



Asymmetric power relations in multistakeholder initiatives: Insights from the government-instituted Indonesian National Forestry Council

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ABSTRACT

Waves of democratization, which occurred in Indonesia by the end of the 1990s, have provided opportunities to deepen and diversify broader civil society elements for engagement in formal public policymaking. In the forestry sector emerged a multistakeholder initiative of the National Forestry Council (Dewan Kehutanan Nasional/ DKN), which was envisioned to promote good forest governance by engaging the broader public in the formulation of strategies and policy options to foster intelligent forest management in Indonesia. The DKN was instituted to create a space for multistakeholder dialogues and learning, and was expected to become an influential body in national forest-related policy-making processes. Through the application of theories related to power relations in multistakeholder initiatives, this paper assesses whether the DKN functions as a deliberative and inclusive platform. The hope and expectation placed upon the DKN were sky-high. The DKN initially provided opportunities for the spectrum of public/governments, private sector organizations, and civil society groups to come together on the same table. It also drew support from many institutions at the national level and donor agencies. However, the DKN has later shown the unequal resources of participants and eventual asymmetric power relations. As a result, it fully facilitated deliberative processes due to the asymmetric power that subtly manifested through the stakeholders' interaction patterns, which were heavily driven by the government.

1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, calls for policy approaches and instruments beyond government interventions have increased immensely to address the pressing forest and environmental challenges faced by global societies. To a large extent, top-down governmental policy responses have been increasingly perceived to be dysfunctional and ineffective to address the increasingly becoming complex forest and environment-related problems (Siry et al., 2005; Dimitrov 2005; Newig, 2007; Wong, 2010; Simmons, et al., 2018). What came to fore was a shift “from government to governance” (Palumbo and Bellamy, 2016), which is a nonhierarchical mode of governing, where diverse actors participate in forest policy formulation and implementation (Bevir, 2013; Giessen and Buttoud, 2014; Maryudi and Sahide, 2017). As such, multistakeholder policy processes were increasingly promoted and adopted to address forest and environmental issues at the multiscale levels (international, national, subnational, and local) (Conca, 2015; Atela et al., 2016; Satyal, 2018; Mzbibain and Ongolo, 2019; Millner et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, the demands for democratization have shaped new political landscapes. Regarding forest and environmental issues, non-state actors have sought ways and demanded spaces in formal public policies (Antlöv et al., 2010; Ito 2011; Wever et al., al.2012; Richards and Hobley, 2016; Hasyim et al., 2020). Over the past two decades, nonstate actors have increasingly become an important element in forest policy-making processes (Laraswati et al., 2021). Democratic reforms have provided opportunities to deepen and diversify broader civil society elements for participation in formal public policy-making, along with government institutions (McCarthy, 2012; Afiff and Rachman, 2019; Andriyana & Högl, 2019).

In response, the government of Indonesia has established diverse channels at the national and local levels to enable public participation in forest/environment-related policy formulation and implementation (Kaisa et al., 2017; Maryudi, 2015; Bong et al., 2016). For instance, it formally involved nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the implementation of a social forestry policy (Rahayu et al., 2020). Broader civil societies were also formally instituted to allow the public to oversee

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government policies (Hasyim et al., 2020). Consultations and communication with the public have increasingly become common norms and procedures before the design of programs and issuance of regulations (Yusran et al., 2017; Wibowo et al., 2019; Meehan et al., 2019). Furthermore, formal and informal multistakeholder initiatives (MSIs)/forums/institutions have been established at the national and subnational levels to facilitate a learning and sharing platform for diverse forest stakeholders to find potential solutions for certain problems (Purnomo et al., 2016; Achyar et al., 2015; Sirimorok and Rusdianto, 2020). Not only in Indonesia, MSIs also feature prominently in many countries, including in their respective forest and environment-related sectors, and in the international forums (Humphreys et al., 2017; Fortin, 2017; TFD, 2023). MSIs can pave way for opportunities for related stakeholders to negotiate and collaboratively make decisions and policy solutions and implement them in management, uses, and conservation of resources (Andersson et al., 2004; Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012).

In this paper, we aimed to look at the nature and functioning of MSIs, i.e., the integration of a variety of actors in collective decision making and the nuances and deliberative qualities of processes and outputs. We specifically analyzed the formal MSIs, which are often touted as a nonhierarchical structure and deliberative form of stakeholder engagement (Roloff, 2008; Rasche, 2012) (Section 2). We also focused on the governance processes and institutional designs/arrangements, e.g., those who participate and mechanism of decision making. We paid to attention engagement among the involved stakeholders. The recent research on MSIs (Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014; Conca, 2015; Saffer et al., 2017), including forest and environmental governance (Moog et al., 2015; Tovar et al., 2021), called for greater attention on power-play, which in most cases proves to be a key driving factor for the functioning of deliberative platforms.

We analyzed the case of the formally instituted Indonesian National Forestry Council (*Dewan Kehutanan Nasional/DKN*), which was established during the fourth National Forestry Congress in 2006 (details in Section 3). We employed theory-driven qualitative methods (Bryman, 2016) with an emphasis on the positivistic analytical-empirical approach (Connell, 1997; Krott, 2000). The methods are centered on testing (and possibly refining) the theory-delineated research hypothesis (Krott, 2000) based on causal relations between dependent and independent variables (Kleinschmit et al., 2016). We followed theories regarding power relations in MSIs, principally the process by which certain actors steer the envisioned democratic and power-free institution (Section 2). The hypothesis was validated through “observations from all the senses” (Connell, 1997: 122) of the “empirical reality” (de Jong et al., 2012). This approach focuses on the use of various data collection methods to obtain valid and reliable information.

Formally instituted through a Decree of the Minister of Environment and Forestry, the DKN comprises five chambers: (central and local) governments, NGOs, local and indigenous communities, academics, and private business organizations. We conducted open-ended interviews (Bryman, 2016) with a focus on several key issues centering around the governance and functioning of DKN. As power relations are a sensitive issue, we followed the work of Maryudi and Fisher (2020) and used stimulating questions in comfortable interview settings to encourage the interviewees to provide further details. Between February and October 2021, we interviewed 27 people, i.e., the presidium committee of the DKN and representatives from the five chambers (Table 1). We also used various types of documents and regulations, organizational reports and minutes of meetings, and media reports related to the governance, activities, and programs of DKN (for the relevance of this approach, see the works of Rahayu et al., 2019; Laraswati et al., 2020). A quick online survey was also directed to the former and current members of the DKN’s Presidium (see the institutional setting) on several crucial issues, such as transparency, credibility, and the extent of the influence of the DKN on policy-making processes. From the survey, 16 responses were recorded. The first author further participated in the 7th National

Table 1

List of Interviewees.

No	Code	Position
1	DS	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at the Faculty of Forestry IPB
2	JFO	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at Gunadarma university Jakarta
3	YJ	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at Hasanudin university Makassar
4	AK	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at Patimura university Maluku
5	EF	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at Gadjah Mada university Yogyakarta
6	PIS	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO KARSA
7	NC	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO Watala
8	TKS	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO Santiri Foundation
9	RH	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO KKI WARSI
10	DR	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO KEHATI and Bisnis
11	HK	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at the Faculty of Forestry IPB
12	DV	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Bisnis
13	DYN	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Bisnis
14	AKR	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Government
15	AJ	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Government (Founder)
16	HH	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Government
17	AST	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO (Founder)
18	JG	DKN Presidium Council Constituents of Community (balnusra Region)
19	ARN	DKN Presidium Council Constituents of Community (Sulawesi Region)
20	MMP	DKN Presidium Council Constituents of Community (Maluku Region)
21	HS	NGO Javlec
22	MAM	NGO FKKM
23	ME	NGO Pijar Lentera
24	AKU	Lecturer in Forestry UNKHAIR
25	OA	DKN Presidium Council constituency of Academics/Lecturers at Sumatera Utara University
26	GS	DKN Presidium Council Constituents of Community (Kalimantan)
27	NA	DKN Presidium Council constituency of NGO / KA POKJA RAPS

Forestry Congress and the DKN’s General Assembly between 28 and June 30, 2022 to observe stakeholder interaction and decision-making processes.

2. Theoretical underpins: power relations in MSIs

No single definition can describe MSIs. Often, when referring to MSIs, scholars use the rationales/aims behind their establishment, formats, and characteristics of their functioning. For instance, Zeyen et al. (2014) underlined the process of finding a common decision (see also Roloff, 2008). MSIs are envisioned as a durable governance innovation (Humphreys et al., 2017) that provides “co-creation venues” (Pera et al., 2016) or “learning dialog platforms” (Payne and Calton, 2004; Conca, 2015; Evans et al., 2021) to gather diverse stakeholders in sharing ideas and achieving inclusive decision making (Almeida et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2021). Occasionally, MSIs are coined with democratic and deliberative policy-making, i.e., a process where decisions implemented based on the consensus of those who are potentially affected (Gutmann and Thompson, 2010; Gasser et al., 2015; Moog et al., 2015). Engagements are based on mutual understanding, learning, and collaboration; differences among participants are negotiated based on equity principles, e.g.,, sharing of expertise, skills, and resources based on their respective capacities (Roloff, 2008; Almeida et al., 2015).

Various types/forms of MSIs have emerged in different political landscapes, from international to national or subnational and local (Conca, 2015; Moog et al., 2015; Pera et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2021). In general, MSIs are expected to provide a nonhierarchical engagement venue for diverse stakeholders, i.e., governments, private/business actors, and civil societies (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Rasche, 2012; Saffer et al., 2017). Nonetheless, creating a democratic and deliberative environment is easier said than done. Zeyen et al. (2014) argued that

power relations are constantly embedded in a multistakeholder forum given the potentially different backgrounds of the diverse actors engaged. Voluntary characters are said to lead to free riding (Potoski and Prakash, 2009). This situation may be particularly true in such highly contested issues as forests; participants may be involved in competition for priorities and attempt to pursue their own interests. Participants may also compete to raise and articulate specific issues and agendas and eventually formulate appropriate policy actions and strategies. Thus, they act according to their specific interests by steering or influencing and manipulating processes (Krott et al., 2014).

The power of participating actors depends heavily on the resources they possess (Schusser, 2013) and their ability to mobilize them to intervene in certain social relationships (Kähkönen, 2014). With these resources, certain actors may attempt to prevent others from achieving their goals (Betsill and Corell, 2008; Ekayani et al., 2016). This actor-centered view is deeply rooted in the Weberian school of thought; power is the ability of an actor to modify the behavior of the other (Krott et al., 2014). It also relates to the ability of an actor to achieve his/her prioritized agendas, and in doing so, they may mobilize resources, including material (such as finances) and nonmaterial (such as ideas, information, and access) and relations (Suiseeya & Zanotti, 2019).

More specifically, based on observable facts, Krott et al. (2014) classified power elements into coercion, incentives/disincentives, and dominant information. Coercion is, as they theorized, linked to the use of actual and imaginary forces to alter the behavior of others. In MSIs, coercion can be manifested in rules and standards to force stakeholders to participate or informally push (back staged) certain decisions (Zeyen et al., 2014; Bakker et al., 2019). It can also be the risk for abandonment of MSIs (Arenas et al., 2020). As a result, marginalized participants may be reluctant to present their positions (Soundararajan et al., 2019). Incentives are also an important element of power in MSIs. Certain actors may make substantial investments to finance the operational budgets of an MSI and execute its programs, which eventually lead to the biased selection of agendas and decisions skewed in their favor (Lundsgaarde, 2016; Biekart and Fowler, 2018). In addition, limited access to financial resources may pose a great challenge for certain actors to participate in an MSI (Cheyns, 2014; Moog et al., 2015).

Furthermore, dominant information, according to Krott et al. (2014), is linked to unverifiable knowledge. Betsill and Corell (2008) believed that the transmission of certain information may alter the behavior of other actors. The use of dominant information may particularly relate to the agenda setting process within an MSI (Dentoni and Bitzer, 2015). Buckland-Merrett et al. (2017) revealed that civil society engagements may be "limited by those who set the agenda." Access and the ability to verify information are crucial in the contexts of transparency. Poor and asymmetric information is often articulated to shape decisions (Wong, 2014). Regardless of the adequate information available, participants may be unable to fully verify and put it into use (Dentoni and Bitzer, 2015). Hence, participants with dominant information can be powerful and alter the functioning of an MSI.

3. DKN—The institutional setting

The DKN was established on September 15, 2006, during the fourth Indonesian Forestry Congress. It was created as an independent body and envisioned to promote good forest governance in the country (the Visions and Mission are provided in Box 1). The establishment of the DKN was enabled by the new Forest Law No. 1999, which was issued following the downfall of the authoritarian New Order Regime. The new law stipulates the need for a communication platform for observers to discuss forest-related problems and challenges and formulate potential solutions. According to MS Kaban, the then Minister of Forestry, the forum was needed to improve the government's legitimacy in a manner in which forestry is not only a government's affair. The forum ensured the power balance between the government and other forest-related stakeholders.

Box 1

Vision and Missions of DKN.

Vision: To foster equitable participation of stakeholders in the national forest governance for a prosperous community and sustainable forest.

Missions:

- 1 To encourage effective and applicable forest policies and good forest management,
- 2 To encourage coherence in forest development for the harmonious relations of forest-related stakeholders and to ensure law enforcement, forest business operations, and community rights over forest resources,
- 3 To encourage good forestry practices with professional human resources and to ensure multistakeholder cooperation for the national forestry interests;
- 4 To encourage involvement of forest and environmental-related stakeholders in activities of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry

Source: Decree of Minister of Environment and Forestry No. 48/ 2016.

Interviewee No. 17 mentioned two differing ideas/concerns. First, some government officials showed resistance, fearing that the envisioned forum would evolve into a super power body that undermines their authority. By contrast, civil society groups also exhibited resistance, fearing that they would not function optimally as a counter-balanced agent when collaborating with the government. Most civil society groups expected that the DKN would not eventually become another nongovernmental group (Interviewee No. 21). These parties eventually agreed that entering into formal policy-making processes was a good opportunity.

The DKN was eventually established as an active and important partner of the government in the formulation of forest policies. Three main working principles were applied. First, government policies have to be formulated through multistakeholder processes, which are one of the main features of good governance. Second, an open mechanism must be established to evaluate the government performance. Lastly, the DKN is to be involved in high-level politics to formulate strategies for forest-related problems that can be solely resolved by forest bureaucrats. For instance, as one of the research interviewees (No. 11) suggested, political tensions were observed between central and regional governments regarding authorities over forest resources.

DKN is a constituent-based institution and comprises representatives of five parties, i.e., governments, indigenous and local communities, business actors, NGOs/observers, and academics/researchers. These parties became the Institute's Chambers, each of which was composed of seven members. The governance of the DKN comprised the following: 1) the Presidium, 2) Working Commissions, and 3) the Secretariat (Fig. 1). In previous terms, the Presidium consisted of 31 members representing the following: a) constituent chambers known as Member of Chamber Representatives/*Anggota Utusan Kamar* and b) five additional competency-based members of *Anggota Berbasis Kompetensi*, who were selected based on their competence to support DKN operationalization. The ABK was abolished in the current structure due to two reasons. The first reason was about efficiency-related operations. ABK was observed to increase the financial burdens (Interviewee No. 19). More importantly, the previous ABK members outpowered the Presidium (Interviewee No. 8).

Programs and activities were developed by the Commissions and created based on cross-cutting issues and national policy priorities during specific periods. For instance, between 2011 and 2016, the Commissions included 1) forestry and governance, 2) conflict mediation and community capacity building, 3) forest economics, and 4) environment and climate change. Furthermore, the Secretariat was responsible for the ABK and tasked to execute day-to-day activities. Constituent members were usually recruited by invitation from the government to the event of institutional structure formation. Those who were unable to attend were excluded in the structure despite their excellent competence and organizational expertise. Many interviewees, both former and current DKN members, indicated that close affiliations and connections determine the DKN memberships more than professionalism and competence. This practice in turn influenced the operationalization of the Institute, as will be discussed in the next section.

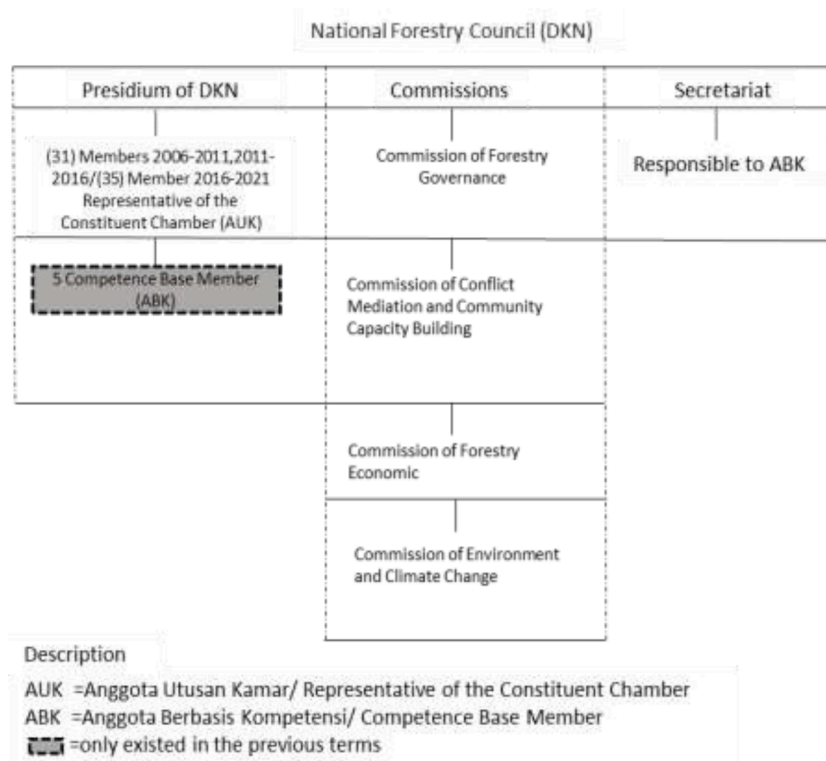


Fig. 1. Current DKN organizational structure.

4. Operationalization of the DKN

As previously mentioned, the DKN was envisioned to promote good forest governance in Indonesia. As such, its operationalization, including in decision making processes, was expected to reflect the democratic and participatory deliberation to gain legitimacy. During its early years, the DKN played a key role in national policy-making processes. As suggested by our interviewees (No. 1 and 11), it was well-listened by and served as a “think-tank” for the Minister.

“In my time in the presidium, the DKN was engaged in meaningful talks and discussions with the Minister. It was not uncommon that we had different ideas and perspectives. Even the Minister asked the DKN to show true value and play a key role in the national policy processes, not only following what the government says.” (Interviewee No. 11)

“In the early time, the Minister used to ask insights from the DKN when he was going to adopt certain policies. The DKN played as a think-tank for the government.” (Interviewee No. 11)

However, the key role of the DKN in policy-making processes diminished over time. The operationalization of the DKN had been heavily influenced by the government, although it was guided by formal rules and informal conventions that encourage equal participation among members/Chambers. The DKN’s working priorities and programs were first identified and proposed at the regional level. All proposals were forwarded to the national Secretariat. During national meetings, they were discussed in the respective Constituent Chambers during the National Working Conference (General Assembly), which was organized by the Presidium at the beginning of its five-year management term. Each member was encouraged to actively propose priorities/programs and inputs and feedback before any decisions were to be made. Regulated by organizational statutes/constitutions, decisions were made through consensus. Voting was only employed when consensus cannot be reached. Frequently, decision making at the

Chamber level was deliberative due to the relatively similar backgrounds of the members.

The Chambers’ proposals were eventually brought to the plenary. Decision making in this level also followed the same preference on consensus. When needed, voting was regulated as follows: 20% governments, 20% business actors, 30% indigenous and local communities, 15% NGOs/observers, and 15% academics/researchers. That indigenous and local communities are given more votes cannot be separated from the historical background of forest management and policy-making processes in Indonesia. In most cases, they are the most disadvantaged group, and the greater vote is aimed to their further empowerment.

“In many cases, local communities do not have capacity and power vis-a-vis other actors. This is the core reason they were allotted with greater votes” (Interviewee No. 17)

Despite the greater vote allocation, local communities may not be able to influence decision making. In most cases, particularly in recent times, the government steers the process (Interviewee No. 11). A representative of local communities elaborated the following:

“We are weak in DKN. We are not fully able to represent the voices of our local and indigenous communities...The truth is that local communities, particularly the indigenous groups, remain disadvantaged compared to other groups” (Interviewee No. 26)

By contrast, government representatives have increasingly become more influential. Interviewee No. 11 clearly mentioned their increased power in the current structure; most of the current programs are the government’s interests fetched into the DKN (Interviewee No. 5). For instance, the DKN was requested to map out the voluntary national contribution of emission reduction. In addition, as reported in the minutes of the 2020 National Assembly, it was “not very much done by the DKN. Some routine activities were sponsored by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, such as environment education and the promotion of ecotourism.” Once, the Minister was also “full of praise” for the DKN for actively supporting the government’s programs and policies, such as

enhancing forest management units and accelerating the implementation of social forestry policy (KLHK, 2022). A representative from the local and indigenous communities concluded that they are in the DKN only to legitimize the drive from and interests of the government (Interview No. 19).

Their increased power is associated with the increased funding for the DKN's programs and activities. As mentioned in its Statutes, the DKN generates funding from membership fees and is open for support from donors and other national and international agencies that align with its visions and missions. During its early years, the DKN has received substantial funding from donors with high expectations, and it evolved into a power-balancing institution for the government. During the research, promoting the "multistakeholder mantra" was easy, and most donors and the broader public were convinced that the DKN is an excellent initiative to foster good forest governance in Indonesia (Interviewee No. 10, 15, and 17). Nonetheless, their support has declined over time (Fig. 2) due to the inability of the DKN to maintain public trust (Interviewees No. 16 and 18). It also limited the networking capacities of recent managerial committees (Interviewee No. 11).

As such, the DKN has increasingly experienced challenges in securing funding for its activities. It has shown increased reliance on the support from the government, compromising its autonomy and independence in program implementation. Over the years, the government has provided an office and staff for the Secretariat. The Secretariat has recently provided more funds to support the DKN's activities, such as mobilizing constituents to attend meetings. In many cases, the DKN members only assemble when the government mobilizes them to discuss government-concerned issues. Several interviewees (No. 1, 8, 9, 18, and 19) in the research concluded that the government has gained more power in controlling the DKN's operationalization. For instance, during the General Assembly of the previous managerial term, the Chair of the (current) Presidium committee was agreed to be handed to the government with the expectation that it would cover all the necessary resources for organizing the 7th National Forestry Congress (and the DKN General Assembly).

With such a strong influence, instead of influencing the government, the DKN became increasingly influenced and controlled by it. Such notion was captured from the survey conducted among the former and current Presidium members. They believed that the DKN had no influence on the government policies. Another two-third mentioned that even if DKN provided inputs and recommendations, they were rarely translated or elaborated in the policies adopted by the government. A transparency-related issue of the current DKN has also been observed. As regulated in its Statute, the DKN was obliged to release an annual report and a financial statement to be audited by a public accountant and approved in the plenary session of the Presidium. However, such reports, particularly the financial reports, were never made available to the members nor the public (Interviewees No 8, 18, 26, and 27). Many of our interviews (No. 8, 16, and 26) were completely "in the dark" about the financial report, and others speculated that the government prohibited the reporting of the funding to the public (Interviewee No. 4). Other interviewees (e.g., No. 4) provided a more illuminating explanation. They simply argued that programs were driven and financed by the government and were therefore only reported internally. The aforementioned survey showed that the former and current Presidium members are concerned about the credibility of the DKN.

5. Conclusions

MSIs are portrayed as manifestations of a democratic society. They are also considered as a key institutional arrangement for strengthening governance in various policy domains and fields. Over the past two decades, Indonesia has emerged as a democratic country. As such, numerous forms of MSIs, both formal and informal, have been established. In the forest sector, the DKN was formally instituted to facilitate partnerships between governments, private/ business sectors, and the

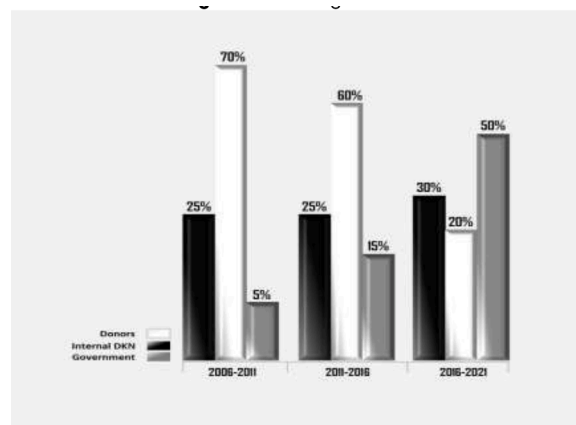


Fig. 2. DKN funding sources.

broader civil society. The DKN was established to promote governance reform in the Indonesian forest sector by providing nonhierarchical spaces for dialogues, exchange, and learning of diverse forest-related stakeholders and influence political processes and outcomes. In this paper, we assessed whether the multistakeholder platform shows the characters of real deliberative forums and encourages deliberative democracy.

We observed that the DKN initially provided opportunities for the spectrum of public/governments, private sector organizations, and civil society groups to gather and express their ideas about forest management and conservation in Indonesia. Certain signals initially evolved into a strategic part of the government to foster wise forest practices in the country. The DKN drew support from many institutions at the national level and donor agencies. However, the DKN later showed the unequal resources of participants and the eventual asymmetric power relations. Given the principally limited resources to sustain its programs and activities, the multistakeholder platform has increasingly relied on and was eventually driven by the government to pursue its own interests. The DKN is yet to demonstrate greater effectiveness in promoting governance reforms in the country. The asymmetric power relations among diverse stakeholders pose risks on the DKN as initially envisioned.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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