Forest Certification As A Way To Reduce Forest Degradation

I am more in favour of forest certification rather than against it.

Forest certification is a mechanism by which an independent organization issues a written assurance that a product, service or process meets specific requirements (Auld, Gulbrandsen, & McDermott, 2008). This may be followed by issuance of a symbol on products from certified companies, to easily identify them in the market. The idea of forest certification is aimed at rewarding foresters who promote aspects of sustainable forestry (ecologically appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable) (Auld et al., 2008). In the Baltic region, the third-party stakeholders that carryout certification include Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). However, some countries have come up with their own national certification mechanisms which are based on the international standards. Forest certification follows two major directions: forest management and chain-of -custody audits. I support certification for the following reasons.

Global definitions of forestry differ from one country to another, hence global uniform standards could be hard to be agreed upon. However, development of national systems of forest certification that are accredited to international ones like FSC and PEFC has been a positive step towards the development of certification, thus enabling it to attain legitimacy through inclusion of stakeholders, cooperation, procedural fairness and transparency of the entire process as well as the results (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018).

Certification plays a fundamental role in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. According to (Auld et al., 2008), some states such as Lithuania and Latvia had over 50% of their forests certified. This has enabled these countries follow up on attainment of SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 12(responsible consumption and production) and SDG 15(life on land). The underlying requirements to attain certification status such as those in the chain-of-custody audits that call for responsible harvesting as well as proper working conditions and pay for workers is enabling attainment of the SDGs.

The decisions of the various forest administrators in the Baltic states to embrace certification has enabled them to sustain their wood exports from state forests. Certification was originally thought to provide avoid an additional monetary benefit although this hasn’t been entirely realized. However it is now becoming a requirement for penetration into markets in western Europe as well as America thus enabling them attain economic benefits of international trade (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018).

Adoption of certification at international scales has enhanced protection and enhancement of High Conservation Values in forests although this has led to some conflicts with state administration. The decision by non-governmental organizations to refuse disclosure of location of endangered species (which are targeted by poachers), refusal of removal of deadwood from logging sites, and rejecting use of pesticides, all of which are prerequisites for certification has promoted conservation thus protecting the environment.

Certification is a better alternative compared to labelling which doesn't involve the participation of a neutral third party but is rather a self-assessment by an individual organization or a group of organizations (Auld et al., 2008). This lowers the likelihood of biasness although this has come at a cost for example foresters in Poland saw the requirements by FSC as being more ecological and social as compared to their economic demands (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018), and the more flexible PEFC was adopted by many European countries because of the less stringent controls (Auld et al., 2008).

As part of the ways of gaining legitimacy of certification that are explained by (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018), the FSC in the Baltic states aims towards inclusion of all possible parties, this is seen through acceptance for state authorities in the FSC economic chamber. This practice enables a good relationship with state authorities which is highly essential for the success of FSC initiatives since they are likely to be manipulated and oppressed if their visions differ greatly from those of the state forests. A classical example how FSC Polska was suspended in Poland following appointment of top administrators who were said to have alliances with state forest authorities.

FSC is operating like a safety net and is the final check of the sustainability practices of forest companies in the Baltics and Europe in general. It was introduced to check unsuitable practices and ensure environment conservation is taken as a priority. It was introduced to serve as a substitute for a forest convention that would ultimately be politicized. Without a global certification mechanism, there would be no binding regulation for environmental values in forestry practices and thus conservation of forests would never have been taken seriously by companies.

Certification however hasn't come without shortcomings. The most common one is the failure to justify the cost of certification in comparison to the additional benefit derived especially for the small private owners. A key aspect of cost examined in (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018) is that costs are incurred by forest enterprises whereas benefits mostly fall to exporting companies. My experience while speaking to forest owners was that they spent money implementing management plans in line with FSC and PEFC guidelines but received no additional prices from export companies for their wood compared to uncertified forests. However, the export companies used the fact that they were certified to their advantage and requested for high offers in the global market thus limiting the benefits to only themselves.

Secondly when considering Swedish forestry, there has been a failure for it to have a great impact because the monitoring and enforcement mechanisms of forest certification haven't been tough enough (Villalobos, Coria, & Nordén, 2018). The study indicates that there is only a 3.7% difference in benefits between compliant and non-compliant foresters and this isn't statistically significant to cause wide spread participation.

Another aspect of the current certification framework that makes it less desirable is the strong push for ecological interests ahead of the others. Right from the creation o FSC in 1993, the ecological and social chambers originally had more power and influence over the economic chambers before it was changed to three chambers each with equal representation and decision making ability (Auld et al., 2008). This needs to be addressed in detail in future certification policies because it leads to conflicts over interests between the various stakeholders, and this isn't the aim of certification. This was the underlying factor for the creation of competitive schemes as forest owners and companies wanted to develop their own

rules.

A significant shortcoming of certification is that it could be used to favor interests of an organization for example when the directorate in Poland wanted to certify Bialoweiza National Park in Poland so that they could justify higher harvesting levels, and compliance with international standards of nature conservation in the biodiversity hotspots although this was heavily rejected by environmental NGOs (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018).

In conclusion, certification effectiveness refers to the extent to which it alters on the ground practices so as to promote social, ecological and ecological values such as reduced forest degradation (Auld et al., 2008). The certification sector is now seen as normalized especially because the main benefit is market entry as opposed to higher price for certified commodities. Some companies are known to even not use certification labels on products because consumers still focus on price and quality and not on certification status (Klingberg, T. 2002). This gives the impression that it is a temporary phenomenon that has now reached saturation among the consumers. Certification has greatly improved the image of forestry as a more environmentally responsible sector. However, for it to attain its intended purpose of a price premium, there is need to focus on output legitimacy through: improved coverage (more organizations involved); more relevant rules to national forestry frameworks; and close emphasis on verification of compliance and banning of timber from non-compliant sources (Niedzia?kowski & Shkaruba, 2018).

References

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