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# Representation and participation in formulating Nepal's REDD+ approach

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## ABSTRACT

REDD+ is an international policy aimed at incentivizing forest conservation and management and improving forest governance. In this article, we interrogate how newly articulated REDD+ governance processes established to guide the formulation of Nepal's REDD+ approach address issues of participation for different social groups. Specifically, we analyse available forums of participation for different social groups, as well as the nature of their representation and degree of participation during the country's REDD+ preparedness phase. We find that spaces for participation and decision-making in REDD+ have been to date defined and dominated by government actors and influential civil society groups, whereas the influence of other actors, particularly marginalized groups such as Dalits and women's organizations, have remained limited. REDD+ has also resulted in a reduction of influence for some hitherto powerful actors (e.g. community forestry activists) and constrained their critical voice. These governance weaknesses related to misrepresentation and uneven power relations in Nepal cast doubt on the extent to which procedural justice has been promoted through REDD+ and imply that implementation may, as a consequence, lack the required social legitimacy and support. We discuss possible ways to address these shortcomings, such as granting greater prominence to neglected civil society forums within the REDD+ process, allowing for an increase in their influence on policy design, enhancing capacity and leadership of marginalized groups and institutionalizing participation through continued forest governance reform.

## Key policy insights

- Participation is a critical asset in public policy design.
- Ensuring wide and meaningful participation can enhance policy legitimacy and thus its endorsement and potential effective implementation.
- Fostering inclusive processes through dedicated forums such as multi-stakeholder groups can help overcome power dynamics.
- While REDD+ is open to participation by different actors through a variety of formal means, many countries lack a clear framework for participation in national policy processes.
- Nepal's experience with representation and participation of non-state actors in its REDD+ preparedness programme provides useful insights for similar social and policy contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks (REDD+) are an international policy framework seeking to incentivize enhanced forest management in developing countries. REDD+ is also supposed to result in a platform for the improvement of forest governance, including participation of a variety of stakeholders in national

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policy-making processes. The participation of civil society, indigenous peoples and local communities in such processes has been highlighted as a critical element in the design and implementation of REDD+ policies and projects (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017; Brockhaus, Di Gregorio, & Mardiah, 2014; Pham, Di Gregorio, Carmenta, Brockhaus, & Le, 2014). It has been argued that if decision-making processes involve a diversity of stakeholder perspectives and both policy and project design meet their various priorities, rights and needs, it is more likely that implementation will be regarded as legitimate by non-state actors (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017; Cadman & Maraseni, 2012; Daviet, 2011). More specifically, the 'full and effective' participation of non-state actors in REDD+ readiness and implementation stages has been considered a vital element for successful REDD+, and is therefore included within the REDD+ safeguards of the UN-REDD programme and the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) (FCPF & UN-REDD, 2012; UNFCCC, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

While REDD+ procedures at the international level have been open to the participation of many actors through a variety of means, many countries lack clear procedures for the representation and participation of non-state actors, including indigenous peoples' organizations and rural communities in national-level policy processes (Brockhaus & Di Gregorio, 2014; Corbera, 2012; Schroeder & Lovell, 2012). Despite a plethora of literature on the importance of addressing barriers to full and effective participation (e.g. Chambers, 1997; Osmani, 2008), there are limited empirical studies that critically examine the participatory mechanisms used in REDD+ policy processes at the national level (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017; Pham et al., 2014; Spiric, Corbera, Reyes-García, & Porter-Bolland, 2016). In Nepal, where the process of REDD+ preparedness started in 2008, REDD+ has been often regarded as an international initiative that could provide new avenues for participation through which a variety of stakeholders could share their concerns, ideas and proposals. REDD+ is thus expected to provide participatory forums to discuss and resolve persisting forest governance challenges, such as tenure conflicts, and in doing so, confront the country's social complexity and political inequality. The country's social complexity, with people stratified according to caste and ethnicity, alongside class and gender, coupled with the persistence of socio-political problems stemming from a very uneven social representation in the state's structures and institutions, further emphasizes the importance of investigating the participation of social groups in a specific policy setting (see also Satyal, 2010, 2017). It is paramount to explore who represents the interests of these traditionally marginalized stakeholders and social groups in REDD+, who participates and how, and who does not and why not.

In this paper, we interrogate whether and how REDD+ processes have induced changes in Nepal's forest governance as regards stakeholder representation and participation. Through an examination of Nepal's REDD+ design and policy process, particularly focusing on the drafting of Nepal's national REDD+ strategy and related documents, we investigate if national REDD+ policy processes have opened up new spaces for policy debate and facilitated progress on issues that had been historically sidelined, e.g. indigenous peoples' rights. Our data analysis focuses on how the newly articulated REDD+ governance approaches in Nepal (e.g. through the supported actions of the World Bank, UN-REDD and various bilateral agencies) influence participation, from the perspective of diverse state and non-state actors.

We provide below a conceptual framework exploring concepts of representation and participation and present our research methodology. In Section 3, we map the diversity of REDD+ stakeholders in Nepal and present the forums that have become available to facilitate stakeholder participation during the country's REDD+ preparedness phase. In Section 4, based on interviews and workshops with state and non-state actors in Nepal, we highlight the nature of representation and degree of participation of distinct social groups. Finally, we discuss the findings and conclude. In doing so, we provide guidance on how REDD+ processes can enhance procedural justice, by granting greater prominence to the hitherto neglected civil society forums and allowing for an increase in the influence of women and Dalits on policy design.

## 2. Conceptual framework and methodology

This article is grounded on notions of representation and participation, and particularly on the works of Hanna Pitkin and Sherry Arnstein, as a basis for analysing the principles for participation stipulated in the international REDD+ mechanisms, specifically the UN-REDD and FCPF safeguards.

Pitkin (1967) defines representation as the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions and perspectives 'present' in policy-making processes and identifies four major types of representation: (1) *formalistic*

*representation*, i.e. an institutional arrangement preceding or initiating representation in which an actor is officially authorized by the state to represent a constituency to the state; (2) *symbolic representation*, i.e. the ways that a representative 'stands for' the represented and the meaning/symbol that the representative has for those being represented; (3) *descriptive representation*, i.e. the extent to which a representative resembles those being represented and (4) *substantive representation*, i.e. when representatives 'act for' and are accountable to the represented. Pitkin and other scholars after her consider substantive representation as morally superior to other types of representation for the objective checks it places on representatives (Pitkin, 1967; Saward, 2008).

Although there are fuzzy lines between these categories, this typology can be thought of as a continuum, ranging from non-elected representatives with little accountability or alignment of views with affected communities at one end to substantive representation at the other. The typology is useful in understanding the diversity of groups being represented and a variety of ways representation can transpire in national policy forums and processes. In the case of REDD+, for example, it creates an opportunity to reflect upon the role that specific actor federations or working groups play in REDD+ negotiations, and who they are accountable to (e.g. indigenous groups, local communities or forest-dependent peoples).

Although participation means different things to different people, various literature and methodological guidance on participation highlight that there are three key elements that need to be considered in order to understand the nature and experience of participation by different actors. The first key element is to understand who participates in the policy-making processes and the different power relations among the diversity of actors involved, particularly of those who are affected by, or can affect policy-making (Faysse, 2006). The second element is about the 'spaces of participation' and the availability of different types of forums, such as places, organizations and procedures that make up a formal policy process. The third element is related to the degree of participation, ranging from simply being told about a policy process (informing) to being able to influence outcomes (empowering) (Arnstein, 1969).

According to Arnstein's (1969) *ladder of participation*, there are at least five different degrees of participation: (1) *informing*, i.e. being informed of decisions *ex post facto* or attending meetings and listening in on decision-making, without speaking up; (2) *consulting*, i.e. being asked an opinion on specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions; (3) *involving*, i.e. being asked or volunteering to undertake specific tasks; (4) *collaborating*, i.e. forming groups of primary stakeholders to participate in the discussion and analysis of predetermined objectives, thus increasing control over decision-making and (5) *empowering*, i.e. having a voice and influence over the decisions made, with ownership and control of the policy process.

Participation is emphasized for reasons of democratic necessity, management legitimacy and improving the effectiveness and equity of policies, programmes and activities (Forsyth, 2010; Osmani, 2008; Pascual et al., 2014). In the context of REDD+, it has been argued that participation in national policy processes can reduce the costs of implementation through greater local awareness and support for projects that have attended to the local people's specific values, practices and challenges in the project design (Chhatre et al., 2012; Corbera, 2012). It has also been argued that local community groups are more likely to participate in REDD+ projects if they receive accessible, accurate and timely information throughout the process (Chhatre et al., 2012; Pham et al., 2014). For such reasons, issues of full and effective participation have been highlighted in funding programmes such as the UN-REDD, the World Bank's FCPF and bilateral initiatives on REDD+ (Schroeder & Lovell, 2012). There are also other global instruments such as the International Labour Organization's Article 169 (ILO-169) and the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) that have provisions for participation of affected stakeholders, including the operationalization of the principles of 'free, prior, informed consent' (FPIC) (UNFCCC, 2011).

Participation of any stakeholder groups does not necessarily influence the decision-making. Whether various actors have a voice, and the extent to which their issues and choices are reflected in policy, depends on how they are represented in the policy forums, their socio-political hierarchy, the institution that defines the rules of participation in the policy process and the functioning of power relations with other stakeholder representatives, both state and non-state (Arts & Buizer, 2009; Peskett & Brockhaus, 2009). Other issues may also influence the quality of participation in national REDD+ processes, even if diverse stakeholder groups are represented. For example, previous analyses of REDD+ processes have illustrated how civil society influence over policy direction can be minimal, particularly for cultural minorities, despite their inclusion in relevant working groups (Mathur, Afionisa,

Paavola, Dougilla, & Stringer, 2014). Power and influence can be exercised by the state or other political actors in line with long-term political norms, which act as barriers, limiting the ability of civil society to even raise issues of importance for specific social groups without fear of retribution (Mason, 2010; Scholte, 2011). Where entrenched conflicts such as unrecognized tenure for indigenous peoples persist in forest governance debates, REDD+ has rarely proven a progressive platform for social justice and has instead focused on the distribution of financial benefits as a mechanism for promoting equity (Schroeder & McDermott, 2014; Suiseeya, 2017).

Furthermore, 'national processes' are not free from international influence, as the World Bank, UN and/or donor agencies commonly impose the procedures to be followed and issues to be prioritized, with the potential to impede the ability of other actors to address the issues of greatest importance to their respective stakeholder groups (Dawson et al., *in press*; Ravikumar, Larson, Duchelle, Myers, & Tovar, 2015; Romijn et al., 2015). The space for debating and addressing social issues in REDD+ policy processes is, therefore, often limited to discussion of how they may be evaluated for national-level monitoring exercises rather than debating how to overcome drivers of existing injustices in the access to forests, natural resources or carbon payments (if any) (Krause & Nielsen, 2014; Schroeder & McDermott, 2014). These are some of the barriers considered to have led to weak implementation and harms to local communities, even in projects that had incorporated FPIC and social safeguards (Arhin, 2014; Bayrak & Marafa, 2016). Furthermore, REDD+ safeguards only provide a guidance; they are not necessarily a substitute for meaningful stakeholder participation in decision-making (Arhin, 2014; Cadman, Maraseni, Ok-Ma, & Lopez-Casero, 2017).

We contribute to this body of research by investigating the representation and participation of social groups in the specific context of forums established to discuss and contribute to Nepal's national REDD+ strategy. Our analysis draws on 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with key national REDD+ policy actors in Nepal in 2017. These interviews followed on from two stakeholder workshops held in Kathmandu in August 2016, involving 30 state and non-state actors in total in the first workshop and 20 in total in the second. The purpose of these workshops was to bring together key forestry and REDD+ stakeholders in a common platform to discuss potential sources of contestations in REDD+ design and implementation in Nepal, including issues of representation and participation. Workshop participants and interview respondents were selected on the basis of their interests and involvement in REDD+ development, as well as to reflect the diversity of interests and varied experiences with and views of REDD+. They included representatives of stakeholder groups focused on the rights of indigenous peoples, Dalits, women and community forest users, as well as representatives from government agencies (e.g. REDD Implementation Centre and Department of Forests), forestry Non-Governmental Organizations – NGOs (e.g. ForestAction), international NGOs (e.g. World Wide Fund for Nature- WWF), academics and others involved in early REDD+ pilot projects (e.g. International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development – ICIMOD). Follow-up interviews were conducted with these different stakeholders, where necessary, to validate the information provided (e.g. asking community forest users on their views on participation of women and Dalits, asking government agencies whether they agree with the issues raised by different social groups). One of the actors we missed out were representatives of the private sector, as they have been invisible in the REDD+ process in Nepal so far. Interviews focused on various aspects of participation in REDD+ preparedness, such as whether and how the interviewees are represented in REDD+ forums, who participates on whose behalf and their experience of participation in REDD+ meetings. Interviews were recorded after explaining the objective of our research and obtaining consent. They were transcribed and analysed through thematic coding. Workshop discussions were captured in notes and compiled as a report. As there is always a danger of potential bias in research data that are mainly based on interviews, we have tried our best to combine them with other methods to draw our conclusions. Besides the interviews and stakeholder workshops, our research methodology also included participation in various REDD+ policy meetings, review of meeting minutes, policy analysis (e.g. REDD+ national strategy) and a review of secondary literature. These additional methods helped in the triangulation of collected data and also crosschecking the validity of information provided by the workshop and interview participants.

### 3. Nepal's REDD+ process, key actors and available forums of participation

Nepal's formal involvement in REDD+ began in 2008, when the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MFSC) formalized an agreement with the World Bank's FCPF. Since then, the country has embarked on the so-called REDD+

readiness phase and it has focused on developing REDD+ governance institutions, such as the REDD Unit in 2008 (which subsequently became the Forestry and Climate Change Cell – REDD Cell and lately renamed as the REDD Implementation Centre – RIC). The RIC has prepared policy documents, notably the draft of the country's REDD+ national strategy which was finalized in 2016. In September 2016, Nepal's Readiness Package was approved by the FCPF and the country obtained additional funding for a second phase of REDD+ preparedness. In this new phase, the RIC is expected to undertake the development of an Emissions Reduction Programme Document (ERPD) for a pilot project at the sub-national level in the Terai region, with a plan to craft an Emissions Reduction Purchase Agreement to capitalize any realized emission reductions or increases in carbon stocks (RIC, 2016a).

REDD+ preparedness activities in Nepal have been mainly supported through the World Bank's FCPF and to some extent through UN-REDD and funding from other bilateral agencies (e.g. the UK's Department for International Development, United States Agency for International Development, Finnish government and Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation). In parallel, pilot projects and 'regular' forestry sector policy reforms have been either completed or are ongoing (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017). Several thematic focused studies on specific REDD+ issues have also been completed (RIC, 2015).

The first draft of the country's REDD+ national strategy (2016) highlights the importance of developing people-centric resource management practices and approaches, and adopting equitable benefit sharing and social justice as guiding principles (RIC, 2016b; Satyal, 2017). It emphasizes the importance of participation and information sharing in REDD+ design and implementation, as well as the government's commitment to developing and enforcing REDD+ social and environmental safeguards during the further refinement and implementation of the strategy. However, the current draft does not provide operational guidelines on how to achieve full and meaningful participation; in other words, it is not specific on how to operationalize REDD+ social safeguards and FPIC principles. While the strategy acknowledges the need to ensure equal participation of all stakeholders irrespective of their caste, ethnicity, gender, economic status or physical remoteness, participation is equated in the strategy with stakeholder consultation. The remainder of this article indirectly contributes to filling this gap by providing key insights on the nature of participation in REDD+ to date, and on what can be done in the future to guarantee participation that is both meaningful and substantive.

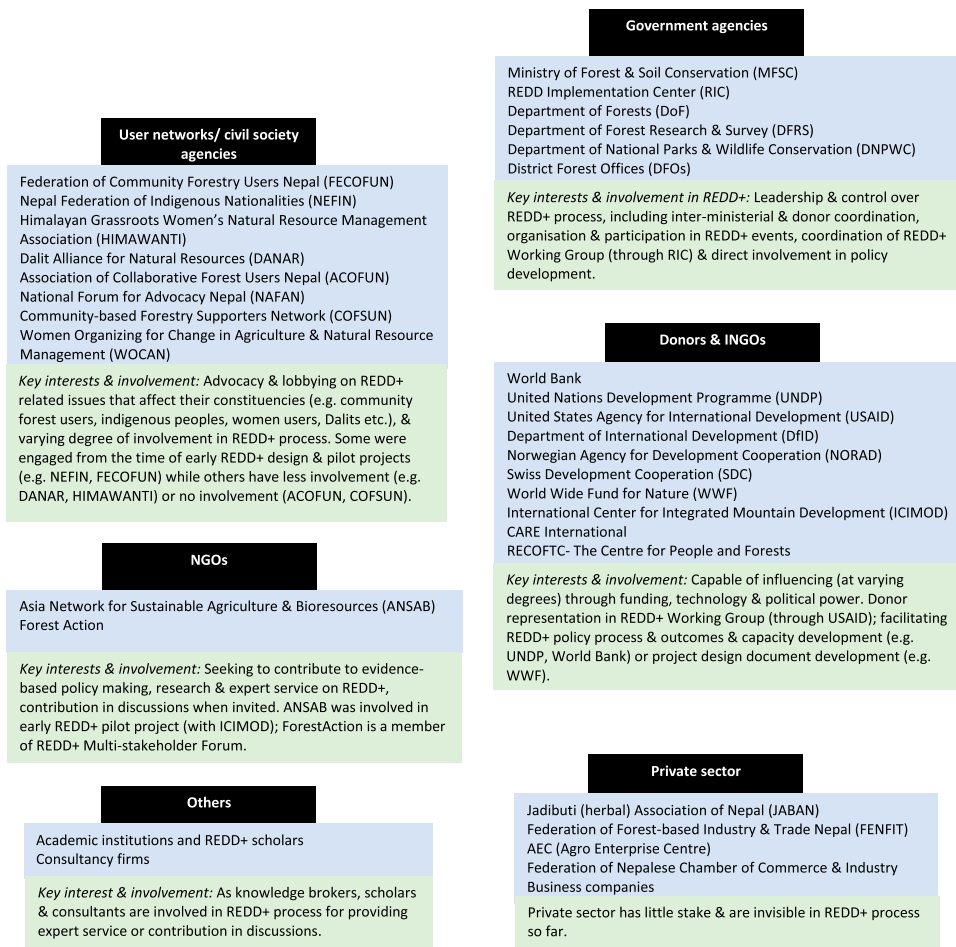
### 3.1. REDD+ actors

Figure 1 enumerates and maps out REDD+ actors at the national level, highlighting their key interests and involvement. Actors with high interest and involvement in REDD+ include state agencies, such as the MFSC and RIC, key donors, such as the World Bank and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), and INGOs (international non-governmental organisations), such as WWF and ICIMOD. Among non-state actors, Nepal's Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) has been working on advocacy and capacity building of indigenous peoples; the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) works to guarantee the rights of forest user groups and local communities; the Dalit Alliance for Natural Resources (DANAR) works for the rights of Dalits in natural resource ownership and management and the Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (HIMAWANTI) works on issues of gender and women's rights over natural resources. REDD+ constitutes only some aspects of the several agendas these organizations work on. FECOFUN and NEFIN are those with high interest and stake in REDD+. Dalits (i.e. DANAR) and women's organizations (HIMAWANTI) are less involved, and their agenda is often represented by FECOFUN and NEFIN. As noted earlier, the private sector has been largely invisible in Nepal's REDD+ process so far. Similarly, the local governments have not been involved in REDD+, as Nepal did not have elected representatives at the local level until recently (i.e. between 1997 and 2017). The representation and involvement of other actors such as NGOs, REDD+ scholars and consultancy firms are based on their linkages with RIC, which has sometimes asked them to provide expert advice or to contribute to REDD+ consultations.

### 3.2. REDD+ forums

A prerequisite for the participation of non-state actors is the existence of forums to discuss and contribute to the national REDD+ strategy and related consultations, where these actors could be represented and participate in decision-making process. This is the case because the institutional design of REDD+ preparedness influences the



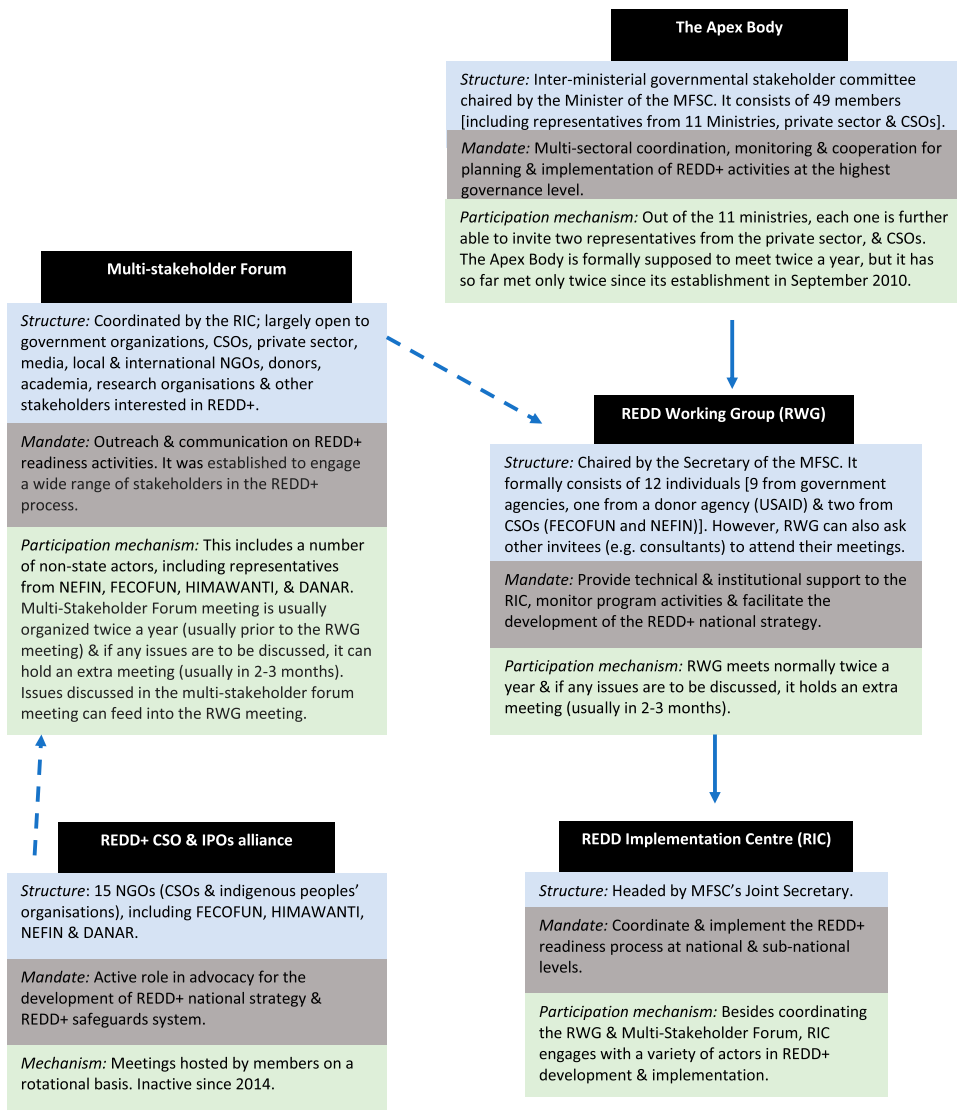


**Figure 1.** REDD+ stakeholder groups in Nepal.

type of representation through the definition of formal procedures of authority and accountability, which in turn shape the nature of engagement and interaction between a variety of actors (Peskett & Brockhaus, 2009; Pitkin, 1967).

In Nepal, there exists a three-tiered institutional framework for REDD+ at the national level (Figure 2), consisting of the high-level inter-ministerial Apex Body; the REDD Working Group (RWG) (coordinated by RIC) and a Multi-Stakeholder Forum (also coordinated by RIC). RIC under the MFSC is the national focal point for REDD+, including policy formulation. RIC is also responsible for overseeing REDD+ development and implementation, including coordination of the readiness process at the national and sub-national levels, and across stakeholders. These three main bodies have been involved in the drafting of the REDD+ strategy and its implementation plan (RIC, 2016b). The REDD+ CSOs–IPOs (Civil Society Organisations–Indigenous Peoples Organisations) Alliance is another social forum envisaged to engage a wider range of stakeholders in the REDD+ process. The Alliance, promoted by the government, is meant to develop a common understanding on REDD+ on behalf of CSOs, indigenous peoples and other stakeholders interested in REDD+.

Amongst the different institutional structures on REDD+, only RWG is active with regular meetings. The meetings of the Apex Body are rare and irregular. Similarly, the Multi-Stakeholder Forum has remained inactive and stakeholders are losing their interest in it. As a NEFIN representative highlighted, 'I had participated in a Multi-Stakeholder Forum meeting back in 2012–2013 and since then I don't think anything has been organised' (interview, June 2017). The REDD+ CSOs–IPOs Alliance has also remained inactive since 2014, as 'there are not many issues to discuss' and 'most of the discussion would take place in the Multi-Stakeholder Forum or in our own



**Figure 2.** Nepal's national REDD+ institutional process and available forums of participation.

network anyway' (interview with FECOFUN representative, June 2017). These forums are also understood differently by non-state actors. For example, DANAR considered the Multi-Stakeholder Forum and the CSOs–IPOs Alliance to be the same, while NEFIN saw the Multi-Stakeholder Forum as a separate loose network of multiple stakeholders who are occasionally consulted (when needed) for discussion on draft policy documents (Stakeholder Workshop-I, August 2016).

We now turn to discuss the dynamics of participation of different user networks in Nepal's REDD+ preparedness. We identify their key concerns and claims, and whether and how they encourage the participation of the social groups they claim to represent.

#### 4. Assessing the dynamics of representation and participation in REDD+ preparedness

As shown above, Nepal's existing REDD+ structures and those envisioned under its national REDD+ strategy have generally attempted to accommodate multiple actors, and have to a large extent provided deliberative



forums of participation for key actors in policy-making. However, insights from our workshops and interviews suggest that the nature of representation of different non-state actors, their degree of participation, quality of information, understanding and interpretation, and power relations in deliberations vary, most particularly among the user networks of indigenous peoples, forest user groups, Dalits and women. We also observe that some actors bring more weight into deliberations, drawing upon their organized networks and constituencies to bear upon decisions (e.g. FECOFUN on community rights and NEFIN on indigenous rights) while other actors (notably Dalits and women) feel marginalized.

Among the user networks, NEFIN is the only group with representation in the Apex Body, while both NEFIN and FECOFUN have their representations in the RWG and REDD+ CSOs–IPOs Alliance. The user networks for women (HIMAWANTI) and Dalits (DANAR) have been advocating for inclusion in the RWG, but are not yet formally represented. DANAR even repeatedly asked to be included in the Apex Body, but its request has not been yet fulfilled. At the time of writing, the representation of both HIMAWANTI and DANAR is limited to the Multi-Stakeholder Forum and the REDD+ CSOs–IPOs Alliance (both of which have remained largely inactive for the last three to four years). Even for NEFIN, there is a resentment that the organization only gets one seat at the table in the available forums of participation, while it effectively represents various groups of indigenous peoples consisting of around 37–50% of Nepal’s population. The section below further unfolds the experience and views of each of these CSOs on representation and participation of different social groups.

#### ***4.1. Representation and participation by different social groups***

Different social groups and their networks have mixed views on their representation and experience of participation, respectively. In general, the CSOs for community forest users, indigenous peoples, women and Dalits have all participated actively in the REDD+ meetings that they have been invited to and they have provided feedback to policy documents. However, many CSOs sometimes expressed dissatisfaction for several reasons: exclusion from RWG membership, limited access to information, little opportunity to share concerns, complicated reporting mechanisms and the tendency for their voice to be undermined by powerful actors in various meetings on REDD+. For example, CSOs representing women, Dalits and Madhesis (people from Nepal’s Terai) are unhappy that they have not been included in the RWG (Stakeholder Workshop-I, August 2016). They have also unsuccessfully requested to be notified promptly about REDD+ policy decisions and for these documents to be made available in Nepali and local languages.

Among the different user networks, FECOFUN has been able to claim what can be classified as descriptive to substantive representation on various governance structures on REDD+ and to continue advocacy on community rights. During our research, we observed that it actively participated in RWG meetings, often putting forward its position and shaping the agenda (even on occasion with statements sounding quite ‘anti-REDD+’). FECOFUN has regarded the degree of its participation as both consulting and collaborative, feeling able to influence policy outcomes and participating in the implementation of REDD+ early pilot projects (interview, June 2017).

Indeed, some issues raised by FECOFUN have been considered in the country’s national REDD+ strategy while others are likely to be incorporated in future drafts. Among the former, the interviewee from FECOFUN noted that his organization had managed to successfully advocate for the wider participation of civil society members in the REDD+ process (e.g. the admission of HIMAWANTI to the RWG); to secure the independence of the grievance redress mechanism; to guarantee the allocation of at least 80% of REDD+ international funds to the local level; to ensure the handover of carbon tenure rights to local communities (similar to use and management rights) and to mainstream a community monitoring approach of REDD+ implementation in order to empower local communities (interview, June 2017). Nonetheless, our interviewee indicated that the representation of Dalits in the REDD+ process had to date been symbolic despite their benefitting from some funding and capacity-building activities. He also noted that NEFIN had been by far the most empowered non-state actor in REDD+, being able to strongly advocate in relation to indigenous peoples’ rights, both nationally and internationally.

Indeed, NEFIN was able to express its concerns about REDD+ more clearly and vociferously, including putting forward a position paper on indigenous peoples (see Sherpa & Rai, 2013). NEFIN has been a member of the Apex

Body, RWG, the Multi-Stakeholder Forum and the REDD+ CSOs–IPOs Alliance. Its representation can be considered as descriptive to substantive, which has allowed this organization to participate regularly in REDD+ preparedness and provide substantive inputs into the strategy’s evolving drafts. However, there are so many diverse groups of indigenous peoples in Nepal (at least 59–81 groups out of the 125 caste/ethnic groups recorded in the 2011 national census) that their representation in these forums is considered insufficient by NEFIN (only formalistic in Pitkin’s sense). When prompted about the degree of participation, NEFIN’s representative showed a considerable amount of dissatisfaction concerning the opportunities for participation of indigenous peoples in REDD+, and he stated explicitly that participation in REDD+ had been for them more informative and consulting than anything else (interview, April 2016). In this regard, he stressed that the government had to do more to develop practical actions to safeguard indigenous rights and follow FPIC principles by fully adhering to the provisions laid out in ILO-169 and UNDRIP. NEFIN’s commitment for indigenous peoples’ fair treatment is reflected in the organization’s continuous demand for the use of the ‘local *and* indigenous’ rather than ‘local *or* indigenous’ communities when discussing benefit sharing on REDD+, as well as their demand to include the term IPOs in the naming of the REDD+ civil society actors’ Alliance (Stakeholder Workshop-II, August 2016).

Since the start of the REDD+ policy process, NEFIN has argued that state actors are disproportionately powerful in comparison to non-state actors, and it has complained in formal and informal forums that their views and concerns have not been properly addressed and included in REDD+ policies and programmes (Sherpa & Rai, 2013). In one of the two workshops held in August 2016, a NEFIN representative noted:

We never face criticism on the feedback provided to the draft documents but at the end our comments are not addressed in the final documents. They just mention that so and so stakeholders actively participated in the consultation but our inputs are not included. It appears sometimes that our participation is staged for validation purpose only ... Our comments to the ERPD draft, submitted to the RIC and consultants in written format (including issues of FPIC, non-carbon benefits, customary rights), have not been incorporated. Although a technical committee was formed, including NEFIN as a member, not a single meeting has been organised.

During our research, HIMAWANTI was also manifestly sceptical about the degree and quality of participation in REDD+ preparedness. In a workshop on Nepal’s REDD+ Strategy Development, held in Kathmandu in 2015, a representative of this organization stood up and said that ‘our voice is often heard but not listened to’. HIMAWANTI had participated in REDD+ consultations and provided feedback and suggestions on drafts of the national strategy, including ‘line-by-line’ comments with a gender perspective in mind. However, they also felt that their inputs had not, at least yet, been incorporated into the strategy’s draft and, in the case of ERPD draft, they were unable to provide the same level of feedback. In the words of our interviewee:

While we appreciate that HIMAWANTI is informed or invited institutionally to REDD+ consultation meetings, we are not satisfied with the way decision-making takes place. For instance, during the consultation meeting on the ERPD, we raised many gaps in the document in terms of women’s roles and responsibilities and activities related to gender mainstreaming. Our concerns were only picked up later and guided through WOCAN (Women Organising for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management, another organisation working on gender) with support from the World Bank ... If the concerns were really felt, it should have been raised at the beginning of a policy-making not after a draft document has been ready. They could have sent questionnaires or asked for inputs before the ERPD was drafted. (HIMAWANTI representative, June 2017)

HIMAWANTI acknowledged during workshops and interview that some gender-specific concerns are also raised by other user networks such as FECOFUN, WOCAN and NEFIN. However, they still see a limited representation of women in existing REDD+ forums (formalistic to symbolic). HIMAWANTI rated the organization’s degree of participation in the national REDD+ process as informing only and stressed that the participation deficit for women is more pronounced in lower levels of decision-making on REDD+, such as in pilot projects. According to our interviewee, this can be explained by an existing information gap about REDD+ and gender, lack of REDD+ materials published in Nepali, local languages or in visual formats, lack of capacity, limited access and opportunities for participation and high opportunity costs of participation.

DANAR, the organization representing Dalits in REDD+ forums and meetings, has advocated strongly for Dalits’ rights and social inclusion in natural resources management. Our interviewee highlighted a number of group-specific concerns to Dalits’ participation. First, he noted that, at the local level, Dalits are excluded from local forest management decision-making such as community forestry due to high membership fees, lack of information and communication, geographical exclusion and caste discrimination while they depend

more directly on forests for livelihood (e.g. charcoal collection). Second, their lack of leadership and organizational skills makes Dalits 'invisible' to REDD+ policy processes (interview, June 2017). There are also high transaction costs to their participation in REDD+ meetings (as the time lost in participation in various meetings cannot be economically rewarded) or often their participation is reduced to a passive role (e.g. inclusion in the monitoring committee of REDD+ projects but not in the executive committee). Dalits, who are particular to Nepal, India and some other parts of South Asia, also lack influential international networks unlike other social groups and hence they have limited influence at various levels of advocacy and decision-making. In the view of our interviewee, 'international mechanisms on REDD+ put too much focus on indigenous peoples' claims and rights to access and use of forest resources, while Dalits' concerns have been sidelined' (interview, June 2017).

DANAR has not yet been able to participate in RWG meetings, as the organization is still not formally represented there. It has so far been able to raise its concerns only through the Multi-Stakeholder Forum or the REDD+ CSOs-IPOs Alliance, both of which have remained inactive lately (Section 3.2). As observed earlier, Dalits', women's and indigenous people's concerns are raised by other non-state actors and user networks such as NEFIN and FECOFUN, but they might not be as effectively communicated as if they were expressed by the specific groups themselves. Even when Dalits themselves raise their concerns, they are not always heard, as the Dalit CSO representative stressed:

We had requested several times for inclusion in the Apex Body and RWG, but we were ignored and not taken seriously most of the time. We are tired of requesting and have reduced our participation in REDD+ consultations ... Active participation means being together in the decision-making process. If Dalits are not involved within REDD+ structures like the Apex Body and RWG, we cannot say REDD+ guarantees 'full participation'. (interview, June 2017)

DANAR's participation in REDD+ consultations has been minimal and our interviewee rated its degree of participation as rather low (informing only). He noted that Dalits', women's and other minority groups' occasional participation in national meetings is sought to give the REDD+ process a 'participatory flavour'; according to him, there is no political will to effect substantial change on the nature of the participatory process. Other interviewees such as those from FECOFUN, HIMAWANTI as well as representatives from ICIMOD, WWF and academia also shared this perspective. For example, one of them noted:

In Nepal, participation has become too ritualistic. It has been a mandatory but co-opted process where donors and government mobilize the language of inclusion, transparency and accountability. However, it has become a passive 'smile' type of participation. Participants are invited to take part, nod and smile, attend the meetings, eat lunch, and go ... While the influential actors talk at length on what they know, there is no useful interaction or mutual engagement for some actors, for example Dalits and women. Consultations thus become one-way flow of information, a kind of *ekalap* (monologue); there is no *bartalap* (dialogue) between them or between state and non-state actors. (Stakeholder Workshop-II, August 2016)

While this view does not reflect the nature of a majority of meetings nor the disposition of all actors, it highlights the operation of power in various forums that impacts on the dynamics of participation. Even in the opinions of representatives from relatively influential user networks such as FECOFUN and NEFIN, the dominance of state mechanisms in REDD+ is a concern. For example, despite repeated demands from indigenous groups, there is no commitment from the state to FPIC nor any clear guidelines to pursue FPIC, even if included in the REDD+ strategy. Government agencies that we interviewed also acknowledged that 'full' FPIC is not feasible hence REDD+ discussions have only covered the topic for the purpose of informing non-state actors about international provisions. FECOFUN and NEFIN representatives also complained when interviewed that REDD+ consultations are often hastily organized, and they refer to English language documents that cannot be well understood by most participants. In some cases, participation of some non-state actors is pursued to validate such documents, with actors having very little influence on policy written outcomes. There is also a tendency of 'paper participation', through which provisions are set out in policies but not actually monitored or complied with.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

We have examined above the dynamics of participation of different social groups and their representative networks in Nepal's REDD+ preparedness phase. We have assessed existing forums of participation within the REDD

+ policy landscape, including who has access to these forums and who does not have, the nature of representation (i.e. formalistic to substantive) and the degree of participation (i.e. informing to empowering). Our findings suggest that spaces for participation in REDD+ consultations are being framed by some key government actors and donors, whereas the influence of other actors, specifically Dalits and women's organizations, has been limited. These findings are in line with Bastakoti and Davidsen (2017) who observed increased prominence of networks of community forestry user groups and indigenous peoples in Nepal's REDD+ policy process, while Dalits and women are yet to find a political space.<sup>2</sup> While some social groups have strong networks and play an important role in national policy-making as well as in making an alliance with others (e.g. FECOFUN), other actors (e.g. Dalits) lack appropriate forums and networks to get their voice heard. Among the highly interested REDD+ actors, indigenous peoples are the ones who have become more aware and vociferous about their rights in the context of REDD+. REDD+ has made it possible for indigenous peoples to articulate their voices more clearly, for example, through FPIC and an emphasis on indigenous rights. However, the representation of Dalits and women has been limited to formalistic and symbolic representation, and their participation reduced to information sharing only. Even the relatively influential community forest user and indigenous peoples' groups say that they only play a symbolic role, providing some cursory legitimacy to the process, but without any influence at all (see Mbeche, 2018 for similar observations in Uganda's REDD+ preparedness). Thus, participation does not necessarily lead to influence in decision-making (Section 2). Participation becomes meaningful only when the voices and concerns of these actors are truly heard and incorporated in each stage of the policy process (Arts & Buizer, 2009; Peskett & Brockhaus, 2009).

Our findings have also highlighted that REDD+ preparedness has resulted in new decision-making forums that have provided opportunities for representation of a number of non-state actors, but their ability to participate equally has been uneven. While the REDD+ process is generally perceived to be inclusive by both state and non-state actors, capacity deficit and resource constraints are considered barriers to meaningful participation of some actors (Cadman, Maraseni, Breakey, Ok-Ma, & Lopez-Casero, 2016; Cadman et al., 2017; Cadman & Maraseni, 2013). While FECOFUN and NEFIN have secured their political space in the REDD+ policy debate in Nepal, other civil society networks are struggling to be included in the process (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017). REDD+ has also provided new networking prospects for indigenous peoples and women's groups, as they have been able to get international recognition, which in turn has helped them to also obtain recognition from the national government. With such exposures, these actors can also directly report to the FCPF, UN-REDD or the REDD Desk for complaints, campaigning and advocacy, and this is certainly a positive effect of REDD+.

However, as our study reveals, not all actors have found such spaces of participation or have experienced similar advantages from REDD+. In fact, these new networks and forums have often been found to be ineffective or unattractive, as they have failed to include the diversity of interests, priorities and needs of a variety of actors. Many actors think that CSO forums already exist, and there is no impetus to challenge the existing CSO hierarchy. REDD+ has also resulted in a reduction of mobilization space and influence for some hitherto powerful actors (e.g. FECOFUN), as a new focus on carbon forestry has decreased the level of autonomy of community forestry regimes and also the critical voice of community forestry activists. Additionally, the REDD+ process has mobilized diverse and opposing actors through interactive forums, but fundamental aspects of participation, equity and fairness, such as who is authorized to make what decisions about REDD+ rules and practices, have remained unaddressed (Ojha, Khatri, Shrestha, Bushley, & Sharma, 2013; Satyal, 2017).

Although REDD+ provides a new stage for debating forest governance and rights, and comes with very lofty principles of fair procedures and more provisions such as on equitable benefit sharing and FPIC, REDD+ in Nepal has not transformed the level and character of participation in policy-making to any considerable extent, and for some, it may even represent greater central control. The new provisions (e.g. FPIC) and forums of participation brought about by REDD+ are not sufficient in themselves. REDD+ seems to replicate the same formalistic approach to representation and tokenistic approach to participation that has characterized other top-down resource management policy approaches in the past, especially in Nepal (Forsyth & Sikor, 2013; Satyal, 2010). In some cases, the new REDD+ forums have been captured by some elite members of civil society, or decision-making processes have been shaped by more powerful actors (for example, see Yadav, Bigsby, & MacDonald, 2015 and Paudel, Green, Ojha, & Barnes, 2007 for patterns of elite dominance in the implementation of community forestry in Nepal). This can also shape the nature of REDD+ and its priorities (e.g. getting

international money into the state's forestry sector, supporting new financial institutions and building capacity – as well as saving forests), while few resources are dedicated to enabling the substantive participation of the most marginalized.

Another concern is whether, and if so how, the representative organizations of social groups bring forward the views of their constituencies or just represent themselves. Besides these poorly designed processes, larger socio-political factors (including political affiliation, complexity of social differentiation, personal connections, institutional positions and power relations) have also continued to influence the dynamics of participation, often reproducing political power rather than transforming it. Similarly, participation of various actors can be constrained by the techno-bureaucracy that has characterized the initial phases of REDD+ readiness in Nepal and elsewhere (Bastakoti & Davidsen, 2017; Ojha et al., 2013). Much of the early discussions in Nepal focused on technical aspects of REDD+, such as carbon monitoring and wider Monitoring, Reporting and Verification, while issues of social justice were sidelined. Tight deadlines and requirements imposed by international bodies also made it difficult to have a meaningful discussion on these issues. Most of the ongoing REDD+ preparedness efforts still tend to avoid and postpone difficult aspects of REDD+ and forestry policy development, including land tenure issues, recognition of rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, and benefit-sharing mechanisms (Larson et al., 2013; Ojha et al., 2013).

To conclude, we think that the research presented here provides some useful policy insights for other countries where REDD+ is being rolled out. We argue that a progressive vision for REDD+ should be based on principles of social justice, equity and fairness. It is necessary to provide equal opportunity and space for participation of all kinds of non-state actors, most particularly the marginalized social groups (Sui-seeya, 2016). For this, it is essential to focus on granting greater prominence to the neglected civil society forums within REDD+ processes and increasing their influence on policy design, and to do so against the state-led treadmill of going through the World Bank's FCPF guidance. Additionally, decision-making processes should be based on principles of transparency, accountability, information sharing and 'do no harm'. While REDD+ can do little to act upon larger socio-political contextual factors and address pre-existing governance challenges, it still has a potential to go beyond what has been done before, by using innovative means of participation to lead to greater recognition of the values, practices and concerns of marginalized groups, and instilling those messages in project implementation, including iterative and collaborative learning.

Finally, as the problems of participation go beyond existing structures and institutions under REDD+, the REDD+ policy process and its ensuing institutions across scales can only make a real difference if these are accompanied by adjacent changes in wider socio-political structures and processes. Nepal's socio-political landscape has changed drastically over the last few years, shaping, to varying extents, the governance and institutional structures of the country. Following years of post-conflict transition (2006–2017), the country's significant political reform towards a democratic and decentralized structure with a new constitution and recent local and national elections (in 2017), as well as a shift towards a more inclusive polity, provide some optimism for increased representation and participation of hitherto marginalized groups (such as women's groups and Dalits) in the years to come. Forest governance mechanisms such as community forestry have already witnessed some progress in that direction (e.g. with provision of 50% of membership of women in all management structures) and the benefits of enhancing representation have transcended the forestry sector. For example, enhancing capacities of community forest leaders has resulted in a new generation of elected leaders in Nepal: in the 2017 local elections, around 2000 community forest user group members were elected to various positions (many of these were women) (White, 2018). This shows how deficits of participation can be tackled and political agency inspired, to some extent, through special arrangements and affirmative actions, such as provisional quotas, and focusing on capacity building of under-represented social groups. Other measures include long-term investment and commitment to the empowerment of these groups, and institutionalizing participation through continued forest governance reform. These lessons and insights from Nepal can also be used to inform policies in similar contexts where structural inequalities prevent certain social groups from effectively participating in decision-making, and voicing and defending their resource interests and claims.



## Notes

- Both the UN-REDD programme and the FCPF highlight the importance of full and effective participation ('full' defined as continued participation and 'effective' as being able to influence the decision-making process) of relevant stakeholders, in particular, indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities. The REDD+ safeguards represent a set of social and environmental objectives as part of the Cancun Agreements (Decision 1/CP.16; UNFCCC, 2011), including provisions relevant for full and effective participation. For example, two of these safeguards provide for: (a) the

respect for the knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples and members of local communities, by taking into account relevant international obligations, national circumstances and laws, and noting that the United Nations General Assembly has adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),

and (b) for 'the full and effective participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular, indigenous peoples and local communities' in REDD+ (UNFCCC, 2011; FCPF & UN-REDD, 2012).

- On the other hand, there are mixed impacts of REDD+ implementation at the local level. In some cases, there have been limited participation of Dalits and women (e.g. Khatri, Marquardt, Pain, & Ojha, 2018; Shrestha & Shrestha, 2017), while in other cases, indigenous peoples, Dalits, women and poor households were found to have a positive impact in terms of their participation in local decision-making and livelihood support from REDD+ projects (Maraseni, Neupane, Lopez-Casero, & Cadman, 2014; Pandey, Cockfield, & Maraseni, 2016).

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