



# Competing discourses on REDD +: Global debates versus the first Indian REDD + project

Marjanneke J. Vijge \*



*Environmental Policy Group, Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University & Research Centre, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands*

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes three of the most contentious scholarly and political debates regarding REDD +, focusing on 1) what REDD + should achieve; 2) who should monitor REDD + outcomes; and 3) how REDD + should be financed. In analyzing these, the article conceptualizes three sets of storylines and assesses which of the identified storylines resonate in the first Indian REDD + project, focusing on both stakeholders' views and project design. The three identified questions do not give rise to contentious debates among stakeholders of the REDD + project. Contrasting views on REDD + found in scholarly and political debates – such as carbon versus non-carbon objectives, authority of technical experts versus local communities, and market versus fund-based approaches – are not prevalent among project stakeholders, who believe that different approaches to REDD + can be combined and can even reinforce each other. Project stakeholders prefer non-carbon benefits as the project's main objective to be monitored jointly by experts and local communities, and favor a mix of fund- and market-based approaches. This is also reflected in the project design. The conclusion reflects on the insights that the multi-level discourse analysis in this article generated, including for REDD + in general.

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## 1. Introduction

When Reducing Emissions from Deforestation (RED) was first introduced within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2005, RED was envisioned as a relatively simple financing mechanism to compensate developing countries for reducing their forest-related carbon emissions, thereby simultaneously mitigating climate change and reducing deforestation. During subsequent years, however, the scope of this mechanism was significantly broadened and now includes forest degradation (the second D in REDD), the plus-activities (sustainable management of forests, conservation of forest carbon stocks and enhancement of forest carbon stocks), and safeguard provisions to prevent negative impacts on so-called 'non-carbon' values (such as local livelihoods, security of land tenure, biodiversity conservation, and 'good governance'). Though general guidelines on how to operationalize REDD + have now been agreed upon by the UNFCCC, REDD + is still heavily debated by politicians and scholars alike. In the meantime, different understandings of what constitutes REDD + are being operationalized into various REDD + policies and practices at the global, national and project level (see also Gupta et al., 2015). A large body of literature is concerned with assessing or enhancing the effectiveness of these REDD + policies and practices. Yet competing discourses regarding what REDD + should achieve in the first place and how it should be designed remain severely understudied,

especially so at project level (for exceptions, see e.g. Evans et al., 2014; Lansing, 2010, 2012, 2013; Somorin et al., 2012; Mustalahti et al., 2012). This is nevertheless an important area of study, since such discourses likely affect the direction that REDD + policies and practices (will) take.

This article aims to fill this gap in scholarly literature. My first aim is to bring conceptual clarity to the myriad scholarly and political debates around REDD + by conceptualizing a range of storylines within three of the most heated debates.<sup>1</sup> As I will show, this conceptualization can be used as a framework to analyze how REDD + is being framed in specific instances. In applying this framework to a case study of the first Indian REDD + project, my second aim is to assess which of the identified storylines are espoused by the project's stakeholders, and which storylines are reflected in the design of the project. By carrying out a multi-level discourse analysis, the article compares storylines commonly used in scholarly and political debates with storylines at the project implementation level. This not only provides insights into the range of existing storylines regarding REDD +, but also into their relevance in a specific case of REDD + implementation.

The outline of this article is as follows: Section 2 presents the case study, methodology, and theoretical approach of the article. Section 3 identifies three contentious debates regarding REDD + and conceptualizes three storylines in each of these debates. Section 4 assesses which of

\* Tel.: +31 317483347.

E-mail address: [marjanneke.vijge@wur.nl](mailto:marjanneke.vijge@wur.nl).

<sup>1</sup> In this article I only focus on discourses around REDD +, thereby excluding discourses that are opposing the very idea of REDD +, for example the "no-REDD" storyline (see e.g. McDermott et al., 2012, p. 70).

these storylines are espoused by project stakeholders, and which ones are reflected in the design of the first Indian REDD + project. Section 5 reflects on the insights that the multi-level discourse analysis in this article generated, including for REDD + in general.

## 2. Case study and methodology

### 2.1. Case study of the first REDD + project in India

This article draws on a case study of the first REDD + project in India: the Khasi hills community REDD + project. The project is located in the sub-watershed of the Umiam river in the Khasi hills of Meghalaya, the North-East of India, and covers an area of 27,139 ha, comprising 62 villages. The area has a high rate of deforestation caused by forest fires, aridization and erosion (exacerbated by climate change), illegal logging, stone quarrying, intensive grazing and agricultural expansion, charcoal making and unsustainable fuel wood collection. Based on experiences with a pilot project for Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) from 2005 to 2009, indigenous Khasi communities, now organized in the Synjuk Welfare Society, and the US-based non-governmental organization Community Forestry International (CFI) decided to explore the potential to generate additional financial benefits from carbon sequestration (PDD, 2012; Poffenberger, 2012). CFI provides technical support in the project design, implementation and monitoring of the project, including marketing support and fund-raising. Bioclimate, a UK-based not-for-profit technical support company, and Plan Vivo, a UK-based accreditation scheme for Payment for Ecosystem Services projects, guided the development of the Project Design Document and the project's validation based on the Plan Vivo standard (Plan Vivo, 2015; Interview D3<sup>2</sup>). In March 2013 the project was certified by Plan Vivo in order to sell the generated carbon credits on the private voluntary carbon market. Initially, two brokers were commissioned to find buyers for the ex-post sale of the project's carbon credits: the Sweden-based U&We, holding around 4900 tons of carbon from the project, and the UK-based Clevel, holding around 450 tons (PDD, 2012; Interview B1). More recently, three additional brokers became involved in selling the project's credits: Carbon Offsets To Alleviate Poverty (COTAP), WeForest and Emergent Ventures (EVI).<sup>3</sup>

The Khasi hills REDD + project initiates activities aimed at forest restoration, reforestation, and reduction of pressure on existing forests, including assisted natural regeneration, regulations on forest use, control and prevention of forest fires, soil and water conservation, introduction of sustainable farming systems, and use of fuel-efficient stoves (Poffenberger, 2012). The Synjuk Welfare Society, hereafter the Synjuk, is a local non-governmental organization that guides the implementation of the project. It was set up by ten indigenous governments, the Hima, to oversee the planning and enforcement of the project, and coordinate its strategy. Community Facilitators currently guide Local Working Committees in each Hima to develop local natural resource management and livelihood plans. Youth volunteers and extension workers help implementing the project's activities in each village. By building the capacity of Self-Help Groups and Farmers' clubs, the Synjuk helps to establish small enterprises, providing people in the project area with alternative livelihood options that reduce pressure on forests (PDD, 2012; Poffenberger, 2012; Interview B1).

The Khasi hills community REDD + project is rather unique in the context of implementing REDD + in India, due in part to the specific governance arrangements of India's North-Eastern states. Being governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution,

Autonomous District Councils are allowed to manage the natural resources in their districts according to customary practices. The Indian national government is not involved in the Khasi hills REDD + project, but merely follows developments in order to fine-tune its national REDD + strategy (see also Vijge and Gupta, 2014).

### 2.2. Methodology

This article draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods. A review of primary and secondary literature informed the analysis of scholarly and political debates around REDD +, drawing in part on previous literature reviews in which the author was involved (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2012a, 2012b; Gupta et al., 2012). The discourse analysis at the project level was informed by interviews with nearly fifty stakeholders – i.e. active participants<sup>4</sup> – of the project, with several key stakeholders being interviewed more than once (see the Appendix A for a list of interviewees). During a field visit to the Khasi hills REDD + project from November 2013 to January 2014 a total of 42 stakeholders were interviewed. These included 3 project advisors from Indian governmental and non-governmental organizations; 15 actors who were involved in setting up the project – Synjuk Community Facilitators and Synjuk staff members – henceforth called 'local project managers'; and 24 actors who became involved only after the project had been set up – youth volunteers, extension workers, members of the Local Working Committees, village headmen, and members of Self-Help Groups and Farmers' clubs – henceforth called 'local project participants'. Existing contacts were used to select interviewees at the project level, using a snowball method. Interviewees were also chosen to represent different geographical regions within the project area, thereby covering regions with distinct opportunities and challenges to project implementation. The 5 interviewed stakeholders operating at the global level included representatives of Plan Vivo, Community Forestry International, U&We, and Bioclimate. They were interviewed during a Plan Vivo stakeholder meeting in Edinburgh in October 2013, followed by several Skype interviews.

The interviews consisted of two rounds. A first round of semi-structured to open interviews yielded information about stakeholders' views regarding the desired objectives and current design of the REDD + project. In a second round of more quantitative interviews, interviewees were asked to rate their (dis)agreement with a set of statements that were drawn from a preliminary analysis of the first round of interviews. Such an approach allowed for a systematic analysis of the interviewees' views on a set of statements which were based on interviewees' views rather than on the researcher's own interpretations. The different levels of understanding among stakeholders posed a challenge to systematically comparing stakeholders' views. Follow-up questions on the questionnaires not only yielded additional qualitative data on stakeholders' discourses regarding questionnaire statements, but also helped to assess stakeholders' level of understanding of these statements.

In addition to the interviews, analyses of primary documents, such as mission and vision statements, project documents and annual reports yielded information regarding the views of involved organizations on REDD +, as well as reflection of such views in project design.

### 2.3. Theoretical approach: discourse analysis

This article employs a discursive approach to analyzing REDD + (Hajer, 1995; Sharp and Richardson, 2001). I use the definition of discourse by Hajer: "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to (...) phenomena, and which is produced and

<sup>2</sup> Interview references distinguish between local project participants (A), local project managers (B), project advisors (C), and stakeholders at the global level (D). See Section 2.2 for an explanation of these categories and the appendix for a list of interviewees per category.

<sup>3</sup> Since these brokers became involved in the project at a much later stage and only after the research had been completed, their role in and views on the project are not further discussed in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Since the research is concerned with views among involved actors on the REDD + project rather than with a complete discourse analysis around the REDD + project among inhabitants of the Khasi hills, the interviews excluded people who were not involved in the project.

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