

FLEISCHMAN, FORREST [S3-P9]

The Three-legged stool of participatory stability: Institutional Supply, public demand, and citizen capabilities in tropical forest governance

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Participation has become a key element of forest conservation development programs across the globe, yet the results are often disappointing. In this paper we suggest a new conceptual framework for understanding what makes participation effective at fostering citizen engagement, drawing on past research on development policy and citizen engagement. We suggest that participation is like a three-legged stool, which requires for its stability a supply of participatory institutions, a demand from citizens to participate, and citizens with capabilities for participation. We illustrate the importance of these three elements using case studies from forest management in central India and southern Mexico. We show that when participatory programs are implemented in places where demand for participation is weak and citizens lack the capability to participate, participation is unsuccessful. On the other hand, where people demand to participate and have the capability to do so, they are able to overcome obstacles to utilizing participatory institutions. Furthermore, we show that individuals' agency for participation is developed in interaction with the structures of participation; this means that there is a long-term synergy between the supply of participatory institutions and the development of skills and demand for participation. These findings imply that designers of participatory forestry programs should pay equal attention to cultivating participatory capabilities, providing incentives that enhance demand for participation, and building institutions to open spaces for participation in governance.