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Accessing Land at the Agricultural Frontier

A Case Study from the Honduran Mosquitia

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Establishing protected areas in neotropical rain forests is the latest type of state implemented land reform in Latin America: previous forest users, such as indigenous people, are partially or fully expropriated or confronted with land confiscation without compensation. Despite these national conservation efforts, the widespread occupation and deforestation of forestland continues.

In this study, I show that the degree to which forest dwellers respect protected areas depends on their integration in organizations other than the ones responsible for state initiated conservation activities. Forest users participate in organizations in order to reduce their transaction costs for production. If participating in conservation efforts such as protected areas does not result in comparatively increased utility, they will not participate.

This analytical framework differs from other approaches that focus on factors such as technological progress, infrastructure development, and regional demographic changes as determining factors for deforestation. In order to disentangle accumulative, synergetic, and opposing effects of forest users' activities, and in order to be able to compare the various encountered organizations, the framework systematically categorizes social and environmental elements into feedback mechanisms, organizations, players, and rules. Additionally, organizations interact in nested structures.

This study's field work took place in 2003/2004 in the Rio Platano Man and the Biosphere Reserve in the Honduran Mosquitia. In this remote frontier setting, the nation state fails in sustainably managing natural resources. Faith-based groups replace the state in establishing basic rules for people's interactions. Church organizations reduce transaction costs for people getting organized. Collective action organizations for natural resource management benefit free-ride on religious groups' previous organizational investments. Or, people's susceptibility to supernatural ideologies facilitates collective action for natural resource use, leading to forest protection as well as deforestation.