

Research priorities on forest governance

Steven Lawry, Research Director, Forests & Governance Portfolio, spoke at Wageningen UR in the beginning of 2015 about current and emerging research priorities on forest governance at CIFOR.

Central to CIFOR's perspective on governance is using a [rights based approach](#) (RBA). RBAs raise a myriad of challenges and questions, including what such approaches are, when and how they can be put into practice, and what their implications are for forest conservation. Whilst there is no one blueprint for RBA, common themes include the need to support both procedural and substantive rights for forest adjacent and forest user communities, linking rights and responsibilities, equalising power relations, providing capacity building for rights holders and duty bearers, and recognising and engaging with local leaders and local people. RBAs can support improved governance. They are shaped by the governance systems in which they operate, as well as by history, politics, socio-economics and culture. CIFOR's approach is exemplified in recent work on tenure, including a new [comparative study of tenure security in Indonesia, Uganda and Peru](#).

During the last CIFOR seminar, participants questioned what is and should be the role of researchers. Should they be independent observers or participating in governance processes and learning, alongside those affected or interested in investigating the impacts of changing tenure arrangements, such as governments, NGOs and researchers. Lawry indicated both approaches are valid, the latter being particularly useful when researchers seek to determine what is exactly the research agenda together with stakeholders. Such an approach was used in the [Collaborative Governance of Tropical Landscapes project](#). This approach may also be appropriate in circumstances where theory of change based research practices are used to further the uptake of research findings. In other words, research for impact.

The implications of using different research models were also discussed. Whilst action and [practice based research models](#) are often used, the merits of [evidence based forestry](#) approach are becoming clearer. Systematic reviews of published outcomes of interventions on forests and people are increasingly highlighting the need for robust, rigorous approaches to conduct and publish on the impacts of governance arrangements. This is an area where academic institutions, such as Wageningen UR, can play an important role in setting out quality standards for research.

Civil society organisations present at the seminar indicated that research is needed to help them focus attention on the increasing number of corporate initiatives, such as zero deforestation commitments, or on the performance of legally binding regulations. Do corporate initiatives lead to regulations, and does this lead to better implemented and enforced laws? Recent work by [Wageningen UR](#) indicates that voluntary corporate initiatives in tropical timber value chains do not yet lead to regulation or to substantially improved performance. Examples from two decades of reforms to devolve [forest rights and enhance sustainable forest management](#) in fourteen countries and the lack of success of some conventions, such as CITES in regulating [wildlife-based trade](#), were given. This topic however requires more research to clearly establish the links.

Another topic raised was in relation to work on REDD by [CIFOR](#) and [Wageningen UR](#). It was questioned if REDD, in contrast to its aims and a general tendency towards devolution of forest governance, is instead creating more centralised governance regimes. Steven responded that indeed it could be argued that the rewards from REDD promote centralisation, but that the protocols seek to balance this by assuring benefits at local level. For example, a study of REDD+ [benefit sharing](#) in 13 countries highlights the diversity of mechanisms used, and? also that challenges include conflicting legal provisions, overlapping mandates and inconsistent implementation among government agencies, weak law enforcement, limited funding and staffing, lack of transparency, corruption and elite capture. Lawry was sceptical of REDD (and other) schemes that are not rights based, referring to the evidence presented in CIFOR's [studies on rights and governance](#), built upon the premise that the transfer of tenure to forestland and connected resources is the key strategy to overcome people's exclusion from forest management.

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