



Of mice and men: Why the unintended consequences of carbon markets matter



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ABSTRACT

Land tenure remains one of the most critical factors determining equity under REDD+, as we demonstrated through our previous article, ‘Roots of inequity: how the implementation of REDD+ reinforces past injustices’. Githiru responded to this paper, with some apparent challenges to both the empirical basis and theoretical arguments, that we had put forward. In this rebuttal, we demonstrate that there were no empirical differences between our original paper and Githiru’s response that had bearing on our findings, but that there are substantial differences in our interpretations of legality and equity, and consequently divergence about who can expect to benefit from REDD+. In a context where land ownership has historically and presently involved processes of dispossession, marginalization and even evictions, this rebuttal illustrates the complexity of the dominant discourse on land tenure and benefits under REDD+ and shows how social safeguards will need to take historical context and people’s current entitlements and agency into account, if equitable outcomes are to be defined and realized.

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1. Introduction

‘The best laid schemes of mice and men go oft awry’

We are grateful to Githiru (2016) for his response to our article ‘Roots of inequity: how the implementation of REDD+ reinforces past injustices’ (Chomba et al., 2016). Differences of opinion and perception, and the debates they generate, are signs of a healthy scientific field, and that a significant issue is being addressed. Yet, we are perplexed by the title of the response, ‘Correcting inequities: how the implementation of the Kasigau project in fact redresses past injustices.’ The title indicates that the response will both correct substantive aspects of our original paper and show how the project redresses past injustices. It does neither.

In fact, the response strengthens, rather than refutes, our central finding that the benefits of the Kasigau REDD+ scheme accrue mainly to a few wealthy land owners, in a context of highly unequal land distribution predicated on a long history of unjust land acquisitions, while people with little or no land face reduced access to land and related resources. In the following we detail the absence

of difference, despite appearances, in understanding of the empirical reality of the history and present-day REDD+ project in Kasigau between Githiru’s response and our original paper. We then show how this alignment breaks down at the conceptual level, where our understanding of the relation between legality and equity differs markedly from that of Githiru. We conclude by finding reason for hope that these patterns of alignment and difference are expressions of a productive dialogue concerning a topic of mutual interest and of great importance to the future of REDD+ and the people of Kenya.

As we noted in the original paper, we are not suggesting that the implementers of the Kasigau REDD+ scheme willfully set out to disadvantage already marginalized people. Rather, we observe what the actual outcomes of the project are – intended or not – and place them in a historical and theoretical context. We contend that such scrutiny is needed to further the debate about the promises and pitfalls of REDD+ schemes. This is important in a context of mounting evidence that REDD+ tends to aggravate, rather than mitigate, existing inequalities in Kenya and beyond (Eilenberg 2015; Mwangi et al., 2015; Scheba and Rakotonarivo, 2016).

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2. Empirical integrity

In the abstract of his response, Githiru writes that he ‘*will highlight several important inaccuracies*’ in our original paper. We naturally wish to acknowledge, and refute where appropriate, the identification of such inaccuracies.

To start, we note that the project implementers were provided with a draft of our original paper prior to publication. This was precisely to ensure accuracy of the information presented. The comments received proved valuable in verifying our understanding of certain events and issues, and also challenged us to be precise in our analyses and conclusions. Despite this, Githiru alludes to inaccuracies in our original paper. However, as we will show, Githiru does not actually identify any factual inaccuracies that affect the main thrust of our argument. Below we will respond to the issues he raises point by point, but before doing that, we wish to point out that Githiru seems more concerned that readers might misinterpret what is reported. Rather than correcting inaccuracies, Githiru uses phrases in the body of the critique such as ‘*which we feel gives the reader the notion that*’, ‘*this might give the wrong impression*’, and ‘*this might misleadingly portray a picture whereby*’. Thus, Githiru’s issue is with the potential interpretation of our analysis, rather than with the evidence we present.

In Section 2 of Githiru’s response, four apparent inaccuracies in our original paper are indicated. The first, that we accept, is that the hypothetical average annual revenue to the wider community (had it been distributed individually rather than collectively), that we quote as 5–8 USD per household, is actually per head. It would be slightly higher per household, but as Githiru also acknowledges, this does not alter the conclusion that the revenues, whether expressed per head or per household, are small.

Secondly, Githiru takes issue with the representativeness of our sample of households in the two locations where we looked at revenue distribution. He asks for more information on how the selection was done, what statistical tests were used, and for a map of the locations of interviewed households. As stated in the paper, the locations were purposively selected so as to include all forms of tenure arrangement relevant in the project area and to be ethnically diverse so that perspectives of different ethnicities would be captured. Within villages, an approximated random sample was obtained by selecting every tenth household from point zero. The point zero was the closest house to the shopping centers of Maungu and Kasigau, respectively. We are unable to provide a map of the locations of interviewed households as this would violate their anonymity. Yet, there is no reason to expect spatial bias in the sampling. We used only descriptive statistics, as described in the original paper, to summarize shareholdings, not tests of differences amongst communities.

Thirdly, Githiru takes issue with how we represent the different actors in the REDD+ project (smallholder farmers, larger land owners, etc.) and their relative gains and losses. We presented a summary of revenue distribution for residents in the five locations, whereas Githiru would have liked to see a further disaggregated sample by those he considers more or less entitled to carbon revenues based on costs, or legitimacy to receive benefits. Similarly, Githiru contests our estimates of the numbers of people involved as landowners with respect to shareholdings in DACs (directed agricultural companies). He discusses the eligibility of people of different ethnicity and historical investment in shareholdings in DACs. On this basis he questions the usefulness of looking at the percentages of current residents in any location who are shareholders, as opposed to proportions of those he considers eligible, in terms of determining how equitably shares are distributed. He is suggesting an added layer of sophistication to the analysis that we presented, which while interesting, does not replace the need to know who, out of those residing in the area, currently benefits

and by how much, from carbon revenues. So neither our methods nor evidence are actually being challenged here, but a suggestion is made for further research.

Finally, the fourth issue relates to the evictions where Githiru confirms that families were evicted, some forcibly. He provides details of the transfers of land ownership prior to the evictions and asserts that the homes were not burnt by bailiffs. Nothing in his account conflicts with the account reported in our original paper. Only two of the land owners in the chain of transfer were mentioned in our account (Meyers, the long-time owner previously known to the local community and Korchinsky), and while the local recollection is that homes were torched, we did not claim that this was done by court bailiffs. Once again, the key points are not disputed, that people were evicted, some forcibly, and that the project implementer observed the process. We welcome the confirmation of details of these evictions that have hitherto been absent from narratives about the project.

Unfortunately, despite his apparent concern about the representativeness of our data, Githiru does not provide any new data on any of the aspects he contests above, except for proportions of different ethnicities in the two locations sampled in the original paper, derived from what he describes as ‘*our long term monitoring data*’. No detail is given on the nature of these data. In a similar vein, Githiru downplays the REDD+ project’s negative impact on peoples’ livelihoods by asserting that only a small proportion of people derive income from charcoal in the area and introducing very rounded figures of ‘*about 200 individuals in Kasigau Location and less than 100 in Marungu*’. These figures are supposedly derived from ‘*a recent survey of primary charcoal producers*’. Again we are left without any details regarding the nature of these data, which makes us question its relevance, not least because people involved in illegal activities are often very hesitant to reveal themselves in surveys (St John et al., 2010).

Finally, Githiru seeks to undermine our main argument by claiming ‘*the generally widespread support for the project that is immediately evident with a visit to these communities*’. This is symptomatic of the response; a series of attempts at questioning our data, analysis and argument, by referring to project surveys, monitoring activities and impressions from visits to the area. We cannot, of course, refute these data and impressions – not least because we are not made privy to the underlying who, how and when of data collection, but stand firm in our published account of local perceptions and analyses that are based on fully documented, independent research following rigorous procedures.

Overall, we are pleased to find that Githiru is in broad agreement with our description of the empirical findings, despite his claims that our account suffers from factual inaccuracies. He confirms our historical account by stating that ‘*land tenure in Kenya has involved dispossession and elite capture enabled by colonial and post-colonial land policies, which left many local people with little or no land entitlement*’. Also at a more detailed level we struggle to find disagreements with our empirical findings. As mentioned, Githiru confirms the evictions of people. He is at pains to distance the land transaction deals between 1998 and 2000, and indeed the REDD+ project, from the consequent evictions in 2002, despite concurring with the historical consequences of colonial and post-colonial dispossessions. He is also at pains to point out that the project implementers did not enforce, but only observed, the evictions, which were carried out by Sasenyi Valley Multipurpose Cooperative (SVMC). He also confirms that people previously producing charcoal have faced reduced access to the resource as a consequence of the project. He further confirms the basis for benefit sharing that we reported. He does not challenge the proportions of carbon revenue received by project actor groups in 2010 and 2011 (53% to the project; 33% to landowners and 14% to the wider community) and provides no figures for subsequent years. He mentions, as we do in

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