

Exploraciones/Explorations

Environmental Governance in Latin America: Towards an Integrative Research Agenda

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Abstract: Latin America plays an important international role with regard to environmental governance. Knowledge generated by empirical and theoretical studies on environmental challenges can support the renewed efforts in the region to achieve equitable and sustainable natural resource use. Although linkages between social and environmental dimensions have been academically explored since the 1990s, new trends in environmental governance in Latin America deserve a comprehensive analytical approach. This Exploration presents emerging research topics and provides a brief overview of relevant elements and ‘crossovers’ for an integrative analysis. The authors argue that in order to enhance ‘Latin American perspectives’ to solving socio-environmental dilemmas, several research streams need to be brought together in integrative frameworks that can address complex questions related to interactions between state, civil society and market actors on multiple scales. A consortium of ten Latin American and European institutions aims to contribute to the development of such frameworks through the project Environmental Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean: Developing Frameworks for Sustainable and Equitable Natural Resource Use (ENGOV). *Keywords:* environmental governance, environmental politics, environmental justice, nature, sustainability.

In recent years, Latin American countries have come to occupy a key role in global debates on causes and solutions to environmental problems and climate change. Based on indigenous and other social movements’ views and struggles, a series of new perspectives and policies have been introduced. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to give constitutional rights to nature while Brazil promised to reduce Amazon deforestation and start the first national programme for reducing CO₂ emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD). In December 2009, several Latin American delegates took firm positions at the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, referring to the ‘ecological debt’ of Northern countries towards the South. President Morales called the Copenhagen Accord illegitimate and announced that Bolivia would organize an alternative event, the World’s People Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, which took place in April 2010 in Cochabamba. At the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun in December 2010, Bolivia also opposed the Cancun Accord and Morales warned that it could cause an ‘ecocide’. Another interesting announcement had come in August of that same year: the Ecuadorian government had agreed with the UN Development Programme to create an international Trust Fund to protect Yasuní, a mega-biodiversity protected area in Ecuador. Although it is uncertain if the Yasuní-ITT initiative will materialize as planned, it is innovative in offering industrialized countries an opportunity to financially compensate Ecuador for not extracting the oil below Yasuni. Finally, the Ecuador court decision of February 2011, ordering Chevron to pay US\$8.6 billion for the pollution caused in the Ecuadorian Amazon by Chevron and Texaco since the 1960s,

has been fuelling debates on hydrocarbon extraction around the world and is likely to affect similar court cases elsewhere.

The region also holds a key position in physical terms: it hosts nearly half of the world's tropical forests, one quarter of the world's potential arable land, one third of freshwater reserves, and a range of important mineral reserves, including hydrocarbons. Simultaneously, the region accounts for one third of the world's carbon emissions from land use changes. Next to the global relevance of these characteristics and trends, natural resources are evidently central to the development perspectives of the region and the quality of life of its inhabitants. The rural and urban poor in Latin American countries face increasing vulnerabilities due to climate change such as flooding, landslides, hurricanes, drought, pest outbreaks and glacier retreat. More than ever before, Latin American citizens demand and expect that their governments find ways to achieve equitable, sustainable and productive development. Next to willingness and creativity, however, achieving new modes to govern the use of natural resources requires overcoming persistent barriers such as historical injustices, social inequalities and economic inefficiencies.

Knowledge generated by empirical and theoretical studies of environmental governance can provide scholarly support for such endeavours, especially if they apply a comprehensive approach that links theory and practice. For this purpose we propose an intentionally broad definition of environmental governance as both *formal* and *informal* practices of use and management of *renewable* and *non-renewable* natural resources and its transboundaries implications.¹ This implies a focus on how these practices are perceived, contested and reshaped in the context of rapid and complex social, political, economic and environmental changes at *local*, *national*, and *global* levels. Although linkages between social and environmental issues have been explored academically since the 1990s, the new trends in environmental governance in Latin America are embedded in a complex and changing multi-scale context which deserves more attention. Important new trends include environmental citizenship, the 'return of the state' and the emergence of new global power relations.

In this Exploration we give a brief overview of relevant elements and 'cross-overs' for an integrative analysis of emerging research topics that deserve special attention. In order to enhance 'Latin American perspectives' to solving socio-environmental dilemmas, several research streams need to be brought together in integrative frameworks that can address complex questions related to interactions between state, civil society and market actors at multiple scales. A consortium of ten Latin American and European institutions hopes to contribute to the development of such frameworks through collaborative efforts in the project Environmental Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean: Developing Frameworks for Sustainable and Equitable Natural Resource Use (ENGOV).

New conditions and building on existing 'knowledges'

Environmental governance in Latin America has gone through major transformations in the last decades. From the mid-1980s onwards, it was a general trend to turn away from centralized, state-based institutional arrangements; with the emphasis on privatization and decentralization, the new approaches to natural re-

source management stressed self-governance and higher levels of participation for civil society and private enterprises. Neoliberal policies guided the privatization of natural resources such as water, forest, land and fish, producing major socio-environmental impacts in the region (Liverman and Villas 2006). Meanwhile, alliances among civil society organizations, (international) NGOs and academic institutions developed an alternative governance perspective for local users and communities. This current paved the way for 'glocalization' processes linking local and global actors to develop local approaches to natural resource management. Nevertheless, persistent inequality, poverty, corruption, violence, limited institutional capacity and elite capture often deepened power inequalities and inhibited effective implementation of such initiatives (Larson 2003).

In the past decade, new political and economic changes at different levels have again strongly influenced environmental governance in the region. At the national level, various post-neoliberal, often left-wing and non-elite parties and candidates have been elected. Their political agendas (have) promised to change the economic development model, democratize policy-making processes and intensify the fight against poverty and social, political and cultural exclusion. In their discourse, many of these new governments have stressed the need for (radical) reforms in order to solve social and economic problems in a sustainable way, based on partnerships between state and non-state actors. In this context, environmental discourses, indigenous identities, and claims and mobilizations for social justice have increasingly moved 'upwards', from activist arenas to national political and state institutions.

At the global level, the long history of economic dependence of Latin America has gradually been replaced by a more multi-polar market configuration. Not only have global trade and investment relations become more diversified in the region, a series of promising new initiatives for regional integration have been developed. Brazil, for example, has proven to be one of the world's main emerging markets. These shifts are creating profound effects in regional and global production and value chains, as well as in (geo-)politics. Rising commodity demands, especially from Asia, have improved world market prices and Latin America's export earnings and public sector revenues. The international economic crisis has not only confirmed critical views on the development model based on free markets and a small state (both in Latin America and beyond), it has also been the trigger for a more prominent role of Latin American countries in powerful international institutions (e.g. G20, IMF). Moreover, concerns regarding global climate change have placed the environment as a central topic on the Earth System Governance agenda, on which several Latin American leaders have taken up an active position (cf. Petkova et al. 2011).

Interestingly, environmental governance in the region challenges the dichotomy of top-down and bottom-up processes: new initiatives addressing environmental dilemmas are resulting from international pressures as much as from bottom-up claims from civil society. But despite the fact that these new conditions generally seem to enable more sustainable and equitable approaches to natural resource use in Latin America, the recent debates and proposed policy reforms continue to reflect clear tensions between the goals of economic development, social inclusion and ecosystem protection. On the one hand, Latin American governments often refer to the Millennium Development Goals as an agenda to simultaneously im-

prove social circumstances (e.g., poverty, food security, gender inequality) and environmental services (e.g., biodiversity, carbon sink, climate regulation). On the other hand, social and environmental issues are usually neglected in large-scale economic projects that are geared towards more mining and oil drilling (cf. Hogenboom and Fernández Jilberto 2009) or the large regional integration programme IIRSA (van Dijck forthcoming). These recent changes and emerging contradictions should therefore be included in our analysis of how environmental governance has been shaped in Latin America, and what lessons can be drawn.

Latin America has long been a significant region in the theoretical development of socio-environmental research. The analysis of natural resource use during pre-Columbian period discloses the long-lasting influence in natural landscapes by indigenous populations and how complex societies were able to flourish in highly fragile ecosystems such as in the dry areas of Mesoamerica, the high altitudes of the Andes or the lowlands of the Amazonian floodplain. Pre-Columbian societies provide several examples of locally adaptive production systems based on indigenous ecological knowledge, low-impact technologies such as irrigation systems and terrace building, and social practices like communal property, seasonal migration and product exchange. By the same token, the analysis of the colonization process reveals how the European perception of nature led to rapid socio-environmental degradation in the region. The literature describes the dramatic social changes based on homogenization of cultural and productive systems, and the focus on short-term revenues leading to increased vulnerability of marginalized populations and ecosystems (Miller 2007).

Similar processes have been described by studies of contemporary societies. Human ecologists have emphasized the interplay between local ecological and social systems leading to sustainable use of natural resources while political economists have focused on broader political and economic factors such as national policies, commodity (boom and bust) prices, and international politics leading to environmental conflicts. As marginalized populations became more integrated into national and global economic, political, and environmental systems, new perspectives were developed in order to enable a better understanding on how local processes and large-scale political and economic developments are related (Fischer and Benson 2006).

The coupling of environmental and social systems across temporal, spatial and institutional scales has improved the analytical power to address the interplay between collaborative and conflictive behaviour among stakeholders, and the socio-environmental outcomes of those interactions. Empirical and theoretical contributions for the development of this approach came from a large range of socio-environmental systems in Latin America such as land use, forests conservation, water, fisheries and mineral extraction. By connecting local and broader socio-ecological processes, factors driving inequalities in distribution of natural resource, environmental risks and poverty production have been exposed (Painter and Durham 1995). This is particularly relevant in Latin America, where persistent inequality in access and control to land and natural resources have enhanced environmental degradation and vulnerability of ethnic groups, women and their children, who are more dependent on natural resources for their livelihood (Martinez-Alier 1991).

Socio-environmental research in Latin America has also contributed to the development of the *commons* perspective as it touches on the issue of property rights,

distribution of access and benefits, multiple use and management arrangements. Defined as subtractable resources whose potential users are difficult to be excluded, the *commons* differ from (exclusive) private goods or (non-subtractable) public goods (Ostrom et al. 2002). Combining a range of market and non-market values and multiple uses at local, national, and international levels, incentives to overuse or conserve the *commons* will vary among actors, depending on the socio-environmental features in place.

The distribution, management, and value of the *commons* play a major role in our understanding of social processes and collective action in Latin America but also tension and contestation over natural resources. This urges an analytical approach that takes into account the features of natural resources, of their users, and of the institutional arrangement for their access and control in order to understand the emergence, performance and reshaping of environmental governance. Concerns regarding global climate change link local actions to global outcomes and vice versa, and lead to increased vulnerability of the poor and environmental risks of fragile ecosystems (UNEP 2009, Escobar 2008).

Integrating analytical frameworks

Despite the large number of academic studies on natural resource use and environmental challenges in Latin America, there is a pressing need for integrated frameworks to promote dialogue among different disciplines and research communities such as studies of agrarian development, indigenous peoples, urbanization, formal environmental politics and informal practices of local resource use. Recently, a large array of initiatives for the sustainable use of natural resources has emerged, including reforms in environmental legislation, decentralized management procedures, social and economic partnerships, financial compensation schemes, and co-management initiatives. However, the gaps between discourse and knowledge building and between institutional design and actual implementation and monitoring are often broad and represent major challenges (Lemos and Agrawal 2006).

The complexity of socio-environmental processes and the need for adaptive and efficient management systems show the importance of adaptive approaches and participatory mechanisms. In this regard, the environmental governance perspective aims to integrate the diversity of management systems including the large range of social actors and ecological systems. *Environmental governance*, which emerged as a neoliberal concept of non-state approach, has been reworked by social scientists to propose new institutional perspectives on natural resource management. Environmental governance takes into account the collective problem-solving capacities of different actors in order to understand social interactions and possible conflicts between them in a complex and dynamic process (Kooiman et al. 2005). This perspective is connected to the concepts of *environmental justice* – which places distribution of environmental benefits and costs, empowerment of marginalized groups, gender inclusion, and poverty reduction in the centre (Caruthers 2008) – and *environmental politics*, where the position of the state has been gradually redefined (Eakin and Lemos 2006).

Considering the long tradition of socio-environmental research and the recent

theoretical developments, the time is ripe to develop a more inclusive, adaptive, and interdisciplinary-oriented framework for environmental governance in Latin America. Despite some valuable examples of stakeholder involvement in scholarly projects and important regional academic networks, the research efforts regarding natural resource use in Latin America are limited by several barriers in knowledge generation and sharing.

Firstly, there have been no systematic regional efforts to analyse the problems of environmental governance and new environmental challenges from a general Latin American perspective. As a consequence, successful proposals for addressing socio-environmental dilemmas in the region have been limited until now to sub-regions (e.g., the Amazon, Andes, Meso-America, the Caribbean) or more local contexts. Secondly, although more integrative analyses have been developed in the last decade, research on natural resource use remains divided into resource units (e.g. mining, land, water, fish, or forest), social groups (e.g., settlers, squatters and traditional populations) and policy sectors (e.g. conservation, development and poverty alleviation). Thirdly, most of the socio-environmental research in Latin America has been carried out from the perspective of single disciplines. The integration between natural and social sciences has developed over the years, but ironically there is still limited cross-fertilization among the broad range of the social sciences and humanities. Above all historically grounded approaches have hardly been incorporated. Fourthly, recent new governance initiatives initiated by post-neoliberal governments, their implications for environmental governance, poverty alleviation and social and gender equality, and the influence of a changing international context have not yet received the necessary scholarly attention. Finally, much still needs to be done to encourage an ongoing dialogue between Latin American researchers and Latin Americanists, policy-makers and other stakeholders in the field of environmental governance in the region.

In order to advance environmental governance research in Latin America, a regional perspective going beyond existing approaches to environmental governance is needed. New insights can be generated from comparative analysis among resource units while recognizing the evident differences in the physical, economic and social use of different natural resources in different regional settings. Furthermore, integrative analysis combining landscape configuration, multiple local actors, and multiple institutions can render a better understanding of how the use of different resources, social groups and policies may be related. Thirdly, bringing together different disciplinary approaches to environmental challenges and governance will render better understanding of the dynamic process from an explicitly multi-scale and diachronic perspective. Fourthly, focusing on recent policies combining poverty reduction, social inclusion, and environmental conservation will shed light on how stakeholders interact to address multi-scale environmental challenges. Finally, international academic knowledge should incorporate a growing regional literature on environmental governance based on solid empirical research (cf. Gudynas 2009; Zhouri and Laschefski 2010). In this way, the dialogue between researchers and policy makers in different parts of the world will be improved, hopefully leading to a common language regarding environmental governance in Latin America and the role of international cooperation.

Towards deepened debates: old questions, new connections

Environmental governance can best be approached as a dynamic process based on interactions among different stakeholders consisting of four main phases: 1) discourse and knowledge building, 2) design, 3) implementation and 4) monitoring/evaluation. More than a policy cycle, these four phases encompass both formal and informal processes and mechanisms which overlap and constantly change according to specific historical, social and environmental contexts, and how the social configuration is shaped among different actors. Often interests and political pressure can override particular *knowledges*, or define which type of knowledge is to be used. This multi-scale process may lead to the emergence, erosion or reshaping of socio-environmental configurations, whose performance may swing between what is less or more socially, economically, and environmentally efficient. The research agenda for environmental governance explores how the interplay between different forms of politics and other social interactions – from everyday life practices to collective actions, and formal politics – can define a large range of outcomes at different scales.

The increasing permeability of spatially and institutionally established borders as well as the recognition that connections require multiple-scale strategies give way to analyses of the transnational dimensions of economic, political and social interactions. In this regard, sustainable and equitable use of natural resources has become a field of cross-boundary study, in so far as a range of new multidisciplinary approaches are brought together. Drawing on the various social science fields enables a better understanding of the complex social relations and processes linked to natural resource use and management in Latin America. In the same vein, historians may describe and analyse how boundaries continuously shift and change over time (cf. Baud 2000). Political scientists and political economists have analysed transnational politics – including transnational advocacy networks and policy networks – and economic transnationalization (Hochstetler and Keck 2007). Political and human ecologists emphasize the interplay between local and broader socio-environmental processes in natural resource management systems (Castro, forthcoming) while sociologists and anthropologists address how culture, information, and technology influence changes in material and symbolic values of nature across social groups (Latta and Wittman 2010).

'Latin American perspectives' to environmental governance, therefore, should encompass two main components: the production system (which requires management measures) and the social context in which negotiations, struggles, and decisions take place. The former includes issues pertaining to the social and ecological challenges to sustainable practices, food security, strengthened resilience, deepened participation, and environmental justice. The latter takes into account the historical, structural, organizational and information contexts. An integrative perspective will permit an understanding of the relationship between contextual factors and different production and consumption patterns under social and environmental change.

The current state of environmental governance in Latin America provokes a series of questions – and an invitation to engage in answering them. Most of these questions are old; in fact, they have been guiding the debates on environment and

development since the 1970s. Unfortunately, despite extensive academic, societal and political efforts, many of the 'old' complexities of environmental governance dilemmas remain very topical. How can we overcome the paradox between increased production and poverty growth due to large scale production systems? How can we solve the incompatibility between different production systems? How can we create structural, local development strategies and effectively promote environmental justice? And how can we turn global climate change issues into an opportunity for economic and social development?

Clearly, scholars can contribute some ingredients, but formulating useful answers to these questions is a task in which a variety of other actors will have to be involved: local communities, civil society organizations, policy-makers and entrepreneurs as well as young generations, private investors and international institutions – all can contribute relevant experience, knowledge, views and proposals. Contrasting interests and perspectives do not have to inhibit beneficial multi-actor communication on environmental issues. Even cases of conflict, the creation of connections for ongoing information flows and exchanges of ideas may be helpful and successful. Such connections might not reduce the tensions but they may open new spaces for deliberation on the use and management of natural resources, and as such contribute to deepened debates and the democratization of environmental governance. Furthermore, these kinds of interactions between *knowledges* and practices and among different actors can play a central role in the development of frameworks where environmental governance is addressed as 'policy in the making', in which old and new formal and informal arrangements are analysed as much as an outcome of a dynamic process of struggles, tensions and cooperation in knowledge-building and exchange as they are 'triggers' for new struggles and negotiations in its implementation and monitoring process.

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Michiel Baud, Fabio de Castro and Barbara Hogenboom are researchers at CEDLA, which coordinates the ENGOV project. ENGOV is funded by the European Commission and involves the collaboration between Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales; Centro de Desenvolvimento Sustentável – Universidade de Brasília; Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco (México); Instituto de Estudios Avanzados – Universidad de Santiago de Chile; Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (Argentina); Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar – Sede Quito; Institut de Ciència y Tecnòloga Ambientals – Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (France); Centre for Development and the Environment – Universitetet i Oslo, and CEDLA. The project's central objective is to understand how environmental governance is shaped in Latin America and to develop a new analytical framework for environmental governance in the region. More information will be presented on www.engov.eu and www.cedla.uva.nl.

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Acknowledgements: This Exploration builds on the proposal for a collaborative research project on environmental governance in Latin America and the Caribbean

(ENGOV). We are grateful for the very useful comments and suggestions to the proposal from the anonymous reviewers for the European Commission's FP7 call, where this proposal has been submitted, and from the collaborating researchers: Alberto Cimadamore, Joan Martínez Alier, Mina Kleiche, Benedicte Bull, Donald Sawyer, David Barkin, Julian Parker, Héctor Sejenovich and Pablo Andrade. The responsibility for this Exploration lies solely with us. This work has been supported by the European Commission within the 7th framework programme under grant agreement no. FP7-SSH-CT-2010-266710.

Note

1. Environmental governance addresses socio-environmental processes both in rural and urban settings, and in production and consumption patterns. In this Exploration we emphasize the role of production systems in rural areas in the Latin American context.

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