

LAND USE

Does REDD+ Threaten to Recentralize Forest Governance?

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Over the past 25 years, developing countries have transitioned toward decentralized forest management that allows local actors increased rights and responsibilities (1–4), and has helped protect forests in many regions (5, 6). A new approach to mitigating terrestrial emissions associated with climate change, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), is poised to interrupt this trend. Given the implications for tropical forest management, REDD+ governance links should be a research priority (7).

Decentralization

Decentralized resource management in the developing world has been called “the most significant ... most distinctive and [most] visible shift in national environmental policies since the late 1980s” (3). At its most extensive, decentralization allows stakeholders to redefine ownership, use, and management of forests (4, 8). Governments have decentralized forest management for many reasons: to reduce costs and increase efficiency by transferring responsibilities, to respond to local demands for rights and international donor pressures to transfer benefits to users, and in recognition that conservation is possible across diverse tenure regimes (2, 3). Decentralization reforms have primarily targeted low-value forests (2, 9); central governments have mostly reserved control of forests suitable for commercial exploitation (1) or biodiversity conservation (9).

Outcomes vary, but effective decentralization reforms have increased local actors’ benefits and rights in forests (3), reduced costs of protection (5), and provided opportunities for biodiversity con-

servation (10). A recent analysis of 80 forest commons across 10 countries shows that rule-making autonomy at the local level is associated with greater forest carbon storage and higher livelihood benefits (11).

However, when presented with strong incentives, central governments have at times reversed forest policy decentralization (12, 13). Centralized governance can protect forests and enhance regrowth, but it requires costly enforcement (14); is isolated to within-park boundaries (15); and can result in resentment among excluded users, which undermines conservation goals (16).

REDD+

REDD+ is a proposed performance-based mechanism under negotiation through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in which developed country donors, corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals will compensate developing countries for forest emissions reductions, including through market mechanisms (see the chart on page 313) (17, 18). Payments will require demonstrated emissions reductions through improved forest protection, sustainable forest management, and/or enhancement of carbon stocks (19). REDD+ will be a key emissions mitigation strategy as evidenced by extensive donor investments to prepare developing countries to implement REDD+, e.g., \$4.5B from six developed countries by 2012 (20–22). By 2020, REDD+ investments may reach \$30B a year (21).

Under REDD+, recipient governments will devise strategies for national land-use and forest-sector planning, stakeholder negotiations, tenure clarification, carbon brokering, national-level carbon accounting, and provision of funds and services to local actors (see the chart on page 313). A national approach is considered integral to the suc-

A major new approach to emissions mitigation may interrupt a promising trend toward decentralized forest management.

cess of REDD+ projects: It can help avoid leakage (23); ensure permanence; and provide reliable monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) (19). This approach effectively converts national governments into the principal forest stakeholders.

REDD+ Reversing Decentralization Trends

Although there are efforts to promote community involvement in REDD+ (24), funding and requirements for REDD+ may undermine decentralization. Generous, long-term REDD+ funding will considerably reduce past financial burdens that motivated decentralization. A conservative market-value estimate of \$1.2 billion per year for avoided deforestation (25) exceeds current global investment for forest conservation. For example, the market value of avoided deforestation for Indonesia [U.S.\$108M per year (25)] exceeded the entire 2005 Department of Forestry budget [\$102M (26)].

REDD+ implementation will place new demands on national forest managers: detailed carbon-oriented forest management plans, reliable baseline data and subsequent quantitative MRV of emissions reductions at the national level, and resources for brokering deals between buyers and sellers (27). These demands would impose prohibitive costs for small-scale initiatives (27), but a centralized system would benefit from economies of scale, coordination, and standardization (14). Communities may participate in collecting forest-specific data, but carbon accounting, a major REDD+ component, will require centralized management.

By monetizing forest carbon, REDD+ will substantially increase the market value of forests, including those previously considered marginal, incentivizing central governments to increase control. Under a performance-based payment mechanism, governments will be pressured to avoid the risk of nonpayment resulting from local-level failures. Evidence suggests that central governments affirm control over forests considered “critical” to national welfare for conservation, protection of ecosystem services, or national economic interests (16). With billions of dollars at stake, governments could justify recentralization by portraying them-



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Prospective state-centric REDD+ mechanism. Elements of the figure are based in part on (18).

selves as more capable and reliable than local communities at protecting national interest. This could involve imposition of excessive requirements (1) or even evictions of local users, as in some national parks (28).

Balancing Multiple Incentives of REDD+

Many governments have yet to apply lessons of decentralization to REDD+ strategies. Of the 34 nationally appropriate mitigation actions submitted by developing countries to the UNFCCC, 12 identified centrally coordinated forest-based mitigation actions without mention of decentralization (29, 30). Moreover, a majority of submissions for REDD+ “readiness” funding from the World Bank did not adequately address governance challenges, such as tenure, benefit sharing, and local engagement (31). After feedback from donors, some proposals adopted the language of local participation and benefit sharing (22). Evidently, the incorporation of decentralized strategies and community participation in REDD+ will depend on concrete incentives. However, individual donor safeguards may not be consistent or rigorous, and the UNFCCC does not currently mandate safeguards, benefit sharing, or local involvement (19). Furthermore, carbon markets seeking cheap verifiable credits will have little incentive to create local partnerships. It is therefore urgent that as major REDD+ financial transfers occur, ground-level projects include decentralized strategies; heavily centralized REDD+ implementation can be detrimental to efficiency and equity (32).

The Way Forward

Communities should have control over local REDD+ design and implementation. Governments may propose REDD+ sites, support low-emissions rural-development strategies, and deliver payments and/or services as incentives (33). Local users should be given authority, information, and support to determine whether they engage with REDD+, to align

their management, monitoring, and enforcement with low-emissions objectives, and to negotiate revenue sharing. New research is necessary to optimize REDD+ effectiveness through a combination of decentralized and centralized forest governance. We must better understand trade-offs and synergies between rural livelihood activities (34), alternative land uses, and REDD+ goals. Research should also focus on how carbon sequestration varies with differing levels of community engagement and autonomy, and across diverse tenure regimes. Studies of the practicality and acceptability to international markets of low-cost community-based MRV strategies will help determine the feasibility of decentralized MRV.

Abbreviated timelines (21, 22) make it doubtful whether pilot studies will mature before global-scale REDD+ implementation. There is a tension between the urgency to reduce emissions and the need for science-based REDD+ governance that could enhance forest carbon sequestration while benefiting millions of forest-dependent people.

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