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Title: Local Participation and Conservation Effectiveness

Are development efforts prioritizing conservation and sustainable market growth more likely to “succeed” as they become more participatory? Although many scholars and commentators appear to believe this is true, issues of (1) inconsistent research priorities and (2) a dearth of empirical evidence make it difficult to identify exactly why participatory institutions contribute to environmental governance, or how to most effectively design participatory development projects. For instance, many initiatives associated with the international conservation regime REDD+ hope to slow smallholder deforestation in countries like Brazil by altering the socioeconomic forces that make local livelihoods reliant on clearing forestland. While the international agreements underlying REDD+ dictate that projects must engage with local communities, documentation from some project review processes illustrates that these general guidelines do not always make it clear to developers what is expected of them in practice. This study contributes to our understanding of participatory development design by comparing remotely-sensed vegetation loss trends from the sites of 18 REDD+ projects in the Brazilian Amazon. Even though all the projects in my sample consult locals about their avoided deforestation activities, only a few provide local communities formal access to project decision-making and management. I use covariates drawn from project documents and various geospatial datasets in conjunction with the synthetic control technique — an increasingly prominent quantitative approach to comparative case-study research — to determine whether there is strong evidence that formal local involvement in decision-making magnifies the ability of these projects to slow deforestation. Many advocates already favor formal local leadership of development initiatives for normative reasons. I contribute to scholarly efforts to empirically identify whether locally-led projects are more likely to meet their baseline goals. In sum, this study speaks to the nebulous question of what is most important for effective collaboration between development practitioners and local communities — a question that has both immediate policy relevance and broader implications for the role participatory institutions should play in sustainable governance.