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The legitimacy of incentive-based conservation and a critical account of social safeguards



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ABSTRACT

Incentive-based conservation has become a significant part of how tropical forests are being governed. Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) is a mechanism to mitigate climate change that many countries have started to implement. REDD+, however, is criticized for its potential negative impacts on local populations and Indigenous people. To prevent and mitigate the negative impacts, safeguards are increasingly being used to prevent and shift the focus toward ‘non-carbon’ elements of forest conservation. We discuss the legitimacy of these types of projects from a stakeholder perspective. Using a normative framework, we assess the Ecuadorian Socio Bosque conservation program, concentrating more specifically on the level of input and output legitimacy. Results show that Socio Bosque in its current form has shortcomings in both input and output legitimacy. We argue that an encompassing conception of legitimacy, including input and output criteria, particularly from a local stakeholder perspective, is essential for the future success of incentive-based conservation and particularly for REDD+ projects.

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1. Introduction

Incentive-based programs for tropical forest conservation to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions caused by deforestation and forest degradation are increasingly being employed in developing countries. The rationale of the programs is to highlight the financial value that forest ecosystems provide to sequester and store carbon, while also providing a whole range of other ecosystem functions and services (Buizer et al., 2014; Corbera, 2012; Kanowski et al., 2011; Karsenty et al., 2014; Logan-Hines et al., 2012). Since 2005, a global incentive-based mechanism called REDD+ has become the centerpiece to facilitate incentive-based forest conservation. REDD+ stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest

Degradation; the “+” adds the component to conserve and enhance forest carbon stocks, and the sustainable management of forests (Pistorius, 2012). REDD+ is a strategy to ultimately halt deforestation and forest degradation from land-use change in developing countries through the payment for the carbon stored in trees or carbon not emitted to the atmosphere. REDD+ is frequently portrayed as a win-win strategy to address climate change through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in an effective, cost-efficient way, while simultaneously promoting local livelihood activities, protecting other ecosystem services and biodiversity habitat (Eliasch, 2008; Kanowski et al., 2011; Stern, 2006).

The incentive-based conservation logic, however, has been criticized. Skeptics argue that it leads to the simplification or *carbonification* of forests, where a forest’s worth is defined by its

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carbon stock and the tons of carbon sequestered, and not for its multiple meanings of spiritual and/or livelihood values, or as a place of biodiversity habitat (Corbera, 2012; Larson and Petkova, 2011; Nasi et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2013; Stephan, 2012). Scientists, local stakeholders, indigenous peoples' and other interest organizations, furthermore, criticize the design and implementation of the programs on the grounds that they lead to negative impacts and threats to local livelihoods and human rights (Corbera, 2012; Phelps et al., 2010; Venter and Koh, 2012). This threatens the legitimacy of incentive-based conservation programs and potentially also the success of a future REDD+ mechanism (Angelsen et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2008). Analyses of REDD+ pilot projects point to the importance of informing local stakeholders, prior to project implementation, about the risks and benefits of any decision that affects their livelihoods, rights, or territory (Angelsen et al., 2012; Fry, 2011; Kanowski et al., 2011; Shelton, 2007; Thompson et al., 2011).

The following section explains why legitimacy is important for incentive-based conservation programs, we then introduce the concept of social safeguards in REDD+ providing a brief background and highlighting key critical issues. Subsequently we state the aims of our paper, elaborate on the methods, and provide a brief description of the theoretical frameworks we apply. Then, we present our results and discuss the role of social safeguards in legitimizing incentive-based conservation projects.

1.1. The importance of legitimacy

Legitimacy refers to the acceptance of rules and standards of behavior by a community, or other local stakeholders affected by them (Biermann and Gupta, 2011; Bernstein, 2005). A prerequisite is that local stakeholders who are an essential part of most conservation projects need to have a requisite understanding of what conservation projects will entail. Having a mechanism that is not anchored in the support and acceptance of local stakeholder, and that does not provide an equitable outcome for them, is likely to be ineffective in the long run both in terms of carbon emission mitigation and socio-economic benefits (Boyd, 2009; Murray Li, 2007; Petheram and Campbell, 2010).

In the design and implementation of conservation projects, and particular in global mechanisms, such as REDD+, non-state actors and the local stakeholders who will be affected by the implementation, play an important part to establish legitimacy. Local stakeholders are decisive for the long-term success of forest conservation projects and it is therefore important that they perceive conservation and REDD+ to be legitimate (McDermott et al., 2012). In South America for example, many potential REDD+ areas are owned by local and Indigenous populations (Ricketts et al., 2010; Van Dam, 2011). These groups play a central role in operationalizing REDD+ by conserving and maintaining forest cover (Ezzine-de-Blas et al., 2011; Van Dam, 2011); they, furthermore, take part in the more technical aspects of REDD+ such as monitoring carbon stocks (Danielsen et al., 2010, 2011; Fry, 2011; Skutsch, 2011), and the conservation and monitoring of local animal species diversity (Krause and Zambonino, 2013).

As a response to the criticism concerning the lack of local stakeholder engagement, social (and environmental) “safeguards” were developed by parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other organizations (see McDermott et al., 2012). These safeguards attempt to minimize the risks for local stakeholders from REDD+ implementation. They have become a core element of REDD+ and similar projects, and they are perceived as a means to increase project legitimacy and success in terms of social and environmental benefits (Ezzine-de-Blas et al., 2011; Larson and Petkova, 2011; Nasi et al., 2011; Pacheco et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2012). Here, we focus on social safeguards, which include among others, the respect for the knowledge, rights and interest of Indigenous people (including land tenure rights), effective stakeholder participation, free, prior and informed consent (Jagger et al., 2012). How the safeguards are defined, operationalized, and how they contribute to legitimacy, however, must be scrutinized. Social safeguards are not a set of neutral tools, but part of a wider debate on the legitimacy of incentive-based conservation, such as REDD+. Proponents of REDD+ continuously stress its potential co-benefits; which includes a means to alleviate poverty, protect human rights, improve national or local governance, conserve biodiversity and provide other ecosystem services (Ebeling and Yasue, 2008; Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2012). However, if safeguards are not sufficiently taken into account, the required policies, legal reforms and the potential to channel new and additional funds to support REDD+ implementation could have negative consequences for local and Indigenous populations. This includes, for example, an increase in government control over Indigenous forest land or the loss of use rights (Phelps et al., 2010). Involving a broader range of stakeholders, such as civil society and other non-state actors in the process and implementation is important in order to establish legitimacy among local stakeholders (Bäckstrand, 2006) but also at the international level.

1.2. Aims

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical account of the role that social safeguards in REDD+ play to establish legitimacy from a local stakeholder perspective. We study normative legitimacy, which assesses the level of legitimacy according to normative theories of democracy or justice. The normative assessment of legitimacy is based on criteria of input and output legitimacy (Scharpf, 1997; Biermann and Gupta, 2011). The empirical focus of our paper is on the Ecuadorian Socio Bosque conservation incentive program, which is considered a pilot case that informs a future REDD+ program in Ecuador. We define our approach to legitimacy and discuss the level of legitimacy of the Socio Bosque program by drawing on Biermann and Gupta's (2011) input and output criteria (see Table 1) applying it to data collected during several fieldworks in Ecuador and additional information from literature sources.

1.3. The Ecuadorian Socio Bosque program

The Ecuadorian Socio Bosque program (Spanish: Programa Socio Bosque – PSB) is a voluntary and government run national incentive-based conservation program targeting

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