

## Models of participation in multi-stakeholder forums

### Results of a realist synthesis review

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#### Key messages

- Multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) are receiving widespread attention due to the growing urgency to address climate change and transform development trajectories.
- Systematic reviews oversimplify complex social settings by ignoring context and process, both key to the success of MSFs. The Realist Synthesis Review (RSR) method addresses this oversight and explains why initiatives succeed or fail.
- The RSR method led to the extraction of four main models used to foster sustainable land use through MSFs: sustainability, livelihoods, participation and multilevel processes.
- Results reveal the need to shift from seeing context as an obstacle that must be surpassed for more successful initiatives, to thinking of how to design initiatives that respond to context.

#### Introduction

This Infobrief presents some of the lessons learned from a Realist Synthesis Review (RSR) of the scholarly literature on subnational multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) set up to address land use and land-use change challenges (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020). MSFs are designed as purposely organized interactive processes that bring together a range of stakeholders to participate in dialogue, decision making and/or implementation in order to address a common problem or to achieve a common goal. These participatory platforms have received renewed attention from policy makers as well as development and conservation practitioners due to the urgency to address climate change and shift to low-emissions development. This Infobrief aims to inform those who are designing and implementing MSFs, as well as the donors and organizations funding MSFs. As participatory approaches to conservation and development are not new, there is much to learn from past experience.

Following the RSR method (see Nilsson et al. 2016; McLain et al. 2017), the study considered an initial 984 articles and examined how context affects the outcomes of MSFs (see Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2018 for the research protocol). It focused on subnational forums that included at least one governmental and one non-governmental participant. There is wide agreement that 'context matters' in conservation and development initiatives, and its central importance is recognized across disciplines, sectors and levels (Weyrauch

et al. 2016). Despite this, there is much need to improve our understanding of how it matters and how best to engage with it to design and implement more successful initiatives.

This Infobrief focuses on two aspects of the review: the use of the RSR method and the lessons learned in terms of context. A companion Infobrief presents the results in terms of stakeholder engagement (Larson and Sarmiento Barletti 2020).

#### Are we learning or repackaging?

Renewed interest in MSFs reflects the awareness that environmental problems cannot be addressed without the effective engagement of the actors that determine land-use practices on the ground (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019). Nevertheless, it also calls for reflection among those promoting and funding MSFs in order to learn the lessons from decades of research and implementation of participatory development. The central question in this debate has been over whether participatory processes can transform the unequal power relations between stakeholders that are inherent to conservation and development. While there is much optimism on how MSFs may address inequality to produce outcomes that are both equitable and effective (Faysee 2006; Hemmati 2002), some claim that mainstream participation does not do this, and may even reinforce structures of inequality between MSF participants (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Larson et al. 2018).

Many initiatives have continued with development theories and practices that portray context as preventing economically poorer parts of the world from achieving effective and efficient progress (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995). Local contexts have often been positioned as something either to be ignored or to be overcome, rather than as the social and political processes that must be better understood for more resilient and equitable initiatives. As the United Nations Development Programme recently recognized, “development has tended to focus on technical assistance alone rather than on the enabling or disabling environment in a country or sector or across sectors. As a result, many technically sound development programmes failed to achieve their intended results” (UNDP 2012: vi). Addressing power relations requires a clear understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and political factors (among others) that structure power relations in a specific space.

Regardless, the transformational potential of collaborating to resolve problems is still considered powerful. And although a transition toward a substantive multi-stakeholder model would be laudable, many past participatory initiatives have at least partly been ‘box-ticking exercises’ to satisfy legal or donor demands. Others legitimated decisions already made and yet others were lost in the contexts in which they were introduced. Recognizing that ‘context matters’ in conservation and development initiatives, we sought to understand how this affects MSFs in order to derive lessons for forums that are more resilient to context.

## Method: What is a realist synthesis review?

We initially planned a systematic review, following the method applied by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in areas related to land, forests and development.<sup>1</sup> Systematic reviews have achieved prominence as evidence-based outputs to inform policy making. The method follows a systematic search and analysis focused on a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to a research question. The model, originally developed for the medical sciences, was later introduced into the natural sciences and more recently expanded into development studies.

Nevertheless, systematic reviews tend to produce explanations of whether initiatives work or not, missing out on the ‘why’ that context helps to provide (Boaz et al. 2002; Hagen-Zanker et al. 2012). This is a major shortcoming considering the importance of context in conservation and development initiatives mentioned earlier. In the complex

arena of the social sciences, yes/no questions and answers are not the most insightful. As our interest was on understanding how context affects MSFs, and thus how to design and implement context-responsive initiatives, the RSR method was selected instead.

RSRs allow for the systematic and comparative analysis of how different contexts affect an initiative’s outcome, providing insights into the transition from theory (design) to practice (Pawson 2013). RSRs still follow a single research question and a systematic search but emphasize understanding the ‘why’. This is done by systematizing program theories (how an initiative should work) and mechanisms (how it tries to change things) before carrying out supplementary research to understand how the context of each case study affected those mechanisms. The RSR method then groups cases by their program theory and mechanism, and explains the key contextual factors that are most likely to impact each program theory (Pawson and Tilley 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably, the review simplified messy and complex interactions for analytical purposes. Two decisions were made to address complexity. First, rather than using a pre-existing list of contextual factors, these were extracted from the evidence available for the cases. Cases that had contextual data were prioritized in selection (Table 1), and contextual factors derived from the analysis were synthesized into 18 factors (Table 2). These draw on the evidence most commonly provided, and some obvious ones, like biophysical factors, are missing. Second, to avoid oversimplification, cases were not reduced to a single program theory but to the two most relevant.

## Findings: models of participation in MSFs

The review identified four program theories, each with its own priorities, mechanisms and intended outcomes. Program theories represent different models, with their own priorities and assumptions, for fostering sustainable land use through participatory approaches. The intended role of the MSF varies in each model, but all aimed to obtain local ‘buy-in’ using different primary mechanisms: sustainability, livelihoods (i.e. development), participation and multilevel coordination. Analysis focused on four contextual factors under each model based on the frequency with which they appeared and, hence, their importance and influence on the intended outcome (Table 3). Although contextual factors are not presented in order of how frequently they appeared in the review, the number of case studies each appeared in is indicative of their relative importance.

<sup>2</sup> See the research protocol (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2018) for a detailed explanation of the procedure, including the selection process of the 19 cases studies from the original 984 articles.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cifor.org/keyword/systematic-reviews/>

**Table 1. Case studies (general summary)**

Case	Short title	Reference	Model(s)	Initiator	Participating Stakeholders
1 Joint Forest Management in Gadabanikilo, India	1/Gadabanikilo JFM	Nayak and Berkes 2008	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government	Community, government
2 Joint Forest Management in Uttaranchal, India	2/Uttaranchal JFM	Mohanty 2004	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government	Community, government
3 Joint Forest Planning Management in Karnataka, India	3/Karnataka JFPM	Martin and Lemon 2001	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government & donor	Community, government, NGO
4 Joint Forest Management in Karnataka, India	4/Karnataka JFM	Martin and Lemon 2001	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government	Community, government, NGO
5 Community Forest Program, Nepal	5/Nepal CFP	McDougall et al. 2013	Sustainability & Participation	Government	Community, government, NGO
6 Bangkok Urban Green Space, Thailand	6/Bangkok Green	Stringer et al. 2006	Sustainability & Participation	NGO	Community, government, NGO
7 Campo-Ma'an Model Forest, Cameroon	7/Campo-Ma'an MF	Jum et al. 2007	Sustainability & Participation	NGO	Community, government, NGO
8 Dja et Mpomo Model Forest, Cameroon	8/Dja et Mpomo MF	Jum et al. 2007	Sustainability & Participation	NGO	Community, government, NGO
9 Juma Sustainable Development Reserve Project, Brazil	9/Juma REDD+	Gebara 2013	Livelihoods (development) & Multilevel Coordination	NGO & private	Community, government, NGO, private
10 Oddar Meanchey REDD+ Project, Cambodia	10/Oddar Meanchey REDD+	Pasgaard 2015	Livelihoods (development) & Multilevel Coordination	NGO & donor	Community, government, NGO, private
11 Finger Lakes National Forest, United States	11/Finger Lakes	Twarkins et al. 2001	Participation	Government	Community, government
12 District Forest Coordination Committees, Nepal	12/Nepal DFCC	Rana et al. 2009	Participation	Government	Community, government
13 Hin Nam No Protected Area, Lao PDR	13/Hin Nam No	de Koning et al. 2017	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	Government & donor	Community, government
14 Vilhelmina Model Forest, Sweden	14/Vilhelmina MF	Klenk et al. 2013	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO, private
15 Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia	15/Nusa Tenggara Barat	Butler et al. 2016	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO
16 Cardoso Island State Park, Brazil	16/Cardoso Island	Sessin-Dilascio et al., 2015	Livelihoods (development) & Participation	Government	Community, government
17 Prince Albert Model Forest, Canada	17/Prince Albert MF	Klenk et al. 2013	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO, private
18 Monarch Butterfly Regional Forum, Mexico	18/Monarch Butterfly	Brenner and Job 2012	Livelihoods (development) & Multilevel Coordination	Government	Community, government, NGO, private
19 Manitoba Model Forest, Canada	19/Manitoba MF	Parkins et al. 2016	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO

**Table 2. Synthesized contextual factors (in alphabetical order)**

<i>Economic poverty</i>	Government recognition of right to and/or interest in the participation of local people
<i>Enforcement of land use and land-use change related laws and regulations</i>	<i>History and experiences of development projects/initiatives</i>
Existence of informal and/or traditional institutions related to resource management/use	Indigenous/local peoples distrust of other groups and organizations
Forest dependence	Local/regional/national interest in conservation and preservation
Gender inequalities in access to participation and/or resources	<i>Political and social sensitivities surrounding the issue of conservation</i>
Government commitment for multisector collaboration	Power inequalities between land use and land-use change actors
<i>Government commitment to decentralization and devolution of decision making to subnational governments</i>	Powerful groups clearly influenced the MSF's process and/or outcome
Government control of decision making	Tenure insecurity and weak recognition of rights to land and resources for Indigenous Peoples/Local Communities
<i>Government development agenda emphasizes extraction of natural resources</i>	Time, capacities and funding available for program

Note: Factors in italics were not among the top four for any program theory and are thus not mentioned in the text. This does not mean that they are unimportant.

## Sustainability

Eight cases<sup>3</sup> followed an approach that proposes to increase sustainability and social inclusion by engaging local people in decision making processes or management bodies seeking more sustainable land use. These initiatives view sustainability as a good in and of itself which local communities will buy into once they participate in the MSF. Two of the contextual factors for this model are attributes of the actors involved (who normally participates in decision making and why, and local institutions), while the other two relate to governance (how strong is government's control over participation, and whether the government wants it to happen in the first place).

Adaptive methods and strong commitment were key to addressing the first factor: *gender inequalities in access to participation and/or resources* (5/Nepal CFP, 6/Bangkok Green, 7/Campo-Ma'an MF, 8/Dja et Mpomo MF). In some cases, women were invited to participate, but if the commitment in time and resources was insufficient or methods were inappropriate, the outcomes were not achieved (1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM). When the second factor – *existence of informal and/or traditional institutions*, such as for forest use and management – was ignored, or replaced by new ones, vulnerability increased for marginal groups (2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM). Existing informal and traditional institutions often have both beneficial and constraining effects on an MSF's goals, and these must first be understood before such institutions are transformed and/or replaced or reinforced. Some cases were clear examples of the third factor: *government control of decision making*. Joint Forest Management and Village Forest

Committee cases demonstrate government control of decision making in different parts of India; they highlight the problem of the Forest Department as the implementing body that maintained control over decisions, regardless of inclusion goals (1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM, 4/Karnataka JFM). Finally, while some cases demonstrate failures in implementation at the subnational level, others show what can happen when the fourth factor – *government recognition of the right to and/or interest in the participation of local people* – is at play. In one case, local people used the MSF to challenge more powerful actors (5/Nepal CFP). Another openly acknowledged power differentials and used strategic engagement to build trust between government and communities (6/Bangkok Green). In another, commitment to process (dialogue, innovation) and women's participation led to greater mobilization and a stronger voice for women (7/Campo-Ma'an MF).

## Livelihoods (i.e. development)

The eight cases<sup>4</sup> under this model include a mechanism aiming to create new income or benefits from more sustainable land use, offsetting local stakeholders' economic losses. This model also proposes that participating in relevant decision making will motivate stakeholders to change their practices. As in the sustainability model, two of the contextual factors are attributes of governance (the government's interest in inclusive participation and in securing community rights to land and resources) while the other two relate to the actors involved (the power inequalities between MSF participants and how much communities depend on forests).

3 1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM, 4/Karnataka JFM, 5/Nepal CFP, 6/Bangkok Green, 7/Campo-Ma'an MF, 8/Dja et Mpomo MF

4 1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM, 4/Karnataka JFM, 9/Juma REDD+, 10/Oddar Meanchey REDD, 16/Cardoso Island, 18/Monarch Butterfly.

**Table 3. Models for participation**

Model	Mechanism	Intended outcome	Key contextual factors
<b>Sustainability</b> – seeks to integrate sustainable land-use change, livelihood, and social inclusion goals.	Include local people in sustainability initiatives to motivate them to adopt the proposed practices.	Improved sustainable land use, reducing the vulnerability of local people, and enhancing their participation in decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender inequalities in access to participation and/or resources</li> <li>• Existence of informal and/or traditional institutions related to resource management/use</li> <li>• Government control of decision making</li> <li>• Government recognition of right to and/or interest in the participation of local people</li> </ul>
<b>Livelihoods (i.e. development)</b> – seeks change by integrating sustainable land-use and development goals.	Create economic output through protecting and/or regenerating forests, and distribute output among local stakeholders to provide development benefits.	The income or benefits of the new land use outweighs the income losses incurred by local stakeholders from prior practices. This motivates them to implement the initiative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tenure insecurity and weak recognition of rights to land and resources for Indigenous Peoples/Local Communities</li> <li>• Powerful groups clearly influenced the MSF's process and/or outcome</li> <li>• Forest dependence</li> <li>• Government recognition of right to and/or interest in the participation of local people</li> </ul>
<b>Participation</b> – seeks change by providing communities with greater control over natural resources through local institutions, which are integrated with government and formalized.	Grant local communities more control over their resources through co-management and co-learning and/or capacity-building effort.	More sustainable land use that is economically beneficial to local populations, and will reduce vulnerabilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous/local peoples distrust other groups and organizations</li> <li>• Time, capacities and funding available for program</li> <li>• Power inequalities between LULUC actors</li> <li>• Government recognition of right to and/or interest in the participation of local people</li> </ul>
<b>Multilevel</b> – seeks change through cross-scale initiatives that involve different stakeholders and government agencies, from different sectors and levels.	Enhance social capital through collaborative decision making and multilevel coordination.	More transparent and legitimate participatory process with increased local ownership of initiative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government control of decision making</li> <li>• Power inequalities between LULUC actors</li> <li>• Government commitment for multisector collaboration</li> <li>• Local/regional/national interest in conservation and preservation</li> </ul>

The first factor – *government interest in the participation of local people* – is important as commitments from higher levels of government were necessary to ensure that participation rights were implemented at lower levels (1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttarakhand JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM). The second factor – *tenure insecurity and weak recognition of rights to land and resources* – limited the ability of local people to benefit from new economic alternatives. In some cases (1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttarakhand JFM and 3/Karnataka JFPM), the rights to use areas were taken away easily, and although some were able to use new areas, these were controlled by the government. Only certain people participated in new initiatives, partly based on land tenure rights, as in Mexican *ejidos* (18/Monarch Butterfly). This model also demonstrates that elite capture is a risk when tenure rights are not secure. This is tied to the third factor: *powerful groups influenced the process or outcome*. These groups sometimes include the government or local elites; projects are often designed and implemented in an entirely top-down manner (9/Juma REDD+, 10/Oddar Meanchey REDD). *Forest dependence*, the fourth factor, is important across cases. Under this model (and others), forests are often relegated for protection

or conservation. If alternative economic activities do not compensate for losses, the livelihoods and food security of those who most depend on forests for income or resources are threatened.

### Participation

The 11 cases<sup>5</sup> under this model applied a mechanism that granted local communities more control over their resources through co-management, co-learning and/or capacity-building efforts. Three of the contextual factors most fitting for this model are attributes of the actors involved - the power inequalities between stakeholders, whether the least powerful ones trust the more powerful ones and whether the MSF had enough time and funds to address this context. The fourth factor — whether the government was interested in the participation of minorities to begin with — relates to governance.

5 5/Nepal CFP, 6/Bangkok Green, 7/Campo-Ma'an MF, 11/Finger Lakes, 12/Nepal DFCC, 13/Hin Nam No, 14/Vilhelmina MF, 15/Nusa Tenggara Barat, 16/Cardoso Island, 17/Prince Albert MF, 19/Manitoba MF.

The first factor – *power inequalities between actors* – is a common challenge. Explicit efforts to address inequalities include open discussion and neutral facilitation, but also addressing time constraints and who is at the table (11/Finger Lakes). Co-management is affected by the second factor: *indigenous and local people's distrust of outside organizations and actors*. This stems from their past experiences of working with outsiders, including government and the private sector (especially extractive industries), and of broken agreements (14/Vilhelmina MF, 17/Prince Albert MF, 19/Manitoba MF). Participating thus brings risks as well as potential benefits. Successful forums have allowed locals to voice concerns in a way that supports discussion and builds trust. When *time, capacities and funding* – the third factor – are short, processes may move too quickly or end too soon. Two cases demonstrate the importance of long-term commitments, sufficient funds and appropriate methods that permitted collaborative design, testing and learning (5/Nepal CFP, 15/Nusa Tenggara Barat). The attempt to keep discussions 'apolitical' and 'technical' may also keep them superficial (17/Prince Albert MF, 19/Manitoba MF). Finally, as with the previous models, *government recognition of the right to participate* is key. This commitment was demonstrated through investments in resources, neutral and balanced facilitation, and the creation of a forum that built trust through frequent negotiation, and by fostering informal interactions (5/Nepal CFP, 12/Nepal DFCC, 13/Hin Nam No, 16/Cardoso Island).

## Multilevel coordination

The seven cases<sup>6</sup> under this model apply a mechanism through which multilevel coordination and collaborative decision making will lead to more sustainable land use. This will also lead to a more transparent and legitimate participatory process, increasing local participation and thus local ownership of the initiative. Two of the contextual factors for this model are attributes of governance (the government's interest in controlling decision making and multisector collaboration) while the other two relate to the actors involved (power inequalities of stakeholders and their interest in conservation).

To be effective, these initiatives require that *government control over decision making*, the first factor, is addressed. Decentralization can open new spaces for local people but also for elite capture. Commitment to a combination of top-down and bottom-up planning, with funding, led to positive outcomes (15/Nusa Tenggara Barat). The second factor, *government commitment to multisector collaboration*, requires funding, capacity and targeted lobbying to build bridges between stakeholders and sectors (13/Hin Nam No). The failure to address the third factor – *power inequalities between actors involved in land use and land-use change* – led to superficial outcomes (17/Prince Albert MF, 18/Monarch Butterfly, 19/Manitoba MF). Finally, *local/regional/national*

*interest in conservation and preservation* affects the outcome of multilevel governance initiatives because actors may have different perceptions or understanding of the problem (15/Nusa Tenggara Barat). This includes perspectives not only on land use but also on inequality, and on related priorities and trade-offs.

## Conclusions

We identified four models for participation, each associated with the four contextual factors that most commonly influenced those outcomes in the cases studied (Table 3). The models represent different ways – based on various central priorities and assumptions – to foster sustainable land-use solutions through participatory approaches. The intended role of the MSF varies in each, but all were aimed at obtaining local 'buy-in' using different primary levers: sustainability, livelihoods (i.e. development), participation and multilevel coordination.

Although the models overlap and many case studies fall under more than one, these categorizations help identify priorities and assumptions behind MSFs and bring out some distinctive – and some common – characteristics of context. The sustainability model highlights the problems associated with prioritizing conservation (and top-down decisions) over inclusion, with contextual variables defining the terms of inclusion. The livelihoods model is most influenced by the rights and ability of local peoples to access livelihood resources. The participation model highlights conditions affecting the quality of participation: trust, power relations and the time needed to address these. Finally, the multilevel model evokes different perspectives, priorities and power relations among actors at various levels. The government plays a central role – across cases – in establishing or undermining the enabling conditions for local participation, rights and decision making.

Context matters because MSFs are not implemented in a vacuum; they are superimposed upon existing patterns of relationships, institutions and power structures. We propose that it is critical to take the time to research and map local stakeholders and institutions, power relationships between stakeholders, and ways of knowing. It is insufficient to position inequalities as obstacles that can be overcome by empowering otherwise disempowered local people. It is due to the importance of context in conservation and development that the RSR method is an excellent tool to generate evidence for such initiatives.

The attention that RSRs pay to how an initiative should work in theory and in practice makes them sensitive to diversity and change within programs. We would have been unable to achieve our analysis with a more traditional systematic review. This is especially useful for the social sciences as the RSR's explanatory focus is more compatible and accountable to the complexity of social interventions like MSFs.

6 10/Oddar Meanchey REDD+, 13/Hin Nam No, 14/Vilhelmina MF, 15/Nusa Tenggara Barat, 17/Prince Albert MF, 18/Monarch Butterfly, 19/Manitoba MF.

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