Adaptive governance in the Brazilian Amazon: a case study of the Green Municipality of Paragominas

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Abstract

Annual rates of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon declined by 77.5% between 2004 and 2011. Yet, the future of the Amazon forest is still uncertain and there remains an urgent need for environmental policies to be improved and strengthened in order to achieve conservation goals and sustainable development in the region. Recent successes have been partially attributed to a combination of several innovative government policies. One such flagship policy was the publication in 2008 by the federal government of a Red List of 36 municipalities with highest rated of deforestation. The list mandated named municipalities to implement stricter deforestation monitoring, and made access to credit conditional on compliance with environmental legislation and legalization of land titles. Both measures caused significant disturbance to local economies.
The first municipality to exit the Red List was Paragominas in 2010 through the development of the Green Municipality initiative. Paragominas went from being the main timber-producing centre of Brazil in the late 1980s with a notorious reputation for deforestation and violence, to becoming a national success story for municipal-level anti-deforestation policies. Landowners and political leaders of Paragominas joined forces with NGOs to build a pact for zero deforestation and improve environmental compliance among landowners. With the success of its initial goals, Paragominas became the model for a state-level policy that is currently working to upscale the experience to other municipalities across Pará.

Hybrid and multi-level governance processes both clearly played a critical role in combating deforestation in the case of Paragominas. However, the success of such processes depends on local initiatives and it is still unclear how they can contribute to the development and adoption of effective sustainability policies in the wider Amazon region. One of the factors that deserves more attention when analyzing successful cases of adaptive governance is the state of local resources at the time of the change, as well as the pre-existing capacity of the system to make a transition. Studies on the transition of socio-ecological systems elsewhere show that analyzing the trajectory of the system is essential to understand its capacity to

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reorganize after a disturbance.
Here, we reflect on the reorganization of governance arrangements and collective action in Paragominas after the disturbance caused by command-and-control policies that followed the issuing of the Red List. Through the lens of the adaptive cycle framework, we assess the pre-existing characteristics of the system to enable this shift. By analyzing the municipality's trajectory, we identify external and internal elements (including focused intervention by non-state actors and emergence of local champions) that played important roles both in triggering change and providing actors with the potential for flexibility and innovation in developing new governance structures. We question whether this model of environmental decentralization can be effective in other municipalities across the state of Pará and the Brazilian Amazon, as well as its medium- and long-term success.

Keywords: Governance, sustainability, collective action