

Climate Justice and REDD+: Voices of Community Forest Users

White Paper

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Abstract

A three-day forum conducted in Pokhara during August 16-18, 2019 involving 26 members of community forest user groups (CFUGs) and Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) from 14 districts has revealed that while the desire of forest users to benefit from REDD+ projects is strong, knowledge of how REDD+ specifically and carbon trading more generally operates in the local, national, and international contexts is weak in the local context. There is high demand for such knowledge to be disseminated widely in areas where REDD+ projects are to be ushered in. Some of this knowledge has been shared through workshops by government and non-governmental organizations, but the recipients of such training and education tend to be higher level officials rather than community forest users working at the grassroots. Caste and gender also influence who has access to these training opportunities. Without a proper understanding of how REDD+ operates, how it strives to mitigate climate change, and how local forests and forest users are implicated, project proponents risk ignoring the principle of fully informed consent. Further, there is high demand for technical knowledge that would enable local forest users to participate in carbon measurements and other activities to keep financial resources from being siphoned away to outside experts. Finally, there appears to be a need for an independent watch dog organization that pays attention to whether REDD+ and other climate policies and projects are being pursued with due attention to equity in terms of caste, gender, income, and geographic location. Without these safeguards in place, REDD+ in Nepal would not withstand the claims from the global climate justice movement that REDD+ is an unjust and false climate solution.

Background

With financial support from the Sylff Leadership Initiative of the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research, I, a faculty member at The Evergreen State College, conducted a 3-day forum in Pokhara from August 16-18 2019, with 24 participants from 12 districts in the Terai involved in the 2019-24 REDD+ agreement signed between the Nepalese government and the World Bank in 2018. The 25th participant was a FECOFUN member from Gorkha district, and the 26th participant was the president of the Pokhara FECOFUN chapter, Kaski district, both of whom helped solicit participation from the 12 REDD+ districts. This forum was preceded by several workshops and meetings with forest users in Chitwan district, where my research on REDD+ over the past three years has been based. In this white paper, I draw primarily from the conversations at the 3-day forum held at the Temple Tree hotel in Pokhara, August 16-18, 2019, as well as the conversations at meetings and workshops held at various locations in Chitwan from August 5-12, 2019. When inviting participants to the 3-day forum, through the Pokhara Chapter of FECOFUN, it was explicitly stated in the letter of invitation that at least one of the two members representing their district at the forum must have never attended a REDD+ workshop prior to the occasion, and at least one of the two members should be female and/or from a marginalized caste, as a strategy to reach participants who have not typically benefited from outreach and professional development efforts. The letter of invitation, the list of attendees and their districts of origin, the program schedule of the 3-day forum, and the list of sites where meetings and workshops were conducted in Chitwan and nearby district Nawalparasi may be requested from the author at joshis@evergreen.edu. The recordings from the 3-day forum are in the process of being archived at The Evergreen State College library. An academic paper presented by the author at the 2019 Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya is in the process of being published in the Conference Proceedings. A copy of this paper may be requested from the author at joshis@evergreen.edu

Rationale for the Forum

I have been conducting research in Nepal's community forests for the last few years, and conducting research on climate justice issues for the last decade. I have observed that while climate change discourses are becoming diffused in the Nepalese landscape, the notion of climate justice is not commonly used. When climate mitigation initiatives are introduced to communities, they are often presented as a way to generate foreign investment for local community development, or as a way to produce local environmental benefits. The idea that climate change is a global phenomenon that is accompanied by inequities in responsibility, impact, and vulnerability, and therefore the need to create solutions that do not exacerbate these inequities, is largely absent in discourses around climate mitigation in the areas I have

studied. These insights, combined with the experience of co-organizing two Indigenous Climate Justice symposia in the US, motivated me to organize this forum as a Sylff Leadership Initiative (SLI). Through this initiative, I wanted to raise awareness about global climate justice in the localized context of community forestry in Nepal by facilitating a forum for conversation about notions of fairness, equity, and justice related to global climate change among forest users who are increasingly becoming enlisted in climate mitigation projects such as REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation).

Forest governance in Nepal follows a unique governance structure where power and authority are shared between centralized forest institutions (Ministry of Forests and Environment) and local community forest user groups (CFUGs). Because of this system of community forestry, REDD+ is being promoted in Nepal as a way to mitigate climate change without disenfranchising local resource users, since in many parts of the world (eg. Africa, South America) REDD+ projects have been accused of land grabs and creating social injustice. Through research over the past 3 years, I have learned that just because REDD+ is being introduced to community forests, we cannot assume that social justice is guaranteed, since forest users are not necessarily acting with full information about the causes and consequences of global climate change and how their participation in REDD+ plays a role in mitigating climate change. Policies such as REDD+ seek to offset greenhouse gas emissions in developed nations by sponsoring forest protection initiatives in developing countries. Questions of justice, equity and fairness are important when considering the price of carbon as a commodity, who determines this price, and whether the labor or rights of sellers of carbon are being compromised in order to facilitate profit accumulation or cost-saving for buyers of carbon credits. These questions are especially important because of the ways in which resource-dependent communities particularly in the Global South are often the most vulnerable groups in the global community to the consequences of global warming and the most powerless in protecting their livelihoods and survival against these threats, while having contributed the least to creating the problem. This injustice is rendered even starker by the fact that solutions that are being generated to address the problem are also in danger of exacerbating these inequalities.

Activities and Agenda

Climate justice has many dimensions. My objective with this project was to focus on one dimension – related to the connection between climate mitigation strategies and forest governance. Since I have researched and written about climate justice and I teach the subject in college classrooms, I shared with forum participants my knowledge about the concept of climate justice and the multiple forms it takes. This included an introduction to the international context of climate governance and the treaty making process, the creation of

cap-and-trade mechanisms that arose out of the Kyoto Protocol, how REDD+ serves as a tool of carbon trading, how carbon sequestration in forests serves as a climate mitigation instrument, what contributions community forestry users make in facilitating carbon trade, why these market-based mechanisms have been resisted worldwide, and why the social justice provisions of REDD+ have been strengthened over the years to address these concerns and demands. My goal was to create better informed participants in the REDD+ projects that are being initiated in Nepal. Informed consent is considered a basic human right internationally. If people are not adequately informed by the global context of these local projects, their consent to participation is not truly informed. My SLI project sought to address an environment of misinformation or lack of full information regarding carbon trade I have observed in REDD+ project sites through my research. Further, forum participants had the opportunity to hear and learn from each other's experiences and perspectives.

Summary of Findings

Chitwan was one of the districts where a REDD+ pilot project was implemented from 2011-13, the others being Dolakha and Gorkha. In the Chitwan district, knowledge and understanding of REDD+ and carbon trading was quite uneven. Some areas in Chitwan, such as Shaktikhor, enjoyed greater awareness and understanding of REDD+ since several CFUGs contained members and FECOFUN officials who were pilot project beneficiaries, having participated in awareness workshops, carbon measurement training, and received financial resources. Other areas, such as Gaduwa and Jaldevi, had little if any understanding, exposure, or resources connected to REDD+. In areas with experience with the pilot project, feelings of frustration and loss of faith had set in, since it had been years since the pilot project support dried up, and no sign of forthcoming financial support. The people I spoke to were unaware of the new REDD+ program to be implemented in the Nepali Terai even if Chitwan was one of the districts included in the program. Rather, respondents shared feelings of uncertainty and confusion as to how certain community forests were seemingly being chosen over others for new forms of financial support, and were under the impression that adoption of scientific forestry over traditional practices was the key to receiving future support. In some areas, such as in the Baghdevi Community Forest, members were at a loss as to why their community's time, labor, and resources were used to measure soil carbon a few years ago and then why they weren't notified of the results or provided any follow-through.

Even after their experience with the pilot project, a thorough understanding of how REDD+ operates and how it is connected to climate change was also not present. One of the most well-versed FECOFUN officials and FUG member in Chitwan, for instance, explained that REDD+ was important to reduce global warming which is created by ozone gas. A commonly expressed concern was also that resources when they trickle down to the local communities

not be diverted to middle persons. Likewise, forest users expressed an overwhelming desire to receive relevant training, technological support, and involvement in carbon measurements so as to keep resources in their communities rather than needing to hire outside experts. Another commonly observed phenomenon was how women and members of marginalized castes or indigenous tribes were tokenized. Any time a request was made to gather participants for a workshop or meeting to discuss REDD+, those in higher up positions in relevant organizations would typically make sure to call upon participation from these groups, but it was clear to me that these members, with some exceptions, were typically underserved in access to information, training, or decision-making power in the day-to-day functions of their organizations, such that they had little to say about their views on REDD+.

During the 3-day forum, invited participants came from 12 districts in the Terai, including Chitwan. Except for Chitwan, none of the districts included in the REDD+ program had experienced a pilot project. Therefore it was to be expected that understanding of REDD+ would not be as deep. However, I was shocked at the (low) level of understanding and exposure, given all participants held positions in their respective CFUGs or local chapters of FECOFUN, and given the selection of the district for the REDD+ program. Whereas I intended for the forum to center on conversations where I would solicit participants' views on REDD+ from a climate justice lens, providing contextualizing information where necessary, I realized from the outset that there was an overwhelming thirst in the conference room to have REDD+ and its mechanisms explained thoroughly. Rather than a forum for discussion and debate, participants saw the forum meeting as an opportunity to learn about REDD+ since their knowledge on it was very limited. My presentations were focused on the international context within which REDD+ arose, starting with the UNFCCC negotiations, and explaining how market-based mechanisms such as REDD+ were based on the notion of carbon trading. I emphasized the notion of free and informed consent as well as concerns about equity and rights in regards to gender, caste, and indigenous groups.

The conversations and discussion that ensued, centering on the concerns, perspectives, and priorities expressed by the participants at the forum, can be summarized as follows.

1. Informed Consent

If REDD+ is to continue, it should ensure the sustainability of community forestry, and receive approval from all affected community forestry members, including the most marginalized and vulnerable members.

Before any irreversible agreements are made at the international level, prior and informed consent from forest communities is necessary.

Community forest users have the right to information, i.e. the mechanisms of REDD+ as well as potential benefits and drawbacks, should be explained clearly to local communities. The state of knowledge and understanding in this regard in local communities is currently negligible, and this must be rectified if meaningful participation from the local level is to be achieved.

2. Meaningful Participation

Meaningful and equitable participation and representation of the most marginalized groups in terms of gender, income, caste, and ethnicity must be ensured at all stages from decision-making, implementation, to benefit-sharing.

Those who have the most at stake should lead the decision-making process; community forest members should be empowered to have ownership of their forests in the process of carbon-trading, and not reduced to serving as hired soldiers for the protection of their community forests.

Central authorities engaged in REDD+ policy making must engage in a massive awareness and outreach program to help local constituents understand the scope and complexity of REDD+ before making key decisions on behalf of forest communities.

Community forest user groups should have the training, technical capacity, and technological resources to measure carbon; carbon measurement mechanisms and policies should be clearly defined.

The discussions, negotiations, and decisions that happen at the top level should be communicated clearly to participants at the grassroots level where the work of forest protection actually happens.

3. Fair and Just Law and Policy

The formulation of relevant laws and policies for carbon trading should be fair, just, and equitable, based on due process, with meaningful participation from and collaboration between all relevant stakeholders, associations, and political actors from the local level; policies should be consistent across all levels.

Good governance, accountability, meaningful participation, and a long-term vision are necessary to ensure fair, just, and equitable distribution of resources derived from carbon trading at the local level, without leakage at central levels of bureaucracy.

Community forest users should retain carbon rights in any carbon trading agreement.

The rights of traditional forest users to continue using forest products, resources, and services should be codified in any REDD+ law or policy.

4. Equitable Benefit-sharing

Financial benefits derived from REDD+ should be proportional to population of communities involved, level of carbon sequestered in their community forest, and distributed equitably among female, indigenous, and marginalized caste members of that community. Ordinary community forest users must not be deprived of the financial benefits and services derived from a carbon trade.

Effective mechanisms for efficient distribution of financial resources derived from REDD+ should be established in ways that are legible to local forest users.

Forest users should be able to influence the minimum price of carbon being sold.

The economic conditions and livelihood prospects of community forest users should be enhanced with meaningful and sustainable economic development.

5. Risk Management

There should be provisions to terminate any REDD+ agreement if unanticipated and intractable problems arise for local communities from carbon trading.

Organizational support is necessary to help with resolution of unexpected problems and incidents.

Community forest users should be protected by insurance policies against forest fires.

Participants were conflicted in and debated two issues in the context of discussions on REDD+. One was the extent to which scientific forestry was beneficial or harmful for forest management, and secondly, participants were divided on the issue of whether Dalit status was a reliable predictor of marginality in the contemporary context, and therefore whether progressive forest policies should privilege caste or income/poverty in seeking to make benefit-sharing equitable. Despite invitation for participants to form a women-only caucus group in workshops, this never occurred, and issues of marginalization of women were typically underrepresented in mixed group conversations. However, one exception was during a workshop with a women-led community forestry user group in Chitwan called Chelibeti, in which it was revealed that it took the creation and formalization of an all-women's CFUG for women's voices and perspectives to not be marginalized, silenced, or deprioritized.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the fact that my presentations emphasized possible harm to local communities from international carbon trading, I was struck by how determined all participants and respondents were to welcome REDD+ to their communities and to maximize its benefits. The consensus appeared to be that benefits from trading carbon credits from forest carbon sequestration could be maximized while seeking to ensure that harm to local communities is avoided. To what extent this level of enthusiasm is based on lack of clear understanding and prevailing misunderstandings, I am not sure. In any case, financial benefits from REDD+ were perceived to be desirable for supporting locally relevant economic development opportunities as well as for sustainable management of forests. There was strong consensus among all participants that knowledge regarding REDD+ is highly inadequate in the local communities to be affected by REDD+, that dissemination of relevant information is desirable and necessary, and that any policies and benefit-sharing should be equitable, just, and should involve meaningful participation of all stakeholders, however marginalized, from the start.

Since it is clear that meaningful participation and fully informed consent were not facilitated in all community forests in the Terai before the agreement on REDD+ was made between Nepal and the World Bank, it is urgent that these gaps and oversight be rectified. A coordinated drive to involve local forest stakeholders (users, CFUG members, FECOFUN officials) in all REDD+ districts, through training and workshops about the complex connections between climate change and forests, how REDD+ operates, what the rights of local forest users are and how they can best advocate for their rights, is essential if the principle of free prior and informed consent is to be respected in pursuing REDD+ in Nepal, and if stakeholder participation is to be meaningful.

It is not that training and workshops have not been conducted. They have, but it appears that the target audience for these educational efforts have tended to be the topmost officials at most bureaucratic organizations, with no obligations for passing down information and knowledge to their constituents. Part of the problem is that training and workshops are often conducted in central locations or city centers such that rural forest users, even when they receive opportunities to participate, must juggle family and work obligations to travel to the workshop or training venue. Such travel requirements create extra constraints for women to participate. There is a need for educational training and activities to be located in the community forest locations for participation to be maximized. Further, outreach materials such as pamphlets, brochures, and posters should be prepared in legible and accessible formats, distilling not only relevant information about science and policy, but about national policies on REDD+ and how the mechanism operates, including how carbon is measured to how benefits are to be distributed.

Once the basic foundations for information and knowledge dissemination have been established, local participation should be solicited in all phases of decision-making and implementation, from establishing a price for unit of carbon traded, measuring forest carbon, to equitable benefit-sharing from the proceeds of carbon trading. Top-down ways to ensure equity in terms of caste and ethnicity can be tokenizing and damaging to social relations. Discussions on how to ensure equity should occur in consultation with local organizations and community members. Consultation with all relevant stakeholders is also essential in determining how risks such as forest fires should be addressed, who owns rights to carbon sequestered in trees and the soil, as well as what conditionalities are acceptable when an agreement is signed with a foreign entity. Again, it is not that these measures have been avoided altogether. It is rather than these measures need to be taken with the involvement of a wider range and greater number of community representatives than has occurred so far.

Community forest users have expressed a strong desire to be active participants, not passive recipients in Nepal's REDD+ programming. The existing array of organizations and institutions seem to have neglected making this a top priority. I recommend the creation of an organization independent of MOFE, FECOFUN, or international organizations, one that can operate at the national and district level, and whose primary role is to ensure that considerations of equity and justice are upheld at all times in the planning and implementation of REDD+.

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