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Guest editorial

Studying conflicts, proposing solutions – Towards multi-level approaches to the analyses of forest conflicts[☆]

1. Introduction

The purpose of this issue has been to analyze how forest conflicts can be fruitfully studied, theoretically and empirically, in order to gain comparative insights from different parts of the world and different forest zones, and to draw implications for conflict management. This conclusion builds primarily on the individual contributions to the Special Issue. We start with presenting theoretical insights based on the structural–functional approach, the institutional approach and the one focusing on perceptions, discourses and frames. We continue with lessons learnt from the comparative assessment and conclude by discussing implications for conflict management and future research.

1.1. Understanding conflicts from structural–functional perspectives

Within the framework of a structural–functional approach, conflicts can be seen as the cause and outcome of processes of structural change. This macro-level perspective, which has its roots in the thinking of Émile Durkheim and Auguste Comte, focuses on social structures and manifest, latent or dysfunctional societal functions, which shape social behavior (Parsons, 1961). From this traditional perspective forestry related conflicts can be viewed as negative, threatening reliable and stable structures or functions and should thus be avoided.

As a reaction to this traditional view other scholars have emphasized that even though conflicts may have negative effects they may also work as a medium for social change, contributing to the improvement of social relations, democratic processes and the content and quality of decisions (Dahrendorf, 1969; Walker and Daniels, 1997; Mouffe, 2000; Castro and Nielsen, 2001; Yasmi et al., 2009). Rather than seeking to avoid conflict, efforts should instead be put on the effective management of conflicts in order to achieve change, moving beyond the dichotomous understanding of conflicts as either functional or dysfunctional (Buckles, 1999; Yasmi et al., 2009). Research however shows that collaboration between different interests is not enough for change to occur. Social change is to a large extent dependent on the will of strong economic interests to align with e.g. marginalized or economically weaker groups (Buckles, 1999; Sandström and Widmark, 2007; Saarikoski et al., 2013).

In terms of forest related research the structural–functional approach with its macro-level focus has for a long time played a minor role compared to reductionist meso- and micro-level approaches.

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With the revival of systems thinking and studies using e.g. a complex adaptive systems (CAS) framework to understand natural resource conflicts, the structural–functional approach has gained a ground again although the policy relevance and impact of these studies hitherto have been rather limited (Wellstead and Howlett, 2012).

The structural–functional approach is useful in identifying manifest or latent drivers of conflict such as socio-economic development and environmental pressure. It can be applied in single case studies but is particularly useful in comparative assessments of drivers of conflicts. There are several examples of this approach in this special issue: the comparative assessment of conflicts between local actors and external actors (e.g. logging and mining companies, plantation estates and conservation agencies) in a South East Asian context (Yasmi et al., 2012) and the quantitative review of the representation of forest conflicts across the world (Gritten et al., 2012). The former points at underlying fundamental causes to conflict, such as rapid economic development, concerns over food security at national and international levels, conservation policies that are exclusionary of local land management as well as poor coordination between societal levels (Yasmi et al., 2012). The latter study identifies geographical components of forest conflicts through the use of the contested resource periphery theory (Gritten et al., 2012).

In addition, the structural–functional approach helps to understand how structural factors affect the pervasiveness of conflicts or the absence thereof. Kröger (2013) uses it to analyze mobilization – or lack thereof – in a situation of land use change in the Eastern Amazon, Brazil, while, Ravikumar et al. (2012) look at how structural change in governance affects conflicts in a context of economic inequities, the weakness of the state and governance related failures (e.g. corruption and marginalization) in Latin America. Kröger (2013) finds that land use change does not automatically trigger conflicts, and Ravikumar et al. (2012) state that although decentralization includes transfer of rights, resources and governance responsibilities, such changes may give rise to both stability and conflict. According to Kröger (2013) the absence of conflict may be explained by a combination of individual and structural factors such as inter-personal relationships and the nature of local conflict cultures. The lack of clear relationships between decentralization reforms and the prevalence of conflicts in Nicaragua, Bolivia and Peru also points to the need to incorporate structural factors in future research such as how decentralization reforms affect power relations between different groups to be able to handle and manage potential conflicts (Ravikumar et al., 2012).

To conclude, a structural functional approach contributes to defining and analyzing the variation in forest conflict depending on structural

aspects such as existing inequalities, exclusionary economic development and international policy regimes (e.g. conservation policies). It may also reveal and explore functional aspects such as contested tenure and lack of land use planning and coordination among state agencies, which only can be handled and potentially solved through the development of new institutional solutions.

1.2. Understanding conflicts from a neo-institutionalist approach

Since the discussion of 'bringing the institutions back in' and the revival of institutionalism in the 1980s within sociology, political science and policy analysis, this theoretical approach has also become prevalent in research on forest conflicts. It emphasizes the need to analyze the influence of cognitive norms, rules and routines on organizational and human behavior, in addition to formal and regulative institutions (March and Olsen, 1995). It brings additional perspectives to analyses of the changing role of the state, under the heading of 'from government to governance', including the role of public as well as private actors and power sharing in decision-making (Pierre and Peters, 2000) and what this might imply in creating or mitigating forest conflicts. Institutional factors may also explain why states or other actors respond differently to e.g. common challenges concerning economic as well as environmental issues such as climate change (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). Furthermore, a neo-institutionalist approach identifies the need to analyze the institutional structuring on the macro as well as the meso- and micro-societal levels, including political, economic as well as social institutions. Hence, tensions between globalization on the one hand and regionalization and decentralization of power within forest governance on the other can be examined (Colfer and Capistrano, 2005).

It is by now widely acknowledged that institutional factors both shape and are being shaped by conflicts and their management. The neo-institutional approach may thus be used to develop governance and management mechanisms to deal with conflicts. Not surprisingly, institutionalist approaches dominate among the contributions to this special issue, varying from the study of forest policy development at the European level to those examining forest conflicts at multiple societal levels including local communities ranging from Sweden to Nepal, India and Latin America. The role of property rights, in particular in relation to institutional change such as forest governance reforms or the instigation of protected areas provides recurrent analytical themes as covered by this issue.

Indeed, forest policy change appears as one of the most important drivers and consequences of conflicts according to several studies in this special issue. For example, recent forest policy processes in Europe have revealed conflicts concerning both substance, and procedures between the member states of the European Union (Edwards and Kleinschmit, this issue). In terms of substance the conflict concerns the traditional alignment between forest production and biodiversity protection interests. The procedural aspects however involve issues of power division and to what extent forest policy should be an issue of national or European concerns. In a similar way the analysis of the contested issue of commercial berry harvesting on private land in Sweden, shows that institutional aspects play an important role in the development of the conflict – and potentially also in its solution – i.e. how extraction of non-timber forest products might be regulated, either through top-down steering or through voluntary measures (Sténs and Sandström, 2012).

Institutional change, with the explicit purpose to solve conflicts, such as the Forest Rights Act in India (Bose, this issue), could however also produce new problems. It is therefore necessary to understand the inherent complexity that is inbuilt into most forest conflicts. For example, the study of increasing levels of forestry conflicts in the Terai, Nepal, demonstrates how such conflicts are related to multiple interests at multiple levels. The focus of the conflicts which often concern issues of land and forest control, is therefore about relations

between 'global–state–community' levels, but also driven by other factors such as ethnicity (Satyal Pravat and Humphreys, 2012). The management of conflicts in practice thus requires comprehensive understanding of their multiple institutional dimensions at several interconnected levels of time and space, addressing issues of path dependency such as the historic legacy of the state and historically determined inequalities in access to and control over forest resources (Bose, 2012; Satyal Pravat and Humphreys, 2012).

Institutional change may however not only reveal but also contribute to the camouflage of conflicts. Hubo and Krott (2012) depict how an administrative reform in the German federal state of Lower Saxony obscured the public administration's concerns for nature conservation due to its weak recognition in relation to the forest sector. Since the visibility of conflicting concerns is a crucial factor for the possibility to balance those contradicting interests this reform had far-reaching consequences for the public administration's possibility to reduce the prevailing conflict between the nature conservation and the forest sectors. Specifically, the presence of independent expertise and its integration into consideration procedures proved vital for the potential to solve this type of conflict. The authors therefore recommend combining different organizational patterns of public administration that allow for multiple conceptual and strategic competences at various levels in order to incorporate and balance different interest and needs into decision-making.

Several articles in this special issue show that it is necessary to take into account broader societal structures to understand why conflicts occur and how they may be managed. In particular, Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl (2013) show, in their comparative study of nature conservation conflicts in areas with and without commercial forestry that enabling binding as well as voluntary institutions but also favorable discourses shaped actors' ideas about available policy options. In addition, mobilization and strategic alliance building were found to be important explanatory factors to understand the emergence of conflicts and the potential for new solutions to conflict management.

To conclude, a neo-institutional approach to the analysis of forest conflict is prominent within this special issue, confirming our statement in the introduction that institutional analysis is an important contribution to the understanding of conflicts and conflict management. It should be noted, however, that the definition of 'institutions' in this special issue is a matter of many interpretations, and that the cause-and-effect mechanisms involved in this research approach are quite diverse. As Raitio (2012) delineates in her contribution on institutions and conflict management, at least four different branches of neo-institutionalism can be distinguished (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Schmidt, 2008; Arts, 2012). These include rational choice, historical institutionalism, sociological as well as a relatively new branch, discursive institutionalism, which lends insight into the role of ideas and discourse in conflicts and linking this to institutional change (Raitio, 2012; Schmidt, 2008). Moreover, institutions may also be studied through other theoretical approaches that are often not defined as institutionalism, such as governance or regulation theories. The general strength in this approach lies in its focus on political, economic or social institutions, involving studies of the relationship between institutions and political agency, performance and change, which enables us to identify possibilities to improve political systems (March and Olsen, 1995).

1.3. Understanding conflicts through a perceptual–ideational approach

Besides studying oppressive or unclear structures and institutions, previous conflict literature has traditionally conceptualized natural resource and environmental conflicts in terms of knowledge disputes, competing distributive interests (who gets what when and how), incompatible values and dysfunctional personal relationships (Moore, 1996; Priscoli, 1997). This view has been challenged by theorists who maintain that environmental controversies are essentially discursive

conflicts in which opponents employ contrasting and often incompatible metaphors and interpretative schemes to make sense of contentious and complex policy issues. Such conflicting ways of interpreting and perceiving policy issues have been described as narratives, storylines, discourses, or frames (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Schön and Rein, 1994; Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2005; Art and Buizer, 2009).

In discourse analysis language is not a neutral tool describing external reality, but represents a dynamic medium through which reality is constructed through social interaction (Hillier, 2003: 259). Such a constructed reality is embedded in social contexts which justify certain type of practices which have concrete consequences (Crush, 1995: 6 in Hillier, 2003). Particularly the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis is interested in how discourses come into being and develop over time, and more specifically how they 'discipline' the thinking, speaking and acting of stakeholders e.g. in forest policy. Thereby, discourses will 'normalize' certain behavior and further certain interests over others (Art and Buizer, 2009).

Frame theory, in turn, has become popular in conflict research because of its ability to explain how people can have alternative understandings of the same problem without abandoning the idea that there is a real problem about which to disagree (Schön and Rein, 1994; Perri 6, 2005; Raitio, 2012; Söderberg and Eckerberg, 2012; Buijs and Lawrence, 2012; Sténs and Sandström, 2012). Approaching conflicts from a frame theory perspective leads to the analysis of the different ways in which parties to a conflict define what the conflict is about, and may therefore be understood as analysis of discourse combined with actor analysis. Similar to broader discourses, frames inevitably have effects on the policy options available in particular dispute situations (Kyllönen et al., 2006). Raitio (2012) illustrates how the conceptualization of problems into certain frames in fact hinders collaborative processes concerning old-growth forest conflicts in northern Finland. The frame of the state enterprise managing public forests conceptualized the conflict as local, while delegitimizing the demands of national NGOs and excluding them from collaboration. Also, the agency perceived itself as 'one of the forestry companies' as opposed to state authorities, thus responding to expectations for democratic, transparent planning processes with vague social corporate responsibility efforts.

Söderberg and Eckerberg (2012) also show how differences in sector frames are evident but in the rise of policy conflicts over bioenergy and forestry in Europe. They discuss how EU bioenergy policy is framed as contributing to green growth, energy security, rural development and climate at the same time but that the dominant framing varies considerably between the forestry, agriculture, energy and transport sectors. Those different frames can be expected to lead to considerable goal conflicts in the implementation of bioenergy policy, ranging from mere policy agreement to policy controversy. While the former might be reconciled by furthering scientific understanding based on evidence from different perspectives and locations in participatory processes, the latter derives from more fundamental conflicting values and interests that concerns basic questions about how rights and responsibilities for sustainability should be shared in a global world (Söderberg and Eckerberg, 2012). Like in the cases analyzed by Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl (2013) such frame conflicts represent power structures, and involve institutional aspects of governance.

As explained above, where institutional change camouflaged conflicts (Hubo and Krott, 2012) discourses that assume 'rational' interests tend to delegitimize or camouflage emotions as a key reason for getting involved in forestry issues and thus in forest conflicts. According to Buijs and Lawrence (2012) the role of emotions as legitimate in forest issues and environmental conflicts is thus also a matter of discourse. Their perspective brings further understanding to how forest conflicts may be investigated and potentially managed, since emotions influence the views on forest management, the processing of information, the motivating of social engagement, and thereby

also the escalation of protests. Forests and nature often refer to the creation of identity, spirituality and feeling of social and historical belonging, but those aspects have largely become delegitimized in the discourse of 'rational' forest science and management (Buijs and Lawrence, 2012). Another example of this kind is the study by Yasmi et al. (2012) which underlines the complex nature of conflict, involving not only material issues but also deep cultural and even sacred connections between communities and their land. To date, few analysts have studied the role of emotions in conflict theory, suggesting that this is an important contribution to the above mentioned theories that deal with perceptions, discourses and frames.

1.4. Combining the three analytical approaches

As evident from the contributions to this special issue, there is an increasing move towards various forms of integrating the analytical approaches of structural-functionalism, neo-institutionalism and perceptions and discourses, instead of applying them separately. As stated already in the introduction, the grouping of the studies into three parts representing the three main analytical approaches can be discussed, since they do overlap in practice. Several of the studies employ a combination of structural-functional and institutional approaches (Gritten et al., 2012; Kröger, 2013; Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl, 2013; Satyal Pravat and Humphreys, 2012; Ravikumar et al., 2012). For instance, the influence of governance structures such as land and tenure rights, economic development and conservation policies which tend to give rise to many of the conflicts, can only be examined through the dual lens of structural-functional and institutional approaches. Also, as Gritten et al. (2012) show, the geography of forest conflicts brings attention to the theory of contested resource peripheries (mainly structural-functional approach) as influenced by the interests of environmental and social movements (institutional approach). Others draw from both discursive and institutional schools of thought (Yasmi et al., 2012; Sténs and Sandström, 2012; Edwards and Kleinschmit, 2012; Söderberg and Eckerberg, 2012). Discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008; Raitio, this issue) is an example of the latter, seeking to combine an institutional approach with a focus on discourses or frames as a factor explaining institutional change. Common to the three approaches is the underlying idea of imbalance of power, whether this concerns the level of societal inequalities and poverty, institutions that give different actors unequal access to resources and decision-making or dominant discourses or frames that exclude other perspectives and normalize certain practices. Addressing power inequalities is also an essential part of successful management or resolution of conflicts, both on the level of processes and their outcomes.

2. Implication for conflict management

As mentioned initially there are other approaches to forest conflict analysis that have not been covered in this special issue. The research field of forest policy analysis has for example been extensively covered in previous studies (Arts, 2012). Another omitted approach concerns the analysis of micro-level communicative situations and the causes to conflict that arise from the inability of actors to understand and communicate with one another (see Hallgren, 2003; Ångman et al., 2011). Inter-personal communication and the design of communicative processes are central themes in the literature focusing on the management of environmental conflicts, particularly in the developed countries (e.g. Susskind et al., 1999; Wondolleck and Yaffe, 2000; Daniels and Walker, 2001). A main focus in practice and research on environmental conflict management has for the past decades been on participatory approaches that involve a range of societal actors – governmental bodies, citizens and NGOs, and private interests – in decision making. Theories of collaborative planning and deliberative democracy emphasize the need for arenas through which the affected

citizens and groups can meet, discuss and learn about each others' perspectives and needs, and seek common ground (Dryzek, 1990; Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999; Rydin and Falleth, 2006). Collaborative planning literature also includes the identification and analysis of practical design principles for such processes (Wondolleck and Jaffe, 2000; Innes, 2004).

The weakness of these approaches is that they do not attend to the more macro-level structures and drives (Fischler, 2000; McGuirk, 2001; Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000; see also Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl, 2013; Bose, 2012; Yasmi et al., 2012). The macro-level drivers are important in explaining why collaborative processes emerge in some cases but not in others. As demonstrated also by the articles in this special issue, the macro-level analysis is essential for understanding the underlying causes of the conflicts and the issues that cannot be addressed within micro-level collaborative process but on a more structural level.

The structural-functional perspective highlights that conflicts do not constitute a separate research field but are closely linked to economic policies, environmental change, livelihood issues, and power structures (Yasmi et al., 2012; Kröger, 2013; Bose, 2012; Satyal Pravat and Humphreys, 2012; Ravikumar et al., 2012). This approach highlights the role of conflict as an indicator for inequality and injustice and therefore draws attention to solutions that reduce poverty and improve democracy and environmental justice. The institutional approach complements the structural-functional approach in attending to the definition and resolution of property rights, which are recurring causes to conflict. It also helps to identify issues that concern unclear or illegitimate mandates or contradictory policy goals, and may thus lead to policy revision beyond the individual conflict (Sténs and Sandström, 2012; Hubo and Krott, 2012; Edwards and Kleinschmit, 2012; Söderberg and Eckerberg, 2012).

The analysis of discourses or frames is needed to understand how communication is affected – and distorted – by power. Research on perceptual-ideational processes broadens the scope of communication analysis from the level of individuals to institutional structures at higher level, where roles, mandates, resources and other sources of power gained outside the collaborative arena become important factors for inquiry. As several authors in this issue emphasize, even actors who might not seek consciously to manipulate the communicative situations will frame conflicts differently, and may consequently have difficulty in understanding the presence of multiple perspectives (Hubo and Krott, 2012; Raitio, 2012; Söderberg and Eckerberg, 2012). With this view, frame theory presents 'frame reflection' as a way forward in understanding different perspectives and seeking common ground (Schön and Rein, 1994).

3. Conclusions: towards multiple approaches in understanding and managing forest conflicts

In this editorial we have presented theoretical insights from the articles of this special issue. We have grouped them under three headings: the structural-functional approach, the institutional approach and the one focusing on perceptions, discourses and frames. We have summarized the implications that each of these approaches have for conflict management, drawing from previous literature as well as from the current contributions.

To reiterate, the approaches applied in this special issue should neither be perceived as an alternative to a more micro level analysis of communicative processes, nor should they be regarded as mutually exclusive. To the contrary, we argue that research and practice are best served by combining the different approaches. As noted above, macro level drivers, institutions and dominant discourses affect micro-level attempts to address conflicts, highlighting the need to analyze them simultaneously. This is confirmed in other multi-causal analysis of a high-profile forest conflict and resolution processes. Saarikoski et al. (2013) for example showed that changes in macro level factors were

essential in creating interdependence between parties to a conflict in British Columbia, leading to will to negotiate. The skillfully designed planning process – analyzed with the help of collaborative planning theory – assisted parties to reach an agreement and in fact enabled changes in the more macro aspects and processes on the level of discourses, new coalitions, and new institutions. Consequently, as the contributions to this special issue has shown how future research and practice on forest conflicts would benefit from a closer integration of the different levels of analysis.

In addition and as several of the studies in this special highlights, the combination of macro and micro theoretical perspectives to conflict analysis draws attention to the positive and negative aspects of conflicts. Conflicts contain a transformative potential as important catalysts for positive social change (Mouffe, 2000; Hellström, 2001; Hillier, 2003; Kröger, 2013; Sténs and Sandström, 2012; Bose, 2012; Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl, 2013). An overemphasized focus on resolving conflicts – typically present in the micro level analysis – risks depoliticizing conflict. At the same time, many conflicts take on destructive dynamics of escalation, where the positive potential is lost. A future research agenda needs to develop a more nuanced and theoretically as well as empirically grounded understanding for what constitutes functional, i.e. productive and destructive elements, in a conflict. Most conflict processes include both positive and negative aspects and we need to distinguish between them in order to maintain the positive potential while reducing the destructive effects of conflicts.

In essence, this special issue has demonstrated the social, economic and political complexity that is embedded in forest conflicts around the world, and how those aspects may be studied and potentially addressed. We find that most forest conflicts cannot be dealt with through cookbook recipes, but require multiple approaches that include the understanding of cognitive factors, such as perceptions and emotions, as well as underlying institutional and structural factors in each situation of conflict. We hope that this contribution will enrich the debates within forest conflict research as well as inspire in conflict management practice.

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