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Managing the High Risk of Inter-Tribe Violence over Sharing REDD Benefits

by

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Abstract

REDD has the potential for creating serious inter-community conflicts that could ignite explosive violence among tribes that have historically been antagonistic. Many tribal communities in heavily populated tropical countries have disputes with neighboring communities over control over forests that have remained largely un-demarcated. Fights over these 'disputed' lands have been contained because of low economic value of these forest lands. This is now set to change because the compensation under REDD Plus is expected to be large. Once intercommunity disputes among tribes begin it is very difficult to stop them. The most efficient, and just, way of preventing such conflicts is to ensure that the approach to REDD Plus becomes activity oriented rather than compensation oriented with the largest share of REDD funds reaching as wages for the tasks carried out to those members of the neighbouring communities who actively work to meet the REDD objectives. The REDD funds must be utilized in carrying out REDD activities, not disbursed among claimants.

Key words: REDD, Violence, Tribe, Risks, Governance

A whole range of almost intractable social, economic and governance issues, monitoring and verification, financing, costs and benefits to individuals and communities, and to the nations as a whole, have bedeviled the progress of REDD ever since the Bali Conference brought it to center stage. It is perhaps not a good idea to add another problem to the already long list. But the very crucial nature, and the complete absence from the REDD discourse of the possible danger of inter community violence arising out of rival claims for compensation, compels its presentation.

Given the divisive political leadership not uncommon across many developing countries, and widespread lack of management skills in the regulatory government agencies, REDD has the unfortunate potential for creating serious inter-community conflicts that could ignite explosive violence among tribes that have historically been antagonistic. Contrary to the imagined peaceful life of tribal people violence between neighboring tribal communities has rarely been absent in the past though the degree varied. As in all societies the tribal societies value their control over resources and any real or perceived threat to their access to these valued resources evokes hostile response. And many tribes that have grown powerful with rich resources, and increased populations, have not shied away from coveting the attractions in their neighborhood. If the history of intertribal wars has not evoked as much interest as between nations it is only on account of the limited scale of these wars, not because of any deficit in bravery and courage. Or conceit and treachery, for that matter.

One of the major tasks before the tribal chieftains has always been the keeping of such violence within manageable limits. The most acceptable way of ensuring that the conflicts remain confined with minimum loss of life was to retain a physical distance from the neighboring communities and avoid skirmishes over the boundary even when leaving them unsettled in the fond hope of extending control if an opportunity arises someday in future. A tribal chieftain would describe his territorial boundaries by pointing to a distant and distinct rock, a huge ficus tree and the many mountain brooks hidden among the folds of the hills. Nothing significant about it except that the neighboring chieftain may also be describing part of the same land as his own. It would be a rare tribal intercommunity boundary that has no significant overlap of neighbourly, and often unbrotherly, claims.

Fights over these 'disputed' lands have been contained because the overlaps would occur only at sites far removed from the habitations where few would take to agriculture, or walk so far to harvest timber when more was available nearby. Stray hunters might sometime encounter members of neighboring communities in these overlaps but the balance of arrow-power would usually persuade them to confine to their wild query. These overlaps were, therefore, rarely of much economic importance to them even as they often hosted the best preserved forests. The boundary ambiguity gave all the communities the feel of a territory larger than geography would permit and there was little motivation to trade it for the assured limits of surveyed boundaries. It is no coincidence that there has been no cadastral survey of lands in the six tribal states of the northeastern India, and no state government would dare initiate the move even now, in a country

where, over most of the rest, land survey was completed more than a century ago. And the situation over most of the other developing countries is not much different.

This would change now because the compensation under REDD Plus, for forests that have been preserved well, is expected to be large. The claims for exclusive ownership of the overlapped areas, made so far within the hearing distance of own tribe members, would gain stridency as the knowledge, and even more the rumors, of the REDD compensations spread among the community members and increasingly the community leadership would pass into the hands of the more aggressive. It is not merely the exaggerated claims of neighboring communities of geographical overlaps of territories that could be the source of problem. In even larger number of cases neighboring communities share rights over forests for usufructs and, having been historically responsible for protecting these forests, have legitimate claims over the REDD funds that may become available for these forests. This could be the beginning of new conflicts among neighboring tribes.

And once intercommunity disputes among tribes begin it is very difficult to contain till one side is decimated, or at the very least, defeated conclusively. The only way to manage these conflicts is to, therefore, prevent them from happening. One should not forget that the biggest intercommunity conflict of the twentieth century that took place between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes of Rwanda, which began with the rival militias' attempts to establish control over diamond and other mineral resources, soon grew to horrendous proportions that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings.

Such extreme violence is more likely among tribes. It is not as if the non-tribal forest communities would not be driven to staking claims over forested lands under the control of neighboring communities for greater compensation but these communities usually have well defined land boundaries which, by itself, limit disputes. Also, unlike the tribal societies used to their own internal mechanisms for dispute settlement, the non-tribal communities have greater faith in secular national judicial systems, and are often patient in the face of long delays inherent in civil dispute settlement processes.

When the governments are perceived to be just and fair, resolving conflicts of this nature would not be an impossible task but there are not very many developing countries where governments have been able to generate that kind of trust. Delineation of boundaries between the neighboring tribes through land survey should, in theory, help but it is not only time consuming it can also ignite the very conflict that is sought to be avoided if undertaken now under the shadow of impending, and imagined, REDD benefits.

The most efficient, and just, way of preventing such conflicts is to ensure that the approach to REDD Plus becomes action oriented rather than compensation oriented with the largest share of REDD funds reaching as wages for the works carried out to those members of the neighbouring communities who actively work to meet the REDD objectives. These activities may include identification and survey of forest boundaries and well organized maintenance of related land

records, inventorization of timber and non-timber forest produce, preparation of management plans and carrying out sustainable harvesting, introducing and gradually enlarging the scope of forest certification, community level value addition to the harvested product, setting up and managing decentralized biomass energy units sustainably for meeting local energy needs, replanting forest lands cleared in preceding years, protection against fires and pests and effective law enforcement against illegal tree felling and poaching of wildlife through intensive intelligence gathering and patrolling using the services of young members of the neighbouring communities. Some other useful and productive works could be promotion of ecotourism through laying trails and managing them, and capacity building of suitable members of the local communities for all the related activities.

This is not to suggest that there should be no money for the communities as a whole. There should be sufficiently large amounts earmarked for the communities too. But these must be seen as developmental funds meant for the entire communities, not compensation money for distribution among the community members.

The key to preventing possible inter-tribal flare ups lies in avoiding placing large monies on the table before the communities for not harming forests. The REDD funds must be utilized in carrying out REDD activities, not disbursed among claimants. This should also help in limiting corruption even in countries not known for good governance.

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