Translating Sustainable Forest Management from the global to the domestic sphere: The case of Brazil

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A B S T R A C T

In the context of fragmented global forest governance, Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) has gained force as a strategy to improve forest conditions and livelihood outcomes. Accordingly, SFM related ideas and norms are translated across different environmental domains, levels of governance, and social-ecological systems. This article discusses how SFM related rules, norms, and discourses are translated from the global to the domestic level of Brazil. Results show how international forest governance is translated to multiple forest policy contexts of Brazil. First, international conventions related to forest lead to specific translations of SFM into national policies. Second, international discourses on SFM have failed to have much influence on the main piece of domestic forest legislation, the Brazilian Forest Code. Third, the confluence of international ideas and norms of SFM with the social-ecological systems of different Brazilian forest biomes produces a set of very different SFM translations on the domestic level. We conclude that translations of SFM, from the global to the domestic level, are shaped by domestic policy and social-ecological systems. Thus, the role of domestic policies and the specificity of forest ecosystems deserve more attention in global forest governance than is currently the case.

1. Introduction

1.1. Sustainable Forest Management and forest governance

Global forest governance is concerned with a broad number of goals and environmental domains, including climate, desertification, biodiversity, and poverty reduction (Humphreys, 2009). At the same time, there is no unifying legally binding instrument on forests on a global scale (Eikermann, 2015). Consequently, forest issues are globally addressed in other international conventions (i.e. climate change, biodiversity, and desertification), as well as by non-legally binding instruments and declarations (Giessen, 2013). This inherent complexity and the lack of a legally binding instrument on forests is usually what described global forest governance as ‘fragmented’ (Wiersema, 2014).

Over the last decades, Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) has gained global traction as a strategy that can achieve environmental, social, and economic goals by using forest resources while maintaining the provision of related ecosystem services (Nasi and Frost, 2009; Quine et al., 2013). In fragmented global forest governance, SFM is a key concept that is part of and central to many conventions and instruments; including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change of 1992 (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity of 1994 (CBD), the United Nations Convention on Combat Desertification of 1995 (UNCCD), and the Non-Legally Binding Instrument on All Types of Forests (NLBI), which the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) agreed on in 2007. The NLBI offers the most recent internationally agreed definition of SFM: [...] “a dynamic and evolving concept, [aiming] to maintain and enhance the economic, social and environmental values of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations” (UN, 2007b, p. 4).

Considering the role of SFM in global forest governance, it is important to explore its ability to overcome the drawbacks of policy fragmentation and lack of a legally binding instrument on forests. The UNFF definition of SFM offers a broad understanding of social, economic and environmental goals (Nasi and Frost, 2009; Quine et al., 2013), allowing a broad scope of interpretation when applied to domestic policy contexts (Eikermann, 2015). How this flexibility translates to national or domestic realities is unclear: does it steer forest policy and management towards the realisation of a full range of objectives (social, economic, environmental) for an equally broad range of policy fields (climate, desertification, biodiversity)? Or, alternatively, does the broad definition of SFM reflect the weakness of a non-legally binding status of the NLBI, leading to very little influence on national forest management?

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Domestic policies play a crucial role in how global rules, norms, and ideas are translated in results 'on the ground' (Arts et al., 2012; Burns and Giessen, 2016). Literature points out that fragmentation in for example global biodiversity policy is related to a lack of implementation efforts on the domestic level (Jöhannsdóttir et al., 2010). Studies of how international forest regimes influence domestic policies are however scarce and mostly focus on climate policies (cf. Chia et al., 2015). Specific studies that do show empirically how a set of international forest rules and ideas are translated to a domestic context are missing for many countries, including a country of global importance such as Brazil (but compare Burns and Giessen, 2016 for an analysis of Argentina). In addition, social-ecological context is often overlooked in explaining domestic translations of international policies, while the valuation and use of forest-related ecosystem services also depend on forest type and the socio-economic conditions of actors involved (Agrawal et al., 2008; Ostrom, 2011).

In this article, we discuss SFM at the domestic policy level as a result of a translation that is understood as the confluence of global governance, national policies, and social-ecological systems. We do so in order to shed light on the mechanisms by which SFM is included – or not – in national forest policies, programmes, and projects and thus how SFM shapes results 'on the ground'. By understanding SFM translations, we may moreover explore in what situations the integrative ambitions that are articulated for SFM can be achieved in practice.

Below, we apply the concept of SFM translations to the case of Brazil. We first describe the concept of translations by drawing on literature on global forest governance, forest institutions, and social-ecological systems. Next, we argue for Brazil as a case study. Our findings discuss SFM translation in Brazil in relation to international treaties, national forest law and policy debates, and the four major forest biomes of the country. We conclude by reflecting on how SFM translations are shaped in the interaction of the influences of global forest governance, national policies, and social-ecological systems on the domestic level of Brazil.

2. Analytical framework

2.1. Sustainable Forest Management translations from international to domestic level of governance

Translations between the international and the national level of forest policy are discussed in literature as complex interactions and in terms of multi-level governance (Armitage, 2008; Berkes, 2008). Several analytical approaches can be applied to describe these multi-level interactions. First, discourse analysis is one way to understand how international forest policies influence domestic decision-making (Leipold, 2014), as norms and discourses can give rise to new, domestic institutions or influence domestic actors' behaviour directly by setting social norms. Second, institutional analysis can explain how national institutions are adapted to international rules and regulations. Institutions play a key role in steering actor's behaviour by setting collective constraints (Goodin, 1996) and operate on different scales of decision-making (Agrawal et al., 2008; Bernstein, 2011; Mwangi and Wardell, 2012; Ostrom, 2011; Young, 2013). Third, regime theory is an influential perspective on the interactions between global and domestic forest policy (Giessen, 2013). While it addresses rules and norms that shape decision-making, it also places focus on the interests of the state and non-state actors in actively accepting or rejecting these rules and norms (Singer and Giessen, 2017). Thus, multi-level governance “involves complex interactions of state, private, and civil society actors” (Mwangi and Wardell, 2012, pp. 94–95), that shape translations from the international to the domestic level.

According to Bernstein and Cashore (2012), global complex governance influences domestic policy through four different pathways. These pathways of influence from the global to the domestic level are (1) international rules; (2) international norms and discourses; (3) markets; and (4) direct access to domestic policy-making processes (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). These four pathways help explain the complexity of global governance, in particular the idea that global governance is not limited to legally binding conventions, and include discursive norms and transnational actors as important influences on domestic policies (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012).

To analyse SFM translations, we first draw on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2005) and the policy arrangement approach (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Arts and Leroy, 2006) to understand how the pathways of influence of Bernstein and Cashore affect domestic policy. In particular, we understand discourses to 'prepare the way for other pathways to occur' (Burns and Giessen, 2016, p. 495), while discourses also enter into competition with other global and domestic discourses (Behagel and Arts, 2014). We consider the ‘international rules’ pathway in terms of the legal obligations that countries take on to transpose agreements into national law, policies, and programmes. The ‘markets’ pathway includes direct and indirect actions that “work with or leverage market to create domestic policy change” (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012, p. 593). In this sense, forest governance is also influenced by non-forest related markets, such as agriculture and cattle (Kröger, 2017). The ‘direct access to domestic policy-making processes’ pathway is related more directly to the role that international and national actors play in policy articulation and implementation, including international donors.

Second, our analysis of SFM translations includes the role of domestic policies, discourses, and actors. Understanding the interactions of international and domestic levels of governance implies understanding how influence emanates from both levels (Singer, 2008). That is to say that domestic policy discourses can either contest or strengthen international discourses; that national rules and institutions co-shape how international agreements are transposed to national law; and that national actors can link to and/or crowd out transnational actors in policy networks. In particular, we consider SFM to be a prime example of ‘complex governance’, as it is discursively articulated in both international fora and national policy debates, part of both international rules such as the CBD and national forest laws, and supported by both transnational development agencies and national NGOs.

Third, we hold that the social-ecological systems differ per country and within a country per type of forest ecosystem. Domestic policy articulations and programmes that relate to specific natural resource, governance, and user systems should be understood as the result of social-ecological interactions (Ostrom, 2009), and hence also lead to specific SFM translations. In particular, insights from political ecology point out that human-environment relations have important effects on cross-scale interactions and whether international rules, norms, and ideas are ultimately adopted or rejected (Adger et al., 2005; Armitage, 2008). Considering social-ecological systems in SFM translation therefore also provides and antidote to ‘blueprint thinking’, i.e. the idea that international norms and principles may be translated in every context in the same way (Ostrom and Cox, 2010).

To conclude, we define SFM translations as the result of a confluence of international pathways of influence, national policies and debates, and social-ecological systems. In other words, we hold that international SFM rules, norms, and beliefs establish themselves as part of national forest policy contexts that are more or less related to a specific forest ecosystem. To study these translations, we consider the various national policies and debates that are expected to be shaped by international pathways of SFM. Finally, we theorise that social-ecological contexts shape SFM translation on the domestic level through the role that natural resources, governance, and user systems (Ostrom, 2009) play in adopting or rejecting international influence. Fig. 1 visually illustrates our analytical framework.
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