

Accessing Land at the Agricultural Frontier

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Aim and Scope of the Series

„Nothing endures but change“. Heraclitus the Ephesian (ca. 535–475 BC)

Institutions, defined as “the rules of the game”, are a key factor to the sustainable development of societies. They structure not only the multitude of human-human interactions of modern societies, but also most of the human-nature interactions. Poverty, famine, civil war, degradation of natural resources and even the collapse of ecosystems and societies often have institutional causes, likewise social and economic prosperity, sustainable use of resources and the resilience of socio-ecological systems. Agriculture, forestry and fisheries are those human activities where the interdependencies between human-human and human-nature interactions are perhaps most pronounced, and diverse institutions have been developed in history to govern them.

Social and ecological conditions are, however, ever changing, which continuously challenge the existing institutional structure at a given point in time. Those changes may be long-term, like population growth or climate change, medium-term, such as new technologies or changing price relations, or short-term, like floods or bankruptcies, but all of them pose the question whether the rules of the game need to be adapted. Failures to adapt timely and effectively may come at a high social cost. Institutional change, however, face a principal dilemma: on the one hand, institutions need to be stable to structure expectations and effectively influence human behaviors; on the other hand, they need to be adaptive to respond to the ever changing circumstance mentioned above. Understanding stability and change as well as developing adaptive institutions and effective, efficient and fair mechanisms of change are, therefore, of central importance for societies and an ongoing research challenge for social scientists.

If we want to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and adaptability of institutions, it stands to reason that we have to develop a good understanding of the causes, effects, processes and mechanism of stability and change. This is the aim of the series “Institutional Change in Agriculture and Natural Resources,” which attempts to answer the questions "How do processes and mechanism of institutional change actually work? What and who are the main determinants and actors driving, governing and influencing these processes? What are the economic, political, social and ecological consequences? How can adaptive institutions be designed and developed, and what governance structures are required to make them effective?" These are the questions at the heart of the series. The works published in this series seek to provide answers to these questions in different economic, social, political and historical contexts.

Volker Beckmann and Konrad Hagedorn
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Preface

During the past 15 years, I was able to visit and participate in several dozens of development projects targeting forest protection and poverty alleviation in low income countries. I always wondered if these activities actually made a difference — and especially for whom. On the one hand, government representatives from support receiving nations can rarely be held responsible for their decision making; on the other hand, international development aid organizations mostly apply interventions without feedback mechanisms to the financial resource providers, the donor countries' tax payers. Additionally, development aid organizations' main goal consists of securing funds for present and future activities and not primarily to eliminate their official reason of inception. The results of this study confirm that for policy makers, cynicism should not be seen as a sign of “burn out” or resignation but as an essential approach for effectively directing interventions. Individual self-interest remains the ultimate driving force of any human organization, including development aid organizations.

I would like to thank Professor Michael Kirk and Professor Konrad Hagedorn for their willingness to support and direct me in my undertakings and for their patience and time spent with guiding me through the intricacies of economic research. I am grateful to Volker Beckmann who reminded me of the significance of Transaction Cost Economics and who made this publication possible. Special thanks go to Jochen Leitz for our discussions on development aid and his assistance for my prolonged stays in the Mosquitia. I am eternally indebted to Paul House for his willingness to share with me so much of his unsurpassed knowledge of the people living “between land and water” in the Mosquitia. Ian Cherrett provided me with most of my relevant knowledge on managing rural development projects and introduced me to the Honduran Caribbean in the first place. Gustavo Gordillo allowed me to gain outstanding practical insight on international bureaucracies and directed me in applying property rights and land reform concepts to Latin America cases. Last, but certainly not least, Paul Vockert enabled me to position myself twice at exceptionally remarkable places.

Davis, USA, December 2007

Frank Boening

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