

Public forest agencies in the twenty-first century

Driving change through transparency, tenure reform, citizen involvement and improved governance

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For the past eight years, the leaders of public forest agencies worldwide have been taking part in a remarkable series of meetings convened by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) at various locations around the globe. This informal group of senior officials, called MegaFlorestais, discusses challenges and shares experiences on critical issues affecting forests and forest peoples, including climate change, market transitions, forest tenure, poverty alleviation and public governance. Given that public forest agencies officially control some 75 percent of all forests worldwide, with the vast majority of this forested land in MegaFlorestais' countries— Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, and the US—the outputs of this group can provide global insight into forest management in the immediate and longer-term future.

The most recent meeting of MegaFlorestais, hosted by Indonesia's Ministry of Forestry in October 2013, discussed "the architecture of forest governance for the twenty-first century." In considering this topic, the MegaFlorestais members agreed that forests and the demands of forest peoples will be different in the future, that changes are coming at a dramatically faster pace, and that new—and sometimes radically different—approaches to forest governance are required. The group summarized the future of forests globally as follows:

Due largely to continued deforestation in the tropics and climate change, there will be fewer natural forests in the tropics and expanded forests in the boreal zone in coming decades. Fires, pests, droughts and related climate disturbances will be much more frequent. Expanded investments in mining, agriculture and energy development in forest areas will lead to the construction of more highways, railroads and pipelines that cut through the remaining natural forests. Forests everywhere will be younger, simpler in structure, and more fragmented. Overall, these changes will make forests much more difficult to manage, and in many ways much more costly, and the products from them will be less predictable, affecting the potential supply to markets, employment, the livelihoods of local people, and revenues to governments.

The 80 percent of the world's poorest people who live in and depend on forests for their livelihoods will be most affected by these changes. Rural populations are projected to increase in most developing countries (although not as quickly as urban populations). Like everyone else, these people are looking for a better future. Many are using legal, political and market systems to assert and affirm their land-based rights. They want more influence over policies that affect them, such as forest tenure, regulations, financial incentives, and they seek new trade and market opportunities. As rightsholders, they are expecting real-time information and a collaborative —if not a lead—role in decision-making.

National and global markets for forest products are also changing rapidly and in novel ways. For example, there is a rapid shift towards plantations as the leading source of commercial fiber; domestic markets remain important in many countries but continue to be largely overlooked in global policy development; demand is increasing for wood as energy and for both new and traditional non-timber forest products, including biofuels, and new products using nanotechnology; and there is an emerging understanding of the need to conserve natural forests for their ecosystem services, such as the provision of clean water. Demand for forestlands is high, as they are some of the most fertile for other uses. Some countries are still sorting out how to allocate their lands between forests, agriculture and energy production, as they contemplate food and energy security with growing populations.

Worldwide, forest governance must transform to meet these challenges, and will become more complex. Many public forest agencies operating today, including those of Russia and the US, were established at least a century ago and were culturally and organizationally designed for simpler times. Others—such as those of Brazil and Peru—are new and have revised their policies and structures in an attempt to reflect contemporary trends and needs.

Yet other public forest agencies are stepping forward with new approaches. For example, in the same year in which the Forest Service of British Columbia, Canada, celebrated its centenary, the provincial government integrated its numerous natural resource programs into a single organization. One land agency is now responsible for coordinating across formerly disparate government “silos” such as forestry, energy development, water and mining. This restructuring, perhaps a harbinger of the future, is as much about changing the way people think and work as it is about reorganization. The move to integrate resource planning and management was directed at achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness, encouraging collaboration among stakeholders, and aligning with the “one land approach” common in communities.

Regardless of the differences in public forest agencies—institutional age, organizational structure and even the political system in which they operate— across the MegaFlorestais countries, we believe the following principles are essential to guide the future of effective forest governance in the twenty-first century. These principles should guide agencies beyond the work that existing laws and regulations have them do to improve the management of the world's forests:

1. Transparency in governance is fundamental

Data on forests should be freely available and easily accessible to citizens. Citizens must have a voice in creating and adapting forest plans, strategies, laws and regulations that affect them, and there should be clear and fair grievance procedures for resolving disagreements. Bidding for forest products from publicly held forests must be fair, open and competitive. Community groups and other stakeholders should have the ability to actively monitor the performance of the agencies that serve them. Citizens are demanding transparency and engagement, and new technologies are making these both feasible and, ultimately, impossible to deny. Public forest agencies can take the lead in engaging citizens in effective and productive ways,

thereby demonstrating to government that such engagement produces policies and plans that are both more durable and more meaningful to citizens.

2. Clarification of tenure (land rights and ownership) must be a key priority of governments

In large forested countries, public forest agencies should be willing partners and leaders in policy changes on forest tenure. Recognizing the rights of communities and Indigenous Peoples is an essential step in advancing human rights, alleviating poverty in forest areas, and preserving the forest. It will inspire public and investor confidence. In many countries, efforts to resolve local, indigenous and wider claims to the ownership of forestlands are in their infancy, but governments are increasingly conferring rights to—or the outright ownership of—forestlands to households and local and historical entities. This often leads to successful local management outcomes. In these cases, it is important to accompany the recognition of rights with the right regulations to encourage sustainable use and capacity building—of both communities and governments regarding their new rights and roles. In all cases, new policies and capacity-building are required to enable people to take advantage of their new rights to forestlands. Public forest agencies must help lead the transformation of forestland ownership and tenure.

3. Inclusive governance is necessary

People demand to be involved in forest governance that affects them. Equally importantly, governmental systems that effectively engage citizens in forestry make more resilient and sustainable decisions because of the trust and support that inclusive governance brings. Organizational structures, policies, plans and regulations must be designed in ways that actively engage all stakeholders, including private land owners, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, in the governance of forests. Inclusive governance practices include using technology to reach citizens in remote areas; developing regulations that can be readily understood, implemented and enforced; engaging forest users in monitoring and enforcement; and establishing effective citizen/stakeholder advisory boards or similar organizations to incorporate wide-ranging perspectives.

4. Forest agencies must evolve

Public forest agencies must be designed to respond to the demands of citizens, changes in their forests and global trends. Their leaders must push for continual improvement. Sometimes organizationally dramatic change will be required to be in a better position to face climate change and other major challenges that lay ahead. Leaders must be accountable to citizens for the effectiveness and efficiency with which they are managing their forests and serving people. Many agencies are considering how to restructure to serve the growing class of new forest owners, and they are shifting from a focus on managing public lands to enabling the sound management of forests by communities.

A universally urgent theme is the need to create effective mechanisms to work across ministries that affect forested lands and to encourage policies that promote regional or landscape scale management. Policies in the mining, water and agricultural sectors often circumvent or undermine policies on forests and forest-dependent communities. Such conflicting policies must be reconciled if countries are to manage their forests sustainably and to address challenges related to the ownership of and rights to forestlands.

While the best approach is likely to differ between countries, the convening power of public forest agencies

should not be underestimated. This power can be used to proactively engage other land-based ministries, as well as the private actors with whom those ministries work, to ensure that rational and transparent decisions on land and land use are made and that, in the process, citizens' rights are protected. Formally or informally, and with or without organizational redesigns or restructures, inclusive, intersectoral decision-making processes must be actively pursued, as difficult as these can be in the absence of a strong political commitment.

5. Forest leaders must acquire new skills

Across the world, public forest agency leaders are facing challenges unlike any they have faced before; they must hone their skills and those of their staff if they are to lead effectively. They operate now in a global environment, where a change in policy or regulation in one country can have international, even global, impacts. Public forest agency leaders must therefore understand the global complexities of human rights, community organizations and enterprises, global trade, emerging trends around new technologies, markets, and climate change.

To be successful, public forest agencies must build an inclusive culture: they need to (really) listen to citizens and constituencies. Public forest agency leaders therefore require outstanding communication skills, including in cross-cultural contexts. They need skills in social/community engagement, collaboration and conflict resolution, because citizens increasingly expect and demand an effective voice in forest policy development. Such skills are essential if forest agencies are to establish and maintain positive relationships with citizens and other stakeholders. For its part, MegaFlorestais supports training symposiums for the next generation of public forest agency leaders and workshops on "rethinking forest regulations" aimed at advancing regulatory reforms that better support changing land rights and emerging best practices. Consistent interaction with their counterparts around the world helps public forest agency leaders gain a wider perspective and greater understanding of the global context and to share ideas and best practices.

Leaders must set ambitious goals and lead their organizations and political leaders towards these goals.

MegaFlorestais leaders acknowledge that implementing these principles requires courage and humility. Clearly this century will bring unprecedented changes to the world's forests. Forest agencies can positively influence this future or be casualties of it. We, former leaders of public forest agencies from around the world —with many others past and present— strive for the former.

MEGAFLORESTAIS

MegaFlorestais is an informal network of public forest agency leaders dedicated to advancing international dialogue and exchange on transitions in forest governance, forest industry, and the roles of public forest agencies. The group includes the heads of forestry agencies of the largest forested countries in the world, and provides the opportunity for these leaders to share their experiences and challenges in a frank and open manner. The process aims to foster stronger relationships between forest agencies, collectively strengthening their abilities to play leading roles in addressing forest governance and sustainable forestry issues.

MEMBERS INCLUDE

Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, and the United States.

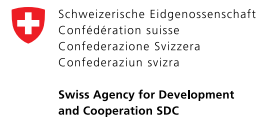
THE RIGHTS AND RESOURCES INITIATIVE

The Rights and Resources Initiative acts as the Secretariat of the MegaFlorestais network.

RRI is a global coalition of 13 Partners and over 140 international, regional and community organizations advancing forest tenure, policy and market reforms. RRI leverages the strategic collaboration and investment of its Partners and Collaborators around the world by working together on research, advocacy, and convening strategic actors to catalyze change on the ground. RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC. For more information, please visit: www.rightsandresources.org.

SUPPORTERS

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