

Does the monitoring of local governance improve transparency? Lessons from three approaches in subnational jurisdictions^a

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Key messages

- Subnational governments are key players in land and forest governance and are expected to meet demands for informed decision-making and transparency, particularly in the context of the emphasis on transparency in climate governance.
- All three approaches reviewed are experiments in transparency, based on different understandings. The Sustainable Landscapes Rating Tool (SLRT) provides a comparative assessment of jurisdictions to be made publicly available; the Multilevel Governance Monitoring Process (MLGMP) aims to align interests and set targets around a landscape goal, through open, collective agreement; and the Participatory Governance Monitoring Process (PGMP) aims to provide collective reflection, creating transparency in opening male-dominated spaces to women's participation.
- Monitoring governance can become a political tool through which to reflect on local priorities and open or strengthen spaces for discussion.
- As both governance and transparency may be locally determined, monitoring tools and approaches should be developed with the participation of local stakeholders or be adaptable to their experiences and priorities.

Introduction

Current decentralization (Lund et al. 2018) and climate change (Brockhaus et al. 2017) initiatives have given subnational governments an important role in land and forest governance. This role is recognized in international climate agreements, which have come with a call for subnational jurisdictions to improve performance and implement informed decision-making (e.g. through land-use planning) to support national commitments. In this brief, we contribute to this effort by examining the lessons learned from three approaches to monitoring subnational governance. Each of these was implemented as part of different territory or landscape governance initiatives: the Sustainable Landscapes Rating

Tool (SLRT),¹ the Multilevel Governance Monitoring Process (MLGMP)² and the Participatory Governance Monitoring Process (PGMP).³ We analyze these experiences and explore their strengths and weaknesses by comparing methods and expected outcomes, in the context of wider trends in discussions over monitoring.

Monitoring activities have increased in response to pressures for transparency and efficiency in “results-based” approaches. Although commonly implemented with evaluations (which often come at the end of a project or activity), monitoring

^a The idea for this brief emerged from the experience of designing and/or implementing a variety of approaches for assessing and monitoring governance by different teams for different purposes. The brief aims to analyze the relative strengths and weaknesses of three of these approaches.

¹ Developed by the Climate, Community & Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA) with support of CIFOR and others, see <http://www.climate-standards.org/sustainable-landscapes-rating-tool/>

² Developed by CIFOR as part of a study on multilevel governance and REDD+, and implemented primarily in Mexico and Peru. One example of this process can be found at: http://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Reports/4974-Report.pdf

³ Developed by CIFOR and the Nitlapan Institute of Research and Development on a project working on gender in indigenous territories, see http://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/BEvans1601.pdf

is used for short-term feedback to ensure that activities are progressing toward goals. Some of the approaches presented in this brief can be used for both monitoring and evaluation, but we engage with them in their monitoring capacities as they were implemented by CIFOR researchers as part of initiatives to strengthen local governance. In what follows, we summarize the three approaches, focusing on their dynamics, development, methods, goals and differences. We conclude by setting out some broader lessons derived from their development and implementation.

Context

Three interlinked trends inform this analysis: the current emphasis on transparency in climate governance, the importance of subnational governments, and the challenges of multilevel governance. The first is reflected in the recently established Enhanced Transparency Framework in Article 13 of the Paris Agreement. The framework specifically addresses progress made by Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) toward the implementation of their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and greenhouse gas emission targets. Importantly, the Paris Agreement underlines the role of stakeholder participation in climate change efforts. As De Sy et al. (2016: 2) note, “land-use sector information will [also be needed to guide] local mitigation planning, implementation of land-use activities, and the accountability of actions and stakeholders.” Thus, stakeholders need reliable and transparent information to achieve their goals, such as investing in carbon emissions reductions.

The second trend reflects the importance of subnational governments and landscapes in the global climate change effort. Subnational jurisdictions can be an avenue for transformative change toward more sustainable land use. One example of this is the response by states in the United States, such as California, to continue acting toward global climate change goals in the wake of the Trump administration’s refusal to support the Paris Agreement. Similarly, the Governors’ Climate and Forests Task Force⁴ provides a platform for subnational governments, mainly from tropical countries but also in collaboration with some from the North, to address climate change while promoting sustainable development and investment. The potential of subnational governments as agents of change (at times countering national development policies) is also reflected in recent research (see Brockhaus et al. 2017; Luttrell et al. 2017; Boyd et al. 2018). Simply put, it will not be possible to tackle climate change and deforestation without subnational governments.

The third refers to the need to unpack multilevel governance to understand its “paradoxes, tensions and incompatibilities” (Stubbs 2005; Saito-Jensen 2015; Myers et al. 2018). This includes understanding the relationships among levels and sectors of government, and among government, private companies and citizens, and how these relationships affect land use and land-use change in the subnational arena (Sanders et al. 2017;

Rodríguez-Ward et al. 2018). Studying multilevel governance means understanding how changes occur in local contexts, particularly for effective and equitable climate-related strategies such as REDD+ (Ravikumar et al. in press; Sarmiento Barletti and Larson in press). It emphasizes the importance of governance conditions for the engagement of local populations in such initiatives (see Stickler et al. 2018; Sarmiento Barletti et al. n.d.).

Three approaches to monitoring local governance: A summary

Describing the three approaches, we explore questions arising from their development and implementation. Although they were implemented in Latin America, the conclusions provide lessons that may be applicable in similar contexts elsewhere.

Sustainable Landscapes Rating Tool

The SLRT was designed by the Climate, Community & Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA) and partners as a rapid-application, evidence-based system to assess and rate the following enabling conditions of sustainability: land-use planning and management; land and resource tenure; biodiversity and other ecosystem services; stakeholder coordination and participation; and commodity production systems. Each condition is rated based on a series of indicators. To illustrate, the existence of a land-use plan is evaluated on whether the plan has been formally adopted, whether it covers the entire jurisdiction, and whether it has been developed through a participatory process. Each indicator receives a rating: A (high, full, clear), B (medium, partial), C (low, not addressed) or ID (insufficient data). Most ratings are based on published evidence, although many must be assessed through interviews with local stakeholders (e.g. those on the extent to which laws are implemented and respected). Through these ratings, the SLRT aims to stimulate reflection and action toward policy and governance that support more sustainable, productive and equitable land use. It aims to facilitate investment in sustainable landscapes by assessing and communicating jurisdictional policy and governance enabling conditions. The tool is geared toward use by actors seeking to invest in land-use activities and production, for example, to support their supply chain sustainability commitments in terms of conservation or avoided deforestation. Governments and producers can also use the tool to benchmark, communicate and monitor the establishment of policy and governance-enabling conditions against internationally recognized criteria. By facilitating investment and partnerships, the tool aims to create incentives for governments and other actors in the jurisdiction to address issues that earned a lower rating and thereby improve governance.

The tool is currently being applied in member jurisdictions of the Governors’ Climate and Forests Task Force (GCFTF) as part of a collaboration between CIFOR, Earth Innovation Institute, GCFTF and CCBA. The design of the SLRT was informed by feedback from consultations with potential users at different roundtables, a trial in San Martín (Peru) and a workshop organized in Brussels (Belgium). It was first implemented in Loreto (Peru), between June and November 2017, in a process consisting of a desk review

of online material, 31 interviews and a validation workshop. The tool was validated in Loreto at a workshop with different sectors of the regional government and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Participants noted both their appreciation of the availability of systematized information that would allow the public to assess activities in the jurisdiction, and its potential application by the regional government to evaluate its strengths, address its weaknesses and monitor its progress in addressing these. Monitoring was not the tool's primary aim, but the response demonstrates a healthy reception of the exercise and its possibilities. Other participants questioned whether governments would continue to use the tool and keep the information updated, build synergies between different actors to generate information, or appropriately disseminate this information to rural communities. A participant noted that a potential drawback of transparent results was that "information would be available for conflictive stakeholders, such as land speculators", revealing the 'political life' of the tool, as different actors in the region could use its results to support their own agendas.

The SLRT demonstrates the complications that arise from the application of tools designed to be unbiased but that, in their application, may be influenced by factors such as an implementer's interests, prior knowledge of the subnational jurisdiction and subjective interpretations of some criteria. Furthermore, the possibility of a rapid assessment is also challenged by the availability of evidence. In Loreto, not all the information necessary to complete the tool was accessible online, presenting a challenge for the tool's stated aim to enable rapid assessment of the jurisdiction. However, where jurisdictions can fund such online presence, a low rating could pressure them to be more transparent with their reports and planning documents. The risk of the combination of potential biases, lack of accessible information, and the rapid-application approach is that important information may be overlooked and errors committed.

Multilevel Governance Monitoring Process

The MLGMP emphasizes cross-sector coordination (e.g. agriculture, environment, mining) in subnational land-use governance by involving local stakeholders in the identification of indicators and metrics to monitor decision-making processes. The process originated in scenario-building workshops to evaluate carbon emissions in eight landscapes in four countries, and ensuing discussions of the governance conditions required to move toward favorable outcomes.⁵ The first tool was developed in Madre de Dios (Peru), a jurisdiction where weak cross-sector coordination has led to social conflict over overlapping concessions (e.g. logging, mining, agriculture).

The MLGMP was developed in two workshops and a series of meetings with Madre de Dios regional government agencies and civil society organizations to facilitate collaborative decision-making in land-use planning. It was purposefully set as a participatory, bottom-up approach to monitoring governance. Workshop participants jointly identified two activities to monitor:

the process of territorial planning and the formalization of mining. Given their role in regional land-use planning, representatives from seven regional government agencies⁶ took part in a workshop that identified a set of potential indicators and strategies for carrying out monitoring activities. Two sessions followed to analyze the results and elaborate the indicators and metrics to monitor the region's land-use planning process. Participants agreed that this process should be further developed and applied by the Regional Environmental Commission, which includes all regional government agencies and some non-governmental actors. This is one of the only regional entities that is institutionalized and functions as an important decision-making body. However, in the long run, the absence of leadership and commitment to implementation stymied the process. One explanation is the constant change of government personnel that complicates the stability of regional governance and the continuity of initiatives. Without the initiative of the regional government officials themselves to move this process forward, efforts made by external entities are rendered ineffective and insufficient.

The MLGMP was replicated in two workshops held in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Yucatan. In Mexico, the process was organized for capacity development, with information dissemination and local governance improvements among its main objectives. The workshops, facilitated by CIFOR researchers, were centered on discussions on governance monitoring, institutional coordination, participation, accountability and transparency. Workshop participants decided what to monitor and selected indicators for how to evaluate it over time. National and subnational government agencies participated, along with civil society organizations, donors, community representatives and researchers. In Yucatan's Puuc region, the workshop focused on the Puuc Biocultural Intermunicipal Council (JIBIOPUUC in Spanish), which manages the Puuc biocultural reserve, a protected area of approximately 136,000 hectares. JIBIOPUUC's structure includes representatives from the federal, state and municipal governments, as well as research institutes, civil society organizations, a Citizen's Committee and a Users' Committee, which represents community interests. The second workshop was held with the Intercommunity Group for Territorial Action (GIAT in Spanish), a watershed management initiative which brings together collective (*ejido*) and private landholdings in the Chiapas Sierra Madre region. The GIAT is a model of inter-sectoral coordination in protected areas, which government authorities have recently sought to replicate in other watersheds.

In both workshops, participants identified obstacles to multilevel governance, prioritized these challenges, and developed goals and indicators against which to review their progress. After a collective evaluation of JIBIOPUUC's strengths and weaknesses, participants agreed on 'participation' as the element to monitor and defined a series of indicators and expected outcomes. 'Participation' was defined as local stakeholder participation in JIBIOPUUC's decision-making and activities, and as the council's

5 <https://www.cifor.org/library/5360/building-future-scenarios-governance-land-use-and-carbon-management-at-the-landscape-scale/>

6 Participants from eight regional government agencies were invited, and all took part except for the Ministry of Energy and Mines.

recognition as a legitimate voice in decision-making on the Puuc region. At the GIAT, participants selected five problems to be addressed to strengthen local governance, and developed indicators and mechanisms to monitor two of those: 'networking with other institutions and actors' and 'strengthening the group's autonomy'.

The Yucatan workshop led to stakeholders calling on subnational authorities to organize more spaces for participation and internal transparency. These workshops faced challenges including the limited time available to implement the tool and ensuring community participation. As these were one-day workshops, important details remained undetermined, including how the monitoring tool would be implemented and by whom. Also, while women's participation in Yucatan was stronger, the community-level initiative in Chiapas noted limits to women's participation in the workshop and subnational decision-making in general.

Participatory Governance Monitoring Process

The PGMP was built from the ground up to respond to two linked questions: First, how can participatory monitoring help local actors define and strengthen good governance in forest communities? Second, how can participatory monitoring improve the participation of women in decision-making in their communities? The process was developed as part of a research project led by CIFOR and the Nitlapan Institute of Research and Development of the Central American University of Nicaragua that sought to promote indigenous women's participation in community forestry related decisions⁷ in five indigenous forest-dependent communities in Nicaragua's North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN in Spanish). The initial research phase identified several challenges to improving governance in the forest communities in the RACCN (Evans et al. 2016), where weak governance has led to conditions that disadvantage women and to low levels of participation by women in decision-making. Two elements that influenced this situation were poorly defined leadership roles in community and territory governance,⁸ and the use of conflict as an excuse to prevent women from participating.

The first step in the PGMP's development was a workshop with authorities and community members, where the group collectively decided what 'good governance' would look like: a strengthened community, good participation by women, good leaders and good forest management. Participants then made a list of the characteristics of each aspect, for instance, the characteristics of a good leader. The next step was to define a question about each characteristic that could be answered "yes" or "no". For example, "In the past three months, did the leaders hold a community meeting?" These questions served as proxies for indicators; the project avoided using the term 'indicator' because the word sounded foreign and technical. After several rounds of revisions, approximately 18 questions were finalized. The technical team followed up with at least three meetings per

community over the course of a year. During these community members voted "yes" or "no" on each question, and then discussed the responses, reflecting on the answers and how they could be improved.

The PGMP created a transparent space for collective reflection and discussion between women and men, opening an arena for authorities to recognize the need for women's participation, while also creating a space for women's voices to be heard. Women's perspectives and priorities were passed on to authorities in order to be included in decision-making. The PGMP often faced resistance from male community leaders who reported that they "didn't want to be monitored." Community leaders were not always present in the monitoring meetings, and some tried to marginalize them as a women's activity. Women were motivated to participate and, although they are still under-represented in community structures, one result of monitoring women's participation was growing interest or recognition of the need to change this situation. As a participant in the process said: "Now women know their rights. When men are doing something wrong, women bring it up."

Discussion and conclusions

The three governance monitoring approaches discussed emphasize different aspects and experiences of assessing and monitoring subnational governance. The approaches differ in their development and implementation, including whether they were developed in direct collaboration with their intended local users or not, and whether they assess a jurisdiction 'from without' (SLRT) or 'from within'. Both the MLGMP and the PGMP prioritize self-monitoring capacities but also involve, to some extent, citizens monitoring their leaders.

For De Sy et al. (2016), independent monitoring "increas[es] transparency" and "broaden[s] stakeholder participation". While the SLRT focuses on transparency, set out in its methodology and criteria for comparability, the other approaches focus on broadening participation by building self-monitoring capacities to follow the improvement of local governance. As such, the approaches hold different goals, priorities, scale and methods (see Table 1). Each approach's desired outcome must be considered when selecting which one to apply to monitor subnational governance. Based on their implementation, the products generated may be distinct, ranging from data to attract investments and partnerships, indicators to compare jurisdictions, spaces for participation, a capacity development process based on self-monitoring, or improving accountability.

Our exploration also suggests that monitoring governance requires the recognition that, to a certain extent, governance is locally determined. Thus, its monitoring should include the knowledge, needs, and perceptions of local people. Although a bottom-up approach may not be appropriate for comparability and application across different contexts, the local determination of governance suggests that a hybrid system might be the best approach, with questions used by all communities, and with the option of adding their own. As in the PGMP, monitoring can become a political tool with which to reflect on local priorities and needs and open further spaces for discussion.

7 The project included similar work in Uganda.

8 In Nicaragua's autonomous regions, indigenous communities and territories are defined jurisdictions each with their own government structures set by law (Larson 2010).

Table 1. Summary of the tools reviewed

Tool	Description/ objective	Primary targeted users	Strengths/ best uses	Weaknesses
Sustainable Landscapes Rating Tool (SLRT)	Standardized, rapid-assessment tool on enabling conditions of sustainability, primarily aimed at subnational governments and increasing transparency	External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparability across jurisdictions with aim to post online • Comprehensive, based on pre-determined categories • If posted online, completed tool permits rapid assessment of conditions/ risks/ needs by external actors • Can be used for internal evaluation and improvement depending on interest, commitment and process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete information may not be so 'rapid' to obtain • Emphasis mainly on policies and documentation, less attention to implementation • Tool not adjusted based on local priorities or needs • Unclear how first assessment will be updated
Multilevel Governance Monitoring Process (MLGMP)	Process that aims to improve cross-sectoral coordination	Internal, subnational jurisdiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on process of discussion and negotiation for aligning goals • Priorities set based on group consensus • Monitoring tool and indicators designed specifically for the agreed target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-step process takes time • Requires the right people at the table • Requires a champion to conduct follow-up assessments
Participatory Governance Monitoring Process (PGMP)	Process that aims to improve local governance and women's participation	Internal, subnational jurisdiction or local community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for governance monitoring emerged from existing local processes • Process and tool designed with and by local communities based on their priorities • Regular assessments aimed at ongoing reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires a champion to conduct follow-up assessments • Risks being blocked by leaders who do not want to be assessed

De Sy et al. (2016) also note “a need for independent monitoring approaches (i.e. unbiased data, tools and methods) that stakeholders involved in land-use sector mitigation activities can rely on for their own goals, but which would also be perceived as transparent and legitimate by others and support accountability of all stakeholders”. While we agree with the need for approaches to monitor land use and governance, we are more cautious on the idea of the presentation of unbiased data. Our analysis reveals that emphasizing technical approaches may oversimplify the contexts that lead to inequity and injustice. The approaches we examined are examples of the desire by local stakeholders to monitor those who govern over their resources, which may lead to increased expectations for transparency and accountability in other aspects of their interactions. As such, these experiences reveal a perceived link between transparency and legitimacy, be it either in how the monitoring method is set up (MLGMP and PGMP) or how its results are validated (SLRT).

Our exploration suggests that monitoring, in and of itself, can be experienced as an act of transparency. All three approaches are exercises in transparency- to show how policies correspond to investor plans (SLRT); the monitoring of the progress on law and implementation by civil servants in Madre de Dios (MLGMP); or women demanding to be recognized by

community leadership (PGMP). However, the approaches are based on different understandings of transparency. Whereas for the SLRT, transparency comes from the application of the same set of criteria in different contexts and publishing the underlying evidence for the assessment, the other approaches deal with transparency by building local participation into their design and implementation. While the SLRT is validated through stakeholder consultations, its scale and proposed aim do not allow for the kind of participatory work set out in the two other approaches. Yet, by no means is transparency straightforward and easy to obtain, as expressed in the challenges during the validation of the SLRT (the possibility of the results being used for more negative purposes), the failure of key government actors to participate in the MLGMP, and community leaders not wanting to be monitored in the PGMP. This reveals that monitoring tools have intended and unintended uses, particularly in addressing the role of subnational actors in governance.

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