



Shifting regimes of management and uses of forests: What might REDD+ implementation mean for community forestry? Evidence from Nepal



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ABSTRACT

At a time when many developing countries are preparing to implement REDD+, there is debate on the possible implications for existing community forestry (CF) governance. Drawing on a REDD+ pilot undertaken in Nepal, this paper seeks to investigate how REDD+ has been downscaled into the community forestry context and with what implications for CF governance. The analysis is guided by three research questions: how are the objectives and discourses underpinning REDD+ translated into actions at the local level; how do the proponents of REDD+ make the problems and solutions technical in order to design the interventions; and what are the implications of REDD+ design for CF governance and what changes in rules and practices on forest management might result from these? The study comprised a review of the pilot project documentation and field study. In-depth interviews, focused group discussions and observations were conducted with forest user groups both within and outside the REDD+ pilot area. Findings indicate that the pilot design and implementation was essentially to show that REDD+ could be implemented in CF and focused on developing a carbon monitoring mechanism which local people could be engaged in. The community forest user groups (CFUG) in the pilot sites have increased forest surveillance and tightened the rules regarding certain uses of forests. We argue that the technical and financial logic of REDD+ have had implications for CF governance, risks of co-opting local voices and has contributed to an ongoing commercialisation of community forests, at the cost of the livelihoods of the poorest people.

1. Introduction

The REDD+¹ programme seeks to provide financial incentives for developing countries to reduce carbon emissions from forests. As it approaches its 10th anniversary, there are questions concerning its impacts.² In many countries, REDD+ implementation has aimed to build on existing community based forest management (hereafter community forestry or CF) and gain from their established institutional mechanisms and past achievements (Newton et al., 2015; Bradley, 2012). However, as Balooni and Lund (2014) suggest, demonstrating benefits from REDD+ in CF is hard given the need to demonstrate additional carbon sequestration gains and the costs of implementation.

Community forestry, a response to the failure of top-down approaches to forests conservation, is widely practiced. CF has been reported to be

better than state management in conserving forests and providing local benefits (Persha et al., 2011; Nagendra, 2007; Agrawal et al., 2008; Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006). However, there are mixed results concerning the benefits of CF management to poor forest dependent people with several reports about restriction on traditional uses (see Ribot et al., 2010; Adhikari, 2005). In Nepal, CF has been regarded as a success contributing to forest recovery and a better supply of products and services (Gautam et al., 2003).

The proponents of REDD+ suggest CF institutions can be used for REDD+ implementation and argue that REDD+ can contribute to CF objectives (Newton et al., 2015; Bradley, 2012). However, some sceptics fear this may lead to a recentralization of power by national governments (see Phelps et al., 2010). Others suggest that REDD+ can lead to enclosure (Bond, 2012), a valuing of forests in narrow financial terms (Leach and Scoones, 2015) and allowing “green grabbing” (Benjaminsen and Bryceson, 2012);

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¹ Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries.

² Reports suggest that the REDD+ has not delivered on its promise of tangible reduction in deforestation (see Angelsen, 2017; Lund et al., 2017).

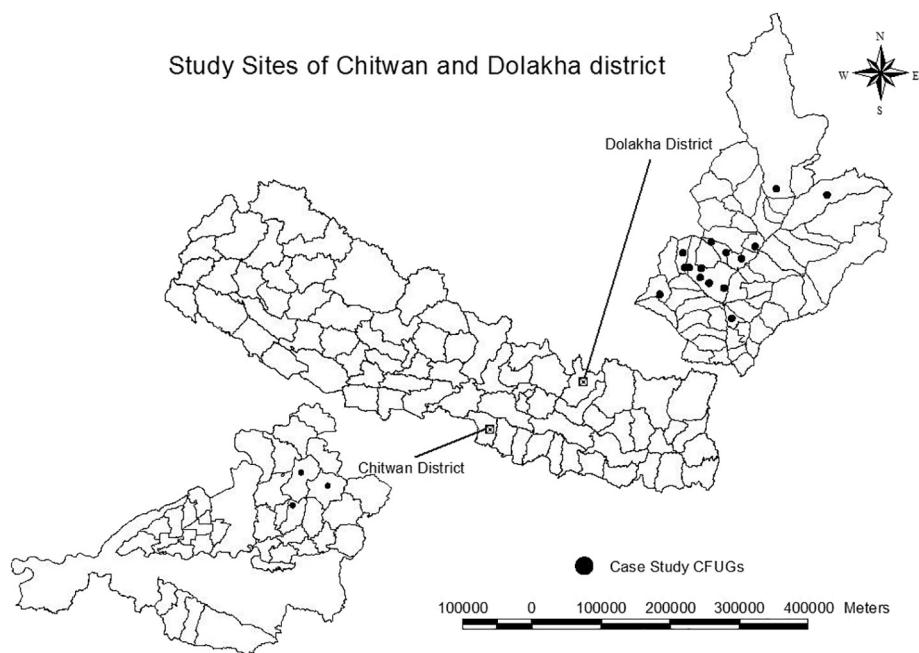


Fig. 1. REDD+ pilot sites and research locations.

Fairhead et al., 2012). Studies also point out a risk of decision making authority shifting from local to the external actors (see Leach and Scoones, 2015; Peluso and Lund, 2011), potentially undermining existing management practices and local use of forests (Chhatre and Agrawal, 2009; Groom and Palmer, 2012). There is emerging evidence that indicates this may be happening (see Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2017; Leach and Scoones, 2015).

Drawing on a study of the REDD+ pilot (hereafter pilot) implemented in Nepal from 2009 to 2013, this paper seeks to investigate the downscaling of REDD+ in the CF context and its possible effects on community forestry governance. In Nepal, REDD+ will be superimposed not only on CF but also on already recovering forests given past changes in the management of and access to forests by local people (Khatri et al., 2016; Dhakal et al., 2011; Adhikari, 2005). Certain activities such as the collection of fuel-wood, timber and fodder and grazing have been regulated leading to a decline in forest uses. Reports suggest that such decline has been, in part, due to the rise of a remittance economy and decline in livestock numbers (Marquardt et al., 2016; Dhakal et al., 2011). Yet, the community forests still provide important resources for many smallholder farmers and our analysis considers what REDD+ implementation might imply for the existing management and use of forests.

REDD+, an international climate policy (Buizer et al., 2014), has the primary objective of contributing to reduce carbon emissions through forest conservation but also seeks to contribute to the improvement of livelihoods of forest users (Lund et al., 2017). The translation of REDD+ objectives to national and local levels has been undertaken by international organizations such as the World Bank and United Nations Organizations through demonstrational projects (Pasgaard and Mertz, 2016) and national policy development (Angelsen, 2017). REDD+ objectives, underpinned by a market rationality of paying for carbon sequestration to achieve forest conservation, arguably can undermine the existing CF governance practices based on local benefits from forest management (see Balooni and Lund, 2014; Fairhead et al., 2012; Chhatre and Agrawal, 2009).

Three research questions inform this paper. First how the objectives and discourses underpinning REDD+ are translated into actions at the local

level? Drawing on ideas of policy translation, the analysis will explore how the ideas and discourses underpinning the policy are interpreted and communicated by the actors involved in the process (see Pasgaard, 2015) and how the objects of the policy, forests and communities, are made legible (Leach and Scoones, 2015). This leads to the second question, how do the proponents of REDD+ make the problems and solutions technical in order to design the interventions? As Li (2007a: 265) puts it, 'extracting from the messiness of the social world, with all the processes that run through it, a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c), a beneficial result'. This process of rendering technical puts aside political complexities of community forest governance (Li, 2007b). Our analysis considers the extent to which the proposed technical solutions help (or does not) address the issues of inequality. The third question asks what the implications of REDD+ design for CF governance are and what changes in rules and practices on forest management might result from these. Answers to these questions will build on the work of others (i.e. Fairhead et al., 2012; Peluso and Lund, 2011) in deepening an understanding of how externally driven initiatives such as REDD+ can alter forest governance practices.

After outlining the methods in section two, a brief description of CF and the REDD+ pilot in Nepal is provided in section three. In section four the findings are organized in two sub-sections: first the processes of REDD+ implementation in CF and the design of interventions and second, the consequences of this for CF management and use. The discussion in section five explores the ways in which REDD+ implementation effects CF governance. A brief conclusion is then drawn in section six.

2. Methods

The findings draw from a three year study of how global public goods provided under REDD+ can be reconciled with the needs of local populations. The research had two parts. The first was a review of the pilot project documentation including procedural manuals (i.e. manual for forest carbon monitoring), progress reports, and publications. Senior staff

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