



Challenges in determining national effects of international policy processes: Forest protection in Norway as a case

Berit H. Lindstad ^{*}, Birger Solberg

Department of Ecology and Natural Resource Management, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Aas, Norway

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ABSTRACT

During recent decades, international forest policy processes have made numerous recommendations for sustainable forest management, including forest protection, but questions have been raised concerning the influences of these processes on national forest policies and management. The main objective of this article is to explore challenges in determining the national effects of three international forest policy processes, while building on earlier literature on the effects and effectiveness of international regimes. Our study focuses on one single substantive element (forest protection) in one country (Norway). We explore the challenges in verifying causal connections between national changes and the international recommendations for an element where a good deal of information is available. Quantitative data for protection status as well as qualitative data from an empirical study giving differing opinions on Norway's compliance with international recommendations are combined and discussed for two alternative concepts of effects: (i) relative improvement with the regimes compared to the situation with no regime, and (ii) the regime's contribution to solving the problem. The findings suggest that international processes can be attributed limited or comprehensive influence depending on the interpretation of the recommendations as well as on the analytical approach chosen in determining influences. Further analysis of the effects of international forest policy processes on forest management and across countries is recommended, and factors considered for such analysis to be informative and credible are proposed.

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1. Introduction

During recent decades, international forest-related policy processes have made numerous recommendations for sustainable forest management and at the same time have highlighted individual countries' sovereign rights and responsibilities over national forest resources (Humphreys, 1996, 2006). Questions raised, therefore, concern whether and to what extent international policy processes affect national forest policies and management.

National effects and the effectiveness of international agreements are subjects dealt with in the literature on international relations¹ for topics as diverse as environmental agreements and human rights treaties. Determining effects is commonly regarded as a complex task. Studies of effects stress the necessity of a cause–effect relationship between the provisions of an international agreement and changes in policies and/or practices for a change to be classified as an effect of

that agreement. Young (2001) and Miles et al. (2002), among others, have elaborated the challenges faced in determining such causal inferences. One aspect of revealing the causal chains between international processes and national changes, and determining the strength of this influence, is to separate the influence(s) of sources other than the international processes in question.

The literature on international relations points to the difference between compliance and implementation. Compliance refers to living up to the recommendations in an agreement, while implementation is “the process by which intent gets translated into action” (Victor et al., 1998), i.e. activities carried out in order to meeting the commitments introduced by an agreement. Implementation activities classify as effects, while passive compliance does not (see, e.g., Underdal, 1998). This distinction relates to how the existing national situation is regarded in relation to the international recommendations, and thus the potential for international processes to have effects or not. The greater the distance between international recommendations and national status, the more need for national changes, and thus stronger effects of the international processes may be expected. Contrary to this, fewer national adjustments, and thus weaker effects, can be expected if the national situation is closer to the international recommendations to start with, or with looser international recommendations.

The main objective of this article is to explore the challenges when determining the national effects of three international forest policy

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +47 97562562; fax: +47 64965801.

E-mail address: berit.lindstad@umb.no (B.H. Lindstad).

¹ “International relations literature” is in this paper used as a generic term for an extensive literature on international cooperation, including formation and implementation of agreements at international and regional levels. A full review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper, but the references can guide interested readers to relevant documents.

processes. Forest protection in Norway is chosen because this is an important element in forest management; it has been exposed in public debates; and a good deal of information is available about it. Three international policy processes are chosen for their importance, and empirical data are available from a Norwegian assessment of compliance (cf. Section 3). Based on the results of our study, we also discuss challenges of relevance for more comprehensive studies of the effects of international forest policy processes.

Methodological approaches developed in studies of the effects of international processes are in this article combined with empirical data related to forest protection in Norway. Differing notions of forest protection status and of Norway's compliance with international forest recommendations are discussed with respect to two alternative concepts of effects: relative improvements with a regime² compared to the situation with no regime, and whether the regime contributed to solving the problem it was intended to solve (cf. Underdal, 2002). It should be noted at the outset that the intention of this article is to explore some of the critical aspects of revealing causal effects as a necessary first step in evaluating the effects of forest recommendations.

The structure of the article is as follows: Section 2 is a brief description of the international policy processes dealt with and their recommendations on the protection of forest areas. Section 3 describes the methods and materials utilized in the study, while the results are presented and discussed in Section 4; the main conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2. Policy processes considered and their recommendations on protection

Three forest-relevant policy processes are analysed in this article: (i) The United Nations forest process (i.e. the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF), the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) and the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF)), (ii) the expanded programme of work on the biological diversity of forests under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and (iii) the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE). A brief presentation of these processes and their recommendations on the protection of forest area is given below.

The main objective of the UNFF, established in 2000, as well as the preceding IPF (1995–97) and IFF (1997–2000), is to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forest. "Forest conservation and protection of unique types of forests and fragile ecosystems" is one of 16 elements in the UNFF (United Nations, 2001). A central recommendation on the protection of forest areas is given in IFF proposals for action (United Nations, 2000: Section 85(a)): "The forum encourages countries to commit themselves to the protection, conservation and representativeness of all types of forests, consistent with national policies and programmes that recognize the linkage between forest conservation and sustainable development. This commitment may be achieved through a range of conservation mechanisms, reflecting varying national circumstances, applied within and outside of protected areas, and the complementary roles of protected forest areas and other sustainable forest management activities (...)".

The proposals for action of the IPF, IFF and UNFF often include terms such as "as appropriate" and "if needed" and are generally vague. The UNFF plan of action states that: "countries will set their own national priorities, targets and timetables for the implementation of IPF/IFF proposals for action" (United Nations, 2001: 11).

The expanded programme of work on forest biological diversity under the CBD constitutes "a comprehensive set of goals, objectives and

activities required for the conservation of forest biodiversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of forest genetic resources" (CBD, 2002: Introductory text). On protected areas, attention is brought to the "need for urgent conservation action for forests that are ecologically significant and/or most important for biological diversity on national and regional scales, in accordance with national priorities, where forest biodiversity loss or threats of loss are significant or of great concern, but also to work to enhance conservation in all types of forests, both within and outside protected areas" (CBD, 2002: paragraph c). An element in the work programme is "Conservation, sustainable use and benefit sharing", with goal 3 reading "to protect, recover and restore forest biological diversity" under which objective 3 reads "ensure adequate and effective protected forest area networks" (CBD, 2002).

The preamble to the expanded programme of work on forest biological diversity reads: "Recognizes that Parties should implement the expanded programme of work on forest biological diversity in the context of their national priorities and needs. Activities implemented domestically by Parties will be prioritized based on country and regionally specific needs, national determination, legislation, circumstances and priorities concerning forest-related issues, and their national forest and biodiversity strategies. Inclusion of an activity in the work programme does not mean relevance of that activity to all Parties" (CBD, 2002: paragraph 11).

The MCPFE is a political initiative concerning the protection and sustainable management of forests throughout the European region. Recommendations on forest protection are given in Vienna Resolution 4 'Conserving and enhancing forest biological diversity in Europe': "... analyze and further develop protected forest networks, taking into account existing networks" (MCPFE, 2003b: paragraph 10).

According to the MCPFE (2004), "the signatory states and the European Community are responsible for implementing the MCPFE decisions at regional, national and sub-national levels. Based on voluntary commitments, which constitute a common framework, governments all over Europe have taken initiatives to ensure and improve the sustainable management and protection of forests". In choosing which resolutions and declarations to sign, individual countries signal political intent to their implementation.

Overall, the recommendations of all three processes classify as "soft law", providing political, rather than legally binding, commitments. They highlight national sovereignty over forest resources, and make frequent reference to "where appropriate", "according to national situation", etc. Furthermore, it is important to realize that "protected forest area" can be interpreted in different ways, e.g. it can refer to areas where forestry activities are strictly prohibited or where the management objective includes some form of protection. Protection can be a means of protecting biological diversity, or be an end in itself keeping areas under natural development for reference and research. And, as protection is one of many forest management options, environmental measures and utilisation of areas outside protected areas may also be relevant when considering forest protection (Parviainen and Frank, 2003).

3. Methodology and data

3.1. Determining effects

As mentioned in the introduction, the main challenge in determining effects is in revealing the causal significance of the recommendations. Ringquist and Kostadinova (2005) emphasise complexities in assessing effects and effectiveness, highlighting the separation of influences from factors other than the agreements and voluntary participation. They relate these dimensions to challenges in constructing realistic counterfactuals (i.e. what would the situation be without international processes?) and acknowledge that collecting reliable data on influences from international recommendations is demanding. Lack of maturity in agreements can lead to premature

² "Regime" is a contested term with various interpretations, but is in this paper used interchangeably with *agreement* and *process* as a generic reference to international cooperative arrangements.

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