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Examining equity in Ghana's national REDD+ process

Abdul-Razak Saeed[a,*], Constance McDermott[b], Emily Boyd[c]

[a] Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading, United Kingdom
[b] Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, United Kingdom
[c] Centre for Sustainability Studies, Lund University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, sustainable forest management, enhancement of forest carbon stocks and conservation (REDD+) aims to reduce the 12–17% of global greenhouse gas emissions attributable to forest loss worldwide. As tropical countries undertake REDD+ readiness, vital questions arise around the equity of REDD+ interventions. In particular, there has been much critique of the impact of REDD+ on local forest communities, and whether these interventions serve to entrench or address existing inequalities and the structural causes of poverty. Taking Ghana's REDD+ process as a case study, McDermott et al.'s (2013) 'equity framework' is used to systematically examine the contextual, procedural and distributive dimensions of equity, based on fieldwork carried out from July 2014 to March 2016.

This study draws on stakeholder perspectives and document analysis to draw conclusions about the equity of Ghana's REDD+ process. Our study shows that Ghana's national REDD+ strategy, legal texts and documents aim to ensure that all actors, including local forest communities, are considered 'subjects of equity'. However, according to stakeholder perspectives and general forest laws and policies, there are multiple barriers to realizing the intended goals of equity. Firstly, the complex, multiple and unclear tenurial arrangements inhibit distributive equity. Secondly, uneven stakeholder knowledge and capacity hamper effective engagement in decision-making and limit procedural equity. Thirdly, contextual factors that are remnants of colonial structures and systems, and that serve competing political and economic interests through resource exploitation impact distributive equity. The 'equity framework' reveals that historical contextual factors impact the achievement of equity through REDD+, even with right government policies and strategies in place.

1. Introduction

Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) is a voluntary mechanism under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It incentivizes forested developing countries employing new strategies to reduce forest loss in order to cut the carbon emissions associated with such loss. The mechanism is aimed at mitigating the 12–17% of total global greenhouse gas emissions attributable to forest loss (Boucher et al., 2014). REDD+ comprises: enhancement of forest carbon stocks; conservation; sustainable forest management; reducing forest degradation; and reducing deforestation.

Under the UNFCCC, many tropical forested countries have signed up to REDD+. New initiatives such as the World Bank Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and the United Nations Collaborative Programme (UNREDD), have emerged in concert with REDD+ to fund these countries' early activities, as the UNFCCC debates the financial architecture to support the mechanism, including via the Green Climate Fund. Ghana is one of 197 countries to have ratified the UNFCCC, and is actively participating in REDD+. As a relatively less industrialized country, but with a growing population, emerging economy and development, Ghana's land use sector is a key consideration in its greenhouse gas emissions (MEST, 2010).

Ghana aims to reduce its overall emissions over the next 10 years by 40% (FC, 2016). It aims to achieve this in tandem with addressing ecosystem service threats and ensuring environmental integrity. REDD+ governance and policy in Ghana is a collective action problem as the country commences its full programme. Collective action in this context is understood as the basic condition for achieving effective governance outcomes in the commons (Ostrom, 1990). There is an opportunity to contribute to knowledge, necessary in shaping Ghana's process of effectively managing REDD+ for equitable and effective outcomes, and reducing the social risks and costs of REDD+ (Ribot and Larson Anne, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to examine how equity features in REDD+ in Ghana, based primarily on REDD+ stakeholder perceptions and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: abdul-razak.saeed@pgr.reading.ac.uk (A.-R. Saeed), constance.mcdermott@ouce.ox.ac.uk (C. McDermott), emily.boyd@lucsus.lu.se (E. Boyd).

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document review. While equity is relevant at all spatial scales, this paper focuses on Ghana's national level institutions, rather than the international UNFCCC level as treated by Ituarte-Lima et al. (2014) in their study. This national focus is particularly crucial given that the UNFCCC stipulates the "adoption of a national approach to reporting on REDD+, that assigns national governments the ultimate authority in governing REDD+ actions" (Ituarte-Lima et al., 2014; p. 293).

Accompanying new governance mechanisms such as REDD+ are theoretical debates around how such mechanisms impact equity, and thereby either entrench or successfully address existing inequalities and structural causes of poverty (McDermott et al., 2013). There are many ways to approach equity in REDD+ (e.g. those of Quesada-Aguilar and Franks, 2015 or Rantala et al., 2015). However, we draw on McDermott et al.'s (2013) 'equity framework', specifically because it provides a comprehensive and systematic approach to analysing how institutions mediate equity. The framework distinguishes several dimensions of equity, including distributive, procedural and most importantly contextual equity, which is lacking attention in works published by scholars on equity and social justice in environmental governance. The framework can also be applied to different levels of international, national and sub-national decision making contexts.

Literature on equity and social justice showcase a broad set of research interests. Mason (2014) frames equity as central to sustainable development and sustainability approaches in his study of the building sector by treating equity as both a lens and object of research. Equity has been tackled in the "Triple bottom line" framework (Schrock et al., 2015), which examines sustainable development within the spheres of environment, economy and equity. Arguments have been recorded of scholars tackling equity in relation to intergenerational equity as opposed to focusing on contemporary disparities and inequities (Schrock et al., 2015). However, McDermott et al.'s (2013) framework provides the opportunity to examine both intergenerational equity and contemporary disparities and inequities through different dimensions of its novel attention to contextual equity. Equity issues are both intra-generational and inter-generational (Markandya, 2011). In the case of climate warming for example, contemporary actions would determine how future generations would be impacted or can cope with future climate impacts.

Markandya (2011) contends equity in the past has been mainly measured via the component of income distribution and therefore development literature lacks adoption of wider measure of the equity concept. McDermott et al. (2013) manage to improve the measures by which equity is examined as enunciated in the next section of this paper. Scholars like Boeckmann and Zeeb (2016) focused their research narrowly on developing a framework and guiding questions that assesses gender equity. Importantly, the McDermott et al. (2013) 'equity framework' can be used to assess a broad range of issues such as gender, emissions reductions (Ituarte-Lima et al., 2014), forest certification (McDermott, 2013) among others.

In this study we apply McDermott et al.'s 'equity framework' empirically to: explore REDD+ governance and policy processes in Ghana, including institutional set-up; to ask questions of those who count in REDD+ governance; and understand how the state mediates actor interests and relations in implementing REDD+. We examine the inclusion and exclusion of actors, identify important decision making processes, identify which actors matter in defining implementation activities, who faces what costs and risks and enjoys what benefits. We further discuss the extent to which the Ghana REDD+ process addresses equity and we do this premised on the importance of REDD+ doing no harm, promoting net benefits and being effective in achieving its objectives (RECOFTC, 2015).

2. Adapting the equity framework to REDD+ in Ghana

Ghana has been endowed with natural resources including an estimated 8 million hectares of forest, which has dwindled at 2% per annum since the 1990s to an area covering 1.6 million hectares (Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, 2012a, 2012b; Marfo et al., 2013). Ghana's forests are divided into 'reserves' and 'off-reserves'. The 'reserves' are governed by the state under a prohibitive 'command and control' approach and zoned into 80% production reserves and 20% protection reserves. 'Off-reserves' across the country are managed under various arrangements including collaborative approaches with communities and farmers. Reports indicate that Ghana has lost, and is continuing to lose, forest cover at an alarming rate in the 'off-reserves', amounting to more than it has in the 'reserves' (FC, 2010; Marfo et al., 2013). This is mainly due to unsuitable exploitation practices including logging that exceeds the annual allowable cut for timber (FC, 2010).

Forests play a significant role in the economic development of Ghana both informally and formally. For instance, formal logging contributed 3.7% of gross domestic product in 2009, and it is estimated that the sector employs 120,000 people (Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, 2012a, 2012b). Ghana's forests informally serve as a source of livelihood including non-timber forest products for subsistence and commercial purposes, hunting, chain-saw operations to supply domestic timber demand, small-scale carpentry, and herbal services. With a population of 25 million people and an estimated 11 million forest area dwellers, out of which 2 million depend on forests and wildlife for their livelihood (Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, 2012a, 2012b). Ghana's dwindling forest remains a valuable natural resource that demands new forms of sustainable management (Lockwood et al., 2010) such as REDD+.

REDD+ focuses on the extent to which it can reduce emissions (effectiveness) at a minimum cost (efficiency), while still achieving fair distribution of costs and benefits (equity)(Quesada-Aguilar and Franks, 2015; Angelsen et al., 2012). REDD+ therefore requires a diversion from business-as-usual to achieve emission reductions, but in an equitable fashion that provides net-benefits without causing harm, and contributes to poverty reduction in both process and outcomes. To understand the realities associated with REDD+ implementation, we investigate equity in Ghana's REDD+ readiness process. Equity has various dimensions and the equity framework introduced by McDermott et al. (2013) attempts to identify and bring together these dimensions in an integrated, systematic and rigorous way (see Fig. 1 below). McDermott et al. (2013) elaborate their framework on the scalar dimension of equity, the goal of equity and the parameter setting process. Their framework sets the scene for questions of why equity matters, who counts, and what counts as equity in the context of changing global values for local ecosystem services.

The equity framework helps to clarify the relevance of equity goals and that goals may incur costs. For example, a scheme that sets out to alleviate poverty through carbon forests can come with a cost of excluding access for some people (Penna-Firme and Brondizio, 2007). Understanding the parameters of equity demonstrates relevance of

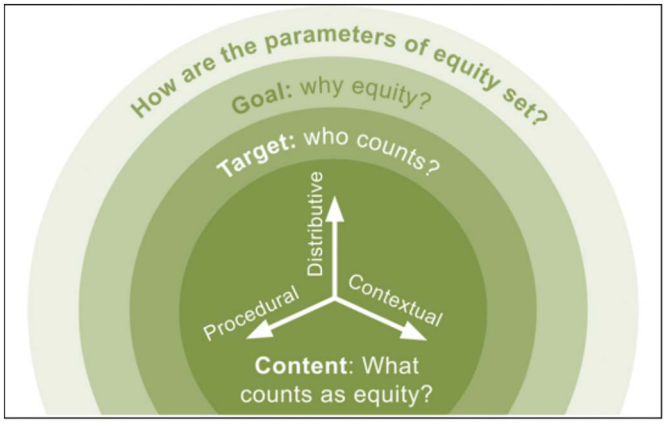

Fig. 1. Equity Framework (McDermott et al., 2013) goes here.