Halting deforestation in Brazil: lessons from the 'deforestation blacklist'

Brazil has made impressive progress towards its voluntary goals to halt deforestation in the Amazon biome. Innovative environmental policy instruments – the List of Priority Municipalities (a.k.a. deforestation blacklist) – implemented by the Ministry of the Environment have played a crucial role in the last decade. The deforestation blacklist encompasses 60 counties considered deforestation hotspots in the Amazon, thus resulting in restrictions to agricultural credit loans and embargo of landholdings. In response, novel institutional arrangements have emerged among local stakeholders and landowners towards georeferencing rural properties and controlling forest clearings. Despite these promising results, most counties remain blacklisted, requiring further analysis to reveal context-specific factors mediating the effect of this policy instrument in fostering sustainable land-use and protecting biodiversity.

I carried out a cross-sectional study in five counties in the state of Pará, northeastern Amazon, where a government program provides institutional support to remove 21 counties from the blacklist. Drawing on secondary data and satellite imagery, I adopt a historical ecology approach to examine deforestation dynamics at the county level. Complementary, building on the Ostrom’s SES framework, I carried out interviews with stakeholders and landowners to investigate what followed afterward a county became blacklisted.

This work shows that strategies to halt forest loss require knowledge regarding context-specific historical, socioeconomic, and geographic factors underlying deforestation dynamics. The blacklist policy succeeded in curbing deforestation whenever illegal activities (e.g., charcoal production, timber harvesting) were effectively disrupted locally, as well as when blacklist sanctions economically penalized local landowners’ elite. Political capital and leadership were crucial in bringing local agents and reliable third-party institutions to provide financial, technical and institutional support. On the other hand, the blacklist policy has been innocuous - and potentially prejudicial – when economic alternatives to replace unsustainable land uses are unavailable.

This research discusses the outcomes from an innovative anti-deforestation policy tackling deforestation at the county level, highlighting the shortcomings of one-fits-all instruments implemented in a complex mosaic of juxtaposed social and environmental realities such as the Amazon. Finally, this work concludes with reflections on the policy implications of these findings for Brazil to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 15.