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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

The Transformation of Land Rights as an Instrument for Conservation? A Case Study from Pará, Brazil

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Abstract

The region around the city of Santarém at the Lower Amazon in Brazil is nowadays discussed particularly regarding mechanised soy production and governmental infrastructural projects, which are all together impulses for deforestation, both on a local and a supra-regional level. Concurrently there are two national protected areas with the aim to guarantee conservation of the rainforest by sustainable forest management and restricted land use. One of these areas is the Reserva Extrativista Tapajós-Arapiuns (Resex).

The Resex is managed by a committee (Conselho Deliberativo), consisting of governmental and public institutions, non-governmental actors as well as representatives of the local population. In 2013 the Conselho Deliberativo approved an agreement about the use of natural resources which includes a transformation of land tenure, saying that the area will stay state-owned, but dwellers will receive fixed parcels of land at their own disposal. The Conselho Deliberativo will be the responsible board for administration of allocation and control. This arrangement replaces the “traditional” local system of common land, where access to resources is managed by each community, and residents practice shifting cultivation instead of farming on defined individual sites.

The present contribution focuses on the transformation of land tenure described above, arguing that this case shows a general tendency nowadays where sustainable use of limited natural resources is to be realised by external regulation - either through the state or through privatisation and thus market mechanisms. This is caused by the assumption that local communities are unable to regulate the use of common resources. But data from fieldwork in 2013 indicate that the “traditional” system already consists of an informal community-based structure that provides a control of access to land. Following researches like Elinor Ostrom, many case studies prove that the protection of commons against over-utilisation and exploitation cannot invariably be reached by the general strategy of transformation into private property or state regulated resources, but that especially local informal structures are able to secure sustainability. This contribution aims to discuss whether and how the informal system of community-based management in the Resex is considered in the new agreement about land tenure.

Keywords: Brazil, community-based management, conservation, land tenure