REDD+ in Uganda: access rights and equity must come first

Key policy messages

1. To achieve equitable outcomes for rural communities REDD+ safeguards in Uganda must be underpinned by substantive guidelines and practices beyond international requirements for monitoring and reporting

2. To aid recognition of communal tenure and multiple access rights, REDD+ must align with and build upon land and forest governance mechanisms currently being implemented by government and other stakeholders

3. The limited number of REDD+ pilot projects in Uganda necessitates learning from a range of interventions, including livelihood initiatives, development projects, community based forestry and carbon forestry schemes

4. Weak accountability for decisions based on short-term political goals is common in land and forest governance, undermining the trust and certainty required for effective community engagement in REDD+

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Background

To reduce deforestation and degradation, REDD+ projects need to be equitable in both procedures and outcomes. REDD+ brings risks and opportunities for rural Ugandans and successful projects must gain and maintain the trust and support of diverse local communities and avoid imposing costs upon them. There is scant evidence from REDD+ pilot projects in Uganda and limited lessons have been drawn from relevant conservation and development sectors, creating a need to scrutinise the context in which REDD+ projects and safeguards are to be implemented. Since 2009, REDD+ preparations have included a range of stakeholders and made progress towards international requirements, meaning establishment of safeguards has been streamlined and implementation of REDD+ projects is accelerating. But although longstanding policies governing forests and land appear to provide a supportive environment for REDD+ in Uganda, the gap between policy rhetoric and implementation is often considerable. This policy brief presents critical equity issues to be addressed in the lead up to REDD+ implementation. Insights stem from a two-day think-tank meeting held with a range of REDD+ stakeholders in Kampala in August 2016.

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Safeguard information systems (SIS) are a key REDD+ instrument to ensure equitable participation and distribution of benefits, costs and risks. However, an SIS approach limited to an indicator-based and broad-scale reporting mechanism is unlikely to identify some negative impacts felt by communities or minority groups, such as insecurity of tenure, absence of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) or to allow for timely, responsive management to those issues. Understanding of equity issues as perceived by communities and social groups within them is required to assess risks and determine whether boundaries have been overstepped. Safeguard procedures therefore need to go further than international standards to include national or subnational assessment criteria. Substantive guidelines, drawing on existing strengths and seeking to reinforce local institutions, are required to respond to issues that may result from REDD+, for example potential loss of customary tenure, which commonly involves marginalised ethnic groups. Where local standards do not exist, procedures tailored to institutional context should be established to fill this critical gap in the REDD+ framework. For example, in Tanzania guidelines exist for village-level organisation in community forestry enabling accountability in decision making, grievance redress mechanisms and, through regular meetings and bottom-up reporting of issues, this supports responsiveness to negative social impacts[1]. A locally oriented approach involving mediation by experienced, neutral, trusted people and organisations (rather than reliance on external consultants) may promote management responsive to issues faced by communities and vulnerable people, thereby avoiding future costs of dealing with grievances.

To aid recognition of communal tenure and multiple access rights, REDD+ must align with and build upon land and forest governance mechanisms currently being implemented by government and other stakeholders

Deforestation and forest degradation has been rapid in Uganda over recent decades. However, the Ugandan government has set ambitious targets for increasing forest cover in the short, medium and long-term, and on 27th July 2016 signed the Kigali Declaration on Forest Landscape Restoration in Africa. The pathways to achieve these goals are largely unspecified. However, it is clear is that land and forest governance in Uganda are highly dynamic, with possible overlapping regimes, and this presents a challenging social and political context for REDD+ and other re- or afforestation projects to operate in. Despite their provision in laws established in the 1990s, community forest management, communal land agreements and certificates of customary ownership have only recently been piloted and are in the process of being extended and trialled widely across the country[2,3]. These far-reaching initiatives impact on many aspects of environmental governance with strong implications for REDD+ that cannot be overlooked.

The limited number of REDD+ pilot projects in Uganda necessitates learning from a range of interventions, including livelihood initiatives, development projects, community based forestry and carbon forestry schemes

There have been few REDD+ pilot projects in Uganda and few examples of best practice or key lessons have emerged. Therefore, evidence must be drawn from relevant successes and failures across conservation and development in Uganda and East Africa. For example, experience from carbon forestry projects reveals registration of communal land or forest is highly centralised and may take years, at substantial cost to the applicant - a disincentive to seek formal tenure and barrier to the establishment of REDD+ projects[2,3]. The absence of adequate, accessible administrative systems to facilitate such essential steps may threaten project viability, by causing extensive delays in delivery of local benefits or failure to deal with grievances leading to loss of support or use of courts for redress.

Institutional barriers may further inhibit REDD+ implementation in Uganda. Many working in the forest sector describe state departments as islands due to administrative boundaries. For example, it is common to charge other departments for data use. Political buy in to REDD+ amongst relevant ministries and integration between departments is essential to address the diverse drivers of deforestation and degradation.

Weak accountability for decisions based on short-term political goals is common in land and forest governance, undermining the trust and certainty required for effective community engagement in REDD+

Communities across Uganda have experienced volatile decision making, including unstable access to forest resources, sporadic encouragement for conversion to agriculture and projects involving concession of tenure to private or public sectors. The history of conservation conflict at Mount Elgon provides a compelling example where lack of transparency has led to mistrust of state forest managers and project proponents, with acute social and environmental impacts[4,5]. Similar issues of short-termism, corruption, oversight of basic rights, lack of justice mechanisms and apparent impunity of those responsible have overshadowed forest conservation across the country. This has led to pervasive mistrust among rural Ugandans, particularly marginalised cultural groups, of institutions proposing land or forest projects. Similar issues have affected carbon-oriented forestry projects such as at Bukaleba Forest[6].

Pilot carbon forestry projects in Uganda have increased understanding of the intensive groundwork required to develop relationships with communities, as prerequisite for any consultation. REDD+ projects focused on carbon accounting to raise financial benefits may fail to address these important steps providing the foundation for equitable outcomes. Pilots, often supported by foreign NGOs, may have sufficient resources to enable flexibility, but attention to requirements for gaining local support may be lacking in subsequent REDD+ projects. The lack of confidence in institutions governing land and forests requires guidelines for community engagement and participation specific to the Ugandan context in order to first build awareness and trust. The involvement of established local groups, cooperatives and NGOs will be essential to empower people sufficiently to participate and make informed choices.

Further information and funding

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