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## Forestland policies and politics in Africa: Recent evidence and new challenges

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Forestland related policies and politics in Africa: recent evidence and new challenges.

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## Forestland policies and politics in Africa: recent evidence and new challenges

### 1. Beyond forests: thoughts on the complexity of forestland governance

Forest governance, land use and sustainability issues in forest-rich countries like those in Africa, require attention to a set of explicit and/or implicit power relations between various actor groups pursuing convergent or conflicting interests (Ribot 2003; Krott 2005; Brockhaus and Angelsen 2012; Krott et al. 2014; Walters et al. 2019). Those interests are often associated with access to and use and/or conservation of forest-related resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003; Peluso and Vandergeest 2020). Hence, an in-depth understanding of forestland governance has two fundamental dimensions: the role of formal and informal strategies employed by some actors to force or resist domination (politics) on the one hand, and the strengths and weaknesses of various arrangements between government entities, business groups and other actors including civil society organisations (policies) concerning the governance of forest-related resources, on the other. A thorough investigation of these fundamental dimensions is particularly relevant in postcolonial and neo-colonial societies like those in Africa which have experienced strong social oppression (Mbembe 2001), manipulation of political (dis)order (Chabal and Daloz 1999) and contestation over the legitimacy of statehood (Hagman and Péclard 2010).

Tropical forests provide habitats and various ecosystem resources including goods and environmental services for millions of people (Newton et al. 2016; Lambin et al. 2001; FAO 2015). Forest goods refers to a variety of above- and underground forestland resources such as forest products (wood and non-wood), wildlife, arable lands for agriculture, oil and mining (Deal and LaRocco 2012; Anseeuw et al. 2012; Hosonuma et al. 2012; Rudel 2013), while environmental services refers to climate change mitigation and biodiversity preservation, etc. (Jackson et al. 2008; Putz et al. 2001).

The notion of ‘forestland’ was first recorded in the beginning of the 17th century<sup>1</sup> and referred to ‘wooded land’ or a ‘land containing or covered with forests’<sup>2</sup>. This historical definition of forestland and the various legal definitions among and within countries give an interesting indication of the close ties between forests, land, and political issues that have various territorial and social implications. This is particularly the case in post-colonial societies in the global south (Maryudi et al. 2016; Islam and Hyakumura 2019; Dominguez and Luoma 2020).

In the case of Latin America, forestland issues have often been governed from the bottom up by social movements (the main concern being tenure rights), and from the top down by a set of market-oriented policies that promote access to large forestlands for conversion to agriculture (Hyde et al. 1996; Kerr 2003). Pacheco et al. (2012) pointed out that from a bottom-up perspective, forest-dependent people, including indigenous groups and migrants, have increasingly gained unprecedented formal rights to forestlands since the mid-1980s. These experiences contrast with the African experience where forestland governance is still dominated oppressively by states and extractive or agri-business sectors (Oyono 2004; Boone 2012; RRI 2015; Assembe-Mvondo 2013). From a top-down perspective, the politics of massive forestland conversion, which greatly increased access to the Amazon rainforest

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[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=forestland&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=29&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=forestland&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=29&smoothing=3)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/forestland>

frontiers, represents a permanent challenge (and threat to) for the rights of indigenous and other forest-dependent people. This is particularly true for tenure arrangements negotiated between states and local actors (Pacheco et al. 2012) since such arrangements are threatened by market-oriented policies that promote hegemonic states' rights to allocate larger forestland areas for conversion to agri-business and to the biggest infrastructure projects (Barbier 2004; Carrero and Fearnside 2011; Laurance et al. 2015).

Because of the growing global sustainability concerns and the socio-environmental damage induced by massive deforestation in the tropics, the meaning of forestland has gradually changed. Castella et al. (2006), for instance, pointed out that in land use policy in Vietnam 'forestland' refers to "all land that was or should be covered in forest". In the same vein, Nguyen and Tran (2018) highlight the distinction made in the 2004 Vietnamese law on 'Protection and Development of the Forest' between two major categories: 'forestland production' (timber, non-timber forest products, forest plantation, etc.) and 'forestland protection' (water and soil protection, biodiversity conservation, eco-tourism, etc.). Concerning forestland production, recent works have shown that about 80% of new agricultural lands are (re)allocated forestlands (Foley et al. 2011).

Despite the changes mentioned above and institutional changes in perceptions and management of 'forestland' developed especially in the context of South-East Asia (Hirsch 1990; Castella et al. 2006; Maryudi et al. 2016; Nguyen and Tran 2018; Islam and Hykumura 2019) there is still no comprehensive definition which includes both historical and recent challenges to forestland sustainability. This is particularly true for large-scale transformations in the global south underpinned by rapid economic prosperity models. With this in mind, forestland can be defined as a continuum from land sparsely covered by trees to a dense forest ecosystem with anthropogenic pressure aimed at converting or using the land for agriculture, hunting, infrastructure, ecotourism, natural resource extraction, carbon storage, biodiversity conservation, and forest restoration.

## **2. Contributions to this special issue**

This selective collection of papers is a major scientific outcome of the first AFORPOLIS (African forest policies and politics) conference organised in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in September 2018<sup>3</sup>. This special issue is composed of seven original papers.

(i) Karsenty (2021) queries whether certification of tropical forests has become a private instrument of public interest. He opines that the certification or the social and environmental private labelling of logging activities (such as the Forest Stewardship Council, FSC) seems to be stagnating or even receding in the Congo Basin region. This situation may be due to the economic difficulties of European logging companies which owns most of forestland concessions in the region. It could also be due to unexpected interactions with a parallel public labelling process for timber legality (EU-FLEGT), which is also strongly promoted in the Congo Basin. Although private certification standards and the EU-FLEGT are expected to be complementary, the reluctance of EU authorities to deliver "green lane" timber certification for entering the European wood market seems to discourage forest concessionaires from committing themselves to the EU-FLEGT policy instrument. At the same time, the demand for and export of African timber is increasingly shifting from the European to the Chinese and Vietnamese markets. With this in mind, the author points out that, on the one hand, the use of public financial incentives (such as differentiated forest taxes) to support and preserve the credibility of forest certification standards would be a

recognition of the ‘public interest’ of those certification instruments and, on the other, recognition that increased independence of private certification auditors is also a key factor.

(ii) Using the case study of the European Voluntary Partnership Agreement on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (VPA-FLEGT), Andong and Ongolo (2021) question what happens when an African forest-rich country like Cameroon is pushed to incorporate such a global forest governance reform instrument in its domestic politics. VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon was seen as a legal policy instrument added to an old and prolific (poorly or not enforced) set of forest regulations. The paper looks analytically at the key actors involved in the VPA-FLEGT politics in Cameroon as well as the role, motivations, and interests of those actors in promoting or resisting the implementation of this EU forest governance reform instrument. The paper also investigates the effects of the governance process on the dynamics of domestic policy change and policy inertia in Cameroon. Considering the sociology of the state-based approach, Andong and Ongolo (2021) show that the VPA-FLEGT policy instrument in Cameroon is a recycled version of existing forest policies; its implementation was embedded in several technical and political roadblocks which have been largely underestimated or even ignored by the European promoters of this instrument. The authors also point out that the legitimacy and relevance of VPA-FLEGT in the dynamic of policy change was subject to controversy and dispute among the key actors. To resist the domination of European actors, the Cameroonian official commitment to the VPA-FLEGT process was mainly motivated by a ‘cunning government’ strategy including various extraventions, blame avoidance behaviours and rent creation or capture.

(iii) The article by Mbzibain and Ongolo (2021) focuses on the role of independent forest monitoring (IFM) in changing forestland governance in Cameroon. IFM emerged as an initiative of the global civil society organisations and was designed to further forest law enforcement and promote transparency in the tropical forest sector through the objectivity and credibility of an independent third party. More specifically, the authors examine how IFM strategies (including complementarity, rivalry and substitution) support sustainable forest management while contributing to the fight against massive forestland conversion and illegal logging. One of the major findings of this research is that IFM facilitates the establishment of a strong pro-transparency network of national NGOs with substantial skills and self-defined strategies in combatting illegal logging in Cameroon. As such, they represent a growing reliable counter-power to the existing dominant actor groups of the Cameroonian forest sector viz. state bureaucracies, international development agencies and logging companies, while supporting the marginalised group of local and forest-dependent communities.

(iv) Magessa et al. (2021) question whether participatory forest management (PFM) is achieving its governance objectives in Tanzania. In this case study, the villages analysed, the residents and the Village Environmental Committee (VEC) members were little involved in committee elections, formal village assemblies, PFM training, or the formulation and first-approval of the by-laws. The majority of the local population felt that benefit-sharing mechanisms and the level of accountability of management institutions were not very satisfactory. Magassa et al. (2021) pointed out that Suledo village was particularly dominated by a very restricted “elite within an elite”, comprising only zonal leaders and their close associates. Overall, they found a significant gap between observed outcomes and PFM policy objectives, and therefore a failure to fulfil some meaningful objectives. In rural Tanzania, some of the major reasons for this failure were: insufficient engagement of residents and VEC members in PFM activities; the dominant role of local elites in PFM implementation, and insufficient accountability by committee leaders to the authorities and residents. Without advocating a step backwards from decentralisation to recentralisation of forest management, Magessa et al. (2021) highlight the need for state bureaucracies to develop more support for communities which are strongly engaged in PFM.

(v) Mudombi-Rusinamhodzi and Thiel (2021) examined the main principles governing access to and use of property rights in communal forestlands (“wooded lands in communal lands”) in Zimbabwe based on an in-depth review of historical and contemporary institutional documents including Acts of Parliament. In the Zimbabwe case study, the authors analysed a category of communal lands that clearly meets the abovementioned definition of forestland. These lands are subject to implicit or explicit anthropic pressure for conversion to other purposes, since “a person may occupy and use communal land for agricultural or residential purposes with the consent of the rural district council established for the area concerned” (Mudombi-Rusinamhodzi and Thiel 2021). This research shows that the government is still the major owner and controls access and user rights to communal forestlands (including potential exclusion and alienation). Its domination over the administration of forestland resources has been perpetrated through a coercive command and control system, which led the authors to emphasizing the need for policy reforms to strengthen and improve local governance of forestland use through a revision of property rights that would, by the same token, increase the livelihoods at the community level.

(vi) Friman (2021) presented an original contribution aimed at understanding how rural women in Burkina Faso struggle and interact with formal institutions to take advantage of forestland conversions such as the production of woodfuel extraction for cooking. The author scrutinises the governance practices which frame the domestic policy and the regulations on woodcutting permits in rural Burkina Faso. The paper points out the importance of social interactions in the formation of ‘institutional bricolage’ processes based on how woodcutting women develop implicit or informal coalitions and arrangements with forest guards to circumvent institutional constraints. The author uses ‘institutional bricolage’ as a contextualised, gendered and complex process in which a weak or marginalised actor group can build informal and non-official institutional arrangements with dominant actor groups to foster or secure their interests.

(vii) As forestland conversion in Africa gains momentum, a variety of afforestation and reforestation initiatives are being developed to restore degraded forestlands and address related sustainability issues particularly for forest plantations. Kimambo et al. (2021) analyse this trend through a case study devoted to the role of smallholder woodlots in restoration initiatives in Tanzania. The adoption of a large top-down forest plantation approach is contributing to the recentralisation of forest restoration processes, despite the development of smallholder tree planting activities whose expansion in Tanzania is curtailed by inappropriate locations, poor woodlot management, and competition from large forest plantation projects, etc. The authors purport that woodlots do not only serve environmental restoration purposes, but are also planted as a source of substantial income for the many Tanzanian smallholders who plant trees to meet the growing regional demand for timber. The authors encourage the allocation of subsidies and incentives to smallholders involved in reforestation campaigns as a way to promote more diverse planting activities.

### **3. New avenues of research and future challenges**

Besides the selection of papers presented in this collection, the first AFORPOLIS<sup>4</sup> (African forest policies and politics) conference led to the identification of new avenues of research in policies and politics related to forestlands. Here are two examples.

- Connecting domestic development, governance and practices in forestland use with global politics. In this regard, more thought should be given to the related issues which have been little or not rigorously examined from a multi-scale or multi-level governance perspective. This is particularly the case for issues of social inequality in the forestland sector (from access

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<sup>4</sup> <https://aforpolis.org/>

to use or preservation), as well as the creation of conditions that allow the poorest actors to participate more actively in resource governance.

- Critical reflection on the role of science in development and sustainability. It is very likely that the future of forestlands in Africa will depend on the capacity and the power of pro-sustainability actors to promote science-based decisions in developing innovative forestland-related policies. However, more studies are needed on successful science-policy interactions and the interests and motivations of a constellation of actors involved in forestland governance in Africa. Similarly, more work is needed to connect global scientific skills with Africa's national and local skills. Emphasis has been placed on the need to develop more knowledge about the role of the science-policy interfaces, for instance, with regard to the governance of increasing Asian (including Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian and Malaysian) investments in the forestland sector in Africa and the related sustainability challenges<sup>5</sup> coming from massive deforestation, biodiversity loss, increasing inequality, and geopolitical tension.

In addition to the new avenues of research which stemmed directly from the 2018 AFORPOLIS conference, the 2019 Coronavirus crisis (SARS-CoV-2) has revealed how unsustainable domestic use of forestland-related resources, including wildlife, can result in a global crisis, and in economic and political rivalry with a serious cascade effects. According to Jones et al. (2008), since the second half of the 20th century approximately two-thirds of the infectious diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans (zoonosis) can be traced to wildlife. This was the case with the coronavirus and previously with HIV/AIDS and the Ebola pandemics (Jones et al. 2008). Besides the coronavirus, the emergence and rapid spread of these devastating diseases is closely connected to massive tropical deforestation, biodiversity loss, as well as domestic and transnational wildlife trafficking (Guégan et al. 2020). Over the last few years, African countries have been identified as new hotspots of wildlife trafficking and other illegal trade in endangered species such as the pangolin, which is said to be the most endangered trafficked animal in the world (Ingram et al. 2018). The growing pressure on African wildlife is due to the rapid depletion of species in Asia (Heinrich et al. 2016; UNODC 2020). However, very little is known about why the risk to human health risks is not discouraging wildlife trafficking in Africa nor why this vital, timely research subject is practically ignored in forestland and biodiversity policies and governance processes in Africa. There is no shortage of literature on wildlife trafficking in general, or on scientific literature on the impact of diseases that migrate from wild animals to human beings. From a social sciences perspective, it is important to assess how harm to the environment in one part of the world affects other parts of the world. We need a thorough review of Africa's forestland-related policies and politics. Interdisciplinary studies would be a good starting point to address these crucial issues, which weigh so heavily on the sustainability of forestland access, use, and preservation in Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> These debates were held during the first Africa-China workshop on "Forestland governance, investments and sustainability", organised in Yaoundé from 3 to 5 September 2019: <https://aforpolis.org/first-africa-china-aforpolis-workshop-yaounde-2019/>

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