



Gender lessons for climate initiatives: A comparative study of REDD+ impacts on subjective wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Although REDD+ is primarily a mechanism for reducing carbon emissions from forests, concerns regarding social benefits, wellbeing and gender are increasingly part of its mandate. This is consistent with the Paris Declaration as well as SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. Critics have argued, however, that REDD+ design, both in policy and projects, does not take gender into account effectively, rather marginalizing women from decision making processes and exacerbating inequalities. Most of that research has been site specific or on single countries. This article uses data from a longitudinal study of subnational REDD+ initiatives in six countries to analyze their gendered impact on perceived wellbeing. Comparative research on subjective wellbeing was conducted at 62 villages participating in 16 REDD+ initiatives and 61 control villages at two periods in time, using a before-after-control-intervention (BACI) design. Focus groups with villagers (68% male) and women (100% female) permit a gendered comparison of definitions of wellbeing and outcomes of initiatives. The results highlight that while definitions of wellbeing overlapped between the two groups, almost half of the women's focus groups thought that having their own source of income was important. Outcomes regarding wellbeing change suggest that perceived wellbeing decreased in REDD+ villages both for villagers as a whole and for women, relative to control villages, but the decrease was much worse for women – a decrease that is significantly associated with living in a REDD+ village. These declines may be due to unrealized expectations for REDD+, combined with little attention to gender in REDD+ initiatives, in spite of an important portion (46%) of specific interventions that women view positively. These interventions provide insights into potential ways forward. Overall, however, REDD+ initiatives appear to be repeating past mistakes, with insufficient attention to gender equality and safeguarding women's rights. More effort needs to be paid to ensuring that gender is an integral part of future initiatives to combat climate change in rural communities.

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1. Introduction

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) is one approach for implementing the Paris Agreement to mitigate climate change through the land use sector. Like the various solutions for addressing global problems, there is much to learn

from the experience of first generation REDD+ initiatives that is relevant for future implementation of REDD+, as well as of other community-level mitigation initiatives that follow, at national and subnational levels. This is particularly true because of the resemblance of early REDD+ initiatives to prior conservation approaches (Angelsen et al., 2017), and the hope that such policies and programs can at least avoid similar errors and, ideally, break new ground.

Although the primary goal of REDD+ is to maintain and enhance forest carbon stocks, much of the framework surrounding REDD+ not only promotes but also requires attention to community

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wellbeing. For example, UNFCCC Cancun safeguard (e) refers to social benefits, and under the Warsaw Framework, countries will be required to have a national social and environmental safeguard information system in place, and regularly report on impacts, to be eligible for results-based payments (UNFCCC, 2014; Duchelle et al., 2017).

Women's wellbeing, in particular, has been emphasized in recent climate agreements, through the emphasis on a gender-responsive climate policy, including in the Paris accord (UNFCCC, 2016a)¹, and the 2016 Decision 21/CP.22 on Gender and Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2016b). In addition, goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals is to “achieve gender equity and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, 2015). These broad commitments remind us that gender should be an integral part of any global initiative.

Current research on gender and REDD+, mostly from case studies, demonstrates a failure to address gender in REDD+ policy and/or a negative impact of REDD+ on gender equity. Through comparative research across 16 initiatives in 6 countries, this article contributes to and goes beyond that research, examining whether these findings present a wider phenomenon. It analyzes the gendered impact of REDD+ initiatives on perceived wellbeing and uses detailed data on wellbeing and specific interventions to analyze shortcomings and propose alternatives. The findings presented here are based on the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) Global Comparative Study on REDD+ (GCS REDD+; <http://www.cifor.org/gcs/>). The research used a before-after-control-intervention research design, which permits clearer attribution of results to REDD+ (Sills et al., 2017). It is based primarily on the analysis of wellbeing change over time, comparing “village” focus groups (FG), which were 68% male, with women's focus groups (100% female) in 62 REDD+ intervention villages and 61 “control” villages (outside of REDD+ sites), at two different moments in time (2010/11 and 2013/14). Wellbeing, for the purpose of this article, is measured by self-perceptions, and is based on definitions of wellbeing developed at the time by the focus group participants themselves.

Analysis of definitions of subjective wellbeing in the study villages, such as good health, education and sufficient food to eat, suggest important overlap between the two types of focus groups, but there are also a few important differences, such as the importance of women's empowerment and income to the women's focus groups, and also “unity” and “harmony”.

The most striking results, however, emerge from the assessment of changes in wellbeing over time. We find, in REDD+ sites, that although there are some positive wellbeing changes, on average both types of focus groups see people as worse off in the period after initiative implementation. In contrast, the perception in control sites was of no net change or of improvement in wellbeing over the same period. Also, a larger number of women's FGs see women overall as worse off in comparison to the village FGs' perception of wellbeing. A regression model based on information from the focus groups and village averages finds that living in a REDD+ intervention village is significantly associated with the decline in women's perception of wellbeing.

With regard to the specific forest-related interventions implemented in REDD+ villages, women perceived almost half to have no effect on their wellbeing; nevertheless a similar portion was seen to have overall positive effects. Although this may appear contradictory, a single project intervention is only one of many things affecting overall wellbeing, and only one specific activity undertaken under the umbrella of a broader initiative. The results suggest that current attention to gender in REDD+ initiatives is

insufficient for addressing gender equality and safeguarding women's rights, but greater attention to wellbeing perceptions and the positive experiences of specific interventions may suggest a path forward.

2. Gender responsiveness and climate policy

Since 2007, when REDD was adopted in the Bali Action Plan, increasing attention has been given to gender in climate policy, related negotiations and other important global commitments. By 2015, the COP21 Paris agreement included the statement that “Parties should when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on ... gender equality [and] empowerment of women...” The specific emphasis of this policy was on participation in UNFCCC processes and “increasing awareness and support for the development and effective implementation of gender-responsive climate policy at the regional, national and local levels” (UNFCCC, 2016a).

The UNFCCC Women and Gender Constituency has built a strong coalition to support women's rights.² The Lima work programme on gender, established at COP20, was extended for three years at COP22 in Marrakech, and called for strengthening “gender-responsive climate policy” in all climate-related decisions, activities and implementation (UNFCCC, 2016b).

Gender responsiveness goes beyond being gender sensitive, or the “do no harm” principle, emphasizing instead the importance of overcoming historical biases (Aguilar, 2016: xxviii). With regard to climate and forests, gender-responsive activities should promote gender equality, women's empowerment, inclusion and equal opportunities for men and women to obtain benefits (Aguilar, 2016).³ Similarly, Kabeer (2010: 108) explains that “gender-transformative” interventions “ensure that women capture meaningful benefits and are empowered by the intervention process,” going beyond those that are “gender-blind” or only “gender-aware.”

Arguably, as a global initiative aimed at climate mitigation in the 21st century, REDD+ should be contributing to the transformational change advocated by the Sustainable Development Goals (called “Transforming Our World”) and affirmed by the Paris agreement. Yet implementers of early REDD+ projects and programs appear to have repeated the mistakes of prior conservation and development initiatives that sideline gender. There are not many gender analyses of national REDD+ readiness activities and subnational REDD+ initiatives to date, but so far the results are not heartening. The existing literature can be divided into two sets, those that focus more on national REDD+ policy processes and those that focus more on the impact of REDD+ initiatives on gender equality, although these sometimes overlap (for example, women's participation is relevant to both).

The policy studies have found little participation of women in meaningful ways and little understanding or capacity to develop gender strategies. In a study of national REDD+ policy in three countries in the Congo Basin (Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic), Peach Brown (2011) found that women had little participation in discussions on climate change or REDD+, including in the development of early policy documents. Nevertheless, in the DRC's Readiness Plan, there was assurance that gender dimensions would be addressed in future decisions related to community forest management and benefit distribution.

Pham, Mai, Moeliono, and Brockhaus (2016) studied the factors that influence women's participation in national decision making

¹ See also http://unfccc.int/gender_and_climate_change/items/9619.php.

² See <http://womensgenderclimate.org/>.

³ See also <http://genderandenvironment.org/2015/08/stop-being-so-sensitive-the-shift-from-gender-sensitive-to-gender-responsive-action/>.

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