



Catalyzing Innovation

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 25-29, 2019



Governance structures of native forests' management policy in North Argentina: the role of policy forum in mediating between conservation and production

Carla Inguaggiato¹, Maurice Tschopp¹, Dimitris Christopoulos^{2,3}, Graziano Michele Ceddia¹

¹University of Bern, Switzerland; ²MODUL University Vienna; ³Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

Presenting Author: carla.inguaggiato@cde.unibe.ch

**Paper prepared for presentation at the
“2019 WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY”
The World Bank - Washington DC, March 25-29, 2019**

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Abstract

Native forests are complex systems and the institutions governing them affect their ecosystem.

The forest policy in Argentina aims to achieve a compromise between production and conservation objectives. Furthermore, there are efforts promoting mediation between forests' conservation and cattle production, aboriginal peoples' rights, family farming survival and large estate land titles. It is therefore at the crossroad between different visions of sustainable development and of land tenure systems.

There is gap in the understanding of social mechanisms that drive collaboration among forest governance stakeholders. This paper aims to develop the understanding of the role of policy forums in connecting stakeholders with different core beliefs on forest management.

We study this complex policy arena via a mixed methods research design, which integrates social network analysis with stakeholder analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative analytic techniques. We combine the study of the policy networks topology, with the analysis of stakeholders' core beliefs systems.

Key Words: environmental governance, policy networks, sustainable forest management, core beliefs advocacy coalitions

In the development agenda of Argentina, like many other developing countries, there are tensions between an agenda favouring food production and conservation of native forests (Lambin & Meyfroidt, 2011; Tanentzap 2015; Grau et al, 2008). Native forests act as a carbon pool, have high-biodiversity and they are the home of several aboriginal people and small cattle ranchers, many of whom live in chronic poverty conditions and often use the land without formal land titles (Aguiar et al, 2018). As such, these areas are often areas of contestation for development and poverty eradication discourses. The forest policy in Argentina aims to achieve a compromise between production and conservation objectives. It is therefore under pressure from contrasting visions of sustainable development and land tenure systems.

There are many factors that can explain the high level of contestation observed in the forest policy arena. While some laws aim to protect the forest, aboriginal rights over land, territory, and support family farming, the main national political economy goal remains the expansion of agro-business and export of agricultural commodities (Piquer-Rodríguez, 2018). Some provincial and national government agencies often find themselves in a difficult mediating position between environmental protection, small farmers, aboriginal people's rights, aboriginal people's interests and national agricultural economic policy.

The forest law 26133 (hereafter "forest law") is the main policy instrument to govern native forest management. The forest law has been a response to very high deforestation rates, especially in the Northwest of the country (Patrouilleau et al., 2018). A large coalition between NGOs and federal deputies for forest conservation have been instrumental to the adoption of the law (Langabehn, 2016). The peak of deforestation registered in the Argentinean Chaco around 2005 and 2006 as a result of agri-business soy expansion (Boletta 2006, Gasparri & Grau, 2009, De Ecónomo & Leake, 2008), contributed to public opinion awareness, thus increasing support for the emergence of this new law (Hufty et al, 2008).

The first instrument of the forest law is a participatory planning process, which defines forest conservation values and use planning through participatory forums that include the four main stakeholder groups: civil society organizations, agribusiness organizations, research sector and governmental agencies including environmental, indigenous affairs and agro-industry. The second instrument is the compensation fund (*fundo de la ley de bosques*) which is calculated based on the proportion of national sold commodities. The main condition for having access to this fund is having land titles (Aguiar et al, 2018). Forest governance stakeholders have unequal economic and political power, and contrasting visions of native forests management and institutions to govern them (Schmidt, M. 2014).

Salta province political economy has a strong dependency on the forest, having forest coverage and high deforestation rate and it is one of the most unequal provinces in income distribution (INDEC, EAHU 2014) in Argentina. It has one of the highest native forest coverage in the country and has experienced very high deforestation rates in the period 2006 to 2017 (Garros et al. 2018). Salta is part of the Gran Chaco ecosystem, the second largest dry forest in Latin America.

This paper aims to analyse the governance structures behind the implementation of sustainable forest management policies using a mixed methods approach combining the study of policy network topology, with the analysis of stakeholders' discourse. Social network analysis, based on extensive fieldwork, allow us to characterize the governance structures in terms of relationships between the different sets of actors that are active forest policy arena in Salta province. Our scope thus encompasses the local, national and international level.

We understand governance as a system in which stakeholders try to influence policy design and implementation through the system of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organizations (Brockhaus, 2014). We adopt a multi-level governance framework as we analyse the connections between stakeholders that are part of different key forest forums present at local, provincial and national level. Policy events are the programs and laws, which are currently being implemented and discussed in the province, and which affect forest management. These include forest use planning boards, international projects implementing actors, regional governance board and climate change and native forests action plan.

The objective is to provide an analysis of the institutional meso-level, through an evaluation of the network topology of key policy networks, which affect land use change and sustainable forest management. We focus on the role of policy forums in supporting the creation of long-term support ties among forest governance stakeholders with contrasting visions of the forest. We have selected key policy forums for sustainable forest management in the province of Salta. We approached all stakeholders that participate in these policy forums. We use social network analysis to investigate if (1) the actors create ties with others that have the same core belief system, and if (2) co-participation in policy forums facilitates the connections across actors holding different beliefs. The discourse analysis of stakeholders' responses to the survey both in the closed and open-ended sections, describing the stakeholders' perception of the problem, the proposed solution and their visions of forest use, allows us to categorize each stakeholder in a different core belief group (Sabieter, Weible, 2007). We hypothesize the presence of three relatively homogeneous groups based on the extensive literature on contrasting visions of native forests (Seghezzo, 2011, Seghezzo, 2017, Lagabehn 2016, Naharro, 2010). The first group is forest policy stakeholders focusing on the role of private enterprise. The second group is stakeholders focusing on the importance of forest natural resources. The third group is

stakeholders focusing on peasants' rights to produce and preserve their culture. We include under the category of peasants local communities living in the forest: small-scale “*criollos*” cattle rangers and aboriginal peoples. Criollos make a living through subsistence cattle-ranching and the aboriginal people depend culturally, economically and socially on the remaining native forests. The majority of peasants living in the forest have no official land property title.

In the network topology are clearly visible three groups of stakeholders corresponding to the three beliefs systems on the role of native forests. Our results indicate the presence of connections among the three belief groups and suggest that policy forums contributed to enhance cooperation among stakeholders belonging to different groups. In the three beliefs groups the government agencies play the role of bridging different beliefs groups. Furthermore, there is a relation between bridging role across beliefs groups and co-participation into policy forums.

The survey results suggest that the three beliefs groups do not have same level of reputational influence. Among the most influential stakeholders, there is only one supporting forest peasants' rights. The weaker influence of the stakeholder group focusing on forest peasants rights' seems to be confirmed by the interruption of the activities for some years of two governmental agencies that are active in this sector.

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