

# Global forest discourses must connect with local forest realities

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## SUMMARY

Numerous inter-governmental conservation initiatives have failed to halt the loss and degradation of forests. This paper explores the role of policy processes in developing and delivering desired future forest outcomes that meet both global environmental goals and the needs of local forest users. There is a clear disconnect between global commitments and local interventions to achieve forest outcomes. There is an incoherence in forest policy development at different spatial scales. Future forest governance needs to recognise the diversity of actors in the policy process and the complexity of local forest contexts. New actors in the policy process will include knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs who increasingly shape the policy discourse. There is also a need for policy durability and problem focused policy-learning pathways. Forest and allied sciences continue to be critical for delivering desired forest outcomes, and learning from the diversity of local contexts is critical to creating effective and coherent policies.

Keywords: inter-governmental, forests, conservation, incoherence, local, forest-users

## Les discussions forestières à l'échelle globale doivent être connectées aux réalités forestières locales

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De nombreuses initiatives de conservation inter-gouvernementales ont échoué dans leurs efforts d'interrompre la perte et la dégradation des forêts. Ce papier explore le rôle des processus de politiques dans le développement et la production des résultats forestiers futurs désirés, répondant à la fois aux buts environnementaux globaux et aux besoins des utilisateurs locaux de la forêt. On note un hiatus très net entre les désirs globaux et les interventions locales pour obtenir ces résultats au niveau de la forêt. Le développement de la politique forestière connaît une incohérence à plusieurs niveaux spatiaux. La gestion forestière du futur doit reconnaître la diversité des acteurs dans les processus politiques et la complexité des contextes forestiers locaux. Des nouveaux acteurs dans le processus politique incluront les agents de connaissance et les entrepreneurs de politique dont la contribution croissante donne forme au discours de la politique. Le système a besoin d'une politique durable et de chemins d'apprentissage de cette politique capable de se concentrer sur la résolution des problèmes. Les sciences forestières et leurs alliées continuent de jouer un rôle critique dans la production des résultats forestiers désirés, et un apprentissage de la diversité des contextes locaux est essentiel dans la création de politiques efficaces et cohérentes.

## Los discursos forestales globales deben conectar con las realidades forestales locales

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Numerosas iniciativas de conservación intergubernamentales han fracasado en detener la pérdida y la degradación de los bosques. Este artículo examina el papel de los procesos políticos en la conceptualización y la consecución de los resultados forestales futuros que se desean y que cumplan tanto los objetivos ambientales globales como las necesidades de los usuarios forestales locales. Existe una clara desconexión entre los compromisos globales y las intervenciones locales para lograr resultados forestales. Existe una incoherencia en el desarrollo de políticas forestales a diferentes escalas espaciales. La futura gobernanza forestal debe reconocer la diversidad de actores en el proceso de

políticas y la complejidad de los contextos forestales locales. Los nuevos actores en los procesos políticos incluirán agentes de conocimiento y emprendedores políticos que moldean cada vez más el discurso político. Existe una necesidad de políticas que duren y vías de aprendizaje político centradas en los problemas. Las ciencias forestales y otras afines siguen siendo fundamentales para lograr los resultados forestales deseados y el aprendizaje que resulta de la diversidad de los contextos locales es crucial para crear políticas efectivas y coherentes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Numerous initiatives have attempted to reach agreement on global forest conservation goals and methods (Seymour and Busch 2016, Humphreys, 2012) but success has been elusive. The loss and degradation of forests continues and is the subject of numerous inter-governmental conferences and processes, however, these global initiatives do not appear to be leading to positive forest outcomes. Globally there is some increase in forest extent but forests are still being lost in low and middle-income tropical countries and forest quality is in decline in many regions (Sloan and Sayer, 2015). Fundamental obstacles to inter-governmental consensus on forest issues lie in the divergent perspectives of different nations, cultures, and economic interest groups who often have conflicting views on the best ways to use and govern forest lands (Ceballos *et al.* 2017).

The search for a global consensus on forest conservation has now been continuing for several decades. In 1983, the International Tropical Timber Agreement was both criticized for its emphasis on industrial logging and praised for its role in promoting inclusive “sustainable forest management”. In 1985, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan recognized the need to integrate the full range of economic, environmental and social values into forest action but was criticized for being “top down” and donor driven. In 1992, the global convention on forests, proposed at the Rio Summit, was rejected by developing countries who claimed their priorities were being subjugated to northern environmental and industrial interests. The proposed convention was seen as a threat to developing countries’ sovereignty (Humphreys 2012, McDermott 2014). More recently, these debates continue within the United Nations Forum on Forests. Singer and Giessen (2017) have argued that the term “sustainable forest management” is unhelpful because it attempts to bring together competing and often irreconcilable perspectives.

International institutions have not yet met the challenge of finding generalisable solutions to forest problems (Pritchett *et al.* 2013). For example the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change’s 15<sup>th</sup> conference in Bali sought to achieve global agreement on reducing deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) as a contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Pistorius 2012, McDermott 2014). The UNFCCC COP negotiations in Paris in 2015 also emphasized the role of reducing deforestation and forest degradation in achieving a non-legally binding agreement to limit temperature increases. However, tropical deforestation rates have increased, not decreased, following these decisions. Global calls to limit deforestation do not have much appeal to hungry farmers or

voracious agricultural entrepreneurs. Temperate and boreal forests are increasing in area but they also are under increasing threat from insects, disease and fire. We reason that the various international forest agreements have not been adequately holistic or coherent in addressing the conflicting demands that societies place on forests. While well intended, these agreements are piecemeal and fragmented (Smouts 2008) driven by individuals taking decisions to promote the interests of their own organizations or countries, and by negotiators who often lack comprehensive expertise in the subject matter (Bull *et al.* 2014).

It will inevitably be difficult to reconcile differences in the economic, social and environmental goals of global elites and transnational organizations with those of local and indigenous peoples (Langston *et al.* 2017, Ehrnström-Fuentes and Kröger 2017). Forests are becoming scarcer in the tropics, degraded in many parts of the world, and planted forest monocultures are expanding in other regions. As countries move through forest transitions it will become increasingly important to find ways for better decentralized decisions on how much, and what types of, forests societies should maintain and how these forests should be governed.

Recent global agreements have made tentative moves to resolve the differences between global aspirations and local realities. The Paris agreement, recognized that global agreements and symbolic statements made by political figures do not connect well to complex local realities (Hirsch *et al.* 2011). Consequently the agreement adopted Nationally Determined Contributions rather than global targets and negotiators now accept that ‘bottom up’ processes and expertise might nurture policy triggers more consistent with Paris goals (Sayer *et al.* 2008, Du Pont *et al.* 2017). However at local levels, powerful actors rather than local people with long-term interests continue to frequently dominate decision making (Campbell *et al.* 2010).

## TWO PARALLEL FOREST POLICY DISCOURSES

We argue that the starting point for diagnosing forest policy incoherence should be a close examination of two parallel policy discourses. There is an increasingly vague, general and aspirational forest policy discourse operating at a global level. This global discourse contrasts with a specific and pragmatic body of practice emerging from decades of attempts to reconcile contested claims on forests at more local levels. The pressures of externally designed or imposed solutions that do not fit local development contexts undermines forest husbandry, particularly in developing countries. Frequently, the forest

policies are subject to ‘issue cycles’, with dominant issues at any point in time determined by international pressures (van Noordwijk 2017). The lack of detailed knowledge derived from ‘on the ground’ forest experience leads to the high-level global discourse advocating approaches that are not implementable on the ground. Forest policies are often negotiated amongst people who have insufficient understanding of technical forest issues – for example, they frequently do not appreciate how forest systems will respond to specific policy interventions.

In low-income countries forest departments are mainly staffed by technical foresters. In these countries there is often a clash of cultures between foresters and the broader environmental and human rights movement. As a result, forestry departments are struggling to manage forests in the face of competing claims from environmentalists and local peoples’ advocates. Hence, the educational needs to improve forest policy capabilities remains a key issue; we still need sharply focused technical forestry skills but these must be deployed by people who have a broad vision and understanding of the socio-economic, ecological systems where the forests occur.

Forest policy incoherence was evident in the Copenhagen agreements between Norway and Indonesia. These agreements revealed a lack of communication between global policy makers and local realities (Gallemore *et al.* 2015). The immediate impact of the agreements was that forests and climate change were raised to the level of an office reporting directly to the president of Indonesia. However this office was only partially successful in wresting control of forest policy away from the Ministry of Forestry (Seymour *et al.* 2015). Like many forestry agencies in less developed countries the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry operates under a system where its staff have a strong vested interest in maintaining the status quo. When the Indonesian presidency changed in 2014 the high-level office was abolished and the Ministries of Environment and Forestry were merged. The vested interests and inertia within the system have meant that this merger has only been partially effective. Tensions remain between demands for economic returns on forest lands and the need to conserve environmental values. The result has been policy churning and contested governance that have prevented Indonesia from implementing the Copenhagen agreements.

#### WHAT COULD BE DONE TO FOSTER COHERENCE IN FOREST POLICIES?

What are the strategies that might work in a post-Paris world to achieve effective, enduring and practical solutions for an appropriate balance between local and global forest governance? Success stories exist (Clapp *et al.* 2016), but the majority of well-intended global efforts have failed to lead directly to meaningful change at national or sub-national levels (Cock 2016). Frequently, global negotiators are not learning lessons from the failures and successes of local and sub-national practice.

#### KNOWLEDGE BROKERS AND POLICY ENTREPRENEURS

At the international level a number of non-governmental organizations act as knowledge brokers (Cashore *et al.* 2016). The World Resources Institute, International Union for Conservation of Nature and others are characteristic of “boundary organizations” (Clark *et al.* 2011), building bridges between academic research, practitioners and the policy community. These organisations strive to ensure that knowledge and issues of concern to poorer countries are addressed in the policy process. However, our observations suggest that genuinely poor forest dwellers have little voice in these processes and even the attention given to the rights of indigenous people is often shaped by a rich world interpretation of their interests.

The knowledge broker is ideally an individual or group of professionals working with stakeholders to unlock knowledge and generate ideas for action (Cashore *et al.* 2016). Knowledge brokers should have sufficient expertise to draw out underlying motivations and understand relationships, power dynamics and the full context of the issues at hand. They must also be sensitive to cultural and local contexts and be open to policy options that are not only of limited political feasibility. They must understand how scientific information, ideas, and ‘policy learning’ might open new opportunities. This goes beyond multi-stakeholder dispute resolution approaches. Such dispute resolution has been criticized for reinforcing the status quo. Efforts need to be redirected towards the ‘causal mechanisms’ through which policy interventions might lead to meaningful change (Strang and Jung 2005). Knowledge brokers have played a key role in unblocking impasses in policy reform processes in British Columbia and Brazil. The knowledge brokers were successful because credible specialists were available and they were given the mandate to perform their functions by strong governmental forestry and land use institutions supported by effective democratic processes. Tropical developing countries where deforestation and forest degradation continue, often lack these strong institutions.

Policies emerge from a complex set of interactions between different actors (Lambin *et al.* 2014). These policy processes are often imperfect and may be excessively influenced by special interests and skilful activism. However, we suspect that significant policy change can often be attributed to “policy entrepreneurs” (Meijerink and Huitema 2010, Roberts and King 1991, Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Policy entrepreneurs are champions of policy reforms and have the influence and credibility to form coalitions of like-minded people with whom they work to bring about policy change (Faling *et al.* 2018). Policy entrepreneurs can emerge from anywhere in the policy community. In the forestry sector, the international conservation NGOs who launched the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in the early 1990s were policy entrepreneurs.

Policy entrepreneurs are not necessarily the people appointed by governments to develop forest policies. They are often self-appointed activists emerging from civil society or industry organizations who may or may not pursue policies

that reflect a democratic consensus on forests. Policy entrepreneurs should be people who move easily between national and sub-national processes and the international policy arena. However, they vary widely in the extent to which they adopt policies that are truly rooted in on-the-ground realities. We argue that in the past decade too many of the policy entrepreneurs have been focused on the global public goods values of forests or on specific ideologies and have not been sufficiently sensitive to local realities, for instance the extreme poverty experienced by many forest dependent peoples in less developed countries.

Examples of the importance of policy entrepreneurs abound within local contexts. For example, in 1997, environmental and forest industry organizations came together in British Columbia to form a bilateral collaboration called the Joint Solutions Project (JSP), which specifically sought to broker and facilitate negotiations between conflicting parties. The JSP provided a non-governmental mechanism through which mutually acceptable internal agreements could be reached. Importantly, the JSP resulted in the creation of “a discourse coalition” (Howlett *et al.* 2009) around ecosystem-based management, subsequently operationalized through the Coastal Information Team (CIT): a group consisting of keepers and practitioners of traditional Indigenous knowledge, as well as scientific representatives. As a largely scientific organization, the CIT’s main task was to separate “disputes over science from interest-based negotiations” (Clapp and Mortenson 2011) in order to produce a clear knowledge base upon which planning agreements could be made. Ultimately however, despite various successes by the JSP and the CIT, these initiatives have been effective specifically for the resolution of conflicts arising from the Great Bear Rainforest, their approach has not been used to resolve ongoing difficulties in other forest policy arenas in Canada (Clapp *et al.* 2016).

## POLICY DURABILITY

Policy changes toward desired targets must be durable. International policy entrepreneurs often limit durability by focusing efforts on a proliferation of new instruments, each championed with a short lived ‘euphoria’ which dissipates when there is failure to achieve traction when confronted with local realities. An issue cycle ensues with an endless succession of new solutions emerging at a global level leading to policy churning and incoherence at local levels. For example, illegal logging “crack-downs” in the Mekong Region, the Congo Basin and Indonesia rarely addressed underlying issues of elite capture and inequality (Environmental Investigation Agency 2017). Policy durability requires that policies make sense to ‘end users’ and that multi-stakeholder learning allows for the development of durable, rather than ineffective and short-lived, reforms.

Durability is a key challenge in local contexts around the world. Indonesia has seen a remarkable lack of durability in its forest policies in recent years. This is in part a reflection

of a national attempt to adapt to rapidly changing local and global circumstances (Pramudya *et al.* 2017, Pirard *et al.* 2017). The policy churning appears to have been at least partly driven by pressure from international policy entrepreneurs. A series of recent policy changes in relation to forested peatlands reflects a gradually improving understanding of peatland ecology and its relations to global carbon fluxes. However, the changes have created a high level of uncertainty for the many hundreds of thousands of people whose livelihoods depend upon forest activities on peatlands. Policy change is clearly needed to regulate the activities of industrial investors in peatland-based industries but policies must be consistent with national intent to encourage investment, create jobs and drive economic growth in these same industries.

Emphasis on policy change that is durable (Mintrom and Norman 2009) both narrows and opens up creative possibilities. Attention needs to be focused on how policy reform might be more incremental (Cashore and Howlett 2007) and might evolve and adapt as local realities unfold. International policy makers ought to design global interventions that are more modest, but have the potential for gradual long-term impact. Global efforts can help nurture, but not determine, local decision making and should trigger those processes that seem more likely to lead to durable change. Global policy decisions take a long time to gain traction at national and sub-national levels. The Copenhagen COP decisions on REDD+ have scarcely progressed in tropical countries where the pre-conditions for their application were not in place. Getting all the pieces into place to enact global policies on forest carbon will take decades and these policies will have to be implemented incrementally (Sayer *et al.* 2008). As the policies begin to be applied, there will be a need for constant learning and numerous adaptations and the final outcomes may look quite different to what was envisaged by the original policy decisions. The slow and adaptive emergence of REDD+ in Indonesia since Copenhagen is a good example.

The numerous and dynamic actors affecting forest systems are characteristic of polycentric governance (Nagendra and Ostrom 2012). A diagnosis of the polycentric governance arrangements can be a starting point for improving decentralized forest decision-making (van Noordwijk 2017). Inventories and analysis of the multiplicity of actors affecting forest systems should inform strategies for identifying and encouraging effective knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs (Riggs *et al.* 2018). Actor network analysis (Prell *et al.* 2009) can help inform the actor and knowledge inventories. For example, Gallemore *et al.* (2015) showed points of disconnect in an Indonesian landscape where global forest interventions did not harmonize with local polycentric governance arrangements. Discourse analysis of the actors and institutions provides useful insight to the common concerns for building commitment towards better holistic forest system management (Barry and Proops 1999). These are some among many tools that can complement each other and incorporate different types of knowledge into the decision-making processes affecting complex forest landscapes (Tengö *et al.* 2017, Evans *et al.* 2017).

## PROBLEM FOCUSED POLICY LEARNING PATHWAYS

Durable and comprehensive policies will require careful analysis of pathways to policy impacts that incorporate multi-stakeholder learning about how to nurture productive change processes (Humphreys *et al.* 2017). Silver bullets will have to make way for long term engagement, learning and adaptation to enrich incremental policy reform processes. A policy trigger from an international initiative may lead to a diversity of locally adapted policy outcomes in different application domains. The Paris agreement may be best seen as a trigger that will lead to a “thousand flowers blooming” all of which will be different but relevant to the complexity and specificity of the contexts where on-the-ground change is needed. Policy tokenism must be avoided; policies designed to appeal to the global elite, the media and based upon emotional responses to poorly understood local conditions will not bring improved global forest governance. Donors must resist the temptation to support ‘magic bullet’ solutions which are not consistent with the social-economic-ecological realities of forest landscapes.

## CONCLUSIONS

To improve the linkage between global and local interventions we have argued for the recognition of new policy actors, the knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs, as critical to creating coherence in the policy making process. We also argue that those actors can greatly assist in the creation of durable policies and the identification of policy learning pathways that are long term and focused on learning and adaptation.

Changes in forest governance require changes in the behaviour of all of the actors who influence forest systems. This behavioural change will take time. Some of the pronouncements from global forestry meetings suggest that decision makers assume that significant change will occur rapidly (Bull *et al.* 2014). Our interpretation of the follow up to the decisions from both the Copenhagen and Paris COPs is that these changes can be very slow and their pathways quite difficult to predict. We observe the beginning of a move from “negotiated agreement” to a continuing process of policy experimentation, learning and adaptation. This process of experimentation, learning and adaptation for achieving desired targets, needs to progress further. Theories of change and associated process metrics show how forest policies might progress via experimentation, learning and adaptation (Sayer *et al.* 2016).

Forest policies at global, national, sub-national and local levels will always be contested. There will never be an end point or steady state for forests. Societal needs for different extents and types of forest will continue to evolve. There will always be contested claims on forest land. The centre of gravity of forest governance needs to move further from the simplistic global discourse driven almost exclusively by concerns for climate change and biodiversity towards a more complex and nuanced approach that responds to the realities of all forest users and their demands on the forest.

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