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ENGOV Working paper No. 2, 2013

Elites and environmental governance in Latin America: A framework for studying a contentious issue

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Elites and environmental governance in Latin America: A framework for studying a contentious issue

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Abstract

This paper seeks to outline key concepts and hypotheses for the study of elites in environmental governance in Latin America. It starts with pointing to an alleged “black boxing” of elites in most studies of environmental governance in the region. It further discusses different definitions of elites and views on how elites change in the general literature, and proposes a resource based view on elites embedding them in the control of four different kinds of resources: economic, political, social and knowledge. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between elites and non-elites and the importance of the dynamics between different elite groups. The paper ends with an outline of how to study elites in environmental governance in Latin America.

Keywords

Environment, governance, elites, natural resources, elite shifts.

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1. Introduction

Since colonial times, the differentiation of the social, political and economic elites from the rest of the population in Latin America has been intimately connected to the control that the former groups have exerted over natural resources. The elites' control over land, metals, water, oil and gas has been equally important as their control over labor in order to be able to dominate societies and state apparatuses (Coronil 1997). A further historical characteristic of Latin America is that this elite control has been intimately linked to the insertion of Latin America into the global economy as exporters of natural resources, and to the elite's cultural, ethnic and economic ties to foreign countries, companies and organizations. Thus, social conflicts in Latin America have in many cases had a triple edge: they have been about the distribution of economic resources, but equally about the control over natural resources and the values, culture and worldviews underlying the use of them (Escobar 2011).

Consequently, in spite of the existence of an elitist conservation movement, the struggles to protect the environment from over-exploitation and contamination have been closely related to struggles against local, national and transnational elites by indigenous peoples, small farmers and other marginalized groups as well as middle class actors sympathizing with their cause (Carruthers 2008). These struggles are also the focus of the great majority of studies of the governance of natural resources in Latin America often based on a political ecology approach, that tends to "privilege the rights and concerns (often livelihood-based) of the poor over those of powerful political and economic elites" (Bryant and Jarosz 2004, p. 808). This has led to a view on elites as representing the expansion of global capitalism in a rather homogenous manner. Moreover, a core but often implicit assumption of these studies is that there is a great deal of elite continuity. It follows that in order to understand the potential for change towards a more equitable and sustainable use of natural resources, one has to understand the organizational capacity and mobilization potential among non-elite groups.

While this may be perfectly justifiable on ethical, political as well as often on empirical grounds, the current situation in Latin America makes this "blackboxing" of elites problematic. With the so called "pink tide" of the last decade in Latin America, new groups have entered political power, many of whom have their background in movements that have firmly opposed the elite's dominance of the political system and control over natural and economic resources. Once in power, as a means to enable increased social spending and expanded social services, some of these new governments have enacted policies to increase the production in key commodity sectors and strengthened the state control over them, and thus come under new criticism for overexploitation and destruction of natural resources (Gudynas 2010, García-Gaudilla 2009, Hoggenboom and Fernández Jilberto 2009). Yet, many have also increased state presence and established new institutions, which in turn may produce new elites associated with state control over natural resources, the way it happened in the 1960s and 1970s when the model of import substituting industrialization led to the emergence of new governmental and business elites.

Thus, whether there has actually been a shift in elites and what it means for environmental governance is a question that needs to be investigated in different national and local contexts. One should ask: Has the entering of new, left of center governments signified a shift in environmental governance? This working paper proposes an analytical framework for a study aimed at answering

that question, assuming that the answer to the question above depends on whether the shift in government is accompanied by a broader shift in the composition and actions of the elites.

A first step in answering the question above is to get a clear understanding of what is meant by the term 'elites' and how to identify a shift in elites. In this paper, a dynamic, relational, resource based model is proposed to studying elites and their intention and ability to create and transform environmental governance leading towards a more sustainable and equitable use of natural resources. The "resource based" approach indicates that we view the elites as acquiring their position through the control over different resources. While economic (including natural) and political resources may be the most important, also social resources (networks) and discursive resources (knowledge) are of key importance. The term "dynamic" highlights the fact that although there is almost by definition an element of continuity and constants in the concept of elites, elites are changing through a variety of different processes. By "relational" we highlight the fact that elites cannot be understood without taking into account their relations with "non-elites" and indeed how this relationship is defined and may be redefined is a key marker of elites and elite change.

In the following, first the role of elites in existing political ecology literature in Latin America is discussed. Second, the concept of elites and how this has been approached in the literature is elaborated. Third, we will discuss factors that may have contributed to elite shift in Latin America, including changes in the global economic context, and political shifts. The final section outlines approaches to study shifts in environmental governance.

2. Environmental governance, political ecology and the "blackboxing" of elites

One may identify two main discourses and bodies of literature on the regulation of natural resources and the environment in Latin America. The first is the discourse of **environmental governance**. Environmental governance may be defined as "a set of regulatory practices, processes, mechanisms and organizations through which political actors influence environmental actions and outcomes" (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006: 298). It describes processes of interaction among state actors (including various branches of governmental and regulatory agencies), and non-state actors (such as private companies and civil society organizations) including mechanisms such as co-management, private social partnerships and public private partnerships. Focusing on such mechanisms implies that no single agent possesses the capabilities to address the multiple facets, interdependencies and scales of environmental problems. It recognizes furthermore the independent role of institutions arguing that: "Key to different forms of environmental governance are the political-economic relationships that institutions embody and how these relationships shape identities, actions, and outcomes" (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006: 298). New forms of networks, public-private partnerships, participatory boards and other mechanisms are viewed as more efficient than hierarchical state policies, precisely because they shape identities, actions and outcomes in different ways. As for example Boyd (2008) argues, a process of such "adaptive governance" may build knowledge, feed ecological considerations into management processes and encourage successful management.

What is downplayed in many studies of environmental governance is thus the importance of the structural inequalities between actors participating in such mechanisms of governance (Piñeiro 2004, Walker 2007). Thus, a focus on governance has sometimes been contrasted to a focus on elites in the study of management of natural resources (Brannstrøm 2009). This is partly related to

the fact that the term environmental governance emerges in the neo-liberal era (Baud, Castro and Hogenboom 2011) when management issues replaced a focus on power and inequalities as the center of attention.

The broad group of writings within the field of **political ecology** on the other hand, takes such inequalities and power-relations as a point of departure. Indeed, with its origins in the impatience with apolitical approaches to environmental management as well as the lack of ecological perspectives in radical political economy, it engages profoundly with how structural inequalities at multiple levels produce environmental degradation, as well as our understanding of it and the solutions encountered to resolve it. Moreover, political ecology “accept[s] the idea that costs and benefits associated with environmental change are for the most part distributed among actors unequally...[...] which reinforces or reduces existing social and economic inequalities [...] which holds political implications in terms of the altered power of actors in relation to other actors” (Bryant and Bailey 1997,p. 28-9).

The many contributions to political ecology from Latin America draw heavily on their origins in neo-Marxism (Durand Smith et al. 2011), and often critically takes “Capitalism and its historical transformations [as] a starting point for any account of the destruction of nature” (Peet, Robbins and Watts 2010, p. 23). However, the political ecology of Latin America has also made major contributions to the understanding of the natural resource component of the conditions of coloniality and the construction of modernity (Leff 1986, Coronil 1997, Alimonda 2011) that forms the premises of current environmental movements and struggles. As argued by Alimonda: “since the Iberian conquest a diversity of regimes have governed nature, but the hegemonic and colonizing ones have been those that have ensured the governability and the production of values of change” (2011, p. 51).

Another main contribution from Latin America has been to include a cultural dimension in the study of environmental conflicts. This leads to the argument that the privileging of certain exploitative productive systems over others, which is the core reasons for the intertwined distributive and ecological conflicts in Latin America, is culturally determined, and these conflicts are thus not only ecological and distributive, as suggested by for example Joan Martínez Alier (2002), but also cultural (Escobar 2011).

In spite of its debt to neo-marxism and, Latin American political ecology has not only been concerned with structures but also with agency and particularly understanding the ideas, strategies and different articulations of socio-environmental movement resisting the dominating modes of production and governance (Rochelau 2008). However, elites have largely been considered to be dependent on their location in structural relations of domination. Their privileges derive from their positions in the structures that configure Latin America as a subaltern region that might be exploited and altered according to the needs of a globally integrated capitalism. The double exploitation of people and nature also forms the basis of the construction of the modern states, dominated by national elites. Thus, the states are not viewed as mediators between the different interests in environmental conflicts, but as expressions of the interests of global capitalist forces allied with local elites, applying various means and mechanisms to support the expansion of a global capitalist model from which it derives its economic basis, i.e., in the form of taxes, royalties etc. (Cardoso and Faletto 1979). Indeed, the embeddedness of the state in broader systems of control has led the attention

away from formal state policies and towards general mechanisms of ensuring compliance with their general interests and purposes (Alimonda 2011, p.45).

In this context, elites have rightly been viewed as a part of the problem of social exclusion and environmental degradation. This is true in spite of the fact that the conservation boom in Latin America actually took place under predominant neoliberal governments in spite of frequent allegations against them of commodifying nature (Schmink and Jouvé-Martín 2011), largely due to the existence of an elitist conservation movement. Inspired by the global processes and initiatives abroad, this has been brought to the national agenda by NGOs, academic and official research institutes, or policy makers often linked to international organizations and more attuned to international intellectual currents than to the needs of the local populations (see e.g. Mumme et.al 1988, Nugent 2002). Consequently, this form of conservation has been criticized for failing to understand environmental issues in the context of the creation of livelihoods for marginalized groups (Holmes 2010). In fact, conservation has often been opposed by local populations dependent on the use of biological reserves for small-scale agriculture and grasslands.

As mentioned, assuming that elites will always essentially be mainly a part of the cause of inequality and environmental degradation is problematic in the current situation, where groups that have been on the barricades to oppose the elites in power, find themselves in power. Moreover, the fate of agendas for environmental protection and more sustainable production patterns of other actors, such as social movements, depends not only on their own ability to mobilize and articulate their demands, but crucially also on the elite's reaction to them. This situation urges a closer scrutiny of the elites and their attitudes and actions, which in turn requires a more precise idea of the concept of elites.

3. Governing elites: who are they, and how do they change?

Elites have directly and indirectly been treated in a plethora of different bodies of literature including the political economy literature, sociological, anthropological, and political science literature. In line with the main focus of this analysis, here we will be concerned with governing elites, understood as *elites that directly or indirectly influence major political decisions*. As has been emphasized in the broad body of elite-literature, this differs from governmental elites (elites controlling government) by encompassing broader societal elites. However, the literature is inconclusive on how governing elites should be defined, how they are sustained and how they may shift. Crucial for us here is how and whether a change of elites happens, and if elite-shifts potentially leads to more egalitarian distributions of power and whether and/or new conceptions of the relationship between environmental protection and development and the use of natural resources.

A surprising number of studies that claim to speak about elites fail to provide such clarification (Woods 1998, Smith 2005). A number of studies of Latin American elites rest on theories of political economy and a structural approach in which elites are (often implicitly) identified based on their relationship to capital and means of production (see, e.g. Hershberg and Perez Sains 2013, Meza et. al 2009). In the highly unequal and class divided societies in Latin America, the term elite is sometimes indeed used interchangeably with "the upper middle and upper classes", as opposed to a concept of "popular classes". In other cases, the term elite is used (mostly implicitly) as including business, landholding and political elites, considered to operate in close alliances, and often allied with global political-economic elites. This is the case with historical sociological literature on the role

of the land holding elites, and their relations to industrial capital for example (Paige 1997, Torres-Rivas 1989), but also newer contributions that study elite constellations associated with regional and global configurations of ownership to capital (Robinson 2003, Segovia 2005)). Interests and attitudes of the elites are essentially considered to be derived from their relationship to capital.

Elite shifts are considered in these contributions essentially to occur with spatial and sectorial shifts in modes of capital accumulation. These may produce divisions between different parts of the capitalist class, and it is such divisions that may provide openings for the major subject of history, namely the dispossessed classes to move history forwards. In Latin America three major such shifts have occurred in recent history: the challenge to the dominance of the land-holding oligarchy posed by the industrial bourgeoisie in the first part of the 20th century, the emergence of new groups of industrialists in the mid- 20th century associated with the import substituting model, and the strengthening of a capital holding class associated with (often privatized) services (including banking, telecommunications, electricity, commerce, tourism, etc.) and natural resource based sectors and integrated into global circuits of accumulation associated with the neo-liberal shift in the last two decades of the 20th century. These shifts produced partial and temporary divisions between agricultural and agro-industrial elites, and between these agro-based elites and industrial elites (Rueschemeyer, Stevens and Stevens 1992, Paige 1997). In addition there is always a possible contradiction between finance capital and productive capital. Recently it is increasingly a potential division between elites that are integrated into transnational circuits of accumulation, and those that operate nationally that have been of interest (Fernández Jilberto 2005).

The shifts discussed above have partly come about as a consequence of changes in the global political economy, and partly due to shifts in state policies and the degree of state participation in the running of the economy. However, throughout the period, natural resource extraction, agriculture and commodity export never ceased to be of importance: in some countries the groups investing in industries in the mid-20th century and that later benefitted from entering into the formerly state owned services as well as natural resource based sectors, often originate with the land holding classes (Bull 2013). Thus a major focus of studies has been how capitalists through for example family businesses and alliances with other families have avoided major divisions between capital owners and ensured a degree of elite-continuation (Balmori, Voss and Vortman 1984, Paniagua 2001).

However, although frequently using the term elite, the capital oriented approach often does not actually dwell much on what the concept entails: indeed elite-studies as such are considered rather to emerge out of the contributions by Mosca, Mitchells and Pareto that were highly critical of the largely Marxist equation of elites with the dominant capitalist classes. The founders of elite studies conceived of societies and organizations as inherently elitist and all groups in power as tending towards monopolization (Mosca 1939, Michels 1962). Yet, they also viewed elites as the main motors of change in society. Society moved forward as new elites dislocate old elites; thus it is regime circulation, not the construction of political subjects among the dispossessed classes that would lead to regime change (Pareto 1916, referred to in Hartmann 2007).

Such elite studies inspired the seminal study of Latin American elites by Lipset and Solari (1967) that takes an explicit system-functional approach to the study of elites. Defining elites as the people holding positions in society which are at the summits of key social structures, i.e. the higher positions in the economy, government, military, politics, religion, mass organizations, education, and

the profession (Lipset and Solari, 1967, p.vii), they studied the values, skills and capabilities of political, economic, military, and labor elites and considering this as integrated parts of the societal system of a developing region. Such a multi-sector approach allows for understanding elite shifts as something that may occur through the ascendance of groups by way of different sets of organizations. For example, in Latin American history we have several examples of middle class groups ascending to power through the military apparatus that in turn have become major agents of social change (see e.g. Lovemann 1999, Nunn 1986).

The study of the characteristics of elites was justified based on the assumption that these had a significant impact on decision making in the absence of the constraints of large-scale bureaucracies and mass political pressure such as those to be found in “modern” societies (Hart 1977). Thus one could not justify the kind of studies of the power elite like the one conducted in the “developed countries” after the pioneering study by C. Wright Mills (1956) of elites in the United States. With the evolution of democracy and state apparatuses in Latin America, such an assumption does no longer hold. Thus, whereas the classics (e.g. Mosca) regarded universal suffrage and parliamentarism as unable to dissolve the principle that an “organized minority” is able to “impose its will on a disorganized majority” (Mosca 1939, p. 154), the strengthening of democratic institutions has given rise to a number of studies focusing on parliamentary elites and other elites emerging from their relations to the formal democratic institutions (see e.g. Alcántara Sáez 1995, 2008). These institutions have in turn allowed previously marginalized groups to ascend to power and possibly to become new governing elites. Second, the strengthening of bureaucracies and groups of experts associated with them, has led to studies of technocratic elites as major governing elites (See e.g., Ai Camp 2002, Montecinos 1996, Joignant and Güell 2011).

This paper proposes a resource based view on elites attempting to bridge the approaches above. Starting from a general anthropological approach we define elites as: Groups that control specific resources by means of which they acquire political power and material advantage (Pina-Cabral, 2000, p. 2), and may control the distribution of these resources in their locale (Marcus 1998).

Building on this we argue that *governing elites* are:

Groups of individuals that due to their economic resources, expertise/knowledge, social networks, or positions in political or other organizations stand in a privileged position to influence in a formal or informal way decisions and practices with key environmental implications.

This definition allows for the recognition that elites are situated in economic and social structures, but it also allows for a degree of agency and elite shifts. Furthermore, it recognizes that in a given social context there may be competing elites that control of different kind of, often interlinked, resources.

This means that elites are more than classes: Control over economic resources, i.e. finance capital, means of production, land and natural resources are of key importance, but control over these resources may occur through other means than ownership and may depend on political resources, networks and expertise/knowledge. Similarly, control over economic resources is a possible means to acquire political positions and influence, but that depends on the nature of existing formal and informal political institutions.

The importance of organization has been a key focus of elite studies since Mosca. Control over organizations and institutions are a key resource that may contribute to defining elites. However, acquiring such control may depend on networks, economic resources and knowledge/expertise, and thus, the different kind of resource should not be analyzed separately. Linking the different kinds of resources also reminds us that although, according to Michels any organization has an elite, this does not necessarily imply that any organizational elite can be considered part of the governing elite; that depends on the kind of political, economic and other resources that the organization control.

Control over economic and political resources depend to a significant degree on existing institutions and economic structures. The final two kinds of resources that we emphasize here do so to a less degree. The first is networks, whether local, regional, national or transnational, including family ties, social networks, professional networks, or networks formed related to specific (political) issues. The establishment of networks partly depends on social structures, but depends also on agency, and may be formed as a means to keep control over specific resources, but also as a means to oppose such control or advocate alternative forms of organizing the economy, society and politics. Such networks may also connect different kinds of elites, for example economic elites and political elites (Silva 1996, Bull 2007).

Second, knowledge/expertise has several functions in the distinction of an elite as well as the kind of influence exercised. A group of experts may acquire an elite position due to their particularly valued knowledge in a specific field (the most well-known case of this from Latin-America is clearly the role of the neo-classical economists in the neo-liberal transformation, (see e.g. Montecinos 1996). Yet, a particular kind of know-how may also be a main means of acquiring control over economic resources, as well as the “marker” of a social elite. Furthermore, knowledge may be converted into discursive resources and thus a means of political influence. In certain areas, very specialized knowledge is required to master the language of a certain field, and those possessing such specialized knowledge tend to dominate the setting of agendas and lead institutions and organizations related to the topic at hand, as is clearly visible in the case of climate change.

This approach allows for a discussion of elites at different levels: the local and the national, but also – important for the cases studied here – it may include actors such as transnational companies that acquire different resources in a specific national or local context.

It should be underlined that this approach is necessarily eclectic: it builds partly on the post-structuralist model developed by Woods (1998), but the categories sketched above rest on a variety of different underlying concepts of power and influence. The resources may be used to influence outcomes in a variety of ways: shaping discourses through the control of media, knowledge institutions, etc., pressuring for direct policy changes, controlling actions through withholding or promising economic rewards, etc.

4. Non-elites, elite shifts and a sustainable and equitable development

A major motive for studying elites has been to understand continuities of inequality and differentiation. Thus, much anthropological literature has focused on processes of succession (see for instance Pina-Cabral & Lima, 2000), and the Marxist oriented studies have focused on the persistence of global capitalist structures to explain, for example, why societal change does not occur in spite of national policy changes. However, the political shifts that occurred in Latin America in the first decade of the 2000s, provide a fascinating scenario for studying different facets of elite change. These political shifts have so far mainly been studied as processes emerging “from below” (Silva 2009). Indeed the turn to the left has been interpreted partially as the result of social uprisings against the neo-liberal economic model implemented across the continent from the 1980s, and against elitist democracies that continued mainly to represent the groups that had exploited the peoples and the nature of Latin America for centuries. An important aspect of the protests was also opposition against the exploitation and unjust distribution of natural resources.

Yet, the economic and political transformations occurring have also involved the emergence of new governance elites that have appeared to distinguish themselves from the social movements from which they emerged (Bull 2012). Indeed, many governments that previously have enjoyed support from grass roots movements, have later disqualified them or consciously attempted to co-opt them (Zibechi 2010, Bowen 2011a). The current transformation thus provides a fertile ground to study issues that are at the core of the elite-literature: whether and how they change over time; whether elite shifts may mean a change in the concentration of resources and power; and whether elites may be willing and able to create more equal economic and political structures. As concluded by Rovira: “... elites have always existed and will always exist, but it is not possible to determine beforehand how they are composed or what kind of social steering they put into practice, nor, even less, for how long they stay in power” (Rovira 2011).

We will be interested mainly in two key aspects of the actions of new elite. First, we will focus on the relationship that these develop to the diversity of non-elite groups. Such relations may range from oppression and exclusion to co-optation, and dialogue. The relations may be ad-hoc and dependent on the will of elites, or they may be institutionalized. Whereas history is full of examples of elite repression and exclusion, there are also examples of dialogue and institutionalization leading to a more equitable distribution of resources. In Europe the neo-corporatist model implemented in the period after WWII between political and organizational elites enabled also a re-distribution of economic resources (Crouch and Streeck 2006). But more equitable distribution of political resources may also be the result of elite compromises: Major studies of the processes of democratization in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin-America focused for example on the compromises reached between different elites including the military, bureaucratic elites, traditional economic elites and new business elites as prerequisites for the establishment of democratic institutions which in turn potentially distributed power and influence more equally (e.g., O’Donnell et al. 1986). So far we have scarce information about whether the emergence of new groups in power will signify a more equal distribution of political influence and economic resources, through for example the establishment of new institutions. This will be among the main questions asked in this study.

The second and closely related aspect what relationship possible new elites will develop to natural resources. As argued above, economic and governing elites have historically been defined partly through their control over natural resources, yet historically in Latin-America elites that have ascended through the military institutions, the bureaucracy or industry have competed with the elites that have gained their position based on exploitation of natural resources and landownership. Today we also see new elites ascending by means of their positions in social movements and political parties as well as transnational corporations, international organizations and other structures. The attitudes related to environmental issues of these alternative elites may depend on their knowledge/expertise, networks as well as particular organizational platform or economic interests.

Yet, considering the elites that have recently gained governmental power, we will not be able to understand their attitudes and actions related to the environment only by focusing on “where they come from” (social movements, transnational companies, etc.). We must also take into account the double imperative they face of ensuring short-term electoral support and strengthening the long term processes of state-building. Both imperatives require access to economic resources a matter which requires the ability to tax general economic activities but also specifically natural resource extraction (royalties). And, in many cases the more resources extracted, the more funds will be available for distributional programs that may provide short term electoral support, and the more funds for the building of state capacity that in turn also may enhance the capacity to tax non-natural resource based economic sectors. This double imperative does in most cases mean that the new governmental elites will face strong opposition from old and new economic elites that may increasingly organize outside the formal power structures if they perceive their interests as sufficiently threatened (Bowen 2011b). How the reaction to such opposition is balanced against the reaction to groups opposing resource extraction on grounds of social justice and environmental concerns, and the need to increase state resources will be at the crux of the potential for the evolution of sustainable and equitable environmental governance in the future.

5. Studying shifts in environmental governance

The study of the new elites in Latin America and their relation to environmental governance should thus start from a study of the degree to which there has been a shift in the control of different kinds of resources, and the means used to control those, as well as studying the relationship between possible new elites and “old elites”. Moreover, one should study their actions related to environmental governance of a sector of economic importance. Such actions may be studied through at least three different lenses.

First, one may study the kind of development model that different new elites are supporting. This may be the strongest indicator of the inclination of the priority given to environmental issues. This may be based heavily on the extraction of natural resources or it may be focused on seeking alternatives to these. The development model has significant implications for the ascendance to “elite status” for certain groups and for the ability of elites to reproduce themselves. It also has deep implications for the very divisions between elites and non-elites.

Second, one may focus on the establishment of institutions/laws of environmental governance. These may be laws regulating the use of natural resources for a specific economic purpose, establishment of ministries, or other governmental institutions, or multi-actor governance bodies. At

the more general level it may be constitutional changes with environmental implications, such as those enacted by the current governing bodies of Ecuador and Bolivia.

However, operating partly in weakly institutional environments, the introduction of institutions of environmental governance will not necessarily completely change the existing development model. Thus, whether elites respect and use, or rather ignore, bend, or bypass such institutions is a matter of empirical research and a third possible focus.

In studying these processes one should ask:

- 1) How do the new elites relate to the demands of the “non-elites”?
- 2) How do the new elites relate to the demands of the “old elites”?
- 3) What discourses, priorities and demands regarding environmental policies have these expressed?
- 4) What can explain their priorities and demands? (Sustaining privileges, acquiring material benefits, changing ideologies and beliefs, etc.)
- 5) To what extent have environmental aspects of such policies been changed through the interaction with opposing elites?

This is assumed to be affected by a combination of:

- 1) Elite composition: Have there been a change in the composition of economic elites due to structural changes? Have new elites entered (based on their knowledge/expertise, networks, position in organizations, etc.?)
- 2) Elite practices and identity formation: How is the discourse and actions by the elites influenced by their practices to sustain the elites as such? What role does nature/the environment play in such practices? Have they changed in any way?
- 3) Elite networks: How do different elites relate to each other? Have the relations between elites changed?

6. Concluding remarks

The study of elites has always been contentious in Latin America. While the poor are frequently subject to surveys and case studies, elites are often reluctant to be scrutinized, and in some cases rather secretive. Moreover, related to the study of environmental governance, much of the social science literature is written in opposition to elite practices and has chosen rather to generate knowledge that may contribute to supporting the efforts of non-elite groups to seek a more just and sustainable governance of environmental resources.

This paper has argued that if we are to understand how to improve environmental governance we also need to study the composition, shift, attitudes and actions of elites, what resources their elite status are based on, and how different elite groups interrelate. This is not an argument for a more “elitist” form of environmental governance. It is rather an attempt to map out some of the conditions for non-elite groups to influence on governance processes, and how to create mechanisms that can enable elite- and non-elite groups to arrive at joint solutions.

In current Latin America the face of elites are changing fast due to shifts in the global political economy, national political movements, technological developments and many other processes. Thus, it has never been more urgent to start a discussion of what the term “elite” really means and how to study elites, topics that all too often are left unanswered in the literature on elites, and in many cases also “unasked”.

This paper has attempted to fill such a gap by proposing a resource based view on elites and arguing that although their control over economic resources often is the most important, also control over social, political and knowledge resources may give privileged influence on decisions and practices with important environmental implications. How this occurs in practices is the topic of this part of the ENGOV project and should be explored also in additional studies.

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