

Grassroots concerns and issues regarding REDD+ in Nepal

Policy brief



Overview

- Strong support and active participation of local communities are critical for the success of REDD+.
- REDD+ grassroots stakeholders, including local communities, have shown strong interest in participating in REDD+ related awareness raising activities but have also started to voice their concerns.
- The main concerns of grassroots actors are: their limited access to REDD+ related decision making platforms and reduced or restricted access to forests and its products due to REDD+, high cost of REDD+ process and unfair benefits of REDD+ to marginalized groups.
- Tenure security, good governance and participatory monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) are the key to ensure effective participation of local communities in REDD+ processes.

Introduction

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) is a results-based payment scheme aimed at reducing emissions by incentivizing government and local forest managers to conserve and protect forests. In Nepal, where local people heavily depend on forests for their livelihoods and nearly one-third of forests (DFRS, 2015) are directly managed by local communities, many stakeholders have emphasized the fact that strong support and active participation of local people is critical for the success of REDD+.

With the development of REDD+, investment has been made to develop the capacity of actors at the grassroots level to ensure that real forest stewards, i.e. local communities and their direct service providers at local level, are able to understand the essence of REDD+ and can benefit from REDD+. With increasing understanding of REDD+, the grassroots actors have started voicing their concerns about REDD+. Identifying and understanding these concerns and issues and accommodating them through appropriate policies and measures are important to ensure effective, efficient and equitable REDD+. In this context, this policy brief has been prepared based on experiences of the six-years of Grassroots Capacity Building for REDD+ in Asia Project¹ by RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests and its partners in Nepal².

The concerns and issues documented in this policy brief are from grassroots stakeholders who were engaged in REDD+ capacity building. Effective products and services were designed and delivered to bridge the knowledge and capacity gap following capacity development need assessment of grassroots stakeholders which in turn enabled them to voice their REDD+ related concerns. Long term and regular interactions were carried out with community forest user group (CFUG) members, Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal (FECOFUN) and Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (HIMAWANTI) leaders in addition to other civil society organizations, forest officials and researchers.

Major concerns and issues

REDD+ capacity building programs have facilitated overwhelming participation of grassroots stakeholders in Nepal. Their participation in the REDD+ capacity building events was found to enhance their REDD+ related understanding, including its possible benefits, on one hand which enabled them to express their concerns, on the other. While going for regular interactions with

¹The Grassroots Capacity Building for REDD+ in Asia project began in 2009 covering five countries—Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal and Viet Nam. Detail of the project can be viewed at <http://www.recoftc.org/project/grassroots-capacity-building-redd>

²The Grassroots Capacity Building for REDD+ in Nepal was implemented in 18 districts across three ecological and five developmental regions of the country.

Table 1: Some facts on encroachment in Nepal

Encroached forest land	97,000 ha
Number of landless in Nepal	450,000 households
No. of land commissions formed in last 40 years and land distributed	21 commissions and 140,000 ha
Estimated cost of eviction for next five years	NRs 6 billion (roughly USD 55 million)

Source: CNRM (2010); DoF (2011)

local stakeholders, focus group discussions among forest users, women and marginalized communities as well as media people, four main concerns and issues were voiced:

Access of local communities to forest resources

Nepal, being a poor agrarian country with limited options for off-farm livelihoods, community managed forests provide livelihoods to about 2.39 million (DoF, 2016) households. In cases where community forests are unable to meet the demand, people illegally enter into government managed forest for basic forest products like fuelwood, fodder and timber as they have very limited livelihood options.

Recalling their significant dependence on forest resources, local communities raised the concern that with monetary stakes attached with REDD+ in terms of carbon trade, the accessibility and rights to use the forest resources may be limited significantly. They added that REDD+ may be used as shield by the government to introduce stringent legal provisions and stricter rules to enter into forests and increase punishment for violation, thus alienating people from the forest, undermining access to the forest and limiting forest-based livelihoods opportunities to them.

The prohibition or restrictions could be imposed on grazing, collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), fodder, leaf litter and grass. Such concerns of the local people is substantiated by increased restrictions for CFUGs to harvest of forest products, including restrictions on grazing in REDD+ pilot sites in three watersheds – Charnawati (Dolakha), Ludhikhola (Gorkha), and Kayarkhola (Chitwan) – which has affected poor households in various ways (Patel et al., 2012).

As shown in Table 1, a significant area of land under encroachment exists in the country. Over 450,000 households are illegally living in nearly 100,000 hectares of forestland. Eviction of those people from the illegally occupied forest would make that land available for forestry which, however, leaves thousands of people without shelter and livelihood options. The landless people, who are occupying part of the forest lands over few decades, feared that

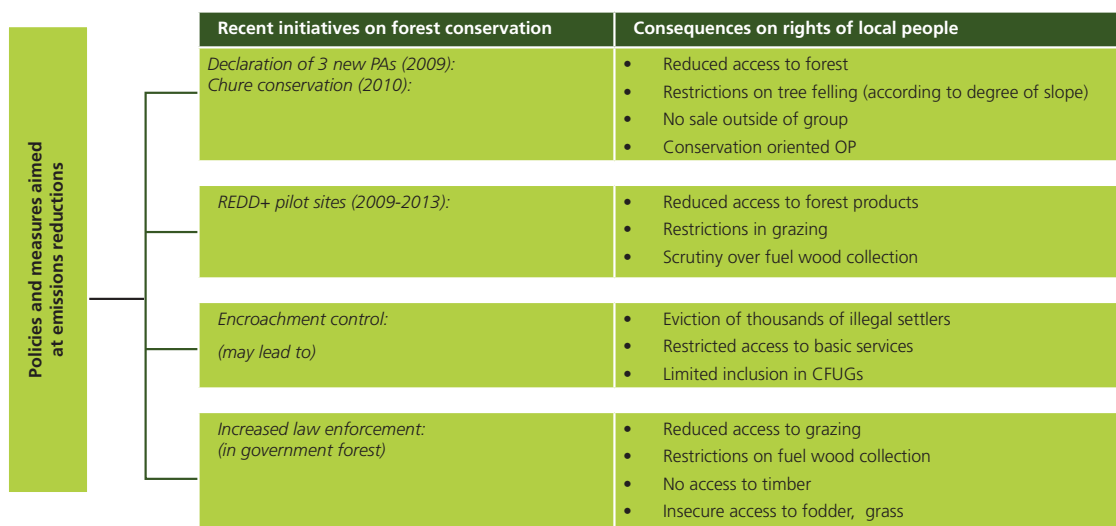


Figure 1: Impacts of policies and measures on reduced access to forest

they might be evicted from forests in order to recover encroached forestland. It was also expressed that forest dependent poor, women, indigenous people and Dalits³ would be hardest hit by such land clearance.

High costs and delayed benefits

Another important concern was regarding the costs of REDD+ (Table 2). The specific concern was the level of detail in the documentation required for carbon inventory and reporting, even for small sized local forests as there are significant number of CFs less than 5 hectares in Nepal. In cases where CFUGs have to procure expensive services from external service providers or are forced to pay government officials to help prepare the operational plan (OP) and conduct other assessments within CFUGs, the concern of high costs for preparing additional documents, primarily for MRV on REDD+ is a relevant issue, and therefore should be considered while designing REDD+ project.

Several questions were raised by the local communities around carbon measurement: *Can we measure the carbon ourselves? Can we report it in our own language? Would they believe our findings? How much do we have to pay for these measurements and reporting? Currently, a major chunk of revenue from timber management goes to contractors. Will not it be a similar case for carbon contractors?*

Table 2: Perceived costs for local forestry groups under REDD+

Implementation Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare and sign contracts • Revision of OPs accommodating REDD+ • Protection measures in addressing D&D • Effective enforcement of CFUG rules • Mobilizing external consultants • Documentation process
Transaction Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness, educational activities • Assigning human resources • Measurement, reporting and verification (MRV)
Monitoring Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline assessment • Documentation of progress in activities • Carbon measurement • Measurement of non-carbon elements and benefits
Opportunity Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenue from timber sale, fuel wood, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) • Land use change (e.g. agriculture)

Equity

While people are curious of the potential benefits from REDD+ and its distribution, it appears that the local communities are skeptical of the REDD+ benefits. Many have been talking about REDD+ payments for over 7-8 years without any tangible income being reported from carbon trade to local stakeholders. Therefore, communities raised questions such as; we have numerous costs from REDD+ but we want to know when the benefits (i.e. money) will come? How will the money be distributed? Will the local communities get the benefits?

Moreover, the benefit sharing method is another concern among the local communities due mainly to the different priorities among local communities. Despite mandatory provisions in community forestry development guidelines for allocating at least 35% of CFUG funds to pro-poor development, decision making processes are dominated by elites, resulting in priority to collective infrastructure development, which benefits everyone. Yet, poor and marginalized groups expect funds that provide direct livelihood and income generation benefits to them, but because they are left out of decision making processes, this type

³ Dalits in Nepal are groups of people who are considered untouchables and are historically deprived in terms of their access to mainstream national development.

of investment is not prioritized. They, therefore, express fear that a flow of REDD+ payments may worsen equity within community.

Weak capacity

Grassroots actors have insufficient awareness of national REDD+ readiness processes. Some members have participated in organized consultation meetings, which in most instances fail to provide comprehensive understanding of the scheme due to limited coverage of issues. They expressed a deep sense of isolation from the Kathmandu-centric policy processes and fear that they are not able to voice their concerns and influence policies on REDD+. Women, Janajati⁴, Dalit and other groups do not have full trust in their own leaders. The Sukumbasis (landless) expressed frustration that their voices are not being heard by the state. Similarly, those who are forced to rely on illegal collection and sale of fuel wood due to their lack of other livelihood sources hardly dare to raise their concerns in such meetings fearing that they would be pointed out as illegal collectors.

These concerns are deeply rooted within historical experiences of exclusion and marginalization. Even when grassroots people are consulted there is little confidence that their voices will be heard and will find space in policies. The procedures and limited inclusion of stakeholder in consultation workshops do not adequately encourage people to share their concerns. For example, lengthy English documents often presented through PowerPoint slides by-pass many uneducated rural and socially marginalized groups. Weak involvement in the current REDD+ readiness phase implies that their concerns are not adequately appreciated and accommodated in policy documents.

Genesis of concerns and issues on REDD+:

The following points present the basis of the concerns and issues that local communities have expressed. Considering the concerns raised earlier, local communities expressed that these issues are likely to continue or exacerbate once REDD+ implementation is initiated. The concerns raised by the local communities are based on following experiences and practices in the country:

- Protection oriented forest policies, regulatory framework and institutional practice, for example, continued expansion of protected areas system (now about 23% of total area of Nepal) has strengthened the concerns of exclusion of local communities from forest management. Forest areas which were already handed over to communities have also been categorized as protected areas. Introduction of Chure conservation program; establishment of new protected forest – (now around 112,646 hectares); and occasional ban in tree felling during 1998, 2010, and 2011 by the government, are some other initiatives and policy decisions, which have resulted in reduced local communities' access to critical forest resources (Jana et al. 2015), and therefore a reason for local communities to fear further exclusion once REDD+ is implemented.
- The CFUGs are required to follow their OP - a forest management plan approved by the District Forest Office (DFO) - in order to manage as well as harvest forest products. These documents are renewed every five to ten years. A challenge is that part of the procedures of preparation of the OPs is often beyond the capacity of the community. There is also a high cost associated with forest inventories, OPs, environmental impact assessments, initial environmental examinations and other reports for CFUGs with large forests areas. This siphons up a major part of a CFUG's income, especially among those with low income, and often leads to a backlog of OP renewal making the harvest of any forest products illegal.
- Elite capture exists in many community based forest management groups including CFUGs, especially in groups with high annual income. There is clear indication that elite

⁴ Janajatis are indigenous people who are excluded from the mainstream development activities in Nepal

capture is a major obstacle to equitable benefit sharing. For example, most community forestry revenue is invested in infrastructure development which is the secondary interest of the poor; whose prime interest is activities that directly improve their livelihood. Though CFUGs are much better than other similar local institutions in terms of decentralized and participatory decision making, there are still equity challenges. For example, poor, women, Dalit, Madhesi⁵ and Janajati in particular have either felt excluded or marginalized from the decision making process within the CFUGs. The level of inequity worsens once the groups move from subsistence to trading of their forest products, which again is dominated by elites and middlemen, who generally have better access to market, as compared with other marginalized groups due to poor capacity and knowledge, and therefore have to depend on middlemen to sell their products. This is also because few people are engaged in decision making and signing of contracts with external parties.

- Limited reach of community to current policy formulation process, including those related to REDD+ instills a sense of exclusion on large section of the society. Limited resources on one hand and poor representation and accountability of key state and non-state institutions on the other have reinforced marginalization and exclusion of those who rely on forest.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for the government and other relevant actors involved in REDD+ processes in Nepal, are based on the responses from community members targeted.

Invest in capacity building of grassroots and other stakeholders: Capacity building of forest communities, especially the forest dependent poor, women, Dalits, Madhesi, and Janajati and helps ensure their active participation in REDD+. Capacity building helps to democratize the REDD+ process and creates a favorable environment for reducing emissions. Likewise, there is a lower understanding and engagement in REDD+ among government agencies, mainly DFOs in districts without REDD+ capacity building projects. This has resulted in low enthusiasm among government agencies and facilitators in the forestry sector to prioritize REDD+ in their agenda. Therefore, building capacity through workshops, interactive programs and mobilizing

⁵ Madhesi are ethnic groups, native of the Southern plains or Terai of Nepal

grassroots and government institutions in REDD+ activities will clarify some concerns. Such programs need to focus on enhancing the understanding of community members on fundamentals of REDD+ and climate change in a simple language, without adding complex technical language, the role of local stakeholders in implementing REDD+, risks and potential benefits of REDD+ and how different stakeholders groups can contribute in implementing REDD+ and distributing the potential benefits from it. Considering the growing scope of REDD+, the focus of capacity development should revolve around promoting sustainable forest management.

Simplify the OP process: Simplification of OPs is important to ensure comprehensibility among, and preparation by, the local forest user groups. The simple logic is that management activities undertaken in the community forest should be previously understood and agreed on by the forest user groups and should be affordable. This is important in the context of REDD+ because the OP serves as the foundation for implementation.

Strengthen tenure security: While community forestry and other management modalities have received a strong legal backing, ad hoc policies, existing regulatory provisions and institutional practices have undermined the autonomy of local forestry groups. These can be corrected by more transparent and predictable policy processes, full adherence to the Forest Act 1993 and supportive institutional practices. This would in turn ensure strong local support for successful implementation of REDD+.

Simplify the monitoring and the MRV process: Simplifying monitoring and the MRV process helps develop the confidence of community leaders and thus ensures participation. It also substantially reduces the cost of the MRV so small sized forest management units can also benefit from REDD+.

Ensure transparent and equitable benefit sharing: Design and development of certain regulatory and institutional arrangements to support a fair, transparent and accessible benefit sharing arrangement is necessary considering the short distribution value chain. It is necessary to develop a more accepted criterion for payment to the institutions and the individual households. If payment goes to fund infrastructure and other development activities, then it is important to ensure interventions benefit the most marginal groups, especially the forest dependent poor.

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