Delineating Decentralisation - Forest Governance and the Indonesian 2014 Village Law

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Decentralisation remains a major trend in the global south and recent years have witnessed significant increases in meta-studies focused on understanding broad interplays between these processes and forests, many of which emphasise negative relationships between such reforms and many desired environmental indicators. At the same time, literature on the power dynamics and political ecologies of these laws highlights both their diversity and the myriad ways in which they can be subverted to serve aims other than those sought by their creators. This paper seeks to bridge these approaches via a case study of Indonesia’s 2014 Village Law, which decentralises substantial administrative and legislative powers to villages, reforms their governmental structures and furnishes them with considerable streams of direct government funding. Whilst many have hailed the law as an opportunity for villages to freely pursue development and democratisation, others have highlighted risks of corruption and elite capture. This paper began as an effort to assess the law’s implications for forest governance, which have received limited attention despite the fact that the country’s previous 1999 decentralisation to district governments was associated with significant increases in forest loss and degradation. However, rather than focusing immediately on forests, research commenced with a general assessment – via semi-structured interviews with villagers and local officials – of the ways in which the law was actually manifesting on the ground. This analysis revealed that, contrary to expectation, the law has been subverted in implementation to actually increase the power of higher bureaucracy over villages. Similarly, trends in forest governance associated with the law were found to be associated with increased legality and adherence to higher level directives and expectations, with some village governments halting their forest governance practices altogether in efforts to preserve access to bureaucratic support and funding. There are significant and potentially transformative links between the Village Law and forests, but not those that would be imagined from reading its text. The case demonstrates the importance of accessing the realities of decentralisation policies as a prerequisite to interpreting causal links between their mechanisms and the evolution of broader social-environmental processes and developing appropriate policy responses.