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# Transforming forest landscape conflicts: the promises and perils of global forest management initiatives such as REDD+

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**Abstract:** Implementation of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) is designed to relieve pressure on tropical forests, however, many are concerned that it is a threat to the rights of forest communities. These potential risks need serious attention as earlier studies have shown that the Asia-Pacific region is a forest conflict hotspot, with many economic, environmental and social implications at global (e.g. climate change) to local levels (e.g. poverty). Drawing on an analysis of nine case studies from four countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal and Vietnam) this paper examines why and how REDD+ can be a driver for forest conflict and how it also has the potential to simultaneously transform these conflicts. The analytical framework, "sources of impairment", applied in the study was developed to increase understanding and facilitate the resolution of forest landscape conflicts in a sustainable manner (i.e. transformation). The main findings are that REDD+ can be a source of conflict in the study sites, but also had transformative potential when good practices were followed. For example, in some sites, the REDD+ projects were sources of impairment for forest communities by restricting access to forest resources. However, the research also identified REDD+ projects that enabled the participation of traditionally marginalized groups and built local forest management capacities, leading to strengthened tenure for some forest communities. Similarly, in some countries REDD+ has served as a mechanism to pilot Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), which will likely have significant impacts in mitigating conflicts by addressing the sources at local to national levels. Based on these findings, there are many reasons to be optimistic that REDD+ can address the underlying causes of forest landscape conflicts, especially when linked with other governance initiatives such as Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade – Voluntary Participation Agreements (FLEGT-VPA).

**Keywords:** forest landscape; conflict transformation; forest governance; REDD+; FLEGT VPA; FPIC

## 1. Introduction

REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) is a performance-based mechanism that tries to compensate tropical countries for reducing deforestation and forest degradations in their territories. The initiative is generally portrayed in the literature and by international development organizations as having the potential for significant positive outcomes (e.g. Brown et al., 2008). Targeted benefits include mitigating climate change, supporting sustainable livelihoods, maintaining vital ecosystem services and preserving global biodiversity. However, REDD+ has also been depicted by some NGOs and activists (e.g. REDD Monitor, Indigenous Environmental Network), and within certain bodies of academic literature (e.g. Yasmi et al., 2012; Patel et al., 2013) as including significant risks as a driver of conflict.

These potential risks deserve serious attention as forest landscape conflicts are ubiquitous in tropical countries, even before REDD+ (e.g. Mola-Yudego and Gritten, 2010; Gritten et al., 2013). The negative environmental and social impacts of these types of conflicts are increasingly reported in the news media and analyzed in the academic literature (e.g. Gritten et al., 2012; Lester and Hutchins, 2012; Munden Project, 2012; Dhiaulhaq et al., 2014) along with the causes of these conflicts. One direct cause that is consistently highlighted involves an outside actor accessing a forest landscape with a project - whether it be establishment of protected areas by the government

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(e.g. Redpath et al., 2013) or establishment of a plantation by a company (e.g. Dhiaulhaq et al., 2014; 2017), that fails to respect the rights of local communities. REDD+ also fits with this model.

In the context of REDD+, efforts have been made to address some of these social impact risks (e.g. weakening the rights of forest communities) through the establishment of REDD+ "safeguards" (McDermott et al., 2012) which have the overall goal of ensuring that REDD+ initiatives do not cause environmental and social harms (UNFCCC, 2011; McDermott et al., 2012). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) safeguards (UNFCCC Decision 1/CP.16), for example, calls upon the REDD+ implementers to ensure "full and effective participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular, indigenous peoples and local communities" and "respect for the knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples and members of local communities" in REDD+ implementation. Despite these efforts REDD+ is still viewed with concern given the complexity of ensuring adherence to the safeguards (Poudyal et al., 2016). Against this backdrop, one needs to consider that the focus of REDD+ in tropical countries with high levels of deforestation and degradation means that it is often implemented in conflict prone contexts that include weak tenure and rights of forest communities and poor governance. On the other hand academic literature often sidelines the potential for REDD+ to transform conflicts (e.g. Patel et al., 2013).

Drawing on an analysis of case studies in four countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal and Vietnam), the paper aims to examine why and how REDD+ can be a driver for forest conflict and how it also has the potential to simultaneously transform these conflicts. The paper expects to flag several critical conflict-related issues that need greater attention in the development and implementation of REDD+, which may help provide crucial information to prevent and transform conflicts. Additionally, the work will also put forward recommendations to ensure that REDD+, and other related international initiatives, such as the European Union's Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPA) can deliver on its transformative potential particularly for the forest landscape conflict. "Conflict transformation" here is defined as a process for addressing conflict which promotes long-term cooperation and justice (see Dhiaulhaq et al., 2015; Kane et al., 2016). Conflict, if transformed effectively, can serve as an opportunity and catalyst for social change in which parties are empowered and structural inequalities are addressed (Reimann, 2004; Bush and Folger, 2005; Dhiaulhaq et al., 2015).

## 2. Analysing conflict mediation through a transformative mediation framework

In this paper, "conflict" is defined as a situation in which one party or more pursues goals and interests through behavior or actions that impairs another party (Glasl, 1999). This is the starting point for the sources of impairment analytical framework that was developed to facilitate the identification of possible causes of conflict related to forest landscape management (Table 1). The framework was created by Patel et al. (2013) and refined through participant input from trainings and workshops on forest conflict transformation organized by RECOFTC (the Center for People and Forests). Participants in these capacity development activities were mainly government and NGO staff from across the Asia-Pacific region. The framework's emphasis on REDD+ considers how this initiative can exacerbate existing, including latent, conflicts or create new ones.

## 3. Material and Methods

### *3.1. Data collection*

The research was conducted in stages between April 2011 and July 2015. The research included 296 semi-structured interviews (SSI) and 47 focus group discussions ([FGD] with 445 people) with representatives from local communities, concerned government departments and agencies, NGOs, and REDD+ networks. Additionally, six national level expert workshops were held (one each in Cambodia and Vietnam, and two each in Myanmar and Nepal) with a total of 98 representatives

from relevant government departments, implementing agencies, research institutes, and NGOs.

The same guiding questions were used in all of the country sites, though these were modified to fit the interests of the participants (e.g. community members, NGO staff, government officials). The questions followed the nine sources of impairment framework (Table 1) to capture REDD+ and non-REDD+ issues related to forest landscape management and conflict. The responses in one activity (e.g. SSI) were then further explored in another activity (e.g. FGD), with the expert meetings being used to identify key issues (if workshop held before fieldwork) or to discuss the main findings (if held after fieldwork).

The responses in each activity were aggregated with special attention to common perceptions within each respondent group and any differences between the groups allowing for comparative analysis. The research was not designed to determine the relative importance or intensity of the different sources of impairment according to any quantitative criteria.

Table 1. Sources of impairment framework (based on Patel et al. 2013)

| Source | Examples of impairment | In REDD+ context |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Access and use restriction** | Regulations limiting local communities' access to or use of forests due to creation of protected forest areas and/or granting of concessions to companies | Policies or practices that limit local access and ability to e.g. harvest forest products can cause conflict. REDD+ may come with such restrictions that may alter the relationship that local communities have with forests. |
| **2. Benefit distribution** | Unclear or inequitable arrangements for distributing benefits from forest management | The introduction of resources through REDD+ must be factored into this already complex equation of benefit generation and distribution. |
| **3. Competing demands** | Contradictions in economic and development agendas, conservation and cultural importance of forest areas | Alternate land use options might generate more income, making REDD+ the less favorable option to communities thereby undermining government initiatives. |
| **4. Conflict transformation capacity** | Lack of capacity among key stakeholders for sustainably addressing conflict | The absence of effective grievance mechanisms or processes challenging top-down decision-making processes, like Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), could make REDD+ a conflict driver. |
| **5. Leadership** | Leadership is not representative, accountable, or transparent | The approach to and content of REDD+ implementation may strengthen prevalent power imbalances and practices or cause conflict by challenging them. |
| **6. Legal and policy frameworks** | Dominance of state law over local and/or customary traditions; multiple, ambiguous and overlapping regulations related to forest management; and poor enforcement | The commoditization of carbon through REDD+ will add complexity to existing regulatory frameworks for forest management. |
| **7. Participation and information** | Lack of understanding and access to information, limited opportunities for stakeholders to meaningfully participate in forest management | Even where REDD+ implementation is equipped with grievance mechanisms and processes to ensure that affected parties understand and agree with the implications, the effective use of such tools is complex and context specific. |
| **8. Quality of resources** | Actual and perceived decrease or increase in the condition of forest resources caused by an external actor | The pursuit of REDD+ benefits may lead to intentionally skewed assessments of forest quality and leakage. |
| **9. Tenure security** | Overlapping and contested boundaries, lack of recognition of customary rights and traditional uses of the land | REDD+ creates further complexity about carbon ownership and resulting benefit entitlements. |

### *3.1. Study sites*

The study countries were selected to reflect a range of levels of progress in the development of REDD+, from leaders such as Nepal and Cambodia where results- based payments have been made to pilot sites, to Myanmar which is still in the early stages of REDD+. The case study sites (Table 2, Figure 1) were selected based on presence or potential presence of REDD+ activities, occurrence of forest conflict in the landscape, site accessibility and costs of conducting research. All the sites are home to forest communities with a high dependence on forests for their well-being, with these forests being threatened by various issues

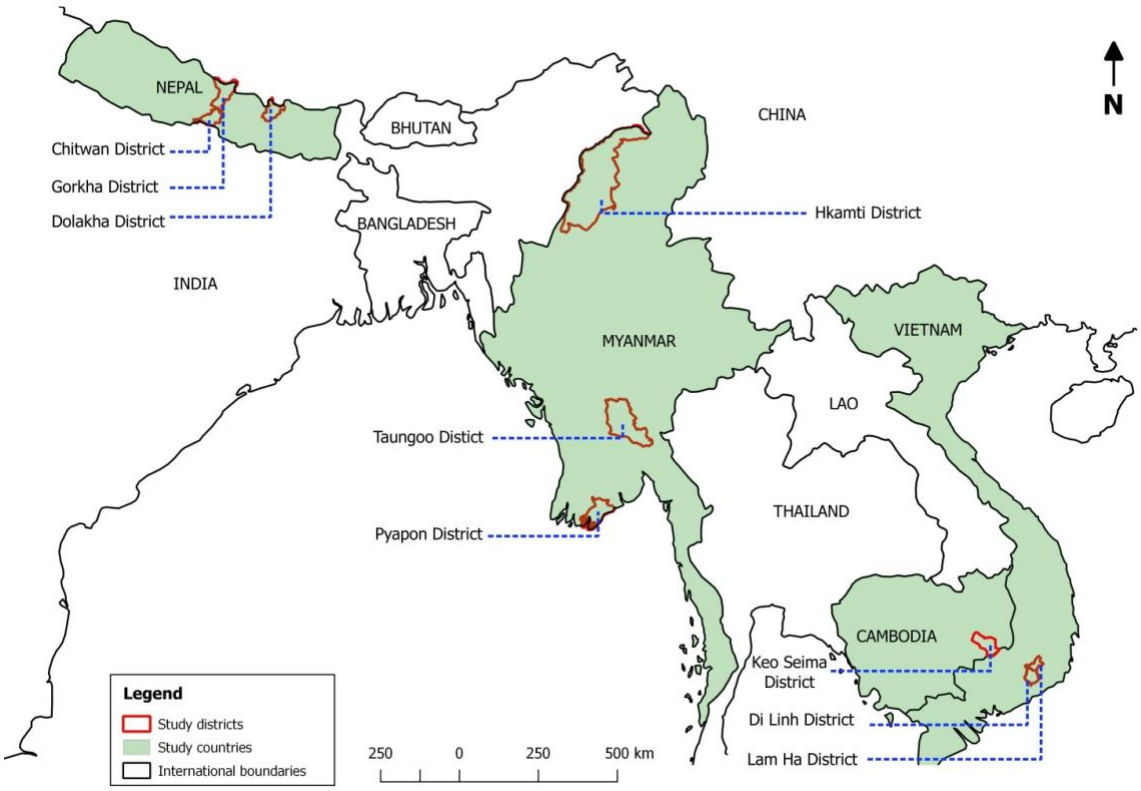


Figure 1. Location of the nine case studies

Table 2. Overview of the case study sites and countries

| Case | Description |
|---|---|
| **Cambodia:** Keo Seima District | • The research was conducted in Seima Protection Forest (SPF) which is predominantly in Mondulkiri Province with a small area extending into Kratie Province. SPF is home to one of several REDD+ pilot projects in Cambodia. The SPF is a remote forested area of 292,690 hectares, divided into a Core Protection Forest Area and two Buffer Protection Forest Areas. SPF is home to 20 villages (roughly 5,000 people) of mainly Bunong ethnic communities who have been living in the area for many generations. The residents depend upon resources inside the SPF for their livelihoods, particularly for cash crop farming, collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as resin, and subsistence shifting agriculture.<br>• Among the 20 villages, six villages (Pu Char, O Chrar, Pu Kong and Gati in Sre Preah Commune, Sre Khtumin in Sre Khtum Commune, Pu Haim in Sen Monorom Commune) were selected for the study sites.<br>• Cambodia developed its REDD+ Readiness Plan (roadmap) in 2010, signed a UN-REDD National Programme and started the inception period in 2011. The National REDD+ Strategy for 2017 to 2025 was finalized in late 2017. |
| **Myanmar:** Hkamti District Pyapon District Taungoo District | • The research was conducted in three sites. The first site is in Yedashay township, Taungoo District in Bago region, in which the Forest Department conducted REDD+ pilot projects with the Korean Forest Service. The second site was in Hkamti Township, Hkamti District, Sagaing Region. The area was a potential REDD+ project site for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The third site is a CF in Pyapon Township, Pyapon District, Ayeyarwady Region. While the last site is not a REDD+ site, it was selected on the basis of it being a community forest that is working to address the drivers of deforestation.<br>• Myanmar joined the UN-REDD Programme in 2011. Its REDD+ Readiness Roadmap was published in 2013, implemented in 2015, and then migrated to a full National Programme for UN-REDD in 2016. |
| **Nepal:** Chitwan District Gorkha District Dolakha District | • The research was conducted in three REDD+ pilot sites: Kayarkhola (Chitwan District), Ludhikola (Gorkha District) and Charnawati (Dolakha District) watersheds. These watershed areas cover a total of 27,789 ha of land in which 13,970 ha (50%) is forest. 10,265 ha (73%) of the forest area is community forest (104 communities). The population (93,000) includes a wide range of caste categories such as Brahmin, Chhetri, Dalit and ethnic groups (Tamang, Chepang, Thami, Gurung, Magar etc.) [ANSAB 2010].<br>• The REDD+ projects were initiated by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources (ANSAB), and the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) in 2009. At the time of data collection, the three pilot projects were testing community forest-based governance and payment mechanisms for REDD+.<br>• Nepal's Readiness Preparation Proposal (RPP) was approved by Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) of the World Bank in 2010. Nepal has also been a member of the UN-REDD Programme since 2010. While the country's Readiness Package was approved in 2016, the draft REDD+ National Strategy is at final stage pending its approval after the federal governance process is clear[1]. |

[1] Promulgating a new constitution in September 2015, Nepal is in the process of adopting a federal structure from the previously centralized one. As of January 2018, the country has conducted elections for selecting local government and provincial and federal assembly members, but the federal processes are being worked out.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Vietnam:**<br><br>Di Linh District<br><br>Lam Ha District | • The research was conducted in Di Linh and Lam Ha districts in Lam Dong province, both UN-REDD Programme pilot sites. The districts cover 260,000 ha with a population of 300,000. The districts contain over 23 ethnic minorities including K'Ho, Tay, Nung, Thai, Hoa and Kinh whose livelihoods come mainly from farming. Forest comprises 56% of the land area in Di Linh and 36% in Lam ha. Approximately 60,000 ha of forest areas are under the management of Commune Forest Management Boards[2]. Among the four communes studied, (two from each district) two communes were majority K'Ho ethnic group, one majority Kinh ethnic group, and the other no majority ethnic group.<br>• Vietnam was selected to participate in the UN-REDD Programme based on the acceptance of its National Programme Document prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the Vietnamese government. Vietnam officially entered the inception and implementation phase of REDD+ in September 2009, moving into the second phase of the programme in 2013. Vietnam has a National REDD+ Action Program (NRAP)[3] as well as provincial action plans (at least 10 for provinces) and site-based implementation plans to facilitate REDD+ implementation (for at least 35 sites) (Huynh and Keenan, 2017). |

[2] Data provided by People Committees in Di Linh and Lam Ha districts extracted from the 'Report on socio-economic development-2010'.

[3] The NRAP in Vietnam was first introduced in 2012 and subsequently revised in 2016 to make it more inclusive and add implementation guidance to 2016-2020 and a vision to 2030 (Huynh and Keenan, 2017).

## 4. Results

### *4.1. Access and use restriction*

The findings from the nine study sites in the four countries indicate that access and use restrictions of forest resources prior to REDD+ were widespread (e.g. in conservation areas or areas designated for land concessions), and that REDD+ can also further restrict access and use. In some of the sites in all the countries, the restrictions have resulted in negative impacts on people's livelihoods through, for example, constraining traditional practices (e.g. shifting agriculture, NTFP collection) that lack legal recognition. This occurred, for example, in protected areas (e.g. Hugaung valley tiger reserve) in Myanmar's Hkamti Township and within economic land concessions in Cambodia's SPF.

In Nepal, following the implementation of the REDD+ pilot project, the Executive Committees of the Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) placed restrictions on the extraction of forest products such as fuelwood and fodder, as well as livestock grazing. REDD+ piloting also encouraged CFUG leaders to increase enforcement and monitoring restrictions in general which have disproportionately affected the forest dependent poor, who have no alternate sources of energy, and vulnerable groups such as women, who are mostly tasked with managing firewood and fodder for livestock. For example, one of female community forest users in in one of the Nepal study sites stated: "I have been rearing goats for 10 years and grazing them in the forest. It is the main source of my livelihood which has been threatened by the CFUG decision to ban gazing in the forest. They (Executive Committee members) have told that if they find any one grazing in the CF, they will impose a fine of NRs 200 (~2 USD) per goat. Those without private land are facing challenges due to these new decisions."

In Vietnam's Lam Ha District, interview participants reported that after the implementation of the government's program of Payments for Forest Environmental Services (PFES)[4] and the UN-REDD activities, they encountered increased restrictions on accessing and using forest resources. While many local community members have benefited from the PFES program, as patrol members and/or through payment for forest management, some local community members expressed frustration with the restrictions, especially not being able to extract timber for house construction.

In Cambodia, after a series of FPIC processes, agreements on the "Cooperative Implementation of the REDD+ project" in SPF were signed by relevant government agencies and local communities in 2012. Based on these agreements, collection of NTFPs are allowed only for subsistence needs, with collection of timber for house building, for example, requiring government permission. Elderly people in SPF in particular expressed concerns that these restrictions would impact livelihoods and that REDD+ may progressively introduce even stricter rules in the future.

### *4.2. Benefit sharing*

The findings in all four countries show that benefit sharing is a widespread and significant source of impairment that potentially leads to conflict. Community level REDD+ stakeholders asserted their desire to participate in decision making regarding benefit sharing. However, some stakeholders, such as government and local elites, often have more power to influence decision making processes. The concerns raised by local community members regarding the possibility of elite capture and corruption are rooted in experience.

The study found that the diversity of stakeholders and overlapping jurisdiction of government ministries and departments have slowed the development of REDD+ benefit sharing mechanisms, while intra-community socio-economic diversity further complicates benefit distribution. Including socio-economic criteria in determining REDD+ payments can enhance benefit sharing equity, but

[4] The PFES program aims to generate funds for forest conservation and improving livelihoods of forest owners and local people engaged in forest conservation. It was first piloted in Lam Dong and Son La province since 2008. Since 2011 PFES has been up-scaled to the national level. It has estimated to have collected about USD 142 million (Trung et al., 2015).

can also be a source of contention. Problems can also arise given a lack of valid and reliable data, which is sometimes the result of deliberate actions to increase their own benefits.

In Myanmar there are different expectations of how REDD+ money should be distributed. For example, in Hkamti District, some villagers proposed that payment should be distributed equally while others argued that households contributing to conservation activities should get more. Some villagers also expressed concerns that the eldest leaders often dominate the decision making due to patriarchal community social structures.

Nepal established the Forest Carbon Trust Fund (FCTF) in 2009 as a performance based financial mechanism for local communities protecting forests in REDD+ pilot sites. The trust fund was considered a key outcome of the pilot project with CFUG representatives expressing satisfaction with the REDD+ payments. However, they, along with NGO representatives, raised concerns regarding the distribution of money among and within CFUGs. This was linked to perceived manipulation by CFUG leaders (some CFUGs overestimated the number of poor households to increase payments). Additionally many upper caste households objected to a distribution system that favored certain minority ethnic groups or lower castes.

### *4.3. Competing demands*

Competing stakeholder interests and management objectives regarding forest resources were found to be an important source of impairment. The increasing price of commodities such as coffee, rubber and luxury grade timber often lead to conflict with other forest management objectives (e.g. conservation). Moreover, in areas with especially valuable resources (e.g. minerals or cash crops) the number of stakeholders and overlapping claims are increasing. Likewise, changes in socio-economic conditions (e.g. migration, market access) and availability of technology (e.g. chainsaws, motorbikes, mobile phones) at the local level are creating complex and competitive dynamics regarding the relative benefits of REDD+ to illegal logging.

In Cambodia, the SPF and surrounding area are subject to high levels of competing interests. For example, in forest areas surrounding the SPF site, many economic land concessions (ELCs) have been granted to private companies; in addition, population growth, including through increased migration, is creating new land pressures, motivating particularly the youths to alternative livelihood sources (e.g. hunting and illegal logging of high value timbers), with some also finding employment with the ELCs.

In the Vietnam study sites, some of the respondents reported that to access more land for food cultivation, they have to enter the remaining forest area (production forest category). If there are no other options for rural livelihoods, the pressure to convert forest (e.g. crops cultivation) will increase. Many members of the Bao Thuan commune felt they have no alternatives to harvesting forest products and slash-and-burn farming for their living.

### *4.4. Conflict transformation capacity*

The REDD+ readiness proposals and/or roadmaps in the countries covered have recognized the potential conflict from REDD+ and stipulate steps for redressing grievances. However, the proposed grievance mechanisms (in Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam) are still in the early stages of development and there are few opportunities for conflict transformation capacity development.

In the site in Phya Pon District (Myanmar), conflict management is typically handled by the CF Management Committee (CFMC). If a conflict involves people from the same village, but not CFUG members, conflict is normally handled internally by the CFMC through traditional negotiation. However, if conflict arises between the community and outsiders CFMC members normally ask for help from local government authorities. Involvement of police and the court were not found in the study villages partly due to costs, including for travel. Moreover, no special conflict management strategy, such as professional mediation, was observed in the area.

In Nepal, the key institution within CFUGs for addressing conflict is the Executive Committee (EC). When grievances are reported, the EC meets the conflicting parties to seek resolution. If this is not possible, the EC may seek help from the local Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN), an NGO, or the District Forest Office (DFO). Normally, when the conflict is between CFUGs, representatives from the affected CFUGs meet. If they cannot effectively address the issue, they file the case with the DFO and follow the legal procedures. The DFO attempts to address conflicts through consensus building and only in the worst cases, takes legal measures. REDD+ pilot projects have seen the creation of two new institutions at the local level both with a mandate to address conflict issues related to REDD+.

### *4.5. Leadership*

Access to and control over forest resources and associated financial and political capital makes local leadership positions increasingly attractive, with REDD+ raising the stakes. This competitive environment means local leaders are increasingly scrutinized; however, concerns of elite capture of REDD+ were present in all focal countries. In some communities, concern was expressed for how and whether REDD+ might expedite the decline in influence of traditional (i.e. indigenous) leaders. Nevertheless, REDD+ was perceived by some community members as an opportunity to strengthen governance and leader accountability (including through the use of FPIC).

In Cambodia, most of the community leaders are men. The reported reason by villagers was men were better educated and more confident to speak out in public as well as the societal tendency society to have more respect for male leaders. Similarly, the voluntary nature of work and need to take part in patrols, often at night, also discouraged women from leadership positions, further contributing to gender inequality.

In Myanmar, notwithstanding political reforms at the national level, decision making at the subnational level was often perceived as slow and bureaucratic, with frequent elite capture. Since the village leader is a paid position and income is expected to increase with REDD+, many respondents expected the village head position will become increasingly contested and political. Similarly, the involvement of household heads, men in most instances, without consideration of gender in collective decision making also poses challenges to equity in REDD+ in the country.

### *4.6. Legal and policy frameworks*

Key challenges relating to legal and policy frameworks in REDD+ include ambiguous provisions in legal documents, overlapping jurisdiction of government agencies, and insufficient consultation with affected communities. Weak coordination during policy making across line ministries resulted in unclear provisions and increased the potential for conflict. Furthermore, insufficient consultation with affected communities during policy formulation sidelines customary practices. Often communities have little awareness of the laws that affect them, leading to confrontations with government authorities when they inadvertently violate laws.

The expert workshop in Cambodia highlighted that ‘carbon rights’ and ‘benefit sharing’ are particularly important issues regarding national legal and policy frameworks for REDD+. There is still no explicit definition or provision in the law regarding the carbon rights from REDD+ because in the 1993 Constitution (Article 58) ‘state property’ is defined to include almost all of the country’s resources, including natural resources (and forests) with the ownership and use rights of the carbon going to the state (Yeang et al., 2014). This reflects the concern that the legal framework does not provide a strong basis for communities to claim carbon rights and associated benefits.

In Nepal, forest-related policy making processes, such as the REDD+ Strategy and the Forest Sector Strategy tend to prioritize conservation over local utilization (e.g. Bampton and Cammaert, 2007; Gritten et al., 2015). This has created tension between organizations advocating for community rights, the government and conservation organizations. In 2012 the government-

proposed amending the 1993 Forest Act which was strongly opposed by CFUGs on the basis that it would curtail local rights. The proposed amendment was perceived by many as driven by the potential financial benefits of REDD+.

### *4.7. Participation and information*

Concerns were raised in all countries, in the expert workshops and study sites, of the challenges regarding capacity, particularly of government staff, to conduct effective participatory processes. This may be compounded by the feeling of community members and NGOs that state actors are disproportionately powerful, which undermines the full and meaningful participation of communities and indigenous people. Nevertheless, the expert workshops in all countries also emphasized the opportunities that REDD+ is providing, including efforts to develop the capacity of stakeholders to facilitate participatory approaches.

One benefit of REDD+ has been the increased mainstreaming of FPIC, particularly in Cambodia and Vietnam. In Cambodia, the implementation of FPIC in SPF was the first instance of full FPIC in the country. The FPIC process engaged the residents of all 20 villages through a lengthy process of awareness-raising, participation, consultation and consent seeking for REDD+. The three-phase process was devised and implemented to ensure compliance with international standards (Anderson, 2011). However, the FPIC facilitation team faced problems related to the lack of strong legally-recognized local representative organizations and in some cases the FPIC process depended on non-elected village chiefs.

In Nepal, the REDD+ pilots have promoted inclusivity in REDD+ and developed leadership capacity of marginalized groups. Dalit households were motivated to participate in forest management activities after receiving REDD+ payments. A Dalit woman from Birenchowk CFUG, Ludhikhola Watershed, said in an interview that “after the REDD program, we are aware of our roles and responsibilities and can express our concerns and voices without any hesitation. Now I am a member of Executive Committee (EC). With this, Dalits have got more opportunities to attend meetings and workshops. Now in EC meetings, women also speak out which is a relatively new practice in our CFUG.” However, not all the increased participation is self-motivated. Some representatives from the CFUGs felt that community leaders have pressured marginalized groups to participate in order to meet project requirements and there is some backlash by more affluent groups against positive discrimination.

### *4.8. Quality of resources*

The performance-based payment mechanism of REDD+, with the amount of payment contingent on the extent and quality of forest resources, is a source of contention given data issues around the accuracy of different forest measurements. The respondents in all four countries said that private sector companies often manage high or the highest quality forest resources, for example, in the form of concessions and often convert forest areas to other uses (e.g. rubber plantations in Mondulkiri province in Cambodia). In Vietnam, while the government has attempted to improve local people’s forest rights though Forestland Allocation (FLA) since the early 1990s, forest management is still dominated by state organizations whose interests often conflict with forest-dependent communities. Most of the high quality forest areas are controlled by Forest Management Boards, State Forest Enterprises and forest companies with local communities allocated poor forest areas (e.g. Sikor et al., 2013). If this remains unchanged, benefits from REDD+ will go primarily to non-community actors. Despite uneven government efforts to protect forests, forest loss and degradation continue due to logging, agricultural land expansion, and shifting cultivation.

In Cambodia, forest clearance in the REDD+ project site has been undertaken by smallholders, medium scale farmers and by speculators selling to large landholders, however their relative

contribution to deforestation is unclear. Some forest is cleared for traditional subsistence crops (rice, maize, etc.), but most is cleared for cash crops such as cashew, soy and cassava. In Cambodia ELCs are the most important driver of deforestation (Delux, 2015). While this is not the case in the SPF itself, surrounding forest areas have been granted to ELCs (WCS, 2013) and the upland grasslands are rapidly being converted to tree crops and cassava (Evans et al., 2013). Whereas in February 2016 the Government confiscated 503,531 ha of forest land from 35 ELCs in ten provinces, as of June 2016, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) had granted 1,552,700 ha of forest land (including inside protected areas) to 223 companies in 18 provinces.

### *4.9. Tenure security*

Tenure security is strongly linked to policy and legal frameworks and competing demands for forest resources. Contested tenure and claims over forests and land have been identified in most of the case study sites, with communities still subject to weak tenure security. Local communities often face uncertain tenure security due to overlapping responsibilities of government offices and ambiguous policies. The research found that while there have been efforts to use REDD+ as an opportunity to clarify land tenure in the project sites and elsewhere, numerous challenges remain including undefined boundaries, conditional or short-term tenure and lack of recognition for customary institutions.

In Cambodia, one of the highlights of the REDD+ project in SPF are efforts to support indigenous community land rights by obtaining Indigenous Communal Land Titles. Andoung Kraloeng village, for example, received its land title in March 2012, which was only the third village in the country to reach this stage. However, the efficacy of such a title remains to be seen as land and forest seizures by large land concessions and mines remains prevalent in the country (Evans et al. 2013). Communal ownership also has a different and less secure set of rights compared to private ownership. Unclear guidelines and lack of transparency in granting ELCs and policies over forestland use were causes of conflict in many of the studied communities.

In all the study countries there has been notable progress in development of community forestry, in terms of area (e.g. CF in Vietnam covers over 4 million ha [RECOFTC, 2017]), but also its legal foundations (e.g. revision to Community Forestry Instruction (2016) in Myanmar moving from emphasis on subsistence needs of community members to commercialization of CF). However, policies and laws do not take into account characteristics of their ownership relations, traditional norms and rules, and farming systems, making tenure claims with regard to REDD+ complex and tenuous.

## 5. Discussion

This paper set out to examine areas of REDD+ implementation that can potentially be a driver for forest landscape conflict, but also help to identify how REDD+ may address existing conflict issues. Numerous sources of impairment that may exacerbate existing, and create new conflicts regarding the development and implementation of REDD+ were found in the case studies in the four countries. These sources of impairment often build on existing issues under the broad umbrella of poor governance (including weak tenure and rights of rural communities, top-down decision making, and lack of concordance in laws and policies) that afflict forest landscapes in the region (Barr and Sayer, 2012). This is reflected in the fact that the sites have suffered from existing conflicts, in various forms, prior to REDD+. The work also found that, in some instances, the implementation of REDD+ has also introduced new sources of impairment which in turn may increase the likelihood of future conflict. It is also notable that REDD+ has introduced some initiatives (e.g. FPIC) that help to address conflict drivers.

Disaggregating the interview and focus group discussion results according to gender and economic status, shows that REDD+ implementation affects forest stakeholders differently. Women

and the poorest community members, for example, suffered the most when there are forest access and use restrictions due to conservation and REDD+ given their lack of alternative livelihoods. In this regard, equity and gender considerations in REDD+ are particularly important, especially in countries that are highly dependent on forest resources (e.g. Khadka et al. 2014, Larson et al., 2018). Furthermore, in many areas access, use and control of forest resources are influenced by gendered power relations (Khadka et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2018). Pham et al. (2016) provide an insightful example from Vietnam where there are significant barriers to the participation of women in decision making on a national level. While progress has been made in the study countries (including being signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)), often there is little tangible change, for example women are still generally absent from the highest levels of decision making (RECOFTC, 2015).

In terms of conflict intensity, the conflicts in the case study sites were at a low level, indicated by contentious debates and fears of future tensions. However, no coordinated community actions such as protests, lawsuits or physical confrontations were present in the study sites according to the interview participants or local media reporting. This does not mean, however, that the conflict issues are insignificant or escalation will not occur. It is often the case that the conflict parties, specifically local communities, realize the risks if the conflicts were to escalate (Yasmi et al., 2012), and therefore avoid direct confrontation. Nevertheless, left smoldering and/or improperly addressed, low intensity conflicts can intensify with impacts ranging from project failure to violence (Engel and Korf, 2005; Yasmi et al., 2006). In this context therefore identifying sources of impairment preemptively helps create a deeper understanding, with the goal of identifying and preventing potential conflicts and transforming conflicts that exist or will likely emerge. Using participatory tools and processes designed to facilitate mutual understanding would be of value (Gritten et al., 2009).

This study also found that certain REDD+ initiatives had significant conflict mitigation and transformation impacts and potential. Some new developments such as increased participation of traditionally marginalized groups, including through the use of FPIC in Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam (but also looking forward in Myanmar where political changes and policy shifts are creating unprecedented opportunities – reflected in strengthening of CF in the country) may help address existing or potential conflicts. Similarly, the emphasis on traditionally disadvantaged social groups (e.g. Dalits) in the REDD+ payment criteria in Nepal has helped to address some social injustices and other deep structural challenges. Additionally, the development of grievance redress mechanisms (although still in early stages of development) in the four countries studied could positively contribute to reducing conflicts in and around forestlands in REDD+ sites.

The recognition and appreciation of communities of the REDD+ projects are attributable, in part, to the efforts and good faith in implementing FPIC. The FPIC processes in the case study sites were some of the first ever applied in the country regarding forest management. These are big steps towards effective participation in REDD+, there is, however, still room for improvement (e.g. AIPP and IWGIA, 2012), with one of the biggest challenges being perceptions and capacities of FPIC among government and company staff. This is coupled with the fact that FPIC's effectiveness is strongly linked to the strength of tenure and legal rights (Mahanty and McDermott, 2013).

Ensuring the effective implementation of social and environmental safeguards into REDD+ strategies and implementation is essential for the effectiveness of REDD+, particularly to ensure that REDD+ projects 'do no harm' (Peskett and Todd, 2013). For example, if unclear benefit sharing mechanisms, elite capture and lack of accountability are not addressed within REDD+, the influx of funds could create perverse incentives and deepen economic and social inequity while having adverse impacts on forest climate change mitigation (Doherty and Schroeder, 2011). REDD+ design is actively seeking to address these issues. There are concerns, however, that safeguards do not go far enough and are too open to interpretation by governments and REDD+ project proponents while NGOs serve as the only watchdogs (WRM, 2015). Others have pointed out that the 'do no harm'

principle erroneously implies that forest communities already have secure rights (Marion Suiseeya, 2015; 2016), weakening the transformative potential of REDD+.

The different initiatives that may result from the introduction of REDD+ should also consider the drivers of conflict, and how the sources of impairment may vary according to their prominence. This has implications not only for the impacts of the conflict, but also the focus of the interventions to address them (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Mapping the sources of impairment, their causality and conflict transformation implications

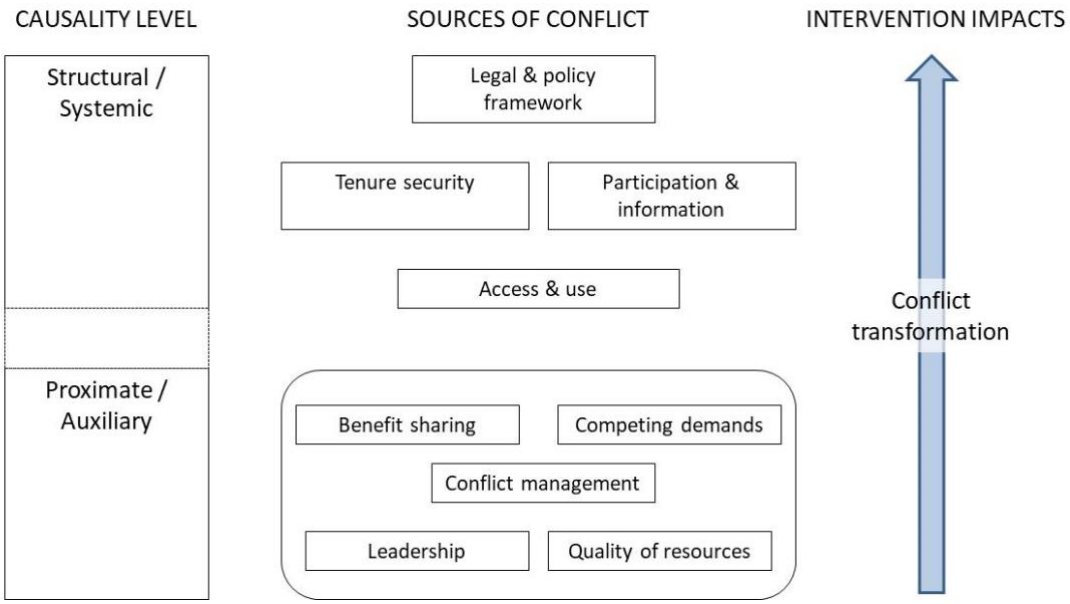


Figure 2 is an illustration based on the research findings of how the sources of impairment can be structured to reflect structural (systemic) and proximate (auxiliary) levels of causality. As such it enables the identification of focus areas when aiming for conflict prevention and transformation in implementing REDD+ through focusing on structural causes. Addressing the legal and policy framework, tenure security and participation in REDD+ requires significant investment, including time and political will from the decision makers and project implementers. The emphasis on these sources of impairment is also recognized in the literature on the issue (e.g. Ribot and Larson, 2012; Dhiaulhaq et al., 2015). The proximate / auxiliary conflict causes are listed in no particular order as they were found to have mixed levels of importance in the cases studied.

The findings have several implications for preventing and transforming conflict in the study sites and beyond, including the necessity of multilevel (local, subnational, and national) efforts. In particular, to prevent and transform conflict in REDD+, requires going beyond party level conflicts (e.g. restoring relationships and reaching agreements) to include the larger conflict context (i.e. structural issues). This effort will require long term engagement, trust building and cooperation between the government, communities and NGOs at local, subnational and national levels starting at the earliest stage of REDD+ development, as well as synergizing with other forest governance initiatives such as FLEGT-VPA. For the sustainable and socially equitable implementation of these and similar initiatives, progress on fundamental issues of land reform will be required.

The EU's FLEGT initiative, particularly the VPAs, is comparable to REDD+ in many ways including the fact that it is an international forest governance regime, it mandates non-governmental stakeholder involvement, seeks to use market mechanisms to incentivize improved forest governance, and requires consistent and credible monitoring (Tegegne et al., 2017). Most significantly, similar to REDD+, FLEGT has the potential to both benefit and harm local communities

(including smallholders), and thus cause and mitigate conflict, depending on its effective implementation. This study on the sources of impairment in REDD+ provides some key transferable insights into guiding FLEGT initiatives to ensure it is implemented in a manner which mitigates and transforms conflicts. This includes the primacy of the three structural sources of impairment, namely legal and policy frameworks, tenure security, and participation and information in determining the success and transformative potential of FLEGT. As both FLEGT and REDD+ create incentives for governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to address these three issues sustainably, synergies should be sought wherever possible to ensure these initiatives are mutually reinforcing, especially where they can mainstream norms of effective forest governance.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings suggest that to anticipate and transform conflict in the context of REDD+, multifaceted approaches which address, or at least consider, all nine sources of impairment are required. This is supported by a large number of respondents in the four countries being able to identify concrete examples of all nine sources of impairment in the selected communities. If one were to prioritize, the current research study, and the literature greatly emphasize the importance of clarifying tenure and rights. Many countries in the Asia-Pacific region have programs for strengthening community forestry. However, they often fail to recognize the importance of ensuring that the local communities can tangibly benefit from their tenure. If their tenure and rights are weak, it means their starting position for REDD+ is also weak (also undermining FPIC). One way forward would be the mainstreaming of the UN Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure (VGGT) in forest landscape related policies. The developing FLEGT-VPA process in many countries in the region also provides opportunities for this. Additionally, the mainstreaming of FPIC in projects is also highly recommended. This would require legal and regulatory support, but also requires a capacity development program for national and sub-national government staff, as well as staff of companies and NGOs. Furthermore, forest governance monitoring systems need to be strengthened, harmonized, and made accessible to local communities.

REDD+ and FLEGT VPA have significant potential to strengthen forest landscape governance across the Asia-Pacific region, with transformative outcomes for rural communities. Renewed efforts by international organizations such as EFI FLEGT and REDD Facilities, academics, civil society and donors to maximize the synergies from these initiatives, as well as linking with other global (e.g. The UN Sustainable Development Goals) and national initiatives (e.g. the peace process in Myanmar) is vital to institutionalize and eventually scale up lessons learned, including to address the structural drivers of forest landscape conflicts in the region.

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**Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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