

Trends in Latin American forestry decentralisations: legal frameworks, municipal governments and forest dependent groups

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SUMMARY

How are forestry decentralisations evolving in Latin America? What role are municipal governments playing, and to what extent are the needs of forest-dependent peoples being taken into account? This article represents a synthesis of research findings from Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. It assesses current trends in Latin American forestry decentralisations, with particular attention to different conceptions of decentralisation, the role of sub-national governments and the problems of forest-dependent groups. With regard to sub-national governments, the research finds that the principal tendency in the decentralisation of decision-making over forests is through contractual arrangements between local or state governments and forestry institutes. For their part, forest-dependent groups are not able to improve their opportunity to engage in forestry-based activities without specific policies operating in their favour – beginning with secure access to forest resources – and such policy changes have most often come about in response to organised demands and in policy spheres outside of forestry.

Keywords: decentralisation, natural resources, Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, marginalised groups, local government

Courants dans les décentralisations de la foresterie en Amérique Latine: cadre légal, gouvernements municipaux et groupes dépendant de la forêt

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Comment évoluent les décentralisations de la foresterie en Amérique Latine? Quel rôle jouent les gouvernements municipaux, et jusqu'où les besoins des groupes dépendant de la forêt sont-ils pris en compte? Cet article représente une synthèse des résultats de recherches en Bolivie, au Guatemala, au Honduras et au Nicaragua. Il évalue les différents courants dans la décentralisation de la foresterie en Amérique Latine, en portant une attention particulière sur les diverses conceptions de la décentralisation, le rôle des gouvernements sous-nationaux, et les problèmes des groupes dépendant de la forêt. Dans le cas des gouvernements sous-nationaux, la recherche réalise que la tendance principale dans la décentralisation des prises de décision quant à la forêt s'opère dans des arrangements de contrats entre les gouvernements locaux ou d'état, et les instituts forestiers. De leur côté, les groupes dépendant de la forêt ne peuvent pas améliorer leur opportunité de s'engager dans des activités basées sur la foresterie sans que des prises de décision spécifique n'oeuvrent en leur faveur, en commençant par un accès sûr aux ressources de la forêt. De tels changements de politique ne sont souvent entrés en scène qu'en réponse aux demandes organisées et aux sphères politiques en dehors de la foresterie.

Tendencias de la descentralización forestal en Latinoamérica: marcos legales, gobiernos locales y grupos que dependen de bosques

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¿Cómo ha sido la evolución de la descentralización forestal en Latinoamérica? ¿Qué papel juega el gobierno local, y hasta qué punto se toman en cuenta las necesidades de los grupos que dependen económicamente de los bosques? Este estudio representa una síntesis de los descubrimientos de investigaciones en Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras y Nicaragua. El artículo examina las tendencias actuales de la descentralización forestal latinoamericana, y se centra en un análisis de los diferentes conceptos de la descentralización, el papel que desempeñan los gobiernos a nivel sub-nacional, y los problemas que los grupos que dependen del bosque deben afrontar. En cuanto al gobierno a nivel sub-nacional, la investigación ha revelado que los acuerdos contractuales entre gobiernos estatales o locales e instituciones forestales representa la tendencia más importante del proceso de descentralización de la toma de decisiones en el sector forestal. La capacidad de realizar actividades forestales de los grupos que dependen de los bosques no puede aumentar sin que haya políticas específicas que operen

a su favor, sobre todo en lo que se refiere al acceso seguro a los recursos forestales. En la mayor parte de los casos, sólo se ha logrado este tipo de cambio de política en respuesta a demandas organizadas y además en campos que no incluyen el forestal.

INTRODUCTION

Local governments are increasingly important actors in forest management, due to a progressive move towards decentralisation of responsibilities and decisions affecting forest resources. To date, over 60 countries around the world claim to be decentralising some aspect of natural resource management, including forests (Agrawal 2001). Even when forest sector decentralisation is not part of national policy, some local governments have become involved in forest resources management without formal mandates to do so (Larson 2005a, Mearns 2005), and some are demanding a greater role in natural resource decisions, particularly in contexts in which central governments still resist sharing responsibilities and control.

In the past five years, an important body of knowledge has been generated regarding the structure and process of forestry decentralisations around the world (Colfer and Capistrano 2005, Ferroukhi 2003, Ribot 2002). That research has principally aimed to understand the new institutional configurations and balance of power relationships emerging from decentralisation; the implications for forest resources and for the welfare of forest dependent people; and the interactions between local governments and local institutions in place for managing natural resources (for example, Andersson 2004, Gibson and Lehoucq 2003, Larson 2003, Larson 2005c, Pacheco 2003, Ribot and Larson 2005, Toni and Kaimowitz 2003).

This article provides an overall picture of current trends, problems, constraints and opportunities in Latin American forestry decentralisations, with particular attention to the divergent priorities of central governments and forest-dependent groups.¹ It is aimed at better understanding ways in which the latter have benefited – and could benefit further – from decentralisation. It is based on research in 2005 in Bolivia (Pacheco 2006), the Brazilian Amazon (Toni 2006), Honduras (Vallejo and Guillén 2006), Guatemala (Larson and Barrios 2006) and Nicaragua (Larson 2006) and represents a synthesis of some of the key results of these national case studies. These five countries have all undertaken forestry decentralisations to some extent yet represent a variety of specific policies and historical and geographical characteristics. The studies were undertaken using a comparative framework to develop a set of common hypotheses and guiding questions regarding the relationships among decentralisation, governance and livelihoods (see Larson *et al.* forthcoming for a more recent model of the comparative framework). To understand the needs of and problems faced by poor forest users specifically, interviews were conducted with leaders and members of forestry,

women's and indigenous organizations, as well as with NGO, project and government officials who work with these groups. National policies and legislation, relevant authorities at various levels of government and existing research were also consulted. The studies were undertaken by lead researchers with substantial prior and on-going experience in forestry decentralisation in each country.

The research took as its premise that a principle goal in decentralising resource responsibilities and decision-making should be to promote greater access for marginalised groups to benefits from forests and forestry. This is not necessarily the central government's goal in implementing forestry decentralisation in practice, but it is often among the primary interests of forest-dependent groups. Decentralisation, understood here as both policy and process, could thus result in benefits for these groups whether or not they were planned by policy makers, but is likely to be more beneficial if it is implemented with these goals in mind.

With regard to decentralisation in general, the studies found both gains and losses for municipal governments, often within the same country, resulting from the nature of decentralisation processes and local responses – characterised by numerous political forces pushing in different directions at different times based on the particular negotiation at hand. With regard to poor and marginalised groups, the research found that small-scale producers are not able to improve their opportunities for engaging in forestry-based activities without specific policies operating in their favour – beginning, in particular, with secure access to forest resources – and that such policy changes most often came about in response to organised demands from these actors and their allies. Also, some of the most important advances, for both decentralised decision-making and direct local benefits, appear more likely to arise in other spheres outside the specific institutional framework for forestry, such as indigenous demands for autonomy or land rights.

This paper is organised in five sections, including this introduction. The second section reviews contrasting conceptions of decentralisation, based primarily on development priorities. The third examines the legal framework for forestry decentralisation in each of the countries studied and the degree to which forest-dependent groups are recognised and accommodated. The fourth section looks at the implementation of forest policies, the role of municipal governments in forest management and the effect on and concerns of forest-dependent groups. This is followed by a summary of the most important trends in forestry decentralisations, as identified in the five-country analysis.

¹ This paper uses the terms forest-dependent groups, marginalised groups, poor forest users and local communities interchangeably to refer to groups of people who live in and around forests and who are traditionally excluded from forest access or benefits in some way.

WHY DECENTRALISE?

Decentralisation is a tool for promoting development and is aimed at increasing efficiency, equity and democracy. But decentralisation has different meanings to different people (Larson 2005c, Meynen and Doornbos 2005). It is one of those ideas, rather like sustainable development, that everyone appears to agree on but only in the absence of a more precise definition of the concept or the specific goals being promoted. These differences often go unstated or even unidentified but are essential for understanding the roots of problems, conflicts and expectations in practice.

Decentralisation priorities can be grouped into two main approaches to development. One highlights the need for improving institutional conditions for the promotion of private investment as the essential condition for economic development and growth. Here decentralisation is aimed at increasing efficiency, because greater local input should result in better-targeted policies and lower transaction costs (World Bank 1997). "Governance" refers principally to the quality of government and its formal links to citizens, and is used primarily in reference to the struggle for "good governance": the transparency, absence of corruption and institutional stability that make investment safer (Meynen and Doornbos 2005).

The other approach stresses the importance of securing local livelihoods, promoting collective action, such as for forest resources management, and building a civic culture for democracy and citizen participation. Some formulations of this approach, though certainly not all, border on romanticism, celebrating "community" or "the local" while failing to take into account local heterogeneity, inequity and power struggles (Meynen and Doornbos 2005), or even a clear conception of development. According to this view, decentralisation is seen as an opportunity for greater local participation and control over decision-making, to the extent that many indigenous organizations have adopted the struggle for decentralisation in lobbying for greater autonomy (Plant 2002). In this construction, "good governance" emphasises downward accountability and the role of local people in decision-making, as much as questions of transparency and lack of corruption. Governance is not limited to the formal sphere but rather refers to the ways in which power and authority are exercised in a particular arena or locale, taking into account the interplay of both formal and informal authorities and institutions (Oyono 2005).

In theory these two formulations are not incompatible. For example, the World Bank emphasises the equity and democracy goals of decentralisation, bringing government "closer to the people" and increasing local participation as well as government accountability (World Bank 1988, 1997, 2000, Manor 1999). But in combination with different approaches to development, they suggest very different political, economic and social priorities.

For example, the former approach puts significant faith in markets, private investors and trickle down benefits for the poor, with a limited direct role for the state or for marginalised groups, who fit into this conception primarily

as a cheap labour supply. The latter focuses specifically on marginalised groups as key actors, and includes various livelihoods approaches to development, such as sustainable livelihoods (Carney 2002, Scoones 1998), rights-based approaches (Scoones and Wolmer 2003, Tsikata 2005) or community-driven development (Mathie and Cunningham 2002). To what extent has this second school of thought played a role in forestry decentralisations?

From a policy perspective, forestry decentralisation is often aimed at reducing costs (Colfer 2005), increasing forest department revenues (Muhereza 2003, Pacheco 2003), or strengthening state control over local communities (Contreras 2003, Sarin *et al.* 2003, Wittman 2002). It is sometimes aimed at providing new opportunities for forest-dependent peoples (Pacheco 2005) – a goal that speaks to the purported equity and democracy benefits of decentralisation, specifically greater control over livelihoods and a greater share of other natural resource benefits (Edmunds *et al.* 2003). This is not usually high on the agenda of national forestry institutes, whose priorities far more often fall within the realm of the first of the two schools of development discussed above. This does not mean that forest-dependent groups have not benefited at all from decentralisation; nevertheless, these benefits have probably been far more limited than they could otherwise be, and situations where decentralisation has led to conflict or further exclusion might have been avoided.

Decentralisation is commonly understood as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, Manor 1999) – hence most often to local governments (or, for example, to state governments in federal systems). "Democratic decentralisation" requires representative and accountable local authorities that have an autonomous, discretionary decision-making sphere with the power – and resources – to make decisions that are significant to the lives of local residents (Ribot 2002). How communities benefit from decentralisation, then, is mediated by the role played by these lower level governments, particularly when policies have not specifically taken into account the needs of these groups.

Theoretically, the institutional framework of democratic decentralisation should provide the conditions for greater local participation in decisions about development and natural resources. Most scholars now agree that local participation is essential for effective and sustainable natural resource management (Carney and Farrington 1998, Enters and Anderson 1999, Gibson, McKean and Ostrom 2000, Edmunds *et al.* 2003). This does not mean, however, that greater participation necessarily leads to greater resource sustainability; in fact, there are clearly circumstances under which local people would choose forest conversion if given the option (Larson 2002, Resosudarmo 2005, Tacconi, Siagian and Syan 2005). Rather, the recognised importance of participation is based in part on experiences suggesting that *lack of participation* often leads to contrary results. For example, because of the failure to integrate local livelihood needs into outside interventions, integrated rural development projects were often ineffective (Lutz and Caldecott 1996) and

many protected area projects actually increased biodiversity losses as well as social conflict (Enters and Anderson 1999). In addition, local people often ignore or filter rules imposed from outside; under the right circumstances, they are much more likely to respect rules that they had some role in creating (Gibson *et al.* 2000).

Participation as conceived under typical forestry decentralisation policies may not be enough to benefit forest-dependent groups significantly, though it may open spaces for participation that grow into effective demands for greater access to resources and benefits. That is, decentralisation as defined above implies – and is often conceptualised by policymakers as – a top-down process. This goes hand-in-hand with the aforementioned conception of governance that refers primarily to government. But participation and democracy are, at least in part, bottom-up processes. Development that includes effective poverty alleviation through livelihood strategies (Ellis 2000) and local empowerment (Chambers 1997) depend on bottom-up processes.

But even where there is a strong central government and a clear, top-down decentralisation policy, what is actually implemented, and the resulting shifts in institutions and governance depend on a two-way process. Hence, we define decentralisation as a set of institutional arrangements among public institutions and social actors that emerge from a broader process with two principle dimensions: (1) top-down measures aimed at transferring responsibilities – political, administrative and/or fiscal – to lower levels of government and (2) the gradual opening of spaces for participation from below, induced by the actions of social movements and local governments that challenge the traditional (centralised) way in which public policy decisions have been made (Larson *et al.* 2006, Larson *et al.* forthcoming). In this view, decentralisation is not only an administrative act involving the transfer of functions, but also a political event leading to a redistribution of powers among different levels of government, and between it and society. It is thus both a policy and a process.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR FORESTRY DECENTRALISATION

In the past decade, important changes in the forest policy frameworks in all five countries have taken place or are in process. Both Bolivia and Guatemala issued new Forestry Laws in the mid-1990s, Nicaragua passed a new forestry law in 2003, Honduras has a new forestry law in discussion in Congress, and Brazil issued a forest concessions law in 2006.² Each of these provides some additional benefits and/or responsibilities for municipal governments and local

forest users with respect to the past, although all are very conservative in transferring decision making over forest resources to lower levels of government. In general terms, Brazil has the most centralised forestry administration, followed closely by Nicaragua. Bolivia and Guatemala are the two countries in which greater decentralisation has taken place in practice, though this is more instrumental to the forestry agency in Guatemala. Honduras falls somewhere in between.

In the first two cases, however, there are exceptions to centralism. Brazil has decentralised, by contract, forest management responsibilities and forest clearing monitoring to the states of Acre, Pará, Amazonas and Mato Grosso; the state of Rondônia has taken responsibilities without negotiating with the federal government, which has been a source of conflicts. Nicaragua, though it has not decentralised any decision-making powers to municipal governments, shares decision-making powers regarding natural resource management with the authorities of the two autonomous regions of its Atlantic Coast. In the latter case, however, this sharing of authority is not based on forestry policy but rather was part of a larger political negotiation process with indigenous authorities over the Autonomy Law.

In addition, Brazil's new forest concessions law provides benefits to municipalities from forestry for the first time, as well as making it possible to provide concessions for community groups; it also expands the responsibilities and resources of state governments. Nicaragua's new law provides an increase in the proportion of forest fees returning to local governments, regional governments and indigenous communities but otherwise seeks to limit municipal government discretion, which had expanded somewhat, *de facto*, in the absence of effective central control.

Bolivia and Guatemala, both operating under 1996 forestry laws, have the most advanced decentralisations to date, in that both countries have established municipal forestry offices that are supported and trained by (in Guatemala), or at least coordinate with (in Bolivia), the central forestry authority. Their actual responsibilities are limited mainly to the supervision and control of forestry activities. In neither case do municipal offices legally have decision-making powers of any kind, except to detain illegal lumber from municipal-owned lands in Guatemala and to undertake preventive confiscation of illegal timber in Bolivia. In Guatemala, permits for the domestic use of wood (of the five countries, only required in Guatemala) may be administered at the local level, but legally these must be signed by INAB; only in urban centres is this a direct responsibility of the municipal government.

Nevertheless, in Bolivia, the Forest Superintendence has gradually accepted collaborating with municipalities in order to be able to fulfil its own mandate. This has

² The new law has been under discussion in Honduras for several years; many hope that it will be passed in 2007. It is expected to make some improvements for poor forest users but still contains problematic contradictions. There are also doubts about the ability to effectively regulate a sector based on concessions or to alter structures that have deep roots in corruption and the protection of elites. A new draft forest policy is being discussed in Nicaragua as well.

TABLE 1 *The role of municipal governments in forest management*

Country	Revenues from logging taxes?	Approval of permits/concessions?	Land owners?	Supervision?	Provide/ sell services?	Municipal Forest Offices?
Brazil	In new law for first time, law recently passed	No formal concessions yet but they are included in the new law	Only of protected areas, though state governments own other forests	No, but it is gradually delegated to the state governments	A few municipalities provide technical assistance to agroforestry	Environment offices but in many cases these do not address natural resources management
Bolivia	Yes, 25% from forest fees, and 25% from conversion permits by law, 14-21% respect to total collected forest fee in practice (1998-2003),	Only in areas declared as municipal forest reserves which consist of up to 20% of public forest within municipal jurisdictions	No, but allocate municipal forest reserves through small-sized forest concessions to ASLs	Yes, by law substantial control and supervision responsibilities and inventory of forest resources within municipal jurisdictions	Yes, mainly to small-scale loggers (ASLs), but occasionally also to smallholders and indigenous communities as result from specific demand	Yes, in 110 municipalities with forest resources, but there is a high diversity of capacities in practice
Honduras	Yes, 1% most areas, 10% hurricane Mitch areas, 20% on experimental basis	Yes by law but in practice only by contract or on <i>ejidos</i>	Yes, <i>ejidos</i> , estimated at roughly 30% of forests; in these areas can choose who to allocate forests to, and whether or not to log	Yes by law but in practice only by contract	Yes, by contract with the Honduran Corporation for Forest Development (COHDEFOR)	Only occasionally
Guatemala	Yes, 50%, but even more significant from incentive programs	No, though OFMs often administer domestic permits	Yes, in some <i>ejidos</i> , but unclear tenure issues with indigenous communities (total communal and municipal areas roughly estimated at 23% of forests)	Yes, by agreement with the National Institute of Forests (INAB)	Yes, in some cases this is an important source of OFM income	Yes, in one third of municipalities, official support program through INAB's Municipal and Communal Forests Project
Nicaragua	Yes, 25%-35%; in autonomous regions, 25% to regional government, 25% to indigenous communities	Opinion on all contracts; autonomous regional governments must approve all contracts	Yes, but only small areas remaining, though municipalities can purchase land for protected areas	By law, only by contract; autonomous regional governments, yes	Only in exceptional cases	Only occasionally, environment offices more common than forestry personnel

resulted, in some cases, in demands from the municipalities themselves for a more significant role in local forest management, leading to the signing of formal contracts for the delegation of certain functions. As of late 2005, five municipalities in the department of Santa Cruz, for example, were authorising various kinds of small-scale permits and

could seize illegal forest products. Two municipalities in Pando were also progressively being placed in charge of local forest management, in this case with regard to Brazil nuts (*Bertholettia excelsa*).

In terms of *legal frameworks*, however, it is probably Honduras that has gone farthest in promoting the role

of municipal governments in forestry decision-making, though in practice this is still very limited. By law, the Honduran forestry institute must coordinate all decisions and permits regarding logging and other forest uses with the corresponding municipality, implying that Honduran municipal governments have the right to approve or reject all requests for logging. In practice, however, municipal authorities only manage *ejidos*³, and rarely play any role on national and private lands, which are managed by the forestry institute. Nevertheless, given that *ejidos* constitute roughly 30% of the nation's forests, Honduran municipalities do have decision-making powers over an important portion; the right of municipal governments to manage *ejidos* was granted by the Law for Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector in 1992.

Honduras has also made important steps toward forestry decentralisation in part because the central forestry authority, COHDEFOR, has been highly discredited and largely gutted. It was temporarily run by an Intervening Commission in 2005-2006. Though other entities have also been given forest management contracts, mainly for protected areas, municipalities have gained ground thanks to the lobbying of the national municipalities association (AMHON). This has resulted mainly in a series of contractual arrangements with the forestry institute, in part because few municipalities have either capacity or interest in local forest management.

Exclusion and inclusion of forest-dependent groups

The policy priority in all five countries is to promote private sector forestry enterprises, sometimes based on plantations, and build a commercially-viable forest industry, with varying degrees of assistance or attention to small-scale producers or forest dependent peoples. Forest policy and legal frameworks in the five countries generally fail to recognise potential significance in the relationship between forestry and poverty alleviation,⁴ though there is still usually some kind of institutional support for forest-dependent groups.

The most exceptional case would probably be the 450 000 hectares of community concessions in Guatemala's Petén, which are administered not by the forestry institute but by the protected areas institute, since the concessions are in reserves. These concessions were won at a particular historical moment when communities were seen as the "lesser of two evils" with regard to logging companies in efforts to promote tropical forest conservation (Gómez and Méndez 2004), and in light of the central government's failure to control illegal activities and land use change. There are also growing efforts in the rest of the country to include more marginalised groups in incentive programs for reforestation and the protection of natural forests. Bolivia's forestry

program now provides concessions to community groups. To date about one million hectares have been allocated as forest concessions in favour of small-scale timber producers (ASLs) within municipal forest reserves⁵.

Honduras' forestry institute includes the Social Forestry System to attend to the nations' 261 community forestry groups, but unfortunately it is largely marginalised within the institute overall. Also, community foresters are only permitted to extract a maximum of 1000 m³ per organization per year in pine forests and 200 m³ in broad-leaf forests, regardless of the annually permitted cut established in the forest management plan (del Gatto 2003, Wells *et al.* 2004). Export restrictions also exclude small-scale foresters, and prices in the national market are much lower. One of the biggest problems in Honduran forestry, however, is corruption (EIA/CIP 2005).

In Brazil, the existing laws, costs and bureaucracy have practically excluded the poor from legal logging. For example, indigenous people control the majority of the protected land in the Brazilian Amazonia (and about 20% of total land), but they cannot log this land legally; although the Constitution does not prohibit it, no by-laws or administrative procedures exist, so they are unable to get permits from IBAMA. A few groups sell timber illegally, and many others have their timber stolen by commercial loggers. Decentralisation at the state level, however, potentially makes it easier for these groups to get logging permits. The state of Amazonas, for example, has created management rules that are more flexible for areas that are smaller than 500 hectares. Still, though management plans do not have to be technically sophisticated, permits are issued for a maximum harvest of only one cubic meter per hectare per year.

Nevertheless, community management is growing, with direct or indirect subsidies from the government or development organizations and efforts to make financial resources available for sustainable forest management. There have been several initiatives to formalise forest resource access for local communities and agroextractive groups, the most illustrative example for improving livelihood conditions being the creation of a system of extractive reserves. These reserves were created after years of conflict and protests led, in particular, by the rubber-tapper movement. Rules for the reserves place constraints on agricultural expansion and allow local people to make a living from the production of non-timber forest products, particularly rubber and nuts, as well as logging.⁶

As of 2005, Nicaragua was the only country that had virtually no formal state support for local groups in forestry, though this appears to be changing under the new government administration that came into office in early 2007. Nicaragua is also one of the few countries in which

³ In the cases mentioned here, *ejidos* are lands legally owned by municipal governments.

⁴ In contrast, poverty strategies and other government planning documents, in Guatemala and Bolivia, do recognise, to some extent, the important of forests or other natural resources in poverty alleviation.

⁵ Traditional small-scale timber producers may organise as Asociaciones Sociales del Lugar (ASL), or Local Social Associations, to benefit from such a concession.

⁶ In practice, local communities may tend to invest more than allowed in agriculture and cattle ranching, but this varies widely across sites.

the small forestry sector is comprised of forest owners rather than concessionaires on state lands. The recent passage of the communal lands law guarantees communal lands titles to indigenous communities who now have the legal right to own and exploit their forest resources as well; this law was the result of an international court case won by the indigenous community Awás Tingni against the government, after it granted a forestry concession on their lands to a logging company without following the appropriate legal procedures. Indigenous communities have also won the recognition of land rights in other countries too, particularly in Bolivia, where some 20 million hectares had been designated for titling to indigenous peoples, and 7 million had already been titled as community property as of late 2005.

Though, like Bolivia, Honduras, Guatemala and Brazil have signed International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, the results have been more limited. In Honduras there have been important advances for some indigenous groups such as the Lenca, who have received communal titles, but in contrast, in the Mosquitia no Miskito community has yet received a title (Korcowski, pers comm., Sept. 9, 2005, Gruenberg 2003). Long term use contracts are tenuous and subject to the whims of politicians⁷. There have been virtually no land titles issued to indigenous peoples in Guatemala, though as of 2007, the procedures are in place to recognise and title communal lands for the first time. Though indigenous people in Brazil have gained increasing control over their traditional lands since these were recognised in the 1988 Constitution, they do not have secure titles.

FORESTRY DECENTRALISATION IN PRACTICE

The new forest policies and/or laws approved in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil and Bolivia, and in process of approval in Honduras, all demonstrate great interest in securing sustainable forest management practices, and most of them, at least minimally, seek to increase the benefits of forest resources for local users. All of these laws have been issued within a political institutional framework that is already decentralised, in that there is formal respect for municipal autonomy, the election of municipal authorities and some amount of funding (through transfer and/or local taxes) for these entities. This section discusses key forestry norms and regulations, the role of municipal authorities and the effects of these policies on forest-dependent groups.

New rules of the game for forest resources use

The distribution of forestry rights in the five countries has been mentioned above. They include concessions to state

lands, a variety of mechanisms related to *ejidos* and private ownership rights. Forest concessions are now recognised in all five countries. Nicaragua has no concessions currently⁸. In Bolivia, a portion of municipal forest reserves is allocated as forest concessions to small-scale forest users or ASLs. In Honduras, concessions are the primary means by which community-based forest users gain access to both national forests and municipal *ejidos*. In Guatemala, there is also a type of social forestry concession for communities in the Petén region on national lands. In other parts of the country, indigenous communities' primary access to forests is through *ejidos*⁹. In some municipalities these lands are owned and managed by the municipal government but others are recognised as communally-owned; the particular status of each depends largely on the historical relations governing management of the particular forest in question.

All the countries also have private forests, both individual and communal. Communal land ownership is much more advanced in Bolivia than the other countries, though Nicaragua has also recently begun titling these areas. In all countries and all property regimes, regulations for the commercial use of timber requires the approval of a forest management plan by the national forestry agency, which authorises the volumes to be harvested and the areas in which the logging will take place. Only in Guatemala do forest norms require permits for subsistence or non-commercial forest uses, though they do not require management plans.

Most countries have regulatory frameworks that distinguish between various types of forestry operations. For example, in Guatemala, simplified forest management plans are accepted for forest areas smaller than 45 ha. In Nicaragua, the forestry institute established three different types of commercial forestry operations, and the requirements for the approval of forest management plans increased according to size; this system was suspended in 2006, however, due to the abuse of the so-called "minimum plans". In Bolivia, though management plans and annual operational plans are needed for all private properties and concessions, differentiated norms were introduced in order to separate commercial from non-commercial, and large-scale from small-scale, forestry operations.

In some cases, smallholders may be negatively affected by norms regulating forest resources use – particularly those who do not have land titles. Most legal frameworks will not permit the approval of forest management plans in untitled areas, making it difficult for smallholders to sell resources legally. This situation is most evident in Brazil, given that a large portion of traditional communities and local smallholders lack formal rights, though some norms have been issued to formalise small-scale logging operations in the Amazon. Even if smallholders do have formal property rights, the capital investments required for management

⁷ The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

⁸ The last concession on "state lands," actually in an indigenous territory, was declared illegal in the international court case brought by the community of Awás Tingni mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, the term "concession" is also used more broadly to refer to large-scale permits issued in the Autonomous Regions that cross more than one property.

⁹ There are exceptions, particularly the *parcialidades* of Totonicapán.

plans and the transaction costs related to their approval make it difficult for these groups to pursue commercial forestry operations. Some restrictions that may be aimed at improving overall conditions, such as prohibitions on exporting logs or on sawing boards with chainsaws, may present even greater hurdles for the market entry of forest-dependent groups. In addition, the implementation of forestry laws and associated bureaucratic hurdles varies widely depending on the particular person in charge (see also Larson and Ribot, forthcoming). In many cases, these groups have no alternative but to enter into agreements with timber companies to finance their forestry initiatives.

The role of municipal forest offices

Municipal forest units, whatever the particular name they adopt in each country, are increasingly becoming key actors in local forest management. About a third of Guatemala's municipal governments (116) and about the same portion in Bolivia (110) have a forest or environmental office, though not all of them are active. About two thirds of Nicaragua's municipalities have established Municipal Environment Commissions, which are forums of government, citizen and NGO representatives to address environmental and natural resource concerns; through numbers are not available, many have some kind of office that oversees environmental or natural resource problems and projects. Similarly, some Honduran municipal governments have technical offices in charge of either forest activities or natural resources management, and in Brazil, several municipal governments have set up environmental secretaries, though these are mostly active in urban areas.

As mentioned earlier, municipal authorities undertake a series of activities related to forestry, although key decisions regarding forest resources allocation and use still remain at the central level of government. In Guatemala and Bolivia, municipal governments monitor illegal logging and forest conversion, install nurseries and promote reforestation – which in Guatemala consists principally in promoting and participating in the PINFOR forestry incentive program. In some cases municipal forestry offices issue permits for domestic timber extraction and for forest clearing for small-scale agriculture. In Nicaragua, municipal authorities must review and give their opinion on all logging petitions in their jurisdiction, though the 2003 forestry law limited their discretion to discussing established “technical norms.” Although they do not have explicit monitoring functions, on their own initiative and/or through environmental protection programs, they have engaged in most of the activities mentioned above, as well as fire prevention and control, watershed protection and the establishment of protected areas. Nevertheless, regional as well as local governments are primarily seen as increasing bureaucracy and costs: their priority is often to establish their authority on the one hand and increase their income on the other. In Honduras, the

involvement of municipal governments varies highly, though at least a few have engaged in all of the above-mentioned activities; those with *ejidos* appear to be the ones more likely to have forestry offices, though their main role may be to negotiate with logging companies.

In Bolivia, municipal governments play an active role in administering a portion of public forest – that of the municipal forest reserves – and to provide forest services to the local groups that have access to forest concessions there. In some cases, as the result of demands from other peasants and/or indigenous communities, the municipal forest units have had to expand their activities to include these other forest user groups. This institutional scheme is new, and as such faces numerous difficulties and constraints, but it has proved its efficacy in contributing to improving access to forest resources for previously marginalised social groups.

Municipal governments in Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua receive a mandated portion of taxes on logging operations, varying widely from as little as 1% in most of Honduras to 50% in Guatemala. In Bolivia, this level of government should earn 25% of fees from forest management and forest clearing, but the portion has been decreasing since the forest fee system was amended, because of the inclusion of a regulation tax granted exclusively to the national forestry agency.

Several municipal governments in all of the countries are developing land use plans, which include identifying the soil's best potential uses and the spatial planning of economic activities. In some cases (e.g. the municipality of Cotzal in Guatemala and Ichilo and Sara in Bolivia), municipal governments are formulating municipal forest policies; these participatory processes constitute critical mechanisms for citizen participation in relation to the forestry sector. These municipalities, however, have not yet succeeded in linking these forestry initiatives with overall municipal planning processes, and in general financial resources are not made available for implementing forest policies. In this same vein, Nicaragua's North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) set up the Secretary of Natural Resources and developed, with the support of international donors, a regional forestry strategy. This is now being used to negotiate both with central and local governments to articulate institutional initiatives and activities, though until the change of government in 2007, there was little indication that the central government, in this case the forestry institute (INAFOR), was willing to collaborate with regional authorities¹⁰.

It is noteworthy that, in all the countries, the sub-national governments may sign agreements with national forestry agencies in order to expand their functions to areas not originally covered in the forestry laws. This is particularly the case in Honduras, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Brazil. In Guatemala, the law specifically prohibits decentralising decision-making power over forests, even through specific agreements. In Bolivia, the Forestry Superintendence has signed collaboration agreements with a few municipalities

¹⁰ Under the new Ortega administration, two leaders from the Autonomous Regions were appointed as director and deputy director of INAFOR.

to transfer responsibilities for issuing permits for small-scale forestry operations and controlling forest fees collection. IBAMA in Brazil has signed contracts to transfer certain functions to several Amazonian states. In Nicaragua, several such contracts have been signed recently with municipal governments, but their implementation is slow, in part due to the lack of legal specialists on these issues. Such contracts are also common in Honduras, but not all involve the municipal governments; some have been signed, for example, with NGOs or forest user associations.

At the municipal level, grassroots participation in the monitoring of local authorities and their decisions and in the definition of policy priorities is still more rhetoric than reality, particularly with regard to forestry. Nicaragua's Municipal Environment Commissions have been the main forum for discussion of forest-related issues, but they are not always effective. New forestry roundtables were being established in 2006-2007 as part of the Forest Governance process promoted by the German cooperation agency GTZ. Both Nicaragua and Honduras have had regional forestry networks, also promoted by donors, that, among other things, were involved in regional planning processes while they lasted. Other local innovations have developed in Honduras, particularly around conservation issues. In Guatemala, a successful "Table for Dialogue" was established at the regional level in Las Verapaces and is now being reproduced in others at the initiative of the forestry institute INAB. In Bolivia, in spite of important participation mechanisms created at the municipal level, mainly for planning, there is no other formal forum that could motivate participation in forestry debates.

Forest dependent groups and decentralisation

Land titling programs have granted indigenous and other communities the legal right to properties that they have occupied sometimes for generations. Though this may not necessarily bring economic returns, there are clear benefits in terms of empowerment and tenure security; and in some cases these changes have brought financial benefits by, for example, increasing local communities' negotiating power with logging companies. Also, these groups need no longer be concerned with fines for operating illegally, nor are they subject to a central government decision to sell their forests in concession to a logging company. Tenure rights give them the legal right to choose whether or not to log or extract other forest products, as well as to exclude others from their land. Depending on the extent and type of tenure rights granted, they are now likely to have the legal right to choose whether to log or extract other forest products, and may be able to exclude others from their land as well. Nevertheless, without other policies addressing access to credit and markets, bureaucratic regulations and costs and community organization and capacity, direct economic benefits are probably limited.

Where municipal governments now manage their own forests, such as in Honduras, community foresters on *ejidos* have to negotiate not with the central authority but with the

specific municipality for access rights. These groups, as clients of the forestry institute's Social Forestry Program and often as members of the national agroforestry organization FEHCAFOR, had greater forest access through the national forestry authority, as a fairly weak organization in a basically clientelist relationship. They have little negotiating capacity with municipal governments. At the local level they must compete with logging companies for forest access, in cases where cash-strapped local governments are more inclined toward those who can pay up front (for an example, see Nygren, 2005). The results are increased vulnerability for forest-dependent groups.

In Bolivia, local forestry groups must also negotiate land access through municipal governments. In contrast with Honduras, however, these groups were precarious and illegal occupants of logging concession lands previously and now have access rights of their own, hence their vulnerability has decreased. The legal framework also specifies that the "municipal reserves" are to be distributed to these local groups, whereas Honduran law leaves the decision regarding concessionaire to the municipal government, as landowner. Though more systematic research would need to be done to expand on this analysis, it appears that communities with clear tenure rights are less vulnerable to being harmed from the power shifts that decentralisation entails.

Decentralisation can also bring government controls closer to local populations and make them easier to enforce. Where those controls are considered just, this may not be a problem for the vast majority of local people, but, unfortunately, poor resource-dependent people often believe the rules are biased against them, such as the requirement for domestic use permits in Guatemala. In fact, municipal governments may find it easier to enforce rules with the poor because wealthier actors may be too powerful or have support from the capital.

Local forestry offices can help make forestry less technocratic and respond better to local social concerns, because they have more direct contact with the local population and because local government as a whole has to respond to myriad needs, not just forest management. On the other hand, forest management decision making is still so centralised that there is little manoeuvring room to make such responses possible. Rather, municipal foresters are primarily charged with carrying out duties assigned by central forestry institutes and may be trained in the same professional schools, where there is very limited, if any, education on the social aspects of forestry. In Nicaragua's autonomous regions there is interest in formulating integral management plans rather than logging plans, but since forestry schools do not train professionals in such alternatives, these innovations must be developed through other kinds of capacity building; nevertheless, legally it is the national forestry institute that defines the nature of the plans that must be developed. In Guatemala, logging companies and the forestry institute see municipal offices as making their job easier by promoting *their* conception of forest management. Still, municipal forest offices can serve as intermediaries with central offices and save local groups both time and money on trips to the

nearest forestry institute office.

Municipal governments in Guatemala have backed local groups in their efforts to gain access to reforestation incentives by providing municipal land for reforestation or signing papers as the legal landowner but allowing them to collect the funds. One Nicaraguan municipality has allowed a local community free access to a municipal forest reserve for firewood, including for commercial purposes, in exchange for fire protection. In Bolivia, municipal governments lobbied the forest superintendence to make exceptions for forestry operations within the municipal forest reserves since small-scale timber producers were not able to meet all of the legal requirements demanded by law. These cases suggest a set of actions that municipal governments *can* take to support local forest-dependent groups in a context of decentralisation, but it is important to note that these are more often the exceptions than the rule.

TRENDS IN FORESTRY DECENTRALISATIONS

Decentralisation is not a linear process; rather, gains and losses are the result of ongoing political negotiations, grassroots struggles and the particular correlation of forces in specific contexts and moments. As such, decentralisation in general and in forestry specifically has moved both forward and backward in Latin America, often in the same country at the same time. This back-and-forth movement, as well as the mixed results for local governments and forest-dependent groups, is also based in part on the different conceptions of decentralisation, and development priorities, as discussed in the second section of this paper. Though “more decentralisation” is not necessarily “better decentralisation”, and the ideal balance of powers cannot be prescribed, real advances have been so slow that retreats in Latin American forestry (and elsewhere, see Ribot *et al.* 2006) can still largely be seen as a failure to commit to democratic decentralisation as a legitimate and desired process. This conclusion summarizes some of the main trends observed in the cases and opportunities for progress.

Forestry decentralisation has moved forward in some way in all of the countries studied. With regard to forestry and forested lands, at least a few sub-national governments and local populations in every country have benefited from more inclusive policies. This includes increasing opportunities for forest-dependent groups to gain legal forest access, greater participation of municipal governments in forest oversight, and/or a greater proportion of forest tax revenues remaining in the local arena.

Forestry decentralisation has also retreated in some ways, or stagnated. Advances in some areas are combined with retreats in others, such as a decrease in forest taxes going to municipalities in Bolivia, and tighter guidelines for municipal government “opinions” on forest management plans in Nicaragua. In Guatemala forward thinking policies on paper are rarely implemented in practice; Honduras’

pending forestry law had still failed to pass by mid-2007. In Brazil’s Amazonian region, the demand for decentralisation or a greater role for municipal governments in forest management is rarely heard.

The decentralisation of decision-making power over forests is usually the result of grassroots struggles affecting other policies outside the realm of forestry specifically. Decision-making power over forests is rarely decentralised to local governments or devolved to local communities without organised demands “from below”. Nicaragua’s two autonomous regions were granted authority over natural resource management as a result of indigenous struggles for autonomy. Indigenous communities in Nicaragua and Bolivia have won new tenure rights that allow them to exclude others from their forests and to choose whether or not to log. Municipal governments in Honduras (which previously owned the land but not the forests) now have similar rights, although perhaps because this was not a result of specific grassroots or local government demands, few have actually acted on them.

Forestry laws do not often decentralise decision-making power over forests to local governments, but some forestry institutes are doing so on a case by case basis by contract. Several states in Brazil and municipalities in Bolivia and Honduras have been granted the power to authorise certain types of permits and/or to control and sanction forestry activities. The Nicaraguan forestry institute has also recently begun to sign contracts granting greater responsibilities to municipal governments. Though Guatemalan law specifically prohibits decentralising decision-making authority, these rules have been bent in some cases and a current initiative in Congress could bring about a change in the law.

Decentralising powers on a case by case basis is a way to guarantee that those receiving authority have the capacity to wield it effectively and responsibly. Nevertheless, some experts have expressed serious concerns about such policies. Ribot (2004, 2005) points out that powers allocated in this way become a discretionary decision of ministers and administrators and are thus established as privileges that can be withdrawn rather than rights. The local government receiving these powers is thus upwardly accountable to the office allocating them, and rights may be withdrawn with a simple change of government personnel. But the transfer of secure rights to resource management encourages both local governments and citizens to invest in them over the long term, and it is downward accountability to these constituents that is the basis for democratic government.

Forestry decentralisations, as implemented so far, do not necessarily benefit marginalised or forest-dependent groups; rather these groups have been more likely to benefit directly from specific policies outside the forestry sphere. The greatest direct benefits to forest-dependent groups have come from policies guaranteeing access to land and forests, particularly as a result of indigenous struggles. For example, indigenous peoples in Nicaragua, Bolivia and, to a much lesser degree, Honduras have benefited from policies to grant land titles

to their territories. Guatemalan communities have directly benefited from access to large portions of the Petén forest through community concessions granted in the interest of conservation. Local groups in Bolivia have also won the right to legal forest access through concessions, though in this case – the most decentralised country overall – it was the forestry decentralisation process itself that was used to respond directly to these demands of local populations.

Access to forest resources, however, does not necessarily mean that these same groups have then immediately been able to benefit in more substantial ways from forest management, which is a multi-dimensional and complex endeavour. Forest policies have often failed to recognise and address sufficiently the other needs of these groups that would make their full participation in forestry activities possible. This includes addressing problems of access to credit and markets, decreasing bureaucratic hurdles and up-front costs, building effective and accountable local management organizations, and increasing local capacity in numerous ways: for business management, negotiating with government and buyers, managing forests and forest products, and so on.

Forestry decentralisations that do not take into account the needs of forest-dependent groups may increase their vulnerability. In Honduras, it is the municipal governments, rather than local peoples, that have benefited substantially from land policies that increase their control over forests. Forest-dependent groups who live on *ejidos* must now negotiate with municipal governments, often in competition with logging companies, for their rights to forest resources. Similarly, poor indigenous Guatemalans feel their vulnerability has increased from policies to control firewood use, in light of their highly conflictive historical relationship with the state.

Important obstacles, both to decentralisation in general and to achieving positive outcomes for small producers, remain. Some countries still fail to recognise the importance of integrating decentralisation and poverty alleviation, though others have made great strides to this end. At the policy level, however, forestry is only just beginning to be included in that equation. Related to this is the on-going resistance of some central governments to decentralise forestry responsibilities, and particularly any meaningful decision-making power. National efforts to establish and raise municipal forest management capacity in countries like Guatemala and Bolivia demonstrate a significantly different vision than that of the other countries.

At the local level, land use planning often includes forests but is not necessarily linked to the development of long-term forest management goals. Nor are land use plans or forest management integrated into broader development policies

and annual investment plans, which still mainly prioritise the construction of infrastructure. Those who provide technical support to forest management and planning – forestry professionals – often have limited training in either the social aspects of forests or the management of forest products other than timber. Finally, questions of local government capacity, transparency and accountability are ongoing concerns, though in many countries the general assessment is that these continue to improve.

Moving forward

Forestry decentralisations that are conceived of based on neoliberal development models often fail to see forest-dependent groups as central actors in natural resource management or sometimes even to take them into account. These policies are also often designed and implemented with a fairly narrow focus, often limited to raising revenues and controlling logging, rather than considering the integral links of forests with other issues of development, poverty alleviation and local livelihoods.

Decentralisation aimed at improving livelihoods for forest-dependent groups would be implemented with much greater attention to the effects of shifts in power relations on these actors. Such policies would be conceived and implemented in concert with improvements in tenure rights and other issues of resource access, rather than being developed in a parallel policy realm disconnected from an analysis of these groups' needs. They would also be developed in close dialogue with forest-dependent groups and those who work with them. Similarly, pro-poor forestry policy would be integrated into development and poverty alleviation policies. Of the countries studied, Bolivia is the one that comes closest to having a clear commitment to decentralisation as well as to addressing forestry together with other issues such as land tenure and livelihood concerns.¹¹

There are numerous opportunities for moving forward with local governments as well. Legal frameworks in all the countries studied support municipal autonomy, and in some cases, legal frameworks and national strategies promote decentralisation, including in forestry. Civil society – including new organizations, associations and alliances of small producers, indigenous groups, etc. – is increasingly willing to engage with municipal governments to voice interests and demands. Hence, from both above and below, this level of government is becoming a recognised and legitimate interlocutor for citizens, NGOs, donors and central governments.

Some municipal governments are increasingly interested in engaging responsibly in forest management and/or oversight, including for the benefit of marginalised groups, and some central governments are supporting these processes. This may involve gradually increasing a local

¹¹ This is even more true under the Morales administration, though forestry has been a much lower priority in government policy than agriculture. Members of Nicaragua's new government administration are also promoting land titling and the development of a community forestry strategy; the preliminary draft of a new forest policy also takes a firm pro-poor approach. It is too early, however, to draw conclusions about this process.

government's awareness, coordination and "ownership" of important forestry-related initiatives being promoted in a particular municipality. There are numerous and varied municipal and grassroots initiatives from which to learn, and analyse institutional dynamics and seek replicable models. Grassroots organizations and networks are improving access to information and markets, increasing both trade volumes and negotiating power.

It is apparent that forest-dependent groups can benefit from forestry decentralisations under the right combination of policies, in particular those that take into account structural inequities, such as with regard to land tenure, and increase the downward accountability and responsiveness of state decision-makers to poor sectors. Results will likely be limited, however, without the adoption of more inclusive conceptions of development, and greater support to the on-going struggles for inclusion by these groups.

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