Whose environmental justice? Exploring local and global perspectives in a payments for ecosystem services scheme in Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Distribution and procedure, two core social justice concepts, are central concerns for the design and practice of payments for ecosystem services (PESs). This paper explores the relationship between local conceptions of justice and the more globally referenced justice principles embedded in the design of PES schemes. The importance of this is that perceptions of justness are powerful determinants of human behaviour and, consequently, many environmental conflicts arise from contested visions of what constitutes 'just' environmental management. With that in mind we propose that PES schemes built on conceptions of justice that broadly align with those of prospective service providers will be better received than those that do not. In order to explore differences in justice conceptions, we specify three commonly defined dimensions of environmental justice: distribution, procedure and recognition. We predict that there will be differences in the importance different actors place on these different dimensions of justice and also differences in how each particular dimension is conceived. We interview 80 randomly selected respondents from a PES case in Rwanda and relate their views about justice to the design of the PES. Our findings challenge the implicit universalism in many market-based conservation interventions: that imposed framings of justice will resonate with local ones. They also challenge the assumption that different dimensions of justice are always mutually supporting – the fallacy of the rising tide that lifts all boats. We also conclude that an environmental justice framing provides a fruitful new analytical approach for research into global forest conservation efforts.

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1. Introduction: why justice?

Our paper examines the practice of payments for ecosystem services (PESs) in relation to conceptions of environmental justice. It does this through a PES case study in the Nyungwe National Park, Rwanda (see Gross-Camp et al., 2012). The paper asserts that justice is an important, yet relatively under-researched aspect of PES interventions. In particular, we argue that there are important lessons to be learned from examining the notions of social-environmental justice evident in the design of PES schemes, and the notions of justice held by local actors who serve as hosts and partners for such schemes. We posit that aligning projects to local conceptions of justice is intrinsically good, but equally important is instrumental in achieving long-term conservation objectives.

Environmental justice has become a powerful narrative that is increasingly employed in both research and advocacy around environmental management (Lejano et al., 2002). Whilst the environmental justice movement has roots in the toxic burden suffered by ethnic minorities in the United States (e.g. Bunyan and Mohai, 1992; Bullard, 1990, 1993), claims for environmental justice are

now found around the world, as demonstrated in collections of works edited by Schroeder et al. (2008) and Carmin and Agyeman (2011). Furthermore, environmental justice work now engages with scales of analysis beyond the state, owing to the increasingly global nature of political-economic systems and of environmental issues themselves (Sikor and Newell, this volume; see also volumes by Walker and Bulkeley (2006), Holifield et al. (2009), Peet et al. (2010) and Martin (2013)). The multitude of environmental justice movements and claims are particular and place-bound local struggles. However, they are also connected through the vocabularies employed, global treaties referenced, and commodity chains and networks of actors. Narratives of environmental justice are therefore both locally and globally constituted.

We propose that research into environmental justice is particularly relevant to PES and to our focus on tropical forests. Our argument is, quite simply, that justice matters. People's individual and shared perceptions of (in)justice begin to develop from an early age (Sen, 2009; Almas et al., 2010). These non-pecuniary motives are known to be important determinants of human behaviour, often outweighing concerns of personal financial gain (Fehr and Falk, 2002; Montada, 2002). This understanding of the importance of justice to human behaviour has stimulated considerable bodies of research applied to other areas, such as organisational theories

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of labour relations (e.g. Moorman, 1991; Folger and Kanovsky (1989); Folger (1989); Whiteman, 2009). Yet relatively little attention has been paid to its role in the implementation of forest conservation. This is surprising given that conservation work has justice principles running through its veins. Whilst not always explicit, these principles can often be inferred from the underlying justification for conservation (such as concerns for 'common heritage' and future generations), the selection of different approaches to forest protection (such as strict preservation or Integrated Conservation and Development Projects) and in the detailed design of specific interventions, such as decisions to compensate people for harm suffered, or reward them for services rendered.

Whilst it is useful to attend to the justice principles implicit in forest conservation policies and interventions, we also propose the need to explore these in relation to local conceptions of justice. For example, compensation schemes tend to imply particular ideas about what are just outcomes, but these ideas are not always shared by local people (Whiteman, 2009), who may believe it more just to mitigate the risk of harm in the first place than to be helped to live with that risk. Likewise, access and benefit sharing schemes may be conceived as 'fair' within international frameworks such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, but their framing of justice may be different to that of intended beneficiaries, who might prioritise alternative dimensions of justice such as recognition of their culture, right to self-determination, or traditional decision making procedures (see e.g. Robinson, 2010; Vermeylen and Walker, 2011).

For these reasons, the study of justice in biodiversity conservation can contribute to our understanding of conservation in practice. We acknowledge that 'justice' poses considerable conceptual challenges, not least because of the practical (if not intellectual) impossibility of reaching consensus. With the exception of some utilitarians, most liberal political philosophers, as well as their critics, accept that there are multiple conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' empirical outcome. However, there is considerably more controversy over the possibility of universal conceptions of rights, including the fundamental right for individuals to pursue what they conceive to be good (Sandel, 1998).

For the purposes of this paper we identify two levels of debate about the nature of justice that serve as our conceptual framework. Firstly, there is debate about what constitutes the relevant pillars or dimensions of environmental justice going beyond matters of material distribution, to include dimensions such as procedure, recognition or representation. Vincent (1998) and Dobson (2007) propose that one can largely focus on matters of distribution, as these are foundational; similarly, feminist justice theorists (Fraser, 2001, 2009; Marion Young, 2011) argue for the primacy of recognition and representation; whilst Crocker (2008) asserts that just procedure is foundational in the sense that it helps bring about just distribution. In this research, we follow Schlosberg (2004, 2007) in not ascribing primacy to any one dimension and instead characterising social justice as multi-dimensional (Walker, 2012). This more open framing of justice allows us to explore the use of different justice dimensions, and to maintain an open mind about the relationship between these dimensions. We suggest that it is unsafe to assume that one dimension necessarily underpins or supports another dimension, i.e. just procedure will lead to just distribution (Crocker, 2008), because the research to tell us that has not yet been done.

Conservation and development interventions often focus on the distribution of costs and benefits, for example seeking to reduce or offset the costs of forest conservation to the poorest, or to increase their share of benefits from activities such as tourism. Distribution of benefits can occur through a range of interventions such as integrated conservation and development projects, revenue sharing, PES and compensation schemes. Whilst it is relatively common

to analyse the effectiveness of the resulting distribution (e.g. whether it is financially regressive or progressive), we take a rather different line of evaluation by asking whether the very focus on income distribution supports or contracts opportunities in other dimensions of justice. In other words we leave open the possibility that a materially progressive outcome may not be conceived as 'just' by actors who prioritise other dimensions of justice. Without evidence to the contrary, we should assume that a focus on one dimension of justice (such as distribution) will not always have positive impacts on other dimensions of justice. In our case study, we especially consider the question of whether a distribution-focused intervention can undermine justice claims for recognition, a possibility we infer from some previous studies of access and benefit sharing interventions (McAfee, 1999; Schroeder, 2008; Vermeylen and Walker, 2011).

We also consider different claims to justice within a particular dimension: what constitutes just distribution, just procedure and just recognition? In particular, we consider some of the most established ways of defining 'just distribution', employing concepts of 'need' and 'desert'. Again, our basic supposition is that principles employed in the design of forest conservation interventions will not necessarily correspond with principles that are prevalent within local host communities. For example, a compensation scheme may allocate its limited resources according to pro-poor principles of distribution (needs-based), whereas most local people might believe that all should receive the same (egalitarian). Thus we ask two main questions in this paper: (1) how do local conceptions of justice fit with those of conservation interventions in our case study location and (2) has the recent emphasis on improving the distribution of costs and benefits impacted on the justice dimension of recognition. In addition to these questions there is an over-arching ambition to see whether the employment of an environmental justice framework provides a useful way of gaining new understanding of conservation in practice.

2. Conceptualising environmental injustice

2.1. Justice as plural

There is a strong tradition of seeking universal principles of justice which might serve as benchmarks for subsequent normative judgments. This is evident in some canonical works such as Plato's (1974) attempt to articulate a virtuous life, Bentham's (2009) utilitarian principle of achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number, Kant's (1998) argument that individual rights must come prior to identification of utility, and categorical imperative that we should act in ways that we would be content to become universal laws of action, or Rawls's (1971) egalitarian principles of liberty and pro-poorness. Although the pursuit of universal justice ideals is a worthy one, we adopt a pragmatic conceptual approach that assumes that the pluralism of justice is intractable. As such we follow Sen's (2009) argument for a more practical 'idea of justice'. Sen illustrates justice pluralism through a fable about a flute that is claimed by different children. The first child claims the flute based on her expertise; she alone can play the flute. The second child is uniquely poor having no other toys to play with. The third child reveals that she actually made the flute. Readers can see where Sen is taking us, and we could contribute further claims, for example another child might uniquely have the storage conditions to preserve the flute for future generations. Our moral persuasion will likely dictate who the 'winner' is and will differ accordingly from individual to individual. Sen (p. 13) suggests a libertarian might favour child 3, an economic egalitarian child 2, and a utilitarian might be swayed by the greater happiness the flute would bring to child 1. Sen's point is to show that there will