



Tropentag, September 20-22, 2017, Bonn

“Future Agriculture:
Socio-ecological transitions and bio-cultural shifts”

Sustainable Resource and Market Access: Towards an Enabling Institutional Environment along the Value Chain of a Non-Timber Forest Product in Amazonia?

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Abstract

Given the lack of access of forest dependent rural dwellers to natural resources and markets as well as the lack of an enabling institutional environment for reconciling biodiversity conservation and livelihood strategies in the Amazon:

How do informal and formal institutions affect the access to Brazil nuts (BN) and markets by upstream actors of the BN value chain (VC) in the Lower Amazon region?

The informal institution analysed is the ‘debt-peonage system’ and the formal one is the ‘Term of Compromise’ (ToC) in Brazil. ToC is a legally-based instrument for overcoming conflicts between Brazil’s Ministry of Environment (MMA/ICMBio) and traditional populations over natural resources in Protected Areas.

The analytical framework captures how both informal and formal institutions as well as related formalisation and institutionalisation processes affect the resource and market access by upstream VC actors. At the core of the analysis is the VC position of BN gatherers affected by both the processes of institutionalisation of limitations upon their access ability per debt-peonage and formalisation of restrictions upon their access rights per ToC. It is an innovative framework for inclusive sustainable value chain development (VCD) of agricultural and, especially, non-timber forest products in different rural contexts.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from ‘community’ to national level (2012–2015). A survey on socioeconomic conditions and resource access was conducted with 185 households in four municipalities of the Lower Amazon basin as were narrative, problem-centred and key-informant interviews with VC actors (BN gatherers and buyers), representatives of government (e.g. MMA/ICMBio) and NGOs.

Results indicate: (i) formalisation of resource and market access restrictions per ToC has reinforced unbalanced patron-client relations among BN gatherers and buyers already institutionalised per debt-peonage; (ii) self-reliant sustainable BN VCD depends on democratic participation in decision-making for locally adapted ToC by transforming the governance structures of councils for managing PAs from ‘consultative’ to ‘deliberative’ ones, while co-shaping a conducive context-sensitive institutional environment, policies and service provision; (iii) ‘socioeconomic upgrading’ of the position of upstream VC actors builds on ability and self-organisation of smallholders in ‘well-managed’ cooperatives. Finally, evidence-based policy ‘suggestions’ are provided for self-determined sustainable rural development.

Keywords: (Agro)biodiversity conservation, access ability, Amazonia, environmental governance, inclusive sustainable development, institutions, livelihoods, local markets, production networks, sustainable upgrading