Benefit sharing and the role of social justice to achieve equitable forest conservation

Presenter: Lauren Cooper; Michigan State University
Presenter Email: ltcoper@msu.edu
Authors: L. Cooper, Michigan State University; E. Huff, Michigan State University; A. Larson, CIFOR; D. Stoian, ICRAF

Despite an estimated $7 billion pledged via international funds to high forest density countries, best practices for distributing forest conservation incentives are not well-defined and are generally under-researched. One key challenge, along with monitoring and overall coordination, is the equitable and just distribution of benefits to stakeholders. Benefit sharing is an important incentive for many actors, but sharing schemes must be transparent, legitimate, and fair to be effective over time.

Earlier approaches focused on financial returns, but new thinking encompasses a broader set of ‘monetary and non-monetary’ benefits, including tenure reform, local climate regulation, and community resilience. There is precedent for programming at various governance levels, and multi-year efforts at different scales and mechanisms have highlighted both the potential for this type of approach, as well as associated challenges.

This study addresses the knowledge gap by assessing, compiling, and communicating best practices across the spectrum of data currently available in multiple programs, triangulated with findings from case studies in focal countries in Latin America. We hypothesize that generalizable best practices can be identified for the design, implementation, and monitoring of benefit-sharing arrangements, and that sufficient agreement on such practices exists amongst key stakeholders. Further, we assert that established programs follow distinct practices and that those that are well-functioning will provide valuable insights for understanding how programmatic guidance can be enhanced through identified best practices. Based on a literature review and empirical data from case studies, this study provides a comparative analysis of forest conservation programs and associated benefit sharing arrangements to identify best practices for the design, implementation, and monitoring of such programs.

Using the framework of Nancy Fraser (2013) on justice in recognition, distribution, and representation, a broader theoretical analysis is explored with the specific examples. This includes a critique of the more technical approaches that have emerged in recent decades and that eschew political considerations in favor of apolitical rhetoric. We assert that the issues around forest conservation are inherently political, and that robust and equitable benefit sharing plans must adequately address fundamental inequalities in representation, communication, and natural resource use to achieve long-term results.