Voices in the Forest: Unraveling REDD+ Discourse and Narratives in the Bale Eco-region, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

REDD+ projects are viewed in environmental discourse as a centralized framework to assist ongoing initiatives to stop deforestation and forest degradation and to advance sustainable forest management. This case study captures the intricacy of REDD+ narratives and their practical implications through a qualitative methodology that includes in depth interviews and document analysis. We used snowball sampling to identify participants with diverse perspectives on REDD+ discourses. The interviews were conducted with 25 key informants who represented a variety of stakeholder groups. Discourse analysis was applied to examine contrasting perspectives of ecological modernization and civic environmentalism storylines and narratives on REDD+ implementation. Additionally, it utilized content analysis to explore diverse viewpoints on REDD+ key dimensions and strategic aspects to gain valuable insights from different stakeholder coalitions. We identified three primary discourse coalitions: promoters, moderators, and opponents. The promoters, predominantly consisting of government agencies and international organizations, view REDD+ as a market-driven, technocratic solution to climate change. The moderators, comprise mostly of regional authorities, universities and local institutions, who tend to advocate for a more balanced approach, emphasizing social justice, local empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods. Opponents primarily include the private sector, civil society networks, scholars, indigenous communities and small-scale farmers, express concerns about the potential negative impacts of REDD+, including on land tenure, cultural disruption, and increased inequality. Our analysis reveals the power dynamics at play, with dominant discourses often overshadowing local perspectives. We argue that a more nuanced understanding of these competing narratives is crucial for effective REDD+ implementation. By considering the diverse perspectives of stakeholders and addressing underlying power imbalances, it makes it possible to harness the potential of REDD+ to promote both environmental conservation and social equity in the Bale Eco-region.

KEYWORDS

Environmental discourse; Environmental protection; Discourse analysis; Social justice; REDD+.

1. INTRODUCTION

REDD+ has emerged as a crucial component of forest governance arrangements, with the potential to combat climate change through the reduction of deforestation and forest degradation (Nielsen, 2014). However, REDD+ is a complex and contested concept that is shaped by various discourses. Therefore, it should be critically analyzed as it is not a neutral tool (Feindt & Oels, 2005). The deliberations on governance in relation to REDD+ are impacted by prevailing discourses that shape the understanding and resolution of an issue, which can be explained through discourse analysis (Poudel & Aase, 2015; Pascoe, 2018). For instance, there are many different levels of discourse surrounding REDD+, covering an array of international concerns to local realities. Such levels interact to reinforce the significance of transparent

governance, in which genuine political debts unfold through open communication in the management of forests (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017). Developing fair and successful REDD+ policy in the Bale eco-region requires an understanding of these political, economic, and social issues, which is the main topic of this paper.

Three meta-discourses were put forward as potential approaches to address issues related to climate change, including: "green governmentality", which emphasizes reforms driven by experts at a multi-lateral level; "eco-modernization", which focuses on market-driven reforms guided by economic rationality; and, "civic environmentalism" which underscores people-centered reforms through the third sector in order to combat climate change. These meta-discourses provide insights into global economics, politics, and culture, and contribute to our understanding of carbon forestry (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2006). Although the REDD+ mechanism has become a well-known strategy for mitigating climate change, conflicting discourses and power dynamics at the international, national, and local levels influence how it is implemented (Johnson, 2021; Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017). While proponents argue that REDD+ can combine cost-effective mitigation with sustainable development, critics draw attention to concerns about equity and local participation (Nielsen, 2014). The discourse around REDD+ frequently reflects a techno-managerial mindset that is dominated by, and favors carbon commodification, which can strengthen current power structures and increase state control over forest resources (Johnson, 2021). The implementation of REDD+ reveals gaps between global discourse and local realities, potentially undermining its stated objectives (Johnson, 2021; Nielsen, 2014; Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017).

Moreover, the evolution of REDD+ has been influenced by conflicting discourses and narratives, resulting in the establishment of new institutional arrangements (Woldegiorgis, 2020; Den Besten et al., 2014). While earlier study has emphasized the difficulties encountered by REDD+ initiatives in the Bale Eco-Region, little is known about how various environmental discourses influence the stories told and the ways in which REDD+ is implemented (Bekele et al., 2015; Brown & MacLellan, 2020; Endalkachew et al., 2021). Interest in REDD+ implementation in Ethiopia is growing, but there have been few studies that have been done to explore the different discourses and narratives around its stakeholders and how these affect practice and policy (Andoh & Lee, 2018).

In addition, existing studies tend to adopt a descriptive or normative approach, overlooking the diversity, complexity, and dynamics of global forest discourses and their implications for REDD+ strategies (Morita & Matsumoto, 2023). Thus, further investigation is required to understand how REDD+ policy makers perceive and value the needs and interests of local populations, and how disputes within REDD+ discourses are likely to stem from and reflect underlying differences in actors' norms and ethics (Brown & MacLellan , 2020).

This study addresses a gap in knowledge by examining how diverse environmental discourses influence REDD+ practices in Ethiopia. Thus, the research question guiding this study is: **how do different environmental discourses and narratives among stakeholders influence the implementation of REDD+ in the Bale Eco-region, Ethiopia?**

This study addresses this gap by employing discourse analysis to investigate how different environmental discourses and narratives among stakeholders (promoters, moderators, opponents) influence REDD+ implementation in the Bale Eco-region, Ethiopia. By revealing these contrasting viewpoints, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers to foster more inclusive and effective REDD+ programs that account for the diverse perspectives and priorities of stakeholders across different

regions.

1.1 Theoretical perspectives and analytical framework

Discourse refers to a broad set of ideas and communication styles that shape collective understanding and reality. It connects shared ideologies and perspectives, influencing how we perceive and address environmental issues (Little et al., 2006). In the context of REDD+, discourse encompasses the overarching themes and viewpoints about forest carbon protection and climate governance. Narratives are specific stories or accounts related to REDD+ told by different stakeholders, which can be categorized into promoters, moderators, and opponents. These narratives help us understand how various actors use and interpret discourses, providing insights into their perspectives and the implications for REDD+ implementation (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Storylines are key themes or plot points within narratives that shape how issues are framed and understood. For example, a storyline might focus on economic benefits or environmental impacts of REDD+. Storylines can thus serve as tools for political manipulation, framing issues to support particular perspectives and limiting opposing viewpoints (Hewitt, 2009). They are constructed narratives that influence decision-making and policy by highlighting certain aspects while downplaying others.

REDD+ is a cornerstone of global climate change mitigation policy, promoted as a mechanism to reduce deforestation and forest degradation while also benefiting local communities. However, critics argue that its market-based approach, rooted in neoliberal environmentalism, is ill-suited to addressing the complex political and social factors driving deforestation in tropical regions (Williams, 2023). Critics argue that REDD+ is not merely a technical, science-driven program but is deeply intertwined with politics and power dynamics. Studies have highlighted how the processes of benefit distribution and decision-making within REDD+ projects can exacerbate existing disparities (Corbera, 2012; Bayrak & Marafa, 2016). These critiques emphasize the need to explore environmental discourses in more detail, identifying the narratives and thus societal implications of dominant REDD+ discourses and practices. The literature indicates three alternative approaches. The first is "green governmentality" for intergovernmental action. The second is "eco-modernization" for market-based solutions. The third is "civic environmentalism" for citizen-led initiatives. These three frameworks illuminate the complex web of global forces influencing climate action, and in combination show new ways carbon forestry initiatives can challenge technocratic dominance and offer a more holistic approach (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2006).

In addition, Civic environmentalism brings a people-centered approach to environmental problems, putting concerns like environmental justice, ecological sustainability, and equity at the forefront. It critically examines the dominant narrative of ecological modernization, highlighting the gap between its promises and realities. Power relations, trade-offs, and community inclusion are key pillars of this approach, pushing back against technocratic, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Civic environmentalism prioritizes social and environmental protection over marketizing forest carbon. Ecological modernization, on the other hand, presents deforestation as a market failure caused by undervaluing carbon's economic worth. This, proponents argue, disincentivizes communities from conserving forests. Their solution - carbon markets and economic education - appears technical and neutral, but critics argue it ignores power dynamics and underlying inequalities. While ecological modernization presents solutions as apolitical and purely technical, civic environmentalism highlights the inherent political dimensions of environmental issues. They point out how power dynamics and market forces influence local

communities and can undermine genuine conservation efforts. This critique challenges the assumption that economic incentives alone can address complex environmental problems without considering social and political contexts. Instead of focusing solely on technical fixes and market mechanisms, civic environmentalism flips the script by putting power dynamics and non-Western knowledge at the helm. It recognizes that political forces, especially the power imbalance between the Global North and South, significantly influence conservation efforts. This focus on the political landscape leads to alternative solutions like valuing local knowledge and holistic approaches that consider social and environmental factors alongside economic ones (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2006). The reliance on markets and technical experts in addressing environmental issues is a key aspect of ecological modernization. This approach can lead to unintended consequences and usually represents a technocratic domain that lacks citizen deliberation and participation (Bailey & Newell, 2011). Krasny et al. (2014) provide a contrasting perspective, emphasizing the role of community-based environmental stewardship in generating ecosystem services and enhancing human well-being. They highlight the potential of civic ecology practices, such as community gardening and restoration initiatives, in addressing environmental concerns. These perspectives align with the principles of civic environmentalism, which prioritize social and environmental safeguards and the inclusion of local stakeholders in decision-making processes.

In our study, we utilize the above theoretical framework to analyze how different discourses, and their associated storylines influence REDD+ practices. By examining the underlying assumptions and rhetorical strategies employed by various stakeholders, we aim to identify key storylines shaping the region's REDD+ policy landscape. These storylines can be broadly categorized into two primary competing discourses: ecological modernization and civic environmentalism. Ecological modernization narratives promote the idea of win-win scenarios, cost-efficiency, and carbon commodification. Civic environmentalism, on the other hand, emphasizes governance reform, social safeguards, and challenges the potential for carbon colonization and top-down approaches (Nielsen, 2014). By analyzing these competing storylines, we seek to understand how different actors frame REDD+ in a way that aligns with their specific interests and goals.

This study explores 12 key dimensions and strategic aspects of REDD+ storylines, which include forest definition, deforestation and climate change, deforestation drivers, source of funding, co-benefits and safeguards, carbon rights, scope of activities, participation, implementation scale, payment strategy, targeting and REDD+ framed to take early actions. By uncovering the symbolic meanings and policy implications embedded within these storylines, we can gain valuable insights into REDD+ discourse in the Bale Eco-region.

2. THE BALE MOUNTAINS ECO-REGION

The Bale Mountains Eco-Region is located 400 km southeast of Addis Ababa. It is component of the Bale-Arsi massif in Ethiopia's South-Eastern Highlands. It is located within the Oromia Regional State, as part of the Bale and West Arsi Zonal Administration (Watson et al., 2013; Groos et al., 2022). It is referred to as an eco-region in this article to be consistent with the Bale REDD+ Project implementers at the case study site as well as the national use of the word to refer to this area. Agarfa, Berbere, Dinsho , Gasera, Goba, Gololcha, Goro, Harena Bulluk, Kokosa, Delo Mena, Nensebo, Mede Welabu, Gora Damole, and Sinana are among the 12 woredas (Hailemariam et al., 2016). These woredas are made up of kebeles, or villages, that are the smallest level of local government (Watson et al., 2013).

The Bale Eco-Region in Ethiopia has experienced significant land use and land cover changes, with forests losing 123,751 ha while farmland gained 292,294 ha between 1985 and 2015. Prolonged drought has induced people to migrate to forest regions, and the "villagization" policy has converted many pastoralists into sedentary farmers. This is to avoid simply attributing deforestation due to "population growth" or overgrazing, which contributes to harmful assumptions and narratives about deforestation that often place the blame on small-scale farmers and villagers (Hailemariam et al., 2016). The region's biodiversity is under threat for a variety of reasons, with increasing fragmentation of forest ecosystems and encroachment of human activities (Mezgebu & Workineh, 2017). According to Bekele et al. (2015), overgrazing, illicit wood extraction for firewood and charcoal, and forest clearing for agriculture are the primary causes of large-scale deforestation in the region. The problem is made worse by underlying causes such as inadequate law enforcement, rapid population expansion, insufficient forest tenure, and low stakeholder participation (Mezgebu & Workineh, 2017). Although the goal of REDD+ programs is to combat deforestation, there are still issues that need to be resolved, such as inadequate economic benefits for communities, low enforcement ability, persistent deforestation, and weak institutional frameworks (Endalkachew et al.,, 2021). Enhancing tenure patterns, forest governance, dependable long-term funding, and benefit-sharing systems are necessary for the successful implementation of REDD+ (Kweka et al., 2015). For the Bale eco-region to manage its forests in a way that is effective, efficient, and equitable, these problems must be resolved.
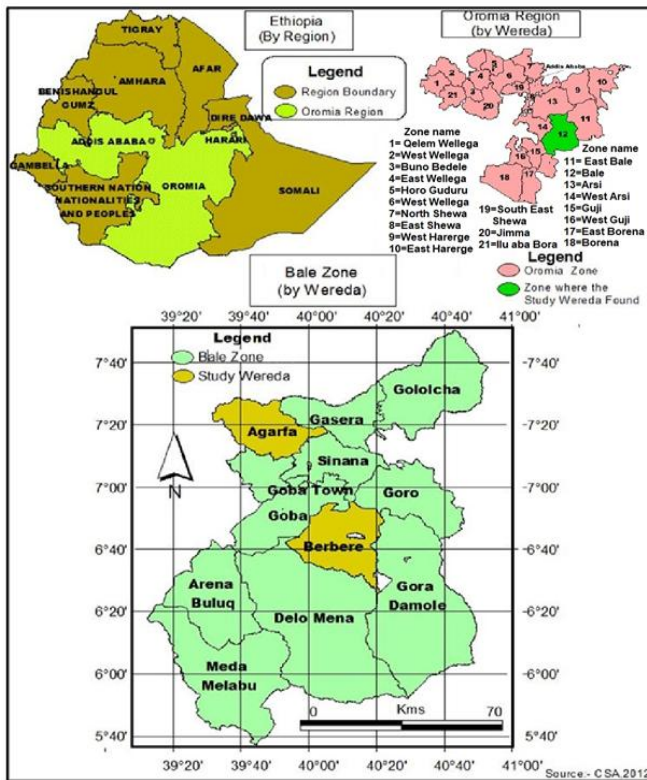

Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia, the Oromiya Regional State and the Bale Mountain Eco-Region [Source: Central Statistical agency of Ethiopia (2012)]

The Agarfa and Berbere woreda were selected from the Bale eco-region as the study area. They were selected due to their earlier involvement in a REDD+ project initiated by the international community in 2006. The two community user groups from these forests were among 15 CFUGs in the Bale Eco-Region in Ethiopia, where the REDD+ project was implemented at a national level for the first time. The rationale behind selecting the two pilot projects was to obtain a thorough understanding of the Bale-Eco-region's diverse communities and better understand the local dynamics of REDD+ implementation. This site and user group selection enabled us to comprehend the ways in which various narratives unfold, as well as their active involvement in forest development activities resonated through REDD+ discourse. Our goal is to investigate how sustainability dimensions have distinct resonances that fit into the complexity of REDD+ conversations. Taking a closer look at the details at the local level, our targeted approach investigated how REDD+ is being implemented in the selected districts of Ethiopia's Bale Eco-region.

3. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study utilized a qualitative research approach to analyze the implementation of REDD+ through environmental discourses within the context of the Bale Eco-region. This involved conducting key informant interviews, and document analysis (examining relevant government policies or strategies related to the REDD+ project). Snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants due to the complexity of the research topic and the diverse range of actors involved. The sampling process began with a small group of key informants selected based on their expertise and relevance to the study. We asked each respondent the following question: Could you please recommend individuals within your network who might have relevant experience or knowledge related to REDD+ discourses and narratives? These initial participants then referred us to others within their networks who could provide valuable insights from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Thus, 25 key informant interviewees were selected to explore REDD+ discourse and practices at the national and local level.

Participants interviewed represented various stakeholders, including federal agencies, regional and local institutions, international NGOs, universities, local communities, small scale farmers, and scholars. They were selected from a diverse range of roles, including policymakers, wood/timber associations, academia, forest-dependent communities, and both public and private sectors.

Table 1. list of key informant participants

Stakeholders	Name of institutions	Number of KIP	Categories of actors
Federal institutions	EFCCC	1	Promoters
	REDD+ secretariat	1	
Regional institutions	OFWE	2	Moderators
	OEPA	2	
International NGOs	Farm Africa	2	Promoters
	Sos- Sahel	1	
	UN-REDD	1	
Universities	Madawalabu University	2	Moderators
Local institutions	CBO	2	
	WEPA	2	
	DOFWE	1	
	Women, youth social affairs	2	Opponents
Local communities	Small scale farmers	2	
Scholars/researcher	REDD+ researcher	2	

Stakeholders	Name of institutions	Number of KIP	Categories of actors
Civil societies	Civil societies representative	1	
Private sector	Wood or timber association	1	

Abbreviations: EFCCC: Environment forest and climate change commission, OFWE: Oromiya forest wild life enterprise, OEPA: Oromiya environmental protection authority; CBO: Community based organization, WEPA: Woreda environmental protection authority, DOFWE: District level forest wild life enterprise.

Throughout this research, we prioritized the ethical treatment of participants. We faced several key challenges. Obtaining informed consent was crucial. We developed a detailed consent form outlining the study's purpose, potential benefits and risks to participants, and their right to withdraw at any stage. This form was presented to participants before their involvement, ensuring they understood their rights and made informed decisions. In addition, maintaining participant confidentiality was a top concern. We anonymized all collected data, removing any personally identifiable information. Data access was restricted to authorized personnel only to safeguard participant privacy.

3.1 Method of data analysis

This study utilized discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis to examine the discourse, narratives, and storylines surrounding REDD+ implementation in Ethiopia. First, we identified discourse coalitions, or groups of actors sharing and promoting specific storylines within the REDD+ debate. This study employed discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis to examine discourse, narratives and storylines of REDD+ implementations in Ethiopia. First, we identified discourse coalitions : groups of actors sharing and promoting specific storylines within the REDD+ debate (Rantala & Gregorio, 2014; Schulz, 2020). To conduct our analysis, we recorded, transcribed, and analyzed interviews and documented discussions using simple coding methods. During preliminary analysis, we regrouped codes to reflect individual actors' positions with respect to REDD+ storylines, identifying adherence to particular forms of storylines related to ecological modernization and civic environmentalism.

Discourse analysis was employed to explore these storylines and narratives based on our theoretical framework. To further enrich our analysis, we incorporated key dimensions and strategic aspects of REDD+ storylines. First, we conducted a comprehensive review of existing REDD+ literature to pinpoint commonly discussed dimensions and strategic aspects of the program. These dimensions were then cross-referenced with data collected from the interviews. Based on these initial findings, we developed a refined coding scheme incorporating 12 key dimensions and strategic aspects of REDD+. This coding scheme enabled us to categorize data according to participants' perceptions and perspectives, allowing us to identify diverse viewpoints and discursive strategies. Content analysis was then applied to the data, focusing on REDD+ dimensions and strategic aspects. To enhance the credibility and depth of our analysis, we supplemented our primary data with secondary sources, including national REDD+ strategies, government policies, and academic peer-reviewed and grey policy literature on REDD+. This combination of primary and secondary data allowed us to triangulate our findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of REDD+ discourse in the Bale eco-region.

4. RESULTS

This section analyzes the main arguments and assumptions used by different actors in the Bale Eco-region to shape the national REDD+ discourse and influence policy decisions. By identifying these key storylines, we can understand how different actors use symbolic language to create shared meanings and political tools.

4.1 Win- win

Like many others around the world, promoters of REDD+ in Bale eco region are extremely optimistic about the program. They think REDD+ can help fight climate change, reduce poverty, and protect the environment all at the same time.

The interview results show that this group asserts REDD+ is a unique and ground-breaking program to combat climate change and protect forests and local communities. They claim it is a paradigm shift in environmental governance whereby REDD+ aims to mitigate climate change while simultaneously empowering local communities and protecting valuable forests. Proponents include various government agencies, including Federal environmental institutions, UN agencies, international NGOs and development partners. They view REDD+ as a vital tool against climate change, highlighting its potential to curb deforestation in the Bale eco-region and boost economic development. They see it as a win-win for the environment and local communities. However, they also advocate for a centralized national approach to manage the program effectively, which they presume will help prevent deforestation and pave the way for quicker carbon credit commercialization.

4.2 Cost efficiency

REDD+ promoters in the Bale Eco-region view the program as a cost-effective solution to address deforestation and its associated environmental challenges. They recognize that unsustainable land-use practices and flawed policies are significant drivers of deforestation and advocate for a coordinated approach to rural development that balances environmental conservation and economic growth. Based on past effectiveness in reducing deforestation and provision of social benefits to local communities, advocates consider result-based mechanisms, such as PES, as central to REDD+ success. However, they consider that passive conservation is not cost-effective and that it does not motivate enough local people to enter REDD+. Rather, they suggest that the promotion of productive activities take place from different land-use sectors, which they say should become coordinated under the umbrella of sustainable rural development.

4.3 Carbon commodification

The commodification of carbon, particularly through market-based mechanisms, offers a governance framework for forest carbon. Promoters are in agreement that REDD+ prioritizes carbon sequestration and introduces market-based incentives to value standing forests. They view REDD+ as a mechanism for transitioning towards a low-carbon economy. The following remark was made by one of the key informants:
"The main global goal for managing forests is to lower greenhouse gas emissions by preventing deforestation and forest damage, and to increase the amount of carbon stored in forests. This global goal influences national priorities. Programs like REDD+ can help reduce global emissions while also benefiting our nation and local communities. Successfully implementing REDD+ projects that reward carbon reductions requires precise measurements of these reductions. This reinforces the idea that technical expertise is crucial for comprehending and managing REDD+."

The passage and interview findings indicate that successful implementation of REDD+ projects needs accurate and detailed measurements of reduced carbon emissions. This emphasizes the importance of expert knowledge in understanding and managing REDD+. In other words, this discourse states that by treating forests as carbon stores and sinks, we can manage them through government regulations. The way we measure, quantify, and track carbon thus influences how we manage forests, highlighting the need for strong institutions and laws to protect the environment and people.

4.4 Governance reform

The findings indicate a strong emphasis on governance reform as a critical component of REDD+ implementation. Moderators advocate for a jurisdictional approach that facilitates effective regional land-use policies, emphasizing the need for inclusivity by involving all stakeholders contributing to deforestation or forest conservation. Moderators includes regional institutions, university and local institutions (except women and youth social affairs) support REDD+ implementation with prudence and adaptability.

The following representative remark was made by one of the key informants: *"REDD+ requires collaboration between governments, NGOs, communities and businesses to fight deforestation. But bureaucracy, conflicts, lack of funding and infrastructure can hinder it. Even with good policies, enforcement and clear accountability are needed for success, which can be difficult in corrupt or poorly governed areas. Balancing short-term costs with long-term benefits is also a challenge. Local communities may need training to adopt sustainable practices."* By promoting a structured governance framework, moderators believe REDD+ can become a more robust tool for climate change mitigation and sustainable development.

4.5 Non-carbon benefits

Moderators highlight the potential for REDD+ to deliver significant non-carbon benefits to rural communities, suggesting that its design can foster positive socio-economic impacts. They advocate for sustainable rural development strategies that integrate conservation efforts with productive activities, thereby enhancing local livelihoods while addressing environmental goals. Additionally, the discourse acknowledges the broader drivers of deforestation, particularly the over-usage of natural resources by urban populations, suggesting that effective REDD+ policies should extend beyond carbon reduction to encompass comprehensive social and environmental co-benefits.

4.6 Safeguards

Safeguards are a central concern for moderators, who stress the importance of monitoring and evaluating REDD+ projects to protect social safeguards effectively. They prioritize social justice and the well-being of the community while placing a high priority on effective safeguards, inclusive decision-making, and equitable benefit-sharing. In addition, moderators advocate for greater inclusion and empowerment of local communities in decision-making processes, with a particular focus on gender and ethnicity. The emphasis on the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) principle reflects a commitment to equitable and participatory governance, ensuring that local voices are heard and respected throughout the REDD+ implementation process.

The following remark was made by one of the key informants: *"Protecting social safeguards and building community wealth demands active engagement in monitoring and evaluating REDD+. To safeguard social well-being and unlock community prosperity, we have to actively monitor and evaluate REDD+ design and implementation.*

They want to prevent harmful practices and ensure the project delivers its promises."

4.7 Carbon colonization

The opponents of REDD+, which include local NGOs, indigenous communities, small-scale farmers, youth and women groups, and researchers, are concerned about the potential negative effects of the program, which include cultural disruption, gender disparity, social harm, and environmental exploitation. Their central concern is that REDD+ neglects the needs of small farmers and vulnerable forest communities. They worry that the program infringes on farmers' rights and could harm local communities. Their narratives highlight potential negative impacts of REDD+, focusing on environmental exploitation and social harm. The following remark was made by one of the key informants: *"The voices of local communities, particularly those of women and other marginalized people, are frequently silenced in REDD+ projects within the Bale Eco-region. Our findings indicate that traditional knowledge and community-led approaches are undervalued, while external actors dominate the discourse. This marginalization limits the potential benefits for local people and can lead to unintended negative consequences."*

Opponents of REDD+ express fears that the program endangers the livelihoods and rights of marginalized communities. They believe marketizing forests and carbon disrupts social structures and clashes with indigenous values. Their concerns revolve around negative impacts on small-scale farmers, potential exploitation, and cultural damage. They argue that REDD+ and centralized forest governance cannot be the answer, and that deforestation is not the primary cause of climate change.

Opponents of REDD+ argue it widens the climate-justice gap by letting rich countries "offset" their emissions onto poorer ones through forest protection. In their view, this is transferring the cost to the poorest nations rather than the wealthiest nations cutting their own emissions or paying off their historical climate debt. In addition, they reject the claim that small-scale farmers expanding agriculture are major sources of emissions. They perceive this as unfairly blaming local people and contributing to manipulation under the guise of moral obligation to conserve forests.

The results reveal that critics of REDD+ paint a bleak picture of local implementation. Opponents also depict project designers using persuasive tactics like framing forest protection as a fight against climate change and offering payments for participation. This culminates in a dramatic call to action, leaving local communities with little room for critical reflection. However, opponents argue that such methods will not translate to improved livelihoods or social development for Bale Eco region local communities. In their view, the promised REDD+ payments might simply enrich the Ethiopian federal government, which takes a sizable share (60%) of the carbon revenue from the Bale REDD+ project.

Thus, Opponents of REDD+ warn the project could rob indigenous communities of their heritage and connection to the forest. They paint a grim picture, citing cases like communities in Mukano Chaffe who they say feel *"displaced, robbed of their land, culture and dignity,"* with restrictions on living near or within the forest. These critics argue that REDD+ lacks true consultation with local people and disregards their traditional knowledge. Instead, they advocate for participatory forest management, built on genuine collaboration with communities, as a more sustainable and respectful alternative to REDD+ and its potential for market profiteering. In their view, REDD+ risks enriching governments, companies, and international NGOs while leaving local communities at a disadvantage.

Opponents of REDD+ in Bale raise significant concerns about the program's impact on marginalized communities and local rights. They argue that REDD+ risks

exploiting local resources for the benefit of distant markets, a critique that resonates with global concerns about the commercialization of forests. Our research highlights a stark power imbalance in REDD+ initiatives within the Bale Eco-region. While local communities possess invaluable traditional knowledge essential for effective forest management, they are often marginalized in decision-making processes. In contrast, international and governmental actors hold significant influence, shaping the REDD+ agenda. This power disparity can hinder equitable outcomes and undermine the project's long-term success. Opponents advocate for genuine collaboration with local communities, suggesting that participatory approaches could offer a more sustainable and respectful alternative to market-driven REDD+ strategies. This remark was made by one of the key informants: *"Gender considerations in REDD+ implementation are extremely important. Women in the Bale Eco-region often face additional barriers to participation and benefit-sharing in REDD+ projects. By addressing gender inequalities and ensuring women's equal involvement in decision-making, participatory forest management can be more effective and sustainable. To achieve the full potential of REDD+ in the Bale Eco-region, it is imperative to address the existing power imbalances and create a more inclusive environment. By empowering local communities, incorporating traditional knowledge, and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits, participatory forest management(PFM) can become a better tool for sustainable forest management and community empowerment."*

4.8 Top-down vs Bottom up

Ethiopian National REDD+ strategies, formulated at the national level, prioritize large-scale carbon sequestration and global climate goals. These strategies are frequently driven by international climate change agendas and often involve technological solutions, carbon trading mechanisms, and financial incentives for forest conservation. In addition, the discourse of the promoters is the most formalized. Their discourses are included in Ethiopian national REDD+ strategies, with most of their storylines embedded in national documents. It includes usage of technology and carbon trading for profit (FDRE, 2018b; FDRE, 2011). This aligns with ecological modernization principles, using payments to achieve conservation goals. However, overreliance on technological solutions may overlook socio-cultural factors driving deforestation. Economic incentives might prioritize market values over intrinsic environmental values.

Moreover, the discourse of the moderators is also the most formalized. Their discourses are also included in Ethiopian national REDD+ strategies, with their storylines formulated and stated as fundamental issues in Ethiopian national REDD+ documents. It includes sustainable livelihoods, social equity, and environmental conservation, and advocates for a decentralized approach to REDD+ implementation, with greater emphasis on community empowerment, local ownership, and participatory decision-making (FDRE, 2018b: FDRE, 2011). This is in line with civic environmentalism principles that the bottom-up perspective emphasizes the importance of public awareness, education, and citizen engagement in environmental decision-making. It advocates stronger safeguards, meaningful local participation, and fair benefit-sharing focused on social and environmental wellbeing, which are the main concerns of the moderator. The National Forest Law, passed by Ethiopia, grants communities and associations the right to own forests, which is a significant step towards empowering local communities and promoting bottom-up approaches to forest management. The strategy and forest law also emphasizes the importance of customs in conservation by recognizing and incorporating indigenous and local knowledge into sustainable forest management approaches (FDRE, 2018a). However, the interview results reveal that there are still significant obstacles standing in the

way of translating these discourses into implementation and practical application.

4.9 Perspectives of actors around key REDD+ dimensions and strategic aspects

In this section the case study delves into a multifaceted exploration of REDD+, encompassing a diverse range of perspectives from key stakeholders by examining 12 critical dimensions and strategic aspects of REDD+.

Table 2. Perspectives of promoters, opponents and moderators around REDD+ storylines

	Opponents	Moderators	Promoters
REDD+ Framed as early action	Problem	Partial solution	Valid, and a solution
Forests definition	Forests provide cultural values and are sources of livelihoods.	The forest is a local source of income.	Forests can be used as inexpensive tools to mitigate climate change.
Cause of Deforestation and climate change/place	Caused by developed countries	Caused by urban-rural over exploitation	Caused by rural areas (local community) through agriculture expansion/livestock
Deforestations drivers/specific issues	The cause is not small scale agriculture	Deforestation is not caused by small scale agriculture.	Local people and small scale farmers cause deforestation
Sources of REDD+ funding	Unknown and only a promise	Input based REDD+; mixed REDD+ finances	Result based REDD+; On a voluntary basis
Co benefits and safeguards	Trade-offs; Plantations with a single crop risk cultural annihilation, moral and rights alienation and conflicts	Potential co-benefits; Social safeguards and MRV for safeguards need gender equality	Guaranteed co-benefits; Voluntary participation
Carbon rights	Forest ownership and land rights	Local forest owners provide an ecosystem service by preventing deforestation.	Since deforestation is prohibited, avoiding it is NOT an ecosystem service.
Scope of activities	An alternative to REDD+ is CFM.	In addition to carbon payment, CFM ought to be included in REDD+; A key tenet of REDD+ is sustainable forest management and rural development.	Predominant focus on carbon trade and payment for protected areas; Encouraging rural economic development as a key component of REDD+
Participation	Absence of power and meaningful consultation regarding REDD+	Increased involvement for societal advantages; Encourage locals to participate in MRV	Indirect local participation is required to ensure the effectiveness of REDD+.
Implementation scales	Not appropriate in our local contexts.	Both top down & bottom up for effectiveness	A jurisdiction-based strategy for quick commercialization; Top down for effectiveness
Payment strategies	Fake and unfair	Against landscape approach, pro	Pro-landscape strategy that takes

	Opponents	Moderators	Promoters
		individual community method	communities into account
Targeting	Our target is our culture	Against landscape approach, pro individual community method	Pro-landscape strategy that takes communities into account

Table 2 summarizes the different viewpoints of promoters, moderators, opponents on 12 dimensions and strategic aspects of REDD+ storylines. Accordingly, the table highlights contrasting perspectives and indicates the complexity of implementing REDD+ effectively. We argue that the primary distinctions between these discourses are due to differing opinions about the conceptual elements of REDD+. Table 1 shows the opponents do not mobilize storylines related to the strategic issues of REDD+ because they are against the concept of REDD+.

Strong opponents' voices highlight the need for real cooperation and participatory forest management as a viable substitute for REDD+, voicing concerns about possible harm to nearby communities. These concerns highlight the importance of addressing social justice issues and potential negative impacts on marginalized groups.

However, the promoters and moderators, while they agree with REDD+ in principle, have different opinions on key issues like benefit-sharing, co-benefits, attribution of carbon rights, implementation scale, range of activities, safeguards, and how to accomplish these goals. The cautious moderators stress the importance of strong safeguards, inclusive decision-making, and equitable benefit-sharing, and they call for active participation in monitoring and evaluating REDD+. Their strategy takes local voices and concerns seriously and aims to integrate REDD+ into national climate action in a balanced manner.

Concurrently, passionate promoters view REDD+ as a revolutionary tool of environmental protection, envisioning it as a win-win for climate change and economic prosperity. Their stance aligns with a broader coalition of government entities, UN bodies, financial institutions, carbon market actors, and conservation NGOs, underscoring the potential economic opportunities and carbon market benefits associated with REDD+. Proponents assert that REDD+ will ensure co-benefits; however, they also concede that trade-offs between carbon, environmental, and social outcomes are unavoidable and should be discussed beforehand. On the other hand, the moderators and opponents draw attention to the possible hazards and expenses connected to the project.

The moderators prioritize safeguards and maximize the potential benefits derived from REDD+, whereas the opponents are adamantly against its implementation. However, the discussion also acknowledges the challenges raised by critics, such as concerns about unsound policies and activities driving deforestation and the importance of collaborative rural development initiatives. The clash of perspectives among opponents, moderators, and promoters underscores the inherent complexities of REDD+ implementation. While promoters of REDD+ emphasize market-based solutions and centralized governance, moderators advocate for a more balanced approach that prioritizes social safeguards and community participation. Opponents, on the other hand, fundamentally challenge the underlying assumptions of REDD+. These divergent perspectives create a complex and dynamic landscape, with power imbalances favoring those who control financial resources and institutional power. However, there is potential for collaboration between moderators and opponents to advocate for stronger safeguards and more equitable benefit-sharing, while

promoters could incorporate elements of the moderators' discourse to enhance their legitimacy. While the three primary perspectives on REDD+ identified in this study align with broader international debates, a closer examination reveals nuanced variations in the Bale Eco-region. For instance, while promoters generally support a market-based approach, there are differing views on the role of government regulation and the importance of local participation. Additionally, the influence of historical land tenure systems and local ecological knowledge has shaped the specific contours of the moderator position. By delving deeper into these nuances, we can better understand how global discourses are adapted and reinterpreted in specific contexts. The study concludes that only through genuine collaboration and dialogue can REDD+ effectively serve the needs of both people and planet in the Bale eco-region context.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this case study capture a complex web of perspectives surrounding the REDD+ initiative in the Bale Eco-region. Our analysis reveals how different stakeholders, namely promoters, moderators, and opponents articulate distinct storylines that not only shape the discourse on REDD+ but also influence its implementation and potential outcomes. This multifaceted discussion underscores both the tensions and opportunities for more inclusive governance. Promoters of REDD+ such as Federal institutions (Environment, forest and climate change commission and Federal REDD+ secretariat), international NGOs (e.g. Farm Africa and SOS Sahel) and UN REDD+ view it as a revolutionary approach to solving climate change, merging environmental stewardship with economic development. They advocate for a centralized strategy to optimize resource management and expedite the commercialization of carbon credits. However, this optimistic view often clashes with local realities. Critics point out that such a centralized approach may overlook the complexities and unique challenges faced by local communities, raising concerns about trade-offs that could arise from prioritizing market-based solutions over community needs (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017). Similar findings by Seddon et al. (2019) observe how regional policies differ from national ones in that they are less concerned with climate change and more focused on economic growth. The moderators discourses also reflect these conflicting priorities.

In addition, the reliance on technical expertise in carbon measurement and monitoring highlights the importance of robust governance frameworks for REDD+. While proponents argue that scientific rigor is vital for effective management, this focus can inadvertently marginalize local knowledge and perspectives. The challenge lies in creating governance structures that incorporate both scientific expertise and community insights, fostering adaptive management that reflects local realities and needs. This is in line with the previous study by Mukono (2024) who observe REDD+ governing practices and techniques have had far-reaching and contradictory social consequences for forest-dependent communities in southern Tanzania, such as pushing people to the margins of the landscape and denying them sustainable livelihoods. Promoters emphasize cost efficiency and sustainable rural development, arguing that REDD+ should integrate result-based payments that support productive activities aligned with sustainability. They envision a win-win scenario that combines forest conservation with economic benefits. Nonetheless, this perspective raises questions about how effectively these strategies can be implemented among marginalized communities, where access to resources and decision-making power may be limited. Similar findings by Asiyanbi (2016) observe the exclusion and marginalization of local forest-dependent communities from the program.

Communities have faced restrictions on their traditional land and resources, and experience limited power in decision making.

The commodification of carbon through market mechanisms is a central theme of REDD+ advocates, reflecting broader trends in environmental governance. While this market-based approach aims to assign value to forest carbon and facilitate climate goals, it also introduces significant equity concerns. Opponents such as small scale farmers, wood/timber associations, civil society institutions, and REDD+ researchers caution that such frameworks may disproportionately benefit external actors, undermining local communities' rights and access to resources. This dynamic necessitates careful examination of how benefits are distributed and who controls the carbon markets.

The discourse surrounding REDD+ increasingly acknowledges the potential for delivering non-carbon benefits, emphasizing the need to enhance local livelihoods while pursuing conservation goals. Moderators such as the Oromiya forest wild enterprise, Oromiya environmental protection authority, Oromiya community based organizations at regional and local level and Madawalabu university argue that effective REDD+ policies must address the socio-economic drivers of deforestation. They advocate for transparency, monitoring, and community involvement to safeguard against adverse social impacts. This focus on social justice highlights the critical need for inclusive processes that prioritize the rights and voices of marginalized groups. Similar studies, such as Brown & MacLellan (2020) note how REDD+'s cost-effective orientation is supported by a "utilitarian–neoliberal" nexus at the policy level, which is at odds with Ethiopia's egalitarian ethics at the community level.

Opponents of REDD+ raise significant concerns about its potential to exacerbate social inequalities and undermine local rights. They highlight the risks of cultural disruption and environmental exploitation, particularly for marginalized communities who may bear the brunt of market-driven conservation strategies. This narrative emphasizes the ethical implications of REDD+, questioning whether it is appropriate to offset emissions through forest protection at the expense of local people's rights and livelihoods. The call for participatory forest management reflects a broader movement advocating for rights-based conservation approaches.

The analysis reveals power imbalances between local communities and more influential stakeholders, such as governmental bodies and international NGOs. This disparity poses significant challenges to achieving equitable outcomes within the REDD+ framework. However, opportunities for collaboration between moderators and opponents suggest a pathway for advocating stronger safeguards and equitable benefit-sharing. By aligning their efforts, these groups can challenge dominant narratives and promote a more inclusive approach to forest management. This is in line with similar findings that emphasize a decentralized approach, empowering local communities through transparent decision-making and fair compensation, and resonates with the ongoing discourses on the need for a bottom-up approach to ensure the success and sustainability of REDD+ initiatives (Nielsen, 2014).

Our analysis underscores the tension between top-down and bottom-up approaches of REDD+ implementation in Ethiopia. While national strategies prioritize large-scale carbon sequestration and global climate goals which incorporate proponents' interests, moderators and opponents advocate for decentralized governance, community empowerment, and equitable benefit-sharing.

However, challenges remain in effectively balancing these competing interests. This is in line with the findings of previous studies which show that the challenges stemming from governance and practices in REDD+ benefit-sharing mechanisms (BSMs) in Ethiopia faces several obstacles, including divergent views on fairness, lack

of awareness, weak coordination among stakeholders, and unclear tenure rights (Phạm et al., 2021). Thus, a key challenge is to ensure that national REDD+ strategies are implemented in a way that empowers local communities and addresses their specific needs and priorities. This requires a shift towards more participatory and inclusive decision-making processes, as well as stronger safeguards to protect the rights and livelihoods of local people.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis of REDD+ discourse in the Bale Eco-region reveals a complex interplay of diverse perspectives, interests, and power dynamics. Proponents, moderators, and opponents offer contrasting visions for the program's future, highlighting the challenges and opportunities inherent in its implementation. Promoters view REDD+ as a revolutionary tool for climate change mitigation and sustainable development, emphasizing its potential for economic growth and carbon market benefits. However, they often overlook the social and environmental risks associated with market-based approaches and centralized governance initiatives. Moderators strike a more balanced approach, acknowledging the potential benefits of REDD+ while emphasizing the need for strong safeguards, inclusive decision-making, and equitable benefit-sharing. They prioritize local participation and seek to integrate REDD+ into broader national climate action strategies. Opponents, on the other hand, fundamentally challenge the underlying assumptions of REDD+. They raise concerns about potential negative impacts on marginalized communities, land rights, and cultural heritage. They advocate for participatory forest management and community-led approaches as more sustainable and equitable alternatives. The power dynamics within the REDD+ discourse are significant, with international and governmental actors often dominating the conversation. Local communities, despite their invaluable knowledge and experience, are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes.

To ensure the success of REDD+ in the Bale Eco-region, it is crucial to address these power imbalances and create a more inclusive environment for governance. Genuine collaboration between all stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and international organizations, is essential. By incorporating traditional knowledge, promoting equitable benefit-sharing, and strengthening safeguards, REDD+ can become a powerful tool for both climate change mitigation and sustainable development. However, it is equally important to recognize the limitations of REDD+ and to explore alternative approaches that prioritize social justice, environmental integrity, and community empowerment. A truly sustainable future for the Bale Eco-region will require a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of deforestation, such as poverty, inequality, and unsustainable land use practices.

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