

# Grassroots facilitators as agents of change for promoting sustainable forest management: lessons learned from REDD+ capacity development in Asia<sup>1</sup>

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*The opportunities and challenges involved in strengthening communication between policy-makers and local stakeholders.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to provide policy-makers and other key stakeholders with insights into the issues and concerns of grassroots stakeholders with regards to REDD+<sup>2</sup> policy and programme development. The lessons shared spring

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<sup>2</sup> Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, including conservation and sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. See also the article on REDD+ in this issue of *Unasylva*.

*Local resource person shares issues and concerns related to REDD+, Nepal*

from experiences in REDD+ capacity development in South and South-East Asia, covering Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal and Viet Nam. Extensive participatory and contextualized discussions and a series of training events contributed to building a cadre of hundreds of REDD+ trainers and facilitators at different levels and reached out to thousands of grassroots communities in project countries.

Subsequent to REDD+ capacity development, grassroots communities have taken a number of initiatives to reduce deforestation and forest degradation. Examples include the revision of forest management plans, the introduction of alternative energy devices, plantation activities and advocacy for women's participation in decision-making.

However, at the macro level, unclear land tenure, poor governance and conflicting land policies continue to pose challenges for the design and implementation of REDD+ and the sharing of its potential benefits. To address these challenges, inform the future global climate regime, and reduce poverty among forest-dependent communities, multi-pronged and multi-scale sustained interventions are needed, supported by partnership-building, collaboration and synergies among stakeholders.

Deforestation and forest degradation, along with agriculture and other land-use

practices, collectively known as AFOLU (Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use), are the second-largest contributor to total global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions after the energy sector and represent a share ranging from 20 to 24 percent of total GHG emissions (IPCC, 2013; Tubiello, 2014). In some countries, such as Brazil and Indonesia, deforestation and forest degradation are together by far the main source of national GHG emissions. Eighty percent of the Earth's above-ground terrestrial carbon and 40 percent of below-ground terrestrial carbon is stored in forests. REDD+ has been proposed as a means for developed and developing countries to work together under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on mitigating climate change impacts globally. It attributes a financial value to the carbon stored in the forests of tropical developing countries, offering incentives to

forest managers/owners for their efforts in reducing GHG emissions from forest lands and in increasing the absorption of atmospheric carbon by managing/conserving forests sustainably.

Given that millions of rural communities depend on forests for their livelihoods and have been sustainably managing forest resources for decades, their meaningful engagement and effective participation in REDD+ is essential to formulate national policies and local institutional processes. Furthermore, as the concept of REDD+ has evolved over the years, it has become necessary to enhance the capacity of grassroots communities in order for them to contribute effectively to REDD+ policy processes and play an active role in implementation mechanisms at the local level.

Although REDD+ capacity development is already underway through multilateral, bilateral and civil society initiatives, most of these focus on technical aspects, are



*Discussion among members of a women's group, Bao Thuan commune, Viet Nam*

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delivered in English and remain limited to key personnel in REDD+ planning and implementation. Yet the most pressing need is to raise local stakeholders' awareness to enable them to participate meaningfully. Suitable tools, including information, education, and communication (IEC) campaigns, are required to provide neutral, balanced information that does not raise unrealistic expectations. Recognizing this need, the Center for People and Forests (RECOFTC) has been implementing a project (referred to in this article as the REDD+ Grassroots Project) with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) since late 2009. At present, the project covers five countries – Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal and Viet Nam – and its main goal is to develop the capacity of grassroots stakeholders, enabling them to effectively contribute to REDD+ processes in the project countries by meaningfully participating in the debate, raising their concerns and aspirations and sharing their experiences in managing and using forest resources sustainably. This article summarizes the project implementation experience and lessons learned.

#### METHODOLOGY OF REDD+ CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

The REDD+ Grassroots Project followed a systematic approach and used a number of simple tools to develop and deliver REDD+ capacity development in five project countries, as described below.

#### Capacity Development Needs Assessment

A Capacity Development Needs Assessment (CDNA) for REDD+ was the fundamental step taken by the project in order to develop a comprehensive and contextualized grassroots capacity-development programme for REDD+. The CDNA for REDD+ used a set of six competency standards (Table 1), with corresponding knowledge, skills, attitude and context for each standard,

**TABLE 1. Competency standards used for CDNA for REDD+**

REDD+ competency standard	
1	Fundamental knowledge and understanding of climate change science and mitigation strategies
2	Understanding of REDD+ in the context of climate change
3	Integration of the REDD+ mechanism into community forest management, i.e. focusing on environmental and social safeguards for monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV)
4	Forest carbon market and trading (may be forest carbon financing)
5	Benefit sharing from forest carbon trade
6	(Opportunity) costs of REDD+

to assess the status of current capacities and capacity-development needs among target stakeholders. Since the grassroots communities were the primary target stakeholders, the CDNA process assessed the capacity-development needs among forest-dependent communities, women, ethnic groups and indigenous people, as well as frontline staff and extension workers of the forest department, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) directly working with local communities, federations of forestry user groups, youth groups, women's groups, teachers, students, and local-level journalists (RECOFTC, 2011).

Besides identifying gaps, the CDNA results were also used to identify various methods/approaches, and to develop a range of IEC materials and tools, to deliver the capacity development among grassroots stakeholders.

#### Cascade approach for capacity-development delivery

The project used a cascade approach for delivering the REDD+ capacity-development activities. This included the design and delivery of training of trainers (ToT) programmes at national and sub-national levels (province/state/district) and a series of training and awareness-raising events at the local level. Using this approach, the project engaged ToT alumni to deliver training, thereby also enhancing knowledge retention among trained alumni. Since the project is implemented through a network of nearly 20 partner organizations, including government, NGOs, CSOs,

local universities, and community-based organizations, developing their capacity was the first step. Using the ToT approach, trainees were then engaged for delivering training programmes at the next level. Moreover, besides enhancing technical knowledge on climate change and REDD+, the ToT also built the facilitation skills of participants. In addition, it developed stakeholders' capacity to promote social REDD+ safeguards through materials and training programmes on topics such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) (RECOFTC and GIZ, 2011; Edwards *et al.*, 2012), gender mainstreaming (RECOFTC, 2013), social equity (RECOFTC, 2014a), and stakeholder participation in REDD+.

#### Channelling grassroots stakeholders' concerns and issues

The results of the CDNA also revealed that while on the one hand the global discourse on REDD+ has been evolving rapidly, the capacity of grassroots organizations to distil the concerns and aspirations of their communities and communicate them to policy-makers is still very limited. To address this gap, the project has used a cascade-up approach to communicate grassroots concerns and issues to policy-makers. This has been done by identifying the communities' key issues and concerns in each project country, followed by multi-stakeholder discussions at the grassroots level. These are then communicated to sub-national and national-level policy-makers and other key stakeholders to influence ongoing REDD+ policy and planning processes in each project country.

### Monitoring and evaluation

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) has remained an integral part of the project implementation approach. The PM&E focused on key aspects of project delivery – use and effectiveness of training materials, tools and approaches; effectiveness of delivery of training programmes; and retention and use of knowledge by participants. To do so, the project notably used Kirkpatrick's model of training evaluation (Bates, 2004).

### RESULTS

#### Improving accessibility of information on REDD+

A general observation based on the CDNA revealed that while a preliminary understanding of climate change and REDD+ existed at national and sub-national level, albeit limited to a few individuals, at the grassroots level such an understanding was almost non-existent across all the countries. Although such a finding may not be surprising, it was nevertheless helpful in assessing current levels of knowledge among grassroots stakeholders, who had some familiarity with the concept of climate change but not with REDD+. Further, because the grassroots stakeholders are the primary target of the project, the results of the CDNA were helpful in exploring innovative approaches to develop the most appropriate IEC materials and tailor them to different country contexts (Table 2). Such IEC materials, besides being produced in English, were also produced in the national language of the target countries via consortia of key organizations in order to contextualize the material (Luintel *et al.*, 2013).

#### REDD+ capacity development delivery

Using the cascade approach for REDD+ capacity development, the project was able not only to reach a large number of stakeholders in a cost-effective manner, but also to link the knowledge-sharing process at different levels (Roy *et al.*, 2014). This also helped to create a local-level network of trainers and facilitators equipped with

**TABLE 2. Information, education and communication materials for REDD+ capacity development**

IEC material	Objective	Primary target audience
Facilitators' manual on REDD+ in English and national languages of the project countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To enhance the understanding of climate change and REDD+ in the context of sustainable forest management</li> <li>To build facilitation and participatory skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National and sub-national level stakeholders</li> <li>Trainers and facilitators working in the forestry sector at national and sub-national level</li> <li>Media persons</li> <li>Project partner organizations</li> </ul>
Facilitators' manual and guidebook on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in REDD+ in English and national languages of the project countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To respond to the capacity development needs on REDD+ safeguards, particularly on FPIC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National and sub-national level stakeholders</li> <li>Trainers and facilitators working in forestry sector at national and sub-national level</li> <li>Project partner organizations</li> </ul>
Question and answer booklets on various REDD+ topics, including safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To provide simple and concise information on climate change and REDD+</li> <li>To respond to capacity development needs on various REDD+ topics, including safeguards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grassroots-level facilitators, including women</li> <li>Local community members</li> <li>Project partner organizations</li> <li>Students</li> </ul>
Posters on climate change and REDD+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To raise awareness on climate change and REDD+</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grassroots communities, women, ethnic groups</li> <li>Grassroots-level facilitators</li> </ul>
Series of radio programmes on climate change and REDD+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To raise awareness on climate change and REDD+</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grassroots communities, women, ethnic groups</li> <li>Local media persons, citizen journalists</li> </ul>
Puppet shows, street plays, drama, songs, competitions, information fair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To raise awareness on climate change and REDD+</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grassroots communities, women, ethnic groups, students, youth groups</li> </ul>

training materials and tools and able to sustain the REDD+ knowledge-building process in their countries. By the end of 2013, the project had delivered more than 500 events, including ToT, refresher workshops, grassroots consultations and various awareness-raising events for REDD+ in the project countries (RECOFTC, 2014b). Over 70 percent of such events concentrated on the grassroots level. Through the events, the project was able to create a cadre of nearly 700 national- and sub-national-level trainers and facilitators, while at the grassroots level it reached nearly 40 000 stakeholders through awareness-raising events in all project countries. Gender mainstreaming in REDD+ capacity development has been one of the project's

key focuses. Of all the trained participants at national and sub-national levels, an average of nearly one-third are women, while at the grassroots level nearly 40 percent of participants in awareness-raising events in the project countries are women. To keep project stakeholders updated about REDD+ developments at the global level and promote continuous learning and exchange of knowledge, refreshers and reflection workshops at the national and regional levels have proven helpful. In particular, annual regional reflection workshops have been effectively used by project countries as a platform for learning from each other and adopting best practices, thereby building a strong learning network and community of practice.

### Retention and use of REDD+ knowledge

The retention and use of REDD+ knowledge varied across different project countries. In countries such as Indonesia and Viet Nam where REDD+ has made good progress thanks to various bilateral and multilateral projects, and in Nepal which has a strong foundation of community forestry, the retention of knowledge on climate change and REDD+ ranged between 60 and 80 percent among grassroots stakeholders. On the other hand, in countries like Lao PDR and Myanmar knowledge retention ranged from 30 to 60 percent. Low rates of literacy coupled with a lack of well-defined criteria for

selecting training participants, as well as the diversity of ethnic groups with different languages and customs, were identified as key challenges for the retention of climate change and REDD+ knowledge in these countries. Also, despite varying levels of knowledge retention, only a few examples of use of the new knowledge were reported by project countries. These included revising local-level forest management planning in order to incorporate climate change and REDD+, initiating plantation activities, advocating for FPIC safeguards in new forestry projects, advocating for the active participation of women in local-level forest management decision-making and a number of success stories of project alumni serving as resource persons at local-level REDD+ capacity-building events.

### Concerns and aspirations of grassroots communities relating to REDD+

The REDD+ Grassroots Project has been able to identify some key issues, concerns and aspirations of grassroots communities, which need to be addressed in order to ensure smooth and effective implementation on the ground. Some of the most recurrent issues are briefly described below:

#### *Complexity of REDD+ language:*

With its complex language, the concept of REDD+ remains abstract for both stakeholders and grassroots communities alike. Most REDD+ concepts and terms are highly technical and do not exist in the native languages of indigenous people and other local communities, hindering their effective participation in national REDD+ programmes (RECOFTC and UNEP, 2011).

*Using the story-telling method to raise awareness among local communities, Myanmar*





*Sharing knowledge with school students,  
Lao People's Democratic Republic*

**Expectations from REDD+:** Complex, confusing, and at times contradictory, REDD+ messages risk raising expectations or exacerbating misunderstandings among stakeholders. At the same time, the growing need for specialized knowledge and technical skills, especially related to the participatory assessment of carbon storage and monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) of REDD+ implementation, risks disempowering local forest stakeholders, who have adeptly managed forests for decades, in favour of the outside expertise required by REDD+.

**Unclear land tenure:** There is widespread anxiety that a poorly designed and implemented REDD+ mechanism may

lead to a backlash against community forestry. Concerns abound that REDD+ will serve as a catalyst for the escalation of conflicts, especially between communities and government – including that the state might reconsolidate forest management over previously devolved forests. This apprehension is primarily based on the fact that in many situations the land-use rights of local communities are not protected by safeguards and communities are not actively engaged in REDD+ design and preparedness processes.

#### **DISCUSSION**

REDD+ capacity development at the grassroots level in the five project countries

has provided a number of useful experiences and lessons. The establishment of a knowledge base is central to REDD+ readiness as well as in progressing through the stages of REDD+. As mentioned above, as REDD+ discourse at the global level continues to evolve, it has been challenging to keep updated information available, comprehensible and relevant for grassroots stakeholders (RECOFTC and UNEP, 2011). Considering the large amount of information available in the public domain, including in the media, some of which may not be verified or may be subject

to different interpretations, expectations among grassroots communities could escalate. It is therefore necessary to filter the information in order to clearly communicate the scope and goals of REDD+ to a wide audience through awareness-raising and capacity-building. While REDD+ requires the development of new elements, such as MRV systems, a benefit-distribution system, and an effective safeguard system, all captured by the National REDD+ Strategies developed to date in the project countries, most policies and measures required for REDD+ are not substantively different from those developed over many years in the context of sustainable forest management. It is therefore important to build on existing experiences of participatory models of forest management and on local people's knowledge for an effective implementation of REDD+, thereby also responding to the Cancun Safeguards (Kant *et al.*, 2011). Further, recognizing that knowledge related to REDD+ comes in many forms, from forest data to economic statistics, and covers topics from MRV to the valuation of ecosystem services to forest laws and policies, it needs to be captured, organized, clearly explained and shared broadly in different contexts, ranging from local to national.

Addressing the issue of unclear land tenure is also fundamental to the effective implementation and distribution of the benefits of REDD+. Unclear land tenure will have negative implications for local communities' rights, livelihoods and practices, and the potential recentralization of forest management through REDD+, as viewed by local stakeholders in the project countries, could undermine the viability of the "+" in REDD+ (sustainable management of forests, conservation, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks) by marginalizing these stakeholders who have a crucial role to play in its success. The persistent ambiguity around the real costs and benefits of REDD+ to local communities, national governments, and other stakeholders further increases the risk of conflict (Patel *et al.*, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

REDD+ capacity-development interventions in the project countries were delivered through an institutionalized process, by partnering with local organizations and using a collaborative learning process among a wide range of stakeholders. This boosted local institutions' competency in forest management, REDD+ and climate change by bringing their ideas, competencies and resources together, and was instrumental for the legitimacy, credibility, effectiveness, and efficiency (through synergy) of the intervention. However, there is no "one size fits all" formula for capacity-development interventions – they should always be target-driven, addressing the specific needs and conditions of stakeholders and reflecting their sustainable development strategies, priorities and initiatives. For REDD+ grassroots stakeholders, a multi-pronged and multi-scale capacity strengthening strategy that draws on the strengths of various learning methods and addresses the unique needs of targeted stakeholders is needed in order to be effective. Facilitators, advocates and IEC materials are all necessary elements in expanding and sustaining capacity building beyond the temporal and spatial limits of the project. However, it has also been observed that due to the complex and changing nature of the subject, repeated capacity-development efforts are needed at the grassroots level in order to ensure that local stakeholders clearly understand the concept and the roles of various actors in implementing REDD+ mechanisms. The more clearly climate change and REDD+ are linked with sustainable forest management, community development and the local livelihoods of grassroots stakeholders, the stronger the support is likely to be for preparing climate-friendly development packages. The crucial elements for this – capacity development, partnership and collaboration – can be fostered through both promoting local initiatives and mobilizing externally-sponsored development resources.

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