**The Future of Global Forest Governance – a transdisciplinary Delphi assessment
(EXTENDED ABSTRACT)**

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Abstract

Deforestation remains one of the biggest global environmental challenges. Over the past 25 years a large variety of forest governance initiatives and institutions have evolved at global level, stemming from fields such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, forest management, as well as human rights and trade. Taking stock of lessons learned on these initiatives in a systematic way, and drawing on the insights of both, policy practitioners and academia in a transdisciplinary way, is a step yet to be undertaken. Against this background, and building on a qualitative, transdisciplinary Delphi methodology, this article aims at (i) drawing lessons from past initiatives, and at (ii) identifying promising forest governance approaches. The findings include rankings of most important challenges and drivers of global forest governance, promising initiatives, influential actors, main effects thus far, ideal and most likely developments until 2030, underexplored research topics as well as key aspects for successful future initiatives on global forest governance.

Key Words: Global forest policy, Delphi assessment, high-level expert panel, deforestation, forest degradation

Background, objectives & method

Today a large variety of global forest governance initiatives exists, dealing with forests and wider forest related issues and including state and non-state actors alike. Each initiative follows distinct rationales of how forest governance ideally operates. These global efforts, however, have not been able to reverse trends of deforestation and forest degradation in the tropics, despite this being the main objective for many of them.

Against this background, the European Forest Institute's Bonn Office has carried out a Delphi assessment involving 38 carefully selected experts from intergovernmental as well as international non-governmental organizations, public administrations and academia, to assess:

1)   major challenges and lessons learnt in global forest governance and related initiatives
2)   possible future options for global forest governance and related initiatives

The assessment employed a Delphi method, which is an established foresight technique based on experts' individual and group deliberations. Generally, it consists of several rounds, including feedback loops based on a panel of experts. It was applied in three consecutive stages, including structured expert interviews (1st round), an online survey (2nd round), and a workshop (3rd round) in which the expert panel participated.

Selected key findings

a) *Current* **challenges and lessons in global forest governance**

As most important global forest governance challenges the expert panel assessed that direct drivers of deforestation that mainly lie outside the forest sector, like agriculture, mining and bio-energy demand as well as indirect drivers of deforestation e.g. corruption and insufficient law enforcement are critical for global forest governance. Socio-economic challenges and drivers such as population growth and the demand for food were perceived to be highly important and

closely interlinked to deforestation and forest degradation, which were reported to remain key environmental challenges for global forest governance today and in the future.

Perceived key lessons were clustered by the research team into i) the most promising global governance initiatives, ii) the most influential actor types and actors, and iii) the main effects of global governance initiatives thus far:

Among the **most promising initiatives**, experts rated Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT), forest big data/transparency initiatives and zero deforestation/commodity initiatives to be the most promising initiatives for the future of global forest governance. In contrast, the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030 were found being less promising, despite being actually at the core of the traditional global forest governance regime complex.

On the most **influential actor types** the assessment finds the governments of sovereign states, followed by private sector entities such as multinational companies to be most decisive for the future of global forest governance. In particular, China, followed by Brazil, the EU, and the USA were mentioned as the most influential states. Within states' governments, agricultural administrations were reported as being most influential, followed by forest(ry) and development cooperation bureaucracies. With regards to influential specific international organizations, the UNFCCC Secretariat, the World Bank, and FAO were ranked highest.

The **main effects of global forest governance thus far** were found lying in awareness raising about the different values of forests. According to the expert panel, forests are increasingly regarded not only for their multiple economic, but also for their environmental and social values. Also, global forest governance has increased the awareness for smallholders and local communities' (forest) land tenure rights and their role as managers and custodians of forests. Additionally, global forest governance was perceived as having mainstreamed the core idea that managing forests in sustainable ways is key in creating an incentive for the protection of forests.

Lastly, (forest) landscape restoration was reported creating opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration as well as a new understanding of how forests intersect with other land-uses. On the contrary, the expert panel neglected that global forest governance has had no effects on the ground level and no positive effect on deforestation.

b) Key conclusions for successful *future* initiatives on global forest governance up to 2030

The **most desirable future** of global forest governance, according to the panel, includes more coordination and cooperation between different initiatives instead of still increasing their number. Likewise, the experts saw more cooperation with new powerful states (esp. China and India) as critical. Also desirable for a majority of experts would be to more actively raise awareness for forest issues beyond the forest sector as well as more information disclosure of companies and governments to enable independent monitoring of global forest trends. The development of new governance institutions and positions as well as legally binding forest conventions, however, were less favored.

The **most likely future** in comparison holds that other global topics such as migration will be more important, especially if states are facing economic crises. An increase in big data and transparency initiatives on forest resources and uses was also found being likely, as was that more legality and deforestation free commodity initiatives will exist. On the contrary, the experts assessed as unlikely that the global and national/local level will be further disconnected and that there will be a global legally binding agreement on forests.

Most important future research topics were found to include inquiry done in a transdisciplinary, collaborative manner, involving scientists, practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders. Likewise, more scrutiny on the impact of other sectors and actors on global forest governance and forest management systems was called for. Furthermore, research needs on the impact and effectiveness of different global forest governance initiatives, instruments and implementation were found to be important.

Key aspects to consider for successful future initiatives on global forest governance

Based on the abovementioned findings, the expert deliberations resulted in the following broad aspects, which were deemed crucial if ongoing or future global forest governance initiatives ought to be successful and effective also on the ground:

- **States matter: a supportive global sustainability enhancing regulatory framework is imperative**

  Despite an overall "fatigue" with the multilateral forest governance processes and institutions, the experts assessed that explicit international frameworks and structures provided for by states are key in enabling action of other actors, especially by providing mandates and framework conditions to act.

- **New coalitions for old problems: issue-specific regional and inter-regional "coalitions of the willing" as key in advancing global forest governance**

  In the context of a multipolar world order, new coalitions with emerging economies like China and Brazil as well as countries from different regions that are willing to move forward on issue-specific global forest governance aspects hold the biggest promise.

- **Hinge on "high politics": biggest promise hold forest governance initiatives using powerful issues as a lever**

  Initiatives such as FLEGT, which are linking forests as an often issue of so-called "low politics" with trade as an issue of "high politics" were perceived as most promising due to the associated political visibility, key power resources, and additional allies from those sectors.

- **Dare sustainability leadership: Self-confident rule-setting in support of the public good can be decisive**

  In opposition to unconditioned free markets, sustainability leadership of states through the application of strong sustainability standards can help to secure sustainable management and conservation of the world's forests and to eliminate incentives e.g. in agribusiness, which trigger deforestation and forest degradation.

- **"Pecunia olet": Responsible (business) investments needed as mainstream approach**
  In contrast to multinational industries, the financial sector has not been strategically targeted enough to support good forest governance and decrease deforestation and forest degradation. This continues, even though there is a large potential and an increasing demand from consumers and institutional investors for green investments.

- **Make wise use of hypes: dynamically emerging new forest governance initiatives provide leverage points to ensure sustainability effects on the ground**
  New initiatives and topics in global forest governance, like zero deforestation and forest landscape restoration, hold potential if they are used to create windows of opportunities that lead to measurable effects on the ground. At the same time, thorough technical knowledge and established networks are needed to ensure that they do not remain of symbolic nature only.

- **Grey is crucial: informal markets need to be acknowledged and targeted**
  Due to the high amount of informal economic activity, employment and related livelihoods, informal markets need to be more actively considered in global forest governance initiatives, which have so far mainly focused on formalizing domestic economic activities.

- **Clarifying tenure: sovereignty-sensitive devolution towards more inclusive tenure rights**
  Although there is an increased awareness for the clarification of (forest) land tenure rights their devolution is still a contested matter between different tiers of government in many countries. Further support from the international donor community will have to find ways accommodating existing concerns, including state sovereignty.

- **Towards legitimate participation: Inclusive "glocal" decision-making needs to be formalized**
  So far global forest governance decision making is largely exercised by governments without meaningful participation of local communities, civil society and the private business sector. More "glocal" modes of decision making, away from expensive metropolitan cities, and towards targeted and meaningful participation of key

stakeholders has the potential to substantially increase the legitimacy of global governance efforts.

- **Harnessing "big brother": Transparency opportunities through big data**
  New technological developments such as remote sensing, big data and the application of new information technologies also by large numbers of citizens, can increase the transparency of global forest governance initiatives. While holding a lot of promise, these developments also entail risks, such as the possibility of manipulating data, the possession of data and technologies mainly by private companies of the global North, as well as the possibility to increase inequity and surveillance.

Reflection

The results are the condensed expression of 38 qualitative expert assessments over 3 interactive rounds of deliberations. The results may lean towards a strictly global conception as well as towards Western views of global forest governance. Hence, replication in regional contexts, and enhanced by other methods, could be useful for gaining additional detailed insights into their specific interpretations and ambitions towards future initiatives in global forest governance.

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→ the full paper is available on request and contains references as well as full rankings per category, further details and description of the methodology and findings.