



# Comparing and Contrasting National REDD+ Strategies in the Hindukush Himalayan Region: Implications for REDD+ Implementation

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## Abstract

The paper compares and contrasts the national REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries) strategies of the three Hindukush Himalayan countries (HKH), namely Nepal, India, and Myanmar. Through review of relevant literature and content analysis of the National REDD+ Strategy, this paper analyses the processes and contents of the strategies with key selected parameters. The review found that the countries have followed a similar pattern of consultative process in the development of REDD+ strategy. However, the strategies have largely focused on the direct drivers of deforestation and forest degradation (D&D), often with limited attention to the underlying causes. Likewise, the institutional arrangement for REDD+ implementation often lacks clarity at the local/community level. Notwithstanding to these shortcomings, the strategy of these countries have prioritised expansion of community-based forest management in order to meet the intended targets of carbon enhancement. We observed that both the process and contents of the Strategies reflects the institutional culture of the forest sector, major drivers of D&D and the status of forestry in relation to the country's economy. The paper concludes that the policies and measures aimed at addressing the drivers of D&D should consider both direct and underlying causes. Moreover, expansion of community-based forest management should be considered whilst ensuring traditional/customary rights of the forest users.

**Keywords:** Action plans, India, Myanmar, national strategies, Nepal

## INTRODUCTION

With the inception of REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries) readiness, countries have laid their commitments to prepare their National REDD+ strategy. National REDD+ strategy is considered as a pre-requisite, agreed internationally for REDD+ implementation (UNEP 2017). It is one of the four key elements agreed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and a central document

which specifies country's assessment and commitment towards meeting the emission reduction targets (ADB 2010). REDD+ strategies are prepared through analytical work, stakeholder dialogue and strategic decisions in order to provide overall guidance to REDD+ implementation (UNEP 2017). The preparation of REDD+ strategies in several countries have been carried out through support from the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), UN-REDD and several other funds dedicated to climate change mitigation (FCPF 2013).

National REDD+ strategy neither has to follow any fixed template, nor has to fulfill technical assessments unlike Forest Reference (Emission) Levels. Nevertheless, paragraph 72 of Decision 1/CP.16 sets a prerequisite for individual countries to take into account several elements including deforestation and forest degradation (D&D), forest governance, safeguards, gender, among others, while preparing their national strategy (UNEP 2017). Globally, there are variations on how individual countries integrate REDD+ with their national policies. While some countries intend to form a separate structure for REDD+, others appear to link it with the existing structures aligned to climate change governance (Vatn *et al.* 2013). In the latter case, Brazil and Tanzania for example, appear to have the ambition to integrate REDD+ with the existing climate change governance (Vatn *et al.* 2013). The Southeast Asian countries, on the other hand, have been actively engaged in forming a separate REDD+ mechanism (ADB 2010). Indonesia, for instance, was first among the developing countries to establish its REDD+ regulations (ADB 2010). Other countries have also engaged in preparing their strategies, due mainly to the urgency of addressing D&D in individual countries.

The commitments from individual countries following the development of National REDD+ strategies vary across regions and country contexts. There is variation across countries where in some cases, priorities have been stressed in averting D&D, while others have stressed on activities including reforestation, afforestation and other conservation

activities (ADB 2010). While nations have been progressing towards achieving their pre-set goals on REDD+, countries in the Hindukush Himalayan (HKH) region have made a notable progress towards setting targets to achieve their goals.

Connectivity of the landscapes between the HKH countries makes it imperative in establishing long-term partnerships and collaboration between the member countries of the region in REDD+ which are critical for setting standards for the effective management of forest resources. A comparative analysis of achievements in various fronts of REDD+ can be useful, which is currently missing in the HKH region. Through the review of relevant literature and content analysis of REDD+ strategies of three HKH countries – Nepal, India, and Myanmar, this paper compares the National REDD+ strategies to inquire on i) the process of REDD+ strategy development and various drivers of D&D; ii) policies and measures (PAMs) to address D&D; and iii) institutional arrangements in addressing the REDD+ goals.

The section following introduction sets a context on forestry and REDD+ readiness in the HKH countries. This will provide a brief overview of the REDD+ strategies in those countries. Section three will provide a comparison of key elements of the National REDD+ strategies. It will primarily delve about the overall REDD+ strategy development process, drivers of D&D, PAMs adopted to address D&D, and institutional arrangements for REDD+ implementation. The following section will analyse the diversity in the process and content of the REDD+ strategies and finally the paper concludes.

## FORESTRY AND REDD+ READINESS IN HKH COUNTRIES

Forests and pasture of the HKH region is an important livelihood base for people living in the region. In majority of the cases, forests and natural resources in the region have been historically managed by local communities and indigenous peoples through traditional and customary practices. In most cases, such indigenous practices are developed through mutual trust and reciprocity among the users delineating property rights of users, and are administered and governed by culture-

specific institutional mechanisms (Gilmour and Fisher 1991; Dong *et al.* 2010).

The HKH region is rich in natural resources (Poudel and Shaw 2015). Regardless of the overall country's area, Bhutan among others, comprises the highest forest area and per capita forest area in the region (ICIMOD 2009). Besides, the total population (in %) depending on the forest (and agriculture) in the HKH countries is also high (Table 1). Forests in HKH spread across various regions ranging from sub-tropical to sub-alpine and include deciduous broadleaf and evergreen coniferous forests, or mix of both (Roy *et al.* 2015).

Table 1: Forests in HKH region

Country	Total forest area (in %)	Population dependent on forest and agriculture (in %)	Forests' contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (in %)
India	21.23	70	
Myanmar	30.73	70	1
Nepal	39.6	70+	9.45
Bhutan	70.45	69	3.18 (2011)
Pakistan	5.01	65	

Source: Roy *et al.* (2015); MoFE (2018)

Diverse practices of forest management exist in the HKH countries, where community managed forests have been viewed to be crucial from the REDD+ perspective. In case of India, Joint Forest Management (JFM) is based on partnership between the local communities and the state. Around 1,18,213 JFM committees involving 20 million people have been managing 25 million hectares (ha) of forest area (GoI 2018). Similarly, community forestry in Nepal is considered to be a global model that has shown notable impact towards reversing deforestation (Acharya 2002; Pandit and Bevilacqua 2011; Niraula *et al.* 2013). Over 19,000

community forest user groups (CFUGs) have been managing a total of 1.8 million ha of forest area involving 2.5 million community members (DoF 2018). In case of Myanmar, the Forest Law stipulates all forests areas and tree cover as Permanent Forest Estate (PFE) and is administered by the Forest Department. These include Reserved Forests, Protected Public Forests, and Protected Area System (GoM 2018). While 25 per cent of the total population in Myanmar lives under poverty, the rural population alone accounts for 85 per cent of the total poor in the country (UNDP 2011). Majority of these poor live close to forest and drive livelihoods from it

(Aung *et al.* 2015). This illustrates how indispensable forest resources are to the local communities in the HKH region.

The success of REDD+ is largely determined, among others, by clarity on community rights over forests and resources. In all three countries, tenure security is a contested subject where the

Government owns the forest land while the local communities have been endowed with the rights to manage and utilize forest resources. However, besides India, the existing legal framework for customary rights over forests and carbon is not clear (Table 2). This is particularly important in case of deriving benefits from and claiming rights over carbon.

**Table 2: Comparison of Forestry Rights Across HKH Countries**

Categories	Nepal	India	Myanmar
<b>Tenure security</b>	Local communities manage and utilize products; ownership of land lies with the government	Communities get share of forest products in JFM, but land owned by government	All forest lands and forest products owned by the Union
<b>Customary rights over forest</b>	Existing legal framework in forestry does not recognize customary practices of indigenous communities	Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act 2006 clearly recognizes customary and traditional rights over forests	Customary rights over forest not clear
<b>Carbon rights</b>	Community rights over carbon not clear	Community rights over carbon not clear	Community rights over carbon not clear

In retrospect, lack of recognition of local communities' access and use of forest largely led to forest degradation (Larson *et al.* 2010) in the developing countries. The fact that the mountain ecosystem in the HKH region is declining (Myers *et al.* 2000; Ives *et al.* 2004; Pandit *et al.* 2007) has been closely linked with the lack of incentives to local communities for their conservation efforts (Sharma *et al.* 2010). With gradual realisation and external pressure, there has been a shift in policies towards acknowledging the rights and access of local communities over forest. The advent of community forestry in late 1980s and 1990s in Nepal and Myanmar,

and Joint Forest Management in India during the 1990s is a clear manifestation of such initiatives. In addition, there has been a shift in the policies in HKH, mainly focusing on participatory approaches to biodiversity conservation (Sharma *et al.* 2010). Nevertheless, in the HKH region, fair and transparent cost-benefit sharing and social safeguard mechanisms are yet to be developed for each management regime covering both carbon and non-carbon categories of REDD+ (Roy *et al.* 2015). Moreover, the benefit sharing and safeguard system can vary across the countries based on specific forest tenure and governance arrangement.

The development and implementation of socially acceptable and inclusive policies, strategies and legal instruments for REDD+ mechanisms to be implemented in the HKH is imperative in order to address problems associated with D&D (Roy *et al.* 2015). While the National REDD+ strategies of India, Nepal, and Myanmar have identified key areas to be addressed in addition to the existing policies and legal instruments supporting the implementation of REDD+, nevertheless, they provide broader directions on achieving the goals. A detailed action plan comprising of operational elements is much needed in these countries. For instance, the REDD+ strategy of Nepal has listed policies and respective measures aimed at addressing those policies. However, specific actionable areas are yet to be worked out to achieve the expected outcomes. Likewise, although the REDD+ strategy of India mentions the ongoing government' initiatives in order to meet the targets of addressing the drivers of D&D, they do not provide any direction towards achieving them.

## **COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN NATIONAL REDD+ STRATEGIES**

### **National Strategy Design and Preparation Process**

Addressing the fundamental aspects of National REDD+ strategies is particularly crucial in ensuring its robustness. Two aspects are particularly important. First, the strategies need to follow a logical sequence where systematic planning through preparation of REDD Preparation Proposal (RPP) will set a vision of achieving the REDD+ targets. The development of

PAMs along with its endorsement and integration with the broader national policies will give shape to the strategies. Second, stakeholder participation is of utmost importance to engage people in maximising the inputs and integrate voices of diverse groups. Moreover, international negotiations largely shape the direction of those strategies. The preparation of National REDD+ strategies is of particular importance in terms of alignment of the forestry sector to the country's overall development framework (UNEP 2017). Couple of factors will shape the legibility of the REDD+ strategies including quantitative targets that countries set to achieve, compliance of international processes including that of UNFCCC, domestic financial commitments and international funds targeted to meet specific targets, and ensuring equitable benefit sharing and social and environmental safeguards (UNEP 2017). This section underlines the processes adopted in REDD+ strategy preparation in three HKH countries.

The inception of REDD+ process in Nepal began following the Conference of Parties (COP) 13 of UNFCCC in Bali in 2007. The establishment of the REDD Implementation Center (then REDD Cell) by the Government of Nepal provided impulse on REDD+ activities in the country. Following the preparation of the National REDD + strategy framework in 2012, a Mid-term Report was submitted to the FCPF which primarily reflected the overall progress in different areas of national arrangements and management, assessment of land use and drivers, forest law and governance, and National Forest Monitoring System (MoFE 2018). A number of studies were commissioned to

understand the land use change, drivers of D&D, and analyse the political economy of forest cover change. Similarly, studies were conducted on forest governance and tenure, benefit sharing arrangements, stakeholder analysis, safeguard systems and forest reference levels among others. Building upon the findings from these studies, the first draft of the National REDD+ strategy was prepared in 2014, which was widely circulated for feedback followed by consultations. The final REDD+ strategy of Nepal was endorsed by the Government of Nepal in 2018.

Similarly, India prepared its National REDD+ strategy in line with the UNFCCC decisions. The strategy builds upon the existing national circumstances which have been updated in line with India's National Action Plan on Climate Change, Green India Mission and India's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to UNFCCC (GoI 2018). The strategy development process in India followed a participatory approach involving various experts representing ministries and other organisations. Moreover, stakeholder consultations were carried out aimed at seeking inputs to the strategy. India received financial support from the collaborative project on 'REDD Himalaya' for supporting workshops and stakeholder consultations on developing REDD+ strategy of India. Nevertheless, forest user group level consultations are not explicitly mentioned in the strategy document.

The development of National REDD+ strategy in Myanmar was initiated following the development of REDD+ readiness roadmap in 2012. Stakeholder mapping remained an important element during the development of REDD+

readiness roadmap preparation. The primary purpose of stakeholder mapping was to identify the interests and potential roles of the stakeholders in REDD+ (GoM 2018). Various stakeholders including government institutions and agencies, private sector, National Forestry and Environmental (Non-Governmental Organisations) NGOs, international or regional NGOs, Women's groups and networks, knowledge institutions, youth groups, NGOs and networks working with Ethnic Groups and minorities were involved during the consultations. Following the development of the REDD+ Readiness roadmap, the preparation of the National REDD+ strategy formally commenced in 2016. The REDD+ strategy development initially started with the analysis of the drivers of D&D. Consultations at various stages were organised for the purpose of identifying the drivers. Moreover, series of sub-national consultations in each state was carried out. Similarly, in order to seek expert views on the draft, the REDD+ strategy document was made public in the REDD+ Myanmar website in 2017. Subsequently, the views from various stakeholders were incorporated into the second draft before its submission to the Cabinet.

### **Rationalising REDD+**

Countries in the HKH region have come up with their propositions and design of their REDD+ framework within an overarching national vision on addressing climate change. The REDD+ strategies of individual countries provide certain guidance and direction in meeting the goals. The REDD+ strategies in the HKH countries however vary in terms of their progress along with variations

in the objectives towards meeting the REDD+ targets. While the ultimate target of these countries is normally to reduce the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the objectives that are sought to meet the target show some variations. This depends on the country-specific priorities which are contingent to the type, nature and scale of drivers of D&D.

There is a wide variation on drivers of D&D across the HKH countries. While some countries consider illegal logging to be the most prevalent driver, others have listed agricultural expansion to be the major driver of D&D. Whatsoever, the

scale and intensity of the drivers determines the actual impact of D&D in individual countries. Moreover, 'deforestation' and 'degradation' can either have an equal impact or in other cases, the intensity of one phenomenon can supersede that of the other. For instance, Nepal has considered both D&D to have impact on the forestry sector. In contrast, Myanmar considers deforestation as the major factor of forest loss while India highlights degradation as a serious issue in emission reduction. In all three cases however, there are geographical variations based on which classifications of the drivers have been carried out (Table 3).

Table 3: Categorisation of Drivers of D&D in three HKH Countries

Categories	Nepal	India	Myanmar
Classification of drivers	Direct and underlying	Planned and projected ; Unplanned drivers	Direct and indirect
Numbers of DD	9 direct underlying causes	Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10 direct drivers of deforestation</li><li>• Direct drivers of forest degradation have not been identified.</li><li>• Seven indirect drivers of D&amp;D</li></ul>
Geographical disaggregation	Ecological regions	On the basis of different States	National with concentration in states/ divisions, border areas, rural areas, urban areas and local areas

The National REDD+ strategies of the HKH countries have clearly stipulated the drivers of D&D, where in most cases, proximate or direct drivers have been stressed. Compared to India and Myanmar, the REDD+ strategy of Nepal has explicitly listed the direct and underlying drivers whilst, most of the strategies and strategic actions have been centered on addressing the former. Moreover, the underlying drivers are common across the

first four<sup>1</sup> direct drivers of D&D in Nepal. Policy gaps and poor implementation, and poor governance and weak political support are regarded as the common underlying causes of D&D. Likewise, land use policy and insecure forest tenure, and weak coordination and cooperation among stakeholders overlap among some of the direct drivers.

<sup>1</sup> Nepal has prioritized the direct drivers of D&D which includes unsustainable and illegal harvesting, forest fire, infrastructure development, and over and uncontrolled grazing are ranked as the top four drivers.

Drivers in India are broadly categorised as planned and unplanned. In both cases however, the drivers involve direct drivers where infrastructure and developmental activities are highlighted as planned drivers while extraction of forest products and anthropogenic removals and natural disturbances to forest are put in the unplanned category. Similarly, Myanmar has stated a total of 10 drivers that mainly involve direct drivers of deforestation. While mining, hydropower and infrastructure development have been categorised as low priority drivers, firewood collection, timber harvesting, illegal logging, and agricultural expansion are highlighted as high priority drivers.

### **Policies and Measures**

The National REDD+ strategy stipulates PAMs that individual countries express their commitment to implement. PAMs are implemented to address the drivers of D&D where some might be built on the existing legal framework, while in other cases, it might demand certain level of legal and policy reform. Moreover, certain PAMs can be targeted to specific locations in order to address the drivers of D&D, significant to that particular region. PAMs in general cover a wide range of policy measures that include management practices, governance and institutional strengthening, capacity enhancement, and policy and sectoral synergy development in order to achieve REDD+ outcome (MoFE 2018). These are either listed in the form of 'strategies' and 'strategic actions' (in Nepal), or 'policies' and 'measures' (in

Myanmar and India). Nepal, for instance, has laid out 12 strategies and 79 strategic actions to operationalise those strategies. Likewise, India has set seven strategies and five activities to achieve their target, and Myanmar has listed 58 PAMs that are grouped into seven action packages. All these PAMs aim at addressing the five REDD+ activities.

In all three countries, enhancement of carbon stocks in forests have been highlighted without due consideration of the forest land ownership and community rights. While the REDD+ strategies are explicit on the involvement of communities in enhancing the carbon stocks, rights over the (carbon) benefits is still obscure. Nevertheless, introduction of new policies and legal instruments (as in case of Nepal) and improvements in the existing legal framework is expected to address the ambiguities on rights of local communities over forest land and carbon.

The existence of policies and legislations supportive to REDD+ were observed in all three countries. Most importantly, these policies and legislations have been considered to acknowledge the significance of forests and biodiversity (Table 4). Policies related to indigenous rights (as in case of India) are particularly critical in terms of securing rights of the traditional users over forests. Nevertheless, inception of new laws and institutional structure (in case of Nepal) and amendments of existing legal provisions (in case of Myanmar) are expected to bring about improvements in these countries.

**Table 4: Policies and Initiatives Relevant to REDD+ in HKH Countries**

Details	Nepal	India	Myanmar
Policies and Laws relevant to REDD+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate Change Policy (2011),</li> <li>• Land Use Policy (2015),</li> <li>• Forest Encroachment Control Strategy (2012),</li> <li>• Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2014),</li> <li>• Forest Policy (2015) and</li> <li>• Forestry Sector Strategy (2016)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indian Forest Act 1927</li> <li>• Wildlife (Protection Act) 1972</li> <li>• Forest (Conservation) Act 1980</li> <li>• Environmental (Protection) Act 1986</li> <li>• National Forest Policy 1988</li> <li>• Biological Diversity Act 2002</li> <li>• National Environmental Policy 2006</li> <li>• The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act 2006</li> <li>• National Agroforestry Policy 2014</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Forestry Instructions 2016</li> <li>• Land Use Policy 2016</li> <li>• Association Law 2014</li> <li>• Forestry Master Plan 2001</li> </ul>
Policy initiatives supporting REDD+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of CBFM across the country in the form of CF, CFM, leasehold etc.</li> <li>• GESI strategy 2009 focuses on gender friendly and sensitive programmes and budget</li> <li>• Introduction of SFM in CBFMs</li> <li>• Plantation in and management of public lands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Namami Ganges- abatement of pollution in Ganges through forestry intervention</li> <li>• Forestry interventions in other river catchments</li> <li>• Green Highways Policy 2015 – plantation of trees along highways</li> <li>• Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana – provide Improved Cooking Stoves (ICS) to poor households</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of community forestry stepping on Community Forest Instructions 2016</li> <li>• 183,000 ha of plantations through ‘Village Supply Plantations’ scheme</li> <li>• Private plantations upto 56,100 ha of teak and 35,700 ha of non-teak species</li> </ul>
Contradictions overlaps in policies and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land Act 1964 and Land Revenue Act 1978 provisions registering of forest land for agriculture and settlements (MoFE 2018: 10)</li> <li>• Confusion between local governments, CBFM groups, and forest agencies over resource management</li> <li>• Contradictory provisions between Forest Act, Local Government and Operations Act 2018, and Mines and Mineral Act 1985</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overlapping and conflicting mandates between land management committees e.g. between central and sub-national land management committees</li> <li>• Overlapping and conflicting priorities between agriculture and forestry sector</li> <li>• No legislation exists that explicitly recognises community land and resource tenure rights</li> </ul>

Expansion of CBFMs is perceived to be an important step towards meeting the REDD+ targets. While Nepal has pioneered in CBFM practices, particularly through community forestry, initiatives to devolve forest management and use rights to communities through CBFM practices exists in other two countries as well. However, contradictions in laws and utilisation of forest land, for various non-forestry purposes, have brought confusions. For instance, the new federal restructuring in Nepal has introduced confusion between local governments, CBFM groups, and forest agencies over use and oversight of CBFMs. Similarly, overlapping mandates among the land management committees at the national and sub-national levels in Myanmar exists. Notwithstanding these confusions, there are initiatives being undertaken by the government of three HKH countries that directly or indirectly contribute to the success of REDD+. In this regard, plantation in private lands (in Myanmar) and forest interventions along the river banks and highways (in India) have been a popular move that are expected to contribute to REDD+ targets.

### Implementation Arrangements

Effective and efficient implementation of REDD+ will require a well-defined institutional arrangement for the oversight, coordination, implementation, monitoring and reporting of REDD+ activities (MoFE 2018). Cadman and Maraseni (2012) argue that the success of REDD+ would be determined by the presence of governance arrangements that would deliver emission reduction targets as well as maintain transparency and inclusiveness. Moreover, institutional

arrangements that would ensure devolvement of resource mobilisation and decision making rights to the local forest users can have better results for REDD+. This section reviews the implementation arrangements of REDD+ in three HKH countries.

Globally, while there is certain progress in the institutional design, countries plan to mobilise the existing institutional set-up in the implementation of REDD+. Countries envisage REDD+ based on the already existing government institutions where key roles involve coordination, ensure measuring, reporting and verification (MRV), and benefit sharing mechanism. Moreover, multiple levels of institutional arrangements are designed for REDD+ implementation in the three countries (Table 5). For instance, Nepal has sought a three-tiered institutional mechanism – central, provincial, and local level – for REDD+ implementation as well as three-tiered institutional set up has been planned for MRV and ensure safeguard. Similarly, India has designated the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change as the focal ministry with two-tier institutional set up for REDD+ implementation. The REDD+ strategy of Myanmar stipulates a national entity i.e. National REDD+ task force, to oversee and coordinate REDD+ implementation in the country. The Forest Department under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation is designated as the lead agency for REDD+. However, the institutional set up beyond the national level is not clear in the case of Myanmar.

**Table 5: Institutional Arrangement for REDD+ Implementation in three HKH countries**

Implementation level	Nepal	India	Myanmar
National	Apex body, REDD working group, REDD implementation center, DFRS, DoF, DNPWC, carbon payment committee	National Governing Council on REDD+, thematic advisory committee, REDD+ technical working group, National Designated Entity for REDD+	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation  National REDD+ task force  REDD+ office (within the Forest Department)
Regional/state	Regional REDD+ focal office	State REDD+ Cell	-
District/local	District Forest Sector Coordination Committee, District REDD Working Group, District/Protected Area REDD Program Management Unit, REDD MSH forum and REDD CSO IP alliance		

Another important element of the institutional set-up for REDD+ countries includes the MRV system. With the MRV framework in progress in the HKH countries, the institutions responsible for the oversight of MRV have a critical role at the same time. While the REDD+ strategies of some countries are explicit in terms of assigning roles to institutions at various levels, others have simply laid out responsibilities at the national level. Nepal, for instance, has clearly proposed the three tiers of MRV institutional structure where the survey division at the Department of Forest Research and Survey (DFRS) will be serving the central role. Likewise, the regional REDD+ MRV unit under the regional REDD+ focal office will be primarily carrying out the responsibility

at the regional level. Finally, the District/PA REDD+ Program Management Unit of the District Forest Office (DFO) will be serving the roles at the local level. Likewise, India is well capacitated in measuring forest area change as well as performs regular national forest inventories for growing stock and forest biomass (Romijn *et al.* 2012; Pandey 2012). Nevertheless, the REDD+ strategy is silent on the various institutional set up to carry out activities pertinent to MRV. Similarly, the Forest Department is responsible to undertake activities related to MRV in Myanmar, though the institutional tier is not explicit. Beyond the MRV, the institutional set up related to fund management will also be crucial to REDD+ implementation in individual countries.

The fund management system in REDD+ countries is crucial in determining the effective mobilisation of money at various levels. While nations have developed the institutional set up for REDD+ fund management, the fact that the money should be mobilised to the local community level is yet to be experienced. Nevertheless, countries have agreed on institutions at least at the national level. The three HKH countries have stipulated their own system of fund management at the national level. Nepal has designated a 'carbon payment committee' comprising of multi-stakeholders and involving the Ministry of Finance in order to make decisions for the payment to the right holders (MoFE 2018). Likewise, India aims to have a National Fund Management System, though a separate entity is not mentioned. Myanmar envisages having an 'environment management fund' for the management of REDD+ results. In all of these cases, a central fund management system at the national level will handle the REDD+ fund where it will be distributed to various levels, the following certain guidelines developed by the individual country.

## **DIVERSITY AND INADEQUACIES IN REDD+ STRATEGIES**

The National REDD+ strategy development process in the HKH countries has taken into consideration the diversity of stakeholder views. The review of the REDD+ strategies show that these consultations have mostly taken place at the national and state/district level. Stakeholders including ministries, civil society organisations, NGOs, and networks have been consulted during the process. Nevertheless, the strategies are

not explicit on whether or to what extent consultations were carried out with the forest user groups in all three countries. This is particularly important in seeking the views and consent of the local forest managers to ensure equitable, efficient, and effective REDD+ implementation (IIED 2014). Overlooking the community perspective in forest policies will fail to acknowledge the rights of the local people and their practices, thus resulting in conflict (Gritten *et al.* 2013).

While there are no standard formats for the preparation of the National REDD+ strategies, individual countries however share some common elements that they intend to implement through REDD+. This is particularly in the case of drivers of D&D and strategies to addressing them. The strategies have stated the existing policies and legal instruments that either align with, or support, the objectives of REDD+. In all three cases, the PAMs intend to address the drivers through re-enforcing the existing mechanism, amend existing policies and laws, and introduction of new programmes. However, in all three cases, proximate drivers have been stressed upon while underlying causes have been mentioned, yet with less emphasis. While addressing the drivers of D&D is key to the success of REDD+, both proximate as well as underlying drivers should be closely considered. The proximate as well as underlying drivers are intricately linked and therefore do not operate in isolation (UNREDD 2014). Therefore, the success in addressing a driver is dependent on how effectively its underlying cause is addressed.

The fact that community managed forests will play a key role in REDD+ implementation, the tenure aspect of

these management regimes is not explicit in the National REDD+ strategies of the three HKH countries. Though forests in developing countries are managed by communities to an important degree, their ownership over the forest land is absent (Agrawal *et al.* 2008). Moreover, a significant share of forest biomass extracted from community managed forests, play a crucial role in climate change (Bluffstone 2013). In this regard, the policies of all three HKH countries appear to be supportive towards the expansion or establishment of community managed forests. Moreover, initiatives such as plantation in public lands (especially in case of Nepal) will help in establishing communally managed forests.

Nevertheless, lack of clarity on land ownership in community managed forests adds ambiguities in terms of access to the benefits from REDD+ (Dahal *et al.* 2017). This is the case in all three countries where ownership of the forest land belongs to the government, while communities are provided with the rights to access, management, and utilisation of the forest products. Moreover, lack of recognition of the customary rights over forests adds dilemma on rights over carbon. The state regulations that do not explicitly accommodate customary laws and local realities can result in conflict (Gritten *et al.* 2013).

The overlaps and contradictions between policies and practices is another common area observed in the REDD+ strategies. While forest policies and ministries related to it have mainly focused on conserving forests, parallel policies and legal instruments have created confusions over meeting the intended targets of REDD+.

This has mainly been observed in case of agricultural expansion and developmental construction (in Nepal and Myanmar). For example, the currently proposed construction of airport in the Terai region<sup>2</sup> will result in massive clearance of forest. This would stand against the government's commitment to achieve emission reduction targets in the 12 Terai districts<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, overlapping mandates and development priorities of various tiers of government has added complexities over management of resources including forests. Lack of clarity in the mandates of different governmental layers might result in exploitation of resources.

In addition to the various governmental tiers, the proposed institutional structures for REDD+ at different governance levels in the HKH countries lack clarity. Nepal being exceptional, REDD+ strategies of India and Myanmar have not mentioned the institutional responsibilities for REDD+ implementation as well as MRV beyond state level (in case of India). Moreover, the REDD+ fund management at lower governance level is not explicit in all three cases. This is particularly important where a decentralised fund management system would be more appropriate in terms of communities' access to REDD+ fund. Moreover, decentralised institutional arrangements to ensure social safeguards at the community level will be important. This is particularly crucial where there are chances of elite capture over the carbon benefits (Lawlor *et al.* 2010).

2 The construction of the international airport demands clearing of 2.4 million trees in Bara national forest alone. (Republica 2018)

3 The Emission Reduction Program Document (ERPD) aims at reducing emissions through expansion of community-based forest management regimes and sustainable forest management in the 12 Terai districts (FCPF 2018)

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper compares the process and contents of National REDD+ strategies of three HKH countries – Nepal, India, and Myanmar. The comparison shows that there are several commonalities in the overall process and content of the REDD+ strategies. The REDD+ strategy development process in all three countries has followed a consultative process along with the involvement of relevant stakeholders of REDD+. The National REDD+ strategy development in the HKH countries has taken into consideration the diversity of stakeholder views. The review of the REDD+ strategies show that these consultations have mostly taken place at the national and state/district level. Stakeholders including ministries, civil society organisations, NGOs, and networks have been consulted during the process. Nevertheless, the strategy is silent on the community aspect, where there is not many reporting on local level consultation. Moreover, presence of too many institutions, especially as honorary participants, simply demands additional effort and time to seek consensus. This is evident from Nepal's experience where presence of diverse ministries in the decision making bodies has simply been counter effective in terms of increased transaction costs.

Likewise, all three countries have highlighted the drivers of D&D, as an important element in achieving REDD+ targets. Moreover, the PAMs are targeted towards addressing those drivers. While the PAMs are focused on addressing the direct drivers, the strategies have largely overlooked the underlying drivers. On the positive side, countries have stressed

on the expansion of community-based forestry as an important policy initiative to REDD+. However, overlapping policies and priorities of the government will serve as a major setback to those initiatives. In addition, lack of tenure clarity in community forestry regimes adds complexities over the REDD+ benefits to the local communities.

The paper also compares the implementation arrangements on REDD+ in the three countries. With exception to Nepal, the two countries – India and Myanmar – have not clearly stated the institutional arrangements below the state level. While institutional arrangements for the overall REDD+ implementation along with fund management, and MRV will be critical at all levels, the omission of local level mechanism to carry out various REDD+ tasks might limit the support of the local communities. The paper makes following recommendations to ensure effective implementation of REDD+.

- Consent of local communities in REDD+ is critical. For that, clear institutional arrangements from national through local level should be established. Though the governance structure might vary among countries, access of local communities to the overall REDD+ process should be simplified.
- REDD+ strategies and implementation plans need to pay more attention to policies that aim at addressing both direct as well as underlying drivers of D&D. Since emphasis has been on direct drivers, policies, institutional capacities, and incentives should also be targeted in addressing the underlying drivers of D&D.

- While the initiatives on expanding community-based forestry regimes in HKH region is notable, countries should equally pay attention to tenure reforms of the forest land. This is particularly important in securing the rights of the local forest managers over carbon in forest. In addition, countries where traditional and customary rights hold importance in ensuring livelihood of the local communities, policies including REDD+, should ensure those rights.
- Finally, there is a huge, and increasing, demand for infrastructure in the HKH countries. With policies highlighting infrastructure development (roads, hydropower, airport, etc.) as high national priorities, a mechanism needs to be in place to harmonise these with REDD+ targets. Any overlapping (or contradictory) policies should be taken care of.

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