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How are institutions included in Integrated Conservation and Development Projects? Developing and testing a diagnostic approach on the World Bank's Forest and Community project in Salta, Argentina

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ABSTRACT

The opportunities and challenges of ensuring participation and success of Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) have been fairly studied. However, it is not often well-established which institutional mechanisms explain the failure in meeting participatory and project goals. To fill this gap, we develop a telecoupling-inspired diagnostic approach to assess the level of institutional distance and opportunity for collective decision-making in ICDPs by looking at project information flows, project asset flows, and rules and regulation flows between project actors. We construct three management archetypes based on the direction and directness of such flows: decoupled management, telecoupled management and collaborative management. The archetypes are applied to a case study of a World Bank-financed ICDP in Argentina, drawing on qualitative data collected from individual interviews with project actors. Our findings challenge the notion that a project becomes participatory if the project design provides guidelines for participatory implementation. We find that our diagnostic approach helps to concretize the call for inclusion of local project actors across the project cycle, which is needed to make projects collaborative, relevant, and socially just. Finally, we advocate future project assessments to build on this approach and map the practical institutional relationships between project actors to provide transparency on the de facto level of project collaboration. This article is relevant for both academics and practitioners designing and implementing conservation and development projects.

1. Introduction

Development projects today are to a large extent operating within the discourse of participation and integrated project designs as rarely questioned premises for success. Centralist top-down approaches have been increasingly replaced by ideas about more grounded, people-friendly, and inclusive interventions (Li, 2007). In the forest sector, so-called Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) have become a popular approach that, in theory, is grounded in a participatory take on development (Bank & Sills, 2014). However, reports on the level of participation and the environmental and social effects of ICDPs are often ambivalent (Bank & Sills 2014; Mutune & Lund, 2016; Saguin, 2018; Wainwright & Wehrmeyer, 1998) and many ICDPs rarely or only indirectly mirror the objectives they were intended to meet

(Jeanrenaud, 2002; Mosse, 2004). This trend has also been observed in cases of participatory forest management, rural development projects, decentralization of forest management, and interventions with market-based solutions to deforestation (see Oberlack et al., 2018; Pfliegner, 2014; Pouliot & Treue, 2013; Ribot, 2004; Mosse, 2004).

Some find that participation in ICDPs facilitates more positive conservation attitudes (Morgan-brown, Jacobson, Wald, & Child, 2010), while others find no effect on conservation (Linkie et al., 2008). Several case studies highlight the inevitable trade-offs and potentially conflicting goals of development and conservation (Barrett & Arcese, 1995; Cagalanan, 2013; Sayer et al., 2009) and report failure or reproduction of the status quo (Arjunan et al., 2006; Bank & Sills, 2014; Oberlack et al., 2018). Generally, participation surfaces as the most crucial but also the most difficult element to realize in such integrated projects (Brown, 2002; Cagalanan, 2013; Tafon & Saunders, 2014; Gockel and Gray, 2015).

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Despite this growing evidence of the success and failure of ICDPs, and the availability of detailed project cycle frameworks for practitioners (e.g. Ba & Kyne, 2008), the misalignment of project design and practice and the wider management issues (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019) should be investigated and monitored to better understand the reasons behind participation challenges. This calls for an analysis that considers not just the informational and institutional flows in project actor networks but also the lack of flows and fragmentation of such networks (Rudnick et al., 2019) and the difference between theoretical and tangible participation and collaboration (Eriksen et al., 2021; Fox, 2020).

We address these research gaps by presenting and testing a novel diagnostic archetype approach to project management assessment that visualizes issues of institutional distance and opportunities for collective decision-making arenas in ICDPs. The approach is theoretically grounded in the concept of telecoupling and developed through an iterative process of literature review and fieldwork conducted in a participatory ICDP at the various sites where project actors were located. Telecoupling has been considered a useful heuristic device to analyze and better comprehend sustainability challenges (Friis & Nielsen, 2017b). Still, to our knowledge, there are no studies to date which have operationalized telecoupling to analyze the management and implementation challenges of development projects. We do this through our diagnostic approach and introduce new ways by which academics and practitioners can address some of the structural problems with participation and collaboration that often characterize international development projects. Finally, we argue that such information contributes to better explaining the misalignment between a project's design and its implementation.

2. Telecoupling as a lens to study the management of ICDPs: A diagnostic approach

In our globalized world, we have developed an interdependent institutional infrastructure where distant actors, processes, and places are connected by material (e.g. goods or people) and immaterial (e.g. information or discourse) flows. The concept of telecoupling has been proposed as a heuristic device (Friis & Nielsen, 2017b) to illuminate this interconnectivity across institutional and geographical distances, and as a framework (Liu et al., 2013) operating with five interrelated telecoupling components: systems, agents, flows, causes, and effects. We apply telecoupling more broadly as an analytical lens in our approach to project management diagnosis, where the framework components of systems, agents, and flows are integrated alongside elements of institutional analysis. The sending system is considered the origin of the interaction or flow, and the receiving system as the recipient. Their boundary is a dynamic delineation and a result of the literature review and empirical case study analysis rather than an a priori definition (Friis & Nielsen, 2017b).

Research adopting a telecoupling lens has often applied the concept to study global connections driving land-use change (Kapsar et al., 2019) but there are calls for more integration of institutions in the analysis of these connections (e.g. Eakin et al., 2014; Oberlack et al., 2018). In this paper, we respond to such calls by demonstrating that the adoption of a telecoupling perspective in the study of ICDPs can shed new light on how they work and why they might fail as conservation and development institutions. Institutions are understood as both regulatory and organizational arrangements (Hobley, 1996) with a focus on both formal and informal practices that structure institutional behavior (Ostrom, 2005). Our take on telecoupling is inspired by the telecoupling network integration approach proposed by Seaquist and Johansson (2019) and the schematic representation of telecoupling as a way to analyze

governance presented in Eakin et al. (2014). Our approach is actor network-based in the sense that we understand the sending system as made up of processes and actors involved in project design rather than a self-standing social-ecological system, while the receiving system involves the project actors dealing with direct implementation and the beneficiaries of project activities.

Through a telecoupling lens, it becomes possible to study not only connections across distance but also how weak or missing flows between project actors cause disconnections between sending and receiving systems (Hull & Liu, 2018) which in turn result in a decoupling of project idea and reality, and unfeasible or irrelevant objectives and outcomes (Fox, 2020). This notion concurs with those who have advocated for participatory planning tools as a means to get the local understandings of problems and solutions 'right' (Agrawal et al., 2008; Li, 2007; Ribot, 2004) and those who believe that addressing local environmental and social needs requires collaborative management, including strong and bidirectional flows among project actors regarding project information, project assets, rules and regulations (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019; Fernández Milmanda & Garay, 2019; Fox, 2020; Grillos, 2017; Larsen, 2008). In the following, we first elaborate on these flows, secondly, we describe the project actors and issues of institutional distance, and finally, we present our diagnostic approach through three management archetypes that reflect different opportunities for collective decision-making as a result of the degree of institutional distance between project actors.

2.1. Flows determining management situations

The project management domain which we analyze, can be looked at as a network of actors and flows, where the type of flows are decisive for institutional distance and thus the ability of collective decision-making. Munroe et al. (2019) consider all decision-making in telecoupled land systems to take place within a collective decision-making arena due to the interdependency between actors in sending and receiving systems. We argue that a prerequisite for a collective decision-making arena to exist is at least some bidirectional flows between the institutions participating in the governance situation. The ability to define development is most likely to be possessed by actors with financial resources and political positions to control the flows of project information, project assets, and rules and regulations, which can be unidirectional from 'sending' to 'receiving' project actors. As such, we argue that de facto collaboration in project management situations cannot be understood without attention to flows as this approach provides more insight into what makes up institutional distance and collective decision-making, rather than looking at 'actors' and 'links' alone (Munroe et al., 2019; Rudnick et al., 2019).

We understand flows broadly as the "movements of material, energy, or information between the systems that are transferred as a result of actions taken by agents." (Liu et al., 2013:5). Telecoupling literature has shown the importance of studying flows over large distances, also with regards to local responses as they might get lost on their way before they can influence distant policy decisions, causing disconnections between signals and drivers (Hull & Liu, 2018; Friis & Nielsen, 2017a; Oberlack et al., 2018). In an ICDP, this is especially problematic when the project claims to have a design based on local needs. In a situation where local opinion and knowledge are not directly part of the design phase, the design may rely on existing research or project actors' experience and imagination regarding local development needs (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019; Eriksen et al., 2021).

In our analysis, we focus on 1) information and planning of project objectives, activities, scheduling, and budgeting (project information flows), 2) the formulation and imposition of rules and regulations on natural resource use, restrictions on land use

in general, zoning practices, etc. (rules and regulation flows), and 3) project funds, goods, and services such as technical expertise (project asset flows). Bidirectional flows of project information (dialogue) and transparency regarding rules and regulations are crucial for relevant funds, goods, and service delivery. Local beneficiaries need to be able to know what to ask for, and whom to hold accountable, to participate in decision-making and thereby help project managers with a more efficient and effective way to bring relevant project results (Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020).

It is necessary to be critical of the relevance of project information flows, especially in cases where the content has been decided far away from the intended beneficiaries. Local community members, as well as other project actors, will never just be passive recipients of flows. Therefore, it is optimal to complement a diagnosis of a project's management situation with an analysis that considers the demand side, rather than only being attentive to whether or not the information is there (Ojha et al., 2016; Berliner, Bagozzi, & Palmer-Rubin, 2018).

Project asset flows and rules and regulation flows are important, particularly when considering rural community actors who might be unlikely to be able to act on information flows without the corresponding financial resources and decision-making authority. Assets can also flow the other way, from local beneficiaries and outwards, by hiring local consultants or in the form of the sharing of benefits generated by a project activity such as tourism revenue (Larsen, 2008). Rules and regulations are decisive for the distance between project actors and thus for the opportunity of a collective decision-making arena because ICDPs will never be implemented in a vacuum. They are bound to specific international and domestic rules and regulations, directly and indirectly, affiliated with the project. Regardless of strong dialogue and collaboration through project information flows and project asset flows, top-down rules and regulations would likely limit the collective decision-making arena and sustainability of collaboration (Fox, 2020; Hasan et al., 2020).

We discern between unidirectional, bidirectional, direct, and indirect flows to enable a more nuanced understanding of network ties and the complexity in networks that are not explicit, formally intended, or structured. We understand bidirectional flows as dialogue and unidirectional flows as situations where dialogue is not required or specifically sought. This could be, for example, when project managers conduct consultations and present a priori defined activities to a local beneficiary (unidirectional flow from project manager towards the local beneficiary) and the local beneficiary express opinions which are then extracted as raw data by the project manager (unidirectional flow from the local beneficiary towards the project manager) (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Many unidirectional flows can be indicative of information asymmetry causing distance between the sending and receiving system.

With direct flow, we mean a transfer or interaction (depending on whether it is unidirectional or bidirectional) between actors in a situation where there is clarity about the process of the flow, the type of flow, and the actors involved. With indirect flow, in turn, we refer to cases where such transfer or interaction is less clear in either process, type, or the number of actors involved. The flow's directness can indicate where it might be necessary to be attentive to more informal institutional behavior. For example, an indirect flow of project information may reflect an underlying incentive to withhold information. An indirect project asset flow can indicate an unclear or unofficial distribution of funds, goods, and services, and indirect rules and regulation flows could indicate discretionary rather than rule-based decision-making.

2.2. Project actors and institutional distance

The term telecoupling can be translated to 'coupled over distance' where distance is relative, relational, and not limited to geographical distance, but also reflects institutional or social distances (Eakin et al., 2017). The way flows are mediated between project actors in the sending and receiving system can maintain, increase, or reduce institutional distance because it influences the level of collective decision-making between project actors in the design and implementation system.

Drawing on Eakin et al.'s (2017) telecoupling typology, we understand institutional distance as something that arises when project actors or systems share few formal, social, or institutional relations. For example, there can be a strong relationship between two project actors if they are financially interdependent. Simultaneously, it can be a relationship characterized by distance if there are indirect or missing project information flows. As such, a project design system and implementation system can be linked through formal ties while being inherently disconnected in practice.

Increasing institutional distance also increases the risk of homogenization of project actors and organizations, and vice versa. While it may be conceptually helpful to construct institutional boundaries around "the donor", "the local community", "the NGO", and "the governmental agency", it is problematic in practice. If these constructs are distributed through flows of project information and there is little or no direct dialogue, it can undermine an understanding of individual realities which may reinforce the institutional distance between project actors (Lewis et al., 2003). Thus, as well as being a consequence of missing flows, institutional distance can be produced by unidirectional flows.

The concept of institutional distance speaks to the organization design theory by Galbraith (1974) and the challenge he identifies in relation to large organizations with interdependent sub-units: "the design problem is to create mechanisms that permit coordinated action across large numbers of interdependent roles" (Galbraith, 1974:28). The higher the number of project actors, the more complex the interdependencies, and the more information must be processed to ensure coordination. If we imagine ICDPs as large organizations and project actors as interdependent sub-units, it becomes clear that strong bidirectional flows between them are crucial to reduce the distance and ensure a space for coordinated action i.e., what we refer to as the collective decision-making arena.

Our understanding of collective decision-making in a project management domain is related to Rudnick et al.'s (2019) description of a '*shared governance network*', where project coordination is shared among many actors through bidirectional flows; more organizations with greater tie density (stronger flows) are less likely to break into fragmented subgroups. In management systems where there are direct interactions between project actors, trust-based, reciprocal relationships are more prevalent and there can be a stronger emphasis on the importance of local knowledge (Ostrom, 2005) and NGO experience (Eriksen et al., 2021).

As Munroe et al. (2019), we understand decision-making by actors through a telecoupling lens and thereby as interdependent in the sense that the choices and abilities of one actor depend on the relation to other actors and systems. For example, implementing agencies such as NGOs can be caught in a difficult position between flows in two directions: towards the local community in the form of project information and service delivery, and towards the government and the financing agency in the form of incoming flows of rules and regulations and project information (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019; Cook et al., 2017). Even though NGOs are typically considered of paramount importance for the participatory effect of ICDPs and other projects (Shin et al., 2017), their behavior may not be predictable in mediating these flows. Local and international NGOs, as well as government agencies and donors, are never homogenous entities and they may display contrasting behaviors and distinct rule-making structures (Ostrom, 2005).

2.3. Project management archetypes

The direction and directness of different flows between actors in the design and implementation systems can indicate project actor relationships, institutional distance, and thus which type of management situation is dominant. We present below a diagnostic approach that can support both practitioners and academics alike in their efforts to understand the causal mechanisms that may lie behind an ICDP's ability to be managed collaboratively. Drawing on the archetype analysis tradition (Eisenack et al., 2021) and inspired by the concept of telecoupling (Friis & Nielsen, 2017a), we construct three archetype management situations that can help diagnose ICDPs claiming to be participatory or community-driven (Fig. 1). We consider issues of institutional distance and thus the opportunity for collective decision-making as dependent on 1) project asset flows, 2) project information flows, and 3) rules and regulation flows. Project information flows are of primary concern in this paper, but the other two types of flows included in Fig.1 are considered relevant to contextualize the direction and strength of project information. Fig.1 shows examples of three archetypes but the specific actors, direction, and directness of flows will vary, also within archetypes, across cases. We exemplify this in Section 4.3.

The tables that accompany the figure contain further information for its interpretation: Table 1 provides a list of abbreviations used in Fig.1 and the typical roles of project actors relevant to include in the analysis of ICDPs. Table 2 sums up Section 2.1 with an overview of the types of flows included in Fig.1, together with a description of the 'direction' and 'directness' variables.

The three archetypes are *decoupled management*, *telecoupled management*, and *collaborative management*. Additional distinctions within the receiving system could be made between project implementing agencies and beneficiary communities. In the sending system, we include those actors that are involved in the negotiations on the project budget and objectives while we include those in charge of implementing project activities in the receiving system. The archetype is then determined by the direction and directness of flows between these project actors.

Decoupled management (Figure 1A) is characterized by a lack of a collective decision-making arena, illustrated by the great distance between the sending and receiving system. In this archetype, implementing agencies and local communities are not part of the design phase of the project. Those activities are reserved for the national government, and the financing agency, and are potentially influenced by recommendations from an international NGO (I-NGO) or other consultants. Project definition- and decision-making is likely to lie with those in the most powerful financial and political positions, such as central government institutions and financing agencies. Although a financing agency like the World Bank would emphasize that the formal responsibility of planning and implementation lies with the borrower, in practice their project supervisors often play a critical role in project design and conceptualization (Burns, Krott, Sayadyan, & Giessen, 2016; Ika, 2015). Between project actors in the sending and receiving system, flows are either unidirectional or indirect, coordination between actors is poor, and there is no mechanism for bottom-up feedback or dialogue. There are no or only a few bidirectional flows, and these would be between the national government and the financing agency. Such a management situation can be indicative of a failed program or project (Rudnick et al., 2019).

Telecoupled management (Figure 1B) is characterized by a greater number and density of flows between project actors. The distance arrow is illustrated as being able to both increase and decrease to indicate that the larger the overlap, the larger the collective decision arena, and the smaller the institutional distance between the two systems and vice versa. The design and imple-

mentation system has an area of overlap to indicate some level of collective planning and decision-making. The premise for this management situation is that two or more actors are involved in both design and implementation activities and that there are direct and bidirectional flows between two or more of these actors. It is not possible to provide one single case that fully exemplifies telecoupled management, as it represents a situation where some but not all actors are coupled over distance, and there is some but not full overlap between actors involved with design and implementation. For example, it can be cases where NGOs or RDAs participate in both design and implementation and have strong bidirectional flows with the local communities, but the local communities, in turn, are still detached from the other actors in the design system.

In collaborative management (Figure 1C), decision-making is more evenly shared by project actors, which is reflected in the high number of strong and bidirectional project information flows, project asset flows, and rules and regulation flows between project actors. All project actors thereby become involved in both design and implementation which allows for collective definition- and decision-making. Design and implementation become an integrated system of feedback and interactions in the collective decision-making arena, which constitutes an opportunity and should not be considered a democratic output in itself. As pointed out by Grillos (2017), some participatory institutions are representative and succeed in collective decision-making, while others can be prone to elite capture.

We see collaborative management as the ideal for projects to be democratic, implementable, socially just, and locally relevant, thus supporting arguments related to co-management frameworks for natural resource governance (Addison, Stoeckl, Larson, & Jarvis, 2019; Ostrom, 2005; Ribot, 2003; Armitage, Berkes, & Doubleday, 2007). Collaborative management is about designing *with* the local community beneficiary instead of *for* the local community beneficiary, by placing them at the center of the arena where decisions on project objectives are made (Eriksen et al., 2021) throughout the project cycle. We acknowledge that the collaborative management archetype draws significantly on Ostrom's school of institutional analysis which has extensively shown that sustainable governance requires multitiered management systems that build on rich local knowledge and institutions that match the complexity of the ecosystems we ought to manage sustainably. While the Ostrom school is mostly concerned with the challenges and complexities involved in *common pool resource* management, we focus specifically on *project* management, which in turn can hinder or enable collective decision-making on the management of common pool resources.

3. The Forest and Community project, Argentina

3.1. Case description

The project chosen to test our diagnostic approach to project management is the Forest and Community (F&C) project, implemented by Argentina's government in three northern provinces of which our focus is on the province of Salta[1]. The project is financed by a World Bank loan to the Government of Argentina, represented by the Ministry of Economy (MEC) as the borrower, and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable development (MAyDS) as the implementing agency. The ministries do not carry out project implementation on the ground but oversee the procurement processes, the financial management, the decision-making on project

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[1] The project is as well designed to be implemented in the provinces of Chaco and Santiago del Estero, but the data collection for this paper has focused on the province of Salta.
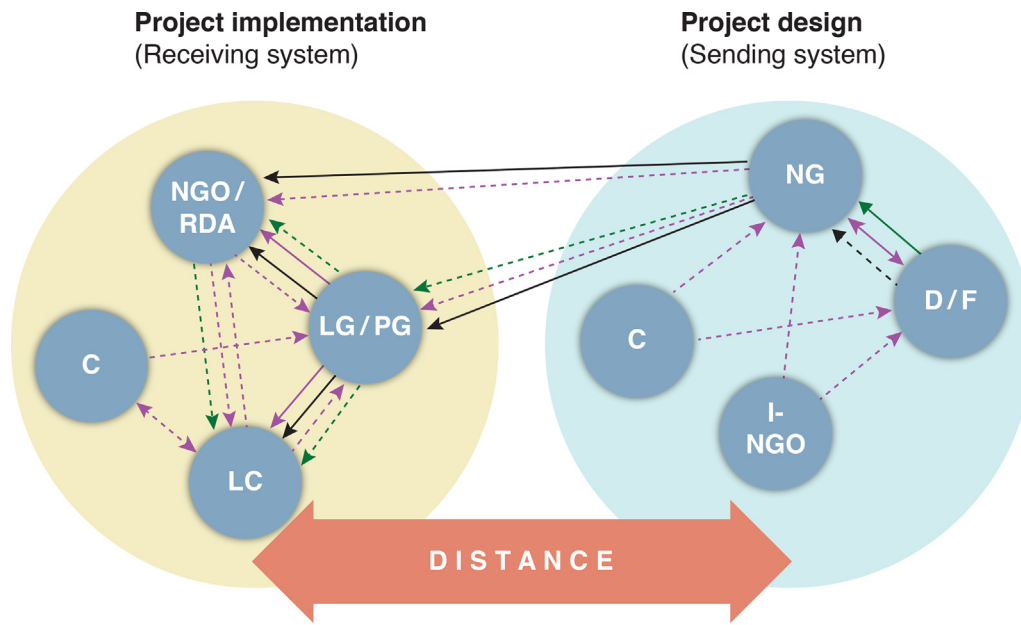
Project implementation
(Receiving system)

Project design
(Sending system)

Fig. 1. Project management in a telecoupling perspective.

Project implementation
(Receiving system)

A collective
Decision-making arena

Project design
(Sending system)

Fig. 1 (*continued*)

A collective
Decision-making arena

Fig. 1 (*continued*)

Table 1
List of key project actors.

Actors	Typical roles and responsibilities
Donors (D) or international financial actors (F)	Support for projects through the provision of loans or grants; Negotiating project activities and distribution of project funds; Risk assessment and analysis of the client's country system and procurement capacity; Assist client with procurement planning; Provide training, technical assistance, and awareness-raising; Monitor compliance with a loan or grant agreement (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019; Rahman et al., 2016)
Consultants (C)	Study, design, or supervision of the project; Technical assistance; Institutional strengthening and capacity building
National Government (NG)	Borrower; Identification of project need, strategy, planning, and design; Carrying out procurement activities following the loan or grant agreement (Rahman et al., 2016)
Provincial (PG) or Local Government (LG)	Brokers and accountable representatives for the target population; Responsibility and decision-making power allocated to the local level government depends directly on the borrower (Rahman et al., 2016). In the F&C project, they are not involved with implementation arrangements.
International NGO (I-NGO)	Outside pressure or consultant depending on the project (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019)
Local Implementing Unit (LIU)	Teams of specialists and technicians hired by the ministry(ies) managing the project, to implement project activities. These units are ideally located in or very near the site(s) where activities are to be realized.
Local NGO (L-NGO) or Rural Development Agency (RDA)	Bottom-up pressure or implementation responsibilities depending on the project; Broker and representative of the target population; Service providers to assist with project implementation; Consultancy (Aldashev and Vallino, 2019; Maya Pasgaard, 2015)
Local Communities (LC)	Official target group/beneficiary; Subject to participatory activities (Maya Pasgaard, 2015; Ravina, Ray, Shih, & Medvegy, 2018)

activities, and are responsible to comply with the World Bank loan agreement. At the time of fieldwork (2019), the provincial government had not been part of the implementation arrangements. MAyDS established a Buenos Aires-based National Executing Unit (NEU) integrated into the ministry's line functions and set up Local Implementation Units (LIU) in each of the three provinces where the project is being implemented. The NEU oversees project management at the national level, including inter-institutional coordination, supervision and monitoring, cumulative procurement processes, liaising and reporting to the World Bank. To make use of existing networks and because there is only a limited allocation of resources to provide salaries for LIU staff, local NGOs and Rural Development Agencies (RDAs) are hired as so-called service providers to provide technical assistance and support communities in project implementation.

The World Bank's 58.76 million USD loan for the project has Sustainable Livelihoods as the largest component with 41.69 million USD in the original project documents (World Bank, 2015). This involves helping selected indigenous and Creole communities with the preparation and implementation of Integrated Community Plans (PICs). The PIC enables access to funding for different land-use activities like silviculture and timber logging, but also includes non-extractive opportunities such as eco-tourism. The project is closely tied to the passing of the 2007 Forest Law in Argentina which included provisions for provincial governments to implement Land Use Planning Processes (LUPPs) as a prerequisite for provinces to receive funds attached to the law. In turn, LUPPs implied a Land Use Zonation (LUZ), where land was to be divided into three zones: a red zone for areas of high conservation value, a yellow zone for medium conservation value, and a green zone for low conservation value. The Forest Law has been criticized for its top-down implementation (Volante & Seghezzo, 2018). The F&C project officially strives to meet this criticism by assisting with the development of PICs for the yellow zones in the Northern provinces. Formally, the F&C project's design is described as participatory, community-driven, demand-driven, and with strong collaboration between project actors, especially local NGOs and community organizations (World Bank, 2015).

The project was still active by the time of fieldwork, why it was premature to identify its impact and evaluate the results. However, it is a large-scale project involving a multitude of stakeholders at different scales and thus represents many of the typical management and coordination challenges of ICDPs. It is also a very complex, ambitious, and contentious project, why we argue that if our diagnostic approach can yield constructive insights in this context, it will be applicable in less complicated cases as well.

3.2. Data collection

Data collection was conducted during two field trips to Buenos Aires and Salta in February and July-August 2019. Relevant actors at the national and provincial levels were identified and most were available for interviews, whereas project actors at the local level were more difficult to access. At the time of fieldwork, nine PICs were being implemented in Salta. Since project staff in several of the PICs were not responsive, the sampling strategy became largely based on recommendations from central management on where to find an area where project activities had been approved and initiated (SSI15).[2] When contact was reached with two PICs located

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[2] The paper will use following interview code style: SSI=semi-structured interview, CSSI=community semi-structured interview; #=interview number organized in chronological order.

Table 2
Description of flow types.

Flow type	Description	Direct and unidirectional	Symbol	Indirect and unidirectional	Symbol	Direct and bidirectional	Symbol	Indirect and bidirectional	Symbol
Project asset flows	Project funds, goods and services such as technical expertise, know-how, and awareness raising.	Direct transfer of funds, goods and services from one project actor to another.		Indirect transfer of funds, goods and services from one project actor to another. The symbol can be used to indicate that there is one or more intermediary actors between the sending and receiving project actor, or that the transfer is unofficial, unclear, undocumented, or vague.		Direct interaction regarding distribution of funds, goods and services between project actors. The symbol can be used to indicate shared responsibility, negotiation or dialogue.		Indirect interaction regarding distribution of funds, goods and services between project actors. The symbol can be used to indicate that the interaction is unofficial, unclear, undocumented, or vague.	
Project information flows	Information and planning of project objectives, activities, scheduling, and budgeting.	Direct transfer of information about project objectives, activities, and scheduling from one project actor to another.		Indirect transfer of information about project objectives, activities, and scheduling from one project actor to another. The symbol can be used to indicate that there is one or more intermediary actors between the sending and receiving project actor, or that the transfer is unofficial, unclear, undocumented, or vague.		Direct interaction regarding project information such as setting of objectives, planning activities, and scheduling between project actors. The symbol can be used to indicate shared responsibility, negotiation or dialogue.		Indirect interaction regarding project information such as setting of objectives, planning activities and scheduling between project actors. The symbol can be used to indicate that the interaction is unofficial, unclear, undocumented, or vague.	
Rules and regulation flows	The formulation and imposition of rules and regulations on natural resource use, restrictions on land use in general, zoning practices, etc.	Direct imposition of rules and regulations from one project actor to another.		The indirect influence of rules and regulations from one project actor to another. The symbol can be used to indicate that there is one or more intermediary actors between the sending and receiving project actor, or that the imposition is unofficial, unclear, undocumented, or vague.		Direct interaction regarding the formulation of rules and regulations between project actors. The symbol can be used to indicate shared responsibility, negotiation or dialogue.		Indirect interaction regarding the formulation of rules and regulations between project actors. The symbol can be used to indicate that the interaction is unofficial, unclear, undocumented, or vague.	

in the same region and representing both Creole and indigenous Wichí participants, these were selected for further data collection.

A total of 44 interviews were conducted. This includes eight interviews with staff from the MAyDS at the national level, seven interviews with staff from the LIU in Salta, three with World Bank employees, 12 with representatives from NGOs and RDAs, and 14 household level interviews in local communities. Two project sites were visited: 1) a community of Creole "Campesinos" with 116 registered project participants (some from the same household), where 12 interviews were carried out at the household level; and 2) a registered community of approximately 53 Wichí families where one group interview was carried out and followed up by one separate household-level interview. The schedule for data collection in the Wichí community involved several modifications due to local frustration with the repeated project and research related surveys carried out in their community. Therefore, the original plan to do structured interviews with a representative number of project participants did not work well, and a group discussion was carried out instead. The local NGO representative, who also participated in the group discussion, had contacted the Wichí community leader, who then invited project participants to join the meeting in the village center. The residents in the community were known to be very angry with interventions like the F&C project that, according to them, never materialized on the ground. Consequently, the Wichí community leader was unsure if anyone would show up and therefore invited all the male household heads in the village, out of which thirteen joined the discussion. Some left during the meeting, others came, and ultimately seven participated actively in the discussions.

Following the group discussion, conversations during a walk in the village provided information on expected service delivery and showcased examples of initiated work that had never been finished, such as the digging of a water well. Since there were no women present at the group discussion (the majority of registered project participants in the Wichí communities are men), a separate household interview was carried out with two female community members. All interviews explored issues related to communication, awareness of project activities, involvement in decision-making across the project cycle, roles and responsibilities, and information-sharing mechanisms (the list of questions is available in the supplementary materials).

Project documents such as the World Bank project appraisal report, implementation manuals, and public information flyers obtained from project staff were reviewed to explore the design of the project and contrast official objectives and management procedures with observed practices. The F&C project officially builds on a series of preparational activities and studies,[3] why it has been described in great technical detail. The purpose of this case study is to share a snapshot of management practice for the sake of showing the usefulness of our diagnostic approach. Therefore, the analysis addresses a sample of project documents rather than an exhaustive list.

A longer-term stay in the field may have resulted in more local voices being heard. However, we assess that it would be unlikely that perceptions about the project would have been different than those gathered since the project had not yet resulted in any tangible benefits that other local beneficiaries could value differently. We consider that the interviews conducted are enough to suggest a management archetype, which is what we seek to demonstrate through our diagnostic approach. Transcriptions of the interviews, written notes from community visits, and project documents were analyzed in Nvivo and QCAmap (see supplementary materials for

further details on the qualitative coding). The direct quotations presented in this paper have been corrected grammatically for readability.

4. Applying the diagnostic approach to the F&C project

4.1. Flows between actors in the F&C project

4.1.1. Rules and regulation flows

We consider rules and regulation flows from the national government and in the context of the World Bank loan requirements and policies since the qualitative interviews revealed these flows to be decisive for project collaboration. The World Bank sends direct flows of rules and regulations to the national ministries through their loan criteria, safeguard policies, and various protocols for procurement, monitoring, evaluation, etc. (World Bank, 2015). According to the NEU project director, this meant that the Bank was very involved with project design, as they generally want to oversee the management of contracts and budget spending to make sure that no project activities go against Bank policies (SSI15). As the Provincial Government also demanded, another Bank requirement was the certification of 'peaceful occupation' for the project area (SSI15). The NEU imposed the Bank-affiliated rules and regulations indirectly when they set project requirements for LIUs and service providers (NGOs and RDAs). Since the LIU worked under the direct guidance of the NEU, who dictated their operations, we consider the rules and regulation flows from the NEU towards the LIU to be direct and unidirectional. The LIU and NGOs/RDAs communicated some of these rules and regulations in meetings and workshops at the local community level. However, we assess this to be a more indirect flow because it was unclear from the interview and document analysis how and to what extent this was done.

The Provincial Government was not officially included as part of the F&C project management but they played an important role regarding rules and regulation flows. The approval of PICs needed to go through the Provincial Government, which has the main jurisdiction to directly impose rules and regulations on land use interventions for both local communities, NGOs, RDAs, and the LIU. NGO and RDA staff pointed to this jurisdiction as being very bureaucratic, limiting participation and slowing down project implementation substantially. For example, they require that project participants in the F&C project can show land titles, and they will not approve projects that do not have proper mechanisms installed for conflict resolution (SSI16).

There was no evidence of formal institutions, such as local forest guards or on-site forest departments, in place to control forest use (CSSI1; CSSI3) nor any protocol for monitoring (SSI16), and from interviews, it was unclear whether the local community members were supposed to be part of the monitoring of LUZ and associated project activities (SSI3). Moreover, the interviewed community members did not seem to have been informed about the relation between the project and the Forest Law, and there were no reports on participation in the LUZ, the formulation of the law, or the setting of F&C project objectives and protocols (8 CSSIs; SSI16).

The apparent top-down flows of national rules and regulations resonate with evidence from the same Argentine northern provinces presented in Volante and Seghezzo (2018). It is noteworthy since the F&C project was closely tied to the Forest Law by arguing to help to communicate the LUZ locally and enable a participatory implementation (SSI14). The project information flows are thus closely linked to the rules and regulation flows, which seem to behave in the same unidirectional and indirect way between actors in the design and implementation system.

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[3] These include the Forestry Development Project (P006040) (approved 1995), the Native Forests and Protected Areas Project (P040808) (approved 1996), and the Sustainable Natural Resources Management Project (P100806) (approved 2008).

4.1.2. Project asset flows

Project funds were transferred directly from the World Bank towards the MEC as the official borrower, and from there to the NEU. Towards the LIU and implementing agencies, the flow of project assets was more indirect and interrupted. This was evident partly by the fact that the project, during a mid-term review, was rated as unsatisfactory, resulting in a change of project schedules and budget cuts which led to a temporary halt of project funds disbursement (SSI5). Moreover, according to a previous project director, the project represented a change in the approach to the management of project funds in the sense that besides small amounts for office supplies, money was only transferred to the LIU, NGOs, and RDAs on-demand after activities had been realized (SSI9).

The management of funds and procurement processes required to implement PICs was centralized, while flows of goods and services required for the operationalization of project objectives were supposed to be delivered by the implementing agencies (SSI9; SSI3; SSI14). An emphasis on heavy bureaucracy and irregular disbursement of project funds seemed to be echoed across implementing project actors (SSI19; SSI14; SSI16), and an RDA employee underscored that there was no participatory approach to the management and decision-making on project funds (SSI19). The LIU project coordinator emphasized that this created great difficulties for local interaction with communities, "delays generate mistrust (..) they (the local communities) are afraid. And for me, it is very reasonable because they are living in areas with many needs (..) If the project does not arrive in a reasonable time, they will say that it is just more of the same." (SSI14). From these findings, we consider project asset flows from the NEU towards implementing project actors, and from the LIU toward the NGOs and RDAs, to be unidirectional and indirect.

From the implementing project actors towards the communities, the distribution of project funds, goods, and services appeared very problematic, fragmented, and in some cases withheld (SSI16; SSI17; SSI20). From field observations and unofficial sources, it was reported that minor goods were distributed by the LIU, such as kitchen equipment and solar cells, without coordination with local NGOs or RDAs and, it seemed, without coordination with the local communities (CSSI2-12). According to local NGO staff, this distribution was "alien to what was formulated in the PIC" and thus not mirroring requests from the communities (SSI20). The implementing agencies questioned the amount of time allocated for participatory exercises to know community needs when the only project activities realized did not reflect their most urgent needs, such as access to clean water (SSI19).

Aside from the local Creole leader who unofficially seemed to assist with project coordination, there was no sign of bidirectional flows with local beneficiaries such as co-management arrangements regarding decision-making and distribution of funds, goods, and services. On the contrary, interview data and project reports conceptualize project activities as 'offers', provided by the implementing agencies, which can be aligned with community 'demands' (World Bank, 2015), and describe how these offers can be either accepted or rejected by the local beneficiaries (SSI15).

4.1.3. Project information flows

Between the World Bank, the MEC, and the NEU, we find direct bidirectional flows since there was dialogue and negotiations on project activities, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation (SSI8; SSI21; SSI15). From the NEU towards the LIU, the flow is unidirectional and direct, as they guided and dictated implementation (SSI9; SSI15; SSI14). This was also the case from the LIU towards the NGOs and RDAs, because they were told which activities to carry out without any structured dialogue or collaboration. According to on-site NGOs and RDAs, their inclusion in the design of the

F&C project was limited to a consultation email with an invitation to read and revise project documents (SSI17). An employee from one of the RDAs noted that "there was practically no participation in the formulation process of the F&C project. On the other hand, in this project, the only thing there is so far, is formulation." (SSI19).

At the community level, none of the interviewees could mention any project-related activity aside from a project meeting in 2018 (CSSI1-12; CSSI13). Such meetings were aimed at mapping local land use and community needs to inform the formulation of PICs (SSI19; SSI14). Some of the interviewed community members described it as events where different agencies presented ideas and strategies for how to improve the export of forest products (CSSI3). None of them seemed fully aware of the project's purpose or expressed any role in defining this purpose (CSSI1-12; CSSI13). As put by one of the project participants, "what did they do in these meetings? They present each topic, tell us what is going to happen, inform us about things, present some idea to carry out, have some requests... those things " (CSSI6). The local Creole leader described the workshops similarly, "in the workshop they tell you what is good and what is bad, they tell you what to do and what not to do" (CSSI1). This type of communication we interpret as an indirect and unidirectional flow of project information from the LIU to the local community as well as from the local community towards the implementing project actors since the participation is characterized more by information extraction than direct dialogue.

The local project meetings allegedly followed the World Bank's consultation procedure (World Bank, 2013) to mitigate negative social and cultural impacts. However, this did not appear to have translated into collaboration on early project design. There were arguments from RDA staff that the meetings were held after overarching project objectives were already decided (SSI19). This was supported by statements from the NEU director who noted that there were three predefined lines of investment, namely forest management, agriculture, and ranching, within which they invited local communities to propose activities (SSI15). In addition, a subcomponent was included in the F&C project design to give room for participants to propose their own projects, but we did not identify any evidence of its operationalization. The implementing agencies seemed to agree that there was an insufficient dialogue with the community to ensure participation in decision-making and to guarantee that project activities were based on local priorities (SSI19; SSI20; SSI16; SSI18; SSI17). The local Creole leader had a more positive perspective on the opportunity for project collaboration and argued that both Creole and Wichí communities were represented at an intercommunity and local stakeholder management roundtable[4] that was overseeing all incoming investments (CSSI1)[5]. Thus, the lack of bidirectional flows between project actors and local communities that we encountered does not mean that local communities are passive recipients of flows[6]. Further data collection at later project stages might reveal more local dialogue or multi-stakeholder communication channels.

Generally, we did not identify any project information flows between the actors designing the project (World Bank, MAyDS, MEC) and the local communities. This might contribute to explaining why the communities' urgent need for water (CSSI13; SSI22; CSSI1-12) was still in the process of being assessed rather than

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[4] We did not find any evidence in any of the remaining interviews that this roundtable was an institution directly included in the design and implementation of the F&C project. Further analysis could explore this issue more in-depth.

[5] Creole and Wichi attitudes were very different, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this difference in detail. See for example Gabay and Alam (2017) for more insights to the Wichí communities and Seghezzo et al. (2011) for discussions of different stakeholders' visions of development, in the context of the Salta province.

[6] Rural communities have been active in advocacy and lobbying in relation to LUZ, see for example Volante and Seghezzo (2018).

directly addressed. The PICs were supposed to bridge this gap and make sure that activities mirrored local priorities, but at the time of fieldwork, they were not yet implemented. Based on these findings, we assess the project information flows from the LIU and the NGO/RDA toward the local communities as unidirectional and indirect because of the low local awareness about project development and the very fragmented execution of project activities.

4.2. Project actors and institutional distance

There seemed to be a mismatch between implementation responsibilities, political authority, and project decision-making power. The provincial jurisdiction (elaborated in Section 4.1.1) was argued as a big challenge for project operations (SSI15; SSI16). It is the provincial government that takes over the responsibility of PICs when the F&C project has been implemented (SSI14). Still, they were not officially included in the project. As goes for the LIU, NGOs, and RDAs, they held implementation responsibilities but were not trusted with the administration of project funds (SSI9; SSI15). The LIU was expected to be in ongoing dialogue with local communities, but they found that their lack of control over funds and restricted project staff (only a handful to implement the 31 PICs that were planned in the province at the time of fieldwork) limited their ability to both coordinate project implementation and be locally present (SSI14). Decision-making and information about the allocation of funds for future project activities were kept at higher management levels so when the financing stopped and the implementation paused, the local project actors, primarily NGOs and RDAs, became the face of the project that had disappointed, even though they were service providers without decision-making authority on project activities (SSI20).

There were different views, presented by project actors, on the gap between project design and project practice. Project staff at both LIU and NEU criticized the management framework as being too complicated, and argued that "someone designed an idea, but it is not realistic." (SSI1). Attempting to design a large-scale forest and community project as participatory was a first in Argentina, and the technical complexity of the design made it difficult for many project actors to imagine and operationalize a realistic implementation (SSI14; SSI19; SSI20). The previous NEU project director admitted that "There is a long way from the idea to the actual project." (SSI7).

Project actors in the implementation system further argued that implementation had not taken off because of the bureaucracy and top-down project design (SSI14; SSI20; SSI9; SSI16) whereas the central management explained the lack of implementation by the financial restructuring and budgetary cuts (SSI5; SSI9; SSI15). None of the interviewed community members or local NGOs were aware that the project was rated as unsatisfactory by the World Bank or what they should have done to avoid the budget cuts (SSI5; SSI3). The lack of bidirectional flows between central management and on-site project actors created an institutional distance to the communities and the implementing project actors (SSI3).

Both NGOs and RDAs believed in the good intentions of the NEU and the LIU as goes for community interaction and political will to move forward with project activities, but they emphasized that the realization of these intentions struggled due to a poor management structure and coordination of project teams (SSI18; SSI19; SSI20). As noted, the irregularity of the project had caused the participating communities to lose confidence (SSI14). They were frustrated that the project activities in which they had expressed interest, particularly the installation of water networks, had not resulted in anything concrete. As a Wichí cacique (local leader) noted, "Without water how do you expect us to participate in anything?" (CSSI13). One of the RDAs got a similar response in an early consul-

tation where Creole communities were informed about the opportunity to develop PICs, to which they answered "We don't want that. We want water." (SSI19). The Wichí community members described the project presence as a disturbing element because they had to manage continuing visits and provide the same answers to the same questions from different researchers and project actors (CSSI13). Implementing NGOs and RDAs often pointed to this as a distance between project objectives and community needs, and between project development definitions and local values (SSI19; SSI16). Explained by a variety of structural barriers, project demands, and management responsibilities, the central project administration focused more on meeting process criteria of technical input and capacity building, than the urgency of realizing certain project activities.

4.3. Decoupled management

It was clear during fieldwork, that many actors envisioned the F&C project to be based on local community demands. However, from assessing the flows between project actors, we identified a management situation where information on local community needs was extracted in uncoordinated timing by the LIU and NGOs/RDAs and then brought into a bureaucratic machinery of provincial jurisdiction, World Bank protocols, and national policy. What comes out of this is uncertain as the project is still active at the time of writing, but we did not encounter convincing evidence of a collaborative or telecoupled management situation. Based on our findings, the management of the F&C project in Salta mirrors the decoupled management archetype (Fig.2). The way actors are situated, the nature of flows, and the resulting distance created between the sending and receiving system, provides no arena for collective decision-making or collaboration on project design and implementation.

The World Bank and the administrating government institutions in Buenos Aires surfaced as the key actors in the design system with the primary control of the direction and directness of flows. The LIU, the NGOs, and RDAs seemed to be part of the same implementation system as the local beneficiary communities since they worked directly with implementation but were not included in the design of project activities. We have placed the provincial government in the implementation system even though they are not official project actors; this is because they play an important role in project implementation, as previously noted (SSI15).

Our study indicates that these institutional drivers can be both formal and informal, although a full analysis of all the institutional drivers determining the direction and strength of flows was not possible. The gap between the formal institutional commitment to collaboration and the reality on the ground, which we found to be more fragmented and decoupled than collaborative, can be indicative that there are informal institutional arrangements at play alongside the more generic coordination issues and structural challenges. For example, the design actors in the F&C project were criticized by the NGOs, RDAs, and community members for not sharing data on project budgets, schedules, and general planning (SSI17; SSI20; CSSI13; CSSI1). If there is an agreement between actors to not share data with others throughout a project history, it could be an important informal but institutionalized relationship that shapes where information flows to. We detected this trend of missing information flows, but further analysis could explore the incentives of project managers withholding project information, or other types of flows, to understand the challenges and opportunities of their management positions in more detail.

While we did not identify any direct bidirectional flows (which is what characterizes our decoupled management archetype) we cannot rule out that they exist in some corner of the current management structure. We faced data collection difficul-
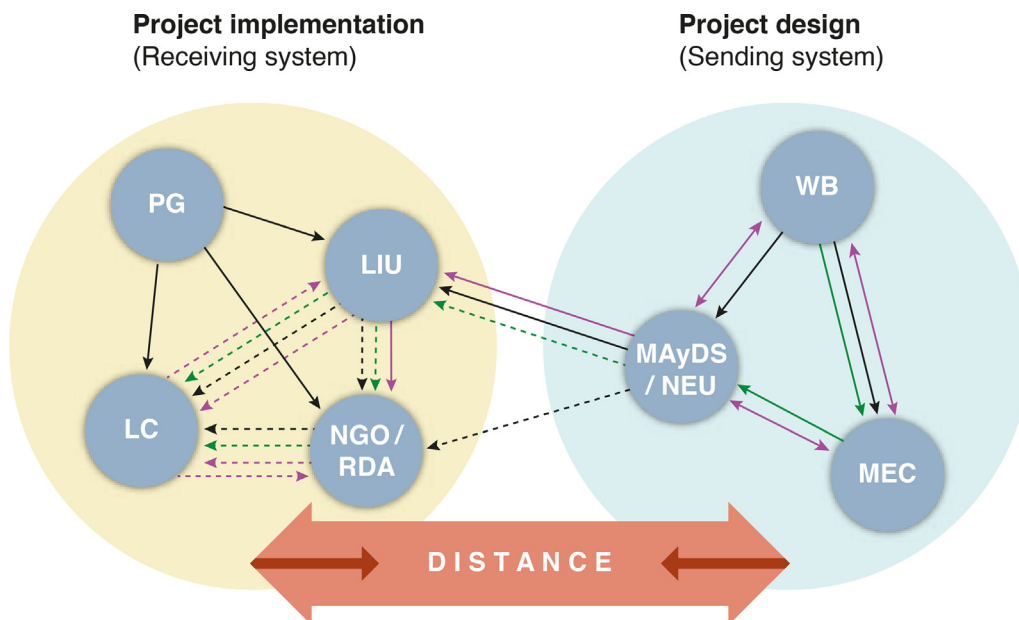
Project implementation
(Receiving system)

Project design
(Sending system)

Fig. 2. Decoupled management in Argentina's F&C project.

ties and a large-scale comprehensive project in 'crisis' where different project actors had different views on the flows between them, why we did not get a complete picture. However, we believe that the qualitative insights we obtained are convincing enough to argue for a decoupled management situation during the time of data collection. As it is a project that has been under preparation, pilot-testing, formulation, and implementation, back and forth since 2015, the situation might have looked differently during another phase in the project. Therefore, we argue for the importance of applying this diagnostic approach throughout the project cycle.

5. Discussion

We have tested the applicability of a telecoupling-inspired diagnostic approach for the study of ICDP management, specifically looking at the case of the F&C project in Salta, Argentina. As a result, we have advanced ongoing debates on telecoupled land-use systems and the effectiveness of conservation and development projects in several ways. Grounded in our empirical findings, and through the lens of institutional telecoupling, we have developed a diagnostic approach that enables us to relate the flows characterizing project design and implementation to everyday (project) practice, which is an analytical approach that has only been hypothesized in earlier studies on telecoupling (Eakin et al., 2014; Oberlack et al., 2018; Newig et al., 2019; Lenschow et al., 2016).

This approach provides a new causal perspective on the well-documented tendency that participation on paper rarely mirrors participation in practice, and that community-driven approaches seldom build directly on community priorities (Mutune & Lund, 2016) but are rather set externally (Fama, 2020). We consider the diagnosis important to increase management transparency and to avoid that the institutional needs of a project (e.g. shown in blueprints and safeguards from the borrower and financing agency) become built into community perspectives from a 'better than nothing' rationale. Such tendency can make project decisions appear perfectly participatory and the distance between theory and practice small (Mosse, 2004) even when the reality is that governmental project actors, or even financing agencies, have the primary power to define project objectives (Burns et al., 2017).

By following the analytical steps in our diagnostic approach, we have shown that the F&C project represents a decoupled management situation where the project is being coordinated in a fragmented and bureaucratic project actor-network with structural challenges and unimplementable activity schedules resulting in more information-extracting than collaborative community engagement, local mistrust, and feeling of time and resource investments without tangible results. This supports existing evidence that participation, as defined and operationalized by project actors in a design system, does not necessarily materialize on the ground. In the decoupled management situation, local institutions and communities are at the receiving end of an already defined project design, which aside from creating local disappointment can lead to an increasing distance between project actors' perspectives on successful development (Addison, Stoeckl, Larson, & Jarvis, 2019) and maybe reproduce or intensify conflicts of interest between international stakeholders and local users of natural resources (Aldashev & Vallino, 2019).

Our diagnosis shows that the so-called participatory design of the F&C project has facilitated institutional distance rather than collaborative management; a somewhat embedded contradiction that appears symptomatic in other ICDPs (Bank & Sills, 2014; Mutune & Lund, 2016). Such institutional distance between project actors can be explained further by the fact that financing agencies and central government actors remain detached from the local communities because they seldom receive and process the knowledge and information emanating from the local level i.e. showing a lack of feedback mechanisms. This is of course not new since other development projects have used participation as a legitimizing rhetoric tool rather than as an operationalized management standard (Eriksen et al., 2021), or in some cases even copy-pasted stakeholder comments from other project consultations (Benites-Lazaro & Mello-Théry, 2019). There has long been an acknowledgment that globalization and the associated telecouplings (trade, discourse, technology, etc.) has led to an increasing homogenization of values and preferences often involving a loss and disregard of local knowledge (Jeanrenaud, 2002; Young et al., 2006). In some cases, the disregard for local realities become so internalized, and as a consequence somewhat hidden, that projects can be considered collaborative because there are mechanisms for stakeholder dialogue, even if practice shows that

local beneficiaries are left out of the decision-making arena (Ayana et al., 2018) (cf. telecoupled management Figure 1B).

Our findings emphasize the lack of *practical* precision in enabling participation and collaboration at the project level, which complements Mosse's (2004) focus on the *conceptual* precision of participation. The F&C project in Argentina is an example of how the notion of a participatory process has become embodied as an expected and formal institutional behavior among project actors: legitimized more by the process and participatory activities than from direct collaboration with intended beneficiaries. This evidence also reflects the importance of further analyzing not only whether projects are manipulative, consultative, or participatory (Arnstein, 1969; Jones et al., 2014), but also why and by whom a given project may be perceived in such terms. Future research could build on the diagnostic approach to better learn from cases like the F&C project where participation is operationalized as a management tool without translating the resulting community demands into action beyond project-related participatory channels (Merino, 2018), or where project concepts and ideas are shared with local beneficiaries but decided beforehand by actors in the design system rather than being developed and defined collectively (Burns et al., 2017).

Finally, we have argued that, in theory, collaborative management situations where all actor groups in the receiving system also participate in the early design phase can reduce the distance between project theory and practice. Each project case needs to develop site-specific approaches to operationalize collaboration through existing local institutions with assistance from local NGOs and RDAs that know the local communities. These actors, however, should not be engaged merely as service providers without ownership of the project, but be part of the early negotiations and formulation of project activities. Both local agencies and communities could be part of a more direct collaboration on project design and implementation by installing mechanisms for participatory budgeting (Grillos, 2017). It is a matter of institutionalized decentralization of project authority to ensure that objectives are relevant and implementable – resembling Ribot's (2003) recommendations for decentralized natural resource management. This, in turn, emphasizes the importance that impact evaluations assess not just project outcomes but the project system itself (Mutune & Lund, 2016). Collaborating with local actors from the beginning of project development, rather than spending time on building a holistic design model, can increase local engagement and the realization and sustainability of project results (Ravina, Ray, Shih, & Medvegy, 2018).

Overall, we believe that the diagnostic approach can support the analysis of which project actors, flows, and institutional mechanisms contribute to explaining the current challenges of ICDPs (and development projects in general) in meeting their participatory aspirations and implementation goals. It can also serve as a monitoring instrument throughout a project cycle to avoid design and implementation becoming separate sending and receiving systems. Future operationalization of the diagnostic approach could benefit from including a temporal dimension to, for example, visualize if and to what extent project management draws on information flows from past project experience. Strengthening such flows could transform management practices in ways that result in more implementable and relevant procedures and outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This research has presented a novel diagnostic approach developed through the lens of institutional telecoupling and to be employed in the study of ICDPs. By looking at the World Bank-funded F&C project in Argentina as a case of 'decoupled management', we have uncovered the persistence of a blueprint development approach where project objectives are designed in negotiations between national and international project actors before any interaction with local project actors and beneficiaries.

We have only illuminated some aspects but not all, of why large-scale ICDPs like the F&C project tend to frequently face challenges with participation and implementation. In contrast to better-than-nothing rationales, our case study suggests that decoupled management and project presence without timely and satisfactory results can end up worsening local realities and opportunities for improvement because they create systematic disappointment and mistrust. More drivers and explanations could be identified from a more in-depth investigation of flows and the role that broader land governance processes play in the prioritization and implementation of project activities on the ground.

The decoupled management situation we identify is not a new phenomenon as it mirrors very symptomatic challenges already described and analyzed in the existing literature. However, the diagnostic approach we have developed to shed light on such challenges in a structured way allows for comparison across projects and project phases. The approach makes it simple and clear where crucial flows are broken or vague. Thus, the motivation for developing this diagnostic approach was the lack of surprise regarding the gap between theory and practice we encountered in the field, and our argument that there is a need to make such shortcomings more transparent and traceable. Not by burying urgent local needs in complex theoretical frameworks but by implementing diagnostic approaches that can be applied across sectors by the multitude of actors typically supposed to work together on so-called participatory ICDPs.

Overall, we believe this work informs project practitioners about the benefits of creating more direct connectivity between project actors in the sending and receiving systems and of conceptually merging the two systems in both project design and implementation phases. The ability of ICDPs and other conservation and development projects to improve the well-being of rural communities and the state of their environments is what is at stake, and the challenge of enabling such connectivity is one that we must urgently overcome.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

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Research approvals

This research got approval from the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation (CEEAH) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). All interviewees have been presented with the research agenda and signed consent letters for interview participation and recording.

Data statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the case studied and questions asked in the qualitative data collection, interviewees were assured to be kept anonymous and that raw data would remain confidential.

Competing interest statement

There are no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence this work.

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