

Introduction - Multi-stakeholder forums and the promise of more equitable and sustainable land and resource use: perspectives from Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Peru

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) have received renewed attention in global development and conservation circles given the urgency to transform unsustainable land and resource use to address the climate emergency.
- There is nothing particularly new about MSFs, as extensive research and practice on the participatory paradigm has emerged since the 1970s; yet there is little apparent learning from these past experiences.
- The seven papers in this Special Issue examine a total of thirteen MSFs organized to address unsustainable land and resource use in forest landscapes in Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Peru.
- Contributors examine the power inequalities that are inherent to MSFs, providing more evidence for the importance of having a deep awareness of such inequalities when engaging MSFs as researchers, organisers, participants, supporters, and funders.
- The evidence and analysis suggest that to get closer to transformational change, MSFs cannot be taken for granted – they should be thoughtfully considered, with substantive, grounded efforts to level the playing field, as part of a strategy for change.

SUMMARY

Multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) have become a popular mechanism in global development and conservation circles, given the urgency to find transformative approaches to address climate change and unsustainable development. In this current context, it is important to take stock of MSFs, an example of a participatory mechanism that is emerging as a new ‘solution’. The papers in this Special Issue of the *International Forestry Review* derive from a multi-country comparative research project carried out by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) that aimed to understand how best to support MSFs organised for more sustainable land and resource use. The seven papers assess the potential of MSFs for more equitable decision-making in regard to land and resource use sustainability, and engage with scholarly debates over these forms of participation. The papers approach MSFs from different theoretical perspectives and analytical interests, yet all engage with issues that stem from the power inequalities that are inherent to these forums. The papers provide more evidence – and a warning – that to get closer to transformational change, we need MSFs that do more than simply bring people to the table.

Keywords: conservation, development, participation, multi-stakeholder forums, transformational change

Forums multi-parties prenantes et promesse d’une utilisation plus équitable et durable de la terre et des ressources: perspectives au Brésil, en Ethiopie, en Indonésie et au Pérou

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Les forums multi-parties prenantes (MSFs) sont devenus un mécanisme populaire dans les cercles de développement et de conservation à l’échelle globale, du fait de l’urgence à découvrir des approches transformatives pour faire face au changement climatique et au développement non durable. Dans le contexte actuel, il est important de prendre en compte les MSFs, un exemple de mécanisme participatif, émergeant comme une nouvelle « solution ». Les papiers de cette édition spéciale de l’*International Forestry Review* sont inspirés par un projet de recherche comparatif mené dans plusieurs pays, par le Centre pour la recherche forestière internationale (CIFOR), qui cherchant à comprendre comment soutenir au mieux les MSFs organisés pour obtenir une utilisation plus durable de la terre et des ressources. Les sept papiers évaluent le potentiel des MSFs à aboutir à des prises de décisions plus équitables, du point de vue de la durabilité dans l’utilisation de la terre et des ressources, et s’engagent dans des débats érudits sur ces formes de participation. Chaque papier s’approche des MSFs en partant de perspectives théoriques et d’intérêt analytique différents, mais tous s’engagent cependant dans les questions émanant des inégalités de pouvoir, inhérentes à ces forums. Ces papiers produisent plus de preuves, et d’appels à la vigilance, que, pour se rapprocher d’un changement transformationnel, il est nécessaire que les MSFs fassent plus que simplement réunir des personnes autour d’une table.

Los foros multiactor y la promesa de un uso más sostenible de la tierra y los recursos: perspectivas desde Brasil, Etiopía, Indonesia y Perú

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Los foros multiactor (FMA) se han convertido en un mecanismo popular en el desarrollo y la conservación a nivel mundial, dada la urgencia de encontrar enfoques transformadores para mitigar el cambio climático y lograr un desarrollo sostenible. Dado este contexto, es necesario hacer un balance sobre los FMA, un ejemplo de un mecanismo participativo que está surgiendo como una nueva “solución”. Los artículos de esta edición especial del *International Forestry Review* derivan de un proyecto de investigación comparativa de cuatro países llevado a cabo por el Centro para la Investigación Forestal Internacional (CIFOR) que tenía como objetivo comprender cómo apoyar a FMA organizados para lograr un uso más sostenible de la tierra y los recursos. Los siete artículos evalúan el potencial de los FMA para una toma de decisiones más equitativa con respecto a la sostenibilidad del uso de la tierra y los recursos, y abordan debates académicos sobre estas formas de participación. Todos los artículos abordan a los FMA desde diferentes perspectivas teóricas e intereses analíticos, pero lo hacen considerando cuestiones que se derivan de las desigualdades de poder inherentes a estos foros. Los artículos proporcionan más evidencia, y una advertencia, de que para acercarnos al cambio transformador, necesitamos FMA que hagan más que simplemente juntar personas alrededor de una mesa.

WHY MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FORUMS?

This Special Issue of the *International Forestry Review* brings together seven papers that provide a timely examination of multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs). MSFs have received renewed attention in global development and conservation circles, given the urgency to find transformative approaches to address climate change and unsustainable development (Gonsalves *et al.* 2005, Bastakoti and Davidsen 2015, Larson *et al.* 2018). Also known as multi-stakeholder initiatives, partnerships and platforms, MSFs focusing on forests, land and natural resources commonly address a variety of issues, such as community forest management, participatory budgeting, or natural resource management (Nayak and Bernes 2008, Søreide and Truex 2011, Wampler 2010) both in the Global North and South. MSFs are defined here as ‘purposely organised 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’ (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019:5). All of the forums examined in this Special Issue took place in forest landscapes, and most aimed at addressing deforestation and degradation.

The popularity of MSFs 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 (Ferraro *et al.* 2015, Detoni *et al.* 2018). Proponents emphasise their potential as a method for more equitable and inclusive collaboration and coordination among multiple actors and sectors than what has been achieved from mainstream applications of the participatory paradigm (United Nations Global Compact 2013, see Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* 2020a for a review). The idea, then, is that including a wider scope of stakeholders and sectors in decision-making will lead to better and more legitimate outcomes than those produced by top-down or unilateral decision-making processes. There is nothing particularly new about this idea – extensive research and practice on the participatory paradigm has emerged since the 1970s. Nevertheless, its meaning has shifted over time (see, for example,

Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). Importantly, there is still substantial naivete, and little apparent learning from these past experiences (Larson *et al.* 2018).

There is much optimism regarding how MSFs may contribute to the wider response to the environmental and social impacts of the climate crisis (Atmadja *et al.* forthcoming), address resource conflicts (Ratner *et al.* 2018) and support Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) initiatives (Fujisaki *et al.* 2016). Multi-stakeholder mechanisms are central to integrated landscape approaches (Minang *et al.* 2015, Sayer *et al.* 2013, Kusters *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, this optimism has been emphasised in international forums (e.g., United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change) as well as national and subnational policies (see Brockhaus *et al.* 2014, Kowler *et al.* 2014).

MSFs could be considered as another iteration of the participatory paradigm that was introduced to transform rural development practice four decades ago. The paradigm was implemented to enable more equitable development initiatives that were tuned to the priorities and needs of local peoples (Chambers 1983, Chambers *et al.* 1989). This approach to participation has been criticized as an expedient way to implement top-down approaches and create the illusion of participation, as a white-washed (or even green-washed) version of ongoing practices (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Some analysts have described participatory approaches as neo-colonial impositions that only seek to control local peoples in their new guise as project ‘beneficiaries’ (Ferguson 1990, Escobar 1995). From these perspectives, MSFs only serve to confirm mainstream practices, including the discourses that discriminate against local knowledge in favour of ‘technical’ knowledge (Sillitoe 1998). ‘Multi-stakeholder’, then, may only be a catchphrase that does not address structures of inequality, reinforces top-down approaches, and takes the ‘participation’ of local stakeholders for granted in box-ticking exercises to please donors (Kapoor 2001, Warner 2006). In practice, then, these initiatives could trivialise local participation, limit opportunities for meaningful public debate, lead to outcomes that confirm unequal development

practices, and fail to challenge the status quo (see, among many others, Williams 2004, Hickey and Mohan 2005, Perret and Wilson 2010). These positions extend the multi-disciplinary critique of the participatory development paradigm, hinging on whether increased participation has the transformative potential to change the status quo (Fox 2020).

In this current context, it is important to take stock of these new MSFs – examples of a participatory mechanism that is emerging as a new ‘solution’. This Special Issue aims to do that by analysing a variety of subnational landscape level MSFs from case study research in four countries. The seven papers (1) assess the potential of MSFs for more equitable decision-making in regard to land and resource use sustainability, and (2) engage with different scholarly debates over these forms of participation. All seven papers derive from a multi-country comparative research project carried out by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) that aimed to understand how best to support MSFs organised for more sustainable land and resource use.

Although approaching MSFs from different theoretical perspectives and analytical interests, all of the papers in this Special Issue engage with issues that stem from the power inequalities that are inherent to these forums. In what follows, we briefly lay out the two main positions regarding MSFs in the scholarly literature and then discuss the role of power and power inequalities with regard to the potential for MSFs to bring about real change. We close by introducing the papers.

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FORUMS

In the scholarly literature, the benefits of multi-stakeholder participatory processes span from the upholding of rights and participatory democracy – acknowledging the important roles that local peoples have in the sustainability of policies and projects – to improved coordination between different governance sectors and/or levels (see, e.g., Backstrand 2006, Chatre 2008, Pruitt and Thomas 2007, Reed 2008, Reed *et al.* 2008, Gambert 2010). Proponents claim that MSF outcomes may be more legitimate, as they include the voices of a wider scope of stakeholders than those usually involved in mainstream decision-making processes (Berkes *et al.* 1989, Botchway 2001, Hemmati 2002). Furthermore, proponents argue that MSFs have successfully brought to the table actors that would have rarely collaborated in the past, leading to more sustainable development and conservation outcomes. They claim that stakeholders are more likely to take ownership over initiatives they have participated in designing, and that participation in these spaces has allowed local peoples greater say over the initiatives that affect them and their territories (Mohanty 2004, McDougall *et al.* 2008).

MSFs can also be understood in the context of calls for rights-based approaches to development, including an

expansion of participatory mechanisms to include Indigenous and local communities in the decision-making processes that affect their territories. These calls – from donors, academia, and grassroots organisations – support the growing recognition of the link between climate change and human rights, rooted in decades of demands for greater community participation in both conservation and development (e.g. Chambers 1983, Chambers *et al.* 1989) and the more recent recognition of the climate crisis’ impact on Indigenous and local communities, who are among the most vulnerable to its effects (Gamble *et al.* 2009, ILO 2017). The impact of these calls is best illustrated in the Paris Agreement, which calls on its signatory Parties to “respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights”¹ in their actions to address climate change.

Nevertheless, the transformational potential of MSFs largely sits on whether they are able to address power inequalities between stakeholders (Fox 2020). These positions build on the notion that “participatory development has often failed to engage with issues of power and politics and has become a technical approach to development that, in various ways, depoliticizes what should be an explicitly political process” (Hickey and Mohan 2004: 4). Analysts acknowledge the problematic nature of power inequalities inherent to the interactions between their participants, and whether these forums can be resilient to the wide variety of contextual factors at play in the different landscapes where they are implemented (see Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* 2020a on the contextual characteristics that affect MSF outcomes). In fact, meaningful participation is conditioned by power contests and relations that are framed by a series of socio-cultural, political, economic, legal, and historical variables that determine the composition, interactions, procedures, outcomes, and impacts of an MSF (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019). The danger is that unchecked power inequalities will limit the possibility of equitable collaboration among equals and may lead to agreements that benefit powerful actors – and that are legitimised by the participation of less powerful actors (see the contributions to Cooke and Kothari 2001 for examples).

WHY POWER?

Both optimistic and more critical positions in the discussion regarding MSFs and participatory processes more widely recognise different kinds and scales of power inequalities between participating stakeholders. In the literature (e.g., Cornwall 2003, 2008, Chambers 2006), these inequalities are based on a series of different characteristics, including political (e.g. power to have the last say), resource (e.g. financial power to get things done), technical (e.g. power to know how to get things done), epistemological (e.g. power to decide on the ‘acceptable’ knowledge to be implemented in a project), and gender (e.g. power to exclude women from processes).

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/frameworks/parisagreement>

MSFs have been proposed as a participatory method that addresses power inequalities among stakeholders. According to proponents, by bringing people to the table MSF organisers and participants are able to understand the perspectives of those most affected by land-use policies and decisions and bring on board those with the power to affect the implementation and sustainability of the initiative's outcomes (Dougill *et al.* 2006, Tippet *et al.* 2007, Reed 2008, Reed *et al.* 2008). This ability to address power inequalities becomes central to their appeal, given the previous criticism of the participatory paradigm. Furthermore, power inequalities are especially challenging for MSFs organised to address unsustainable land and resource use in the Global South, in forest contexts framed by histories of inequality, conflict, and land dispossession, with inherent trade-offs. The stakeholders in these contexts are significantly diverse, including their land and resource access rights and priorities (Robbins 2012, Barnes and Child 2014). If MSFs can indeed address inequalities and promote collaboration, they may have impactful outcomes, as recent experimental research on collaboration and reciprocity has noted that inequalities undermine cooperation (Hauser *et al.* 2019). Nevertheless, this is easier said than done.

In Africa, Asia and Latin America, Indigenous and local communities participating in MSFs related to forests and land use may be customary rights-holders to the spaces that are either impacted by unsustainable use or that will be impacted by the decisions made by the forums. If they do not have secure rights, their position may be more vulnerable. Even if they are statutory rights-holders, there are some questions as to whether MSFs might undermine those rights (Fay 2014). These concerns reflect the broader critique above that suggests the participatory development paradigm reaffirms power inequalities among stakeholders, or between project implementers and beneficiaries (see Cooke and Kothari 2001, and Cornwall 2003 for examples).

The papers in this Special Issue think through these discussions of power inequalities and MSFs, approaching them from different perspectives.

METHODOLOGICAL AND ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

The seven papers that make up this Special Issue stem from a research project run by CIFOR in Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia and Peru in 2018–2020. Of the seven papers, one compares findings from 13 case studies across all four countries; the others all discuss cases, either comparatively or individually, with two papers from Peru, two from Brazil, and one each from Indonesia and Ethiopia. The team of contributing authors is diverse: representing eight women and three men, from Peru (4), Indonesia (3), Brazil (1), Ethiopia (1), Spain (1), and the United States (1). All were part of a research team that undertook a comparative project to assess the potential of MSFs for more equitable processes and outcomes regarding more sustainable land and resource use.

The forums were selected after scoping research in each country, as they fulfilled four criteria: they were organised to

address unsustainable land and/or resource use, they were organised at the subnational level, they included a forum for in-person interactions, and their participants included at least one government and one local actor. Subnational MSFs were selected because they were closer to the geographical spaces of resource and land-use planning and management, and due to the current interest in implementing multi-stakeholder processes as part of jurisdictional approaches to tackle climate change and deforestation (Fishman *et al.* 2017). A fourteenth case study, Brazil's Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm), was also included in the project given its prominence as a national multi-sector coordination platform. It was not included in this Special Issue, which centres on subnational case studies.

The papers engage with different MSFs from different disciplinary perspectives, but they are brought together by two key aspects. The first is that data derive from the application of the same set of research methods (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019). This makes this set of papers unique in the scholarly literature, as there is a gap of systematic comparative analyses of MSF processes. For each case study, the research team interviewed MSF organisers and participants, stakeholders who were not part of the forum for different reasons (but conceivably should have been), and key context informants – a different semi-structured questionnaire was designed for each. Research materials were translated into Amharic, Indonesian, Portuguese and Spanish in order to interview more than 500 research participants in their national languages. The range of actors interviewed was a reflection of an awareness by the research team that there were important differences to be considered between participants in an MSF. This included (but was not limited to) who convened the forum, who funded it, what kind of participation in decision-making was available to different participants, and who was not taking part in the process (and why). Papers share the analytical starting point that coordination and collaboration, as part of a multi-stakeholder solution, must be established based on the recognition that not all participants are equal.

In relation to this point, the second aspect is that the authors followed an analytical interest in power and power relations among MSF participants. The papers recognise the multidimensional nature of power as central to any understanding of how MSFs may or may not be able to support transformational change (see Partzsch 2017, Veneklasen and Miller 2002, 2006 on the multiple dimensions of power). Our analysis not only differentiates between sources of power, but also between the different mechanisms through which power is exercised. The papers argue that treating all participants as if they had the same access to informing the outcome of a collaboration process may lead to the reinforcement or exacerbation of existing power inequalities – those underlying structures upon which inequality and injustice are constructed. The problem, then, is not merely 'more coordination', but 'better' coordination. The papers seek to understand what this entails in different contexts.

THE PAPERS IN THIS ISSUE

In the first paper, **Organising for transformation? How and why organisers plan their multi-stakeholder forums**, Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* present an analysis of interviews of MSF organisers in case studies across the four countries included in the research project. The paper aims to understand how and why they organised their forum and their perception of its transformational potential. Analysis found that MSF organisers held two non-mutually exclusive concepts of MSFs – as an event and as a method of practice. In the former, organisers saw participants as collaborating as equals towards their common goals. Yet, those events were short-lived, excluded some stakeholders, and did not always lead to tangible outcomes. The latter concept was framed by the political interests and development priorities that drove unsustainable land and resource use in each jurisdiction where MSFs were held. Most MSFs brought actors together for implementation of their organisers' ideas and only dealt with the effects rather than the structural causes of unsustainable use. The authors concluded that for MSFs to reach their transformational potential, they must first recognise that power differentials cannot be addressed simply by bringing people together. Rather, they must include strategies to address power inequalities between stakeholders, assure the effective participation of underrepresented actors, and have funding strategies that will allow for more than just short-term planning.

Also considering the potential broader impacts of MSFs, Yami *et al.* examine how forums support community forest governance in Ethiopia. In **Can multi-stakeholder forums influence good governance in communal forest management? Lessons from two case studies in Ethiopia**, the authors compare the results of research in two MSFs in Oromia regional state that were introduced to address deforestation and forest degradation. Yami *et al.* show that gender inequity had a negative influence on the achievement of good governance in both sites. MSFs attempted to narrow the gender gap by setting minimum quotas for women's participation, which only led to representation without empowerment. The authors argue that the practice of assigning women to committees could aggravate the existing gender inequity, as putting women in time-consuming and less powerful positions could discourage them from engaging in decision-making processes. Furthermore, they argue that both case studies are evidence that MSFs would benefit from a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. A bottom-up approach would mobilise stakeholders, understand their multiple interests, and gather updated evidence on challenges and opportunities. A top-down approach could support the implementation of MSF decisions, as government authorities could use their decision-making power and mobilise implementation resources. Failing to substantially engage the government in MSFs could either lower the success of the MSFs in bringing change or limit the changes to the local community level. However, caution is required to prevent the government's excessive control over MSF processes and outcomes.

Continuing an examination of the inner workings of MSFs, Tamara *et al.*'s **Trust-building and leadership in multi-stakeholder forums: Lessons from Indonesia** explores the roles of trust and leadership as nurturing conditions for collaboration in MSFs. Based on a comparative analysis of research results with three MSFs in Indonesia, they show how a charismatic leader who is trusted by MSF participants can effectively facilitate a forum's process by mediating different and often conflicting interests. Conversely, shared leadership might only work when participants already have a feeling of ownership towards the MSF. For a better chance at selecting the most appropriate leadership approach and improve trust building, Tamara *et al.* call for MSF organisers to take into account the historical relationships between stakeholders, including any positive informal relationships, to build a better strategy to handle antagonism and improve collaboration. Hence, different challenges within MSFs may require different kinds of leadership.

Gonzales Tovar *et al.*'s **Politics and power in multi-stakeholder territorial planning: Insights from two 'Ecological-Economizing Zoning' processes in the Brazilian Amazon** also considers how networks and relationships among stakeholders may affect an MSF, based on their different historical and social contexts. The paper compares lessons from comparative research with two territorial planning MSFs in the states of Acre and Mato Grosso, showing how they are shaped by historical power asymmetries. The historical context, local elites and alliances, trade-offs and subjectivities, and political will and institutions across levels and sectors shaped power dynamics, collaboration and sustainability outcomes – both inside and outside the MSF. Acre's territorial planning MSF emerged from and was nourished by a context that embraced 'forest-citizenship' and social-environmental local movements, and promoted equitable, collaborative and balanced power relations and environmental benefits. Conversely, Mato Grosso's case shows an MSF that arose from external demands and institutions, was framed as a technocratic process, and operated in jurisdictions where economically powerful elites dominate important political and societal spheres, leading to much less equitable processes and outcomes. Overall, both MSFs and land-use planning must be recognised, in theory and in practice, as political processes rather than technocratic tools.

The last three papers examine three MSFs from the perspective of the Indigenous Peoples and local communities that engage in these processes. The papers explore the inclusion and exclusion of these underrepresented actors and the questions that these processes bring to the wider interest in MSFs. Londres *et al.*'s **The costs of elite-oriented multi-stakeholder forums to address deforestation: the case of the Green Municipalities Program in the Brazilian Amazon** highlights the risks of multi-stakeholder processes in highly unequal contexts that do not question the power of elites, and questions the legitimacy of initiatives that gain wide acclaim but are perceived by some local actors as highly unjust. Para's Green Municipalities Program – a major MSF designed to combat deforestation – deployed a strategy to address deforestation by collaborating directly with the

powerful sectors that are driving it. Londres *et al.* show how the MSF prioritised addressing the interests of the large-scale productive sectors with greater economic power, to the detriment of Para's Indigenous and smallholder communities, who were systematically excluded from the process. The MSF's focus on the effects rather than the drivers of deforestation left the underlying socio-political structures driving both deforestation and social injustice unchallenged.

Palacios Llaque and Sarmiento Barletti present a different experience of Indigenous Peoples' participation in MSFs – and a different kind of exclusion. In **The meeting of multiple governmentalities and technologies of participation in protected areas: The case of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve (Peruvian Amazon)**, they examine different forms of governmentality in the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve, a protected natural area in the Peruvian Amazon that is co-managed by Indigenous communities and Peru's Protected Areas Service. The co-management partners are supported by a multi-stakeholder Management Committee, composed of a variety of different stakeholders to the Communal Reserve. However, while this co-management arrangement includes historically excluded actors such as Indigenous Peoples in participatory governance, it excludes another population: Andean migrants. This case study interrogates the role of MSFs related to protected areas and poses questions about the arenas of participation necessary for an equal interaction between the different interests in the governance of protected area.

Rodriguez and Sarmiento Barletti's, **Can multi-stakeholder forums mediate indigenous rights and development priorities? Insights from the Peruvian Amazon**, examines the appropriateness of MSFs to support indigenous rights. Their paper engages with the multi-stakeholder roundtable for Isolated Indigenous Peoples (PIACI), which was set up to support the recognition process for five Indigenous Reserves to protect forested areas with officially recognised PIACI activity in the Loreto region. However, the MSF's objective clashed with Loreto's jurisdictional development agenda, setting up a conflict of rights and economic interests over the areas of the proposed Reserves, and raising concerns about the Roundtable's equity. The case study raises wider questions regarding the appropriateness of an MSF as a mechanism to foster respect for the recognised rights of vulnerable peoples and to promote a productive and equitable relationship between their rights and mainstream development interests. Rodriguez and Sarmiento Barletti's paper presents a key lesson for MSFs seeking to responsibly engage with the rights of vulnerable populations: recognised rights are not negotiable. The authors propose that to support such rights, MSFs must be designed so that their participants collaborate in identifying the challenges to rights coming from different levels, actors and discourses, learning from those challenges, and tailoring solutions and/or recommendations to address them.

Together, these papers provide more evidence for the importance of having a deep awareness of power inequalities when engaging MSFs as researchers, organisers, participants, supporters, and funders. It is somewhat puzzling that to date so little comparative research has been conducted on MSFs

and participatory processes in general, although methodologically this can be challenging. Even more puzzling is how little reflection appears to be behind the current call for multi-stakeholder platforms as a key solution for the sustainable governance of forests and forest landscapes. Certainly, in interviews with forum organisers, it was clear for some that they had not previously considered exactly *why* they had organised the forum as part of their initiative.

The evidence and analysis presented in this Special Issue of the *International Forestry Review* suggest that such forums cannot be taken for granted – they should be thoughtfully considered, with substantive, grounded efforts to level the playing field, as part of a strategy for change. We have called this approach 'designing for engagement' in a paper that was written as part of the same research project (Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* 2020a). This approach can be supported by purposefully crafted tools that allow forum participants and organisers to reflect on their processes and outcomes, discuss the challenges brought about by power inequalities, and use that evidence to adapt their future work (see Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* 2020b for examples).

We are aware that MSFs are here to stay and will continue to be promoted at different levels. Our papers are proof that to get closer to transformational change, we need forums that do more than simply bring people to the table.

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