic strategies and options after the program (Chen et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2009) and its implications for rural incomes and inequality (Uchida et al., 2007; Li et al., 2011). While other studies explore its local impact from a more comprehensive perspective (Weyerhaeuser et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2006), they do not adequately provide a combination of biophysical and socioeconomic evidence for a holistic understanding of the policy's implementation and impacts. Whether the SLCP has been implemented effectively, the extent of its ecological and socioeconomic outcomes, and how its performance can be improved are still not clear. In particular, there is an urgent need

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¹ SLCP is also known as "Grain for Green". Under the program, the government pays farmers with 2250 kg and 1500 kg of grain per ha of converted cropland per year in the upper reaches of the Yangtze and Yellow River Basins respectively. In addition, annual cash subsidies of about 46 USD/ha/year for miscellaneous expenses and a one-off subsidy of about 115 USD/ha for seeds or seedlings are also provided. The grain and cash subsidies continue for eight years for ecological forest plantation and five years for economic tree species. In 2004 the grains subsidy was replaced by an equivalent cash payment.

for in-depth assessment of how governance of the policy implementation interplaying with local variations leads to the various observed ecological and socioeconomic outcomes.

Globally, there is a growing body of studies of forest restoration governance documenting the significance of the interaction of local factors with forest restoration policy, and the varying outcomes. For example, Buchy and Hoverman (2000) argue that requiring public participation in forest restoration program has far-reaching consequences for both the distribution of power between the actors and policy outcomes. The gap between the intention of forest restoration policy and its outcomes occurs where there is an insufficient power transfer to the local authority (Clement and Amezaga, 2009). Research therefore calls for better understanding of existing local practice and institutions that will help in identifying and implementing restoration initiatives and assure sustainable outcomes and sound governance (Van Oosten, 2013). While most of the existing literature documents how top-down policy implementation may limit such programs' success, few studies have examined the extent to which these top-down policies have actually contributed to reforestation.

In this paper I go a step further to examine how local variations affect the implementation of forest restoration policy and its outcomes, taking the SLCP as an example. The paper is intended as additional source of literature on China's ecological restoration program and contributes to the global debate on forest restoration governance. Applying a conceptual framework of decentralization analysis, it uses an in-depth case study from two villages in Southwest China to examine how the policy's implementation interacted with local institutions, leading to a complex course of decision-making and actions to eventually produce different policy outcomes in each village. With a combination of quantified ecological and socioeconomic outcomes and qualitative analysis of local institutions, this paper provides new insights into why the SLCP program leads to positive outcomes in some places but fails to do so in others, although it is generally implemented via a top-down approach. It argues that improved understanding of the governance mechanism and its outcomes would contribute to better formulation and implementation of forest restoration policy in China and even worldwide.

2. A decentralization lens for the analysis of forest restoration governance

Decentralization usually refers to "power transfer from central authority to lower levels in political-administrative and territorial hierarchy" (Crook and Manor, 1998). In this paper, the analytical framework for forest restoration governance, based on notions of Agrawal and Ribot (1999) and Ribot et al. (2006) that form the conceptualization of *power*, *actors* and *accountability*, is used as a critical dimension of analysis. Without an understanding of the power of various actors, the domains in which they exercise their power, and to whom and how they are accountable, it is impossible to know the extent to which meaningful decentralization has taken place (Crook and Manor, 1998; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999; Ribot and Larson, 2005). In theory this approach holds the notion that effective decentralization can only take place when sufficient decision-making power is transferred to the lowest level of local government which is downwardly accountable to the local population and believes that direct election can achieve democratic decentralization with positive environmental and social outcomes (Ribot, 1999; Ribot and Larson, 2005).

In practice, the effectiveness of decentralization in public service and promoting local democracy is varied; successful decentralization leading to the intended outcomes has rarely been achieved (Ribot et al., 2006; Larson and Soto, 2008). Most commonly, researchers report that decentralization is limited by: 1) insufficient power transfer, with central governments devolving obligation powers, rather than meaningful power with adequate resources, to local authorities (Larson, 2003; Xu and Ribot, 2004); 2) lack of downward accountability, with central governments strategically choosing local institutions that are upwardly

accountable and less democratized so they can most easily control the power transfer (Ribot, 1999; Ribot and Larson, 2005); and 3) local elite capture, preventing the participation of all members of society in decision-making (Saito-Jensen et al., 2010).

This research uses an empirical approach to consider forest restoration governance through the lens of the decentralization analysis framework. Taking the SLCP as example, it compares the governance process and its environmental and socioeconomic outcomes in two villages. The SLCP, as the largest forest restoration program among the world, emerged in a broad context of decentralization reform through which the Chinese government intends to further promote forest decentralization by improving local volunteerism and autonomy in the implementation of the policy (SFA, 2002; Bennett, 2008). However, the implementation and outcomes of the policy vary. The lens of decentralization analysis is thus a critical analytical tool for understanding the different power transfer dynamics and actors' reactions which lead to the different outcomes observed.

To obtain a holistic perspective of governance, the research was conducted at multiple levels exploring decision-making at the county, township and village levels from the local perspective.² The research tracks the decision-making power in the SLCP that has been transferred to different levels of the administrative body. It also examines to whom the authority is accountable after receiving this power. The inclusion of accountability in this analytical framework allows the examination of the relations between different levels of decision-making bodies to understand how stakeholder concerns are represented in governance processes (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Empirically, it considers 1) the powers (e.g. land zoning, tree species selection) and accompanying resources (e.g. SLCP quotas) that have actually been transferred to lower-level actors to determine whether an autonomous decision-making domain exists to address issues of local significance; 2) the local-level entities receiving powers and their relation to the population, to understand the extent to which these are both representative of and downwardly accountable to local people (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999).

This research is contextualized in Chinese characteristics in forest management and rural politics, where decentralization reform in forest has been carried out for several years (Liu, 2001; Xu and Ribot, 2004). Despite forest usufruct having been allocated to households via the Responsibility Contracting System in the late 1980s,³ unstable policy and policy implementation have made forest access and ownership much more insecure for most households (Yeh, 2000; Xu and Ribot, 2004). This ambiguity of property rights in post-socialist China has led to various ecological and social outcomes (Ho, 2001). Recently, deeper decentralization reform to build grassroots democratization is aiming to enable village administration organizations to control their own resources for sustainable use, with implications for villagers' longer-term livelihoods (He, 2012). Villagers have a new outlet for their concerns in the form of the popularly-elected Village Committees, which, in principle, are more accountable to villagers than to higher levels of government. The nexus of these two forces – large-scale government interventions on the one hand and local democracy on the other – forms the context of this research.

3. Research site and methods

3.1. Study area

The case study was carried out in Yunnan Province in Southwest China (see Fig. 1). Yunnan is of great importance in Southwest China

² The administrative structure in China is as follows: center, province, prefecture, county, township, and administrative village. The administrative village is the lowest administrative body and is composed of several natural villages (naturally-settled hamlets).

³ The agrarian reform in China started with the establishment of the Household Responsibility System in the agriculture sector, which distributed collective agricultural land to individual household in a contract based on use rights for up to 30 years. Later a similar approach was applied in forest sector (Liu, 2001).

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