

## Defining and assessing forest governance<sup>1</sup>

### Forest governance research

Research into forest governance issues is a popular and timely endeavour. This is reflected e.g. by a large number of publications (e.g. Kleinschmit et al. 2009, Giessen et al. 2009 and Buttoud 2012, similar Hogl et al. 2013, Arts et al. 2013, Arts/Visseren-Hamakers 2012, Rametsteiner 2009, Agrawal et al. 2008, Glück et al. 2005). The high relevance of international forest governance research is further reflected by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) dedicating to this very topic its group 9.05 on Forest Policy and Governance, which includes a special working group 9.05.02 on Forest Governance.

***Forest governance research can be understood as social science inquiry into forest-related decisions, their implementation and resulting effects within a given institutional setting.*** In order to arrive at relevant and valid conclusions, social science inquiry, more than their physical sciences counterparts, need to clearly define the terms, concepts and methodological frameworks which they apply (Krott/Giessen 2014). Unfortunately, this is not easily and, hence, not always done in forest governance research, running the risk of rendering the concept of forest governance a buzzword, rather than advancing scientific rigor.

At the core of the concept lie recent empirical observations about the changing role of private actors and institutions *vis a vis* the state with its government, multiple administrative actors and binding norms, rules, and procedures. An early claim within the political science about ‘governance without government’ (e.g. Rosenau/Czempiel 1992, Rhodes 1996) led to numerous studies at multiple levels on the role and effects of private actors and institutions. This is reflected by forest governance studies addressing issues such as forest certification, national forest programmes, community forestry and decentralisation, payment for ecosystem services, international forest deliberations (Glück et al. 2005). This view was later challenged by critiques (e.g. Peters/Pierre 1998, Agrawal et al. 2008, Hysing 2009, Howlett et al. 2009, Bell/Hindmoor 2012, Giessen 2010, Arts, 2014) for its strong focus of governance research on private actors and institutions. This gave rise for the advancement of the forest governance research programme towards scrutinizing both, private as well as public actors and institutions and their interplay in light of their effects on forests.

This broader conception of forest governance promises analytical added value in two ways. Firstly, it promotes social science research which engages with the broader settings, the interplay between public and private actors and institutions as well as formal and informal aspects of forest-related decisions, their implementation and effects. Secondly, the concept of forest governance spurs interdisciplinary research among the forest-related social sciences such as political science, sociology, legal studies and economics, but also between the social and the physical science. The endeavour of the forest governance research programme of also scrutinizing the effects of public and private

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<sup>1</sup> for more details refer to:

Giessen, L., & Buttoud, G. (2014). Defining and assessing forest governance. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 49, 1-3.

actors' decisions and their implementation creates research bridges between the social science disciplines and physical science inquiry analysing biophysical effects, which social sciences alone are not able to generate (comp. Giessen 2013a).

### **Defining forest governance**

In the abovementioned sense we propose a wide definition of forest governance, which scholars may find useful to build upon and to further develop according to their empirical cases. Accordingly, ***forest governance comprises a) all formal and informal, public and private regulatory structures, i.e. institutions consisting of rules, norms, principles, decision procedures, concerning forests, their utilisation and their conservation, b) the interactions between public and private actors therein and c) the effects of either on forests.***

The shortcoming of such a wide definition is that it is difficult to cover all these aspects within the methodology of one study, while at the same time maintaining scientific rigour. Rather, a number of smaller, particular studies may be expected (and actually have been reported already), each focusing on a different aspect of forest governance. In such a research programme, forest governance studies often focus on a particular level of analysis, ranging from global to international to national to regional and local. Accordingly, it may be useful to focus the above definition of forest governance to any of these levels as one among other criteria for categorising these studies. This requires developing and adapting definitions and concepts on global forest governance (e.g. Giessen 2013a,b), international forest governance (e.g. Rayner et al. 2010), national forest governance (e.g. Krott 2005), regional forest governance (e.g. Giessen 2010), and local forest governance (Djogo/Syaf 2004, Secco et al. 2014)

### **Assessing forest governance**

Assessing forest governance can be done as a scientific endeavour conducted within the scientific realm, or as a practical enterprise undertaken by actors in the field of forest conservation and utilisation practices.

*Within the scientific realm*, the researchers are guided by methodological frameworks, which they develop intersubjectively in order to advance scientific knowledge about real world phenomena. There are two broad approaches for such scientific analyses: *Analytical* studies are concerned with the mere reflection of these phenomena and their explanation and strive for developing value-free methodological frameworks. In contrast, *normative* analyses imply value judgements on desirable conditions within their methodological frameworks and often develop recommendations towards selected ends. In both approaches, the researchers are free to define their concepts and hypotheses on potential causalities following scientific thought and rigour.

On the contrary, *practice-oriented assessments* of forest governance inherently imply value judgements which are closely related to the interests of the authors' organisations developing the methodological frameworks. Recently, a number of such practice-oriented frameworks for assessing forest governance have been developed (FAO 2014, WRI 2013). In such works, value judgements are

an implicit or even explicit part of the methodological framework. WRI (2013), for example, build on the normative concept of good forest governance. This does not mean that such assessments are non-scientific; they often are a combination of scientific and practical aspects which are integrated and through this provide for added value to real world challenges (similar Stevanov et al. 2013).

Lukas Giessen and Gerard Buttoud

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