



On the banality of forest governance fragmentation: Exploring “gecko politics” as a bureaucratic behaviour in limited statehood



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ABSTRACT

Governance of tropical forests at both the international and the national level is more and more fragmented because of the large constellation of actors, ideas and interests influencing forestland policies for their conservation or change. In public policy area, fragmentation is to some extent the result of competing interests and objectives that lead to a power play in policy-making between actor groups (both public and private), i.e., state bureaucracies, Intergovernmental organisations, nongovernmental organisations and private companies. In this power relationship for the control of tropical forestlands, the hegemony of state bureaucracies in forest governance processes is increasingly contested because of the growing influence of external actor groups in forest governance. Our findings show that the fragmentation of forest governance, which might be considered specific to pluralistic systems, became banal even in tropical countries with a state-centred system like Cameroon where the state claims hegemonic ownership of forestlands. This fragmentation is particularly reinforced in limited statehood where state bureaucracies are attracted to/dependent on external resources for dealing with weak institutional capacity and to face the government's lack of ability to supply public goods and services. But despite the governance fragmentation constraints, this article reveals that some governments and sectoral bureaucracies in limited statehood are capable of using cunning behaviours to secure their own interests in domestic forestland policies and avoid pressure from external actors. In the case of Cameroon for example, the strategy being used relies on a wait-and-see game, uncertainty and recourse to sudden, ambiguous decisions; this is what we call “gecko politics”. Broadly, this article seeks to understand how a government or state bureaucracy in limited statehood with a state-centred system can try to impose its own interests in the context of forest governance fragmentation?

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1. Introduction

The main objective of many co-existing individual regimes in global environmental governance is to solve problems of interdependence connected to environmental degradation such as deforestation, biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions. Since the 1990s, intergovernmental organisations (IOs) and non-state actors (NSAs) including, transnational nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and other private actors such as multinational corporations have been trying to change the governance of tropical forests. To do that, a number of policy reforms have been formulated to influence domestic policies in tropical countries which are home to the majority of tropical forests. Among these policy measures some, such as international conventions, are designed as binding rules while others are based on incentives mechanisms such as market-based instruments (Cashore et al., 2004;

Humphreys, 2008; Hufty, 2011). In both cases, there has been a proliferation of individual regimes promoting forest conservation, sustainable forest management, enforcement of forest law, better regulation of trade in forest products, and most recently, the protection of ecosystem services and carbon stock enhancement. The international forest regime that has emerged from these policies is fragmented (Humphreys, 2006; Smouts, 2008; McDermott, 2014; Wiersum et al., 2013).

At the national level, in most developing countries the forests are still mainly owned – at least legally – by the State (White and Martin, 2002; Agrawal et al., 2008). Consequently, national governments and state bureaucracies in these countries keep the upper hand over forestlands despite the growing influence of international actors like the IOs and the NSAs. Depending on the strength of the forested countries' economic and political power on the international scene, State domination of forestland policy may be explicitly assumed by national bureaucracies or may be the result of shrewd management. The more a tropical state is attracted to/or dependent on foreign resources such as Official Development Assistance, the more it tends to use cunning strategies to impose its preferences in forestland policies while managing to

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avoid blame from international actors. Beyond their formal hegemonic status on forestlands, the fact that some national bureaucracies have to resort to cunning to secure their interests and maximise their own benefits is evidence of the fragmentation of contemporary forest governance. Along the same lines, internal disputes within governments (whatever the political system) between pro-environmental and utilitarian ministries of forestlands illustrate the banality of forest governance fragmentation at various levels. Following Hannah Arendt's (1963) thought, the notion of banality in this paper refers to the notion used in political philosophy, i.e., it is the result of a lucid and rigorous analysis of a reality observed in the society without minimising the facts or imposing value judgments. In the African political context for example, Mbembe (1992) suggests that banality beyond the formal bureaucratic formalities observed in African society, may imply predictability since it is made up of repeated daily actions and gestures.

Considering the banality of governance fragmentation in a pluralistic system as a starting point for our analysis, the theoretical contribution of this paper is to reveal that fragmentation – even informally – may also be banal in a state-centred system. Empirically, the paper analyses how bureaucracies in a state-centred system, especially those in limited statehood,¹ may react to the banality of forest governance fragmentation. The concept of fragmentation in environmental governance literature refers to the competing co-existence of a mosaic of institutions (public and private) with different spatial scopes (from bilateral to global) pursuing different interests and objectives (Biermann et al., 2009; Bernstein and Cashore, 2012; Zelli and Asselt, 2013; Giessen, 2013). In the forest policy domain, a number of scholars consider that fragmentation is strongly reinforced by lack of both coordination and policy coherency in the international forest regime (Humphreys, 2008; Smouts, 2008; Buizer et al., 2014).

In regime theory literature, the dynamics of fragmentation in global forest governance has been characterised as a “regime complex” (Raustiala and Victor, 2004). This theory has led to growing academic interest in the field embraced by the International Forest Regime Complex (IFRC) in which fragmentation is a core characteristic.² Among the main research questions that can explain the power relationship in IFRC, Giessen (2013) highlighted the fact that it is largely unknown how bureaucracies in domestic politics can influence and take advantage of the fragmentation of forest governance. Based on this useful starting point, our paper aims to address the question of how national bureaucracies in limited – but smart – statehood, can secure their own interests in a context of forest governance fragmentation. Our main hypothesis is that: state bureaucracies in limited statehood such as Cameroon employ cunning behaviour to keep the upper hand over domestic forestland policies through astute manipulation, ambiguous decision-making and institutional dysfunctioning. Using the gecko metaphor, we suggest categorising this style of bureaucratic reaction as “gecko politics”.

This paper is the result of desk and field research conducted between 2011 and 2013. Empirically, the research analyses a period of two decades of Cameroon forestland policies starting in 1994 when the post-Rio forest law was adopted and ending in 2013. Data analysed in this study came mainly from three sources: literature, interviews, and live field observation. The bibliography reflects extensive analysis of the scientific literature and institutional documents. We were privileged with access to a variety of formal, informal and sometimes even confidential documents (letters, emails from actor coalitions) on the country's forestland policies. The interview phase was composed of 30 semi-directive discussions with a sample of the most representative policy implementers on the forestland use decision-making process. We held 30–60 minute interviews with representatives of state bureaucracies, IOs and NSAs. For the direct observation phase the author

participated regularly in conferences, seminars and meetings on forestland policies in Cameroon.

The paper is divided into five sections. After the introduction, Section 2 gives an overview of forestland use governance in Cameroon. Section 3 deals with the theoretical framework of governance fragmentation in state-centred systems. Section 4 analyses empirical evidence from two case studies in Cameroon: the Ngoyla-Mintom forest project and the Herakles palm oil project. Last, Section 5 presents our conclusion.

2. An overview of forestland use governance in Cameroon

2.1. Complex embedding of land tenure and forest land

In 2012, the dense humid forestland area in Cameroon was estimated at 21 million hectares, i.e., close to 45% of the country's total land area. From the legal angle, the term forest tenure makes a distinction between a “permanent” forestland domain (PFD) and a “non-permanent” forestland domain (NPFDF) (WRI/MINFOR, 2013; Beligné, 2013). The PFDs are forestlands allocated to the State domain and municipalities, covering about three-fourths of the country's total forestland area. This category includes: the Forest Management Units (FMUs) composed of timber production areas and the hunting reserves, on the one hand and the protected forests (national parks, plant and animal reserves) on the other, while the NPFDFs are composed of the community forests which are reserved for the local populations, privately owned forests and forests in the “national domain”. Forestlands in the national domain in 2012 covered approximately 4.5 million hectares (Beligné, 2013). These are lands that the State can award to private entities for agriculture. The national forestlands domain are usually exploited by rural populations who do not have titling acts since they consider these spaces as their property according to customary rights (Karsenty, 1999; Oyono, 2004).

2.2. The Cameroonian forestland: a mosaic of actors and overlapping interests

In Cameroon, like in most tropical countries, forestlands are subjected to various types of pressure. They can be reassigned to other uses (e.g., forest operations, mining, agriculture) or be set aside for conservation (interests related to biodiversity, carbon storage). Pressure is especially strong in countries where the State claims hegemonic ownership of the forests and their resources but does not have the capacity and/or the political will and interest to ensure sustainability (Karsenty and Ongolo, 2012). Three basic reasons can explain the rush on forestlands: first, the idea that tropical forests are vast “under-exploited” spaces, rich in arable lands and other sub-soil resources; second, the idea that forestlands are rife with economic opportunities of many sorts where an agro-industrial investor can, for instance, expect to amortise investments in agriculture by reaping profit from timber obtained on the site of the agro-industrial project; third, the lack of transparency which characterises the majority of land deals in tropical countries including Cameroon (Anseeuw et al., 2012).

At the state level, the decision-making processes on forestland use policies are characterised by fragmented responsibilities that are divided among pro-environmental and utilitarian ministries. The main concern of each ministry is more to safeguard its prerogatives than to contribute to the coherence of forestland use policies. Since 1997 for example, a set of FMUs already allocated by the ministry of forests to timber companies have been unilaterally attributed to agro-industrial operators by other state bureaucracies, thereby promoting a wave of forestland conversions (Ongolo and Karsenty, in press). This situation is aggravated by the outcome of ambiguous arbitration by governmental leaders, and in some cases, national bureaucracies can benefit from the fragmentation of global forest governance. The Ministry of Forests (MINFOR) for instance gives preference to individual regimes that favour logging or timber trade such as the International Tropical Timber

¹ In a word, the concept of “limited statehood” in this paper refers to a state which lacks full domestic sovereignty (Krasner and Risse, 2014).

² For a systematic overview on IFRC, see Giessen (2013).

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