



# Research Notes

## Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI): A Research Update

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The Social Dimensions of Environmental Policy Initiative (SDEP) of the University of Illinois Department of Geography and the Beckman Institute

is working in partnership with The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), to finalize the Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI). RFGI is a four-year, twelve-country, forty-researcher, Africa-wide comparative environmental-governance research and training program directed by James Murombedzi of CODESRIA and Jesse Ribot of University of Illinois. RFGI is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency to research the effectiveness of local representation within the United Nations and World Bank's carbon-forestry initiative called "Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD). REDD is in the business of paying national governments to pay forest-dependent people not to cut their forests in order to store carbon so that people in Illinois can continue to drive big cars and live in porous homes. The REDD secretariat requires that local populations be consulted prior to any REDD project and that the implementing agencies (governments, NGOs, businesses and other carbon entrepreneurs) obtain 'Free Prior and Informed Consent' (FPIC) of local populations before implementation. RFGI is exploring how such community consent being obtained.

RFGI is now entering its last year. We are completing over thirty ethnographic case studies of forestry interventions in twelve countries in Africa –Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda – with additional comparative cases in Nepal and Peru. The research asks how local people are being represented within REDD and other forestry interventions. Using what we call the Choice and Recognition framework, RFGI research is divided into two areas of study. The focus on 'choice' explores the logic behind how intervening agencies (governments, donors and implementing front-line bodies) understand, conceptualize, and operationalize notions of representation and FPIC. These 'studying up'

institutional-choice studies are accompanied by local ethnographic studies of the effects of interventions on local representation, citizenship and the public domain – concepts developed in the RFGI program materials on the SDEP web page (see <http://sdep.beckman.illinois.edu/programs/democracyenvironment.aspx#RFGI>). The objective of RFGI is to develop guidelines that these programs can use to strengthen local representation of forest-based rural populations within REDD and other natural resource management decision making. RFGI is currently developing guidelines for the World Bank and UN for the implementation of REDD that, in the unlikely event that they are used, will help ensure that REDD interventions support democratic forms of local representation.

While only eight of our thirty-four case studies are in peer review, some interesting vignettes are emerging. In general we have found that few projects support what could be called democratic representation. Most intervening agencies avoid working through elected local governments and concoct their own institutional arrangements for FPIC and local engagement. The results are often divisive. In Senegal, for example, Université Cheikh Anta Diop doctoral student Coumba Dem Samb studied a project aimed at conserving mangrove swamps in order to reduce carbon emissions. In Senegal 'community natural reserves' and local forest management are legally under the jurisdiction of elected local governments. But in the Community Natural Reserve of Somone, Senegal's National Park Service, in the name of 'women's involvement in environmental management,' and evoking the national policy to promote women's engagement in involvement in environmental management, circumvented the local government by choosing to constitute a women's group to manage and protect the reserve. The big beneficiaries were the elite leaders of these women's groups, not the average group members. Further, men and youth in the villages felt excluded and angry. So did the majority of women who were not benefitting from the arrangements. The elected rural council president was also frustrated – having been excluded from decision making in a matter legally within his jurisdiction. In the end, the village was deeply divided. Men disengaged from management of the reserve. Women were divided by class. Local elected government was de-legitimated. The result was far from democratic and probably not sustainable. This kind of community fragmentation

through REDD interventions was common among the studies.

Another example of community division comes from the case of the village of Inferno in the region of Madre de Dios in Peru where UIUC's Carol Burga conducted her Geography masters thesis research in collaboration with the International Center for Forestry Research. Burga found that REDD interventions supported a despotic local regime. In Inferno, REDD was being used by elected indigenous community leaders to discipline community members by creating rules that make entry into the community difficult or that allowed them to exclude people from the community for their 'poor' behavior. The category of 'indigenous' leader is already problematic since it is not inclusive of all people living in the area. It became more problematic when REDD arrived in the villages. As soon as REDD agencies promised payments to the 'community', the leaders began restricting community entry and excluding villagers on grounds of moral turpitude – non-participation, drinking, or being away too long from the village for work in the cities. Via exclusion, these villagers lost the right to obtain promised income from REDD projects and they lost the benefits of community membership, including the ability to vote. Their marginality and life risks are augmented by such exclusion. The intervening agent, a large NGO, did not question these local representation arrangements – thus strengthening abusive authorities in the name of 'community' consultation.

A key condition for national governments to obtain REDD funds from the UN or World Bank is the demonstration of FPIC in the REDD preparatory process. In Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda, the governments undertook extensive consultations with the affected communities in their preparations of REDD project intervention. Examination of these "extensive consultations," however, showed that they are not adequate for FPIC. In all three instances consultations were undertaken by NGOs chosen for their specialist knowledge of forestry, and their choice of local participants in consultation meetings reflected a bias towards NGOs or traditional authorities rather than elected local representatives. Local governments hardly participated in the consultation processes. Indeed, preliminary analysis shows that the processes were mostly undertaken by national-level institutions without substantive local representation.

In most of the cases we have been observing – for instance in Uganda, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa – places where there are democratic local governments – the projects have chosen not to work with the elected authorities. They like NGOs, customary chiefs, and participatory processes. Intervening agencies claim that local governments

are slow or corrupt, or that NGOs and participatory processes are better – more transparent, effective or efficient. They claim that chiefs are 'legitimate.' They are probably rights. But they do not ask if chiefs are representative, equitable, or despotic. They do not consider whether 'legitimate' means preferred or liked or simply feared and accepted. The arrangements are very problematic. If local elected government is dysfunctional, then the object of state and donor interventions should be to improve local democracy, not to circumvent it. Imagine if a park-improvement project came to Urbana, Illinois and decided that they were going to invest in fixing up one of our parks by working with a church or an NGO without consulting local government. They would be arrested the moment they began any construction or landscaping. Yet, this disregard for local government is promoted all over Africa, Asia and Latin America when international development agencies intervene. It is based on anti-government ideologies plus intervening agencies that choose to privilege the instrumental objectives of their interventions over the procedural objectives of democracy.

Democracy is never just elections. But without elected authorities, participation, NGO representation, working through hereditary chiefs, delegating powers to private firms to implement 'public' programs are certainly create opportunities for enclosure and elite capture. Local government is also often captured by elites. But at least there exist plausible mechanisms for influencing or ousting them. In the common case where it is the electoral laws that create elite capture then these need reform – not abandonment. Most central governments create local governments that are systematically accountable to the center. That is not local democracy – despite that international development agencies applaud when elected local governments are created, even if they are patently undemocratic. The objective is to create local democracy, not to replace it by the marketplace of participation or the private domain of corporations, chiefs and NGOs. The narrative that government is bad and the private sector, NGOs and chiefs are good has won the day in environmental circles. Guidelines for international development programs to support local democracy are direly needed.

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