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REDD+ readiness in Nepal In search of effective stakeholder participation

Naya S. Paudel, Dil B. Khatri and Rahul Karki

Key messages

- In Nepal, key substantive issues, such as measurement, reporting and verification, reference emission levels, governance and financing, on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) are under-addressed. Dispute regarding REDD+ procedural issues, such as participation and communication have dominated. Adjusting this balance may be productive for making headway with substantive issues.
- The REDD+ process in Nepal is failing to fully engage all relevant stakeholders. This lack of genuine engagement invites the risks of non-cooperation of many forest dependent communities and stakeholders.
- Language, technical and attitudinal barriers are limiting participation of a wide range of stakeholders. Work to reduce these barriers, develop capacity of weak stakeholders and forge productive dialogue between experts and civic actors may help improve their participation.

Introduction

Nepal is preparing to implement REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation), and is currently in the readiness phase, that is, the crucial stage of developing the necessary policy and institutional framework for REDD+ to take place. Preparation of the National REDD+ Strategy is underway with input from various stakeholders and multi-stakeholder involvement is a key principal of the process (Box 1). The government is leading the formal process, with the involvement of development partners, civil society organizations (CSOs) and indigenous people's organizations (IPOs). The government has set up central-level institutions for formal decision making that are aimed at allowing for input from multiple stakeholders. Non-state agencies are involved in awareness raising, capacity building, piloting and generating knowledge to inform the process of developing REDD+ policies and institutional framework.

Despite Nepal's attempts to forge a process that is inclusive and participatory and that may lead to effective, efficient and equitable outcomes from REDD+ it is facing several operational challenges that reduce its likelihood of achieving these objectives. This policy

Box 1. Principles underlying REDD+ readiness in Nepal

Ensuring multi-stakeholder involvement in aspects of REDD+ that reflects the diversity of actors in Nepal's forestry sector from both government and civil society and including those stakeholders from other sectors such as agriculture, local development, energy and infrastructure (GON 2010:ii).

brief synthesizes some of the critical issues observed within the REDD+ readiness process in Nepal. The aim is to inform key actors of some key REDD+ -process- related issues and consider the measures needed to facilitate the implementation of successful REDD+. The messages in this policy brief are based on an in-depth study conducted in collaboration with Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) that examined the political economy of forest policy and governance in Nepal, REDD+ initiatives and the institutional framework, and assessed the country's likelihood of achieving effectiveness, efficiency and equity in REDD+ outcomes (Paudel et al. 2012). The study was based on a review of literature, policy documents, secondary information and stakeholder consultation at local and national levels.

The government has adopted a multi-stakeholder process

The government of Nepal has sought to establish inclusive and participatory processes for achieving REDD+ readiness through three main processes: (i) policy provisions, (ii) institutional arrangements and (iii) conscious efforts to engage stakeholders. In particular, the government

- has recognized a multi-stakeholder process as its underlying principle (Box 1);
- has institutionalized multi-stakeholder forums at different levels of governance (Figure 1);
- invites stakeholders to meetings and workshops;
- seeks stakeholders' feedback on key policy documents.

To engage stakeholders in the process, a REDD+ Stakeholder Forum has been formed, comprising representatives of government, CSOs, IPOs and donors. The government has set up an Apex Body and a REDD+ Working Group (RWG), comprised

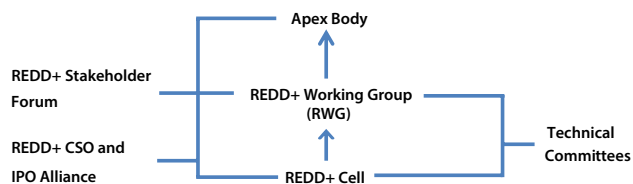


Figure 1. Multi-stakeholder institutional arrangements for REDD+ governance in Nepal.

of representatives from the government, CSOs, IPOs and donors to make key decisions on REDD+ policy. There are also several technical committees made up of government officials, experts and stakeholders. Stakeholders must be consulted and key actors invited to comment on policy documents as part of a mandatory provision for REDD+ in the country's Readiness Preparation Proposal. Agencies that support REDD+, such as the World Bank through its Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, initially praised Nepal for the participatory and consultative nature of its REDD+ readiness processes. As seen in Figure 1, both vertical and horizontal institutional arrangements are in place to ensure the robustness and legitimacy of decisions.

REDD+ readiness in Nepal is therefore characterized by supportive policy provisions, necessary institutional arrangements and strong interest and enthusiasm among stakeholders. Despite these characteristics, however, the multi-stakeholder approach has not been able to fulfill its potential for making national REDD+ in Nepal truly inclusive and participatory in practice. The shortcomings of the process in everyday practice are evident in the following three aspects, particularly in the quality aspects of current practice.

International development agencies dominate the process

REDD+ in Nepal is supported and influenced by several donors and international development agencies, primarily the World Bank, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Only a small number of national non-government organizations (NGOs), CSOs and consultants are actively engaged in this process. It is this small group (working with international agencies, domestic NGOs and consultants) that are implementing REDD+ projects, organizing and participating in workshops, consultation meetings and training sessions, contributing to media coverage and writing policy documents. Ordinary citizens, especially those in marginalized social groups (such as women and the Dalit caste and Madhesi ethnic groups), have little opportunity to join in such processes. The few CSOs and IPOs that are involved in REDD+ tend to claim that they represent all citizens. However their narrow organizational mandate and working culture prevent them from representing the diverse groups of people who depend on forests for their livelihoods. The continually increasing membership of the CSOs and IPOs Alliance, and persistent demand for a presence in the REDD+ Working Group by many CSOs indicate the challenge of representation.

Some CSOs are excluded or marginalized

Certain segments of society, including some CSOs and especially groups for women, Dalits and Madhesi, have experienced exclusion and marginalization during the process of REDD+-readiness-related activities. Many CSOs and private sector entities have expressed dissatisfaction for several reasons: they

Box 2. Indications of actors' dissatisfaction with the level of participation and inclusion in REDD+ readiness in Nepal

- CSOs, especially those representing women, Dalit and Madhesi, have demanded that they be included in the REDD+ Working Group
- Indigenous People demanded that the REDD+ CSOs Alliance change its name to the REDD+ CSOs and IPOs Alliance.
- The Dalit are not satisfied with the RWG for their lack of representation. Also they are seeking to strengthen their identity in REDD+ CSOs and IPOs Alliance.
- CSOs/IPOs are asking that all REDD+ documents be made available in Nepali.
- Many stakeholders have raised concerns about the failure to notify them promptly of decisions and policy documents.

(See REDD+ CSOs and IPOs Alliance's common position paper on Nepal REDD+ programme)

have been excluded from the REDD+ Working Group; they have limited access to information; they have little opportunity to share their concerns; and they tend to be undermined during meetings. These groups are marginalized and excluded not only by the state but also by non-state actors, including other CSOs and IPOs. Some examples of the issues of participation and inclusion are given in Box 2. These examples demonstrate how stakeholders compete and negotiate for inclusion and meaningful participation in REDD+.

The multi-stakeholder process is more of a burden than a functional collaboration

Stakeholder consultation and participation has not secured meaningful engagement of weaker actors. Government officials and independent experts who prepare REDD+ documents have stated that stakeholder consultations yield little input on key substantive issues especially the draft documents such as study reports on measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) and reference emission level. Valuable inputs are rather obtained from other means (either through emails or small meetings with experts). Given the high costs of trying to involve multiple stakeholders, with little apparent benefit in terms of substantive inputs in the studies and policy development process, many officials see multi-stakeholder engagement as a cost-heavy burden rather than an opportunity.

Causes of weak stakeholder participation and engagement

As Nepal has worked toward REDD+ readiness over the past four years, two factors in particular appear to have prevented the process from benefiting from the policy and institutional arrangements set up with the aim of encouraging stakeholder participation. These two factors are (i) the prevalence of technical issues within the REDD+ domain and (ii) weak stakeholder capacity, discussed below.

The prevalence of technical issues disempowers weaker stakeholders and weakens their participation

The government is undertaking several technical studies on reference emission levels, MRV and Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments, among others. Findings from these studies will inform to the development of National REDD+ Strategy, which is the main government policy document on REDD+ (REDD Cell 2013). As the studies progress, the REDD+ readiness process is dominated by technical workshops, consultants' reports, peer reviews and comments on technical documents. This has undermined weaker actors involvement in various ways. First, many CSO activists have a non-technical education, so they find it difficult to comprehend and respond to the complex technical issues. Second, most documents are in English, which creates a major language barrier. Third, most stakeholders participate on a voluntary basis only and so do not have enough time or resources to read and understand the documents and articulate their concerns and wishes. On the other side, officials are often under pressure to process documents within tight deadlines and so are reluctant to engage with stakeholders if the process does not yield clear inputs.

Consequences of the poor multi-stakeholder process

The failure to fully realize the multi-stakeholder process in Nepal, as seen in the limited inputs from forest-dependent citizens and many CSOs to date, has two major consequences for REDD+ readiness in the country.

Stakeholders have little agreement on broader issues of forest tenure, governance, management modalities and revenue sharing

Deliberations within multi-stakeholder processes tend to be limited, which has led to disputes and dissatisfaction on procedural aspects such as representation, participation and communication. CSOs, IPOs, women and Dalit, in particular, are struggling to support their interests and strengthen their identity within the REDD+ process. With procedural aspects dominating, substantive issues are receiving inadequate attention. These substantive issues include the potential trade-offs, risks and challenges of implementing REDD+ (such as timber trade, road construction, etc.), which are yet to be recognized, analyzed and discussed. Stakeholders have yet to agree on a broad vision of forest tenure and governance, management modalities, and the roles and responsibilities of the government, local communities and the private sector. If these issues are not addressed through informed engagement and negotiation, REDD+ outcomes that are efficient, effective and equitable are unlikely to result.

Weak stakeholder ownership over the REDD+ process

As a result of inadequate deliberation, study reports and policy documents are likely to receive little input from most stakeholders. Moreover, stakeholders who feel excluded and marginalized are unlikely to gain much sense of ownership over the process. This is particularly the case for forest dependent poor. Stakeholders with little sense of ownership will have little support for REDD+ during its implementation, which could undermine REDD+ outcomes (Khatri 2012)

Recommendations

The factors identified in this policy brief point to four recommendations for promoting meaningful stakeholder engagement in REDD+ readiness in Nepal, with the aim of achieving outcomes that are effective, efficient and equitable.

Aim for quality in the participatory process

Both government and non-state actors, particularly CSOs and IPOs, must fundamentally shift their conceptualization and understanding of participation. Currently, participation appears to be a burden for all stakeholders. However, it is certainly possible for them to work together to create more of an enabling environment, considering the deeply rooted democratic values in Nepal and the long-term strategic benefits of participation. Many of the language, technical and attitudinal barriers hampering the consultation process can be removed. For example, documents can be translated into Nepali and then explained to stakeholders in dedicated sessions, and formats for soliciting feedback from stakeholders could be made more accessible and easy to use.

To achieve REDD+ readiness, those leading the process must resolve lingering disputes, dissatisfaction and other procedural issues. Once these procedural issues have been resolved, the discussion can be turned to the substantive issues, such as MRV, reference emission levels, Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments, drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, policy, governance, financing, economic incentives, benefit sharing and the optimum means of REDD+. The successful implementation of REDD+ relies on stakeholders engaging with these substantive — and potentially divisive — issues and resolving them through continuous and deliberative dialogue and negotiation (such as community forestry program in Nepal).

Build the capacity of CSOs and IPOs to deal with technical issue

Consultants working on REDD+ should be trained to communicate their work to the public. Members of CSOs and IPOs and other actors should be equipped to understand and contribute to the scientific analysis that informs the policy and institutional framework. The capacity-building package should include ways to help ordinary people understand and contribute to the development of reference levels and MRV, among others. Structured interactions between experts and CSOs/IPOs will help each side to understand the other's language and perspectives. This will also reduce their efforts to grasp the issues and effectively articulate their interests on REDD+.

Encourage productive dialogue between scientists and civic actors

There is a need for productive dialogue between the technical (scientific studies, technical processes, technical experts) on the one hand and the social (socio-political aspects, civic actors) on the other. Ways to encourage this productive dialogue include the following:

- Create an open and non-threatening environment.
- Discuss complex scientific concepts as they apply in practice to local resource management.
- Frame the debate as an exploration of practical, everyday issues.

- Carefully select the venue, participants and timing of sessions.

Only a thorough and productive dialogue between diverse actors will lead to appropriate policy, legal and institutional framework that support and ensure effective, efficient and equitable REDD+ outcomes.

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