Supporting indigenous and forest-dependent peoples’ interests

Civil society organisations have increased their capacity in REDD+ and have ensured better reflection of the interests and rights of indigenous and forest-dependent peoples in REDD+ frameworks.

Why: Securing land and resource rights while reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation

Numerous groups of indigenous and forest-dependent peoples live in or depend upon the rich tropical forests that are subject to efforts aimed at reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+). There are concerns over the potential conflicts related to valuable forest resources and ownership, land grabbing and fraud due to unsecured land rights for indigenous peoples and local communities. Poorly designed and implemented REDD+ initiatives could lead to loss of livelihoods and increased poverty among forest-dependent communities. Moreover, conflicts can increase the risks that emission reduction targets are not achieved in a lasting manner. For REDD+ to succeed, communities must participate in transparent REDD+ decision-making and benefit from REDD+ activities, and their rights and interests must be protected.

The Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN) is one of the 45 organisations that received support from Norad under Norway’s International Climate and Forest Initiative during the period 2009–2013. RFN’s program consists of an international policy component and four country components in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Ecuador and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) operating on national, provincial and local levels. These countries all have tropical forests rich in biodiversity and carbon as well as indigenous and local communities who depend on the wealth of resources provided by these forests.

The purpose of RFN and its partners’ work was to ensure that the rights and interests of indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities as well as the protection of biological diversity were clearly reflected in the governing documents and guidelines of multilateral REDD+ initiatives as well as in national REDD+ plans and activities in Indonesia, PNG, Ecuador and the DRC.

Results: Indigenous and forest-dependent peoples’ interests are integrated in REDD+ policies and frameworks

RFN and partners have improved civil society participation and influence in international and national REDD+ processes. Civil society awareness raising, mobilisation and capacity building provided an important foundation for numerous representatives and groups who advocated for the interests of indigenous and forest-dependent peoples in national REDD+ planning, development of REDD+ frameworks, multilateral discussions, international negotiations and other forums. Major improvements in capacity enabled civil society organisations (CSOs) and community groups to generate public pressure, develop policy inputs and engage with local and national governments in countries such as Indonesia and DRC, international organisations such as UN agencies and international finance institutions and also the private sector. In several instances, this contributed to integrating the interests of indigenous and forest-dependent peoples in REDD+ frameworks at provincial, national and international levels.

At international level, RFN and partners participated in the design process of the UN-REDD safeguards and guidelines for ensuring free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in all UN-REDD supported programs through the Social and Environmental Principles and Criteria (SEPC) and the related Benefits and Risks Tool (BeRT). This helped raise the standard for grievance and accountability mechanisms, in setting a wider scope for which stakeholders qualify for FPIC and
the degree to which the rights holders or possible claimants will be allowed to influence the
design and implementation of grievance mechanisms. This made UN-REDD a leader on policy
standards for indigenous peoples’ involvement in REDD+. The issues of social and environmental
safeguards have now become entrenched in all major international REDD+ processes and
increasingly also at national level in countries such as Indonesia and DRC.

In Indonesia, Norad’s support contributed to giving civil society an unprecedented role in national
policy development. Unlike similar processes in the past, the national REDD+ strategy was
developed through a transparent process where civil society input was welcomed by the
Government. RFN’s partners played an important role in pushing for civil society inputs and the
concerns of communities and local organisations. The process resulted in a REDD+ strategy that
was well-received by most actors as it was open on several challenging issues such as free, prior
and informed consent (FPIC), tenure, conflict, indigenous peoples and biodiversity. Decision
makers now accept that these at times controversial issues need to be addressed if REDD+ is to
succeed.

An important achievement is that one of RFN’s partners in Indonesia, the Community and
Ecological Based Society for Law Reform (HuMa), helped draft the national REDD+ safeguards
that cover issues such as rights, governance, transparency, benefit sharing and biodiversity. The
safeguards are now adopted by the Government and have been included in the national REDD+
strategy. RFN’s partners also influenced REDD+ strategies at provincial levels, with particular
success in Jambi and Central Sulawesi Provinces, and the development of the Provincial REDD+
Strategies and Action Plans. In Jambi, the strategy includes provisions on community based
forest management, benefit sharing and conflict resolution on tenure issues. In Sulawesi,
communities’ tenure rights and FPIC have been strengthened. A group of local NGOs, including
several of RFN’s partners, developed a Roadmap for Tenure Reform which has been presented
to the Government.

Another important milestone in terms of indigenous peoples’ rights was reached following long-
term work by the Indigenous Peoples’ Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), one of RFN’s key
partners. In May 2013, the Constitutional Court of Indonesia ruled that indigenous peoples are
legal subjects and that indigenous peoples will get back rights over their customary forests within
State Forest Areas that were seized by the State through the 1999 Forest Act. Consequently, the
ruling is expected to strengthen indigenous peoples’ rights to REDD+ benefits.

In DRC, RFN’s main partner in REDD+ work is the Congolese civil society working group for
REDD+ issues, Groupe de travail climat REDD (GTCR). GTCR has more than 200 member
NGOs in DRC and works to influence the national REDD+ process and provide policy guidance
to the Congolese Government and multilateral partners such as the World Bank. GTCR has
produced position papers, public statements and other media work, held meetings with policy-
and decision-makers, participated in thematic groups formed by the national REDD+ coordination
office and submitted input to the Forest Investment Programme (FIP), the Forest Carbon
Partnership Facility (FCPF) and UN-REDD Programme. GTCR has carried out capacity building
of civil society groups, local communities and indigenous peoples on REDD+ and also provided
technical input to the development of the DRC’s national REDD+ strategy.

Civil society has criticised DRC’s REDD+ processes for being highly centralised, activities mainly
taking place in the capital Kinshasa as well as field realities and the interests of indigenous and
forest-dependent peoples not being reflected in national processes. GTCR’s work has resulted in
a greater recognition among stakeholders of the need for civil society consultation and
participation and also of the rights and interests of forest dwellers and indigenous peoples. Civil
society representatives are now normally included in governing structures on REDD, though not
functional so far, and their positions in the process are not questioned like in the past. Capacity
building at the provincial level has prepared the ground for a decentralisation of the REDD+
process in DRC and ensured that REDD+ better reflects regional differences and forest dwellers’
interests.
DRC’s national REDD+ strategy was initially due in December 2012. The Government was eager to finalise the document despite major shortcomings and delays during its preparation. Following civil society pressure, only a national REDD+ framework strategy was prepared and a commitment made to continue preparation and finalise the DRC national REDD+ strategy in 2016. Civil society’s input resulted in the integration of provisions for participatory community mapping of rights and forest uses, community forests, and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in the framework strategy. These are key steps to strengthen forest-dependent peoples’ rights in future REDD+ regimes and investments.

The GTCR has also played an important role in convincing the World Bank to make DRC’s adoption of community forests regulations a condition for the release of Forest Investment Program (FIP) funding to DRC. These regulations can result in the recognition of important local community roles in forest management. REDD+ benefits can therefore more easily reach communities who consequently see REDD+ as a component of a development model that also works for them. Input from RFN’s partners improved the DRC’s investment plan submitted to the World Bank’s FIP (May 2011) through integration of indigenous peoples and communities’ interests and rights.

**Lessons: Several achievements, but real change on the ground remains limited**

Important achievements include more national political debate on forest and climate issues, increased civil society capacity and improved REDD+ frameworks. However, the REDD+ processes have taken a long time and real change on the ground in terms of improved livelihoods as well as conservation of carbon stocks and biodiversity largely remain to be realised. For instance, climate and forest issues have climbed dramatically on the political agenda in Indonesia as a result of international, bilateral and civil society efforts within REDD. Capacity has improved and frameworks are coming in place. However, forest conservation on the ground largely remains weak. This illustrates the importance of long-term efforts in the challenging REDD+ work.

The combined engagement in international, national and local processes enabled substantially increased knowledge among CSOs in the relatively new, changing and challenging REDD+ field. CSOs’ credibility in REDD+ processes consequently increased. Experiences from both Indonesia and DRC have shown that these synergies enabled more effective engagement and influence of national REDD+ processes, including national follow-up of international decisions to integrate indigenous and forest-dependent peoples’ rights. At the same time, despite the increased capacity and recognition of the role of civil society and forest-dependent peoples’ rights in REDD+, vigilance and continuous efforts are required to actually ensure this is implemented in practice as those with opposing interests (e.g. various industries) often continue to promote their own agenda.

Organisations working on rainforest REDD+ issues are very diverse in nature and work under very different conditions. Linking CSOs in different provinces and countries have proved useful in terms of exchange of lessons and capacity building. Analyses of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in different contexts enabled learning on how CSOs can work and engage on REDD+ issues. Such cooperation has also brought important international decisions into national CSOs’ work.

RFN’s partner organisations have not been able to engage and play an active role in the development of REDD+ plans in Papua and West Papua Provinces, Indonesia. The Central Government is reluctant to engage in a region which is politically sensitive due to separatist movements and where the provincial government has been opposed to a large scale agricultural expansion project. Without serious attempts from the Government to develop REDD+ there is limited space for intervention by CSOs in such a politically sensitive environment. Political turmoil and rivalries in neighbouring PNG as well as untimely interference by international actors is another context in which real progress in REDD+ has proved very challenging. Working in volatile and unpredictable political environments, at times combined with varying foreign interests,
introduces risks and requires long-term and consistent engagement by a capable and proactive civil society to create positive change.

Changing forest management away from unsustainable extraction that provides large short-term economic gains is challenging. This is particularly the case when confronted with the massive economic and political powers such as timber, plantation and mining industries and important decision-makers in government. As experienced for instance during the work with the moratorium on new forestry concessions in Indonesia, an important lesson is that it is not enough to work with the progressive forces within government. Civil society organisations must also pay close attention to the sectors engaged in the destruction and unsustainable use of forests. Multi-stakeholder dialogues should be broad enough to include everyone with an interest in forest management despite some of the challenges introduced by engaging opposing interests.

REDD+ work include many and at times highly technical issues that require specialised competence. The ability of civil society to work together to understand all relevant issues, advocate joint positions and exert targeted pressures on policy and decision-makers, is key to influence the development of national REDD+ strategies. RFN’s Indonesian partners are an example where CSOs increasingly have seen that they achieve more through collaboration, for instance joint press releases and policy recommendations to provide consistent messages to policy and decision-makers, also through cooperation across provincial borders.

Sources: Project reports, evaluation of Norad’s support to CSOs through Norway’s International Climate and Forest Initiative (LTS, 2012) and phone interviews