

Shifting global development discourses: Implications for forests and livelihoods

Proposal for the thematic focus of the IUFRO Special Project: World Forests, Society and Environment 2015-2018.

Background

Sustainable development objectives and discourse have dominated environmental and development policies and practice for the past three decades and since the 2000 Millennium Summit of the United Nations, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have played a major role in guiding these processes. In September 2015 the United Nations will adopt a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-2030.

During the last decade new narratives have emerged in a concurrent fashion within global environment and development discourses with catchphrases like: “Green Economy”, “Inclusive Green Growth”, “Low Carbon Development”, “Climate-Smart Agriculture” and “Sustainable Intensification”. The first three narratives apply to the wider economy, while the latter primarily focus on agriculture. There is no universal consensus about the meaning of these concepts; instead they are interpreted in different ways by different actors and in various contexts. The different understandings of e.g. “low carbon development”, “green growth” and “green economy” cover a spectrum from narrow concerns about climate change and clean energy supply at one extreme to calls for more extensive transformative change in the global economic system for more efficient resource use at the other, which also calls for more sustainable and inclusive commodity supply with improved equity in benefit sharing¹.

Although their scope and horizon vary and are still unknown, these narratives suggest new rationalities and approaches to sustainable development, that foresee a larger role of private initiative and entrepreneurship, options for growth with no or limited environmental costs, and the absence of politically costly trade-offs.

UNEP, for instance, defines green economy as: “The improvement of human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”.² The green economy initiative pursues low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive economic development. The OECD developed a green growth strategy that aims to encourage economic expansion and development while ensuring that natural assets are not jeopardized in providing the resources and environmental services required for human well-being.³ OECD believes that appropriate investment and innovation can generate options to move away from business as usual scenarios, which it believes is imperative to achieve sustainability goals. Low carbon development refers to economic development involving low-emission and climate-resilient economic growth. Low carbon narratives often refer to LEDS, low carbon emission development strategies. LEDS are considered in voluntary

¹ Newton, A.C. and Cantarello, E. 2014. An Introduction to the Green Economy – Science, Systems and Sustainability. Routledge.

² <http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/AboutGEI/WhatIsGEI/tabid/29784/Default.aspx>

³ <http://www.oecd.org/greengrowth/48224539.pdf>

or obligatory carbon emission reduction strategies,⁴ and may apply to the whole economy or to specific sectors. The sustainable intensification narrative is similar to the green growth narrative, but focuses on food production and is associated with “climate-smart agriculture”. It argues for increased food production to meet growing global demand, while adequately addressing competition for land, water and energy, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.⁵ In all these narratives, economic growth, people’s wellbeing, climate mitigation and adaptation, and food security, are meant to be achieved simultaneously.

Narratives and discourses do shape practice. In the recent past they have shaped forestry and forests use, as well as forest policies and forestry development assistance. The sustainable development agenda of the 1990s triggered forestry reforms and sustainable forest management objectives, imposing new standards on corporate forestry, promoting forest tenure reforms and allowing communities to engage in commercial forestry activities, which was not possible before. The sustainable development agenda also influenced other environmental narratives and practice. It resulted, for instance, in the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity) and set a global biodiversity conservation agenda.

The interactions between practice and discourse are complex, and especially so when different discourses are being promoted and pursued in an overlapping and parallel fashion. For instance, the sustainable forest management narrative has elements of sustainable development but also places explicit focus on increased efficiency of public administration. Policies that support devolution of forestlands can aim to achieve greater economic efficiency, but also recognize ancestral rights, which are part of a broader sustainable development narrative. Devolution of forestlands and the granting of use-rights also stems from the recognition that the empowerment and agency of local actors is essential to meeting the primary goals of sustainable forest management. Sustainable development and sustainable forest management efforts have had quite mixed outcomes, in terms of contributing to livelihood improvements of forest dependent communities and the ecological integrity of forests. While the new ‘green economy’ is becoming more prominent in public statements of global, regional and national environmental development actors, sustainable development remains an important stated objective and forests are still prominent in those objectives.⁶

We hypothesize that the new generation of narratives and practices, placing green economy and green growth activities as the engine of development, influence and will continue to influence – perhaps in an increasing way – in future forest policy and practice. This in turn will influence in a significant manner progress in terms of the contributions of forests and the goods and services they provide to the improvement of rural livelihoods. For instance, the new narratives give rise to programs that stimulate and eventually incentivize innovations and entrepreneurship. It is expected that an increasing number of policies will encourage the adoption of technological innovations, perhaps through more effective fiscal policy and the removal of policy distortions. While these measures may lead to more integrated and effective use of resources and more inclusive businesses, they may also negatively affect forest dependent rural poor and other vulnerable stakeholders who will not be able to comply with more demanding standards that are advocated as being part of green economy practice. In this light, the focus on agricultural intensification may have important implications for forestry, as it is likely to increase the profitability of agricultural production and thus the opportunity costs for forest-based activities.

⁴ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1448>

⁵ Garnett et al. 2013. *Science* 341 (6141) 33-34

⁶ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>



At this juncture of time, it is not clear what the impact of a wider green economy or green growth agenda will be on hard won progress made during the 1990s and 2000s with regards to communal forestry, local forest tenure rights, and participatory forest governance. It is widely recognized that this progress varied significantly across different regions. The new green economy agenda deviates from the sustainable development agenda, but can also embrace complementary objectives. Under some scenarios, the new agenda suggests new opportunities for local, smallholder and indigenous forestry because of the economic and environmental benefits these efforts may offer. For instance, forest product value chains in many places increasingly involve smallholders and communities as the suppliers of unprocessed forest products or wood that has only undergone primary transformation; a result of the shift in forest ownership achieved in recent decades. On the other hand there is already evidence of a moving away from the development, equity and social justice objectives that have been the core of the sustainable development narratives.⁷ Instead, attention is being focused on narrower environmental goals linked to profit maximization. Beyond the social-cultural implications, it is also not clear what the impacts of these trends might be for forest extent and condition in different contexts.

Understanding the scope and horizon of the new environmental development narratives and how they may influence forestry will help to understand and anticipate their potential socio-environmental impacts. It will provide important insights and arguments to shape future forest policies and support. Better understanding these narratives and their implications and possible outcomes may have practical consequences for policy change (e.g. adopting more explicitly holistic and landscape approaches, supporting bio-economy and adoption of more efficient energy technologies). It could lead to the adoption of improved business practices (e.g. adoption of inclusive business models, improved production standards, and social safeguards). It may yield new “hybrid models” that enhance public-private institutional arrangements to effectively support climate compatible development, while also ensuring that the notions of equity and social justice are strongly included. The outcomes will be conditioned and shaped by different institutional, social, cultural, economic and biophysical contexts, which necessarily constitute important elements in an analysis of narratives, agendas and outcomes.

Guiding questions

A 2015–2018 focus of IUFRO WFSE on the new environmental development narratives, agendas and practice will generate new knowledge, guidelines and instruments to inform forest policy dialogue and formulation and practice for both public agencies and business sectors. We construe the focus on these narratives, agendas and practice around the following guiding questions:

1. What contemporary narratives and related strategies, agendas and practice within the global environmental and development discourses are relevant to forest policies and practice?
 - a) What are the similarities and differences among them? What is the role of forests and forestry in shaping contemporary narratives and related strategies, agendas and practice?
 - b) What (possible) forest-relevant trade-offs are embedded within and between these narratives and related strategies, agendas and practice?
 - c) How are the narratives reproduced across different sectors and levels from global to national, to sub-national, to local, taking into account differences in context?

⁷ E.g. Puppim de Oliveira, J.A. 2012. Green economy and good governance for sustainable development: Opportunities, promises and concerns. United Nations University Press, Tokyo.



2. To what extent do forestry (corporate, smallholders, communities, regulatory agencies, support-agencies, and scientific community) actors adopt new environmental development narratives and pursue related strategies, agendas and practices?
 - a) How are forestry actors adapting their strategies, agendas and daily actions to perceived opportunities emerging under these narratives?
 - b) Are there examples in the forestry sector where the new strategies, agendas and practice have resulted in controversial approaches to forest conservation and management?
3. What are the potential implications of the new environmental development narratives and related strategies, agendas and practice on forests, forest management and forest-related livelihoods?
 - a) Do the new strategies agendas and practices affect rights to forests, empowerment and agency of local actors, administration, legality, access to capital, and access to markets? Are local stakeholders, including communities consulted in the development of these new strategies and agendas?
 - b) Are there observed (or what could be the likely) impacts on livelihoods of forest dependent groups, or forest extent and conditions, that might be associated with these narratives, strategies, agendas and practice in different contexts? Are mechanisms being put into place to detect the potential emergence of undesirable impacts?
 - c) What are the likely influences of the new environmental development narratives and related strategies, agendas and practice within other sectors (agriculture, energy) on forests and forest-based livelihoods?
4. What sort of social and political configurations strengthen or weaken the influences of different discourses on actor specific strategies, agendas and practice, and what is the specific role played out by the narrative in legitimizing business as usual or transformative change?
5. What insights, recommendations, and tools and instruments emerge based on knowledge generated from answers to the previous questions that can contribute to improvement of forest livelihoods and forest integrity or mitigate threats to them.

Modus operandi

Interested authors are invited to submit **by 30th April 2015** an extended abstract (1000-1500 words) of an article with maximum length of about 8000 words to WFSE coordinator Pia Katila (pia.katila@metla.fi). A selection of appropriate abstracts will be made by the IUFRO WFSE editors, Pia Katila, Glenn Galloway, Pablo Pacheco and Wil de Jong.

Principal authors of accepted contributions will be invited to a meeting during which the overall plan as described here will be discussed again in much greater detail, and contributors will present the first full drafts of their papers. Following this meeting contributors will be given adequate time to write papers and submit them to the editors for review and feedback.

An academic forestry journal will be approached to publish a subset or all of the papers that will be prepared by contributors, to increase academic recognition of the WFSE core product. In this negotiation open access of all the contributions will be assured. If all contributions cannot be published under the journal format, a complementary volume will be published as a volume in the IUFRO



World Series.

Time Schedule

December 2014	Call for papers
30 th April 2015	Deadline for submitting extended abstracts
May 2015	Selection of papers
October 2015	Meeting of principal authors, deadline for full first drafts
April 2016	Deadline for submitting final papers to WFSE editors
June–November 2016	External review and revision of papers
First half 2017	Publication of journal and IUFRO World Series

