



# Municipal Politics and Forest Governance: Comparative Analysis of Decentralization in Bolivia and Guatemala

KRISTER P. ANDERSSON  
*University of Colorado, Boulder, USA*

CLARK C. GIBSON  
*University of California, San Diego, USA*

and

FABRICE LEHOUCQ\*  
*Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Mexico City, Mexico*

**Summary.** — The success of efforts to decentralize governance responsibilities hinges upon the incentives of local politicians. We test this argument by studying the experiences of forestry sector decentralization in Bolivia and Guatemala. We analyze the survey responses of 200 mayors and show that local-level institutional incentives are systematically linked to variations in local politicians' interest and investment decisions in the forestry sector. Further, we find that a decentralization policy that transfers very limited decision-making powers to local governments stifles local interest in organizing resource governance activities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Policymakers across the globe have turned to decentralization reforms to improve the governance of forests. Until the 1970s, central governments tended to view forest governance as a top-down affair to maximize economic development. But given the perceived failure of these top-down forestry policies, decentralized policy has become a highly touted response to the difficulties of forest governance. The logic of this recent wave of forestry decentralization reforms is that local governments can design more appropriate policies because they are more familiar with both the local environment and the needs of local users.

Some scholars and policymakers argue that decentralization will work because local communities and politicians have the specific time

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and place information needed to construct better policies than central governments (i.e., Hayek, 1948; Oates, 1999; World Bank, 1988). Others indicate that decentralization operates differently depending on precisely what powers are decentralized (i.e., Cohen & Peterson, 1999; Litvack, Ahmad, & Bird, 1998; Ribot, 2002; Rondinelli, McCullough, & Johnson, 1989). Still others argue that decentralization may work, but only in the context of specific institutions that include mechanisms of accountability, oversight, and resource transfers (i.e., Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Andersson, 2003; Blair, 2000; Fiszbein, 1997; Gibson & Lehoucq, 2003; Larson, 2002). Studies using relatively large samples of municipalities to test these hypotheses are uncommon for single-country studies and non-existent for multi-country studies. Consequently, we do not possess very much systematic evidence about one of the most significant policy innovations in the environmental arena in the past 50 years.

Building on the initial one-country studies by Andersson (2003) and Gibson and Lehoucq (2003), this study takes the analysis of institutional incentives for decentralized forest governance one step further by comparing the dynamics of municipal politics in two different countries. This allows us to explore whether these conditions are country specific or operate at a more general level. Another advantage of such a comparative effort is the possibility to analyze the effectiveness of the contrasting institutional designs of the two countries' decentralization reforms.

We posit that one of the fundamental conditions for decentralization policies to be effective is that the local government officials, to whom governance responsibilities have been handed over, are interested in carrying out their new mandate. Policy analysts should not take such interest for granted, especially when it comes to environmental governance. The problem is often that local governments bear substantial costs associated with environmental protection, but reap only a small part of the benefits. This collective-goods dilemma raises an important question: Why would local politicians be interested in forest governance?

We try to answer this question by constructing a theoretical argument that puts local politicians at the center of the analysis. More specifically, we explore the incentives that might affect local government mayors' interest in decentralized forest policy. Since the local government mayor—in his or her capacity as

the local government executive—often has the last word when it comes to defining work area priorities and allocating municipal resources to those areas, it is crucial to consider the mayor's perceptions of the rewards and penalties associated with different allocation decisions.

Though focusing on mayors, our approach indirectly recognizes that other actors—such as local resource users, central government agents, and special interest groups—also play important roles in decentralized resource governance. We let their influence on municipal affairs manifest itself through the degree of political pressure and financial rewards that the mayor perceives when interacting with each of these actors.

Following this logic of decentralized governance, our prediction is that mayors are more likely to express interest in—and actively support—municipal forest governance when they see a political advantage in doing so.

We assess the usefulness of this argument by comparing local governments in Bolivia and Guatemala. In the mid-1990s, national governments devolved important responsibilities over forests to the municipal governments. In 2000–01, our research team carried out extensive fieldwork in 200 randomly selected municipal governments in Bolivia and Guatemala. In each municipality, we interviewed the mayor for approximately two hours and collected data on the municipality's biophysical and socioeconomic characteristics.

The results of our fieldwork indicate that there is considerable variation in the political priority that the mayors place on forestry. We find that the relative strength of three institutional incentives at the local level helps explain why some mayors are more interested in forestry governance than others. Furthermore, Guatemalan mayors have significantly more interest and report taking more action regarding their forests than their Bolivian counterparts. We link this difference in outcome to the greater authority and experience that the Guatemalan mayors exercise over forest resources within their territories.

We develop our study in five sections. In Section 2, we provide an overview of the move to decentralize natural resource policy, especially in the developing world. Section 3 theorizes about local politicians' incentives in light of decentralized natural resource policy. We then introduce the particular decentralization trends in Bolivia and Guatemala in Section 4, paying

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