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

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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.

Key words — Latin America, Bolivia, Guatemala, decentralization, incentives, forestry

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
and place information needed to construct bet-
and policy innovations in the envi-
much systematic evidence about one of the
studies. Consequently, we do not possess very
hypotheses are uncommon for single-country
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 envi-
ronmental 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 institu-
tional incentives for decentralized forest gover-
nance 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 condi-
tions for decentralization policies to be effective
is that the local government officials, to whom
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 inter-
ested in forest governance?

We try to answer this question by construct-
ing a theoretical argument that puts local poli-
ticians 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 penal-
ties associated with different allocation deci-
sions.

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 gover-
nance. We let their influence on municipal af-
fairs 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 gover-
nance, our prediction is that mayors are more
likely to express interest in—and actively sup-
port—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 govern-
ments devolved important responsibilities over
forests to the municipal governments. In
2000–01, our research team carried out exten-
sive fieldwork in 200 randomly selected munici-
pal 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 socioeco-
nomic 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 institu-
tional incentives at the local level helps explain
why some mayors are more interested in for-
estry governance than others. Furthermore,
Guatemalan mayors have significantly more
interest and report taking more action regard-
ning their forests than their Bolivian counter-
parts. We link this difference in outcome to
the greater authority and experience that the
Guatemalan mayors exercise over forest re-
sources within their territories.

We develop our study in five sections. In Sec-
tion 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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