

A critical reflection on participation in international forest policy processes

WRM Briefing

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This is the second in a series of briefings based on a longer discussion paper produced from 2019-2021 by Larry Lohmann, a member of WRM's advisory committee. The discussion paper is based on input from interviews with several grassroots activists, the WRM advisory committee and the international secretariat; and it is a critical self-reflection on WRM's past, present and future work around forests, deforestation and its participation in international forest policy processes, fora and initiatives. The discussion paper can be accessed [here](#).

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A critical reflection on participation in international forest policy processes

The last big international effort to analyse the Underlying Causes of Deforestation happened more than 20 years ago with a significant participation of civil society groups. This UN-led process came up with the final report "Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation" in 1999 which included a list of policy recommendations, so that policymakers in relevant international spaces could formulate policies to address the identified causes.

However, a recent analysis produced by WRM shows that more than 20 years later, the policy recommendations have been largely ignored. In fact, in many ways, the Causes of Deforestation have been reinforced and new Causes can be added to the list.

This briefing paper aims to reflect on the participation of social movements, NGOs and grassroots activists in international forest policy processes, in particular, with the following issues and questions: what is the world of policymakers about?; should civil society groups continue providing policymakers with information and recommendations?; what are the dangers of participating in such policy forums?; how can policy work be inserted into a wider political strategy?

The world of policymakers

Policymakers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge from popular movements, intellectuals and NGOs, which they then call upon to decide the correct levers to push to bring about changes for the better.

First, like grassroots activists, policymakers insist on reinterpreting and deploying information that they are given in order to bring it into line with the commitments and understandings that they already have. But

those commitments and understandings are different from, for example, grassroots activists.

Grassroots activists might try – for example – to make sense of information about an anti-dam struggle on another continent by considering whether its strategies might be adopted in their own context in modified form.

Policymakers, however, would be more likely to treat that information as a warning about the kinds of resistance that might be expected to local dams, and as an incentive to formulate ways of repressing, containing, or compromising with it in advance.

This divergence is only natural. Whereas grassroots activists might be trying, for example, to build democratic alliances to protect water, policymakers are much more likely to be paid to ensure that state investments in hydropower can be defended.

Policymakers also tend to be more committed than forest communities to using the information that they are given to reinforce institutionalized fantasies rather than join in struggles for forest justice.

For example, most policymakers put their faith in orthodox economics – a field that, since the 18th century, has been organized around fantasies depicting a world of “equal exchange.”

In this fantasy world, labour exploitation does not exist, racism and patriarchy are accidents that have nothing to do with production, nature consists of “resources” that are in principle inexhaustible or replaceable, wealth is due to the ingenuity and discipline of owners and managers, and all problems or contradictions are “exceptions” to an underlying equilibrium.

No matter how implausible these fantasies may seem, most policymakers are dedicated, as part of their professional duties, to preserving it by reinterpreting criticism from the grassroots as nothing more than calls for “reform” of a fundamentally non-oppressive, non-exploitative system. That

too means that the two groups will act in different ways on the same information.

Second, policymakers are not, in fact, individuals who control how the future is going to unfold. In reality, they have their hands on very few of those figurative levers of power. Even if they were paid or otherwise motivated to support popular movements and protect forests, and supplied with every bit of relevant information about the underlying causes of forest destruction, they would have few means of acting on that information. Nor would most people even particularly want them to have privileged or unchallengeable access to many levers of power.

Like grassroots activists, policymakers are usually well aware of these limitations. They know that the power of states and international organizations, and therefore of whatever policies that they might formulate, is always constrained by many factors.

These include the need to organize natural resource subsidies for capital and to build and maintain coalitions with powerful political parties, religious groups, civil society organizations, corporate associations, financiers and so forth.

Policymakers cannot simply decide on their own to take seriously the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation if there are no powerful popular movements forcing their bosses and prominent political institutions to do so.

They understand that in the absence of such movements, they would be fired from their jobs if they tried to act too strongly against capital's imperatives to deforest. That in turn would jeopardize their prestige, livelihoods and the welfare of their families.

Not least, taking effective action on the underlying causes of deforestation would disrupt the fantasies that structure the institutions that employ policymakers, as well as their own enjoyment of their life's work.

Should policymakers be provided with information and recommendations?

Even if there are “gaps” in policymakers’ knowledge about those underlying causes, it may not necessarily do any good to “fill” those gaps with a publication like the 1999 “Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation”. Indeed, it may sometimes even do harm, unless it is accompanied by actions based on a profound, realistic understanding of how policymakers are likely to react (or not) to the information, how popular movements might respond to this reaction, how policymakers might react (or not) to this response in turn, and so on.

That in turn requires a solid grasp of the possibilities available to popular movements to put pressure on policymakers, their superiors, patrons and opponents other than simply providing information to them – or to the opinion formers, researchers or lobbyists on whom they rely.

It also requires a solid grasp of the damaging ways in which policymakers may turn to their advantage the mere fact of movements’ participation in official forums, regardless of what information is exchanged.

For example, will the act of activist participation bestow credibility on a forum at a time when social movements are seeking to reduce its credibility?

Will it unwittingly lend support to the fantasy that states and policymakers are capable of tackling the underlying causes of deforestation given the correct information and the “political will”?

Activists have not always taken the trouble to exercise such skills of strategic anticipation and long-term political evaluation of the contexts in which knowledge is shared.

Instead, many have tended simply to assume that identifying the roots of crisis in a public or private forum – or striving to insert a bit of critical text into a policy document – must necessarily be good for popular movements,

regardless of the forum in which that identification takes place or the text in which the criticism appears, and regardless of the nature of the cut and thrust that ensues. Therefore, many activists assume, no thought needs to be taken about context.

This can lead to a lack of discrimination in the choice of the forums in which discussions about forest crisis are conducted, a diffusion of movement energies, and an unwitting reinforcement of the underlying causes of deforestation. It can also lead to unnecessary surprise and disappointment when the conclusions of a study like the 1999 "Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation" end up having so little impact on forest politics.

Neither are "knowledge gaps" necessarily the overriding reason that blocks middle-class environmentalists or influential NGOs like Environmental Defense Fund, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) or The Nature Conservancy from being able, by and large, to make effective common cause with grassroots forest defenders.

Of course, good information about the underlying causes of deforestation is always necessary to efforts to break damaging alliances and build more constructive ones.

But it is not sufficient. More important is the determination to come to terms with class, race and gender hierarchies and loyalties, dangerous funding structures, bureaucratic logics, cultural and political biases, and the fantasies that structure the behaviour of people who work in corporations and state or international institutions.

One especially significant reason that forest movements need to exercise discrimination in their choice of discussion forums is that their craftier opponents have learned to welcome criticisms of destructive forest policies and practices as guides about how to immunize themselves against more severe opposition. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," goes the old saying.

Corporations and organizations such as the World Bank have often emerged more resilient after skirmishes with environmentalists because of their ability to adapt many of the trappings of popular resistance to their own purposes and fantasies.

Without the pressures exerted by forest movements, for example, how could capital and its agents and regulators have found either the motivation or the materials to forge new weapons like green labels, ecosystem service exchange, environmental economics, Free Prior Informed Consent procedures, and so forth? All of these, as noted above, are now a part of the arsenal belonging to the forces of deforestation and forest degradation.

What are the dangers of participation in such policy forums?

It can be unwise to participate in policy forums without understanding the relative strength and orientation of the forces that will determine how that participation is ultimately used. Unless collective efforts are made to predict these outcomes, alliances may be weakened.

The dangers can be illustrated by events from WRM's own experience. In the 1990s and 2000s, different WRM Advisory Board members from the global North insisted on continuing to exchange information and opinions within certain international forest forums despite the pleas of grassroots groups and others associated with WRM not to do so.

Concerns were raised that, by implicitly giving credibility to those forums, the board members in question would undermine movement positions in the specific, sensitive local negotiations and maneuvers in which they were engaged.

Although everyone involved agreed on the nature of the forest threats in question, two radically different theories of political strategy were in operation.

The Northern board members were at least partly motivated by the political theory that disseminating correct information about forests could only help popular movements no matter what the nature of the forum was. The idea was that “every little bit helps.”

They also openly expressed a belief that the only way of “engaging” with the actors in the forum was to confront them in their own protected environment with contrary analyses and demands for change.

The grassroots groups, on the other hand, had a far more sophisticated grasp of realpolitik. They knew that information is never mere information, but always part of a complex political game that can give it different kinds of significance. They also had enough experience to understand that there are many more kinds of “engagement” with corporations and states than simply making demands of them within their own favoured arenas – giving verbal comments on policy, adding provisions for “safeguards,” and the like.

For example, they knew that to refuse to participate in a forum is one way of “engaging” with that forum, provided outside sources of political strength are available.

It was this kind of practical experience that the Ecuadorian organization Acción Ecológica, cited when it objected in 2002 that an international NGO's negotiations in favour of “corporate accountability,” “new investment criteria,” “access to energy,” and so forth– all of which tended to focus on adding “text” to various policies – were actually “weakening our efforts” to “prevent corporations from enter[ing] our country,” “steal[ing] our resources,” “introduc[ing] transgenic organisms”, and “harm[ing] our sovereignty”:

“We understand that a Northern organization cannot conceive of a world without corporations, but this is not true in our case. In our countries selfcentered development is still possible based on community economies and a large portion of the markets is informal. Millions of persons still live

from hand craft, small agriculture or inshore fisheries. Our economic, social and environmental problems originate precisely from the implementation of market economies whose arms are the corporations.”

This terminology notwithstanding, it is not only “Northern organizations” whose participation in certain kinds of policy discussions can adversely affect movement partners’ work.

For example, in the 1990s, the growing commitment of a Southern network to supporting Southern governments in international policy forums meant that it was no longer able to exercise solidarity with Indigenous and other movements who often had to oppose the policies of those governments. That became a matter of concern for many organizations. Accordingly, this network agreed to withdraw as host of the WRM Secretariat and no longer plays an active role in WRM.

This network's and other NGO's subsequent efforts to single out various bits of the Kyoto Protocol carbon trade treaty for endorsement also put it at odds with various movements struggling against carbon markets at the grassroots.

In short, in evaluating what it might mean to submit information, analysis or demands to a particular policy forum, it is always necessary to consider the extent to which prevailing “ground rules” determine what that information will mean in context.

To take yet another example, a United Nations or other international body will often inform representatives of forest movements that they will be allowed to speak only for two minutes and that they should not “speak too loudly” (to quote Dercy Teles, a union leader from Acre state in Brazil).

In effect, this tells the activists that the political meaning of their speeches will not be “in” the text of what they actually say.

Instead, it will be changed into something like “Thank you so much. I have

been generously allowed to participate, and I know you will take into consideration how what I say might benefit your plans. But I know that you have little chance of actually understanding or respecting me. And that's perfectly OK! Never mind."

In deciding whether to attend, activists need to assess in advance whether it will be possible, in alliance with others, to subvert this meaning of their statements away from the effect that the forum organizers intend. And similarly for written submissions to official or corporate consultation procedures.

How can policy work be inserted into a wider political strategy?

There are still more reasons for questioning the idea that the problem with official national or international forest policy and practice is that policymakers "lack the necessary knowledge" about the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation.

Arguably, one of the weaknesses of – for example – WRM's ongoing campaign critical of industrial tree plantations is that it appears to rest too much on the assumption that the problem is largely that not enough people – or at least people in power – understand that "plantations are not forests."

The problem is that there seems to be little basis for thinking that rank and file technocrats at, say, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), do not "know" that plantations are not forests. Nor that if they knew, then FAO would formulate better policies.

The reality is that even if every single official at FAO understood and agreed with WRM's point, the FAO would still have overwhelming incentives to ignore and devalue its own knowledge. Hence simply telling the FAO and other organizations year after year that "plantations are not forests" is by itself not much of a campaign strategy.

The point is not that it is useless to compile a document like the 1999 Addressing the Underlying Causes or to propagate slogans such as “plantations are not forests.”

The point is, rather, that such interventions need to be integrated into a coherent overall strategy of building new alliances that operate according to ground rules different from those governing policy forums and thus can mobilize different kinds of leverage.

In other words, it is not an effective campaign strategy simply to compose a “text,” set out a “position,” or formulate an “ask” and then to insert it into any available forum or organize a social media buzz on the assumption that it will always have the same effect.

It will not. Sometimes such a text will amount to a threat or warning to those in authority. Sometimes it will be a tactic for embarrassing or discrediting corporations or states. Sometimes it will be an opening move in a complicated legal strategy. Sometimes it will be a tactic for attracting media attention. Sometimes it will be an appeal to outsiders who are not present. Sometimes it will be a way of unifying diverse currents of resistance. Sometimes it will be a method of sabotage. Sometimes it will be just a way of stimulating and organizing a movement’s internal reflections.

Whether a text makes a difference, and what difference it makes, depends on the larger context in which it finds a place.

Yet if activists need to be wary about simply assuming that contributing to a policy forum will always be tactically useful, they also should not jump to the conclusion that it will always be tactically useless.

As WRM Advisory Board member Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network, Frank Luvanda of Suhode Foundation in Tanzania, and other friends of WRM have argued, popular movements cannot rule out in advance the possibility that a presence in some particular policy forum may prove useful or necessary at certain moments. Insofar as that is true, however, it is because that presence has a function in carefully thought-out larger strategies.

It is not because participating in international policy forums constitute the “only” way of “engaging” with corporations or the state. It is not because the alternative would be to “do nothing and sit around in our armchairs” (a direct quotation from one Southern-based NGO network formerly associated with WRM). It is not because “the forums invited us and it’s an opportunity;” or that “they’re paying us, and maybe we could use the money for our own purposes.”

Emmanuel Elong of Dibombari, Cameroon, a leader in the central African struggle against the palm oil plantations of the transnational firm SOCFIN, is one activist who points to the importance of having a clear strategy in mind when participating in international forums.

Elong is clear that, for him, international forums are of value mainly because they either provide indirect ways of putting pressure on local authorities to protect community rights (that is, of letting them know that they are being monitored from abroad) or help local organizers obtain new means to do their own work.

But such benefits need to be balanced against the considerable time and sweat required to participate in such global forums. It takes a lot of effort, for instance, to communicate local experience in rural Africa to distant urban-based audiences.

It also takes a lot of effort to counter the damage that other participants in the same meeting may do to the cause of forest protection. Organizations such as WWF, for example, have been known to attend international forums in order to back the efforts of conglomerates like SOCFIN to get a stamp of approval from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

Whatever benefits might accrue from participation in international policy forums also need to be balanced on a case-by-case basis against competing claims on organizers’ time from grassroots communities themselves.

Shrishtee Bajpai is a young researcher-activist working with communities

in Korchi, Maharashtra, India, who are simultaneously confronting mining companies, megaprojects, exclusionary conservation policies, conservationists, entrenched patterns of patriarchy and anti-*adivasi* (indigenous) prejudice, and the challenge of taking advantage of any remaining opportunities opened up by the 2006 Indian Forest Rights Act. Bajpai emphasizes that in such contexts, what is crucial to empowerment is “reflection, not reaction” – including reflection on “who we are” and why certain institutions are the way they are.

That takes time, trust, study, close daily attention to process and to internal divisions, patient devotion to efforts to expand networks and political spaces, and a willingness to admit that there is “no ultimate place to reach, rather a spiral process of struggles and transformations.”

Little of this can be allowed for in the schedules of activists committed to regular attendance at international policy forums.

Fellow Indian activist Pravin Mote, while not dismissing such forums, also prioritizes grassroots work. Mote notes that what communities often learn and benefit from most is direct contact with other, similar struggles and their strategies.

His analysis is echoed by that of Manoel Edivaldo Santos Matos, the veteran union leader from Santarém in Brazil. Santos keeps an open mind about participating in any forum in which key issues can be discussed, but also emphasizes that strengthening communities is the real issue.

In any negotiation, he adds, it is crucial to know who is who. Who is ultimately on the side of workers? Who is ultimately on the side of capital? In many ways, Santos observes, this has become harder over the last 20 years. “People who say they support you,” he points out, “are sometimes the most dangerous.”

In addition, the increased reach of media of all kinds has made public discussion at international forums and elsewhere more dependent on massproduced sets of what are often deceptive data. People get confused

and their analyses weakened, Santos notes, giving corporations an advantage. While Santos sees Indigenous movements as having grown stronger over time, in the age of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro they now face new attacks. These attacks, as in India, are coordinated with fresh attacks on labour and reinvigorated support for agribusiness.

For Soumitra Ghosh from West Bengal, one plea for participation in international policy projects that rings particularly hollow – at least in the Indian forest context – is that “we could use the money and travel opportunities being offered for purposes of our own.”

Ghosh singles out for special scrutiny not United Nations or other intergovernmental organizations themselves, but rather well-known, nominally-independent, well-intentioned international NGOs committed to recruiting Southern and grassroots input for international policy processes.

Such organizations, presumably, would agree with many of the conclusions of the 1999 report *Addressing the Underlying Causes*. Yet by not putting such conclusions to work in effective strategic contexts, Ghosh argues, they often contribute to a “loss of flexibility” in grassroots organizations.

For example, such organizations can become too dependent on making paper contributions to the forestry libraries of ministries and international agencies to the detriment of effective ground-level work.

If too many grassroots activists become NGO representatives in policy forums rather than strategists striving to build political connections and political strength on the ground, Ghosh adds, forest struggles suffer. Local leaders tempted into taking up “issue-hopping” international careers have less time for local exchanges and movement organizing.

Ghosh cites his own NGO as an example of an organization whose effectiveness was adversely affected when it tried to reconcile its grassroots work with the funding opportunities afforded by international NGO connections. It became a drag on his organization's work to have to report

so many “facts” to outside agencies (including data about underlying causes of deforestation) and to demonstrate that it was achieving “tangible outcomes.”

Ghosh’s warnings about international “NGO-ization” of grassroots movements find some parallels in the testimony of Dercy Teles, the union leader from Acre state in Brazil.

Teles has been involved in forest struggles for many decades. She concludes from hard experience in the Conselho Nacional de Seringueiros (National Council of Rubber-Tappers) that civil society organizations should not try to become assistants to state bureaucracies. Nor, she adds, should trade union organizations take on the role of executing state policy.

For example, for trade unions to help promote an urban style of education among rubber workers in the Amazon – one designed to prepare them for jobs in cities – is to ignore the reality that “ours is a different kind of education.” It is also a mistake, Teles says, for union organizations to accept the management of corruption-prone large budgets.

One suggestive case of how participation in policy forums needs to be subordinated to wider strategy considerations was the hearing of the California Air Resources Board (CARB) held in Sacramento, United States, in September 2019.

The hearing was advertised as helping CARB to decide whether to adopt the California Tropical Forest Standard as a methodology for evaluating and legitimizing REDD+-type programmes conducted outside California’s boundaries.

CARB’s staff had already made clear through years of exchanges with activists and experts that CARB had no interest whatsoever in fighting deforestation. Nor was it interested in joining movements to curb it.

What CARB was interested in was getting official permission to use forests in regions like Acre, Brazil and Chiapas, Mexico to manufacture cheap licenses to pollute for California industries under the state’s global warming legislation.

The forest activists who chose to participate in the 2019 hearing, such as Miriam Cisneros from the Kichwa community of Sarayaku in Ecuador and Jutta Kill of WRM (many of whom were restricted to that fabled two minutes of time for their presentations), were under no illusions that the hearing had been convened for any other purpose than to further this goal.

Moreover, CARB knew that they knew this. And the activists in turn knew that CARB knew that they knew it. All sides understood that the hearing had nothing to do with reasoned discussion of the causes of deforestation.

Instead, it was a theatre for ritual displays of power. The issue was what effect the drama enacted in the hearing room would have on media coverage and California taxpayer mentality.

Would the drama give moral authority to Sacramento's efforts to help California manufacturers go on using fossil fuels? Or would it instead reinforce popular opposition both inside and outside the borders of the state in a way that made trouble for Sacramento bureaucrats?

No critic of the Standard seriously expected CARB to respond to information or analysis about the underlying causes of deforestation. They knew CARB would react only to physical shows of strength and transnational unity.

Such shows of strength included the physical resistance to REDD+ projects that had already taken place on various continents. They included the rebellious red T-shirts sported by opponents of the Standard present at the meeting. They also included the implied economic threats to California corporations, the threats to the reputations of the bureaucracies that cooperate with them, and the livelihood threats to the individual officials working inside those bureaucracies.

Of course, it is too difficult to evaluate exactly what effects the participation of forest activists in this particular international policy forum might ultimately have.

What is certain, however, is that those effects, if they turn out to exist, will not be due to the “opportunity” afforded to activists by CARB to “submit evidence” or “engage” with a REDD+ process on CARB’s terms in CARB’s own protected Sacramento environment.

Instead, they will be due to the activists’ own overarching strategies of twisting CARB’s ground rules, understanding and confronting CARB’s governing fantasies, and simultaneously “engaging” with corporations in other, more wide-ranging and more confrontational ways across the world.

Final remarks

The lessons and observations in this briefing paper may be useful not only in responding to the question of with whom groups and activists committed with supporting the struggles of Indigenous Peoples and other forest-dependent communities to halt deforestation and defend their territories should spend the most time talking to, and how they might talk to them.

They may also be useful in deciding how to respond to incessant demands from state officials and corporations to provide them with “alternatives” acceptable to their needs.

As noted above, policymakers and private companies alike engage in unending efforts to reinterpret the actions of resistance movements as “criticisms of a model” as well as “proposals for an alternative model.” But that is not usually what they are. And on the whole it is damaging to popular movements to acquiesce in such reinterpretations.

In short, it can be just as anti-democratic and self-defeating for forest movements to endorse the political theory that action consists in the implementation of “alternatives” as it is for them to lend support to the fiction that “policymakers” can – or should – decide the future after being given “true and correct” information by popular movements.

For grassroots struggles, the big problem is not that no one has given the

authorities good “alternatives,” any more than it is that no one has given them proper “information.” The world is not a set of implemented plans and models but something far more complex.

It is one important reason that today WRM has turned its efforts more toward facilitating and strategizing horizontal alliances, exchanges, discussions and other processes among different grassroots movements themselves.

