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Multi-level collective actions and institutions play an important role in natural resource governance and rural development; however, the origins and transformations of these institutions have only recently begun to receive systematic research attention. To address this gap, we trace and analyse the historical processes driving formation and change of Mexican inter-community forestry associations over time, drawing on survey data and in-depth case studies from two Mexican states, contextualised within the national and international political-economic landscapes over time. While we initially categorise whether an association is grassroots (“bottom-up” or state-mandated (“top-down”), the fifty-year historical review reveals a contested dynamic over political, economic and technical changes in multi-level commons governance. In this political-economic process, the line between self-organised and top-down is blurred, hybrid and continually evolving on multiple scales, driven by both cooperation and conflict across governance levels from the local to the global, and embedded in broader struggles over land, democratic institutions and market participation. Mexican forestry associations mediate between social movements; member needs such as political representation, economic cooperation and forestry services; conflicting political interest from a diversity of community and non-community actors including foresters, political party leaders and timber corporations; and state mandates and market forces. These findings fill a gap in institutional commons theory and practice, elucidating the political dynamics of polycentric and multi-level governance. (Text from authors’ abstract)

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