

Only money talks

How REDD+ discourses in the Nepalese media overlook the politics of policy making and governance

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Key messages

- The predominant view of REDD+ in the media in Nepal is that it offers a way to generate money from forest management and supports decentralization of Nepal forestry sector.
- The REDD+ debate in Nepal is dominated by a small group of forestry and development experts based in Kathmandu. The under-representation of local and marginalized groups means their interests and concerns are less likely to be accounted for in the formulation of REDD+ policy.
- REDD+ receives little attention from the media and politicians, and remains peripheral to the political agenda. Rather, it is seen as led by local and international NGOs.
- In the Nepalese media, domestic politics around forest policy and governance receive little attention. This suggests that the government does not see REDD+ as a priority.

Introduction

Local communities in Nepal manage about one-third of the country's forest area. A range of state–community partnership schemes are in place, with community forestry the most prominent. The Nepalese government and other stakeholders have welcomed the introduction of REDD+, or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation in developing countries, a climate change mitigation mechanism designed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on the expectation that REDD+ will both incentivize local communities to strengthen sustainable forest management and improve the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. Government and other stakeholders have entered into the REDD+ readiness process, which involves implementing the Readiness Preparation Proposal, piloting REDD+ in community forestry, and raising awareness and building capacity among stakeholders, including local communities.

ForestAction Nepal in collaboration with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) conducted a study to understand the dominant discourses on REDD+ in the Nepalese media and the implications of those discourses for forest governance and REDD+. The study employed content analysis of news and other articles in three major national daily newspapers:

Kantipur, *Gorkhapatra* and *The Himalayan Times*. The study adopted the methodology developed by CIFOR for similar analyses across six countries: Brazil, Cameroon, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania and Vietnam (Di Gregorio et al. 2012). The content analysis was supplemented by interviews with nine journalists working for national newspapers and local FM radio stations.

This policy brief sets out key messages from the study and discusses their implications for the implementation of REDD+ in Nepal. Recommendations for how stakeholders may achieve effective, efficient and equitable REDD+ outcomes in Nepal are offered.

Dominant REDD+ discourse: Making money from forest management

The first mention of REDD+ in the Nepalese print media appeared in 2007 following the Bali Climate Change Conference. Media coverage of REDD+ then grew considerably after 2009 (Figure 1). Analysis of newspaper articles on REDD+ revealed that the discourses are dominated by the idea that forest conservation and management can be an avenue for earning money. Among the REDD+ issues reported in the media, “ecology” and “economics and markets” gain the most attention and the idea of forests as a source of revenue receives considerable attention (Paudel et al. 2012).

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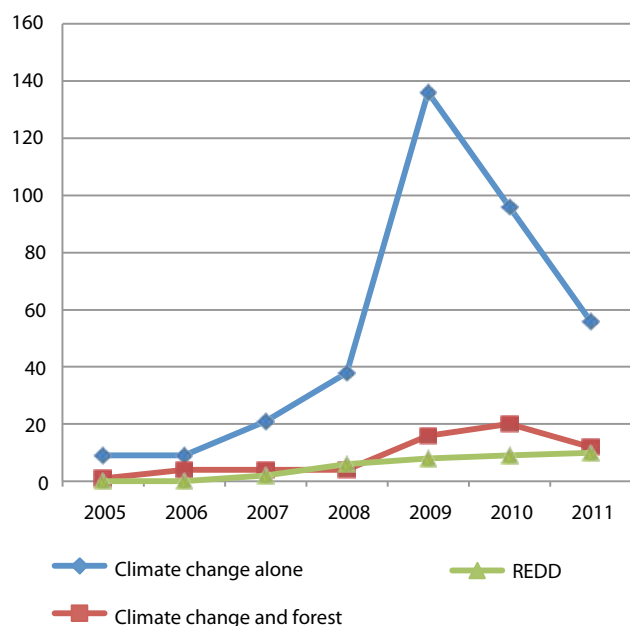


Figure 1. Coverage of REDD+ in the Nepalese media, 2005–2011.

Those who support REDD+ in the Nepalese media conveyed two messages: (i) REDD+ has led to an increase in the perceived importance of forest conservation and management; (ii) forest managers in Nepal can potentially earn large amounts of money from forest conservation and management via REDD+. For example, a journalist for Kantipur (24 August 2009) reported, "If the forests in the nation are protected, then there is the possibility of getting millions of dollars under REDD+."

However, articles did not analyze the potential synergies and trade-offs between carbon sequestration and other benefits of forests such as provision of timber, fuelwood, fodder and biodiversity. This omission is important because the local economy is heavily based on subsistence farming, of which forest is an integral part. An assessment of REDD+ pilot project sites revealed that community forest user groups are focusing forest-management activities for carbon stock enhancement, such as by introducing stronger rules and restrictions, but possibly

at the expense of supplying the community with their forest-product needs. However, the prevailing view that REDD+ is a potential source of income risks raising stakeholders' expectations without giving them an adequate understanding of the challenges involved (Khatri et al. 2012).

REDD+ and community forestry: Premature enthusiasm?

REDD+ in Nepal is seen as an opportunity for generating additional benefits for Nepal's community-based forest managers. For example, Jagdish Paudel, a climate change expert, writes in *The Himalayan Times* (11 October 2010):

Community-based forest management in Nepal has been the mainstream forest policy for almost two decades [. . .]. If [REDD . . .] is adopted, it opens the possibility for local forest dependent communities to benefit from additional revenue stream by participating in the global carbon market.

Statements such as this, made in the early days of REDD+ in Nepal, reflect enormous optimism about the potential benefits of REDD+. However, the media has overlooked many questions, including the actual level of support that REDD+ can deliver to community-based forest management. The more technical aspects of REDD+, such as measuring, reporting and verification (MRV), receive little attention. Nevertheless, some other studies pointed out several challenges with implementing REDD+, such as the need to address the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, demonstrate additionality in the hill areas that have already been reforested, and the equitable distribution of benefits among stakeholders and within forest management groups.

"Independent experts": The ones that speak most

The media content analysis showed that a diverse range of actors are involved in Nepal's REDD+ policy process. Actors include government agencies (i.e. bureaucrats), international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community networks, indigenous communities, and forestry and development experts. However, REDD+ discourses and policies are shaped by a small group of experts based in Kathmandu,



Figure 2. REDD+ actors present in print media (as advocates and adversaries).

comprised of independent consultants, forestry officials (bureaucrats), and development professionals from international and national NGOs.

Actors were classified as “advocates” (total: 34) and “adversaries” (total: 3); “advocate” here refers to an actor who supports (often proposes) the main argument and supports the issues based on individual interests.

Eleven of the advocates (32%) identified were forestry and development experts (6, 17%) or journalists (5, 15%). Farmers groups made up the second largest category (21%). High-level bureaucrats who view REDD+ as a viable option for conservation had either published articles or were interviewed in the media. Other advocates were found among national NGOs, research institutions/think-tanks, international NGOs, indigenous communities and the private sector (Figure 2). Within these organizations, a small number of individuals have played an active role in shaping the REDD+ discourse. These experts articulate their own interests, or the interests of the organization they represent; for example, experts representing the forestry department call for the heavy involvement of government in the REDD+ process, whereas experts outside of government appear to be interested primarily in securing funding for REDD+ activities. The fact that very few adversaries were identified in the media reporting frames suggests that the Nepalese print media have not examined the debates surrounding REDD+. Bushley and Khatri (2011) suggested that opposition to REDD+ policy is very weak because the major actors, particularly government agencies and leaders from civil society organizations such as Federation of Community Forestry Users’ Nepal (FECOFUN) and Nepalese Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), are undertaking REDD+ readiness activities.

Marginal attention to politics and policy making in REDD+

REDD+ has not become central to the national political agenda in Nepal, in contrast to other countries, particularly Brazil and Indonesia. The low media coverage of the issue and the dominance of forestry experts and development professionals in the debate indicate that REDD+ does not have a presence in the political sphere (Figure 3). Only three (8%) newspaper articles picked up the North–South debate on REDD+, looking at financing and MRV requirements, and only two (6%) captured national issues on forest governance, drivers of deforestation and degradation, conflicting interests of stakeholders and participation in policy. Moreover, no political actors, that is, members of parliament or parliamentary committees, have entered into the REDD+ debate. The general disregard for REDD+ in the mainstream political process could indicate limited legitimacy of the REDD+ decision-making process, weak ownership and poor implementation; these factors can undermine the carbon-effectiveness, cost-efficiency and equity of REDD+ in Nepal (Ojha et al. 2013).

Newspaper coverage on REDD+ is limited to reporting of news, and none of the articles examined for the study analyzed the differences in opinion between stakeholders. This lack of analytical rigor can be attributed in part to the limited knowledge of journalists and the challenges that journalists face in comprehending the scientific and technical issues related to REDD+. A senior reporter of *the Nagark* daily newspaper said during an interview that “first, REDD is difficult to understand by ourselves; second, if we write something on it, editorial team finds it highly complex and discards the news.” The general trend is that, instead of engaging in these complex topics and investigating them, journalists tend to avoid them.

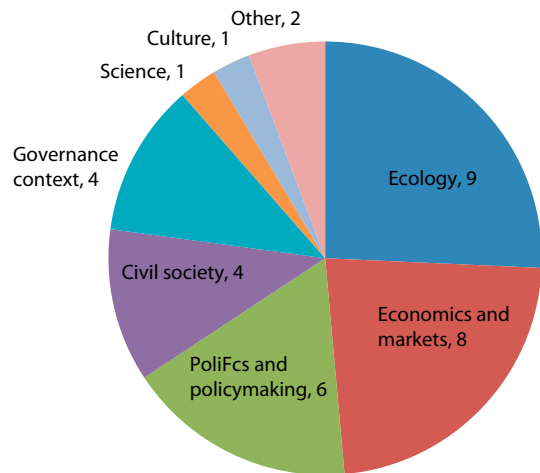


Figure 3. REDD+-related issues covered in selected newspapers.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

REDD+ is mainly portrayed in the Nepalese print media as a readily available source of funding that would benefit community forestry. However, the REDD+ discourse revealed in the media overlooks both the livelihood benefits of REDD+ for forest-dependent groups and ways to translate REDD+ into domestic politics. There are three plausible explanations for the limited media coverage of REDD+ and avoidance of domestic policy issues. First, REDD+ is partly seen as lying within the framework of international climate justice, which pays limited attention to national/local politics (Di Gregorio et al. 2013). Second, REDD+ is not yet fully implemented and there is little understanding of many of the operational issues, such as mechanisms for MRV, setting reference levels, REDD+ implementation framework and benefit-sharing mechanisms. This lack of understanding may exacerbate conflicts and contestation among national stakeholders, slowing progress. Currently, advocates of REDD+ portray it as a win-win situation without paying attention to the internal governance issues. Third, the media perceives REDD+ as being sponsored solely by international donors, and hence as another rural development project. During the interview, a senior reporter at Kantipur said, “issues related to climate change and forests are treated as sponsored by local and international NGOs, with little political substance. So, these issues have never been priority for the newsroom.”

The dominant actors in the Nepalese REDD+ debate are largely forestry and development professionals based in Kathmandu; by contrast, forest-dependent people are kept on the margins in the REDD+ debate and policy process. Consequently, their concerns and interests tend to be marginalized in the REDD+ readiness process. In this context, we provide the following recommendations to REDD+ stakeholders for developing better understanding and effective and equitable implementation of the scheme in Nepal.

Develop and communicate a realistic picture of REDD+:

Stakeholders involved in REDD+ should develop better understanding of the potential benefits and costs associated with REDD+ implementation. To develop a realistic picture of REDD+, the stakeholders need to be aware of all the relevant elements: the potential for addressing the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation; the potential for emission reductions and expected additionality; the need for governance and institutional arrangements; reference levels; MRV; overall transaction costs;

financing arrangements; and international carbon markets. Developing understanding requires scientific analysis of these topics and communication among wider stakeholders; the media can play an important role in this step. Equipped with this knowledge, stakeholders and local communities would be able to make more informed decisions, make strategic choices and help ensure the full commitment and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders.

Engage with politicians: Effective implementation of REDD+, especially curbing deforestation and forest degradation, requires strong political commitment at national level. Our analysis indicates that there is little national ownership over REDD+ in Nepal, that is, primarily external experts talk about REDD+. In addition, there is very limited linkage with existing political processes, that is, REDD+ is rarely framed in terms of politics and policy making. The recent political transition in Nepal, with the election of the Constituent Assembly and beginning of a new political process, is expected to lead to a new, stable and democratic process. In this context, those conducting REDD+ initiatives should adopt strategies to engage, inform and educate the political actors in REDD+.

Media capacity building: Considering the limited capacity of journalists to comprehend the technical and implementation issues associated with REDD+ and to engage with it, attention needs to be paid to building journalists' capacity. Capacity can be built in various ways, such as: encouraging and supporting journalists' participation in international forums; organizing training for journalists; and providing writing fellowships and regular interaction between media and experts/officials. Frequent interactions between community networks, professional communities and media also help develop deeper understanding.

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