



Interrogating scale in the REDD + assemblage in Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the relations and frictions that make up the institutional assemblage for the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD +) program in Papua New Guinea (PNG). By engaging with REDD + using assemblage-thinking – a theoretical orientation and method that focuses on relationality, heterogeneity and emergence – this paper interrogates the dominance of scalar discourses around climate change and environmental governance. While scalar discourses predefine categories and hierarchies (such as the ‘global,’ ‘national’ and ‘local’), assemblage-thinking offers a method to resist such framings and reimagine relations between power and spatiality. Through institutional ethnography and discourse analysis, this paper critically examines how scalar discourses become dominant and how they translate into environmental governance projects, specifically the Central Suau REDD + Pilot Project. By using assemblage-thinking to problematise scalar discourses, we can see how such discourses may reinscribe inequalities by defining arenas of governance that work to exclude certain groups.

1. Introduction

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD +) is a climate change mitigation mechanism that compensates developing countries for reducing emissions from deforestation through conservation, sustainable forest management and carbon stock enhancement. Since Papua New Guinea (PNG) first proposed the idea of REDD + to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2005, REDD + has become a leading approach to environmental governance. At COP21 in 2015, REDD + was cemented in the *Paris Agreement* (UNFCCC, 2015) which explicitly recognises the importance of results-based payments for emissions reductions from deforestation and forest degradation. Alongside this prominence in the international climate regime, REDD + has generated debates in academia (Milne and Adams, 2012; Mahanty et al., 2012; Dressler et al., 2012), with particular focus on the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of market-based mitigation measures (Miles, 2007; Laurance, 2008; Angelsen et al., 2012) and the equity dimensions for forest-dependent communities (Corbera et al., 2007; Long et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2011). To effectively reduce emissions, communities need to be recognised as key actors in decision-making to ensure benefits are distributed to people who rely on and manage the forests (Mathur et al., 2014). This paper contributes to these ongoing debates around REDD + by critically analysing the dominance of scalar discourses within the REDD + assemblage in PNG and how these discourses may reproduce

inequalities.

With significant forest resources, PNG has been a proponent of REDD + internationally and is a pilot country for the UN-REDD Programme. REDD + is just one expression of environmental governance in PNG’s long history of engagement with conservation and development initiatives (van Helden, 1998; Filer and Sekhan, 1998; West, 2006), but it has become a dominant approach to addressing climate change and deforestation. In a country with the third-largest tract of intact tropical rainforest in the world (Babon and Gowae, 2013), forests are important, not only for the environment and economy, but for the people who live with them and depend on them. REDD + has gained traction in PNG as over 95 percent of the country’s greenhouse gas emissions are from land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) (Babon and Gowae, 2013: iix). While there have been conflicting accounts of the causes of deforestation in PNG, commercial logging and subsistence agriculture are identified as the main drivers (Shearman et al., 2009; Filer et al., 2009). PNG is unique among REDD + countries as 97 percent of the land and almost all forests are owned by customary landowners (Filer et al., 2009). Furthermore, most of the population live in rural areas and rely on subsistence agriculture (Laurance et al., 2012). As such, forest-dependent communities play a central role in implementing REDD + projects which often involve changes in subsistence practices. It is within this context that the REDD + assemblage has been coming together in PNG.

Over the past decade, an array of institutions, policies and projects

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have been developed in PNG to implement REDD+. ¹ While the early years of REDD+ were marred by challenges related to governance, transparency and corruption (Melick, 2010; Pearse, 2012; Pettit, 2012), the PNG government have undertaken a range of REDD+ readiness activities, including the development of institutional frameworks, organisational capabilities and demonstration activities (Grussu et al., 2014; Filer, 2015). PNG is now in the second phase of REDD+ and has already established a *National REDD+ Strategy* (2017), safeguards and steps towards a national forest monitoring system and an investment plan to facilitate results based payments. A number of pilot projects have also been initiated, including the Central Suau REDD+ Pilot Project in the Milne Bay Province, which is a key demonstration site for REDD+. Developed by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the German aid agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (SPC/GIZ), the Central Suau REDD+ Pilot Project encompasses 64,000 ha of lowland forest owned by 110 clans with an estimated population of 7000 people (SPC/GIZ, 2015). The project was initially proposed as a Reduced Impact Logging (RIL) site, but after a feasibility study it was changed to a conservation project (SPC/GIZ, 2013). Subsistence agriculture is identified as a major cause of deforestation in this area so a conservation-based REDD+ project necessitates forest-dependent communities alter their livelihood practices. This paper uses the Central Suau REDD+ Pilot Project as a case study to examine and problematise the dominance of scalar discourses within the REDD+ assemblage in PNG, particularly how these discourses enable and constrain certain actors to engage in decision-making.

Scalar discourses – that is, ways of understanding the world that pre-define categories of scale and organise hierarchies, such as the ‘global,’ ‘national’ and ‘local’ – have come to dominate how we frame and address climate change and, thus, how we design, implement and evaluate environmental governance initiatives. For example, Sovacool and Brown (2009) have analysed climate change mitigation and adaptation in terms of scales of action and argued that global, national and local scales of action must be combined in order to achieve emission reductions and avoid dangerous climate change impacts. In terms of REDD+, scale has come to dominate the ways in which such projects are implemented and evaluated with literature focused on which scale REDD+ projects should operate at (Angelsen et al., 2008) and how benefits should be shared across scales (Angelsen et al., 2012; Luttrell et al., 2013). Recent research has explored the ‘global’ and ‘local’ dynamics, contestations and complexities of REDD+ projects (McGregor et al., 2015; Eilenberg, 2015; Asinyabi, 2015). More specifically, studies on REDD+ in PNG have criticized the government’s ‘national’ approach to REDD+ as heavily top-down and paternalistic (Chatterton, 2010; Pettit, 2012: 177), and called for greater attention to ‘local’ consultation and livelihood needs (Leggett and Lovell, 2012). However, this dominance of scalar discourses is problematic as it reifies categories and hierarchies which may mask underlying power relations and inequalities.

As such, this paper interrogates and challenges the dominance of scalar discourses by engaging with REDD+ as an assemblage. An assemblage is not an entity or product in itself; it is an ongoing process of relations coming together and frictions emerging. I adopt assemblage-thinking as a theoretical orientation and method that focuses on relationality, heterogeneity and emergence. Assemblages, as specific ways of arranging social relations, offer a way to analyse spatiality and power not as products or things, but as relational effects (Allen, 2003: 66). Rather than treating assemblage and scale as mutually-exclusive or contradictory concepts, I investigate how these approaches intersect and the power relations at play as certain discourses of spatiality become dominant.

To begin this task, I ask what relations and frictions make up the

¹ Babon’s (2014) thesis provides a comprehensive account of the political ecology of REDD+ in PNG.

institutional REDD+ assemblage in PNG. Relations and frictions are not just objects of investigation, but are also the means of inquiry to analyse REDD+ as an assemblage (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 171). Relations cannot exist prior or independently of their enactment and are made visible through practices like work and exchange (Strathern, 1988; Demian, 2000). In line with Tsing (2005), I use the concept of ‘friction’ to explore the awkward, unequal and unstable aspects of interconnection across difference. After tracing the relations and frictions, I question how scalar discourses hold together the REDD+ assemblage in PNG and how they have become dominant in policy-making processes. I then investigate how these scalar discourses have translated into the Central Suau REDD+ Pilot Project and point to the frictions and inequalities that may emerge as certain actors are excluded from decision-making. Finally, I consider how assemblage-thinking can be used to interrogate scalar discourses around climate change and environmental governance. But first, I review the theoretical literature that grounds assemblage-thinking and the politics of scale and detail the methodologies and approach used in this study, namely institutional ethnography and discourse analysis.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framings

2.1. Assemblage-thinking

Drawing on Actor-Network Theory, assemblage-thinking considers the ways that humans and non-humans are entangled in socio-natural configurations (Burnham et al., 2016). Following Li (2007), I define an assemblage as “an ongoing labour of bringing disparate elements together and forging connections between them.” Rather than pre-emptively defining the way the social world is made, assemblage-thinking focuses on telling a story that captures the multiple connections and relationships between sites and actors (Mol, 2010). Assemblages are relational, heterogeneous, partial, unstable and situated; they do not follow pre-determined scales, hierarchies or configurations of relations (Ong, 2005; Collier and Ong, 2005; Grossberg, 2014; Muller, 2015).

Assemblage-thinking is indebted to Deleuze and Guattari and their emphasis on relationality, multiplicity, emergence and resistance to totalizing categories (Deleuze, 1994; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Cockayne et al., 2017: 581). Deleuze and Guattari prompt us to map assemblages of complex processes, including multiple, interconnecting dimensions of the biological, climatological, economic, political, social and cultural (Bonta and Protevi, 2004: 15). Horowitz (2016) has drawn on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblage to examine encounters between large-scale conservation and indigenous activism in New Caledonia. West (2016) has also linked Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘becoming’ to recent moves towards multispecies ethnography in her research into conservation assemblages in PNG. Similarly, this paper engages with assemblage-thinking to interrogate relations of power and inequalities within the REDD+ assemblage in PNG. Within assemblage-thinking, power is a relational effect of social interaction, not a property of someone or something; it is only through the mediation of relations that power operates (Allen, 2003).

Importantly, assemblage-thinking rejects hierarchical discourses of scale where ‘local interactions’ are embedded in a wider and larger ‘global context’ (Latour, 2005: 176). As assemblage-thinking enables us to remain open to relations and avoid fixed and bounded categories (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Tsing, 2015), it is particularly useful for examining climate change and environmental governance, which are often closely intertwined with scalar discourses. Assemblage-thinking has been used to understand the multiple epistemologies through which climate change is known and experienced (Burnham et al., 2016). For example, Burnham et al. (2016) have adopted assemblage theory to explore how smallholder knowledge of climate change is structured through interactions with dynamic socio-natural assemblages.

Some effort has been made to analyse REDD+ as an assemblage

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