Analyzing REDD+ as an experiment of transformative climate governance: Insights from Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to an emerging body of literature on policy experimentation and governance transformation processes. We use the example of REDD+ as consisting of policy experiments in an emerging domestic policy domain to understand obstacles to transformations in forest and climate governance. We ask two interlinked questions: to what extent did the establishment of the REDD+ Agency challenge ‘business as usual’ in Indonesia’s forest and climate policy arena?; and what does this mean for a transformation away from policies and governance that enable deforestation and forest degradation? We draw on the transformation literature to better understand the role of REDD+ to achieve a transformative shift in climate governance. As an experiment of transformative climate governance, the study of REDD+ provides important insights for other forest or climate programs. Our analysis shows that the REDD+ Agency was successful in some extend in introducing an alternative governance mechanism and in shaking the governance structures but we also note that some of the key actors thought that greater ownership was achieved when the REDD+ Agency was dissolved and the mandate was returned to the ministries. We conclude that policy experimenting is a process, and while the creation of novel policies and their experimentation is important, also their assimilation may lead to new opportunities.

1. Introduction

Forests play a vital role in global climate regulation. Deforestation and forest degradation are the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries, and they have accounted for 11–13% of all global CO₂ emissions during the last decade (Friedlingstein et al., 2010; Baccini et al., 2012). In response to this, reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries (REDD+) has emerged as a climate change mitigation mechanism.

The importance of forests in climate change mitigation (and adaptation) was reconfirmed in the Paris Agreement, and REDD+ continues to be an important mechanism to achieve climate targets in land-use and forest sectors. REDD+ aims to achieve a shift from project-based conservation to more integrated, nationally led policy reforms, including reforms in incentive structures that lead away from deforestation and forest degradation. At the local level, REDD+ is implemented via diverse pilot projects (Corbera and Schroeder, 2011; Sunderlin et al., 2014) that aim to demonstrate avoided deforestation and degradation (e.g. by measuring the carbon stored in trees), as well as promoting various other co-benefits, such as biodiversity protection and improvements in livelihoods for local people.

Research on REDD+ has increased during the past nine years (Mbatu, 2016) and includes: experiences on pilot projects (Hajek et al., 2011; Murdiyarso et al., 2011; Peskett et al., 2011); the role of REDD+ in international climate negotiations (Reinecke et al., 2014); monitoring, reporting and verification (Korhonen-Kurki et al., 2013; Salvini et al., 2014); and the risks and opportunities it presents on a national level (Corbera and Schroeder, 2011; Gupta, 2012). However, studies on institutional and governance structures are scarce among the REDD+ research, despite the fact that the success of REDD+ will depend largely on good governance (and efficient institutions) (Mbatu, 2016). In this context, we propose that examining REDD+ as a policy experiment can help to address this gap.

We argue that REDD+ has a highly experimental character, expressed in the high diversity of governance approaches and pilots,
as well as in the flexibility for realizing REDD+ at country level. Thus, REDD+ mechanism can be considered as a new, experimental, governance instrument. REDD+ is part of an emerging forest governance that is moving away from state control towards more diverse set of actors and institutions. It belongs to a set of wide-ranging policy reforms within and beyond the forestry sector that affect not only a narrow set of regulations, but also a broad range of institutional patterns, and aim to change the behavior of actors across sectors and levels (Brockhaus and Angelsen, 2012).

We study these features of a REDD+ policy experiment, using Indonesia as a case study, and through this, provide new insights to REDD+ debate. We describe the complex institutional setting, where new policies for REDD+ are embedded and distinguish transformative factors and restrictive conditions in the policy arena that influence REDD+. Furthermore, we analyze one particular experimental feature of the REDD+, namely the REDD+ Agency in Indonesia, and ask two interlinked questions: to what extent did the establishment of the REDD+ Agency challenge ‘business as usual’ in Indonesia’s forest and climate policy arena; and what does this mean for a transformation away from policies and governance that enable deforestation and forest degradation?

First, we theorize transformational change in the context of REDD+ and introduce the concept of a policy experiment, and develop our analytical framework. Then, we present the methods and materials used for the Indonesian case study. Next, we look deeper into the Indonesian national policy arena. We examine what kind of policy arrangements have been created for REDD+ and analyze how they contribute to transformation. In conclusion, we argue that policy experimenting is a process, and while the creation of novel policies and their experimentation is important, also their assimilation may lead to new opportunities.

2. Policy experiments: a way toward transformation?

2.1. Transformational change and REDD+

The idea of transformations has emerged to explore how change processes take place in society, how societies are enabled and what obstacles prevent them from taking place change processes (Westley et al., 2011). According to Brown et al. (2013), transformation is generally understood to denote a profound, substantial and irreversible change. Fundamental changes in formal and informal institutions that go beyond incremental technical developments appear to be a common feature in the discussions on transformations. Zeitlin et al. (2005, 450) present the notion of ‘substantive change’, by which they refer not only to formal institutions, such as law, policy and rules, but also to “broad changes in policy thinking”. Similarly, Scoones et al. (2015) analyze the multiple forms of transformation and strategies of change, classifying them as ‘shaping and resisting structures’, ‘reframing knowledge’, ‘realizing institutions and incentives’ and ‘mobilizing and networking’.

Policy change is an integral part of the broader transformation process. There are several well-known frameworks to study policy change, such as Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 2007) and the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (Ostrom, 2011) that address the collective action problem, for example. ACF is based on rational policy analysis that expects that actors can solve collective problems and be able to produce rational policy processes (Arts, 2012; Sabatier, 2007). ACF focuses policy outcomes and policy learning as a result of advocacy coalitions, policy brokers and outside events (Arts, 2012; see also Pierson, 1993). Pierson (1993) notes that whilst individuals choose, their choices are influenced by incentive structures, and these structures provide strong inducements that frame their decisions to make particular choices. Institutional policy analysis can be considered as a critique of rationalism. Thus, rational choice and rational design are defined by rules, norms and beliefs, and further as ‘institutions’ that also affect individual level decision-making (Ostrom, 2011).

In the context of forest governance, we understand transformational change as a shift “in discourse, attitudes, power relations, and deliberate policy and protest action that leads policy formulation and implementation away from business as usual policy approaches that directly or indirectly support deforestation and forest degradation” (Brockhaus and Angelsen, 2012; 16–17). To achieve this, innovative policy development and governance experimentation is required to accelerate change processes. We argue that both institutional structure and actors’ activities need to be considered when analyzing the change (Pierson, 1993).

To analyze transformational change in the REDD+ policy arena, Brockhaus and Angelsen (2012) propose a political economy framework to study factors enabling or hindering larger policy change related to REDD+. ‘Institutional setting’ is defined as the formal and informal regulations, rules and norms that are established over time and that are not easily changed or transformed (Scharpf, 2000; Baumgartner et al., 2011). Brockhaus and Angelsen (2012) further present four ‘is (institutional stickiness, interests, ideas and information) as interlinked key determinants for change and resistance in the policy arena. Institutions arise from norms, regulations and institutional arrangements; ‘interests’ refers to different REDD+ actors and their material interests; ‘ideas’ refers to ideological beliefs; and ‘information’ refers to knowledge and its use in REDD+ processes. Numerous frameworks have been used across scientific disciplines to better analyse what we are calling here institutions, interests, ideas and information. Even though terminology and perspectives vary, they do not differ as much as, for example, when sociologists use concepts of culture, knowledge, power and history. Hall (1997) and Grindle (1999) apply these to the discipline of political economy.

We further see the actors as players in the ‘policy arena’, which is framed by institutions but shaped by the actions of the actors (whether individuals, communities, organizations or networks) and characterized by more or less hierarchical or inclusive processes, involving a range of powerful actors, which can foster or prevent certain policies and influence policy formulation (see, for example, Corbera and Schroeder, 2011; Arts, 2012). Grin (2006, 63) argues that if structures operate through acting agents (actors), the latter are the ones who in principle might be more reflexive. Structure and action may be transformed “though structuration processes guided by deliberate ‘reorientation’” – a process that Grin calls ‘re-structuration’ (Grin 2006; 63).

2.2. Policy experiments in REDD+

Experiments can bring about a shift in attitudes, power relations and deliberate policy action, and thus contribute to transformation. Conceptually, the initiation of experimental governance represents the development of novel ‘rule structures’ for participation and learning within an already established pattern of institutional arrangements and actor constellations (Ostrom, 2011). Within policy literature, various definitions of ‘experiments’ are offered; a common denominator and defining element is a hypothesis driven approach in which variables and elements are intentionally modified in order to systematically generate knowledge (Van den Bos, 2010).

Experimentation often involves testing, piloting or demonstration and is under continuous assessment and adaptation in response to real-life system conditions (Van den Bos, 2010). Thus, experiments are usually seen as local trials, or small-scale projects that are closely controlled. In addition, the focus of experimentation is diverse and can also relate to a technology, a practice, a program or a policy. The literature on policy or governance experimentation is traditionally linked to the literature on adaptive management (Holling, 1978; Walters, 1986). In other words, experimentation is triggered by an intentional destabilization of existing institutions and routines, which actors can induce to explore novel possibilities and outcomes of
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