

Community involvement in monitoring, reporting and verification of REDD+ activities in East Africa

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Farmers in Uganda

Source: Adrian Paul Nel

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INTRODUCTION

REDD+¹ is a policy mechanism aimed at not only reducing carbon dioxide emissions from developing countries through sustainable management of forests, but also at providing co-benefits in terms of biodiversity and livelihoods (UNFCCC, 2010). In principle, therefore, REDD+ is meant to slow (or even reverse) the rate of forest loss and degradation in developing countries, while at the same time providing socioeconomic benefits to communities or at worst not causing undue harm to their well being. For the objectives of REDD+ to be achieved, therefore, there is need to monitor the forests as well as the socio-economic status of the communities dependent on them.

The Cancun decision text on REDD+ agreed that countries should put in place robust and transparent national forest monitoring systems and a system for providing information on how the safeguards are being addressed and respected. In respect to forest conditions, the Durban text of the UNFCCC emphasizes the need for the data and information provided to be transparent, complete, consistent, comparable and accurate (UNFCCC, 2011a). The same should apply for socio-economic aspects. As countries develop national REDD+ programmes, they need to put in place ways to collect this data and information – both to help inform their activities but also for reporting purposes.

Why involve local communities

One important avenue through which communities can be actively involved in REDD+ is through monitoring. Involving local communities in monitoring of both forest conditions and safeguards has a number of benefits. This can provide valuable information for local management as well as for establishment and strengthening national Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV) Systems. The Cancun talks stressed the need for REDD+ activities to include and promote the full and effective participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular indigenous peoples and local communities (UNFCCC, 2011b). Community involvement, therefore, is a step in the right direction. Indeed, the success of initiatives that aim to conserve and sustainably manage forests is often greatly tied to the level of participation of local communities. Community members are knowledgeable about the natural resources in their area (Topp-Jørgensen et al. 2005; Berkes et al. 2000) and are therefore well placed to notice changes. In addition, levels of local awareness and knowledge relating to the forest areas are increased (Sheil & Lawrence, 2004) thereby enhancing the capacity of the community to rationally manage their local environment. Engaging local people has been also advanced as a cheaper

¹ Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries

means of getting the job done (Burgess et al. 2010; Phelps et al. 2010; Skutsch, 2010).

The relevance of community participation in monitoring has been emphasized in a study by Danielsen et al (2011) about the efficacy of locally collected data in measuring degradation and consequently carbon flux. In this study, results of community-based and professionally executed monitoring of biomass and forest use in 3 countries, Tanzania, India and Madagascar, were compared. It was revealed that the cost of collecting data can be halved when local people are employed as opposed to trained scientists, without compromising the quality of the data collected. Further, this approach makes it cheaper for repeated monitoring of the forests to be done thereby improving reliability of the results, and it can be a basis on which communities could receive an incentive for engaging in activities of REDD+. It also highlighted that involving local people in monitoring may accelerate decision-making, and provide information to address environmental problems at operational scales of management.

Danielsen et al (2011), however, also note a number of potential shortfalls of such an approach. These include: its requirement for a committed and competent group; the state offloading its responsibilities (and thus costs) of monitoring and reporting onto poor local communities; and the potential incentive for the communities to continue reporting positive trends, so that they continue to be paid, even if forest conditions are deteriorating.

What needs to be done

Capacity building is needed. A viable team of community members should be selected in accordance with agreed-upon criteria. These should be trained about the best practices of monitoring and reporting. The need for initial training of the local people implies a start-up cost that might not be necessary if professionals were used, but the reduced costs for subsequent monitoring outweigh this initial cost.

Establish clear guidelines and standards about how monitoring and reporting should be done, and these should be harmonized across different areas so that the results are comparable at local, national and international levels. In addition, the types of data the communities are willing and able to supply should be defined. With regard to social well being, local people can provide reliable and accurate information about whether or not REDD+ is affecting them, and how. Indicators of socioeconomic status have to be identified that apply to particular localities, but which are consistent with national standards.

There is need for independent third party verification of the work done by the local communities to ensure reliability of

the information and as a means of eliminating potential cases where communities may report wrong trends.

There is need for discussion between local communities and the state to explore how community monitoring and reporting might be nested within or linked to national systems. Further, more discussion and insights are needed on: experience with community involvement in natural resource monitoring and governance; and what conditions are needed to ensure effective community involvement in monitoring and reporting.

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