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# The evolution of REDD+: An analysis of discursive-institutional dynamics

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## ABSTRACT

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+<sup>1</sup>) is a policy that developed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and is based on the idea that climate funds and carbon markets can be used to incentivise developing countries to reduce tropical deforestation. This paper analyses the development of REDD+ from 2004 to 2011 through Discursive Institutional Analysis (DIA). DIA seeks to analyse how new discourses become institutionalised in plans, regulations and guidelines, while including and excluding issues, (re)defining topics, and (re)shaping human interactions. The analysis of policy documents and 32 in depth interviews with actors involved in the climate negotiations illustrates how discursive and institutional dynamics influenced each other. Competing discourse coalitions struggled over the definition and scope of REDD+, the use of markets and funds, and the issue of social and environmental safeguards. The rapid development of the REDD+ discourse has nonetheless culminated in new institutional arrangements. The working of a 'discursive-institutional spiral' is revealed where discourse coalitions respond to the inclusion and exclusion of ideas in institutions and practices. The institutional contexts at the same time shape the boundaries within which actors can bring in new ideas and concepts.

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## 1. Introduction

Deforestation and forest degradation contribute to 12–17% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Van der Werf et al., 2009; IPCC, 2007; Stern, 2006). Hence, forest protection can play

an important role in mitigating climate change. Experts have argued that the target to limit global warming to 2 °C or less cannot be reached without incentivising the protection of tropical forests (Stern, 2006; IPCC, 2007). Reducing Emissions from Deforestation (RED) was proposed at the 11th Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention

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<sup>1</sup> REDD+ in this article refers to 'Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation in Developing Countries and the Conservation, Sustainable Management of Forests and Enhancement of Forest Carbon Stocks' (REDD+), paragraph 1.b.iii of the Bali Action Plan agreed by parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2007. When the text refers specifically to the discourse used between 2005 and 2006 which referred to the narrower scope of deforestation but not forest degradation, the term 'Reducing Emissions from Deforestation' (RED) is used.

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on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2005 as a forest-based mitigation strategy for a post-2012 climate regime. The central idea was that finances could be generated for the protection of forests in developing countries by creating forest carbon credits. These credits could then be traded or exchanged within carbon markets linked to a post-2012 climate deal (UNFCCC, 2005; Humphreys, 2008). The introduction of REDD+ responded to the fact that incentives for tropical forestry under the Kyoto Protocol were limited to plantation forests only under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) (UNFCCC, 2002). Besides carbon stocks, forests are important storehouses of biodiversity (Myers et al., 2000; Wilson, 2006) and provide for the livelihoods of an estimated 1.2 billion often poor people worldwide (World Bank, 2004). Biodiversity conservation and the interests of Indigenous Peoples and local communities are therefore important issues in global discussions on forest and climate and they have played a key role in the development of REDD+.

Given the overall slow pace of international climate negotiations the evolution of REDD+ and its recognition in policies, plans and programmes has occurred surprisingly quickly. This paper analyses the development of REDD+ from 2004 to 2011 through a Discursive Institutional Analysis (DIA). This approach looks at the relations between discourses and institutions, how actors shape discourses, and how discourses are institutionalised (partly so, or not at all). Actors involved in the global REDD+ debate have struggled over ideas, concepts and meanings but have nonetheless reached some compromises. The implementation of REDD+ in agreements and institutions, and how that process in turn influenced the continuing development of the discourse, is analysed. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What actors or groups of actors took part in the negotiation process that culminated in the REDD+ agreements?
- 2) What ideas and concepts did these actors introduce or contest in this process?
- 3) To what extent did the REDD+ discourse contribute to changes in institutional arrangements and how did the institutional context in turn influence the further development of the discourse?

## 2. Discourses and institutions

### 2.1. Discursive approaches

Attention to the role of discourses – generally described as language practices that give meaning to reality – has grown over the past decades within theories on policy analysis (Fischer, 2003; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). In particular, studies on the development of environmental policy have revealed how the ‘naming and framing’ of environmental problems are the result of discursive processes (Jasanoff, 1990; Hajer, 1995). Thus, the analysis of discourses can help us to understand how certain policy ideas and concepts gain legitimacy over others and how struggles over meaning ultimately define a policy problem. Some argumentative approaches focus on the agency of actors as the entry point of analysis (Schön and Rein, 1994; Snow and Benford, 2000). They analyse how actors, coalitions and networks frame policy issues differently, thus

structuring issues through strategic action and contests over elements of the discourse (Fischer, 2003; Arts and Leroy, 2006). Other discourse approaches focus on the working of scientific paradigms, societal institutions and technologies of power through language practices and systems of meaning (Foucault, 1994; Hajer, 1995, p. 264). Such approaches prioritise structures over agencies and analyse how discourses – as a disciplining force – shape subjects, identities and interests.

### 2.2. Discursive institutionalism

Discursive institutionalism (DI) considers discourses not only as ideas and language, but takes into account the institutional context in which discourses emerge and the way in which they are institutionalised in social practices (Schmidt, 2008; Arts and Buizer, 2008). The distinction between ideas, discourses and institutions is important. In discursive institutionalism, ideas are considered to be the carriers of the content of a discourse. Ideas can be cognitive or normative, and therefore can also convey interests (Schmidt, 2008). Discourses in this approach are defined as communicative processes through which actors structure and exchange their ideas, often through contestation with others. Discourses are then ‘the how, when, why and where’ ideas are conveyed. Institutions in this line of thinking are seen as norms, laws, conventions and procedures that both enable and constrain discourses (Schmidt, 2008; Arts and Buizer, 2008). But actors may also simultaneously bring about change in institutions through their discursive practices. According to DI, actors may alter or maintain, through their discursive abilities and the logic of communication, the institutions of which they are a part. They can deliberate about institutional rules, even while using them, and they can urge others to maintain or change those institutions of which they themselves are part (Schmidt, 2008). By analysing actors and the ideas they bring to discourses, it is thus possible to explain change and continuity in institutions and social practices.

In this paper, we introduce the concept of the ‘discursive-institutional spiral’ to discursive-institutional theory. This term refers to the dynamic process of institutionalisation of discourses on the one hand and the opening up of discourses in response to these institutionalisation processes on the other. It suggests the ‘spiralling’ of a discourse through expanding constellations of actors and ideas that contribute to discourse development, and subsequent moments of discourse institutionalisation in arrangements and practices. The discourse then narrows down, including and excluding certain ideas in new rulemaking. Such spiralling is also an expression of power, because some actors and ideas will ‘win’ over others in this discursive-institutional process.

### 2.3. Methodological framework

The development of REDD+ was analysed using the Policy Arrangement Approach (PAA) (Arts and Leroy, 2006). The PAA is characterised by four analytical key dimensions of discourses, actors, power and rules in a policy field and its focus on the broader institutional context of policy making. It has also been used as an operationalisation of DI in order to better analyse how discourse coalitions emerge in policy fields, fight

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