

Looking for gender equality in REDD+

The consideration of gender issues and women's rights in REDD+ policy formulation and implementation can be seen as a moral imperative, but it is also based in legal texts and institutional commitments. This brief provides an overview of the work with gender issues in REDD+ policy making to date, and brings up some key issues relating to gender equality in the design and implementation of REDD+ programs.

THE AMBITIONS of the Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programs being planned and implemented in numerous countries include not only climate change mitigation objectives through the protection of carbon stocks in forests, but also important social objectives such as poverty reduction, ensuring rights of indigenous and local communities, and gender equality. To date, a substantial amount of the funding for REDD+ preparations has come from aid budgets, which are bound to development and poverty reduction objectives, as well as social and environmental standards or safeguards.

Gender in REDD+ policy

The 2010 Cancún agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) contains the first official mention of gender in relation to REDD+. It requests countries to address gender considerations when developing their national strategies on REDD+ (UNFCCC, 2011: 13). This request, in combination with institutional commitments to mainstreaming gender in all policies and programs, led the international organisations working on REDD+, including the World Bank and the UN, to develop guidelines on how to include gender considerations in REDD+ implementation (UN-REDD, 2011, 2013; CIF, 2014).



REDD+ meeting with cattle breeders in a village in Burkina Faso. Photo: Lisa Westholm

A review of official documents related to gender in REDD+ and climate policy shows that while the inclusion of gender considerations is seen both as a matter of equality and efficiency, the solutions proposed are dominated by the efficiency perspective. This means that there is a focus on how gender equality can enhance the success of REDD+ programs and

implementation in terms of meeting objectives relating to avoided deforestation, carbon sequestration and poverty reduction. In addition, gender equality is primarily presented as a matter of economic empowerment of women, i.e. that improving women's income earning opportunities, especially by promoting commercialisation of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) will lead to greater gender equality.

Key messages:

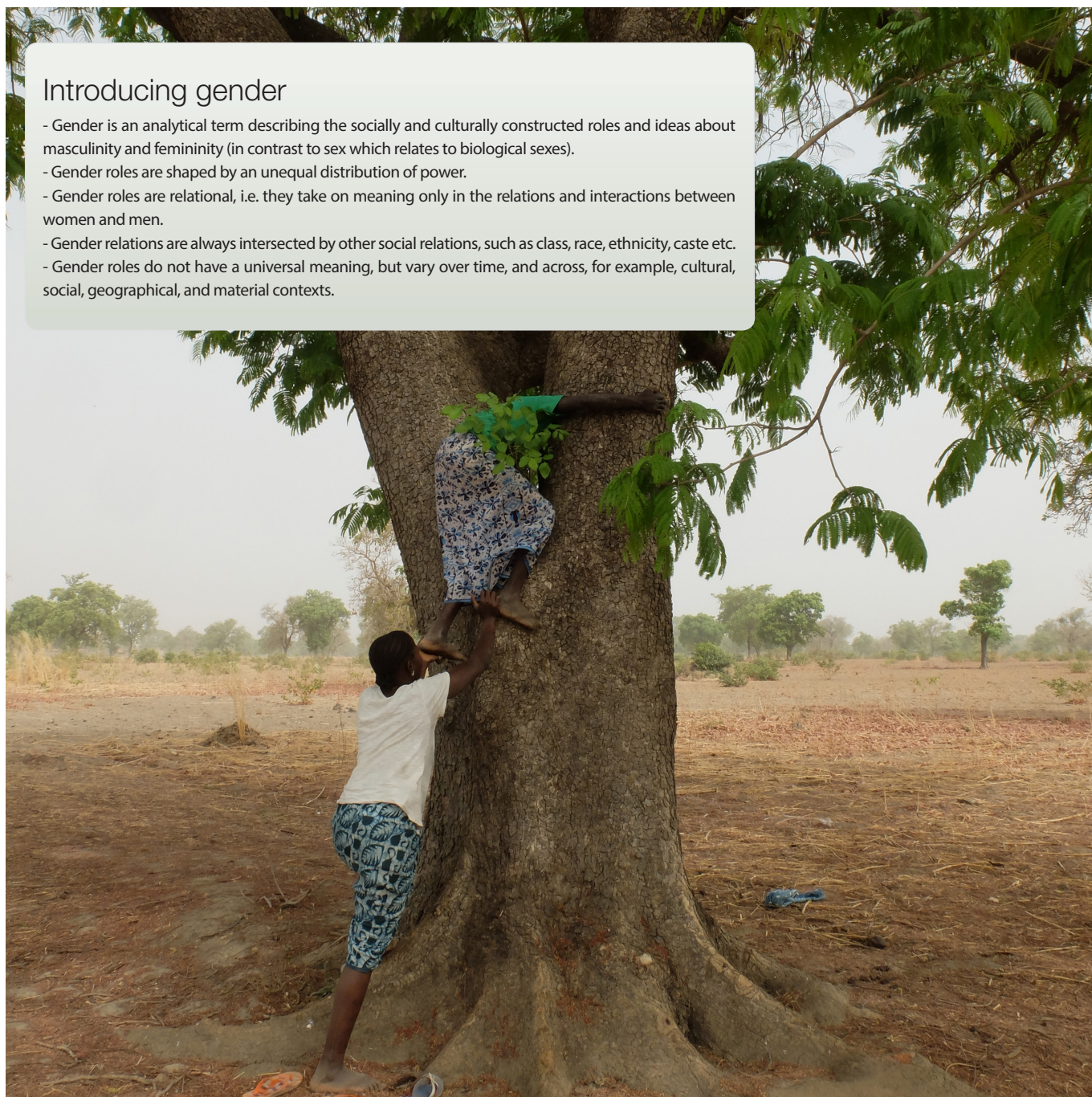
- An exclusive focus on women's economic empowerment is unlikely to shift unequal power relations.
- Basing policies on the assumption that gender roles will remain the same forestalls opportunities for transforming gender relations.
- Policies need to be based on proper gender analysis which takes into account the local context.
- Policy makers need to recognise, acknowledge and have an open debate about the trade-offs involved in policy proposals.
- Gender equality cannot be achieved in REDD+ in isolation, but needs to be addressed in a broader context of social policy.

Empowerment through markets

A common way of involving women in REDD+ programs is through targeted activities drawing on what are traditionally seen as female activities, notably the collection of NTFPs. There is a longstanding perception that women are the main collectors of NTFPs for household subsistence. While this is partly true in some contexts, it is not the case everywhere.

Introducing gender

- Gender is an analytical term describing the socially and culturally constructed roles and ideas about masculinity and femininity (in contrast to sex which relates to biological sexes).
- Gender roles are shaped by an unequal distribution of power.
- Gender roles are relational, i.e. they take on meaning only in the relations and interactions between women and men.
- Gender relations are always intersected by other social relations, such as class, race, ethnicity, caste etc.
- Gender roles do not have a universal meaning, but vary over time, and across, for example, cultural, social, geographical, and material contexts.



Women helping each other climb a tree to pick fruits. Photo: Lisa Westholm

The assumptions regarding women's role in NTFP collection, and that marketization of NTFPs would therefore be especially beneficial for them, has been made in community forestry and forest conservation schemes since the early 1990s. Despite critique of such assumptions, they have been included in REDD+ programs around the world.

There are expectations that targeting women in REDD+ through NTFP commercialisation schemes will create incentives for forest protection and simultaneously enhance women's economic empowerment. Underlying these expectations are a number of problematic assumptions about the nature and stability of gender relations and inequalities. Extensive research has shown that the roles of men and women in forest

use and management is not stable. Rather, roles tend to shift with changing circumstances. For example, increased profitability of NTFPs has repeatedly been shown to increase men's interest in these products, often to the detriment of women. This makes it problematic to base policies on the assumption that what men and women do will remain the same.

Further, the promotion of NTFPs as a way to empower women implies that gender inequalities are a matter primarily of economics. While improving women's economic situation is important, a feminist critique of the focus on economic empowerment is that it fails to acknowledge that gender inequality is a matter of power relations. Because markets and economic exchange are shaped

by power relations that benefit some, and disadvantage others, an exclusive focus on economic empowerment is unlikely to lead to a shift in the balance of power.

A matter for 'the others'

There is a tendency among the implementing organisations of REDD+ to treat gender issues as a concern of poor women at the local level, rather than as something that needs to be taken into account throughout the process of policy formulation and implementation. Gender issues are seen as a problem of the poor, and particularly of women, rather than being relevant also for the development institutions themselves. This is the result of a lack of interest in, and understanding of, gender issues within development institutions. The

failure to take gender equality into account throughout policy and project formulation makes it more difficult to successfully address gender equality in project implementation.

A case study from Burkina Faso showed that the consideration of gender issues were pushed to the future, and to side activities specifically directed at women. The definition of project activities on the other hand, although described in project documents as demand-driven, was concluded at the national level, by government officials, ministry staff and donor agents. The existing participatory processes aimed to make local concerns heard in the process, and to promote policy makers' understanding of the local context, were insufficient. In the planning stages, only a small number of villages were included. Observations from consultation meetings in REDD+ villages showed that the REDD+ staff lacked knowledge and interest to listen to the concerns raised, and make sure different voices within the community were heard. Instead, the meetings tended to confirm the views entrenched in the policy process, rather than allowing local voices to be heard. This led to already marginalised groups being excluded from the REDD+ process.

Another problem with addressing gender inequalities as a concern for poor women, and targeting them in interventions is that this risks increasing their burden of labour. In many places, women already bear a heavy burden of responsibility for care work within the household, including cooking and activities related to this such as fetching firewood and water, raising children and caring for elders or sick family members. The focus on NTFPs as a solution to both forest protection and women's empowerment, risks leading to women in the global south being assigned a disproportionate share of the responsibility for environmental protection and care. This also stems from the common perception that women are more caring, not only of their family and community, but also of the environment.

Studies show that women, more often than men, are expected to undertake such work without economic compensation, and without relieving their responsibilities in other areas. The gender issues related to REDD+ are thus closely connected to broader social policy issues and distribution of labour, in the household and in society.

Institutional resistance

There is a tension in REDD+ and other climate programs, between the need for global standardisation of policies, and the necessity of understanding gender relations in context. This tendency should be recognised and dealt

with in policy making. Because gender relations can only fully be understood in context, efforts to address gender inequalities require sensitivity to the specific context where they are implemented. From the perspective of global policy making, this means that there is a need for flexibility, even in standardised solutions. However, this also requires interest, knowledge and understanding of the issues relating to gender relations and the promotion of gender equality.

The lack of knowledge and interest in gender issues within the international institutions implementing REDD+ add up to an institutional resistance to transformation. There are attempts by women's and/or environmental organisations to advocate for more informed efforts at including gender concerns in REDD+ policy. However, in order to gain influence they often adopt a moderate position, aligning with the mainstream discourses on gender in REDD+ and climate policy making, instead of challenging them. Even when the language of feminists and gender advocates is taken up by international institutions, it tends to be given a different meaning, running the risk of perpetuating stereotypes of what men and women do in the forest rather than promoting change in gender and power relations.

Conclusions

Although attention to gender inequalities is written into climate policy texts and institutional commitments of the organisations implementing REDD+, it tends to be treated as a bureaucratic obligation rather than an attempt at effecting lasting change and targeting the underlying reasons for existing inequalities.

The lack of knowledge and interest in gender issues within international institutions, leads to such concerns being pushed to the future and treated as a concern of poor women in the global South, rather than recognising that unequal relations of power shape policymaking at all levels, with repercussions in all social spheres, in the global North and South. By postponing attention to gender issues in REDD+, the opportunities for effecting more profound change are forestalled, not just in forest governance and forest conservation projects but also in other development contexts.

In addition, attempts at addressing gender issues are often based upon stereotypes and assumptions about what men and women do in the forest which may not be true for the local context where REDD+ programs are implemented. Even when such assumptions largely concur with local reality, they tend to disregard the changing nature of gender relations, and tend to contribute to perpetuating specific gender roles.

Because gender relations are contextual and culturally, geographically and historically contingent, policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities must be flexible and open to the specificities of a local context. At the same time, global climate policy schemes strive for standardisation. However, such standardisation should not be promoted at the expense of the possibilities for local voices to be heard and having a real chance to influence the way policies interventions are designed.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise that no policies can be analysed in isolation from a broader societal context. Advocating for gender sensitive REDD+ policies in isolation is not going to result in transformative change of gender relations. Rather, there is a need for broader social policy which can relieve women of some of their burden of responsibility, and open up the possibility for making different choices and taking on different roles.

About this brief

This text is based on a doctoral thesis by Lisa Westholm titled *Conserving carbon and gender relations? Gender perspectives on REDD+ and global climate policy*. It was defended at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, in September of 2017. It is available at: <https://pub.epsilon.slu.se/14518/>.

The thesis includes three scientific papers also published elsewhere:

Westholm, L. (2016). Fruits from the forest and the fields: Forest conservation policies and intersecting social inequalities in Burkina Faso's REDD+ program. *International Forestry Review*, 18(4), 511-521.

Westholm, L., & Arora-Jonsson, S. (2015). Defining solutions, finding problems: Deforestation, gender and REDD+ in Burkina Faso. *Conservation and Society*, 13(2), 189-199.

Westholm, L. and Arora-Jonsson, S. What room for politics and change in global climate governance? Addressing gender in co-benefits and safeguards.

This brief can be quoted as:

Westholm, L., 2018. Looking for gender equality in REDD+. Focali Brief No 2018:02, Gothenburg.

Responsibility for the content of this brief rests entirely with the author.



Parkia biglobosa (African locust bean or *néré*) provides NTFPs in the form of fruits whose seeds are made into a valuable spice, traded and used across West Africa. Photo: Lisa Westholm

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