

From Product to Place: A landscape approach to governing agri-food systems

Concerns about the pace at which global agri-food production chains and other extractive industries have been using the Earth's finite resources led to the design and implementation of roundtables, governance mechanisms aimed at ensuring that value chains based on tropical commodities become more environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive (see insert). However, after operating for more than a decade, they have not been wholly successful. Major areas under palm oil, soy and sugar production in, for example, Brazil, Indonesia, Liberia and Paraguay, are still grappling with uncontrolled deforestation and there are struggles with local communities about the use of the land and land tenure rights (Bodegom 2013).



The lack of success of roundtables has had to do with conflicting interests (Box 1). Less obviously, it is argued that the design of roundtables is incomplete. Commodities are primarily seen within the context of a functional value chain, i.e., from producer to consumer, rather than as part of a landscape where people live and work and where different stakeholders compete for space and natural resources. Separating production systems from their spatial context suggests that the complex reality is being ignored. A stakeholder dialogue based on a landscape approach is suggested as a solution for managing the

competing claims for natural resources within these systems more effectively (van Oosten 2013). Does this then mean that the roundtable approach will become redundant? Are there other alternatives that can be used to adequately manage the natural resources taking into consideration the existing landscape? And, if there are no alternatives, is there a way to improve on the existing system? These are some of the questions that researchers at Wageningen UR have been trying to answer in their research on landscape governance. To answer these questions, the researchers studied commodity roundtables in Paraguay, Indonesia and Brazil.

Roundtables

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was established in 1993 for the certification of timber, followed later by the setting up of commodity roundtables. Roundtables have been facilitating dialogue between civil society and industry actors aimed at achieving sustainable standards where workers, local communities and natural resources are better protected. There are currently 11 roundtables, organised around specific products (e.g., soy, palm oil, cotton, cocoa). Membership is restricted to producers, buyers and civil society; state bodies are excluded from roundtables so as to ensure their autonomy.

Field research at study sites in Indonesia (i.e., Halimun Salak, East Kutai, Sungai Wain), included a stakeholder analysis and other participatory methods (e.g., participatory mapping, ranking, scoring). The data was used to analyse the drivers, pressure, state, impacts and responses to competing land use claims within a framework based on earlier work carried out under the research programme Global Food Security (van Berkum et al., 2011). The research provided a means to better understand the interactions between society and the environment and identify possible solutions.

The landscape approach

The landscape approach aims to reconnect production chains to their spatial context – agriculture, land, water, forests and people are all connected (Figure 1). Working from a landscape perspective means that the complex multi-functionality of a landscape becomes central to the analysis, and this makes it hard to separate isolated production chains from their spatial context (i.e., the natural resource base, the socio-economic realities, the multiplicity of stakeholders, their culture, functions and knowledge). It also means that the spatial impacts of production chains become difficult to ignore. A main drawback of the landscape approach is that the issue of governance is hard to capture because existing governance mechanisms are based on political-administrative structures of states, which do not always correspond with biophysical boundaries and socio-culturally defined landscapes. Notwithstanding this, the researchers found the landscape approach useful in identifying problematic issues of governance and in helping to resolve them. They particularly looked at case studies in Indonesia.

Governing landscapes

Some basic similarities in all the cases studied included: incidents of clashes between large-scale agri-food and resource extraction industries and forest/nature conservationists or small-scale farmers; formal rules and regulations regarding land use were fuzzy; rules and regulations could be informally drawn up and agreed on by the various actors involved. In the case of West Java, the encroachment of expanding commercial agriculture and resource extraction threatened two national parks – Gunung Halimun and Gunung Salak – to such an extent that the National Park Authorities created an ecological corridor to join the two parks. In the process, however, approximately 100,000 inhabitants of local communities located inside the corridor lost access to their farmlands. A coalition of inhabitants and local non-government organisations (NGOs) strongly protested against this and a multi-party agreement was reached, following a multi-functional landscape approach (Henneman 2012). In another case study, vast areas in East Kutai, Kalimantan are being used for open-pit mining of coal. Mining companies are required to restore the areas mined to the original forest. Together with the inhabitants and local NGOs, the mining company created a multi-stakeholder platform, which took responsibility for designing a multi-functional landscape plan in line with the needs and desires of the various actors involved (Brascamp 2013).



Mosaic landscape in the Halimun-Salak corridor

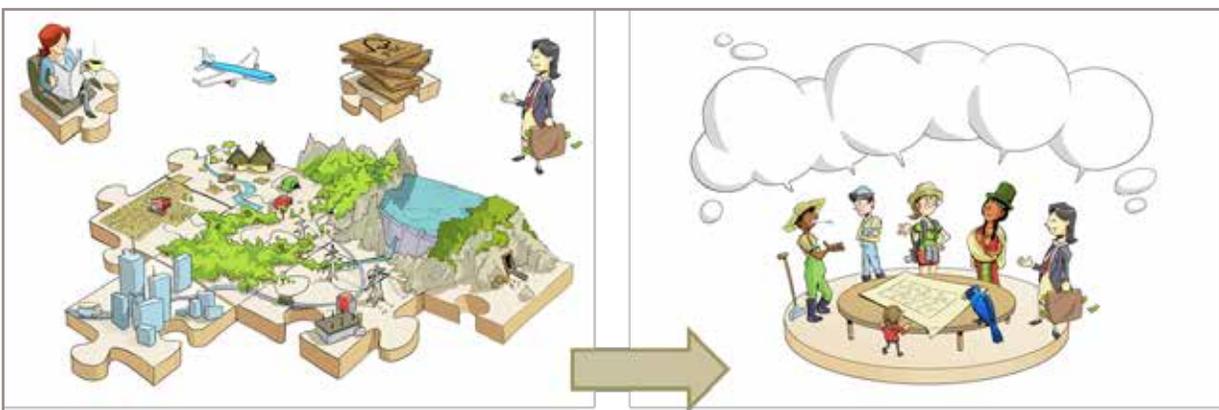


Figure 1 A landscape approach

Figure 2 Landscape governance

A landscape approach refers to the management of complex landscapes in an integrated and holistic manner, incorporating all the different land uses within those landscapes in a single management process. Landscape governance refers to the process in which landscape inhabitants, policy-makers, civil society and private businesses decide on what the landscape looks like. This implies spatial decision-making beyond the formal political-administrative structures of states, as landscapes usually follow the biophysical and socio-cultural boundaries of geographical space (van Oosten 2013).

The cases illustrate that landscape governance involves multi-stakeholder arrangements at the landscape level, based on a multi-functional reality of place. Solutions to problems are sought through dialogue and negotiation involving global, national and local groups, drawing on complementarities rather than on competing land use.

Hybrid approach: A possibility

Roundtables have been successful in developing globally accepted standards on sustainable production, and consultation mechanisms along the production chain, so at the moment it is hard to tell whether they will become redundant in the immediate future. Agribusinesses and other extractive industries need to become part of the landscape they are sourcing from, and contribute to a harmonious spatial development of place.

Landscape governance arrangements are, however, often poorly aligned with formal planning structures because the boundaries of landscapes often do not coincide with those of administrative constituencies of states. This does not take away from the usefulness of the landscape approach. The examples from Indonesia show how landscape governance can effectively move across political administrative boundaries, linking agri-food businesses and other extractive industries to stakeholders living in or depending on the landscape. It is therefore worth considering combining the two different perspectives into a hybrid approach. Currently, there are several initiatives in the making, claiming that such an approach could work.

Time will tell whether production chain approaches and landscape approaches can work together.

But one thing is for sure, there is an urgent need to re-connect agri-food chains and resource extraction industries to those geographical areas where the products are derived from. Having a bottom-up approach to stakeholder collaboration and public-private engagement at the landscape level will help connect the global to the local and enhance the sustainability of global agri-food chains for future generations to come.

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