

Key messages from the 2nd Nordic Conference on Forest Policy Science, Sweden, 12-14 Nov. 2014

Across Nordic and Baltic countries, there is a small but dedicated group of forest policy researchers. The network unifying forest policy scientists and thematic conferences are of particularly high value for enhanced cooperation among otherwise scattered individuals and for advancing forest policy research in the region. This policy brief is the results of an interactive work of the network developed at the 2nd Nordic conference on Forest Policy Science.



Photo: Participants having lively discussions during the workshop session/ Alexandru Giurca

Complexity of Forest Policy

Forests are no longer seen simply as a source for timber supply, but rather as ecosystems that sustain livelihoods and provide a range of products and environmental services. Forest policymaking has to respond to market globalization and environmental challenges, such as the loss of biodiversity and climate change. Beyond these ecological and economic challenges, governance systems are changing. Forest policy have become more multi-level, including processes at international and EU levels, but as well at the sub-national level; policy processes increasingly involve a multitude of non-governmental actors from various sectors relat-

ed to forestry.

The increasing complexity means that forest policy processes at all levels need to balance more diverse management objectives, stakeholder opinions and divergent interests in forests. Forest policy research can contribute by elaborating on this complexity, and respectively expand on relationships between involved actors and/or institutional structures, provide critical insights from other cases, explain historical cases, or predict effects of alternative future actions.

Furthermore, forest policy research can sometimes provide policy recommendations to concrete challenges.

Contribution of Forest Policy Science

Forest policy researchers recognize that management of natural resources is driven by multiple interlinked factors, such the trajectories of socio-economic development, present state of forest ecosystems and the interests of involved actors. The knowledge of such complex socioecological systems can only be partial. We start from the premise that as not all questions are asked, nor answered, the choice of research topics is, inherently, political as it shapes what aspects of reality are known and communicated. Further, we acknowledge that the choice of research approach and methods is likely to affect the findings of research.

Forest policy researchers come from and draw on multiple disciplines of social sciences in their research, e.g. political science, sociology, environmental politics and law, development studies, history, geographic, communication. Our ability to combine and understand knowledge derived from different disciplines and drawing on multiple methods and forms of data, such as statistics, quantitative and qualitative data from surveys, interviews and observations, allow us to arrive at more nuanced and multifaceted understandings of reality than researchers who

draw on only one discipline or work with only one form of data.

Forest policy researchers view policies from the perspective of both policy makers and people at the receiving end of policies. We examine values and material interests at stake in policy formulation and implementation.

Forest policy scientists focus on disclosing how policies incur divergent costs and benefits to different groups. Accordingly, forest policy research contributes to understand why contestations arise and what is needed to further develop current policies. Our research aims to generate lessons to minimize and manage future contestation. In essence, we can support policy-making that is perceived as legitimate by the public, or spell out the area of conflicts and propose compromise solutions. To this end, one crucial arena in which forest policy research has expertise is in the conception, elaboration, implementation and monitoring phases of the policy process. Policy research is instrumental for understanding expected as well as unexpected impacts of policy implementation.

Forest policy research investigates factors like actors, interests, rules, power and discourses to elucidate for example: i) the drivers of policy change, ii) perceptions of policy options and iii) policy and procedural legitimacy. Additionally, examination of historical factors and international determinants foster learning processes in politics and policy creation.

Forest policy research builds on long-term experiences from multiple contexts and countries, and engages in international, national and sub-national policy-making and deliberating fora.

Therefore, the knowledge is specialist and context dependent.

Forest policy researchers ask difficult questions and examine policies and their impacts from the

perspective of multiple actors. Thus, we are apt at anticipating how policies are likely to be received and how demanding they are likely to be in terms of implementation and enforcement.

We value independent inquiry and the freedom to ask questions. We are thereby able to help elicit what questions remain unasked, and support policy makers in navigating the challenges and opportunities implied in policy processes. In contrast to natural sciences, the true value of forest policy research is not in eliciting universal causal laws but rather in providing the ethical guidance for the human action in managing, utilizing and protecting forests.

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