

## Linking notions of justice and project outcomes in carbon offset forestry projects: Insights from a comparative study in Uganda



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### ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, Uganda has emerged as a testing ground for the various modes of carbon forestry used in Africa. Carbon forestry initiatives in Uganda raise questions of justice, given that people with comparatively negligible carbon footprints are affected by land use changes initiated by the desire of wealthy people, firms, and countries to reduce their more extensive carbon footprints. This paper examines the notions of justice local people express in relation to two contrasting carbon forestry projects in Uganda, the Mount Elgon Uganda Wildlife Authority – Forests Absorbing Carbon Emissions (UWA-FACE) project and Trees for Global Benefit (TFGB). UWA-FACE closed down its initial operations at Mount Elgon after 10 years as a result of deep controversies and negative international publicity, whereas TFGB is regarded by many as an exemplary design for smallholder carbon forestry in Africa. Our approach builds upon an emerging strand in the literature, of empirical analyses of local people's notions of justice related to environmental interventions. The main contribution of the paper is to examine how people's notions of justice have influenced divergent project outcomes in these cases. In particular, we highlight the relative success of TFGB in the way it meets people's primarily distributional concerns, apparently without significantly challenging prevalent expectations of recognition or procedural justice. In contrast, we illuminate how controversy across the range of justice dimensions in UWA-FACE at Mount Elgon ultimately led to the project's decline. This paper therefore explores how attention to notions of justice can contribute to a fuller understanding of the reactions of people to carbon forestry projects, as well as the pathways and ultimate outcomes of such interventions.

### 1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, Uganda has emerged as a testing ground for the various modes of carbon forestry used in Africa. The extent of the country's entrance into this new domain of environmental governance is evidenced, for example, by Uganda being the origin of the fourth largest share of voluntary market forest carbon credits (Goldstein and Ruef, 2016), and hosting one of the world's earliest carbon offset projects (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2014). In carbon forestry projects, landowners or land rights-holders are paid using carbon finance to grow trees to sequester carbon for climate change mitigation. In general, voluntary carbon market funds are derived from comparatively wealthy individuals, firms, or organizations in the global north seeking to 'offset' their emissions with sequestration of emissions undertaken elsewhere. The presence of mitigation projects in the so-called 'Global South' thus

sets up interesting transnational dynamics that raise a number of challenging questions of environmental justice (Agarwal and Narain, 1991; Marino and Ribot, 2012; Leach and Scoones, 2015).

Analyses of impacts and outcomes of carbon forestry have demonstrated the diverse reactions of rural people to such interventions, and examined the interactions between these responses and project outcomes (Corbera and Brown, 2010; Mahanty et al., 2013; Paasgard and Chea, 2013). Two projects in Uganda exemplify the diverse reactions to and outcomes of carbon forestry in the Global South, namely: 'Trees for Global Benefit' (TFGB) in (former) Bushenyi District and the Uganda Wildlife Authority – Forests Absorbing Carbon Emissions (UWA-FACE) project at Mount Elgon National Park. The different paths of these projects illustrate important aspects of relative project 'success' and 'failure'<sup>1</sup> when studied comparatively. UWA-FACE at Mount Elgon largely closed down its initial operations after 10 years as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> We use these relative notions of project 'success' and 'failure' throughout the paper to characterise how these projects are presented by relevant actors and are commonly understood.

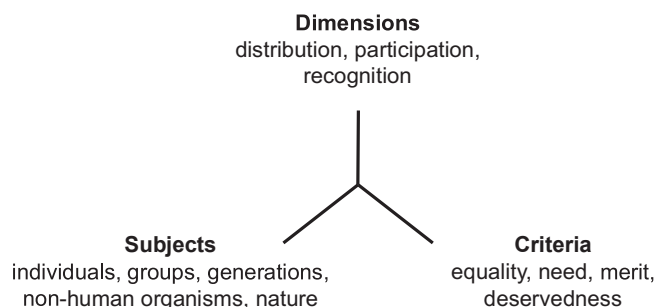


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework for characterizing notions of justice.  
Source: Sikor et al. (2014; 525).

controversies and negative international publicity (Lang and Byakola, 2006). In contrast, despite mixed – and, in some assessments, problematic – aspects (Fisher, 2012; Fisher, 2013), TFGB is often held up as an exemplary project design for smallholder carbon forestry in Africa, featuring in UNEP and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) study reports (TEEB, 2009; Solgaard et al., 2012). Moreover, the project was also fêted as the 2013 recipient of the SEED Award of UNEP/UNDP and IUCN.<sup>2</sup>

Existing explanations for carbon forestry project outcomes in Uganda have tended to focus upon comparing contemporary institutional arrangements (Jindal et al., 2008; Peskett et al., 2011; Reynolds, 2012; Tienhaara, 2012), and/or emphasising the historical and political-economic contexts upon which those arrangements are layered (Nel and Hill, 2013; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2014; Lyons and Westoby, 2014). The latter have implicitly and explicitly highlighted issues of environmental justice. However, this paper contributes to these existing analyses by prioritising empirically derived notions of justice amongst local people affected by two strongly differing interventions. We build on this to examine how these notions of justice influence people's reactions to the projects and the eventual project outcomes. Through explicit attention to empirically derived notions of justice across two contrasting cases, this paper seeks to contribute to an emerging strand in the literature (e.g. Sikor, 2013; Martin et al., 2014; He and Sikor, 2015). Because this focus on empirical notions of justice is comparatively recent, it has thus far been relatively absent from studies of carbon forestry. It is the contention of this paper that attention to rural people's ideas about justice, and experiences of (in)justice, in conjunction with historical and institutional analyses, allows a fuller understanding of the reactions of local people to carbon forestry projects and the outcomes of these projects. Our comparative examination of the influence of local notions of justice on the outcomes of the TFGB and UWA-FACE carbon forestry projects broadly illuminates the ways in which UWA-FACE ran counter to local ideas about what is just, leading to various forms of resistance that culminated in the project's decline. In contrast, TFGB is broadly compatible with many prevailing local ideas about justice, contributing to the project's relative success. More broadly, this analysis highlights how affected people's notions of environmental justice can have material implications for the success or otherwise of environmental interventions.

First, this paper details our empirical approach to justice. Second, we describe our methodology, followed by a presentation of brief case histories and descriptions of the institutional arrangements of each project that outline external assessments of justice. Our results in Section 5 onwards then link empirical notions of justice to local reactions and project outcomes.

## 2. Applying an empirical justice lens to two cases of carbon forestry in Uganda

The empirical environmental justice approach taken in this paper builds upon that of Martinez-Alier (2002); Schlosberg (2007); Walker (2012) and Sikor (2013), who have shown how multiple notions of justice inform environmental practices and politics in the Global South. In contrast to other analyses (e.g. Corbera et al., 2007; Mathur et al., 2014), these 'empirical' approaches do not assert or apply universal justice principles, for instance by starting from a theoretical position such as Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. As such, empirical justice analyses do not provide a template for external evaluations of justice, instead seeking to reflect perspectives that are qualitatively and inductively understood. Empirical approaches seek to understand the notions of justice asserted by people, and how some notions gain support and come to be considered legitimate. Such an approach does not essentialise prevailing conceptions of justice in any given time and place, but rather remains attentive to the ways in which both subjectivities and perceptions of justice are shaped and re-shaped over time in different historical and geographical conjunctures. The approach therefore accepts the inherent difficulty of weighing the relative validity of competing notions in a purportedly 'objective' or context-independent manner. Emphasis is instead placed upon understanding the notions of environmental justice that are important to people, and analyzing how these affect people's demands, activities, and most pressingly their reactions or 'responses from below' (e.g. Hall et al., 2015). Accordingly, the paper discusses wide-ranging notions of justice that were inductively elicited, and that extend over interdependent scales between the individual, community, and the global.

We draw upon a framework developed by Sikor et al. (2014) to make sense of diverse notions of justice. This does not pre-specify characterizations or notions of justice, but seeks to deal instead with 'actual (empirical)' (Sikor et al., 2014; p. 525) and historically and geographically situated notions of justice. For the purposes of comparison, however, the framework does highlight dimensions, subjects and criteria of justice (see Fig. 1), in relation to which inductively elicited notions of justice can be post-hoc categorized, described and related. Similarly to assist with post-hoc analysis, the framework incorporates Schlosberg's (2004) dimensions of distribution, participation, and recognition. Here, distributive justice refers to the ability of different actors to, for instance, enjoy environmental or economic benefits related to resources, or avoid environmental harms. Participation, or procedural justice (as we refer to it in this paper), relates to how decisions about environmental management are made. This includes attention to decision-making in terms of people's roles and the rules governing the process. Finally, recognition involves acknowledging the individual and collective identities of people, as well as their values and histories in ways that demand respect of social and cultural differences, including different visions of the relationship between humans and the environment (Martin et al., 2016).

In our usage, 'subjects' are the kinds of stakeholders considered to possess rights or bear responsibilities, assert demands for recognition and/or a role in decision-making, be deserving of care, or to bear responsibilities for an environmental process or change. 'Subjects' in this sense might therefore include rights-holders and duty bearers in rights terminology. Common examples of subjects in environmental interventions are the local poor, entire local populations, indigenous peoples, global society, future generations, groups with globally high resource consumption, non-human organisms, and 'nature'.

Criteria are decision-making guidelines that organize the relationship between subjects with reference to particular dimensions of justice. For example, distribution of natural resources among humans can be equal, needs- or merit-based, or dependent on the existing distribution of rights.

One aspect of this empirical approach to justice is that it makes no a priori assumptions about whether claims of justice are equally

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.seed.uno/awards/all/trees-for-global-benefit.html>.

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