



Barriers to equity in REDD + : Deficiencies in national interpretation processes constrain adaptation to context



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ABSTRACT

A national interpretation process involving diverse actors and interests is required to transform global environmental initiatives into policies appropriate to the national or subnational context. These processes of localising norms are critical spaces to formulate equitable pathways to environmental conservation, yet have received limited attention from policy makers and researchers. We explored national policy processes for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) in Uganda and Nepal from the perspectives of ‘intermediaries’, state and civil society actors at subnational and national scale who promote the interests of various stakeholder groups. Through think-tank meetings and semi-structured interviews with a range of intermediaries, we uncovered that REDD+ implementation processes in both countries are dominated by international actors, applying a demanding administrative agenda and restricting space for deliberation. Consequently, social aspects of policy were compartmentalised, reduced to technical exercises and local equity concerns inadequately addressed in national REDD+ policies. For example, social safeguards approaches were perceived to lack substantive guidelines to promote equity. Limited national political space to criticise government policy and lack of attention to relevant evidence further restricted ability to address entrenched injustices such as status inequalities faced by marginalised groups. Although civil society organisations choose to maintain official involvement with REDD+, many expressed a possibility they would oppose REDD+ in future, or serious doubts about its design and expected outcomes. Concerns centred on lack of recognition of indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ values, identities, practices and institutions such as customary tenure systems, alongside possible detrimental impacts to decentralised forest governance regimes, well established in Nepal and emerging in Uganda. We suggest features to be enshrined in REDD+ policy for adapting national interpretation processes to become more effective spaces for empowering diverse intermediaries to negotiate and influence localisation of international norms, ultimately to promote more equitable pathways to reduced deforestation and degradation.

1. Introduction

Transforming internationally-conceived environment and development goals into mechanisms and policies that are perceived to be fair, or equitable, by local people is a major challenge. The Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and Aichi Targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity are prominent global policy initiatives which explicitly target social equity as an important goal alongside environmental conservation. Social objectives of

environmental policy are essential for moral reasons, with the minimum goal being to avoid imposing risks and harms. The pursuit of equity (comprising three dimensions: distribution of costs and benefits, decision-making procedures and recognition of diverse identities and values) is also increasingly acknowledged as crucial to gain the widespread support and compliance required to attain ecological goals, and in many cases to address drivers of environmental degradation (McDermott et al., 2012b; Myers et al., 2018; Schlosberg 2013). To move towards implementation, global environmental initiatives

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commonly involve a process for in-country actors to transform the internationally-determined elements into policies acceptable to diverse stakeholders in the national or subnational context. We term these *national interpretation processes* (after Okereke, 2007; Peskett and Brockhaus, 2009) and pay attention to the debate and prioritisation of norms within them, or how people feel things should be and the way things should be done (Walker, 2012). A key role in national interpretation processes is played by ‘intermediaries’, comprising a range of subnational and national, state, civil society and private sector actors with diverse objectives, who influence whether and how international norms fit with local norms and practices (Acharya, 2004; Bratman, 2014; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Stovel and Shaw, 2012).

Although a crucial arena and scale of policy negotiation, national interpretation processes related to global environmental or climate governance have been the subject of limited scholarly attention. We use processes for debating and formulating approaches to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) in Nepal and Uganda as examples, and REDD+ Working Groups as the institutional loci for the actions of state and CSO intermediaries. While numerous studies have addressed which stakeholders participate in REDD+ discussions at national level, few have examined the nature of their participation and potential to influence the prioritisation and interpretation of equity-related norms (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012; Okereke and Dooley, 2010). Nepal and Uganda are both advanced in administrative processes and entering the REDD+ implementation phase, but represent different political environments or opportunity structures for intermediaries to function within. We explore the perspectives of actors involved in REDD+ working groups in Nepal and Uganda to highlight some of the factors enabling or restricting attention to and localisation of equity-related norms and the pursuit of diverse social interests.

1.1. REDD+ national interpretation processes: overlooked forums for achieving equitable REDD+

Approximately 70 countries are formulating approaches to REDD+, with many having begun or approaching implementation (Bayrak and Marafa, 2016). Since the inception of REDD in 2006, details of this emerging mechanism have been subject to ongoing negotiation in annual United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings, with notable progress reached through the 2013 Warsaw Framework and the 2010 Cancun safeguards (Arhin, 2014). Due to the potentially profound impacts of changes in forest governance not only on forests but also on people living in or near forests, and the importance of the support of such people in determining environmental outcomes (Dawson et al., 2017; Pascual et al., 2017), equity concerns have increasingly formed part of REDD+ negotiations. Items such as benefit sharing criteria and social safeguards, including full and effective participation, transparency and respect for local knowledge and rights have therefore entered international and national policy debates (Krause and Nielsen, 2014; Okereke and Dooley, 2010; Turnhout et al., 2016). The ‘full and effective’ participation (both continual and with ability to influence decision-making) of non-state actors, including indigenous peoples, local communities, various social groups and the civil society groups representing them, in REDD+ readiness and implementation stages is considered essential for the legitimacy and effective design of REDD+, and is included as a ‘safeguard’ principle under both UN-REDD and the World Bank Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) (Chhatre et al., 2012). Despite safeguards, the practical means to avoid harm or ensure positive outcomes for indigenous people, local communities and vulnerable people is still a major area of contention (Evans et al., 2014; McDermott et al., 2012a; Suissey, 2017). Indeed, early impacts of REDD+ type projects suggest that negative impacts are likely to be experienced by some local inhabitants, through limited participation, disruption of livelihoods, institutions and social systems, impacts on food security and land tenure, with powerful

actors capturing most of the benefits (Bayrak and Marafa, 2016).

REDD+ policies must be debated at national and subnational level to support formulation of policies compatible with existing regulatory frameworks, suitable for the promotion of effective emission reductions and to uphold relevant principles of equity at the relevant scale of implementation (Brockhaus and Di Gregorio, 2014). The importance of national interpretation processes is recognised by the UN and other international agencies: “*The UN-REDD Programme supports nationally led REDD+ processes and promotes the informed and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders, including indigenous peoples and other forest-dependent communities.*” (<http://www.un-redd.org/>, accessed 21/11/16). Yet, beyond considerations of which stakeholders are represented on REDD+ committees and cursory attention to the relative power of civil society organisations, the dynamics of REDD+ national processes and their implications for local outcomes have received limited critical scrutiny by researchers or policymakers (Bastakoti and Davidsen, 2017; Corbera and Schroeder, 2011; Ravikumar et al., 2015). There are several reasons to consider whether national interpretation processes may address local equity concerns. Firstly, although commonly assumed nationally-led processes, they include extensive involvement of international organisations (such as the World Bank, UN and donor agencies (Brockhaus et al., 2014)). Second, the processes are often guided by extensive, externally-designed administrative procedures requiring detailed, resource-intensive consideration of technical issues, notably monitoring, reporting and verification (Ravikumar et al., 2015; Romijn et al., 2015). As a result, instruments for addressing equity, such as social safeguards, are commonly reduced to administrative monitoring and reporting exercises rather than meaningful debates about the politics of justice within implementing countries (Krause and Nielsen, 2014; Myers et al., 2018; Schroeder and McDermott, 2014). Through this technocratic lens, negotiations can become detached from wider national issues regarding land and forests, leading to weak integration with other sectors and relevant drivers of change (Corbera and Schroeder, 2011). Finally, the political space within implementing countries may be dominated by the state or other political actors such that the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs) to be critical or raise questions of rights and justice for marginalised groups is often constrained (Chhatre et al., 2012; Mason, 2010; Thompson et al., 2011). Host government repercussions against CSOs for voicing dissent can be severe, and such expression of state power can shape both the composition and functioning of civil society (Scholte, 2011).

2. Methodology

2.1. Case studies

Nepal and Uganda form illustrative case studies for understanding processes of national interpretation. Both countries have participated in REDD+ readiness activities since 2009 and are progressing towards implementation. Both have high levels of rural poverty and livelihood dependence on natural resources, which are particularly acute among minority social and ethnic groups. Dalits and indigenous people together make up approximately half of Nepal’s population and their participation in, and impacts of policy upon them, are key issues in land and forest governance (Paudel and Vedeld, 2015). Nepal’s forest sector implemented community-based forest management in the late 1970s with 20% of forests now under such governance (Larson et al., 2010). In contrast, in Uganda forest governance comes under state control to a large extent but with extensive customary tenure prevailing, leading to sometimes overlapping management regimes (Naughton-Treves et al., 2011). There are several marginalised social or ethnic groups inhabiting forests or land adjacent to them, including the Batwa and Benet, who have suffered severe impacts of forest conservation in Uganda and who may be considered to justify specific attention within the REDD+ process (Cavanagh, 2012). Civil society is active in both countries but freedom of expression is constrained or unequal between social groups

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