

Protocol for a Realist Synthesis Review

How does context affect the outcomes of multi-stakeholder forums on land use and/or land-use change?

A Realist Synthesis Review of the scholarly literature

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1 Introduction

This protocol was developed to conduct a realist synthesis review (RSR) of the scholarly literature on multi-stakeholder decision-making or coordination initiatives set up around land use and land-use change at the subnational level, and that include at least one local and one government actor. Throughout, we use the term multi-stakeholder forum (MSF) to refer to what are also known in the scholarly and grey literature as multi-stakeholder initiatives, platforms, processes, partnerships, and networks. For the purpose of the research that led to our review, we defined these initiatives 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 to achieve a goal for their common benefit.

The combination of our subnational focus, our attention to the role of these initiatives in the scholarly literature and practice, and our emphasis on context was intentionally set out to make an evidence-based contribution to scholarly debates on participatory processes as a broad and diverse category. Moreover, our approach sought to provide insights into how

initiatives can be designed to account for, and adapt to, the specific contexts in which they are implemented. We aimed to identify, through a systematic search and analysis of the peer-reviewed literature, the key contextual factors affecting the proposed outcomes of the MSFs that fit our criteria.

More specifically, we aimed to shed light upon three different aspects: (1) how and why multi-stakeholder initiatives work; (2) the mechanisms through which they pursue their proposed program theories; and (3) the different and often cross-cutting contextual factors that may affect outcomes (positively/negatively). The salience of these issues is demonstrated by ongoing demands for participatory decision making from both the grassroots and donors, the growing recognition of participatory spaces in national policies related to development and conservation, and the increasing concern that little evidence is available regarding actual outcomes of such initiatives.

In this protocol we present the background and rationale for our review, and describe the series of phases and steps through which we carried it out.

2 What is a Realist Synthesis Review (RSR)?

We had initially planned to conduct a systematic review for this analysis, following on CIFOR's application of the method in areas related to land, forests and development. Systematic reviews have achieved prominence as evidence-based scholarly outputs to inform policy making (see Boaz et al. 2002 and Hagen-Zanker et al. 2012). Yet, these reviews are uncommon in the social sciences, where knowing whether an initiative works may not be as insightful as understanding *why* it works (or not).

We thus chose the RSR method, because it allows us to engage in the systematic and comparative analysis of *how contexts affect the outcomes of MSFs*. RSRs are still structured by a single research question and a rigorous systematic search, followed by analysis that is more akin to our interest as social scientists in understanding complex social interventions. RSRs allow us to explain how interventions do not produce outcomes on their own but are always positioned within specific contexts (e.g. socio-cultural, economic, political, etc.). The method has many of the characteristics of a traditional systematic review, but it includes an emphasis on understanding the 'why', through the use of 'program theories.'¹ This requires that reviewers carry out further research to understand the context of each case study. We posit that what could be perceived as a trade-off relative to the neutrality of the systematic review is actually a strength of the RSR method, especially for its application in the social sciences, as it has much greater explanatory potential.

Thus, from an RSR perspective, it is understood that outcomes are the product of the mechanisms that underlie interventions, and mechanisms themselves are functions of the interactions that take place between participants and their contexts. Astbury and Leeuw (2010, 368) describe mechanisms as the "underlying entities, processes, or structures which operate in particular contexts to generate outcomes of interest", and Pawson and Tilley (1997) define them as "a combination of resources offered by the social program under study and stakeholders' reasoning in response" (see Dalkin et al. 2015; Durham and Bains 2015 for more on the relation between mechanisms and outcomes). In cases where there is sufficient data, causality can be narrowed down in context-mechanism-outcome configurations. These configurations are potentially powerful additions to our analytical toolkit because they bring to the fore the program theories on which an intervention rests, as well as how these theories combine with context and mechanisms to produce different outcomes.

Based on this method, our review addresses the role of context in the success and failure of multi-stakeholder initiatives. This is seldom studied systematically and less so comparatively. We do this by examining the contextual factors that influenced the intended outcomes of the MSFs studied. Based on this analysis, we provide insights into how MSFs can be designed to account for, and adapt to, the specific contexts in which they are implemented. Thus, in comparison to the better-known systematic review, an RSR's explanatory focus is more compatible with and accountable to the complexity of social interventions like MSFs, and has allowed us to reach conclusions that are more useful for informing research, practice, and policy.

¹ A program theory is a theory of change, or the way in which the organizers of an intervention believe change will occur.

Our RSR: (1) defines the objectives and program theories of a set of MSFs; (2) identifies the mechanisms that emerge through/during the implementation of their programs; (3) distinguishes which contextual factors have the most impact; and (4) discusses how these connect with project outcomes. The review presents an explanatory model that is accountable to the complexity of multi-stakeholder interventions, such as the cases defined within the search parameters of the RSR (Pawson et al. 2004). Specifically, the review examines how contexts affect the way in which mechanisms, as proposed in an initiative's program theory, will change behaviour (McCormack et al. 2007). In other words, we aim to understand (through deductive and inductive analysis) how initiatives with the same mechanisms may lead to different outcomes in different places and under different conditions (e.g. gender inequalities, cultural practices, socio-economic status or levels of education).

This attention to the specifics of how an initiative should work both *in theory* (as assessed from its program theory) and *in practice* (how contexts affect outcomes) makes the RSR sensitive to diversity and change within programs (Pawson et al. 2014). We believe that the review will contribute to the work of MSF organizers and participants, by providing analysis that can improve the likelihood of reaching the desired outcomes.

The following two RSRs inspired our own review:

- Nilsson D, Baxter G, Bulter J, and MacAlpine C. 2016. How do community-based conservation programs in developing countries change human behaviour? A realist synthesis. *Biological Conservation* 200:93-103.
- McLain R, Lawry S, and Ojanen M. 2018. Fisheries Property Regimes and Environmental Outcomes: A Realist Synthesis Review. *World Development* 102:213-227.

2.1 Why are we running an RSR of multi-stakeholder forums?

MSFs are widespread, both in the Global North and South. In pragmatic terms, the growth of MSFs related to land use and land-use change reflects the growing awareness that environmental problems cannot be addressed without the effective engagement of the actors that determine land-use practices on the ground; nor can such problems be resolved within a conservation community when the drivers are located in other sectors. In theory, MSFs may produce more effective and sustainable outcomes by getting those sectors and actors that have commonly held contradictory development priorities to coordinate and align goals through discussion, negotiation, and planning. Departing from this awareness, our review is motivated by and addresses two key issues, one of which is more scholarly and the other more practice-based. Both issues are deemed important as they address the current expectations for the mainstreaming of MSF-like mechanisms around land use and land-use change.

The scholarly issue is framed by two different sides within a multi disciplinary discussion over the participation of communities in development and conservation initiatives since the 1980s. The discussion hinges on whether this increased participation has the transformative potential to change mainstream approaches (see Chambers 1983; Chambers et al. 1989). These mainstream approaches, often referred to as 'business as usual' (henceforth, BAU), are commonly top-down, unisectoral, and/or expert-driven. Analysts on both sides of the discussion commonly acknowledge the problematic nature of power inequalities in BAU approaches, but diverge on whether participatory processes, such as those we will focus upon in our review, can transform these inequalities. As such, one position highlights the potential for more horizontal decision-making processes (see Hickey and Mohan 2005; Reed 2008) and the other argues that it is only a new catchword for existing technologies of governance and does little to address underlying structures of inequality within the status quo (see Cooke and Kothari 2001).



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The practical issue is set in the context of the growing mainstreaming of multi-stakeholder decision-making processes, which emphasize inclusive participatory methods. Stakeholders are broadly the actors with "an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group. This includes people who make a decision, or can influence it, as well as those affected by it" (Hemmati 2002, 2). This mainstreaming is a result of demands by both donors and local representatives, and in some cases is related to international agreements such as the International Labour Organisation's Covenant 169, which sets out the right of indigenous peoples to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (Espinoza Llanos and Feather 2012; Zaremborg and Torres Wong 2018). Expanding on the focus on power inequalities in scholarly discussions, the argument in favor of these processes links the wider participation of stakeholders to normative and pragmatic benefits. Normative benefits refer to the upholding of rights and participatory democracy, while the pragmatic benefits emphasize stakeholder participation as leading to more sustainable initiatives (see Buchy and Hoverman 2000; Hemmati 2002; Reed 2008).

Our review is motivated by this laudable interest, the potential transition towards a multi-stakeholder paradigm, and an awareness of how easily participatory processes can become 'box-ticking exercises'. It is informed by our own experiences in multi-stakeholder participatory processes, informed by ongoing CIFOR research and literature on such processes, as well as the wider critique of the participatory paradigm in international development.

In light of these different influences and frameworks, our review was carried out with the conviction that the changes proposed by the program theory upon which any multi-stakeholder process is based are contingent upon the contexts within which such interventions are embedded. Although these concerns are not particularly new, it is important to apply this lens to a mechanism that is emerging as a new 'solution'. This review does so, with important innovations. Most of the literature on MSFs around land use and land-use change focuses on international initiatives such as the round tables on

Sustainable Palm Oil and on Responsible Soy; our review engages with those that are closer to the ground. Given the rationale for the RSR, we aim to provide insights for both scholars and practitioners on all sides of the issues mentioned above. This is especially so in terms of setting out how initiatives can be designed to account for, and adapt to, the contexts in which they are intervening.

2.2 Why these criteria? (subnational level / land use and land-use change / local and government stakeholders)

Our initial review of the relevant literature revealed that: the great majority of studies still propose MSFs as the way forward, with little consideration of alternative avenues that disempowered stakeholders may prefer or find more

empowering or effective; most studies examine global MSFs, concentrating on their ability to make concerted decisions and whether or not they are easy to enforce, thus, little data is available on the effectiveness and impact of decisions at the national and especially subnational levels; and, there is little attention paid to contextual factors that may affect the inclusion and participation of subaltern stakeholders, and thus the legitimacy and potential effectiveness of decisions emerging from MSFs.

In response to such trends, our review purposefully analyzes initiatives at the subnational level, places emphasis on the importance of context, and seeks to identify which contextual factors may lead to scenarios where MSFs may not be the answer. Our subnational focus also places us closer to the geographical spaces – landscapes or territories (McCall 2016) – impacted by land-use change, planning, and management, and the inclusion of government takes us closer to scholarly and practice-based interests in jurisdictional approaches for tackling climate change and deforestation (see Fishman et al. 2017; Boyd et al. 2018; Stickler et al. 2018).



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3 How did we carry out our research?

Building our review around both conceptual and practical issues required the realization that although all multi-stakeholder processes have participatory components by design, not all participatory processes are multi-stakeholder, and even less include the minimum combination of local and government stakeholders that meet our criteria. This awareness is important due to the fact that most of the scholarly literature available on multi-stakeholder processes do not define their case studies in these terms. In fact, an extensive portion of the literature that uses case studies involving multi-stakeholder participation does not actually define or discuss them as such. As a result, we encountered limitations when conducting our test systematic search on the title, abstract, and keyword fields of EBSCO PUCP² articles with combinations of 'multi-stakeholder' terms (e.g. multi-stakeholder forum, multi-stakeholder initiative, multi-stakeholder platform) and terms related to land use and land-use change (e.g. climate mitigation, Payment for Environmental/Ecological Services, afforestation, reforestation, conservation strategies, Sustainable Forest Management). We noted that much of the literature on participatory decision-making bodies engages analytically with processes that fit our description of MSFs, but that those articles do not specify the terms 'multi-stakeholder' or 'stakeholder' in their title, abstract, or keywords. This was particularly the case at the subnational level.

In order to address this challenge, we broadened the scope of our search to be able to engage with a wider range of case studies. As we describe below, we continued to use multi-stakeholder-related terms but expanded our search to include process-related terms relevant to our criteria. This made our search longer and more extensive and resulted in a larger number of case studies for analysis.

In addition, in order to build a stronger and more adaptable method for analysis, we extracted contextual factors from the evidence available for each case study rather than using a pre-existing list of contextual categories. We then synthesized the contextual factors derived from our analysis into a final set, which was integrated into mechanism-context-outcome combinations. Similarly, and based on our initial search, we did not associate each case study with only one program theory (as is commonly done in the RSR method) so as to avoid oversimplifying the complex interactions and ideals that are set out within an MSF.

3.1 Summary of the RSR phases

- Phase 1: Literature search and initial screening
- Phase 2: Selection of case studies for inclusion
- Phase 3: Data extraction from selected studies
- Phase 4: Context research (including interviews)
- Phase 5: Synthesis of data and drafting of RSR

² Accessed through the Catholic University of Peru, <http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/recurso-electronico/ebSCO-research-database/>

3.2 Phase 1: Literature search and initial screening

- Full texts of peer-reviewed articles were **not** screened at this phase (only titles, abstracts and keywords).
- All articles were saved onto Zotero, a free reference manager software.
- All articles that passed the inclusion criteria were downloaded and saved onto Dropbox.
- The inclusion criteria for Phase 1 was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords, or to the introduction/conclusion if there was no abstract.
- All published studies were included that met the criteria for our population (e.g. subnational MSFs, local and government stakeholders) and intervention (e.g. land-use change improvement); these were then filtered for scale (e.g. subnational).
- The metadata of each article (URL, title, abstract, author, journal, year, page numbers) was saved in an Excel spreadsheet.
- Phase 1 ended with 984 articles.

3.3 Phase 2: Selection of studies for inclusion

- We read the full text of studies that passed the initial screening, and selected studies following an enhanced criteria for inclusion.
- Phase 2 criteria included articles with a qualitative assessment of the context addressed by the MSF; information on the impact on local forest-dependent communities brought about by the MSF; description or analysis of contextual data for the specific case study; and, specification of how the MSF was convened, what actors took part in it, and how decisions were made and implemented.
- Phase 2 ended with 124 articles.

3.4 Phase 3: Data extraction from selected studies

- We grouped case studies by program theory using the abstract description of how they were expected to work.

- We outlined program theories by identifying the main strategy(ies) each MSF proposed to create change.
- We synthesized these into four program theories and grouped case studies by the theories most relevant to them.
- We followed an extraction template to select evidence from studies. The template included the following characteristics of each case study: details on the intervention proposed by the MSF; its program theory/theories; the context, mechanism and outcome relationship at play in the case study; comments on the rigor of the study; and other relevant notes to understand the MSF, its outcome, and its context. Those articles that did not have enough information to complete the template were excluded.
- The extraction template was also used to identify additional mechanisms that contribute towards the MSF reaching its proposed outcome.
- Phase 3 ended with 42 articles.

3.5 Phase 4: Context research (including interviews)

- We supplemented the template data by contacting the authors of the publications included in the review, and by carrying out further desk research on the MSFs and their contexts. Those case studies for which there was not enough evidence to understand how context may have influenced the MSF were excluded.
- Phase 4 ended with 17 articles.

3.6 Phase 5: Synthesis of data and drafting of RSR

- We synthesized homogenous context, mechanism, and outcome patterns to represent a single relationship pattern.
- We then synthesized the remaining evidence into the program theories, adjusting where required, including adding additional mechanisms and contexts that influenced each mechanism.

- We prepared a scholarly article identifying how MSFs operate by highlighting the key mechanisms that affect their outcome, followed by the contexts that trigger such mechanisms.
- Our final RSR is organised by program theory based on a synthesis of the case studies. Each program theory includes interventions, mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes to offer deeper insights into the importance of context for outcomes – and to help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

3.7 Search strategy

Databases and catalogues

Phase 1 searches were carried out in the EBSCO PUCP database and on Google Scholar. Where possible, the searches were done as queries on title + abstract + keywords. Google Scholar searches only considered the first 50 hits for each search.

Language

Although the initial literature search and screening (Phase 1) covered studies in English, the research on the context of each selected study (Phase 4) was multilingual. The research team included members proficient in Bahasa Indonesian, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

3.8 Search terms

We conducted a systematic search on EBSCO PUCP of all possible combinations of the terms from lists 1 and 2 below.

List 1 - "REDD" OR "REDD+" OR "land-use" OR "land-use change" OR "Sustainable Forest Management" OR "forest management" OR "conservation" OR "PES" OR

"benefit sharing" OR "reforestation" OR "afforestation" OR "forest" OR "environmental management" OR "community forestry" OR "adaptation management" OR "resource governance" OR "environmental improvement" OR "sustainability"

List 2 - "stakeholder-based decisions" OR "spaces of interaction" OR "roundtables" OR "collaboration" OR "collaborative decision making" OR "adaptive governance" OR "stakeholder engagement" OR "stakeholder involvement" OR "stakeholder consultation" OR "stakeholder collaboration" OR "stakeholder participation" OR "multi-actor collaboration" OR "multi-actor platform" OR "multi-actor governance" OR "public participation" OR "public consultation" OR "actor-oriented environmental governance" OR "participatory environmental governance" OR "public-private-civic partnership" OR "cross-sector partnership" OR "co-management" OR "collaborative conservation" OR "adaptive management" OR "multi-stakeholder" OR "multi-stakeholder initiative" OR "multi-stakeholder process" OR "multi-stakeholder platform" OR "multi-stakeholder partnership" OR "multi-stakeholder forum" OR "multi-stakeholder governance" OR "multi-stakeholder dialogue" OR "multi-stakeholder collaboration" OR "multi-stakeholder network"

3.9 Searching for grey literature on the internet

Although our initial search (Phase 1) only covered peer-reviewed published articles, context research (Phase 4) considered grey literature in conjunction with published articles and queries to study authors. Google Scholar was especially helpful for this search, especially due to its 'cited by' tool which allowed us to quickly find material related to our selected studies. Websites and publication repositories of relevant specialist organizations and universities were also explored.

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This protocol sets out the rationale and method for a Realist Synthesis Review (RSR) of the global scholarly literature on multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) set up to address land use and land-use change at the subnational level. The review engages in the systematic and comparative analysis of how contexts affect the outcomes of MSFs. These forums are set up as purposely 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 to achieve a goal for their common benefit.

The growth of MSFs related to land use/land-use change reflects the awareness that environmental problems cannot be addressed without the effective engagement of the actors that determine land-use practices on the ground; nor can such problems be resolved within a conservation community when the drivers are located in other sectors. MSFs may produce more effective and sustainable outcomes by getting those sectors and actors that have commonly held contradictory development priorities to coordinate and align goals through discussion, negotiation and planning. In contrast, MSFs may also be an expedient way to implement top-down approaches and create the illusion of participation. Scholars and activists note that 'MSF' may reify top-down approaches, and take the 'participation' of local stakeholders for granted in box-ticking exercises to please donors.

This review is a timely examination because MSFs have received renewed attention from policy makers and development and conservation practitioners, in light of the growing perception of urgency to address climate change and transform development trajectories. Through this review, we aim to contribute empirically to the study of MSFs and similar participatory processes, but also methodologically to the social sciences more generally through the application of the RSR over the more common systematic review.



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