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Forest Policy and Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/forpol

Civil society participation in REDD+ and FLEGT processes: Case study analysis from Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia and the Republic of Congo

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Civil society
Participation
REDD+
FLEGT
Policy making
Africa

ABSTRACT

REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) are two initiatives with roots at an international scale that aim to influence national and local level forest governance. This paper looks to understand how the breadth and depth of participation of different types of actors, most particularly civil society, compares between these initiatives and in what ways the structure of the governance arrangement and/or the focus of commodities may influence this participation. The paper presents findings from an assessment study on the dynamics of participation of civil society actors in REDD+ and FLEGT processes in four countries of Central and Western Africa: Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia and the Republic of Congo. Building on key civil society participation literature, a questionnaire tool was developed and applied in these countries. The analysis is drawn from interviews based on the questionnaire tool, some in-depth interviews and secondary research. The study finds that there is a growing recognition of civil society participation in national policy making of forest governance in the four countries, and a majority of the civil society organisations are participating in REDD+ and FLEGT processes. The quality and degree of their participation (that can range from informing to empowering) however, varies between FLEGT and REDD+ (i.e. FLEGT being more accommodative than REDD+), among a diversity of these actors and the studied countries. The difference in participation between REDD+ and FLEGT is related to the design of these two processes, the general lack of time and financial investment and the technical nature of REDD+ consultations. Moreover, FLEGT has been more inclusive and participatory right from the beginning whereas participatory spaces are generally lacking in REDD+ process, most particularly in its initial stages. As REDD+ and FLEGT processes are being consolidated in these countries and worldwide, this paper provides several avenues of interventions needed to address gaps on participation, such as strengthening participatory platforms, addressing representation deficit for community groups and focusing on capacity building of civil society actors.

1. Introduction

Forest governance is increasingly responding to global claims over forests as a central strategy to address the worldwide problem of deforestation, illegal logging and climate change. With increased globalisation of forest governance through polycentric and multi-level mechanisms, the ways in which global initiatives are domesticated through national forest policy making are more important than ever, including how different actors are involved in the process (Dawson et al., 2018; Maryadi and Sahide, 2017; Myers et al., 2018). In this paper, I explore two initiatives with roots at an international scale, that aim to influence national and local level forest governance: (a) Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhance of forest

carbon stocks (REDD+), an international policy framework that seeks to incentivise enhanced forest management in developing countries; and (b) Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT), an initiative developed by the European Union to address the global concerns of illegal logging by strengthening legal forest management, improving governance and encouraging trade in legally sourced timber. In particular, my aim is to understand how the breadth and depth of participation of different types of actors, most particularly civil society, compares between these initiatives and in what ways the structure of the governance arrangement and/or the focus of commodities may influence this participation.

Comparing REDD+ and FLEGT is nothing new. Several studies have attempted to compare and contrast them in different ways. A number of publications have analysed possibilities for REDD+ and FLEGT to

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complement or conflict with one another (Broekhoven et al., 2014; Dooley and Ozinga, 2011; Hajjar, 2015; Phúc et al., 2012; Späth, 2015; Ochieng et al., 2013; Sikor and To, 2014). For example, Mustalahti et al. (2017) examined civil society participation in REDD+ and FLEGT in Lao PDR, suggesting the vital importance of participation to these processes, but as Mustalahti et al. (2017) point out, REDD+ and FLEGT share a fundamental concern for forest degradation, deforestation, and emphasise the governance issues that underpin these issues. There are, however, several governance features of these arrangements that make them distinct from one another. For example, a point of comparison between REDD+ and FLEGT that can also influence participation of different actors is the object of sale. Compared with FLEGT, which is concerned with the sale of timber, the idea of carbon credit and being paid to ‘sell air’ under REDD+ mechanism is relatively abstract for many actors. This highlights, to some extent, the complexities of operationalising participation under carbon-dominated forest management.

Proponents of REDD+ and FLEGT espouse participation by a range of actors in tropical countries in the development of the prospective initiatives. For example, ‘full and effective’ participation of non-state actors has been highlighted within the REDD+ safeguards of the UN-REDD programme and the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) (FCPF and UN-REDD, 2012). The REDD+ safeguards provide guidelines on issues such as stakeholder identification, clear procedures, social/cultural appropriateness, information sharing, capacity building, and grievance resolution. Similarly, FLEGT (and specifically the Voluntary Partnership Agreements or VPAs) aim to foster actor participation in decision-making, both in the VPA process itself and as a result of the commitments that the parties make (Fern, 2014a; Commission of European Communities, 2003).

While there is an emerging body of literature on assessment of participation of different stakeholders in national REDD+ development (for example, Pham et al., 2014; Atela et al., 2016; Brochaus et al., 2014; Dawson et al., 2018; Satyal et al., 2018) and FLEGT VPA (Wodschow et al., 2016; Overvest and Zeitlin, 2014), there are comparatively limited studies that link and compare REDD+ and FLEGT policy making and include the synergies between these two processes (see Hajjar, 2015; Tegegne et al., 2017 as exceptions). In particular, the impacts of REDD+ and FLEGT initiatives on forest governance reform and civil society participation in Central and Western Africa is not well understood.

This paper interrogates whether and how REDD+ and FLEGT processes have induced changes in the region’s forest governance with regards to civil society participation. It focuses on an assessment of the quality of civil society participation in the national policy making processes of REDD+ and FLEGT VPAs in Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia and the Republic of Congo.¹ In order to analyse civil society participation, three main variables are considered: (i) who participates, (ii) when they participate, and (iii) how they participate (i.e. their degree of participation that can range from information sharing to empowerment). Building on key literature on civil society participation (Section 2), a questionnaire tool was developed and applied in the four countries. The analysis is drawn from interviews based on the questionnaire tool, some in-depth interviews and secondary research.

The four countries were chosen due to the advanced stages of REDD+ and FLEGT in these countries. The study was part of a larger project

¹ The focus of this study is on civil society participation in policy processes and whether or not their positions are reflected in the policy outcomes. For this, REDD+ processes that were assessed in the four countries included respectively: development and adoption of the RPin (Readiness Plan Idea Note), the REDD+ strategy, RPP (Readiness Preparation Proposal) and for Cameroon, Ghana and Republic of Congo, the ER-PIN (Emissions Reduction Project Idea Note). The focus of FLEGT process was on VPA development and negotiation.

linking FLEGT and REDD+.² To date, FLEGT VPA implementation and REDD+ negotiations are not integrated, as they are happening in parallel and are overseen by different Ministries and, in some countries, different civil society organisations (CSOs). The selection of countries from both West and Central Africa was also due to the proximity of these countries to each other that allowed them to be considered a geographically coherent area facing similar challenges but with different experiences that are important to share.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the conceptual framework. Section 3 provides the research methodology. Section 4 provides country-by-country assessment of civil society participation in REDD+ and FLEGT VPA. The focus is on the mechanism of participation (i.e. how actors get involved and participate in decision-making through FLEGT VPA and REDD+ structures and processes) and the dynamics of participation (nature and degree of their participation). Section 5 provides an overall discussion and conclusion is provided in Section 5.

2. Conceptual framework

This paper is grounded on the notion of participation drawing from key literature on the topic, as a basis for analysing the principles and practices of civil society participation in the REDD+ and FLEGT processes (see also, Satyal et al., 2018, which applies similar approach).

Although participation means different things to different people, it is most commonly defined as “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them” (World Bank, 1998, p. 3). Although ‘participation’ in forest governance has a feel-good quality, it is interpreted and practiced in very different ways. Participation, including that of non-state actors, is considered vital for the success of policy processes that aim to address both social and environmental objectives and their implementation frameworks (Daviet, 2011; Forsyth, 2010). In particular, participation of civil society, indigenous peoples and local communities is often highlighted as one of the key issues of public discourse on forest governance, with emphasis on ‘full’ and ‘effective’ participation (Lawlor et al., 2013; Pham et al., 2014; Atela et al., 2016). Some civil society groups argue that an empowered civil society with the capacity to access and analyse information, to monitor forest management and to advocate and hold governments accountable can contribute to improving forest governance (e.g. Fern, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). The extent to which some countries have a clear mechanism for engaging civil society actors and local communities is often questionable.

Participation is emphasised for the reasons of democratic necessity, management legitimacy, sharing of knowledge and understanding, and transparency and accountability (Stoll-Kleemann and O’Riordan, 2002). It benefits decision-making processes by increasing likelihood of reaching practical and credible decisions that reflect a broad consensus among actors (IAIA, 2006; Osmani, 2008). It may also promote fairness in policy-making by improving relations between actors that previously had poor relations, and thus reduce conflict. However, critics warn that participation should not be seen as a universal panacea that promotes social justice (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cleaver, 1999; Faysse, 2006). Participation processes are also very often expensive, time consuming and sometimes involve stakeholders who are not representative or it empowers those who are already influential (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008).

Various studies have used the main ideas from the mainstream participation literature and applied them to assess the provision of participation and power dynamics in forest policy formulation and implementation (see Maryudi and Sahide, 2017). In particular, there is

² This national case study complemented work by other project partners who looked at participation at the ‘project’ level – individual concessions or other investments in logging, large-scale agriculture or REDD+ sites.

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