Does REDD+ Threaten to Recentralize Forest Governance?

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FOREST GOVERNANCE | Forests in Nepal

Deforestation and forest degradation contribute approximately 17% of human-induced carbon emissions, and are the focus of efforts to seek cost-effective climate change mitigation. REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) is a proposed mechanism by which developed countries will compensate developing countries for reducing emissions through improved forest protection, sustainable forest management, and carbon stock enhancement (activities such as reforestation). Donors have already pledged over $4.5B by 2012 for REDD+, and pilot projects are planned for across the tropics. REDD+ investment may reach $30B a year by 2020. As such, REDD+ has significant, if little understood, implications for tropical forest management and governance.

Over the past 25 years, many developing countries have transitioned towards models of decentralized forest management that that allow local actors increased rights and responsibilities, and have often also reduced management costs, and provided positive biodiversity and carbon conservation outcomes. Our analysis reviewed reasons why governments have pursued decentralization (often related to costs, burdens and foreign aid), and considered how REDD+ incentives and demands may influence these motivations. We identified several ways in which REDD+ could interrupt decentralization trends and catalyze a recentralization of forest governance.

The changes we consider are largely financial: REDD+ will monetize forest carbon, increasing the market value of forests and central government financial interests. As REDD+ payments will be contingent on verifiable changes in forest management leading to emissions reductions, central governments will also be pressured avoid the risks of nonpayment resulting from local-level failures. With billions of dollars at stake, governments could justify recentralization by portraying them selves as more capable and reliable than local communities at protecting forests and national interests. REDD+ also places new demands on forest managers, many of which are technical, expensive and require centralized oversight. New demands could exclude small landholders, communities and local government units, especially because current REDD+ plans offer few mandates or incentives for governments to promote decentralized management and local engagement. Moreover, future REDD+ revenues are expected from the sale of emissions credits on an international carbon market likely to seek lowest-cost credits with little incentive to create local partnerships. These changes and shifted incentives could alter forest governance models across the tropics.

We conclude that it is therefore urgent that as major REDD+ financial transfers occur, communities control local REDD+ design and implementation processes, and that new research identifies ways to optimize effectiveness through a combination of decentralized and centralized forest governance. For

example, we must better understand trade-offs and synergies between rural livelihood activities, alternative land uses and REDD+ goals; how markets will engage with community forest managers, and how carbon sequestration varies across different types of forest governance. However, our analysis notes, the current rapid development of REDD+ projects for urgent climate mitigation makes it doubtful whether incipient research efforts will mature before global-scale REDD+ implementation.

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