

*Community Forest Management in the Tropics: A QCA of its Performance*

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Community Forest Management (CFM) – ranging from community-based regimes to various forms of co-management – has become an influential approach around the world the last couple of decades. Responding to some of the adverse effects of state forestry and commercial timber production, CFM claims to improve local livelihoods and conserve forests. Many international organizations, donors, NGOs and governments therefore advocate CFM. However, a vast body of literature reveals that the overall results are mixed. Forests generally benefit more than people, and within the latter group the poor and marginalized benefit the least. Lack of results is mainly due to ambiguous land and forest rights, weak village organizations, and unfair benefit sharing arrangements, amongst others.

This paper adds to this literature in two ways. Instead of the neo-institutional approach, so dominant in the CFM literature, it takes a practice based approach as theoretical lens. This approach prioritizes ‘social practices’ over ‘robust institutions’ as the key units of analysis for understanding outcomes. At the same time, it applies a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) methodology to allow for a systematic cross-case comparison and modest generalization, without neglecting case complexity. In so doing, the approach integrates both the case study approach and the quantitative data analysis approach that currently dominate the CFM literature.

By analysing a decade of CFM research at the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy (FNP) group of Wageningen University in the Netherlands, this paper compares and synthesizes CFM cases in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It posits that three practice-based factors are potentially crucial for CFM performance: (1) Active engagement of community-based organizations (CBOs); (2) Practicability of rules and regulations for forest users; and (3) emergence of a Community of Practice through which information is shared, trust built and practices learnt. The conclusion is that none of these factors are necessary preconditions for CFM to perform well, but that particularly ‘the practicability of CFM rules and regulations’ is always part of a broader set of conditions that is jointly sufficient to explain (partial) success. Hence, CFM institutions can only become effective once they are workable for local people and easily align with daily logics of practice. Thus, practicability of institutions is much more important for understanding CFM performance than their robustness, as is generally claimed in the literature. Such implies specific lessons for policy making, program design and project implementation, which the paper will draw.