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Multilevel governance challenges of altering development trajectories: technical solutions to political problems?

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Who holds power over land use decisions? Why are efforts to keep forests standing, such as REDD+ and other initiatives, still so far from altering development trajectories? Understanding the politics of land use change is challenging in part because there are so many different actors and interests involved: national and sub-national government sectors including environment, forestry, mining, and agriculture, as well as private companies, NGOs, and indigenous people and local communities. At the same time, with the increasing importance of finding new development pathways, it is ever more important to understand how these different actors work together – or in opposition – to produce land use changes on the ground. In this context, the research focused on three interrelated questions: 1) Across levels and sectors, how and why are land use decisions made? 2) Are investments and interventions in reducing carbon emissions leading to changes in land use decisions, and if not, why? and 3) What are the challenges to and opportunities for bringing about transformational change?

The research team conducted over 700 semi-structured interviews with actors involved in or knowledgeable about 54 sites of land use change in 11 regions in 5 countries – Peru, Indonesia, Vietnam, Tanzania and Mexico. We examined sites with initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, including but not limited to REDD+, and also places where forests are being converted for agriculture, oil palm, mining, and other uses. Our study finds that despite diverse legal systems and varying levels of decentralization, powerful actors with a stake in deforestation often figure out how to get their way – whether using the rules, at any relevant government level, to their advantage, or going around them. Technical approaches failed to solve what were fundamentally political problems. The results suggest that well designed governance structures will not be sufficient for achieving good governance outcomes, and that the process and practice of governance is key.

We know of no studies that have collected data on this topic at this scale, to be able to analyze such a diversity of perspectives on land use politics and governance at so many sites of land use change around the world. The research helps address a knowledge gap by examining the on-the-ground dynamics that drive land use change through a multi-level governance lens. Understanding the practice of land use decision-making in diverse contexts is critical in the emerging context of “new” approaches such as REDD+, green economy or low-emissions development. This research produces key insights that can inform policy makers, NGOs and grassroots movements.