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Can Decentralization Help Both the Forest and its Users? Sorting out the Institutional Conditions for Social-Environmental Synergy

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Most recent empirical studies have found that decentralization has had an overwhelmingly positive effect on forest conditions, Decentralization seems to support more stable and healthier forests. Recent studies that focus on non-biological outcomes—such as rural livelihoods, elite capture, and forest user-participation in local governance decisions—on the other hand, have found more mixed results. These contrasting results suggest that it is possible that decentralization may simultaneously produce improved forests but worsened social outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to develop and test a theory about the institutional conditions under which decentralization will support both forests and equitable livelihoods. We argue that in order to gain a deeper understanding of how decentralization may produce multiple outcomes—which may sometimes represent trade-offs and sometimes synergies—one needs to recognize the influence of local institutional arrangements. More specifically, we propose that decentralization will lead to improved local outcomes when a combination of the following three institutional conditions exist: (1) The user group has an active forest governance decision process in place; (2) The user group has substantive decision-making rights around forest use & management, and (3) The user group's self-governance efforts are embedded within a broader hierarchy for common-pool resource management. We use a quasi-experimental research design, which allows us to contrast forests that have been subject to decentralization with similar forest sites that have not been subject to such reforms. Using longitudinal field data from the International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) research network, we test these ideas with regression techniques.