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IUFRO Spotlight also aims to present activities such as sessions at major IUFRO congresses or the work of IUFRO Task Forces with a focus on emerging key issues that are of great interest to policy makers and groups inside and outside the forest sector, and contribute to international processes and activities. The IUFRO Spotlight findings will be distributed in a periodic series of emails as well as blog postings.

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Governments Reclaiming Role in Forest Certification

Many governments are reclaiming a role that had been pretty well ceded to ENGOs and other private organizations over the past few decades – state governance of forest certification.

According to the authors of *From governance to government: The strengthened role of state bureaucracies in forest and agricultural certification*, this has become more noticeable following the recent rise of state-driven schemes for certifying timber legality as well as palm oil production in places such as Indonesia.

Their report sums up findings from a variety of recent studies and suggests, they say, that public administrations are beginning to reclaim certification authority through state-led mandatory schemes as part of a trend away from “transnational private governance to international state-driven governance.”

Dr. Lukas Giessen, Senior Researcher and Head of the International Forest Policy Working Group at the Chair of Forest and Nature Conservation Policy, University of Goettingen, Germany, and lead author of the study, says: “At the current stage, this does not replace neo-liberal market-based instruments.”



Photo by Ahmad Maryudi



These certification systems were analyzed by the authors.

“But it is a way for states, and individual administrations therein, to gain and maintain sovereignty over their policies while, at the same time, adding public legitimacy to their policy interventions. It means the trend toward more market-based approaches to forest policy will be countered by state-driven initiatives,” he said.

The authors say this shift is likely to be beneficial to large-scale industries in developing countries, which will receive state certification and-or legality verification efficiently and at low effort and cost. Governments in developing countries that introduce these policies will also enjoy increased tax revenues as in the case of palm oil certification in Indonesia.

Also, they say, since state-led certification tends to lower standards in the name of domestic public interest, this will put considerable pressure on market-based schemes such as FSC to also lower costs and standards – a process already begun in Indonesia. In the long run, they add, forest enterprises around the globe will benefit from less demanding certification standards and prices – which may not necessarily be seen by all as a good thing.

As cautionary notes, they add that the transformation to stronger, government-driven certification schemes will, by their very nature, have a negative effect on regimes that are weak or in their infancy – such as indigenous people who are struggling for basic rights to manage forests in their own way.

And, they add, neither certification nor legality verification can resolve the inequality in timber trade between big and small timber producers and actually have the potential to intensify such inequalities.

Dr. Giessen says their report provides counter-balance to existing research on private actor/institution certification, which has shown a bias toward overestimating private influence. It also shows the significant role ministries and other state forest administrators can and do play in certification politics worldwide.

In addition, he notes, the findings point out a way to generate new momentum in international forest politics under the UNFF by acknowledging, especially in developing countries, state sovereignty as well as the primacy of public interventions over private ones.

All forest-related ministries around the world will probably welcome the publication, Dr. Giessen said, since the findings will reflect, in those ministries' opinions, a more realistic view of policies and politics than do the views of the private actors.

The report may also spur private certification schemes to develop adaptive strategies so they can better compete, he added.

The report can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2016.02.001> and brings together findings from a number of more detailed studies on:

- *Voluntary and mandatory palm oil certification in Indonesia, see:*
<http://journal.ipb.ac.id/index.php/jmht/article/view/10798>
- *FSC and PEFC certification in Argentina, see:*
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264837715003968>
- *Stakeholders' preferences in forest certification in Indonesia, see:*
<http://mail.student.ipb.ac.id/index.php/jmht/article/download/10366/8082>

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