Gender and REDD: Threat or opportunity for mountain women?

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The role of Himalayan women in forest management is not well recognised despite the role they play in managing trees and forests for fodder, medicine, food, and fuelwood. As a result of existing gender inequities, women seldom hold ownership and tenure rights to land, trees, water, and other natural resources. This has a bearing on women's rights to receive benefits from payment for environmental services activities (PES), including those mitigation measures related to climate change that are land-based, such REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation).

REDD is a set of steps designed to use market/financial incentives in order to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases from deforestation and forest degradation. Its original objective is to reduce greenhouse gases, but it can deliver co-benefits such as biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. REDD credits offer the opportunity to utilise funding from developed countries to reduce deforestation in developing countries.

Women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region have local, specific, and sophisticated knowledge of the interlinked systems of forests, livestock, and crop production. They make huge contributions of labour and time to maintain

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forest and soil resources. Yet, the global community is only now beginning to understand the 'added value' these actions play in limiting and mitigating carbon emissions, through carbon sequestration in trees and soils.

The question that now arises is: does the new focus on carbon emissions mitigation through REDD provide a way for women, who have provided this global environmental service, to receive compensation for their labour? Or, does it pose a new threat to women's

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struggle for access to resources with which to maintain even a low level of subsistence?

Nepal: A model for gender equitable REDD?

Nepal is world-renowned for the bold and transformative model of forest governance initiated in the early 1980s through the Community Forestry Programme. Today, 14,000 community forest user groups (CFUGs) manage over a million hectares of forest. Of these, 878 are women-led and managed. Women also comprise a significant percentage of the members in mixed gender CFUGs.

The knowledge gained from over three decades of implementing community forestry in the hill and mountain regions of the country has lessons on how to engage user group members in forest management schemes. It may even offer a way to design a payment for environmental services model that benefits rural women.

The government of Nepal is committed to implementing a user-based, gender sensitive, and poverty-focused forestry programme for REDD. It is developing policies and processes that support a targeted approach to benefit socially excluded groups, including women.

However, these policies under development lack clear guidelines on how to operate the remuneration at the community level. Moreover, women are not represented in the REDD consultations.

There is a clear need for pilot projects that can generate lessons that will be of interest to the government of Nepal as it strives to institutionalise gender-equitable REDD structures and processes. Since REDD is performance-based, it rewards programmes that are more effective and efficient. Hence, it will be important to demonstrate how women's involvement has made a difference in effectiveness and efficiency.

Can Nepal address this critical gap so that policies, mechanisms, and processes take full account of the differentiated rights, roles, and responsibilities of men and women? Can it promote gender equity in REDD policy and practice in order to reward women who protect and manage forest resources? Can Nepal develop women's leadership capacities, so that women in mountain areas can hold policymakers, forestry staff, and donor institutions accountable to their stated commitments to gender equity?

Conclusions

As a mitigation mechanism for climate change, REDD provides a framework to reward forest managers for their efforts to protect, nurture, and rehabilitate forests and to expand community-based forestry systems that address the basic livelihood concerns of women and other groups depending on this resource. REDD could reduce the vulnerability of women and ecosystems to climate change while bringing new financing and mechanisms that help address poverty alleviation goals. It could reward women for their stewardship (especially regarding saving seeds and nurturing trees) through targeted and effective public governance measures that pay them for their time.

While REDD presents opportunities for positive outcomes for forest-dependent communities, it risks serious negative outcomes if REDD projects exclude rural women from decision-making processes, benefits, and the use of forests on which their households and farms rely. This risk exists because current consultations on REDD at the national and global levels, rarely include women who represent these concerns.

If a country, such as Nepal, can include women in these critical consultations, it can demonstrate how REDD – as a payment for environmental services mechanism – can value women's contributions to forest management and remunerate women for activities that mitigate carbon emissions.