



Policy Brief

International Forest Governance: Trends, Drawbacks, and New Approaches A Critical Review

This publication is based on the report "*International Forest Governance: A Critical Review of Trends, Drawbacks, and New Approaches*" published as IUFRO World Series Volume 43 (2024).

Editors

Nelson Grima
Daniela Kleinschmit
Christoph Wildburger

Layout

Eugénie Hadinoto

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Border between countries with different forest governance approaches;
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Foreword

In 2007, the Global Forest Expert Panels (GFEP) were launched as an IUFRO-led joint initiative of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). The initiative consolidates available scientific knowledge to respond to key forest-related policy questions. Its publications, comprehensive reports and policy briefs provide decision-makers and stakeholders with the most relevant, objective, and accurate information, making an essential contribution to increasing the quality and effectiveness of international forest governance.

In 2010 IUFRO published the report “Embracing Complexity: Meeting the Challenges of International Forest Governance” within the framework of the GFEP Initiative, presenting the findings of the most comprehensive scientific assessment on this topic at the time. I had the pleasure of working closely with the scientific chair and authors of the report in my previous capacity as GFEP Coordinator.

That report noted the complex and fragmented nature of international forest governance and the need for new or adapted institutional arrangements to strengthen and coordinate forest policy learning at the global level, and to support engagement and problem-solving among diverse stakeholders.

The ‘playing field’ for international forest governance has become even more crowded since then. The conclusion of the report that “the governance challenge for the future is not one of negotiating a

new super-instrument but of coordinating multiple existing and future initiatives.” is undoubtedly as relevant today as it was back in 2010, if not more so.

Against this background, I am delighted that a follow-up study of the 2010 report was initiated by IUFRO’s Science-Policy Programme in 2023. The new study assesses the developments in international forest governance since 2010, and it includes an update on the main changes related to actors and instruments; an overview of the forest-related finance landscape; an identification and analysis of the relevant current discourses; and an analysis of the different governance designs, including deficits and alternatives.

This policy brief and its associated report revisit the questions examined in the earlier GFEP report, analysing and synthesising scientific information and lessons learnt since 2010. I sincerely hope that this publication will support a more coherent policy dialogue about the role of forests in addressing the ongoing environmental, social and economic challenges, and that those shaping the international forest governance will find the information presented useful.



Alexander Buck
IUFRO Executive Director

Introduction

International forest governance (IFG) has greatly changed and developed in the past years, with emerging new processes, actors, and instruments. These developments are partly rooted in the fact that the central aim of IFG shifted from stopping deforestation to becoming ‘the’ leverage to tackle climate change, and additionally, to tackle biodiversity loss, thereby presenting forests as a central solution to solve the global challenges of the world. Another content driven shift in governance that has been increasingly recognized is towards legality verification processes and instruments, as they have been pushed forward by several countries and regional organizations. These processes and instruments aim to support sustainable forest management internationally, as well as to hinder deforestation and illegal timber trade. Additionally, the earlier focus of international forest governance on multilateral governmental processes has shifted towards a governance architecture where private and hybrid governance have become increasingly relevant. This shift is accompanied by a change of instruments, with a stronger focus on ‘financialization’ of the forest sector, including finance for pledges and payments for ecosystem services.

In 2010, given that no comprehensive scientific assessment of IFG existed, the Global Forest Expert Panels (GFEP) initiative led by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) published a report to fill that gap. That report provided an overview of the complex and diverse elements that made up the global forest governance arrangements at the time; identified and analysed the core components of these arrangements; and proposed options for dealing with complexity and improving the effective implementation of forest governance at all levels. The outcomes of that report showed that IFG was complex and fragmented, and that many critical problems were cross-sectoral, requiring synergistic approaches to be solved.

Since 2010, an increasing number of actors, institutions, and arrangements at all scales have added additional layers of complexity to the already intricate IFG regime. Therefore, a new assessment was needed, and IUFRO’s Science-Policy Programme undertook the task of producing the assessment report on which this policy brief is based. The current assessment provides an overview of the changes in IFG since 2010, critically analysing them to identi-

fy evolving trends, challenges, and potentials. Specifically, the assessment and this policy brief contribute to inform forest-related, international and regional political processes; raise awareness about global challenges of international forest governance and the critiques voiced; and provide ideas for future governance designs.

The new assessment report not only provides updates about new processes, actors, and instruments, but also aims to highlight those political, civil society, and scientific voi-

ces that have gained increasing attention over the last decade in a demand for a stronger focus on the human dimensions of IFG, and the effects of IFG on people. The assessment tries to be internationally encompassing, but recognizes that, despite this aim, many voices are silenced, be it because of language issues, or because these voices are not published in scientific, available channels. This policy brief summarises the key messages distilled from the assessment results and the potential IFG alternatives for the future.



KEY MESSAGES





1

The former dominant concept of a centralized International Forest Governance (IFG) in the form of legally binding, or non-legally binding intergovernmental agreements has continued to shift towards a more pluralistic understanding to IFG.

Despite the dominance of state governance, co-governance mechanisms, including civil society and private actors, have appeared (e.g., in REDD+, or in the forest certification systems) and continue to develop, to the point that the diversity of processes and actors has increased substantially in the past years. While globally dominant actors continue to shape the rules of IFG, some processes also consider local and Indigenous voices and their knowledge. Nevertheless, social inequalities persist.

A shift towards regionalization, bilateralism, and unilateralism is another emerging trend in IFG. The European Union, with its focus on legality verification, the EUTR, and more recently, the EUDR, has been a leader in this shift, using markets to impose trade requirements such as zero deforestation on countries importing into the EU.



2

A major critique of IFG is its ‘limited effectiveness’, particularly in reference to its failure to adequately address deforestation, forest emissions, and biodiversity loss. Yet, IFG is still presented as the dominant solution to this problem, resulting in an ‘Olympics’ of pledges and targets.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the rate of deforestation has decreased globally from around 13 million hectares of forest per year in 2010, to around 10 million hectares per year in 2020. Despite this decrease, the dominant critique of IFG is about its ineffectiveness to stop deforestation. The continued reference to the deforestation rate as the main indicator for the effectiveness of IFG shows a limited awareness of the diversity of needs and demands connected to forests globally, since neither the number of hectares, nor the deforestation rate, fully reflect the ecological, economic, or social effects of IFG.

Ambitious and reductionist pledges and targets have increasingly appeared as a political response to the frustration over the perceived lack of progress, requiring a rapid growth of science and technology to measure and model progress. With this technical focus, IFG misses out on the opportunity to address issues related to the diversity of forest goods and services, for example regarding the livelihoods of local people, and simply trusts that these will come along automatically if forest cover grows and degradation decreases. Measuring the effectiveness of IFG against other criteria such as comprehensive sustainability, equity, or justice might allow for new processes and instruments. However, this is not currently mainstreamed in IFG.



3

Forest-related finance for IFG has increased in complexity, with constantly emerging new policy instruments, incentives, standards, and targets in a wide variety of forms. This growing complexity is supported by actors and institutions with interests in short-term economic gain, rather than sustainability and a transition towards just forest governance. Alternative finance remains rare.

Although state-led finance such as taxes is still relevant for IFG, other forms of forest-related finance have gained traction, broadening the options of finance mechanisms, but also risking further financialization of the forest sector. These alternative finance options mainly aim at market augmentation (e.g., through green bonds and other forms of including new sustainability features), or market creation (e.g., in the form of new markets for forest carbon and other ecosystem services).

There are alternative finance mechanisms directed towards development, justice, and sustainability that extend well beyond market augmentation or creation, but overall, these are a minority. The main mechanisms follow the ‘economic growth’ paradigm, with financial actors and shareholders more often interested in short-term profits than long-term, just, and sustainable forest governance. Hence, financialization risks perpetuating inequalities and producing perverse effects on sustainable forest management. Philanthropic and community-led finance mechanisms offer an alternative to the currently prevailing finance mechanisms, but so far these have played a limited role.



4

In the past decade, a ‘climatization’ of the forest governance discourses has taken place, which becomes evident in the growing public and private forest carbon markets.

Climate has been a relevant discourse in forest governance since the 1980s. While at that time climate was seen within forest governance as a ‘managerial discourse’, it was not deemed to be an overall meta-discourse consistently influencing global environmental decision-making but just one discourse amongst others, such as biodiversity or forest conservation. Although these other discourses still exist, they have been often ‘twisted’ towards a climate argumentation.

Deforestation and forest degradation have been considered a major problem but are gradually becoming more closely related to climate change, boosting the importance of climate issues into IFG discourses. Additionally, climate change is linked to forests in two more ways: 1) the potential of forests to mitigate climate change, and 2) the effects of climate change on global forests. The former is strongly connected to the aims and targets of the climate-related decision-making, for example as formulated in the 2015 Paris Agreement. As these targets have been globally agreed upon, and demand (domestic) implementation, many policies and instruments are designed to support these. This focus of IFG on climate aims is not only manifested in political attention, but also in financial support.



5

Formerly, the critiques to IFG were focused on technical aspects, but a ‘critical critique’ point of view is gaining traction following approaches such as political ecology and critical policy analysis. This form of critique addresses social problems such as power asymmetries, justice, post-colonialism, or exclusion. Often, this critique focuses on uncovering underlying power relations rather than offering specific suggestions for political solutions.

While ‘problem-solving theories’ accept the general governance setting as it is, ‘critical theories’ aim to uncover and question power relations. In earlier times analysing institutional governance structures and problems such as fragmentation, missing coherence, or knowledge uncertainties was central. Nowadays the ‘critical critique’ of IFG, that places more emphasis on problems of social relationships, has gained increasing attention. Consequently, problems such as power asymmetries between different regions (e.g., North-South) and different actors (powerful versus vulnerable actors) are becoming more present. This attention on social relations has been fostered by a wide range of actors, including scientists and other affected stakeholders. Also, those critical issues of IFG that have been addressed for a long time, but have not been solved in the last years, are now accompanied by additional issues related to even more fundamental problems.

This push for attention on social relations and justice perspectives is paralleled by an increased reliance on market mechanisms managing nature and forests. This form of marketization depoliticizes issues and shifts political discourses to an economic arena where benefits and gains rule IFG. Markets are understood as problem-solving structures that serve as political means for the needed societal transformation. Marketization comes with a win-win logic often promising effectiveness in ecological, economic, and social terms, but these win-win solutions are strongly contested.

IFG alternatives for the future

Alternatives for IFG can be grouped into two categories: 1) pragmatic alternatives, and 2) radical alternatives, both further described below. However, regardless which alternatives are enacted for IFG in the future, the measuring of effectiveness mainly through the deforestation rate and its support through pledges and targets would benefit from a **clear reframing** of IFG goals. Balancing the currently strong environmental focus on forested land to other demands connected with forests, in particular those concerning human and social needs, can broaden IFG goals, and thus, change the starting point against which the effectiveness is measured.

1) Pragmatic Alternatives

They build on existing approaches of IFG and overcome potential weaknesses through continued improvement. They comprise approaches such as overcoming fragmentation through more effective cooperation and coordination, supporting learning experiences, and innovating and using technical solutions in implementation (e.g., measurement and verification). Examples of these approaches are illustrated in Figure 1.

2) Radical Alternatives

They aim to overcome the marketization and financialization of IFG to address problems of, and between, social relationships and power asymmetries. Here, two alternatives are presented:

➔ **Fostering open, global discourses of reduced consumption** and implementing mechanisms to support them can work as an alternative to the economic growth paradigm. Reduced consumption, as addressed in recent years by the de-growth discourse, can focus on a suite of different goals: reducing the impact of human activities on the environment, contributing to a just redistribution of income and wealth, and a shift from a materialistic to a participatory society.

The goal will define the mechanisms to be implemented. For example, the goal to reduce impacts of human activities on the environment is already being partially addressed by some IFG processes and instruments, leading to restoration or nature conservation, among others, but other mechanisms are often neglected, such as reducing or localizing consumption and production. Mechanisms to

FOREST +

A governance framework capturing the diverse forest values and cross-sectoral linkages



A NEW DIPLOMACY

Adapted to complex and fragmented International Forest Governance and bridging the gap between high level diplomacy and experimentation on the ground

- ▶ Determining the most appropriate scale for discourse and action and committing to an appropriate principle of subsidiarity
- ▶ System of inter-arena coordination through learning
- ▶ Intelligent stakeholder participation
- ▶ Encouraging leadership by policy entrepreneurs
- ▶ Coordinated portfolio of policy instruments comprising hard law and soft law



A NEW LEARNING ARCHITECTURE

Encouraging situations of policy learning by emphasizing in particular informational instruments

- ▶ Implementing and using a clearing-house mechanism to ensure a comprehensive knowledge management
- ▶ Establishing a learning platform with a set of services providing information, tools and resources, building on diverse networks organized around a particular problem
- ▶ Making use of e-governance tools
- ▶ Improving the network management lead by an organization and making use of policy entrepreneurs

FIG 1: Summary of approaches to embrace the complexity of International Forest Governance – synthesized from the 2010 Assessment of International Forest Governance

RADICAL ALTERNATIVES

Fostering open, global discourses of reduced consumption (de-growth discourse) can focus on different goals, and the goal will define the mechanisms to be implemented. <i>Examples:</i>	
GOALS	EXAMPLES OF MECHANISMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Reducing the impact of human activities on the environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Restoration or nature conservation Other mechanisms are often neglected: reducing or localizing consumption and production
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Contributing to a just redistribution of income and wealth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Setting prices on environmental and social externalities, recognition and management of public goods, or establishing alternative funding schemes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A shift from a materialistic to a participatory society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthening democratic institutions and equal participation opportunities within them

Fostering local-based, people-centred approaches to respond to problems of privileging powerful actors over local, affected people.	
GOALS	EXAMPLES OF MECHANISMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Granting equal rights and chances to participate meaningfully in IFG, including broadening the formal sources of knowledge to include traditional knowledge forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ inclusion of representative forms such as Non-Governmental Organisations acting on behalf of marginalized people ▶ participation via surveys ▶ polycentric governance approach, with many, mainly independent, centres of decision-making connected in an interdependent system.

FIG 2: Potential future, radical alternatives for International Forest Governance

support the goal of achieving a just redistribution of income and wealth are, among other things, setting prices on environmental and social externalities, recognition and management of public goods, or establishing alternative funding schemes. The goal of shifting from a materialistic to a participatory society can be supported by strengthening democratic institutions and equal participation opportunities within them. Although reduced consumption has gained increasing attention, sensitive issues such as its meaning for development, or the question of global population growth are yet to be addressed.

➔ **Fostering local-based, people-centred approaches** to respond to problems of global asymmetries and dynamics of privileging powerful actors and their interests over local, affected people is another radical alternative.

Mechanisms supporting such an approach focus on granting equal rights and chances to participate meaningfully in IFG, including broadening the formal sources of knowledge to include traditional knowledge forms. These mechanisms vary widely, but in general they include representative forms such as Non-Governmental Organisations acting on behalf of marginalized people.

Another form of support to the deliberative participation of people in international governance is participation via surveys. An example is the My World global survey conducted by the United Nations between 2012 and 2015 in the framework of the development of the SDGs. A less centralized form of a people-centred approach is the polycentric governance approach, with many, mainly independent, centres of decision-making connected in an interdependent system.

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A short publication such as this cannot do justice to all the complexities and controversies related to international forest governance and its linkages and effects, not only on forests, but also on people. For a more comprehensive assessment, the reader is directed to the full report.

Nelson Grima
Daniela Kleinschmit
Christoph Wildburger

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