Challenges in Applying Social Indicator Systems - The Case of Forest Communities in Guatemala

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Abstract

Indicator models are applicable to many different situations and cases, yet controversial as they potentially increase gaps between the outcomes in research and reality. By reducing complexity such models often simplify the real world situation. Specifically social sustainability, based on local traditions and norms, but also determined by state, provincial gobernment, politics and laws, has to be understood in a cultural context for a comprehensive assessment. Human well-being (HWB) is especially relevant in this discussion as it substantially depends on the local perception and has major influence on the success of sustainable development. On that account, a HWB indicators set was developed in the frame of a sustainability assessment tool by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). The main objective of this study was to identify the local understanding of HWB in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) of Guatemala, where social and economic issues such as land use conflicts and poverty might affect sustainable forest management.

There have been many projects supporting the community forestry approach in order to maintain or enhance ecological sustainability but so far little attention has been paid to the social perspectives of a sustainable future. Thus we examined the actual situation regarding the CIFOR human well-being indicator set compared to local perceptions of HWB. Furthermore, we analysed, whether the applied indicator model is sensitive to the local understanding of HWB. In total 37 interviews were conducted with local stakeholders including forest workers, housewives, farmers and teachers in two communities in the MBR.

It has been found that several CIFOR indicators include important issues of the local population: conflict, fairness, access to resources and benefits from the forest. Other elements, on the contrary, are not covered to the extent to which the local population describes them. Health issues are pressing and the access to medical assistance is crucial in the perspective of the local population. Further, education is an important factor; the central issue is the financial burden related to the fact that students in remote communities have to move to urban areas for higher education. Economic problems are mainly related to the lack of long-term employment opportunities. These aspects should consequently be addressed in more detail in the HWB assessment.

From a transdisciplinary point of view we concluded that such indicator models developed together with the local population could help to approximate the HWB assessment of CIFOR to local realities.

Keywords: Human well-being, local perception, sustainability assessment, transdisciplinarity

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