Intensity and embeddedness: Two dimensions of equity approaches in multi-stakeholder forums

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Abstract

Multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) have been positioned as a transformative solution for more sustainable decision-making in forestry, land use, and climate change interventions. Yet, there is much criticism about the possibility of these forums to address the power inequalities that frame interactions between different stakeholders to forests and their resources. Based on a systematic search of cases in the scholarly literature, we present a new approach to examining how MSFs organised at the jurisdictional level to deal with unsustainable land and resource use in forests address equity issues. We engage with MSFs from two key characteristics: the degree to which an MSF includes local peoples as part of a forest-landscape solution (its intensity), and the degree to which the MSF and its outcomes are part of the societal and institutional fabric of a given area (its embeddedness). The reason for focusing on these aspects is simple yet important: we propose that an MSF's long-term resilience and success, and potential to promote equitable change is impeded if local peoples are not regarded as key partners and change-makers (rather than 'beneficiaries'), and if the forum and/or its outcomes are not meaningfully institutionalized. Intensity and embeddedness are useful analytical tools that go beyond typologies that identify characteristics found in successful MSFs. These tools are helpful in terms of explaining how different approaches across different contexts function as classifying MSFs as either top-down, bottom-up, or a combination of both is not particularly useful. We also provide practical lessons from cases under different combinations of intensity and embeddedness.

Introduction, scope and main objectives

Multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) have been positioned as a transformative solution for more sustainable decision-making in forestry, land use and climate change interventions (Bastakoti and Davidsen 2015; Larson et al. 2018). Their popularity is driven by the recognition that environmental challenges are complex and multi-dimensional, as is the array of actors with multiple interests in land use and land-use policy and practice (Gray and Purdy 2018). However, despite increasing interest and funding to support platforms in achieving more equitable and effective participatory processes, there is little comparative research on the topic and existing data on the track record for MSFs in accomplishing meaningful participation and conservation or sustainability are mixed. Moreover, recent research suggests that such platforms rarely address the underlying issues of equity, such as inclusion and unequal power relations, a key dimension of the MSF approach (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020). Measuring their effectiveness has also proven to be a challenge (Sterling et al. 2017). Based on a review of cases in the scholarly literature, this paper contributes to closing this evidence gap by presenting a new approach to examining how MSFs on land use and land-use change address equity. This approach engages with MSFs around two key dimensions: their intensity and their embeddedness.

We define intensity as the degree to which an MSF includes local peoples as part of a forest-landscape solution. Intensity combines two aspects of MSFs: social inclusion in its processes and whether the forum aims to equitably distribute aspects of power (e.g., access to participation, land/resources, decision-making, and equal respect for different kinds of knowledge) among stakeholders. Thinking through intensity allows us to gauge an MSF's explicit focus and position it with respect to others, based on its emphasis on empowerment,

increasing equity, and actions toward addressing structural inequalities. We define embeddedness as the degree to which an MSF and/or its goals or objectives are embedded or entangled in wider societal or governmental programs and processes. Thinking through embeddedness allows us to map the connections between an MSF and existing or planned policies, projects, programs, and government and social institutions and movements, and thus to understand an MSF's pathways or obstacles to impact.

We focus on these aspects to propose that an MSF's resilience and potential to promote equity are impeded if local peoples are not regarded as key partners and change-makers (rather than 'beneficiaries') and if the forum and/or its outcomes are not meaningfully institutionalized. We prioritize these concerns for several reasons. First, MSFs are specifically designed to be participatory processes; hence, any understanding of how they work must include an exploration of who participates, how and with what results. Second, participation in an MSF has a particular intent, depending on the assumptions of those who design it as local people's participation is seen as essential for on-the-ground changes, but approaches vary (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020). Third, although MSFs commonly involve different stakeholders – government, private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – this article prioritizes inclusion and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women and youth. These groups have been recognized as being most at risk from climate change and large-scale land-use changes, as well as efforts to address the latter (IPCC 2007; Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2020). They are also highlighted in global priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, and international agreements recognizing rights to self-determination and free, prior and informed consent. Finally, there are not enough systematic data available to understand how MSFs work, how they are tied to empowerment and social change, or if and how they bring about positive land-use change outcomes.

Understanding the impacts of such forums requires better analytical tools; the concepts developed here are intended to be a step in that direction. In what follows, we develop an analytical framework for understanding these two key aspects of MSFs, intensity and embeddedness, based on 13 case studies chosen from an extensive literature review (see Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020). The next section briefly explains the methods and cases. Section 3 presents a summary of our results, followed by a discussion of the overall findings and lessons regarding the analysis for understanding approaches to equity. We close with a short conclusion.

Methodology/approach

This paper is based on a set of MSFs that address governance and management of forested landscapes at the subnational level and that involve both government and non-government participants. We define MSFs as "purposefully organized interactive processes that bring together a range of stakeholders to participate in dialogue, decision-making and/or implementation regarding actions seeking to address a problem they hold in common or achieve a goal for their common benefit" (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019: 1). Thirteen cases were chosen from the literature to explore the intensity and embeddedness of MSFs. These cases are not an exhaustive list of the different kinds of MSFs in the literature, but they do offer evidence to support the utility of our approach and offer insights into MSFs in general. The sample includes voluntary and statutory MSFs, which have varied aims including dialogue, negotiation, fostering trust, addressing disputes and conflicts, managing resources, collective decision-making and implementing solutions. As this variety suggests, MSFs do not necessarily fall under a neat definition: after all, their multi-stakeholder nature is likely to prevent this.

Subnational MSFs were chosen for three reasons. First, prior to this project, recent analysis on MSFs focused primarily on international initiatives (e.g. the Roundtables on Responsible Soy and Sustainable Palm Oil). Second, subnational MSFs are closer to the geographical spaces and the stakeholders involved in and affected by land-use change, planning and management. Third, the analysis contributes to a growing interest in scholarship and practice on subnational jurisdictional approaches to tackle climate change and deforestation (Boyd et al. 2018). The 13 case studies were selected following an inclusion criterion beyond the baseline criteria set out above. They were chosen to represent different kinds of MSFs that were identified from the research carried out toward a realist synthesis review of subnational MSFs that considered almost 1000 articles (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020; see Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2018 for the protocol). The case studies are indicative of wider trends in the literature that were identified in the review. Beyond this, the cases were chosen following two additional criteria. First, they included sufficient material to understand how the processes work, allowing their intensity and embeddedness to be evaluated. Second, the cases included data on how MSFs can change over time and how these shifts impacted their processes and outcomes.

Table 1 includes basic information for our 13 case studies and Table 2 presents the set of indicators for the different levels of intensity and embeddedness in order to evaluate the case studies. These attributes and characteristics are not meant to be exhaustive but represent key trends identified in the literature and in prior research by the authors (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019; Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020).

Table 1. Case studies

Case Study	Short title	Source
1/Hekluskogar, Iceland	1/Hekluskogar	Berglund, Hallgren and Aradóttir 2013
2/Finger Lakes National Forest	2/Finger Lakes	Twarkins, Fisher and Robertson 2001
3/New South Wales, Australia	3/NSW	Brummel et al. 2012
4/Embera Community, Panama	4/Embera	Holmes et al. 2017
5/Juma REDD+ Project, Brazil	5/Juma	Uaugstsson et al. 2014; Gebara, 2013
6/Yalova Model Forest, Turkey	6/Yaloya	Bekiroglu et al. 2016
7/Hin Nam No Protected Area, Lao PDR	7/Him Nam No	de Koning et. Al. 2017
8/Bangkok Urban Green Space, Thailand	8/Bangkok	Stringer et al., 2006
9/Ashaninka Communal Reserve, Peru	9/Ashaninka	Caruso 2011 & 2014
10/Dwebe Project, South Africa	10/Dwebe	Fay 2014
11/Makuleke Claim, South Africa	11/Makulele	Fay 2014
12/Agama Forest Cooperative, Ethiopia	12/Agama	Alemayehu et al. 2015; Behagel, et al. 2017
13/Ntchisi Forest Reserve, Malawi	13/Ntchisi	Zulu, 2013

Table 2. Indicators for different levels of Intensity and Embeddedness (Hewlett et al. 2021)

Value	Embeddedness	Intensity
Nominal	Focused on a single issue	Voluntary Participation
	Tangential	Limited Scope for increasing inclusion
	Accidentally nested	No mention of inequalities
	Connection to single issue policies and guidelines	Short-term
		Informal and Non-binding conflict resolution, problem-solving
		Local knowledge not taken into account
		Emphasis on increasing Participation
Low	Significantly entangled	Establishment of partnerships
	Intentionally embedded	Coordination
	Limited connection to wider policies and guidelines	Collaboration
		Limited emphasis on equity and empowerment and nominal recognition of rights
Medium	Directly connected to wider policies and guidelines	Specific measures for inclusivity and increasing participation
	Integrated with multi-level processes of governance	Co-management
	Creation or formalization of governance institutions	Some focus on equity and empowerment
		Negotiated restricted rights to resources
		Some Resource Sharing
High	Structural and Institutional Change	Focus on empowerment
	Embedded or connected with wider projects/programs focused on participation	Focus on addressing inequalities
	Changes in local participation in decision-making and control over resources	Recognition of some customary rights and responsibilities
		Management-Ongoing
		Contractual and equitable partnership
		Binding
		Increase rights to resources

Results

Our results are summarized in two tables and a figure below. Table 3 summarizes the classification of MSF case studies based on their Intensity, and Table 4 their classification based on their Embeddedness. Figure 1 provides a visual and comparative summary of these classifications.

Table 3. Classification of MSF case studies based on their Intensity

Value	Intensity	Hekluskogar	Finger Lakes	NSW	Embera	Juma	Yaloya	Him Nam No	Bangkok	Ashaninka	Dwebe	Makulele	Agama	Ntchisi
Nominal	Voluntary Participation			X		X				X	X			
Nominal	Limited Scope for increasing inclusion	X												
Nominal	No mention of inequalities			X		X								
Nominal	Short-term	X												
Nominal	Informal and Non-binding conflict resolution; problem-solving	X			X						X			
Nominal	Local knowledge not taken into account												X	
Nominal	Emphasis on increasing Participation	X	X	X	X	X	X			X				
Low	Establishment of partnerships										X			
Low	Coordination		X								X	X		
Low	Collaboration		X						X					
Low	Limited emphasis on equity and empowerment and nominal recognition of rights	X	X											
Med	Specific measures for inclusivity and increasing participation							X	X					
Med	Co-management		X					X	X	X		X		
Med	Some focus on equity and empowerment				X								X	
Med	Negotiated restricted rights to resources									X			X	
Med	Some Resource Sharing							X		X		X		
High	Focus on empowerment							X	X				X	
High	Focus on addressing inequalities												X	X
High	Recognition of some customary rights and responsibilities							X		X			X	X
High	Management-Ongoing									X			X	X
High	Contractual and equitable partnership													X
High	Binding									X			X	
High	Increase rights to resources									X			X	X

Table 4: Classification of MSF case studies based on their Embeddedness

| Value	Embeddedness	Hekluskogar	Finger Lakes	NSW	Embera	Juma	Yaloya	Him Nam No	Bangkok	Ashaninka	Dwebe	Makulele	Agama	Ntchisi
Nominal	Focused on a single issue	X	X	X	X				X					
Nominal	Tangential	X												
Nominal	Accidentally nested													
Nominal	Connection to single issue policies and guidelines	X		X										
Low	Significantly entangled													
Low	Intentionally embedded					X								
Low	Limited connection to wider policies and guidelines		X	X	X									
Med	Directly connected to wider policies and guidelines					X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Med	Integrated with multi-level processes of governance					X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Med	Creation or formalization of governance institutions					X	X				X			
High	Structural and Institutional Change									X	X		X	X
High	Embedded or connected with wider projects/programs focused on participation												X	X
High	Changes in local participation in decision-making and control over resources							X		X	X		X	X
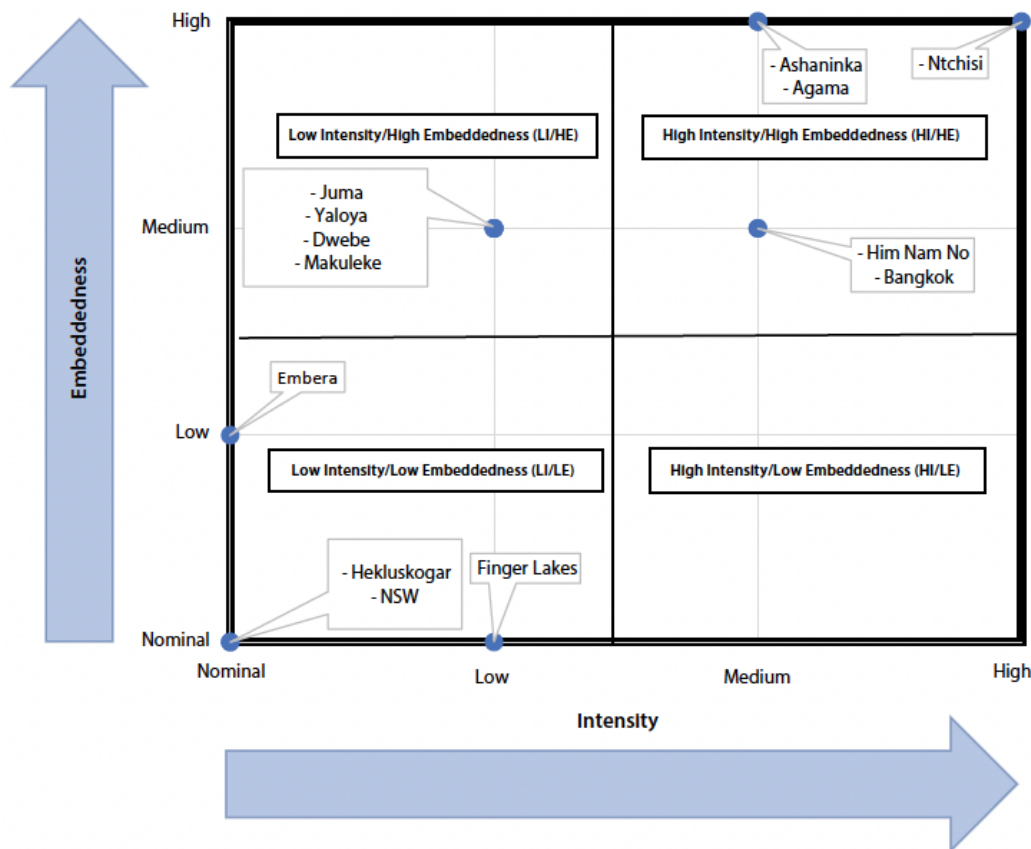
Figure 1. Visual summary of intensity and embeddedness by case study

Discussion

This discussion is organized in six sub-sections that address different aspects of the case studies, our method of analysis, findings and insights stemming from the literature. We begin with a summary of the findings.

The outcome of the combination of different degrees of intensity and embeddedness depends on the context in which MSFs are implemented.

The first option is high intensity and embeddedness. These MSFs will help to address power inequalities beyond the forum itself (Ntchisi and Agama). However, Bangkok had a medium level of intensity and embeddedness—which led to enhanced citizen participation in planning—but the application of the same MSF elsewhere had less positive outcomes when there was insufficient funding and support for participation from government actors; more proof that context matters. Furthermore, most of the case studies in our review with medium or high levels of embeddedness tended to have medium or high intensity levels. These cases were embedded in institutional contexts that were supportive of more equitable processes. This leaves the question of what would result from an MSF with high intensity and embeddedness in a highly unequal context that is not open to equity concerns, which could potentially lead to changes limited to the MSF's immediate area of action or could negatively affect equity in the MSF and greatly diminish any potential for positive outcomes beyond. The second option is low intensity and high embeddedness. Our wider research on MSFs showed how forums that were highly embedded in broad contexts of relative equality may only need low or medium intensity to achieve equity-related goals (see Gonzales Tovar et al. 2021). A highly embedded MSF in a context of inequality, however, may not have a wider impact if it places little or no importance on changing the status quo by addressing power inequalities (low intensity). In our review, MSFs with low intensity and medium embeddedness levels were organized in contexts marked by unequal structures. Finding these contexts challenging, MSF organizers changed their goals to what seemed like more plausible pathways to positive change, but which ended up being detrimental to the priorities of local communities. The third option is an MSF with low embeddedness and high intensity. In this case, even if the MSF is equitable and seeks to address power structures (high intensity), this would not enable changes in power relations outside the MSF (low embeddedness). This scenario was not found across the case studies. When there were low embeddedness

levels, even when some measures were taken to improve equity (e.g., Yalova), inequalities remained as there were no structural changes. The fourth option is low intensity and embeddedness. These MSFs did not seek to address inequalities (low intensity) and had little connection with wider processes and institutions (low embeddedness). Hekluskogar and Finger Lakes were initially established as part of wider government trends to increase participation of local stakeholders in establishing plans for protecting natural resources. They did not address power differentials and had a marginal inclusion of stakeholders. These cases focused on a single issue and were not entangled with wider processes; therefore, they did not lead to any structural changes.

There are limited data on processes, outcomes and medium and long-term impacts of MSFs, highlighting the need to publish more details

We found limited data on the actual planning and execution of the MSFs. Many of the articles reviewed had limited information from interviews with organizers and/or participants, while some did not include any interviews at all. Furthermore, for most case studies, there were limited official data about how the project was developed, funded, and implemented. Overall, there was little detail regarding how processes within MSFs were designed and ran. A general problem identified in the literature about MSFs, particularly those at the subnational level, and projects that include MSFs as part of their methodologies, is that few studies provide substantial research on the context prior to an MSF's introduction and details about its implementation. While this limitation is problematic, the most glaring gap identified in this and previous research (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2019, 2020) is the lack of literature based on long-term studies of MSFs. One reason for this knowledge gap is that the boom in MSF implementation has not been matched by the same degree of interest in research on these cases. Furthermore, some organizations with extensive experience with MSFs do not publish material with sufficient detail about their MSFs' processes or evidence to substantiate their findings about their work. These same organizations often argue that there is insufficient material available to provide evidence for whether MSFs are truly successful, how and why (see Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2019). A third issue is the selectivity of the data—much of the information on MSFs is published by their organizers, who may not be as willing to, or interested in, presenting their failures. This lack of knowledge sharing greatly reduces the ability to evaluate long-term impacts of MSFs or related projects.

Lessons for methods and research processes

A practice-based approach is promising for studying MSFs. Four of the most detailed cases (Ashaninka, Dwebe, Makuleke, and Agama) all engage with this in similar ways and provide the most useful materials for understanding the case studies. In these cases, the issues of power, representation, decision-making processes and outside influences were all directly addressed in ways that allowed for more detailed and nuanced understandings. Given the overall paucity of evidence about how decisions are made in these processes, these cases offer important guides for the approaches needed to fill knowledge gaps. Participatory research offers another promising method for studying MSFs. For example, in Embera, the authors partnered with local people to improve a project that they supported but did not organize; they include this engagement in detail in the article. The details provided stem from a participatory approach that produced a nuanced account of the ways stakeholders engaged, the slow process of shifting power dimensions and the struggle to build equity into the management system. Embera demonstrates that people engage in MSFs for their own reasons and have their own objectives. The details they include, however, point toward the need to transcend approaches which only gauge people's positions or experiences after the fact, and instead document MSF processes in detail. This information would allow for deeper analysis of the reasons why the project was unsuccessful even though people were willing to participate. That is, the ways people engage with an initiative and its context are not easily accounted for by extrapolating from their willingness to participate. Participants' perspectives and decision-making processes are complex and need to be explained and understood to improve the effectiveness of MSFs. The details about local people's decision-making, regarding what they prioritize and why, are insightful. This same kind of detail can and should be extended to descriptions and discussions about those leading the project so that the decision-making processes of the organizers is not taken for granted (see Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2021 for a study of MSF organizers' perspectives). This raises the question of how much information is included when those responsible for a project are also authoring articles.

The objectives of MSFs change over time

The objectives set out at the beginning of an MSF do not always end up being those that are prioritized, as priorities and collaboration arrangements change through time. For example, in Hekluskogar the government initially sought to address the imbalances of the status quo top-down approach by applying new participatory

methods. This resulted in the establishment of the MSF, which successfully brought different actors together and obtained funding for the project. Priorities seem to have changed since then toward knowledge sharing, as the government took complete control of the project, undermining the potential to increase participation both within the MSF itself and in the wider processes implementing conservation and land restoration projects. Additionally, this decision resulted in a reduction in both the MSF's intensity and embeddedness. There was a different kind of transformation in Dwebe and Makuleke as different kinds of MSFs emerged to deal with land claims and resource management. While these two processes sometimes overlapped, they were not fully integrated with one another due to an NGO's reluctance to get involved and the unwillingness of local leaders to integrate their land claims with a process that would not prioritize them over conservation objectives. As such, there were multiple simultaneous MSFs, each with different primary objectives. Ashaninka offers insights into a different kind of shift, one in which NGOs were able to integrate a government-led process with their goals of building a more inclusive and accountable system of governance.

Implementation matters – Designing a participatory process to be equitable is not enough

Having a design or intent that focuses on addressing power inequalities is important but is not enough. Some of the cases provided evidence of how thoughtful design was undercut, and/or how the intent of addressing these issues was de-prioritized, in implementation. Actors involved in implementing an MSF may impact its planned intensity in different ways. In most cases – and perhaps to be expected – these changes were introduced by some of the most powerful actors. However, sometimes the opposite happens. In Ashaninka, historically marginalized actors created alliances to impact the MSF and improve its intensity. Because this case was so highly embedded in the Peruvian system of Natural Protected Areas, its impact extended beyond its immediate context into higher levels by supporting the legal transition toward co-management for communal reserves. Importantly, these processes happened in an international context that was supportive of Indigenous Peoples' involvement in environmental management, and in a national context where laws protecting Indigenous rights had been in place for more than a decade. Although we cannot generalize, this may suggest that historically marginalized actors might be able to flip the issue of power, but this may depend on how these actors and their objectives are embedded in wider processes at different levels.

Responsibilities must come with benefits

As MSFs aim to increase local participation, increased responsibilities for local peoples do not tend to correspond with an increase in resource access or control, or land rights. As was demonstrated by Ashaninka, there was hesitation among Indigenous leaders because the agreement they were meant to sign placed extensive responsibilities on local organizations and communities without providing sufficient support or benefit. Agama is similar, as communities had responsibilities over an extensive array of activities, while gaining little in terms of control over resources. In fact, in these cases, local partners were supposed to increase their regulation of forest resource use and monitor to ensure that there were no infractions based upon the new rules. In contrast, in Ntchisi, local people gained formal access to the reserve, rights to some financial benefits from licensing for access and support in managing their own forests. However, there were no cases where local people received titles to land that had been declared a protected area. While this was the original aim in Makuleke, participants only achieved access rights to the reserve. Consequently, the importance of identifying the balance between rights and control gained, and responsibilities mandated should be incorporated into the concept of intensity. There are few examples in the literature of cases where full rights over protected areas or forest resources are transferred from private or state ownership to local people. Conversely, in many cases rights are extended, but with extensive systems of control and management by governmental agencies (Larson and Pulhin 2012).

Conclusions/ wider implications of findings

We examined MSFs based on two characteristics: the degree to which an MSF includes local peoples as part of a forest landscape solution (its intensity), and the degree to which the MSF and its outcomes are part of the societal and institutional fabric of a given area (its embeddedness). Our analysis proves useful in describing cases and explaining how they differ, particularly in terms of equity. Intensity and embeddedness are useful analytical tools that go beyond typologies that identify characteristics found in successful MSFs. They are helpful to explain how different approaches across different contexts function and add nuance to simplified dichotomies. The analytical application of intensity and embeddedness to our case studies permitted new insights, demonstrating their value as analytic tools while also pointing toward ways that they could be further

developed. Importantly, a major point regarding the analysis of MSFs is that there needs to be sufficient material detailing their processes. There may be many cases in the literature, but little have sufficient detail.

As for the application of these analytical tools and their further development, intensity might be expanded to include a more detailed analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the different stakeholders so it can differentiate between stakeholders participating in the projects at different scales (e.g. funders, organizers, implementers, local people). For example, there are cases where a government or donor policy sets out a framework to increase the rights of local people to participate in decision-making and management of forest resources, but at the level of implementation there is no corresponding commitment to this degree of intensity. As for embeddedness, those assessing and writing about MSFs should find this concept valuable for how they engage in research about the medium- and long-term impacts of MSFs. It is not enough to simply look at an MSF as a closed circuit or single event; to understand the wider potential of MSFs to impact wider sociocultural, economic, and political structures, the surrounding institutions, whether formal or informal, should be considered. Ashaninka offers insight on how different stakeholders perceive embeddedness in terms of the ways 'natural resources' are defined. This includes how Ashaninka people understand their territory as part of a living landscape that is inhabited by different kinds of other-than-human beings (Sarmiento Barletti 2016), thus, bringing more actors and 'institutions' into the project. This insight raises the potential for embeddedness to engage with different ways of conceiving what is beyond – but connected to – the project, including the ways in which local people inhabit their landscapes and experience protected areas.

Acknowledgements

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