

Comparing Forest Decentralization and Local Institutional Change in Bolivia, Kenya, Mexico, and Uganda

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Summary. — In this paper we assess the institutional and environmental impacts of forest decentralization in Bolivia, Kenya, Mexico, and Uganda. We develop theories of institutional impacts based upon the specific content of decentralization reforms. We classify each country's reforms in terms of the creation/change in local user group empowerment and accountability mechanisms. Using data from the International Forestry Resources and Institutions Program, we estimate the effects of forest decentralization on local forest investments, rulemaking, wealth inequality, and forest conditions in the four countries. Some results support our theory, but the theory is insufficient to explain the full range of outcomes.

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Key words — Bolivia, Kenya, Mexico, Uganda, decentralization, forestry

1. INTRODUCTION

Forest decentralization programs have rapidly spread in developing countries in the last 20 years (Agrawal, Chhatre, & Hardin, 2008; Andersson, Gibson, & Lehoucq, 2004). There is now a large literature that examines case studies of decentralization and develops theoretical frameworks to explain the causes and consequences of decentralization (Boone, 2003; Falleti, 2005; O'Neill, 2003; Ribot, Agrawal, & Larson, 2006). In this paper we use these frameworks to develop a theory of how changes in accountability and user empowerment that result from decentralization policies impact user group behavior and forest conditions. We then test this theory using a unique over-time dataset on forest resources and institutions in Bolivia, Kenya, Mexico, and Uganda, which allows us to test theories across a broader range of cases than has been possible in previous work. We find, consistent with previous theories, that in countries where reforms increase both upward and downward accountability as well as empower forest users, there are more likely to be positive results both in terms of intermediate outputs such as user group collective action and in terms of outcomes such as improved forest conditions and decreased income inequality. These effects, however, are weak and inconsistent. The theory explains the data most strongly in Mexico, the country with the most well-established and democratic decentralization in the study area, but the results from Bolivia and Kenya are mixed. Surprisingly, Uganda, the country with the least stable forest governance system, saw the greatest increase in one important measure of local collective action—the making of rules about forest governance. The mixed nature of these findings indicates that the theories we test are useful guides, but are insufficient to explain the full range of decentralization outcomes.

Research on forest decentralization, like much of the broader literature on decentralization, is plagued by analytical problems. First, decentralization is not a single, well-defined policy but rather a general term that is applied to a diversity of policies that may include some combination of (a) moving

bureaucrats from central locations to sites closer to resources; (b) increasing the decision-making discretion of local level bureaucrats; and (c) increasing the decision-making authority of local users (Cohen & Peterson, 1996). Second, while there are a large number of theoretical arguments relating to the benefits and costs of decentralized political orders, under closer scrutiny these fail to generate consistent explanations of observed outcomes (Andersson *et al.*, 2008; Treisman, 2007). Third, decentralization policies interact with numerous other pressures to change governance institutions, forest user behavior, and resulting forest conditions and livelihood outcomes (Andersson *et al.*, 2008). The connection between national policy changes and changes in local level behavior are mediated by complex processes that inhibit policy implementation in even the best of circumstances (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1978; Sabatier, 1986). Forest management, an activity frequently undertaken in remote and politically marginal areas of poor countries, is not a promising candidate for implementation success.

Not surprisingly, evaluations of forest decentralization have reported disappointing results. The most influential theoretical work in this area is Agrawal and Ribot's (1999) framework, which emphasizes the importance of actors, powers, and accountability on the influence of decentralization reforms

* We wish to acknowledge generous financial and administrative support from the Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Collaborative Research Support Program (SANREM), the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, and the International Forestry Resources and Institutions Program. Additional funding for Forrest Fleischman's work on this project came from a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship #2007054263. We thank Jacqueline Bauer, Krister Andersson, and Elinor Ostrom for extensive comments on the drafts of this paper, as well as our collaborators in Mexico, Bolivia, Uganda, and Kenya, who worked so hard to gather this data. Any remaining errors are our own. Final revision accepted: August 29, 2011.

on governance institutions.¹ Work in this tradition has led to the pessimistic conclusion that decentralization reforms have reinforced the power of the central state (see also Boone, 2003; Larson & Ribot, 2007; Ribot & Larson, 2005; Ribot *et al.*, 2006). This literature has emphasized evaluations of the political consequences of decentralization, examining whether local actors have in fact gained political power, but has largely neglected the impact of decentralization policies on forest conditions and local level collective action around forest management (Andersson & Gibson, 2007). Most of this literature draws on relatively small numbers of cases, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

This paper seeks to address this gap by explicitly analyzing changes among forest users on the ground, placed within the larger political context of national decentralization policies. Rather than assuming uniform effects, we follow the approach suggested by Agrawal and Ribot (1999) and Larson (2003) by examining how particular decentralization policies affect local actor incentives, drawing on the extensive literature on decentralization in the four countries we study. We move a step further, however, by examining how these altered incentives affect both local forest user collective action (in terms of investment decisions and rulemaking) as well as the broader objectives of forest decentralization reforms (in terms of wealth inequality and forest conditions as seen by local user groups). Using the relatively large number of cases available in our dataset allows us to test the generality of theories developed by previous authors using smaller samples.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section we review the history of forest decentralization reforms in each of the four countries. These case histories provide the basis for our theoretical predictions of the impact of decentralization on our outcome variables. In Section 3 we draw on existing theory to derive predictions of the effects of decentralization in each of the countries. In Section 4 we describe the data we use for our analysis as well as summary statistics for each of the four countries. In Section 5 we report our empirical results. In Section 6 we discuss these findings and in Section 7 we conclude.

2. NATIONAL CASE HISTORIES

As a starting-off point for our analysis we examine how decentralization reforms in Bolivia, Kenya, Mexico, and Uganda have affected actor incentives. These countries were selected because all four have undergone forest decentralization reforms in the last decade, and baseline, pre-reform data were available in the International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) database. Furthermore, they represent diversity in terms of region and age and type of reforms.

(a) *Bolivia*

Two recent dissertations have focused on the forest decentralization in Bolivia (Andersson, 2002; Andersson & Pacheco, 2004; Pacheco, 2007). The Bolivian reform is considered by many to be a success story (FAO, 1999; Ferroukhi, 2003; UNDP, 1998, but see Pellegrini, 2009). Market-oriented and municipal government reforms took place from 1985 through 1995, expanding both the participatory nature and political power of municipalities, including the forestry sector. Then, in 1996, an agrarian reform and a forestry law were passed. These were the first laws in Bolivian history to recognize forestry as a legitimate land use for all property owners, and to recognize the harvesting rights of indigenous communi-

ties. These policies specify that the Bolivian government owns all forest resources, with private ownership restricted to plantations and permits granted for commercial harvesting activities (Andersson & Pacheco, 2004).

Prior to 1996, de jure control of the forest sector rested exclusively with the central government. The new set of forestry institutions attempted to introduce checks and balances between numerous actors. The most powerful of these actors was the newly created forestry superintendence, a politically independent central regulatory agency. Some power also rests with the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Planning, and municipal governments are given control over monitoring, administration and technical advice. Municipal governments have no authority to tax the forestry sector, but they are supposed to receive 25% of the money from central government forestry taxes, including a one USD tax per hectare on logging concession holders. In the vast majority of municipalities, this amount of money is insufficient for the purposes it is supposed to support (Andersson, 2003).

Municipal governments hold other powers to engage in land use planning through participatory processes that may play an important role in planning in the forestry sector (Andersson, 2004). In addition, the governance institutions of indigenous communities and other local forest associations have been empowered to play a much more active role in forestry planning, including commercial timber harvesting (Pacheco, 2007).

(b) *Kenya*

Relative to the other three countries in this study, the history of Kenya's forest decentralization has not been well studied. A broad decentralization began in 1983 with the establishment of the "District Focus for Rural Development" system, which delegated responsibility for numerous rural development projects to the local districts. However, policymaking, planning, and funding decisions largely remained centralized within government ministries. Local districts (and their associated county councils) had limited accountability to local people, and decision-making in the forest sector rested exclusively with the forest agency (Omondi & Omosa, 2002; Ongugo & Njuguna, 2004; Poole & Leakey, 1996).

The New Forest Act of 2005 replaced the Forest Department with the Kenya Forest Service (KFS), a semi-autonomous body managed by a board made up of representatives from various central government ministries. Under the Act, the KFS is expected to devolve powers to the private sector and to forest conservation committees and community forest associations (CFAs). Community participation, achieved primarily through CFAs, and integrated management of forests are central principles motivating the new policy (Ongugo, Mogoi, Obonyo, & Oeba, 2008). Because the 2005 law went into effect in early 2007, the formation of CFAs and other responses to the law's requirements are still evolving.

(c) *Mexico*

The process of decentralization in Mexico differs from the processes in Kenya, Bolivia, and Uganda due to Mexico's history of communal land tenure. Agrarian reforms in the Mexican Constitution of 1917 set in motion the creation of ejidos and comunidades. Ejidos were newly created communities with collective rights to land, governed by local councils in collaboration with the central government, while comunidades were indigenous communities who had prior rights. In both cases, the national government claimed ownership of the land, with the community receiving long-term rights to use the

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