Making space for better forestry

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Views on Making space for better forestry

From: Felipe Vega
President, Junta Nacional Forestal Campesina (JUNAFORCA)

Forestry in Costa Rica has been characterised by its poor use of resources, lack of an integral forest policy, little or no participation of communities in policy formulation, aggressive intermediary market traders, and uneven profit distribution. Initiatives to improve forest legislation, to provide the forest sector with resources for reforestation, management and protection of forest resources have been insufficient and at times inappropriate, mainly due to their excessively technical or regulatory approach, which is out of touch with the reality of forest management at local levels.

Whilst communities have strengthened their organisational capacity - which has in turn stimulated the formation of national networks such as JUNAFORCA - the political space opened up for consideration of the forest needs of communities and smallholders is still small. There is a resistance by the traditional forest sector agencies to negotiate with the organisations representing local people who know and make their livelihoods from the forest resource. Coherent development strategies and constant struggle will be needed to enable these organisations to face the challenges posed by their members, and by forest product markets.

This is a valuable study, it compiles a wealth of information and shows a way forward for smallholder communities to influence national forestry policy. It will be a vital reference source for those organisations working to formulate proposals and improve the quality of life of smallholder families.

From: Dr Gerardo Budowski
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Costa Rica is often cited as an example, sometimes even as a model, of achievement for its system of protected areas, its policies on the study and use of biodiversity, the promotion of reforestation, and its ingenious schemes to add value to existing forest lands. Yet other reports show that the country had one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. While there is some truth in all these notions, the current forest situation in Costa Rica is much more complex, and generally poorly understood by government bodies, NGOs, international agencies, foreign observers and the general public.

This study provides a comprehensive picture of the many Costa Rican forest policy issues through a careful compilation and analysis of data, from the past to present, using case studies and indicating trends. Its conclusions and recommendations indicate how forest policy processes in particular can be improved and become more effective.

Better policy processes, policies and implementing instruments are needed to accelerate the transition from past destructive forestry to sustainable forest management, for the benefit of present and future generations. This study will be an extremely useful tool in meeting this challenge - and should be widely used by decision makers and scholars in Costa Rica, and in other countries where these issues have resonance.

Executive summary

Why forests and policy matter

Forests problems have hit the headlines in many countries in recent years. There is widespread recognition that forests are in trouble. Some people point to the adverse environmental impacts of rapid deforestation and forest degradation, whilst others are more concerned with declining access to the forest goods and services which people need. Considerable pressure now exists in many countries to control those who have been stripping forest assets, and to strike a new balance between national economic development, the resilience of the environment, and people's direct needs.

Behind the headlines lie issues of the power of different groups to exert their interests, and of policy frameworks in which these power differences are played out. In Costa Rica, policies that affect people's behaviour towards forests have played a major role in the way the country has developed, and continue to dominate many people's livelihoods. These policies come from many different sources, and their effects vary across groups of people. Capacity to influence policies also varies across groups. The overall effect of the complex web of policies directly conditions the nation's options and potential for sustainable development.

Costa Rica is well-known for its system of protected forest areas, and also for its dramatic rate of deforestation outside the protected areas. Many people would support the contention that the protected area system works well in terms of protection of the environment and biodiversity. There is also an increasing belief that the protected area system is good for Costa Rica in economic terms. However, there is no such consensus on whether protected area policy is meeting social and socio-economic needs.

Outside the protected areas, whilst a range of public policies stimulated the massive deforestation over the last fifty years, in recent times financial and economic incentives have brought an increase in the areas under plantation. Secondary forest has regenerated on grazing lands abandoned because of low beef prices, mostly on large private landholdings. However, there are forest resources with high productive potential in the small patches of forest on small private lands. Yet the combination of policies influencing decisions by smallholders has tended to create a disincentive to their engagement in forest management. This situation is changing with local, regional and national organisations of small farmers emerging to address forest policy issues.

This report is based on a collaborative research project carried out by a team of foresters, economists, social scientists and political analysts consulting widely over a period of two years. The report examines the environmental, economic and social 'raw material' for sustainability in Costa Rica's forests; it analyses the evolution of key policies and policy processes; and it draws conclusions about what 'works' and the ways forward for policy that is supportive of both forests and people.

The evolution of contests over policy

Before the 1950s, forest had slowly declined in area as the country's agricultural society emerged. Large coffee-producing landowners dominated, and a collection of laws had been passed which, on the one hand, tried to
mitigate certain impacts of agriculture on the forest, and on the other hand, set the scene for dramatic deforestation. Amongst an educated elite there was also a growing sense of concern that efforts to protect the environment were needed.

Wholesale conversion of forest was first stimulated by government policy in the early 1450s, when a new government sought to build a powerbase through a policy of extending low-interest credit to cattle ranching. Colonists were able to secure lands outside the Central Valley by clearing the forest. Some of these colonists were displaced smallholders; others were wealthier interests seeking extensive lands for cattle ranching. Timber industries benefited through a surplus of low-cost timber created by the conversion of forest land to grazing lands, while coffee growers in the Central Valley and the new plantation owners in the southern areas of the country profited from an increase in prices on the international market.

From 1970 to 1990 the protected area system became firmly established, and the forest industry continued its rise. Financial incentives for reforestation became government's main policy tool in forestry. These incentives mostly benefited larger landowners and were generally insensitive to people's motivations for forest management and conservation. The main losers were the smallholders, who collectively own about two-thirds of the country's land. However, the short-comings of the incentives system generated considerable debate, and stimulated the formation of smallholder forestry organisations.

Constraints on better policy

Costa Rica's forests (covering 35 per cent of the nation's land) and people (the population is 3.3 million) are today at a turning point. The conflicting tendencies of the past, from state-promoted deforestation for agriculture, to absolute protection against the people' of forests and other ecosystems, are today giving way to a national commitment to sustainable development in which a balance between socioeconomic and environmental priorities is attempted. But the history of land allocation, agricultural development and protected area establishment which has shaped today's landscape of forests and people, continues to constrain the available options. The constraints include:

- The macro-economy, particularly structural adjustment, which has a large part in determining forest policy.
- Excessive influence on policy of some actors, particularly sections of government, forest industry, and more recently the advocates of forest protection.
- Limited policy analysis capabilities amongst key actors.
- A high level of regulation which, in effect, protects the existing large-scale forest industry.
- Forestry financial incentives benefiting only the large landholders.
- The integration of forest management and forest product processing is not yet perceived to be profitable by small-scale and medium-scale enterprises.
- Uncommunicative and unresponsive state agencies, and capacity weaknesses in local government.
- Existing mechanisms for regionalisation do not coincide with coherent socio-cultural areas.

Policies and policy processes that work

Costa Rica's 'natural' strengths with regard to policy for forests and people lie in its high level of education, its history of social Organisation and its relatively democratic governance systems. Lessons which can be learned about policies and policy processes that work for forests and people in Costa Rica include:

- Cross-sectoral policy analyses, when well-targeted, have brought sectoral actors together and given impetus to policy debates.
- Economic incentives increase capacity amongst large-scale producers, and increase levels of Organisation amongst smallholders, if government can afford them.
- Linking local success (e.g. ASACODE) to regional alliances (e.g. ASUNFORT) and national associations (e.g. JUNAFORCA for smallholder forestry) generates considerable "political space" for improving policy.
- Public/private collaboration for forestry technical assistance has raised standards, for example, through the 'forest regents' programme.

- Initiatives ensuring that local groups benefit more from conservation are beginning a necessary 'socialising' of the protected area system.

- Progressive land taxation can be an effective tool for redistributing land to those that need it, and for providing locally-controlled resources for better land use.

- New 'green policies' can secure international finance. Ecotourism is already providing high returns, while bioprospecting and carbon-fixing both offer much potential. However, distribution of the benefits is an issue requiring negotiation.

- Constitutional guarantees on the environment, through the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (Sala IV) and the Ombudsman's Office, have provided new means for citizen participation in environmental management.

- Innovative bilateral support, for example through the National Council of Non-governmental Organisations (CONAO), can create effective space for negotiation of differences between actors.

Some of these policies and processes have forced open doors for a general rethinking of policy. The potential for good forest management is stronger today than in previous decades. For example, in the early 1980s there were neither technologies nor adequate producer support organisations for a smallholder development strategy; this is no longer the case. Administrative decentralisation through Regional Environment Councils and other measures also gives some room for manoeuvre. There is also much evidence of a local 'ethic' of sustainable development, which can be learned from and built on through these measures.

A number of challenges and opportunities present themselves. Formal policy is vital, but cannot do everything. The focus of government institutions needs to shift from attempted control of all decision-making over forests to enabling reconciliation of national, private and collective interests. Policy needs to accommodate uncertainty and change; to clarify how to integrate or trade-off different benefits and costs; and to provide signals to the managers of forests as to how they will be held accountable. This generally implies negotiation amongst different positions, and 'deal-cutting' between different social groups to keep policy 'on the boil'.

**Recommendations for an improved national policy process**

These challenges imply the need for improvements in the workings of government and the political system. Increased participation and democratisation of forestry policy needs to be reconciled with the increased liberalisation and globalisation of the economy, the effects of which, in Costa Rica, are likely to include increased land concentration. These improvements require active national debate and negotiation.

**Negotiating goals and priorities for forests**

a. Install mechanisms for national-level goal-setting for forests and people, whereby priorities debated at the level of local organisations can be channelled up through networks, with proven local-national links, to national-level 'negotiating spaces' involving different sectors.

b. Set basic forest management principles and objectives at national level, the aim of which is to enable local systems to plan in detail and to pursue practical and flexible action.

**Developing institutional roles and practice**

c. Effect key constitutional reforms and congressional laws for 'participatory democracy' - including community election of representatives and public debate of draft laws.

d. Establish 'socio-environmental areas'. Current planning based on ecological/land use suitability needs to be reconciled with area for which there is socio-economic and cultural-political cohesion. Objectives for environmental areas are only likely to be turned into effective action where they are taken up by existing forms of social Organisation.

e. Build strategic alliances at regional level. Alliances to bridge the divide between environmental and social agendas are particularly needed at the 'meso' levels between national and local organisations.
f. Support local-level organisational capacity. Financial incentives from government could be more focused on initiatives for social organisation to pursue forest management for local benefits.

g. Identify capacities that are based on practical collaborations between public forestry agents and private sector/non-governmental actors - and strengthen these collaborations on a case by case basis.

h. Re-orient work patterns in government institutions to improve accountability of staff, and create incentives for working flexibly and creatively for results, rather than for rigid compliance with formal procedures.

i. Government should promote accountability, and seek public opinion on major changes in public-private institutional roles and other key forest-related changes affecting the public, through a referendum or plebiscite.

j. Focus on resource-conserving production systems. Initiatives should engage with the whole cycle of production, processing and marketing of forest products. In many cases, local actors require regular small benefits from forests, rather than returns from a one-off cut.

**Monitoring, analyzing, informing and adapting**

k. Track the practice of policy, through practical monitoring and recording, at all levels 'up' to the national goal-setting fora, so that learning can change policy for the better.

l. Facilitate local involvement in policy analysis. When their interests are recognised, analysis by community-level actors themselves can play a major role in improving policy.

m. Improve analysis of policy contents and instruments through support for cross-sectoral working groups, and improve information systems for policy, through e.g. Forest Resource Accounting

n. Spread information on local policy success. Continue the process, begun by this study and others, of analysis, recording and disseminating of information about local forest management success and lessons for policy processes derived from local initiatives.

Existing forest sector bodies and other groups already involved with policy can make a start on some of these recommendations straight away. In addition, an initial forum involving all the key forest actor groups is needed to debate the above options, agree priorities, and identify the institutional mechanisms for taking the next steps.

This study identifies what is good and bad in existing policy processes in Costa Rica. It describes the progress that has been made when strategic alliances form between social groups. The challenge for these alliances now is to put their weight behind some of the key options identified above - bringing accountability and equity to the core of policies affecting forests; negotiating between local and national interests - to shape policy processes that generate real benefits for forests and people.

**Contents**

I Introduction 1

1.1 The purpose of this report 1

1.2 The existing knowledge base 2

1.3 The process of the study 3
1.4 A note on terms used in the study 4

2 Costa Rica’s forest and social landscape 5

2.1 Biophysical landscape 5

2.1.1 Physical geography and climate 5
2.1.2 Forest areas, timber volume and biodiversity 5
2.1.3 Farm-forest patterns and transition areas 7
2.1.4 Plantations of commercial species 9

2.2 Social and economic landscape 10

2.2.1 Tenure and administration of forest areas 10
2.2.2 The economic role of forests 11

2.3 Institutions and actors linked to the forest 16

2.3.1 Governmental institutions 16
2.3.2 Forest and tourism industry actors 17
2.3.3 Community-level actors 19
2.3.4 Academics, conservationists, donors and consumers 22

3 Policy stories: the evolution of policy influences on forests and people 27

3.1 Before 1950: large landowners emerge, civil society forms and the forest slowly declines 27
3.2 From 1950 to 1970: national agricultural development, land titling and massive deforestation 30
3.3 From 1970 to 1990: protected areas, the rise of forest industry and the end of the agricultural frontier 35
3.4 From 1990 to 1997: sustainable development’s growing pains 44
3.5 The evolution of power to influence policy - a visualisation 52

4 Policy for forests: the current state of play 55

4.1 Summary of extra-sectoral policy influences 55
4.2 Summary of government policy for forests, and perspectives of other main actors 57

5 Key policy contests and dilemmas 63

5.1 Management of forest production and industry 63
5.2 Fiscal and financial incentives 70
5.3 Management of protected areas 77
5.4 Decentralisation and participation in policy processes 81

6 Conclusions and recommendations 87

6.1 Constraints on better policy 87
6.2 Policies and policy processes that work 89
6.3 Challenges and opportunities 92
6.4 Recommendations for an improved national policy process 94

Bibliography 101

Annexes 107

I Participating community members 107
II Advisory Committee Members 107
III Chronology of Activities 107
IV Data used for figures 109

Tables
2.1 Agricultural land distribution in Costa Rica 11
3.1 Summary of policy processes influencing forests and people in Costa Rica before 1950 30
3.2 Summary of policy processes influencing forests and people in Costa Rica from 1950 to 1970 34
3.3 Summary of policy processes influencing forests and people in Costa Rica from 1970 to 1990 43
3.4 Summary of policy processes influencing forests and people in Costa Rica from 1990 to 1997 50
4.1 A chronology of Costa Rican forestry legislation and policy statements 58
4.2 Summary of current government forest policy in Costa Rica 59
4.3 Summary of policy positions of some key non-governmental actor groups 60
5.1 Incentives for reforestation, forest management and protection in Costa Rica 71

Figures

2.1. Temperature and precipitation ranges in Costa Rica colour plate after page 14
2.2. Distribution of forest area and districts with high population density in Costa Rica colour plate after page 14
2.3. Forest land in Costa Rica 6
2.4 Protected areas of Costa Rica 11
3.1. Export value of forest and selected agricultural products from 1950 to 1996 33
3.2. The power of different actor groups to influence forest policy in Costa Rica 53
6.1 Elements of an improved policy process 95

Boxes

2.1 Biodiversity for sale National Institute of Biodiversity, INBio 13
2.2 Carbon offsets some Costa Rican innovations 15
2.3 Citizens’ rights and the forests - the Ombudsman’s Office and the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (Sala IV) 17
2.4. Farmers want forests and trees in the landscape - a study in Coto Brus 19
2.5 Getting smallholder forestry on the agenda - the National Smallholder Forestry Assembly (JUNAFORCA) 21
2.6 International cooperation gets serious - the Bilateral Sustainable Development Agreement between Costa Rica and the Netherlands 25
3.1 A "new ecological order"? - the National Conservation Strategy for Sustainable Development (ECODES) 39
3.2 The first statement of cross-sectoral policy for forests? - the Forest Action Plan for Costa Rica 40
3.3 After the cattle years diversifying livelihoods and trees in the Hojancha Community, Guanacaste 42
3.4 Who owns biodiversity? the Biodiversity Bill 45
3.5 Proposing extreme measures as a policy development tactic - the ‘CULPA’ bill 47
3.6 Decentralisation that works? - the Arenal Conservation Area 52
5.1 Public-private collaboration for forest management - the Commission for Forestry Development of San Carlos (CODEFORSA) 66
5.2 Does small- or medium-scale timber production pay? 67
5.3 Low-impact community forest management with significant financial returns the Fallen Timber Extractive Reserves project 69
5.4 Forest certification: a fast-evolving policy instrument 74
5.5 A civil society policy forum? - the National Council of Non-governmental and Social Organisations (CONAO) 84
5.6 Securing small, regular, low-impact and equitable benefits from the forest the San Miguelena 85
6.1 Forest Resource Accounting - strategic information for better forestry