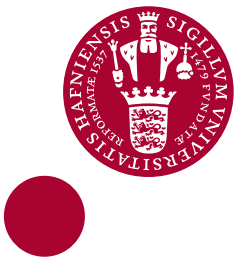
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The logic of professionalization in participatory forestry

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Forest inventory, Tanzania. Photo Henrik Meilby

The logic of professionalization in participatory forestry

Introduction

Participatory forestry (PF) reforms ostensibly seek to promote forest-adjacent communities' participation in forest management by devolving management rights. PF's objectives include sustainable forest management, equitable local livelihoods and development opportunities. In practice, however, PF initiatives often appear to sustain domination by government officials and/or private enterprises in forest management decision-making. Even when rights are actually devolved, the outcomes tend to fall short of expectations. Although improvements in forest management and conservation are common, PF reforms seem to result in increased hardships for the poorest and the elite capture of often limited local financial benefits.

Based on a special issue in the journal Forest Policy and Economics, this policy brief argues that part of the explanation for these paradoxical outcomes of participatory forestry reforms is that they promote professionalization, i.e. a reliance on scientific management approaches and structured, highly detailed systems of information gathering, dissemination and planning. This creates obstacles for implementation and privileges forms of knowledge typically held by forestry professionals and social elites in forest-adjacent communities.

Participatory forestry

PF entails forest governance approaches that involve people living in and around forests and are referred to as decentralized, participatory, joint, and community-based forest management as well as indigenous forestry and social forestry. Legislated and implemented by governments of many developing countries, often with advisory and financial support from donors, such regimes exhibit great variation in the sharing of rights and responsibilities between various levels of government and rural communities. PF emerged in the 1970s and by the 1990s had become the standard model for forest conservation and management in the developing world.

Policy Recommendations

Bureaucratic and technical framings of participatory forest management processes appear to impede implementation and facilitate elite capture, while contributing less by way of supporting actual forest management practice by participating communities. Therefore, we recommend to:

- Simplify technically demanding and costly procedures for participatory forest management including regulations and guidelines for forest inventory and monitoring procedures to:
  - reduce financial and human resource-related obstacles to implementation of participatory forestry
  - increase alignment between official regulations and actual management by communities
  - promote inclusive participation within communities, and
  - reduce risks of elite capture

A recent global assessment found that forest adjacent communities are officially involved in the management of approximately 30 per cent of the forests in low and middle income countries – a share that is increasing. While research overwhelmingly finds that such approaches serve to conserve forests, it also indicates that they fall short of their promises of equitably distributed social and economic benefits to forest-adjacent communities.

Critics argue that the reason for these disappointing social outcomes stem from their contradictory manner of implementation. Some have shown that rather than devolved decision-making to forest-adjacent communities, participatory forestry is manifested as continued domination by government officials, private enterprises and local elites. Explanations for this paradox include hidden motives that favour the retention of control by government, and a general reluctance to hand over control based on concerns about communities' capacity for forest management.
Another explanation may also be found in how PF is framed. Recent studies illustrate that many PF processes emphasize bureaucratic management procedures and standardized forest inventories aiming at a sustained yield of forest products, especially timber. These studies link observations of such a techno-scientific framing of participatory forestry to various underlying logics. Some point to this technical framing as a convenient way to maintain the status quo in the existing political economy of forest exploitation. Others regard techno-bureaucratic codes in forest bureaucracies as processes of socialization that emphasize scientific forestry, i.e. the way for professionals to conceptualize and manage forests.

Professionalization

Professionalization is a process that aims to distinguish competent practitioners from amateurs. It underscores a need for expertise and systems of information gathering, dissemination and planning. The logic of professionalization in the forest sector arose in 18th century Central Europe with the establishment of State bureaucracies and a scientific approach to forestry. Through colonialism, efforts of international organizations such as the FAO, and donor-funded programmes, principles of scientific forestry travelled widely, being adapted to the vastly different contexts colonial foresters encountered. Participatory forestry emerged when professional forestry was already firmly established in forest bureaucracies, and principles of scientific forestry widely applied, at least in principle.

For this reason, and because participatory forestry reforms have historically been implemented through forest bureaucracies and in forests formally under state management, PF reforms have not escaped the logic of professionalization. Accordingly, the key instrument regulating the relation between the state and forest adjacent communities in such reforms today are management plans based on the standard scientific forestry approach. They combine general assumptions about forest ecology with situated knowledge about forest conditions based on forest inventories. A plan presupposes the delimitation of the forest area, which often requires settling boundaries with adjacent communities, as well as more general land-use planning to delimit other uses of the forest. Further, plans assume periodic renewal based on updated forest inventories. Typically, forestry professionals – most often forest department field staff – are instrumental in facilitating the making and renewal of plans. Thus, setting up and running a participatory forestry management regime is a complex enterprise. The logic of professional forestry bureaucracies, which are institutionally central to these processes, contributes to this framing of participatory forestry.

Unpacking professionalization

The articles in the special issue illustrate how participatory forestry reforms in practice favour professionalization by downplaying politics, indicating ways in which the framing of participatory forestry as professionalization may be questioned.

From Tanzania, Scheba & Mustalahti (2015) unravel the efforts – over two decades and involving technical and financial inputs from multiple donors with a budget of more than 500,000 EUR - to initiate participatory forestry in the Angai forest. They recount how, despite these intensive efforts, residents in the area are, after two decades, not involved in management and most have little if any knowledge of their rights and management responsibilities as outlined in forest management plans that have been prepared largely by consultants and forestry professionals.

This study echoes Faye's (2015) research from Senegal demonstrating how techno-bureaucratic logics of effectiveness and technical expertise determine the institutional choice in a participatory forestry project in Senegal funded by, among others, the World Bank. Faye shows how the emphasis on effectiveness and technical expertise results in the crafting of new institutions at the community level and thereby the bypassing of existing elected rural councils with a legal mandate over forestry. Faye emphasizes how this choice of crafting new institutions – legitimized by technical assertions - serves to ensure continued control over forest management by the Forestry Department.

The legitimization of control over forests through technical expertise is also a theme in Green & Lund's (2015) study of donor-supported community-based forest management in Tanzania. The new management regime implies professionalization in the sense of the creation of elected village forest committees with the responsibility of implementing numerous standards and procedures to manage a hitherto largely unmanaged forest. They show how detailed requirements for community-based management imply the need for expertise, which is built in a few key individuals through early trainings under the donor-financed implementation project. These chosen few remain in the leadership of the committee for more than a decade. Further, district forest officials intervene in elections on their behalf due to concerns over loss of their expertise in case they are ousted.

These three studies emphasize how the professionalization of forest management impedes the implementation of participatory forestry and implies the need for expertise, which subsequently fosters elite capture. The articles by Faye and Green & Lund also show how resistance to forestry professionalization by residents of the forest adjacent communities emerges in relation to its anti-democratic consequences, rather than in relation to relevance and usefulness to practical forest management. This latter issue is in focus in two other studies that concern the application of scientific forestry principles in PF, and PF's contributions to actual forest management planning and practice by community-level forest managers.

Rutt et al. (2015) and Toft et al. (2015) examine the relevance, use and usefulness of inventory-based management planning in community forestry and collaborative forestry in Nepal. Using a combination of inventory analysis elaborated by donor projects and captured in management plans, analyses of remote sensing imageries, interviews and participatory mapping exercises, they demonstrate that forest management plans based on professional forest technicians' inventories are seriously flawed; are not used in practical forest management; and that community-level managers manage their forests capably and knowledgeably, in accordance with their own priorities and being respectful of overall resource sustainability. According to Rutt et al., more than 5,000 forest management plans in Nepal have expired, without resources to renew them being available. Along with testimonies from forest officers that the resources allocated to management plan renewal do not allow for rigorous forest inventories, Rutt et al. use this evidence to question the premises of the current system of inventory-based forest management planning.

Conclusion

Many of the practices we observe in the name of participatory forestry appear to promote professionalization. As much as these practices profoundly affect the social relations around forests – largely to the detriment of participation – they appear largely irrelevant towards informing actual forest management.

Village level forest bureaucracy, Tanzania. Photo Jens Friis Lund



Professionalized forest management demands a certain kind of expertise from those who manage; i.e. literacy, numeracy and knowledge of forest management and planning procedures. This demand fetters participation. Professionalization

contributes to commonly held perceptions of the need for expertise in participatory forestry that arguably underlie the argument that rural communities lack the capacity to manage forests. Efforts to include ostensibly needed expertise in the design and implementation of PF through institutional choice (Faye 2015) and/or capacity building efforts (Green & Lund 2015) thus only perpetuates the way PF is framed in the first place.

Rather than a paradox, the observed partial and delayed processes of PF implementation (Scheba & Mustalahti 2015) constitute logical outcomes, when pilot projects to demonstrate best-practice and resource-intensive forest inventories and management planning processes are prerequisites for management to take place. Observed instances of inequity and elite capture under participatory forestry are also logical consequences of professionalization, through the privileging of certain forms of knowledge held by, or actively built into, a narrow selection of institutions or people. Doing away with professionalization will not do away with inequity and elite capture, as these are shaped by structural conditions that participatory forestry reforms cannot be expected to alter. Even so, doing away with professionalization could create different and probably more conducive conditions to challenge such structurally conditioned outcomes and pave the way for more widespread implementation of PF by lowering financial and human resource demands.

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Tree felling under participatory forestry, Tanzania. Photo Jens Friis Lund



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