Evaluation of the impacts of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification of natural forest management in the tropics

Core research team

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The purpose of this project

Forest management certification is a non-governmental, voluntary, market-based mechanism designed to promote sustainable use of forest resources. It recognizes responsible management through independently verified compliance with agreed-upon principles, criteria and indicators that describe the acceptable ecological, social, economic and policy outcomes of forest management. The hoped-for outcomes of certification include maintenance of forest values (e.g., biodiversity, ecosystem service provision), enhancement of the social welfare of forest owners, workers and local people (e.g., health and education, access to credit, increased assets), and improved financial and legal status of certified FMUs (forest

management units) of concessions, private landowners and communities.

This project represents the first field-based evaluation of forest certification carried out by independent researchers with the goal of critically assessing **when, where, how, to what extent, why, at what cost to whom and for how long** certification has changed the ways forests are managed. Included in this broad assessment is the question of whether, in response to certification, forest cover is maintained and whether and how local people benefit. These questions will be addressed as part of a theory-based empirical impact evaluation, employing both quasi-experimental qualitative and

quantitative methods. Overall, we aim to establish how Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification has been implemented in different tropical regions and will assess to what extent this intervention has been implemented as intended. We will accomplish this with a process evaluation that incorporates insights from all stakeholders through a multi-stakeholder platform and information system. Both the impact and the process evaluations will be implemented in Brazil, Peru, Republic of Congo, Gabon, Cameroon and Indonesia, as explained in more detail in CIFOR Occasional Paper 91.

For this study ‘certification impacts’ are changes in the forest and surrounding areas that are attributable to the influence of certification on participating FMUs, neighboring communities, forest workers, and local and national governments. Impacts can be positive or negative, primary or secondary, direct or indirect, short or long term, intended or unintended.

Evaluation: a tool for learning about impacts and promoting social learning

The project is designed to assess the extent to which certification caused observed changes in the outcomes of forest management (i.e., the likely or achieved short- and

medium-term effects of the intervention) and to establish how other factors contributed to these outcomes.

For such an evaluation to be credible (i.e., true and technically adequate for handling evidence), salient (i.e., relevant and of value to decision-makers and other evaluation users) and legitimate (i.e., fair in its knowledge gathering, unbiased and respectful), it needs to include active participation by all relevant boundary and operational partners. An evaluation is also a vehicle for grounding deliberative processes that can inform forest management decisions. CIFOR’s evaluation is being developed in a transparent manner through a *Multi-Stakeholder Platform* convened to discuss different perceptions of certification and to capture these insights in a theory-of-change.

Forest management decisions result from the interplay of factors that operate at diverse scales. At the FMU-level, for example, choices are based on silvicultural knowledge, traditions, technical and financial capacities, market information, timber availability, inputs from social actors, governmental policies and regulations, and other factors. At the same time, forest management decisions are constrained by factors including lack of knowledge, capacity, and financial and institutional means (e.g., no

Figure 1. Operational model of the evaluation process for the *Assessing the auditing and accreditation processes*. Deliberation and syntheses continue throughout the evaluation. Both the *Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP)* and the *Information System (IS)* also continue to be consolidated as the evaluation work progresses and new members are incorporated. Note: CBs = certifying bodies, FSC = Forest Stewardship Council, and ASI = Accreditation Services International.

Figure 2. The approach to integration of different studies to design an evaluation framework during Phase I. Field studies to collect empirical data will be carried out during Phase II along with more targeted activities for the process evaluation.

mechanism for participation of social actors relevant to the specific timber operation), as well as by policy, institutional and market failures. Given the many factors that affect management decisions and certification's impacts, CIFOR's approach is to first build a thorough understanding of the national and local contexts (e.g., biophysical, social, political, economic) for certification and how they have changed.

Current activities

Phase I of the evaluation involves collection of basic information from certifying bodies (CBs) and Accreditation Services International (ASI; Figure 1). This information plus the results of associated studies will help the research team to pose hypotheses about the impacts of certification (i.e., the evaluation framework) that will be addressed by the theory-based impact evaluation (see Figure 2) in Phase II.

Studies currently underway are:

- A **typology of forest management units** to categorize FMUs based on factors that may influence both the probability and the impacts of certification. In addition to elucidating the variables that differentiate FMUs, a typology of FMUs and FMU-owning parent companies will provide insights into the factors that have influenced the evolution of forest management over time (e.g., the characteristics of local legal regimes, membership to industry associations).
- **Certification dynamics** document certification decisions, characterize the dynamics of the population of FMUs into and out of certification, and reveal how these dynamics change over time (Figure 3).
- **Self-selection** will identify the non-certified FMUs that are most relevant for constructing the counterfactual to certification for certified FMUs.
- **Political economy analyses of the forest and timber sectors** to characterize the features and evolution of contextual factors that determine the fates of managed natural forests in the context of broader discourses and actions related to land cover change. This study will provide a timeline of key events and processes likely to have influenced forest management decisions. The results will be useful in the interpretation of the results of related studies (*Typology of forest sector; certification dynamics; Self-selection into certification; and Remote-sensing*).
- **Remote-sensing analysis to evaluate the impact of FSC certification on deforestation** to isolate the effects of certification from other factors that influence forest-cover dynamics.
- **Process evaluation: Preliminary assessment of the auditing and accreditation processes** to explore the processes used by ASI. Concurrently, we are constructing a typology of auditors and certifying bodies that work with the FSC on natural forest certification in the countries of interest.

Figure 3. Contextual and other factors (e.g., retention of trained workers and availability of capital) influence FMU choices about certification over time. Arrows represent transition probabilities (or proportions) for FMUs that remain in a category (depicted by the curved arrows) or move into other categories (straight arrows) during a given period of time.

Through the ongoing work, we are developing an understanding of the intervention and drawing a roadmap for rigorous empirical, field-based evaluations of the environmental, social, economic and political impacts of tropical forest management certification.

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