Evaluating conservation impact of popular participation in forest management

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Introduction

Popular participation in forest management signifies people's involvement in the management of the forest in or around which they live, and is an important policy tool in the efforts to conserve the World's forests. At least 35 developing countries are officially engaged in promoting some form of popular participation in forest management, and recent estimates of the share of the World's natural forests officially managed with some degree of popular participation are 10-12 per cent (e.g. Sunderlin et al. 2008).

The global significance of the trend of promoting popular participation in forest management has implied that a number of studies to evaluate its impacts have been conducted. These studies are a potentially important source of information for development agencies, national policy-makers, implementing agents, and scholars on where, how, and under what conditions popular participation in forest management is a feasible, or perhaps the superior, approach to forest conservation. To conduct impact evaluation is, however, not as easy as it might appear. This brief reports on a recent review of studies on the conservation impact evaluations of popular participation in forest management and provides recommendations on how to do such evaluations.

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Policy Conclusions

- Information is lacking on the conservation impacts of popular participation in forest management. Few studies exist outside Nepal, India, Mexico and Tanzania.
- Impact evaluations should investigate the policy of popular participation as it unfolds on the ground.
- Impact evaluations should carefully consider the trade-off between scale and detail and adapt their approach to measuring forest condition outcome to the characteristics and management objectives of the particular forest at hand.
- Impact evaluations should investigate whether observed impacts on forest condition are attributable to the policy of popular participation or may be caused by confounding factors.

What are impact evaluations?

»Impact evaluations are about assessing the degree to which changes in outcomes can be attributed to an intervention rather than to other factors« (Ferraro 2009:75). In other words, impact evaluations should answer the question, »How does the intervention change the outcome as compared to no or alternative intervention(s)?« This implies that any impact evaluation should empirically investigate i) the intervention, ii) the outcome, and iii) the degree to which the outcome can be attributed to the intervention. Many impact evaluations, however, actually only monitor changes in outcomes, whereas the nature of the intervention (or policy) and the attribution of the change to the policy intervention rather than to other factors are left disregarded (Ferraro 2009).

What did the review reveal?

A search for conservation impact evaluations of popular participation in forest management published in international scientific journals found 60 such studies. All studies were reviewed with regard to their empirical investigation and characterisation of i) the policy of popular participation in forest management, ii) the outcome in terms of forest condition, and iii) the degree to which the outcome can be attributed to the intervention or policy.

Geographical coverage

The first major finding of the review is that we know very little about this issue outside a few countries with old and prominent processes of popular participation in forest management. Figure 1 displays the number of studies per country (countries with one study only are lumped in the category »Other«) and shows that more than half of the studies are from Nepal and India, and that apart from these countries only Mexico, Tanzania, Brazil and Honduras feature more than one study. Although the review is confined to studies published in scientific journals in English, this indicates that there is a lot to be learned about the more than 35 national processes of popular participation in the developing world.

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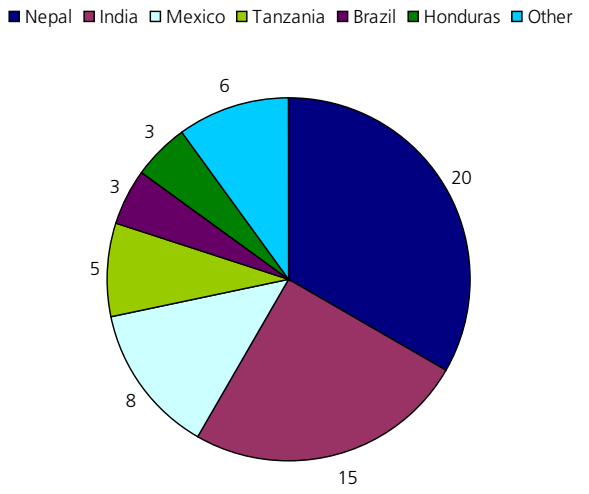

Figure 1. The 60 studies divided upon countries.

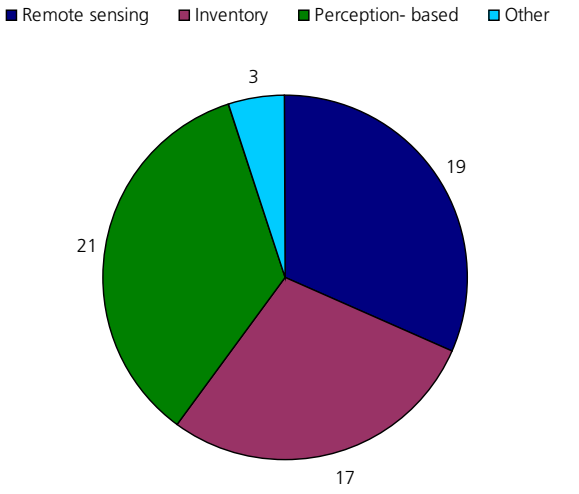

Figure 2. The 60 studies divided upon approach to measure forest condition.

The policy

With regard to the policy of popular participation in forest management, the review showed that almost one-third of the studies did not empirically establish whether the policy actually existed, i.e. was implemented, on the ground in the study site. Further, among the two-thirds that did so, many merely noticed the existence of rules, committees, forest watchers or some other indicator of the degree of popular participation. This calls for concern whether these studies reflect actual processes on the ground, as a growing body of research has demonstrated that even though forest areas may officially be designated as managed by popular participation approaches, the situation on the ground can look quite different (e.g. Ribot 2004). Hence, all conservation impact studies should empirically investigate the policy on the ground.

The outcome

Regarding the investigation of the outcome, i.e. forest condition, the study found that almost one-third of the studies investigated the effect of popular participation in terms of change in forest cover by use of remote sensing techniques. The implication is that changes in forest characteristics beyond mere forest cover, that may be important for its ecological and economic functions, are not revealed. Whether this level of detail is warranted obviously depends on the particular forest's characteristics and management objectives. Another third of the studies based all or parts of their investigation on people's perceptions of the changes or status of various indicators of forest condition; although recent research questions the validity and reliability of such perception-based approaches (see Lund et al. 2009). Lastly, almost one-third of the studies measured forest condition by way of inventory. Many of these studies provide detailed measurements of various ecological indicators but, of course, are typically smaller-scale studies. In sum, we find that there is a variety of approaches to measuring the outcome and that the approach chosen should be carefully suited to the particular forest.

The attribution of outcome to policy

Almost all the studies seek to infer the policy's effect by counterfactual measurement of forest condition, i.e. over time (before and after policy implementation) and/or against forests under a different management regime. What separates impact evaluations from such monitoring of changes and differences is whether the observed change is attributable to the policy that is evaluated rather than to other factors. Two-thirds of the studies do actively address, i.e. discuss and/or present data, this issue of the attribution of the observed outcome to the policy rather than to other, confounding factors, but many do so casually and, hence, fail to provide a convincing argument for their case. Studies should pay more attention to potential confounding factors by careful choice of counterfactual measurement and investigation over time of developments in factors that may affect forest condition and use patterns, such as: population density; market access; climate and natural disasters; project support and; land-use policies and practices.

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Concluding remarks

The review revealed clear trade-offs between scale and detail in the impact evaluation studies with a tendency to ignore the importance of empirically investigating the policy and the attribution of outcome to policy in large-scale studies. In general, designers of impact evaluations should adapt scale and detail to the objectives and context of the study. In relation to the policy, this would entail giving priority to empirical investigation in areas where popular participation is recently implemented or contested. In relation to the outcome this would entail giving priority to detail in high value forests and/or where resource extraction targets key species. Finally, in relation to the attribution of outcome to policy, it would, as mentioned above, entail giving priority to detail in areas where popular participation could be confused with other developments of importance to forest management.

To learn more about the review please refer to Lund, J. F., K. Balooni and T. Casse (2009). Change we can believe in? Reviewing studies on the conservation impact of popular participation in forest management. Conservation and Society 7(2): 1-13. Available online at www.conservationandsociety.org.

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