Choosing Democracy: Natural Resource Management for Environmental Policy Makers, Donors and Practitioners

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Summary

Supporting local democracy in forestry is crucial for enhancing local people's wellbeing. Most public decisions in forestry remain centralized. Forestry authorities on the national level often hire experts who are not accountable to the to the local people living in and around the forests. Many decisions related to forests should be transferred to the local level. This policy brief focuses on how to structure the local democratic representation in forestry governance.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Introduction

How can donors, policy makers, practitioners and environmentalists support local democracy as they design and implement forestry, REDD+, adaptation and other natural resource management interventions? This policy brief presents principles of democratic forest governance and recommendations for policy and practice derived from the Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI) research program of CODESRIA, IUCN and UIUC supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The principles and recommendations in this brief are based on RFGI studies on forestry policies and project implementation in eleven sub-Saharan African countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, with comparative cases in Nepal and Bolivia. The RFGI research working papers and other RFGI readings on how to better analyze and support democracy within natural resource management interventions are listed in Annex A.

Supporting local democracy in forestry is crucial for enhancing local people's wellbeing. Democracy helps ensure that forestry interventions respond to local needs and aspirations, and local democracy can have long-term sustainability, scalability, equity and efficiency benefits. Yet, despite stated participatory and democratic objectives of forestry policies and projects, most public decisions in forestry remain centralized; forest services and natural resource projects rarely allow local democratic authorities to make significant forest management and use decisions. Central forestry authorities often rely on trained foresters or hire outside experts to determine what should happen to forest resources, but these forestry professionals are usually ignorant of local priorities or simply do not see local priorities as important. These experts are accountable to the central authorities rather than to the local people who live in and around forests. Elected local representatives are only allowed to make minor forest management decisions despite the importance of forests to local people's livelihoods.

Other non-representative institutions involved in forest management, such as customary chiefs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), project committees, user groups or private enterprises, also often make important forestry decisions about public local natural resources that affect local livelihoods. These authorities operate in parallel to, rather than under the authority of, elected local governments. Despite being created to represent local people, elected local government is rarely involved in important natural resource management decisions. This exclusion is partly due to the fact that many intervening agents – including donors, government agents, and project designers and staff – lack the skill and training to build and support democratic local government or democratic practice in their projects. Yet, to be equitable and to serve local needs, sustainable forest management and use efforts such as biodiversity conservation, sustainable forestry, carbon forestry (such as REDD+), agroforestry, and alternatives to shifting cultivation programs require a conscious approach that takes democratic principles into account.

Ensuring local decision making in forestry is democratic involves transferring the public decisions over forest management to democratically representative local elected authorities. To effect a transfer to these authorities means identifying the appropriate powers to be exercised locally and identifying the higher-level and parallel authorities that currently hold these powers – so that they can be moved from these institutions to local representatives. These transfers will require support from all intervening agencies to ensure that local elected authorities have sufficient and meaningful powers (decisions and resources) to respond to local needs and aspirations regarding forestry. The identification of public powers in the forestry sector and the attempt to move these powers to where they belong (with democratic local leaders) cannot be achieved without a clear understanding of what democracy is and how it works. If, as is all too common, intervening agents do not know what democracy is or how it works, they will be unsure of how to identify and support it. The principles in this brief are designed to help agents intervening in forestry to understand and support democracy (for more elaborate guidelines for supporting democracy through natural resource management policies and projects see RFGI Handbooks listed in Annex A).

Working with local democracy can strengthen local participation in forestry decisions so as to make them more efficient, more equitable, and more socially (and thus ecologically) sustainable. By working with local democratic institutions forestry also can support the consolidation and building of local democracy. Forestry and other environmental interventions that do not support local democracy, however, are likely to damage local democratic institutions and democratic processes.

This brief defines democracy and summarizes responsive forest governance principles to be used to support democracy when working with: local government, parallel organizations, and citizens.

RFGI

The Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI) is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). It is a US$ 3 million, 4-year research and conservation application programme focused on enabling and strengthening representation of forest-based people within local-government environmental decisions in Africa.

What is Local Democracy

In order to support democracy, intervening agents must have a clear understanding of what democracy is and know how to analyze its basic elements. The elemental concepts of democracy are: responsiveness, representation, democracy, accountability, public domain, and citizenship.

- **Responsiveness** of leaders to the people is the outcome that democracy aims to accomplish – decisions that respond to and reflect local needs and aspirations.
- **Representation** is the responsiveness of leaders to the people. When leaders are responsive to citizens, their decisions represent or reflect the aspirations and needs of the people.
- **Democracy** is in place when leaders are accountable and responsive to the people. Accountability to the people is what makes democratic responsive to local people – it is what makes leaders represent them. Note that leaders can be responsive and can represent people without being accountable – but this is not democratic representation, rather, it is called benign dictatorship. Representation is democratic when driven by accountability.
- **Accountability** is the ability to sanction someone for their actions – to reward or to punish them: by voting, by protesting, by taking them to court, etc. Democratic accountability, that is, 'downward accountability' to the people, is when the people can sanction leaders for their actions. Accountability is what ensures that leaders are and remain responsive – that is, representative.
- **Public Domain** is the set of powers that are under public authority. These are the powers of government (executive, legislative, and judicial). These powers constitute the space of democracy – the matters over which democratic authorities or leaders decide, and on which they are accountable to citizens. These powers include, for example, how forests will be used and by what rules, as well as the power to resolve disputes.
- **Citizens**, a core ingredient of any democracy, are people who are empowered to influence their leaders – who can sanction them or hold them accountable. Citizenship is the power to demand that leaders respond to peoples' needs. With out this power of sanction, people under a given authority are mere subjects – commanded, rather than served by, their leaders.

In short, democratic representation is in place when leaders are accountable and responsive to the people. Thus the components of local democratic representation are: **authorities** (or **leaders**) who hold significant and meaningful public **powers** (that make up a **public domain**) and who can be held **accountable** by and to **the people** (or **citizens**) of the jurisdiction in which they govern. We call this the **Actors** (leaders and citizens), **Powers** and **Accountability** model[1].

[1]Agrawal and Ribot et al. 2008.

Principles of local democracy

- Responsiveness
- Representation
- Democracy
- Accountability
- Public domain
- Citizens

Democratic Decentralization and Natural Resource Management

Democratic decentralization reforms have established elected local governments in most nations of the global south. But many of these elected local governments cannot really be called democratic. Most often, they lack either the power to be responsive to local people or the accountability that would drive that responsiveness. To be effective, democratic authorities must be both empowered and accountable.

If empowered and made accountable to the people, elected local governments are a potential home for participatory and democratic approaches promoted by many natural resource programs and projects. Because local governments are permanent local institutions, rather than temporary project-based committees or NGOs, they are sustainable – they endure over time. Because local governments exist everywhere inside national territories, participation through institutionalized democracy can scale up – to cover the whole of a national territory. The principles outlined here are designed so that forestry activities in areas where local governments exist support rather than undermine the consolidation of local democracy.

The Principles of Responsive Forest Governance

Assessment tools and theoretical background are provided in the RFGI Handbook I. These are drawn from the literature on democracy and democratic decentralization and insights from RFGI case studies. They are designed to guide support for democracy in forest interventions and are summarized here:

Orienting Principles

- Educate Policy Makers, Government Officials and Agents, Development Practitioners, Environmentalists, and Donors about Local Democracy. Intervening agents must use resources, such as the RFGI Handbook I (see Annex A), to learn what democratic representation is – what its basic parts are and how it works – so that they can support it. Intervening agents should not assume that they know what democracy is, what it involves, or why democracy is relevant to sustainable forest and natural resource management.

- Foster Social Sustainability. If local people do not feel that a law, program or project is just, they may not engage with it and are more likely to resist or sabotage its implementa tion. Giving local democratic representatives serious negotiating powers over law, program and project decisions will help make these interventions locally relevant, legitimate, welcomed, and therefore socially sustainable.

Principles for working with elected local government

- Choose Democracy. Choose to place public decisions with decision makers who are accountable and responsive to local citizens. Therefore, where it exists, projects must work through elected local democratic government. When local governments exist but are not democratic, work to make them democratic.

- Strengthen Local Democracy Where it is Poorly Constituted. Do not circumvent poorly constituted or corrupt local governments. Where local governments are weak or unaccountable, strengthen them and make them accounta ble. Where local governments are corrupt, fight corruption.

- Do not assume that local governments are any more corrupt or less efficient than 'parallel institutions' such as NGOs, customary chiefs, village committees, private com panies or central governments, developments agencies, environmental organizations.

- Provide Democracy with Power. Ensure that democratic local authorities have sufficient and relevant discretionary decision-making powers and implementation and enforce-ment means so that they are able to be responsive to local needs and aspirations. The powers held by local democratic leaders constitute the local public domain of democracy – there is no democracy without these powers.

- Give Local Democratic Authorities the Powers to Negotiate with External and Higher-level Actors. To represent citizens and to negotiate effectively, democratic authorities need to have the right of refusal – the right to say 'no' (or 'yes') to outside interventions. The right of refusal (or acceptance) is a foundational element of fair negotation.

- Do not Treat Elected Local Governments as Mere Implementing or Service-delivery Agencies. The power to deliver services that people need or demand is part of democracy. The power to deliver pre-determined services prescribed by projects or by higher levels of government is not local democracy – even if imposed by a higher-level democratic government. To be responsive, local authorities need the power to deliver services that they choose. They cannot respond if the services to be delivered have been prescribed or earmarked by higher authorities. They are not democratic if they are only given the power to implement an outside agenda without the power to respond to what local people want and need. Local leaders need discretion so they can be responsive.

- Make Democratic Authority Accountable to Citizens. Elections alone are never sufficient to ensure accountability. Use multiple means, in addition to elections, to keep democratic authorities accountable and their activities transparent (a full discussion of accountability mechanisms is provided in the RFGI Handbook I).

Principles for working with parallel authorities

- Keep customary authorities, NGOs and private bodies focused on private decisions of and for their groups. Parallel actors such as indigenous leaders and chiefs, NGOs and corporations have many important roles within society. But in a democratic system they do not make public decisions except where democratically elected leaders have delegated decision-making powers to them.

- Promote equity. When working outside of local government, systematically engage with local organizations representing all classes, genders, orientations, castes, ethnicities, and ages. Level the playing field through practices and policies that affirmatively favor the poor, women, and other marginalized classes and groups.

- Place public decision in the hands of local democratic government. Local public decisions belong with local democratic government. When working on public decisions with groups or individuals outside elected local government, these parties should operate under the authority of or through delegation by a local democratic authority.

Principles for working with citizens

- Inform local people of their rights and powers. Let local people know: which decisions are public; which powers their local authorities hold; how local authorities use them; what services local authorities can deliver; what means of accountability they are able to exercise; and how they can access those means.

- Empower local people to sanction – punish and reward – government. Support the right and provide the means for local people to influence and hold accountable the authorities that govern them. These means should be made available to all residents of the jurisdiction where the natural resources under consideration are located.

With the above principles in mind and an understanding of the components of local democracy forestry project or policy designers and practitioners can assess local natural resource governance arrangements. Elaborate guidelines are provided for such an assessment in the RFGI Handbook I. An assessment collects information that can help intervening agents identify ways to support local democracy through their interventions, such as:

- Does your project support the RFGI Principles?
- What would your projects or programs do differently were you to re-design and implement using RFGI principles?

More specifically, project designers, practitioners and evaluators must ask:

- Are the leaders you intend to work with, or are working with, democratic?

- Do they have sufficient and meaningful powers:

  - Are these powers locally meaningful – do they relate to key forest management decisions of importance to local people?
  - Are these powers sufficient – are the powers enough to say 'yes' or 'no' to outsiders concerning decisions being made? Are they enough to respond to local needs and aspirations?
  - Do they have sufficient decision-making discretion and resources to be flexibly responsive to their citizens?

- Are they systematically accountable to the people?

  - Through what means do they share information?
  - Through what means can they be rewarded or
  - punished by the people of their jurisdiction?

- Are all local people empowered as citizens with the appropriate and sufficient means to hold their leaders accountable?

  - Are multiple means of holding leaders ac countable in place?
  - Are these accountability means known to citizens?
  - Are accountability means accessible to the full array of residents of the jurisdiction of the forest in question? Can marginal groups use them with the same effectiveness as others?

Thoughtfully evaluating the answers to these and other questions will help policy makers and project personnel to better design, implement and evaluate democratic forest management policies and interventions. They can also help activists or local populations evaluate and rethink the degree to which their own local institutions are or can be made more democratic.

Build the local public domain

- Transfer to local elected governments public decision-making powers that belong at the local level.
- Take them from line ministries that resist democratic decen tralization.
- Take them from parallel insti tutions that presently exercise these public powers.
- Place parallel institutions that exercise public powers under the authority of elected local government (by supervision or delegation).

Make elected local authorities more accountable to the people

- Apply multiple accountability measures outlined in the document.
- Enable people to act as citizens making the exercise of accountability available to all local people.

RFGI recommendations

RFGI recommends that intervening agents strengthen democratic local government. The recommendations involve expanding the public domain and supporting elected local government´s accountability to the people. To do this, RFGI recommends that policy makers and intervening agents working on natural resource management:

Build the local public domain

- Transfer to local elected governments public decision-making powers that belong at the local level
  - Take them from line ministries, such as environmental or forestry services that resist democratic decentralization.
  - Take them from parallel institutions that presently exercise these public powers.
  - Place parallel institutions that exercise public powers under the authority of elected local government (by supervision or delegation).

Make elected local authorities more accountable to the people

- Apply multiple accountability measures outlined in the RFGI Handbook I.
- Enable people to act as citizens making the exercise of accountability available to all local people.

How to achieve these goals? The identification of public powers (executive, legislative, judicial) in the forestry sector is a political project of determining those powers that should be under local public control – guided by principles of appropriate distribution of powers, called 'subsidiarity' principles, and outlined in the RFGI Handbook I. Many of these powers are centralized based on false technical arguments made by forest services that prevent local authorities from making decisions over the uses of forests. Countering this widespread situation of technical excuse making requires counter-experts who are versed in forestry but who are not beholden to the command-and-control culture of forestry. The transfer of powers to representative local authorities requires identifying where these powers are currently held in line ministries and in parallel authorities. Democratizing forest governance requires legislative action and practices that then move these powers into the domain of democratic local government – so that local elected authorities have sufficient and meaningful powers with which they can respond to local needs and aspirations with respect to forestry. Local people must be enabled to hold their elected leaders accountable.

Composed by: Jesse Ribot.
Painted by: Mor Gueye

Look here in the rulebook—which you must obey—
you have rights to the things that we don't take away.
But we can't take the wood without taking the trees
so you'll have to make due with the stumps and some seeds.

You can grow village woodlots—eucalyptus or pines
we'll help you to manage them through incentives and fines.
If you want to participate please lend in a hand.
Do as we tell you and we'll tell you you can.

If you listen-look-learn and do as we say
even democratization will be on its way!

We must protect forests from people like you
so people with business will have business to do.

Ribot, Jesse. 1997. 'An Ode to the Lorax: The Business of Sustainable Development, An African Forest Tale', *Africa Today*, Vol. 44, No. 2.

Site-Specific Solutions

Obviously, achieving democratic decentralization in forestry is not easy and there is no simple formula for accomplishing it. The rich and powerful rarely give up their wealth and power voluntarily. But some changes in who holds power have to happen if forest management and use are to be democratized under elected local government, as decentralization reform mandates. There will be resistance at every step. That is normal. The challenge is to continue to work for democratic decentralization of forest resources in the face of central authorities, powerful line ministries and parallel authorities who do not want to give up their privileges – even when discourses of decentralization indicates they will and laws demands them to. They certainly will not do so just because intervening environment or development agents ask them to. But each time pro-democratic policy makers or practitioners intervene in forestry, they can insist that the public decisions made in the local arena be under the jurisdiction of local democratic elected government and that their powers be exercised with checks and balances that ensure accountability to local citizens.

All projects are unavoidably political and embedded in many layers of interest particular to each intervention site and country. Practitioners will need persistence and sensitivity to develop locally appropriate and creative strategies for supporting and increasing democracy. Intervening agents must always remember that no project site is exactly like another; there is too much variation from place to place to say exactly how any practitioner must achieve democratic outcomes. Besides, democratic outcomes are not achieved once and for all. They are a continuous struggle – they come and go. But they are more durable when the institutionalized apparatus, empowered local elected democratic authorities plus aware and empowered citizens, are in place to fight for these outcomes. This is why RFGI offers recommendations and actionable principles rather than prescriptions. Methodical and persistent application of RFGI principles should result in more and more durable democracy and democratic outcomes, and in more sustainable forest management in the long run.

Handbooks

This brief summarizes the principles and recommendations that are presented in two handbooks that were developed from the RFGI research program. These more-elaborate RFGI tools are the "RFGI Handbook I: Leveraging Local Democracy through Forestry" and the "RFGI Handbook II: Bringing Improved Natural Resource Governance into Practice." URLs are available in Annex A. The handbooks provide methods to analyze the democracy effects of natural resource interventions and how to engage more-actively in supporting local democracy.

Annex A: RFGI Handbooks, Working Papers, and other Key Readings

Handbooks

- RFGI Handbook I: Leveraging Local Democracy. A Field Testing Draft. UIUC. December 2015. RFGI Working Paper No. 34.
- RFGI Handbook II: Bringing improved natural resource governance into practice: an Action Learning handbook for Sub-Saharan Africa, Edmund Barrow, Kenneth Angu Angu, Saadia Bobtoya, Regina Cruz, Sophie Kutegeka, Barbara Nakangu, Moumini Savadogo, Gretchen Walters of IUCN. December 2015. RFGI Working Paper No. 35.

RFGI Working Papers

N.1: The Effects of REDD+ on Forest People in Africa: Access, Distribution, and Participation in Governance
By: Emily Anderson & Hisham Zerriffi

N.2: Review of REDD+ and Carbon-Forestry Projects in RFGI Countries
By: Mukundi Mutasa

N.3: Social Protection in REDD+ Initiatives: A Review
By: Rebecca Rutt

N.4: Studying Local Representation: A Critical Review
By: Prakash Kashwan

N.5: Choix, Reconnaissance et Effets de la Décentralisation sur la Démocratie
By: Jesse Ribot

N.6: The Re-emergence of Customary Authority and its Relation with Democratic Government
By: Emmanuel Nuesiri

N.7: Calling for Democracy? Villagers' Experience of the Production of Class Relations for Ecotourism and Carbon Markets in Niombato, Senegal
By: Rocio Hiraldo

N.8: Quand la Représentation résulte à des Fragmentations d'Identités de Genre
By: Coumba Dem Samb

N.9: Gouvernance Climatique dans le Bassin du Congo: Reconnaissance des Institutions et Redistribution
By: Phil René Oyono

N.10: Zonage des Terres, Conservation des Paysages et Représentation Locale Déboîtée en RD Congo
By: Phil René Oyono & Floribert Ntungila-Nkama

N.11: Representation in REDD: NGOs and Chiefs Privileged over Elected Local Government in Cross River State, Nigeria
By: Emmanuel Nuesiri

N.12: Représentation Locale Compromise Dans la Gestion de la Rente Forestière Communautaire au Sud-Est Cameroun
By: Antang Yamo

N.13: Institutional Choice and Fragmented Citizenship in Forestry and Development Interventions in Bikoro Territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo
By: Raymond Achu Samndong

N.14: At the Expense of Democracy: Payment for Ecosystem Services in Hoima District, Uganda
By: Aggripinah Namara

N.15: The Illusion of Democratic Representation in the REDD Readiness Consultation Process in Ghana
By: Emmanuel Marfo

N.16: REDD+ Institutional Choices and the Implications for Local Democracy in the Kasigau Corridor, Kenya
By: Susan Wangui Chomba

N.17: From Recognition to Derecognition in Senegal's Forests: Hemming in Democratic Representation via Technical Claims
By: Papa Faye

N.18: Déficit de redevabilité dans la gestion de la rente forestière communautaire
By: Billy Kakelengwa Mbilizi et Alphonse Maindo Monga Ngonga

N.19: Gouvernance de la redevance forestière annuelle et citoyenneté au Cameroun
By:David Eteme

N.20: Démocratie locale « en berne » ou péripéties d'un choix institutionnel « réussi » dans la gestion forestière décentralisée au Burkina Faso
By: Mawa Karambiri

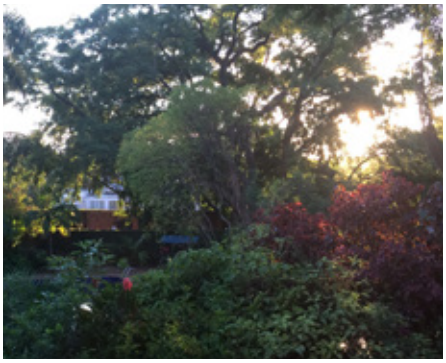
N.21: Choix institutionnel, gestion autoritaire et privatisation de la rente forestière communautaire en Province Orientale (République démocratique du Congo)
By: Patrick Matata Makalamba et Phil René Oyono

N.22: Effect of institutional choices on representation in a community resource management area in Ghana
By: Manali Baruah

N.23: Representation through privatisation: regionalization of forest governance in Tambacounda, Senegal
By: Melis Ece

N.24: Waiting for democratic representation in Africa's social forests
By: Alois Mandondo and Poonam Jusrut

N.25: Assuming women's representation in carbon forestry projects
By: Doreen Ruta



N.26: Autochthony, democratisation and forest: the politics of choice in Burkina Faso
By: Muriel Cote

N.27: Land governance, local authorities and unrepresentative representation in rural South Sudan
By: Phil Rene Oyono and Deng-Athoi Galuak

N.28: Decentralization, institutional choice and the production of disgruntled community representation under the modified taungya forest management system in Ghana
By: Prine Osei-Wusu Adjei

N.29: REDD stakeholder consultation: symbolic or substantive democratic representation in preparing Uganda for REDD+?
By: Robert Mbeche

N.30: Resources, rents, representation and resistance: the struggle for just conservation on Mount Kilimanjaro
By: Martin Kijazi

N.31: Examining the democracy outcomes of environmental subsidiarity: the case of a carbon forestry initiative from central Mozambique
By: Alois Mandondo

N. 32: The Process of Institutional Choice and Recognition for the Decentralized Forest Management in Charcoal-Producing Zones of Tambacounda, Senegal
By: Poonam Jusrut

N.33: Chiefs, representation and non-citizenship in forestry: lessons from the Social Responsibility Agreement in Ghana
By: Frank, K. Agyei

N.34: Leveraging democracy through forestry: field testing version (RFGI Handbook I)
By: Jesse Ribot

N.35: Implementing improved natural resource governance in practice: an action learning handbook for Sub-Saharan Africa (RFGI Handbook II)
By: Edmund Barrow et al.

Annex B: Other Key Readings

- Ribot, J., Melis Ece and James Murombedzi (eds.). In progress (expected submission to press in July 2016). Special Issue on Rights, Representation and REDD+. This is a collection of eight articles from eight researchers in my recent five-year thirteen-country comparative research program the Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI).
- Ribot, J., Ashwini Chhatre, and Tomila V. Lankina (eds). 2008. Special Issue on The Politics of Choice and Recognition in Democratic Decentralization. Conservation and Society. Vol. 6, No. 1. Read more
- Ribot, J. 2008. Building Local Democracy through Natural Resources Interventions: An Environmentalist's Responsibility. A Policy Brief. Washington: World Resources Institute. Read more
- Ribot, J. 2004. Waiting for Democracy: The Politics of Choice in Natural Resource Decen tralizations. Washington: World Resources Institute. [Published in French in 2007.] Read more

All RFGI working papers are available Here

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