

Just forest governance: how small learning groups can have big impact

Forests are power bases, but often for the wrong people. As attention turns from making an international deal on REDD to making it work on the ground, the hunt will be on for practical ways of shifting power over forests towards those who enable and pursue sustainable forest-linked livelihoods. The Forest Governance Learning Group – an alliance active in Cameroon, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda and Vietnam – has developed practical tactics for securing safe space, provoking dialogue, building constituencies, wielding evidence and interacting politically. It has begun to have significant impacts. To deepen and widen those impacts, FGLG seeks allies.



Policy pointers

- **Support learning groups for forest governance** built on stakeholder engagement, safe space, 'governance-connected' individuals who link to the issues of people marginalised by policy decisions, and action to influence policy.
- **Ensure modest resources** have substantial impact by enabling groups to have clear goals and adaptive action, inspirational conveners, leverage of additional support, and wider collaboration networks.
- **Engage with FGLG** – supporters and allies are sought for a new five-year phase of work focused on transnational learning and preparedness for forest rights and small forest enterprise, legitimate forest products, and pro-poor climate change mitigation and adaptation through forestry.

Governance, 'goodness' and REDD

'Governance work starts with a smile when we leave home in the morning, then things generally go from bad to worse over the course of the day'. So said a participant at a Forest Governance Learning

Group event in South Africa (see 'Backstory'). Forest governance – 'who gets to decide what about forests' – is a stubborn beast to shift. Some of the biggest problems surrounding forests in the tropics are problems of excessive power – wielded by loggers,

Backstory

The Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG) started off in 2003. An alliance of in-country teams and international partners, the FGLG is facilitated by IIED and currently active in Cameroon, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda and Vietnam. A Tanzanian team is in the offing. FGLG connects those marginalised from forest governance to those controlling it, and pushes for better decisions.

How does the FGLG work? In each country it takes a four-pronged but well integrated approach involving:

- a team of 'governance-connected' people from a mix of agencies and with experience and ideas
- policy work on forest livelihood issues that arise when people are marginalised from decision-making
- practical guidance and tools for making progress
- creating and taking opportunities to make governance improvements.

Over 90 policy research outputs and tools and over 100 press, TV and radio advocacy outputs have been produced by FGLG to date, and we are currently working on a series of films about social justice in forestry. Major learning events involving all the country teams and other international players have been held in Ghana, India, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda, and (in December 2009) Indonesia. Other inter-country capacity-building work, and engagement with over 40 international organisations and forums, aim to disseminate insights and embed findings in international policy.

FGLG country teams are well networked, motivated and targeted in their approach – they carry out focused studies, network building and uptake of governance tools, and take direct opportunities for governance reform. In 2009, an independent evaluation of FGLG has shown that a wide range of forest governance decisions has been influenced by the work, and that this is beginning to have significant effect on the ground. With work planned to 2013, we hope to deepen and widen this impact.

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the oil palm and soya industries and their government beneficiaries. These problems have been around for years. Yet we know that, in the right hands, forests can be managed sustainably to provide productive local livelihoods, liberate communities and, with luck, reduce emissions harmful to the climate.

When the world's attention shifts in 2010 from international climate deal-making to practical in-country arrangements for REDD (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) and related strategies, much will depend on finding both the proven means and the confidence to improve forest governance.

Actions anticipated in getting ready for REDD, such as determining tenure of the land, are no small matter – there is often much at stake.

Practical tactics for impact

Alongside these old problems and new pressures for forests, there are increasing opportunities to make vital moves towards locally controlled forestry, viable forest-based climate strategies and practical forest governance. The Forest Governance Learning Group continues to try and seize some of these opportunities, and below we describe some of the results.

Over the last five years IIED, together with the Thailand-based Center for People and Forests (RECOFTC) and 10 country teams in Africa and Asia

that collectively constitute FGLG, has been motivated by some shared understanding about forest governance.

- Negotiated solutions are the ones that last – this needs time and effective countervailing forces (such as civil society versus government) and a core focus on improved capacity and accountability.
- Forest law enforcement and governance initiatives were the main international preoccupation in forest governance until REDD came along – and they are poorly integrated yet.
- Much is stacked against the smaller players – despite their greater potential for sustainability and livelihoods – while rights and benefits are the main local preoccupation.

While 'top-down' approaches have not worked well for improving forest livelihoods and sustainability in the past, work at this level is still needed, such as on information systems, knowledge-sharing and standards harmonisation. Equally, bottom-up approaches on their own struggle to achieve scale and change in the dynamics of international institutions – but it is only at this level that forests can be truly mainstreamed into varied needs. It is in this governance terrain, in which top-down and bottom-up approaches must be connected, that FGLG has been working.

Table 1, below, attempts a categorisation of forest governance tactics developed by the FGLG country teams, with examples, while Table 2 offers a typology of impacts on forestry decision making, also with examples from the FGLG country teams.

Table 1. Tactics for governance work: a typology with examples from FGLG work

| Tactic | Examples |
|---|--|
| Securing safe space – mutual trust and independence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Developing a team with in-confidence rules, anonymity being vital for participation of key players and creativity – Uganda, Indonesia and Cameroon ■ Developing trust for negotiations, requiring carefully played in working with stakeholders and tactical positioning on key issues – Ghana and Mozambique |
| Provoking dialogue – connecting stakeholders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Convening stakeholders to establish positions – contact group for Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) in Ghana, district level groups in Indonesia ■ Taking decision makers to the field and fostering other engagement between citizens, duty bearers and innovators – on charcoal sector in Malawi |
| Building constituencies and networking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Focusing on clear objectives for engagement, with time and flexible action to achieve them – all teams ■ Intensive informal communication with decision makers – all teams |
| Wielding evidence – generating and presenting information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employing economic evidence and legal tools to force information out and clarify positions – India non-timber forest product trade, Uganda court cases ■ Producing research briefs, press pieces, cartoons, theatre, internet, TV and radio for the right people at the right time and place – Mozambique, Uganda |
| Interacting politically – engaging with political players | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Undertaking low-profile shuttle diplomacy among political players to move issues forward – Ghana on local groups and VPA, India on Forest Rights Act ■ Exposing malpractice when the evidence is solid and the context sufficiently safe – Mozambique on logging deals, Ghana on range of illegalities |

Table 2. Impacts on governance: a typology with examples from FGLG work

| Tactic | Examples |
|---|--|
| Issues understanding – of key governance barriers/ opportunities and on-the-ground realities – improved | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Research used and evidence-based advocacy effective – on non-timber forest products in India and small forest enterprises in Cameroon ■ Awareness of illegal activities raised – on economics of the charcoal sector in Malawi, on grounds for dismissal of key government players in Mozambique ■ Interrogation by stakeholders of a vision for good governance and social justice – with local evidence ‘unblocking’ decisions in Uganda and Ghana |
| Tactics understanding – of practical ways to change governance – improved | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Clarified and legitimised lobbying tactics – in the Mabira campaign in Uganda, in work with political parties in India ■ Improved understanding of link between local livelihood opportunities and governance tools usable in supporting them – in Vietnam ■ Strong coalitions of actors built to influence policymakers – in influencing forestry staff and the law in Mozambique and Ghana |
| Capabilities – to influence or change governance – strengthened | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improved capacity of FGLG members to influence decisions in favour of community priorities and transparency – in Uganda, Malawi and India ■ Widening groups of opinion-formers and decision-makers learning and thinking in a different way – Indonesia local government actors ■ Organisational change influenced – for small forest enterprise in South Africa, and politicians enabled to push for governance reform as ‘their’ issue in India |
| Engagement mechanisms and processes improved | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Platforms developed for multi-stakeholder engagement/ monitoring – through court cases in Uganda, in VPA process in Ghana ■ Experience sharing across countries facilitated and connections made with key international processes – through learning events and exchanges ■ Mechanisms shaped by effective use of policy briefs used to inform, influence and support – by all FGLG teams and internationally |
| Discourses and decision-making processes changed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forestry’s profile, and awareness of forest governance issues, raised within wider development agendas – by work on finance and law in Uganda ■ Questions of social justice in forestry installed in national forestry discourse – in Ghana and Mozambique ■ Particular policies/ strategies promoted that open up wider sector thinking – on empowerment in South Africa, on making decentralisation work in Malawi |
| Decisions changed and policies influenced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Government decisions on investment proposals changed – on de-gazettment in Uganda, on land giveaways and logging in Mozambique ■ Policies influenced lead to better deals for local people – VPA in Ghana, community logging in Sulawesi, Indonesia, benefits from non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in India ■ New institutions/approaches installed after convincing evidence – small forest enterprise funds and policy in South Africa, community forestry in Vietnam |

First indications of impact on the ground

In 2009 an independent evaluation of FGLG’s work described how the forest governance impacts detailed in Table 2 are beginning to be felt on the ground.¹ Below are a range.

- Forest-linked livelihoods around Mabira reserve in Uganda are more secure after the reversal of a presidential decision to convert forest to sugar plantations.
- Small forest enterprises in South Africa can now operate in a framework of simplified, rationalised and improved policies.

- Investments in locally over-exploitative logging deals have been questioned and prevented by high-level action in Mozambique.
- Increased access rights to non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in state forest land have been secured for indigenous community groups in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa states in India.
- Practical actions for locally beneficial community forestry are now better enabled by governance frameworks in Vietnam.

Yet, in general, formal rights are still commonly in the wrong hands and capabilities are poorly matched to need. Flashpoints of forest conflict around the world

abound – from Iquitos in Peru, to Mabira reserve in Uganda, to the Kampar Peninsula in Indonesia. Three-quarters of the world's forests are government-controlled. If they were managed well that might be bearable, but often they are not; and there is a sense that a timebomb is ticking at local level. There is much to do.

Lessons on grappling with forest governance

On learning groups that begin to work Shared understanding is emerging about what makes an effective learning group for forest governance. We have tried to capture this in the following working definition.

Learning groups organise around the idea that good decisions can only be made when they are based on engagement, learning and pragmatic choices. They provide a group of selected individuals an informal and moderated space within which dialogue, learning and decisions can take place. These individuals are typically 'governance-connected', drawn from divergent interests, institutions and sectors. There is a deliberate attempt to create groups for, or link to the issues of, those marginalised and affected by policy decisions, and to take action to influence policy formulation and implementation.

With today's challenges in forest governance we think this approach is critical, and in many contexts appears innovative or even subversive. But it is hardly new. Indeed, in a way the main impacts of FGLG is that tried and tested approaches to old and entrenched problems are needed. We need to build and support the capability of key people to connect together for long enough to take opportunities to tackle core problems of rights and capacities to manage and benefit from forests sustainably. The real innovation required is to make this palatable to supporters that increasingly work in short time horizons and expect quick, tangible, traceable results.

On proving that learning groups work Three main reasons make it difficult to pin down the effect that FGLG has had. First, most of the teams learn and plot as a team but rightly take actions and speak through others – often their constituent member organisations and platforms. Secondly, over time the work of member institutions and other initiatives becomes supportive or aligned with the core objectives and processes of FGLG – again, a good thing but one that makes tracing effects difficult. Thirdly, turning learning into action takes time – a few years is barely long enough for effects of improved understanding to translate into action on the

ground. Despite these challenges, peer-to-peer review and interrogation at the annual international learning events, and the independent evaluation of 2009, both show that impact is apparent and that it is possible to identify parts of the trail between action and effect.

On having impact with modest resources A major lesson of the work so far is for clarity and shared understanding to be reached on the goal – 'the big change' that is needed. When this is clear, almost total flexibility is then possible on what actions are taken to achieve it. This takes time, often requiring several rounds of specific action and iteration. With a clear eye on the prize it is possible to adapt to changing circumstance and take opportunistic action. Without it, such action can amount to nothing.

Another critical ingredient is energetic and inspirational convening of the group – charismatic and dedicated individuals drive forest governance change. Finally, to have impact, groups rely on voluntary input: not much can or should be paid for directly so individuals and organisations involved through time need to use their networks and lever additional funding and other sources of support. Again, if the goal is clear and modes of engagement are flexible, this has proven possible.

In 2009 a new five-year phase of FGLG work began. In addition to the continued emphasis on developing transnational learning and preparedness to improve social justice in forestry, there are three themes that dominate the agenda: forest rights and small forest enterprise, legitimate forest products, and pro-poor climate change mitigation and adaptation through forestry. Country teams are already highly engaged with small enterprise governance issues, the European Union's FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) action plan, and REDD. So we have our work cut out, and we hope for as many supporters and collaborators as possible. Please get in touch.

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Further reading & websites

Forest Governance Learning Group: www.iied.org/forestry/research/projects/forest.html contains news and materials from the country teams and the initiative as a whole.

Notes

■ ¹ Blomley, T. 2009. *Evaluation of the Work of the Forest Governance Learning Group 2005-2009*. Report for IIED. IIED, London.

Download the pdf at www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=17070IIED