

Who is gaining, who is losing? Examining Benefit Sharing Mechanism (BSM) under REDD+ in India [†]

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Abstract: This paper critically assesses the institutional structure of Benefit Sharing Mechanism (BSM) under Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in global south, managing forest sustainably to conserve carbon (REDD+) in India. Moreover, examines the problems and prospects of livelihood enhancement of the local community. The findings of the study indicates that intervention of carbon market promotes the neoliberal capitalist agenda which can adversely impact the livelihood of local communities through forest grabbing. The proposed top-down centralized model of BSM can hinder the effectiveness and increase leakage. At the local level, the existing institution of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India failed to achieve sustainability and decentralized right-based forest management systems. Our work has led us to conclude without safeguarding the rights of local communities and securing basic necessity for local forest dependent communities, livelihood enhancement would not be possible.

Keywords: REDD+; Benefit Sharing Mechanism; Joint Forest Management; Livelihood of Local Community; Sustainability

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1. Introduction

Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in global south, and managing forest sustainably to conserve carbon (REDD+) appeared in global climate change and forest management discourse in 2005 at 11 Conference of Parties (CoP) of United Nation Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC). It evolved in the subsequent CoP at Bali (2007), Poznan (2008), Copenhagen (2009), Cancun (2010), Warsaw (2013), and Paris (2015). The notion of REDD+ adopted from carbon trading under Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) of Kyoto protocol (1997) [1]. REDD+ provides an opportunity to developed nations and corporations to offset their carbon through buying carbon credit from tropical forest rich countries. It is argued that the financial compensation will work as a positive externality to sustainably manage the forest resources in developing nations.

REDD+ disseminated as the most cost-efficient and fastest way of climate change mitigation and win-win solution for biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. Besides, it is seen as a common platform to achieve the Paris Agreement target and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially goal 13 (Climate Action) and goal 15 (Life on Land) [2]. More than 70 developing nations including India already implemented REDD+ projects [3].

The objectives of the paper are to critically assess the institutional structure of REDD+ Benefit Sharing Mechanism (BSM) in India. Moreover, to analyze the problems and prospects of livelihood enhancement of the local community in policy and ground level.

2. REDD+ in Indian Context

India is one of the central actors within REDD+ negotiation who are compelled to add conservation activities [4]. To implement REDD+ projects, India submitted a readiness proposal of national strategy in 2008 and modified the proposal in 2018. Already implemented first pilot projects in Khasi hill region of Meghalaya and 27 more projects across nation [5].

Further, India introduced the flagship programmed Green India Mission (GIM) under National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2010. It aims to enhance 50 to 60 million tons of carbon sequestration capacity annually by increasing 10 million hectares of forest/tree cover [6]. The government of India claimed that the effort of GIM will lead to achieve National Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Accord.

Any Policy intervention on India's forest landscape is crucial because it is one of the mega-diverse countries with 24.62 percent forest/tree cover. More than 200 million livelihoods directly depend on forest [7,8].

3. Materials and Methods

This article analytically relied upon environmental Discursive approach of Hajer. Discourse is "*an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities*" [9]. It is particularly useful to understand how certain policies gain legitimacy over others and analyze institutional structure.

In the initial stage we used international and national REDD+ policy documents, webpages, research articles and newspaper articles to analyze the discourse and institutional structure of BSM. In the secondary stage, we conducted interviews with the forest department and NGO. In the final stage, conducted focus group discussion, semi-structured interview and participant observation with forest dwellers in Sundarban, India to understand the ground reality.

4. Discussion

Sharing financial benefits with local forest dependent communities to sustainably use the forest resources is the principal component of REDD+. After a decade of REDD+ implementation, there are no universally accepted BSM to equitably disburse the fund. Cancun Agreement, Warsaw Framework and Paris Agreement provides some guidelines of BSM [10]. Different nation-states adopted different institutional structures and benefits sharing mechanisms.

4.1. Institutional Structure of BSM In India

India adopted top-down approach of BSM where fund will transfer through national to sub-national to division to local level in. At the national level, Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) instituted National Designated Entity (NDE) REDD+ with incorporation different ministry and forest bureaucrats. NDE REDD+ will be responsible for technical support and disbursement of fund to sub-national level. Internal finance will be mobilized from allocation through GIM, Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), Namami Gange Programme, Green Highways Policy. Whereas, in the sub-national level, State Forest Department (SFD) and REDD+ cell will the transfer fund to Divisional level. After that, divisional forest department will transfer the fund to local level institution Joint Forest Management (JFM) [7].

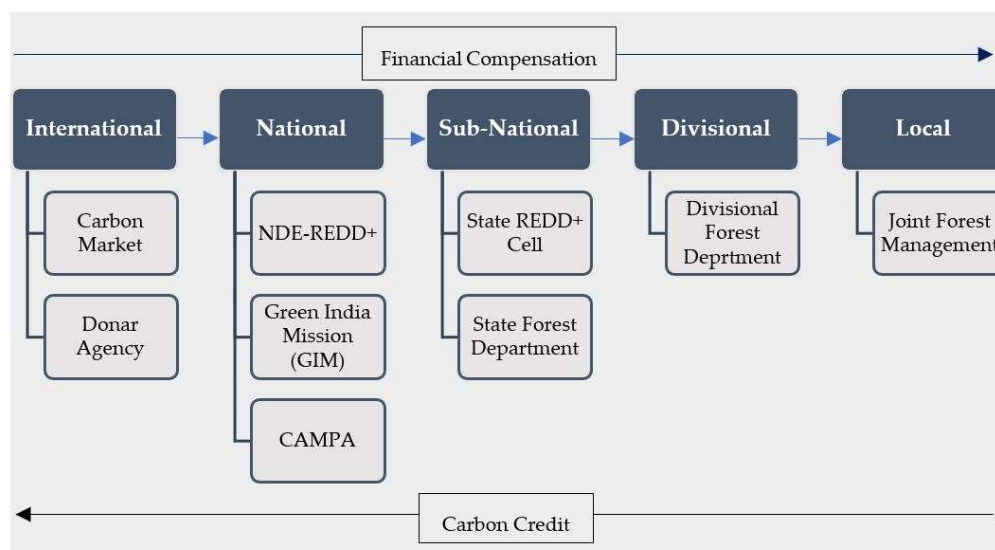


Figure 1. Institutional Structure of Benefit Sharing Mechanism under REDD+ in India. (Source: Authors, 2022)

All the decision making power vested in the ministry or forest department, there is no space for the voice of the local community. The local institution JFM is heavily controlled by the forest department [11]. The nationwide implementation of REDD+ can centralize forest governance [12,13].

4.2. Problem and Prospect of Livelihood Enhancement

The livelihood forest dwellers depend upon minor forest products and forest based resources. The forest dependent community of India mostly lived below the poverty line without basic facilities and amenities. A study showed that from the Khasi hill REDD+ project, there were no adequate financial incentives received by the local community, even though they lost their rights to collect minor forest products on the project site [14].

5. Conclusion

There are numbers of problem discerned in existing BSM in India; firstly, in international level, the intervention of carbon market promotes neo-liberal capitalist agenda which adversely impacting on the rights local community and undermine the indigenous knowledge [15]. Secondly, at the national level, centralized BSM can hinder the effectiveness and increase leakage. Finally, at the local level, the existing institution of JFM in India failed to achieve sustainability and decentralized right-based forest management systems over the last decades.

After decades of REDD+ regime, no significant goals have been achieved. Even new powerful stakeholders are illegally accusing land without any prior consent from local people, and promoting fast growing commercially profitable mono-culture [16]. Further, the livelihood of the forest dwellers has not improved on REDD+ site in India. Our work has led us to conclude without safeguarding the rights of local communities and securing basic necessity for local forest dependent communities, livelihood enhancement would not be possible.

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