



Photo by Icaro Cooke Vieira/CIFOR

The role of multi-stakeholder forums in subnational jurisdictions

The Social-Economic Ecological Zoning Multi-Stakeholder Forum

Mato Grosso, Brazil




Key messages

- The multi-stakeholder forum (MSF) emerged from external (national and international) demands. As such, it faced opposition from influential subnational actors in Mato Grosso's production sector, who feared it would restrict their activities. This limited its success in promoting equity and changing the status quo.
- This MSF challenged contextual power asymmetries, as the participation of a wide range of actors prevented domination by the agribusiness sector. Nevertheless, indigenous and traditional populations were not adequately represented and had limited technical knowledge and resources to participate effectively.
- By framing the Social-Economic Ecological Zoning (ZSEE) process as mainly technical, the diverging interests of multiple actors remained largely unaddressed.
- In Mato Grosso's highly polarized context, other mechanisms beyond the MSF were used by both agribusiness (e.g. public hearings, Legislative Assembly) and social-environmental actors (e.g. social action, federal institutions) to influence the ZSEE process towards their own interests.

MSF at a glance

Participants	    
Organizers	
Year started	2008 (phase 1), 2016 (phase 2)
Funding	 
Forum Type	Knowledge sharing and decision making
Outcome	Legally binding, coordination and recommendations

 Government
 NGOs
 Private sector

 Academia
 Indigenous peoples
 Local communities

Summary

Territorial planning in Brazil was originally promoted by the military government in the 1970s as a strategy to map the natural resources of the Amazon region. Later, as a response to international pressure to reduce deforestation rates caused by development and infrastructure projects in the Amazon, the concept of Environmental Zoning was introduced. However, it was not until after Brazil had transitioned to a democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s that participation mechanisms, such as multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs), were promoted across the country. During the following years, new Brazilian institutions established “Ecological Economic Zoning” (ZEE, Zoneamento Ecológico-Econômico) as a territorial planning tool that involved the participation of civil society and multi-stakeholder ZEE commissions. These changes were part of a global trend in which scholars and practitioners proposed participatory territorial planning as a solution to environmental problems and land conflicts, where dialogue and negotiation among stakeholders could help to mediate and harmonize different interests. Although, by law, a ZEE commission is not the highest decision-making body in a state-level ZEE process – as the final approval comes from state and federal government authorities – the ZEE map is required to become a Law.

Throughout the twentieth century, state policies aligned with federal policies and international bank projects to favor large-scale farming in the Amazon region, which led to land occupation and deforestation. In the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso (Figure 1), state-level policies favored those processes. Mato Grosso became the Brazilian state with the largest livestock, soybean, corn and cotton production. It also therefore became the state with the highest deforestation rates, which peaked in the 1990s-2000s, with the loss of approximately 40% of its Amazonian forests. To date, the state government authorities often strongly support – and have ties to – the agribusiness sector, forming a powerful agribusiness alliance.

To explore the potential of MSFs in territorial planning, we studied Mato Grosso's ZEE commission, an **MSF set up to make Mato Grosso's ZEE process participatory and inclusive by discussing and providing the semi-final approval of the ZEE proposal drafted by the government.** By federal law, the ZEE's ultimate goal is to guide land use and occupation activities towards sustainable development. However, the study revealed that Mato Grosso's government initiated the process largely to access international funds and comply with new national stipulations. Mato Grosso's Secretariat of Planning (SEPLAN), supported by the state's Secretariat of the Environment (SEMA), who were not part of Mato Grosso's agribusiness alliance, were designated as the official authorities to lead this. During that process, these authorities modified the name from Ecological-Economic Zoning to “Socioeconomic-Ecological Zoning” (ZSEE). A ZSEE commission, the MSF, was created in 2007 (phase 1), but the final approval of the ZSEE map by governmental authorities was obstructed by the agribusiness sector. When the second phase of the process was reinitiated in 2016 and a new ZSEE commission was created, SEPLAN alone was put in charge. The MSF had still not approved a ZSEE map when this research concluded in 2019. This flyer covers both phases 1 and 2 of the MSF.

For this research, in-depth interviews were carried out with 24 MSF participants and 12 non-participants, 1 MSF organizer and 5 key context informants from different sectors with knowledge and firsthand experience of land use and land-use changes in Mato Grosso. This study aims to:

1. identify the processes and outcomes that influence the MSF's effectiveness in achieving sustainable land use;
2. examine how the MSF addresses issues of power and inequity in decision-making processes.

Our data suggests that the ZSEE organizers devolved limited decision-making power to the MSF and framed the elaboration of the ZSEE primarily as a technical process in an attempt to

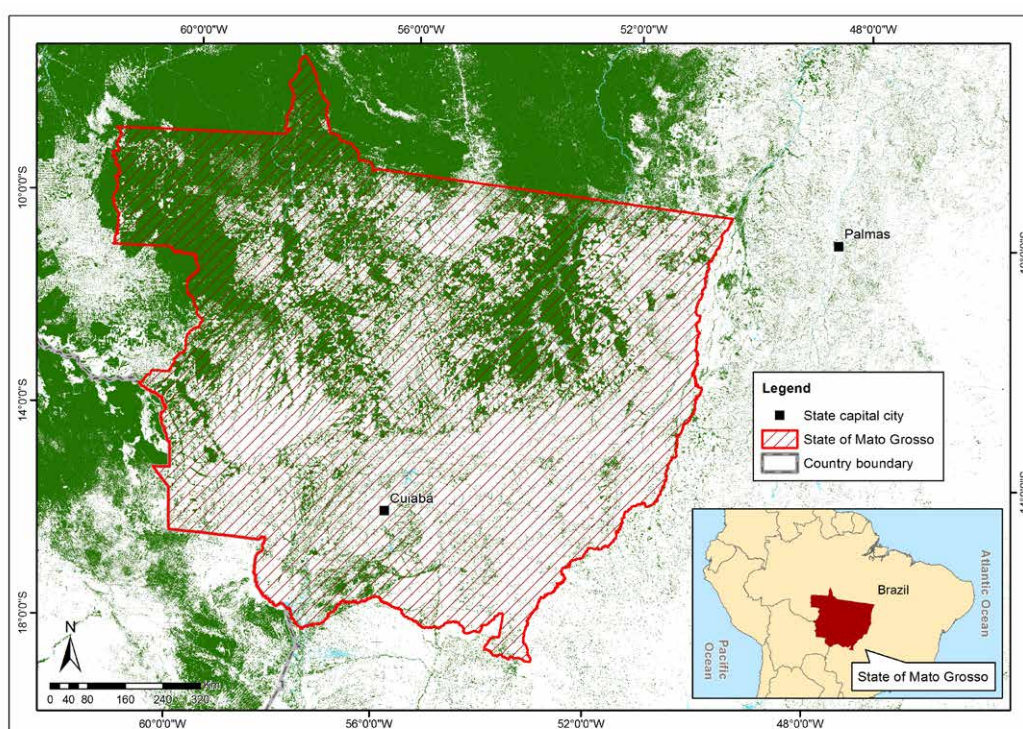


Figure 1. Location of study area: state of Mato Grosso

avoid confrontations between actors with conflicting interests. Participants from all sectors complained that, in both phases, the MSF's role was to review a ZSEE map previously drafted by a team of technical experts, rather than actively participate in the drafting process.

How effective was this MSF?

All interviewed participants acknowledged that the amount of time and number of meetings in both phases had been insufficient to allow them to understand the complex technical language of the proposed ZSEE map, which they did not participate in drafting. This suggests the MSF failed to improve participants' understanding of the ZSEE process.

The MSF also failed to bring diverse types of knowledge about social issues together. As confirmed by the organizer, SEPLAN mainly uses official data to elaborate the ZSEE map, which includes very little about Mato Grosso's highly diverse traditional communities.¹ Therefore, participants from civil society and grassroots organizations in both phases argued that traditional populations were poorly represented in the map. In phase 1, only two *quilombos* – the only traditional communities recognized in the state government's database – were included in the ZSEE map.

Moreover, the MSF failed to harmonize divergent land use priorities and interests. All participants confirmed that the MSF had not yet managed to elaborate a ZSEE map that all participants agreed on. On one hand, Mato Grosso's Federation of Agriculture and Livestock and production-oriented government agencies perceived the ZSEE map drafted by SEPLAN/SEMA as "more environmental than socio-economic" and "restrictive", and considered it didn't represent the reality of the State. On the other hand, representatives of NGOs, agroecological farming organizations and traditional populations thought that in both phases, despite the limited representation of traditional populations, the ecological-environmental aspects were well addressed, promoting a more sustainable use of land. In phase 1, the ZSEE map was approved by a majority of votes in the MSF, despite dissatisfaction from civil society actors and agribusiness sector representatives; in phase 2, at the time of the study, the MSF had not yet reached agreement on whether to approve the draft. The MSF organizer expressed frustration about the ZSEE process taking significantly longer than planned. Hence, the ZSEE map was circulated among some governmental agencies even though it had not yet been approved by the MSF.

Furthermore, the MSF was unable to build trust among participants towards the MSF and thus the overall ZSEE process: participants from the agribusiness sector perceived the process to be biased towards environmental goals, while others related to social-environmental grassroots movements viewed the process – and Mato Grosso – as dominated by agribusiness. An NGO representative who participated in both phases said that many participants, especially from grassroots movements and traditional populations, have begun to lose trust in the ZSEE process and in those leading it.

The on-the-ground effectiveness of the ZSEE map, even if approved, remains uncertain. The organizer and all participants manifested significant concerns about the extent to which Mato Grosso's ZSEE map could be implemented effectively to guide land users' decisions towards sustainable development. Local populations have little knowledge about the existence of the ZSEE process and how to use its map. Also, actors from the agribusiness sector, fearing the ZSEE map could negatively affect their sector and Mato Grosso's economy, declared that they would only help to implement a ZSEE map they are satisfied with. Support from this sector is key, as it owns most of Mato Grosso's territory, has significant economic resources and exerts strong influence in the political sphere as well as among small- and large-scale farmers.

Was this MSF able to address inequity?

More than 90% of the interviewed participants from all sectors considered the process in which the ZSEE map had been drafted by the MSF organizers to lack equity, and almost 70% of the interviewed participants commented that phase 2 was either weak on equity or not equitable at all. Civil society participants argued that the ZSEE map does not reflect equity partly because traditional populations were poorly represented in both phases (the ZSEE map in phase 2 was drafted based on the map drafted in phase 1, not permitting the MSF to challenge contextual power asymmetries).

Participants also identified procedural inequities. Phase 1 of the MSF did not include the participation of indigenous peoples' representatives, and traditional populations' representation was very limited. Moreover, most participants argued that the ZSEE map drafted in this phase was not drafted participatorily. Participation improved in phase 2, however, as indigenous and traditional populations were allocated two participation spots each. Interviewees stated that the agribusiness and development sectors had an advantage due to their economic resources to hire technical experts to assist them –which allowed them to speak with greater self-confidence at MSF meetings, master technical issues, and exert greater influence on several of Mato Grosso's governmental authorities. According to key context informants, the private sector is seldom challenged in Mato Grosso given its dominance of the region's economy and high level of influence in the governmental sphere.

Nevertheless, the MSF has, to an extent, challenged power relations and the agribusiness sector's structural power in Mato Grosso. First, the map drafted by the ZSEE organizers, who were not part of Mato Grosso's agribusiness alliance, led to the discussion of a map that challenged the status quo, proposing a shift from agribusiness to sustainable development. In addition, agribusiness actors, who felt sidelined, were not a majority in the commission in either of the two phases; thus, they were unable to dominate votes in their favor. However, according to two key informants and the MSF organizer, the agribusiness sector reacted to being challenged in the MSF by trying to dominate other governance mechanisms and spaces. In phase 1, it pushed for public hearings to be held and organized by the Legislative Assembly, which, according to interviewees, the agribusiness sector dominated; these often became scenarios of open confrontation between the latter and the social-environmental sector, even in some cases resulting in death threats.

¹ A term used in Brazil that refers to several culturally differentiated groups that depend on land and natural resources for their livelihoods, such as extractive populations, "*ribeirinhos*", "*quilombos*" and "*pantaneiros*".

These confrontations extended to other spaces, such as to the Legislative Assembly, which approved a pro-agribusiness ZSEE map; street protests, where civil society protested against the ZSEE map approved by the Legislative Assembly; and federal institutions, which supported and legitimated the civil society protests. To prevent the repetition of such confrontations in phase 2, the organizer decided not to hold further public hearings. However, for the ZSEE map to become legally binding, it needs approval from the agribusiness-oriented Legislative Assembly and governor. Nevertheless, agribusiness interviewees in phase 2 showed great self-confidence in controlling those political spheres, stating that if the MSF approves a ZSEE map they are not pleased with, they would find ways to block its final approval by the government.

Recommendations

- *Conflict resolution and decision making:* Given the increasing polarization between stakeholders, the MSF may benefit from a temporary pause to carry out a strategic process of peace and trust building, led by a facilitator with no direct affiliation to any sector. It may be advisable to re-elaborate the ZSEE map anew, involving participants in all stages and giving them meaningful decision-making power over the process.
- *Time allocation:* MSF organizers should prioritize the quality of decision making over deadlines, and allocate more time and effort to organizing individual meetings with each actor. Given the economic importance of agribusiness in the region, a ZSEE map that promotes a progressive transition towards sustainability may be approved and implemented more effectively.
- *Extending stakeholder representation:* Improving the representation of indigenous and traditional populations in the MSF through logistical and financial support, as well as the incorporation of non-technical information and traditional knowledge, is crucial for their empowerment and thus effective participation.
- *Recognition of capacity gaps:* For more effective participation, all MSF participants should have equal understanding of the objectives and the technical aspects of the MSF. Capacity building should be part of the MSF process, especially for those participants who require more resources to understand technical information.
- *Monitoring:* Considering stakeholders' distrust of the process, the MSF's effectiveness, objectives, processes and results implementation should be monitored by an independent agency with no direct affiliation to any sector.

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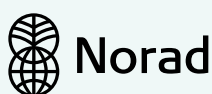
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