

Natural resources governance: Responsibilization of citizens or forcing responsibility on them?

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The possibilities of citizens to participate in natural resource governance are increasing. Responsive and collaborative models of natural resource governance can open up new opportunities, but can also lead to unreasonable responsibilization, or even force responsibility on under-

resourced organizations and individuals. This is the conclusion made in studies published in the Special Issue of *Journal of Forest Policy and Economics*, entitled "Responsibilization in Natural Resource Governance," and edited by Professor of Natural Resources Governance Irmeli Mustalahti from the University of Eastern Finland and Professor of Natural Resources & Environment Arun Agrawal from the University of Michigan.

The studies included in the special issue deal with natural resources governance in Indonesia, India, Mexico, Nepal, Tanzania and Russia, and show that natural resources governance involves a plethora of different actors for whom responsibilization has become more the rule than the exception. Often, [local communities](#) were given increasing responsibility for natural resources governance—without being given appropriate resources or operating conditions. In some cases, responsibilization had changed from mildly persuasive, to demanding, then to forced responsibility.

"The shift from responsibilization to forcing responsibility on local communities can be described as symbolic violence. Obligations and demands dictated from above are often a form of soft and invisible violence that can lead to corruption, [social inequalities](#) and exhaustion of natural resources," says Professor Irmeli Mustalahti.

The term symbolic violence was coined by Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist and philosopher who observed and identified symbolic violence in nearly all power structures that societies have.

"In Finland, too, responsibilization has become an important objective, a tool for enhancing efficiency," says Professor Mustalahti.

She points out that some structures of governance and top-down demands do not necessarily support the well-being of citizens but instead

force responsibility on them and are, in fact, manifestations of symbolic violence. Young people, too, are affected. This is a theme addressed also by the ALL-YOUTH research project which is supported by the Strategic Research Council coordinated at the Academy of Finland.

Professor Mustalahti and Professor Agrawal point out in their article that responsabilization and forced responsibility is not an issue in natural resources governance alone; the education and health care sectors are also affected. For example obligations can be transferred or reassigned to local communities, patients or students without giving them proper resources and operating conditions. In [public discourse](#), forcing responsibility on citizens has been justified for reasons pertaining to climate, economy and labor policy.

"In order to support responsible and collaborative [governance](#) of natural resources, we need to have better understanding of citizens' skills and abilities, and of social structures and agency. Citizens must have adequate operating conditions, and tasks assigned to them must be in line with their resources and possibilities to influence," says Professor Mustalahti.

More information: Irmeli Mustalahti et al. Research trends: Responsibilization in natural resource governance, *Forest Policy and Economics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.forpol.2020.102308](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2020.102308)

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