



REDD+, Governance, and Community Forestry

Highlights from the Forest Governance Learning Group Asia Experts' Meeting



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Introduction



As the mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) evolves at international, national, and sub-national levels, it opens discussion on how lessons from community forestry might be applied to further its development. While there is growing recognition that community forestry has great potential to contribute in this context, its complementarities as well as its shortcomings must be further explored and understood.

In order to examine the relationship between community forestry and REDD+, the Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG), with support from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), REDD-Net, the Climate Development and Knowledge Network (CDKN), the Norad Grassroots Capacity Building Project for REDD+, and RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests, invited 12 experts from India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Vietnam, and the UN-REDD Programme to convene in Bangkok to reflect on emerging issues. This booklet summarizes their responses to key questions and related thoughts and concerns, concluding with recommendations for policy-makers.

We would like to thank the experts for their contributions, in addition to Ms. Regan Suzuki, Dr. Yurdi Yasmi, Dr. Chandra Silori, Ms. Toral Patel, Ms. Simone Frick, and Dr. David Gritten for their work in organizing the meeting and in synthesizing the experts' inputs in this publication.

Key questions



- Q1** What is the potential for community forestry to contribute to REDD+?
- Q2** How can community forestry approaches strengthen benefits to local communities under REDD+?
- Q3** Can REDD+ promote and strengthen community forestry?
- Q4** Does REDD+ pose risks to community forestry?
- Q5** How can the rights and interests of local communities and indigenous peoples be ensured in the context of REDD+?
- Q6** What capacities already exist at the community level that can contribute to REDD+ implementation? What capacities must be built?
- Q7** How can REDD+ build upon governance lessons from community forestry?
- Q8** What are the key lessons from community forestry that need to be communicated and integrated into REDD+?
- Q9** What can government agencies do to ensure that REDD+ implementation benefits local communities?

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Q1

What is the potential for community forestry to contribute to REDD+?



“It is impossible to achieve the goals and aims of REDD+ if communities are not involved.”

Danang Kuncara Sakti

“There is a need to change the mindset of governments, so that local communities become the subject, not only the object, of forest management and REDD+.”

Yani Septiani

There are significant variations in the scope of, and legislative support for, community forestry¹ across Asia as the situation in each country is highly context-specific. For instance, formal recognition of community forestry remains elusive or contested in countries such as Indonesia, Lao PDR, and Thailand. In other countries, unclear or contradictory legislation juxtaposed by weak enforcement remain major barriers to the commitment of local and sometimes national governments to community forestry. Where regulations, particularly those developed by local people, and community forestry institutions are strong, they can be instrumental in supporting REDD+.

Community forestry in its different forms has long been recognized as an effective approach to the sustainable management of forest resources. In particular, it has provided an important basis for increasing capacities and participation in decision-making processes for communities living in and around forests. The active involvement of forest-dependent communities is fundamental to implementing REDD+ effectively. Without it, the drivers and underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation cannot be fully addressed.

Community forestry can provide a structure for the planning and implementation of REDD+ throughout the region. Existing mechanisms for benefit sharing under community forestry can offer a model for the distribution of benefits from REDD+. Furthermore, community forestry supports the process for ensuring tenure rights, which are essential for local communities to derive maximum benefits and to safeguard their interests under REDD+.

¹ RECOFTC defines community forestry as a practice that includes all aspects, initiatives, sciences, policies, institutions, and processes that are intended to increase the role of local people in governing and managing forest resources. It consists of informal, customary and indigenous, and formal or government-led initiatives. Community forestry covers social, economic, and conservation dimensions in a range of activities including indigenous management of sacred sites of cultural importance, small-scale forest-based enterprises, forestry outgrower schemes, company-community partnerships, and decentralized and devolved forest management.

Q2

How can community forestry approaches strengthen benefits to local communities under REDD+?



Community forestry supplies a framework through which REDD+ can deliver a range of benefits to forest-dependent communities. While acknowledging the instrumental role of local communities in forest management, community forestry can help to ensure that the benefits of REDD+ reach those whose livelihoods are most dependent on the maintenance of healthy forests and the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded forests.

Key tenets of community forestry include: securing tenure and access rights; supporting decentralized and participatory governance; realizing sustainable forest management through jointly developed management plans; providing equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms; and developing sustainable livelihoods and forest-based enterprises. In some countries, such innovative approaches have already begun to be integrated in the national REDD+ plans, for example in the Philippines National REDD-Plus Strategy. In many other countries, however, the provision of legislation that supports well-defined tenurial arrangements, strong governance, and fair benefit-sharing mechanisms remains a significant challenge. In Nepal, the close involvement of the Federation of Community Forestry Users in REDD+ planning and development has been conducive in this respect, but innovative approaches to ensure fair benefit sharing from the REDD+ mechanism are still needed. Clear benefit-sharing arrangements under the Joint Forest Management² system in India offer several models for delivering REDD+ benefits to local communities. In the case of Indonesia, policy direction and forest management have increasingly shifted from the pre-reform era state-based model, in which timber use was large-scale, to a community-based model.

Acceptance of community forestry at the policy level does not directly translate into improved local realities. In many countries, cross-sectoral harmonization of legislation and strengthened enforcement of regulations are urgently needed for community forestry to fulfill its promise of delivering benefits to local communities. The same would apply to any initiatives under REDD+.

"If there is an absence of community forestry approaches in REDD+ then there will be a big gap in terms of benefits for communities."

Marlea Munez

"REDD+ will only be successful if local people are not hungry."

Nguyen Duc Tam

² JFM was considered to be a form of community forestry for this meeting, understanding that the Government of India does not recognize it as such.



Q3

Can REDD+ promote and strengthen community forestry?

Although REDD+ is accompanied by multiple risks, it can help promote and strengthen community forestry. If it is developed and implemented so that it is inclusive and rights-based, it may help to improve multi-stakeholder participation and the engagement of marginalized groups in forest management. Specifically, the principles of Free Prior and Informed Consent, if applied beyond their formally recognized constituency of indigenous peoples, can provide a robust framework for ensuring participation, transparency, and accountability.

However, the experts had mixed views on the possible impacts of REDD+ on devolved forest management. On the one hand, REDD+ can accelerate decentralization of forest management by building on existing community forestry institutions. Local governance structures would be further strengthened by increased management functions, creating greater avenues of engagement with international decision-making processes for REDD+. On the other hand, the development of REDD+ has raised concerns about recentralization. The potentially large amounts of funding may create powerful incentives for increased state involvement in forest management.

The social and environmental safeguards of REDD+, as stipulated in Annex I of the Cancun Agreement, can contribute to community forestry by ensuring the rights of local communities. According to the Agreement, national governments must articulate mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on a series of wide-ranging safeguards. In conjunction with consultation of local communities, diligent adherence to these safeguards can work towards protecting and enhancing local rights.

"The role of FGLG Indonesia is to look at community forestry where it is working and show that it can contribute to the objectives of REDD+."

Budhita Kismadi



Q4

Does REDD+ pose risks to community forestry?

There are widespread concerns that a poorly designed and implemented REDD+ mechanism will lead to a backlash against community forestry. REDD+ may catalyze conflict escalation, especially between communities and the government. Where land-use rights are not safeguarded and if local communities are not actively engaged in REDD+, national governments may be tempted to reconsolidate control over previously devolved forests. Apart from the potentially negative implications this would have for local communities' rights, livelihoods, and practices, the potential recentralization of forest management through REDD+ would undermine the viability of the '+'³ in REDD+ by marginalizing the local stakeholders who play a crucial role in its success.

Information on REDD+ is another potential area of conflict. Confusing and at times contradictory messages run the risk of raising overly optimistic expectations. A particular risk identified by the experts is a disproportionate emphasis on conservation of carbon stocks. Conservation-oriented management must be balanced with careful consideration of forest-dependent people's access and use of forest resources, in addition to broader issues of food security and social justice. The persistent ambiguity around the real costs and benefits of REDD+ to local communities, national governments, and other stakeholders further increases the risk of conflict. Currently, it is not well understood that REDD+ is a performance-based program that may not bring direct benefits to all individuals within participating communities.

Given its conceptual nature and technical complexities, the lack of clarity surrounding REDD+ is hardly surprising. The result is a proliferation of assumptions, unjustified expectations, misunderstandings, and genuine anxiety. In this environment, the absence or delay of real benefits to communities could have disastrous impacts for the future of REDD+. Finally, the need for specialized knowledge and technical skills further risks undermining the local forest stakeholders who have adeptly managed forests for decades.

"REDD+ is an opportunity, but also it could be a trap if we do not do it correctly."

Nguyen Quang Tan

"If we convey this REDD+ concept unclearly, then we are heading for conflict with local communities."

Bambang Supriyanto

³ The plus sign in REDD+ refers to sustainable management of forests, conservation, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

Q5

How can the rights and interests of local communities and indigenous peoples be ensured in the context of REDD+?



“One way to ensure that local communities are part of the planning and execution of REDD+ is the creation of a multi-stakeholder council.”

Marlea Munez

Local communities and indigenous groups must be well informed and actively engaged throughout the planning, implementation, and monitoring of REDD+. To this end, the establishment of multi-stakeholder processes and oversight measures will be crucial. This will help to ensure credibility and transparency in REDD+ and safeguard against the possible exclusion of marginalized groups.

The REDD+ consultation process must include women and youth groups as well as caste- and class-based representatives among other key stakeholders. While full representation of the most vulnerable stakeholders is an ongoing challenge, it is crucial to incorporate as many voices as possible into the discourse around REDD+ to maximize equity and effectiveness.

Policies must be clear and consistent, ensuring that the rights and interests of local communities are adequately upheld. Vague or ambiguous policies lead to an environment of uncertainty and insecurity, with the unintended effect of undermining the rights of local communities. Logging bans throughout the region are a classic example of how well-meaning, but poorly-informed policy can be damaging to key stakeholders and ultimately lead to unintentional and adverse impacts.

Q6

What capacities already exist at the community level that can contribute to REDD+ implementation? What capacities must be built?



Local capacity to contribute to REDD+ is significant, but there are considerable barriers to its full realization.

In community-managed forests, existing skill sets may help to facilitate REDD+ implementation, for example carbon monitoring, protection, rehabilitation, and negotiation. In Andhra Pradesh, India, the Vanasamakhyā⁴ system provides a robust performance index consisting of social, institutional, livelihood, gender, and forest development parameters. Similarly, the current piloting of community carbon accounting methods is an important step in recognizing and integrating existing local skill sets. Nonetheless, the incorporation of these local knowledge systems into national and global REDD+ frameworks will continue to be a key challenge. Interventions that fail to acknowledge these skills and to validate local contributions may be counterproductive, resulting in the weakening of commitment to REDD+ and possibly even efforts to intentionally undermine it.

While REDD+ ideally reinforces local capacity to sustainably manage forests, it may also create gaps with its highly technical demands. Some local communities may lack capacity for monitoring, reporting, and verification requirements and their associated tools and technologies. In Andhra Pradesh, experts have identified the need to provide extensive training in measuring, reporting, and verification methodologies and GPS technologies as a top priority.

"Many communities have the capacity to conduct a forest inventory. However, technical government requirements create major complications and delays."

Harisharan Luintel

"To benefit from the skills and knowledge of local communities, linkages between community forestry institutions and local governance institutions need to be fostered."

D. Suryakumari

⁴ Vanasamakhyā or Vana Samrakshana Samithis is a state-level federation of village-level forest protection committees.

Q7

How can REDD+ build upon governance lessons from community forestry?



“All governance lessons in community forestry can be applied in REDD+.”

Nguyen Quang Tan

“We have a lot to learn from traditional institutions, as well as from the numerous examples of misgovernance.”

Sanjay Upadhyay

Experience from community forestry has highlighted the diversity and complexity of forest management. Tenure rights and benefit-sharing arrangements can be fraught with ambiguity and contention, thereby precluding the effectiveness of simplistic, top-down solutions. On the other hand, it has underlined the importance of participation in decision-making processes, which help shape comparatively more effective bottom-up approaches. Elite capture of processes and benefits remains a deep-rooted challenge across the region. The best response appears to be broad-based community participation in decision-making processes.

In parallel with the traditional pillars of governance, it is important to mainstream gender and other rights-based considerations. Assuming that regulatory and institutional frameworks, planning and decision-making processes, and eventual implementation will be gender-responsive or rights-based is insufficient: explicit safeguards are necessary.

Lack of accountability and weak enforcement of legislation are common governance issues throughout much of the region. Accordingly, transparent and accountable governance structures need to be prioritized, particularly by the international donor community. Simple and effective procedures and processes must be built into legal frameworks to ensure that these principles of good governance are upheld.

Q8

What are the key lessons from community forestry that need to be communicated and integrated into REDD+?



Lessons building upon the successes and shortcomings of community forestry will be instrumental in REDD+ development. While community forestry has its limitations, one recurring theme stands out over time: local communities have proven their ability to sustainably and equitably manage forests.

Admittedly, the question of which structure best supports community forestry remains unresolved and highly context-dependent. Legislative frameworks for community forestry have alternatively been viewed as either rigid barriers to progress – often irrelevant and obsolete – or supportive conduits for community development. In Vietnam, for example, community forestry has progressed impressively since the government handed over forestlands to local communities in 1989, despite the lack of formal policy support or mechanisms. Conversely in India, the most successful examples of community forestry are built on solid legal foundations of clearly defined and enforced rights.

Community forestry continues to grapple with the fundamental issues of social hierarchy and internal group governance, which REDD+ will inevitably have to confront. Many states have a deeply ingrained view of forest resources as a source of revenue. Meanwhile, many local communities rely on forests for their livelihoods. If the opportunity costs of leaving forests intact are too high, then REDD+ incentives can do little to challenge practices that lead to deforestation and forest degradation.

“We have learned that local people can manage the forests very well.”

Bao Huy

“Community forestry is not a silver bullet, there are numerous examples of successes, but also of failure, we must learn from all of these.”

Thomas Enters

Q9

What can government agencies do to ensure that REDD+ implementation benefits local communities?



“Arbitrary policy changes as well as complicated bureaucratic procedures lead to insecurity.”

Thomas Enters

The experts identified two main roles for the government in REDD+ implementation: as a coordinator and as a facilitator. As a coordinator, it needs to develop and enhance intersectoral dialogue to ensure cooperation among agencies. Likewise, it must encourage multi-stakeholder dialogue across and between local and national levels to improve the consultation process. This will be particularly essential in the process of determining rights and responsibilities of various actors and in synchronizing national laws.

As a facilitator, the government should identify and remove barriers to open and transparent involvement in the development of national REDD+ programs. For instance, it should encourage participation through stakeholder capacity building, ensuring clear communication, sharing of information, and providing a strong regulatory framework. It must also provide a recourse mechanism, in addition to ensuring effective governance and enforcing the rule of law. Only then will REDD+ be able to tackle deep-rooted issues such as corruption as well as a lack of transparency and accountability.

Recommendations

- Clear forest tenure rights are central to the potential success of REDD+. In many countries, forest tenure reform will be necessary to ensure that local communities have clear rights to the land and/or forests.
- REDD+ depends on the inclusion and active participation of local communities. Accordingly, policy-makers must enact formal procedures that ensure community involvement.
- Capacity-building programs must take into account communities' existing skills and be demand-driven. This tailored approach will help to ensure that local stakeholders will have the skills and knowledge required to exercise their rights, fulfill their responsibilities, and maximize benefits under REDD+.
- REDD+ can build on the foundations of community forestry. Where community forestry exists, policy-makers must align the implementation of REDD+ with community forestry principles, the benefits of which have already been demonstrated.
- Ambiguity and contradictions in the policies and actions of government institutions threaten the rights of local communities. Intersectoral coordination among government agencies and harmonization and streamlining of legislation are crucial.
- A transparent decision-making process, from design to implementation and monitoring, is fundamental to the success of REDD+. The process must ensure that the interests of local and often vulnerable communities are represented and duly considered.
- A clearly defined mechanism that shares benefits both vertically and horizontally must be implemented. The processes involved must be done in a transparent, accountable, fair, and equitable manner.
- Confusion regarding the benefits of REDD+ underlines the importance of clear and consistent communications in all stages of designing, implementing, and monitoring of REDD+ mechanisms.









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