

Grassroots facilitators as agents of change for promoting sustainable forest management: Lessons learned from REDD+ capacity development in Asia

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Abstract

This article aims to inform policy makers and other key stakeholders about issues and concerns of grassroots stakeholders with regards to REDD+¹ policy and program development. The lessons shared here are generated from REDD+ capacity development at grassroots level in south and south-east Asia, covering, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal and Vietnam.

By decoding global discourses on climate change and REDD+ extensive participatory and contextualized discussions and series of training events have built a cadre of hundreds of REDD+ trainers and facilitators at different levels and reached out to thousands of grassroots communities for raising their awareness in project countries. Subsequent to REDD+ capacity development, grassroots communities have taken a number of initiatives to reduce deforestation and forest degradation. Some examples include revision of forest management plans, introducing alternate energy devices, plantation activities, advocating women's participation in decision making etc.

Keeping in mind that the climate change and REDD+ are continuously evolving topics, sustained capacity development is needed alongside building skills to effectively communicate aspirations and concerns of grassroots communities to policy makers and thus help bridging a gap between them. At a macro level unclear land tenure, poor governance and conflicting land policies continue to pose challenges for designing and implementation of REDD+ and sharing potential benefits from it. To address some of these challenges, multi-pronged and multi-scale sustained interventions are needed, supported by building partnerships, collaborations and synergies among stakeholders. Such a coordinated effort will ultimately contribute to future global climate regime and help in poverty reduction among forest dependent communities.

Key Words: *REDD+, Sustainable Forest Management, Capacity Development, Land Tenure, FPIC*

¹ Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation, including Conservation and Sustainable Management of Forests and Enhancement of Forest Carbon Stocks

Introduction

Deforestation and forest degradation along with agriculture and other land use practices, collectively known as AFOLU (Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use) are second largest contributor to total global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions after energy sector, having a share ranging from 20 to 24% of the 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% of the below ground terrestrial carbon is stored in the forests. Thus, in addition to the large contribution of deforestation and forest degradation to global emissions, combating both has been identified as one of the most cost-effective ways to lower emissions through a global mechanism, called REDD+. REDD+ has been proposed as a collaborative action between developed and developing countries under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to mitigate climate change impacts globally. It creates an opportunity for financial value for the carbon stored in forests of tropical developing countries, offering incentives for forest managers/owners for their efforts in reducing GHG emissions from forest lands and increasing absorption of atmospheric carbon by managing/conserving forest sustainably.

Considering the fact that millions of rural communities live in and around forests for livelihoods and have been sustainably managing the forest resources for decades, their meaningful engagement and effective participation in REDD+ is essential to formulate national policies and local institutional processes for the future global climate change regime. As the concept of REDD+ has grown over the years, it has become necessary to enhance the capacity of grassroots communities in order for them to contribute effectively in REDD+ policy processes and play an active role in the implementation of REDD+ mechanism at local level. Secondly, although REDD+ capacity development is already underway through multilateral, bilateral and civil society initiatives, most of such initiatives focus on technical aspects of REDD+, delivered in English and largely limited to key personnel in REDD+ planning and implementation. However, the most pressing need is to raise local stakeholder awareness to enable them to take part meaningfully in REDD+ planning and strategy development. Using suitable tools; Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns are required to provide neutral, balanced information that avoids raising unrealistic expectations.

Recognizing the need of developing the capacity of grassroots stakeholders for REDD+, RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests has been implementing a project (henceforth referred as REDD+ Grassroots Project) with support from Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) since late 2009, at present covering five countries – Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal and Vietnam. The major goal of the project is to develop the capacity of the grassroots stakeholders, enabling them to effectively contribute in the ongoing REDD+ processes in the project countries by meaningfully participating in the debate on REDD+ and climate change, raising their concerns and aspirations and sharing their experiences from managing and using forest resources sustainably.

This article summarizes the experiences of implementing the project and lessons learned from a range of approaches and tools used in the project to develop the capacity of forestry sector stakeholders for REDD+ at various levels. The key objective of sharing the experiences from the project is to inform policy makers and other key stakeholders about the effectiveness of various approaches used in the project and also to share the concerns and issues of grassroots stakeholders with regards to ongoing REDD+ policy and program development in the project countries.

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 at the grassroots level in five project countries, as described below.

Capacity Development Needs Assessment

Capacity Development Needs Assessment (CDNA) for REDD+ was the fundamental step taken by the project in order to develop a comprehensive and country contextualized grassroots capacity

development program for REDD+. The CDNA for REDD+ used a set of six competency standards (Table 1) and corresponding knowledge, skills, attitude and context for each competency standard to assess the status of current capacities and needs for developing new capacities among the target stakeholders. Since the grassroots communities were the primary target stakeholders of the project, the CDNA process targeted to assess the capacity developments needs among forest dependent communities, women, ethnic groups, indigenous people, and frontline staff and extension workers of the forest department, non-government organization (NGO), and civil society organizations (CSO), directly working with local communities, federation of forestry user groups, youth groups, women groups, teachers, students, and local level journalists (RECOFTC 2011).

Table 1: Competency standards used for CDNA for REDD+

Sl. No.	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 (maybe Forest Carbon Financing)
5	Benefit sharing from forest carbon trade
6	(Opportunity) Costs of REDD+

Development of REDD+ capacity development material

Besides identifying REDD+ capacity gaps, the CDNA results were also used to identify various methods/approaches and appropriate materials and tools to deliver REDD+ capacity development activities among the grassroots stakeholders. Thus, using the results of the CDNA, the project developed a range of IEC materials and used different tools to deliver REDD+ capacity development among grassroots stakeholders.

Cascade approach for capacity development delivery

The project used a cascade approach for delivering REDD+ capacity development activities. According to this approach, the project designed and delivered Training of Trainers (ToT) programs at national level and sub-national level (Province/State/District) and organized a series of training and awareness raising events at local level. Using cascade approach, the project provided an opportunity and engaged ToT alumni from one level to another for delivering REDD+ training programs, and thus enhanced the potential of 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 in five countries, developing their capacity was the first step, using ToT approach, and later on engaging them for delivering training programs at the next level. Moreover, besides enhancing technical knowledge on climate change and REDD+, the ToT also focused on building facilitation skills of the participants. In addition the project also developed capacity of stakeholders to promote social safeguards of REDD+ by developing a range of materials and delivering trainings programs at different levels 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 stakeholders' participation in REDD+.

Channeling grassroots stakeholder concerns and issues

The results of CDNA also revealed that while on one hand the global discourse on REDD+ has been growing rapidly, the capacity of grassroots organizations to synthesize concerns and aspirations of grassroots communities in relation to local level climate change and REDD+ issues and communicate them to policy makers is still very limited. To address such a capacity gap, the project has used cascade up approach to communicate grassroots concerns and issue to the policy makers. This has

been done by identifying key issues and concerns of grassroots communities in the context of each project country followed by organizing multi-stakeholders discussions at the grassroots levels and synthesizing them to communicate to the sub-national and national level policy makers and other key stakeholders with an objective 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 the project delivery – use and effectiveness of various training materials, tools and approaches, effectiveness of delivery of various training programs, and retention and use of knowledge by the participants. Particularly to assess the effectiveness of delivery of various training programs and retention and use of knowledge by the participants, the project used Kirckpatrick’s model of training evaluation (Bates, 2004).

Results

Improving accessibility of information on REDD+

A general observation reported based on the CDNA revealed that while a preliminary understanding on climate change and REDD+ existed at national and sub-national level, although limited to a few individuals, at the grassroots level such an understanding was almost non-existent across all the countries. Such a finding although may not be surprising, but it was indeed helpful in assessing the current level of knowledge among grassroots stakeholders, who to some extent were familiar with climate change but not to REDD+. Further, because the grassroots stakeholders are the primary target of the project, the results of CDNA were also helpful in exploring various innovative approaches to develop most appropriate IEC materials on climate change and REDD+ and tailor making them for different country contexts (Table 2). Such IEC materials besides producing in English were also produced in the national language of the target countries by developing a consortium of key organizations to provide inputs to contextualise the material in different country contexts (Luintel, et al, 2013).

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"> To enhance the understanding on climate change and REDD+ in the context of sustainable forest management To build the facilitation and participatory skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National and sub-national level stakeholders Trainers and facilitators working in forestry sector at national and sub-national level Media persons Project partner organizations
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"> To respond to the capacity development needs on REDD+ safeguards, particularly on FPIC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National and sub-national level stakeholders Trainers and facilitators working in forestry sector at national and sub-national level Project partner organizations
Question and answer booklets on various topics of REDD+, including on REDD+ safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide simple and short information on climate change and REDD+ To respond to the capacity development needs on various topics of REDD+, including safeguards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grassroots level facilitators, including women facilitators Local community members Project partner organizations Students
Posters on climate change and REDD+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To raise awareness on climate change and REDD+ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grassroots communities, women, ethnic groups

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassroots level facilitators
Series of radio programs on climate change and REDD+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To raise awareness on climate change and REDD+ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassroots communities, women, ethnic groups • Local media persons, citizen journalist
Puppet shows, street plays, drama, songs, competitions, information fair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To raise awareness on climate change and REDD+ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassroots communities, women, ethnic groups, students, youth groups

REDD+ capacity development delivery

Using cascade approach for REDD+ capacity development, the project was not only able to reach to a large number of stakeholders in a cost effective manner, but was also able to link the knowledge sharing process at different levels (Roy et al., 2014). Such an approach also helped in creating a local level network of trainers and facilitators who were equipped with various training materials and tools and thus were able to sustain REDD+ knowledge building process in their countries. By the end of 2013 the project has delivered more than 500 events of various kinds, including ToT, training, refresher workshops, grassroots consultations and a range of awareness raising events for REDD+ in five project countries (RECOFTC 2014b). More than 70% of such events focused at the grassroots level. Through these events, the project has been able to create a cadre of nearly 700 national and sub-national level trainers and facilitators, while at the grassroots level, it has reached to nearly 40,000 stakeholders through awareness raising events in all five project countries. Gender mainstreaming in REDD+ capacity development has been one of the key focuses of the project. Of all the trained participants at national and sub-national levels on an average nearly one third are women, while at the grassroots level nearly 40% participants of awareness raising events are women in the project countries.

In order to keep project stakeholders updated about the new developments on REDD+ at the global level and promote continuous learning and exchange of knowledge, refreshers and reflection workshops at national and regional levels proved very helpful. In particular annual regional reflection workshops are effectively used by the project countries as a platform for learning from each other and adopting best practices of capacity development from each other and thus build a strong learning network and a 'community of practice' both at national and regional levels.

Retention and use of REDD+ knowledge

The retention and use of REDD+ knowledge varied in different project countries. In countries like Indonesia and Vietnam where REDD+ has made good progress due 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 60-80% among grassroots stakeholders. On the other hand in countries like Lao PDR and Myanmar the knowledge retention ranged between 30-60%. Low rates of literacy coupled with lack of well defined criteria for selecting training participants, and diversity of ethnic groups with different language and customs were identified as the some of the key challenges for retention of climate change and REDD+ knowledge in these countries.

However, despite varied levels of knowledge retention, few examples of making use of new knowledge are reported from the project countries. Some of such examples 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 active participation of women in local level forest management decision making and a number of success stories of the project alumni serving as resource persons to various local level REDD+ capacity building events.

REDD+ related concerns and aspirations of grassroots communities

The REDD+ Grassroots project has been able to identify out few important issues, concerns and aspirations of grassroots communities, which need to be addressed in order to ensure smooth and

effective implementation of REDD+ on the ground. Some of the most raised and common issues across the project countries are briefly described below:

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

Expectations from REDD+: Complex, confusing, and at times contradictory, messages of REDD+ risk raising expectations or exacerbating misunderstandings among the 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 the local forest stakeholders who have adeptly managed forests for decades in favor of the outside expertise required by REDD+.

Unclear land tenure: A widespread anxiety, mainly stemming from the fear that a poorly designed and implemented REDD+ mechanism may lead to backlash against community forestry. Concerns abound that REDD+ will serve as a catalyst for the escalation of conflicts, especially between communities and government—not least of which is the fear that the State will reconsolidate forest management over previously devolved forests. This apprehension on the part of grassroots communities is primarily based on the fact that in many situations, the land-use rights of local communities are not protected by safeguards and the communities are not engaged actively in REDD+ design and preparedness processes.

Discussion

The REDD+ capacity development at the grassroots level in 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 has been repeatedly mentioned, REDD+ discourse at the global level continues to evolve, it has been extremely challenging to keep updated information readily available, particularly for the grassroots stakeholders, in a format that can be easily understood by them and is relevant to their local forest management interventions (RECOFTC and UNEP 2011). Considering the fact that a large amount of information being available in the public domain, including in the media, some of which may not always be verified or may be subject to varied interpretation has potential to escalate the expectations among the grassroots communities from REDD+ mechanism. Therefore, filtering through the information to clearly communicate the scope and goals of REDD+ to a wide audience of people is necessary through awareness raising and capacity building, since without this widespread knowledge it will not be possible to address the challenges related with the managing expectations of grassroots stakeholders, and ultimately progress on REDD+ related activities.

While REDD+ requires the development of various novel elements, such as MRV systems, a benefit distribution system, and an effective system of safeguards, 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. Therefore, it is important to build on the existing experiences of various participatory models of forest management and building on local peoples' knowledge for an effective implementation of REDD+, thus also responding to the Cancun Safeguards (Kant et al., 2011). Further, recognizing that the 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 relevant forest laws and policies, it needs to be captured, well-organized, clearly explained and shared broadly in different contexts, ranging from local to national.

Addressing issue of unclear land tenure is fundamental to effective implementation of and benefit distribution from REDD+. Unclear land tenure, while on one hand will bring negative implications for

local communities' rights, livelihoods and practices, the potential recentralization of forest management through REDD+, as expressed by the local stakeholders in the project countries, would undermine the viability of the '+' in REDD+ (sustainable management of forests, conservation, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks) by marginalizing the local stakeholders who would play a crucial role 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 forging partnerships with local organizations and using a collaborative learning process among a wide range of stakeholders. While partnership and collaboration boosted local institutions' competency in forest management, REDD+ and climate change by bringing their ideas, competencies and resources together, these have been instrumental for legitimacy, credibility, effectiveness, and efficiency (through synergy) of the intervention. However, there is no 'one size fits all' formula for capacity development interventions including partnership and collaboration; they could and should always be target-driven, addressing 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 unique needs of targeted stakeholders would be effective. Development of facilitators, advocates and IEC materials are proved to be effective to expand and sustain the main ideas of capacity building interventions beyond the temporal and spatial limits of the project. However, it has also been learned that due to complex nature of the subject which is continuously evolving, repeated capacity developments efforts are needed at the grassroots level in order to ensure that local stakeholders understand the concept clearly, and also the roles of various actors in implementing REDD+ mechanism.

The clearer the linkages between climate change and REDD+ with sustainable forest management, community development and local livelihoods of the grassroots stakeholders, the better would be the support for them in 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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