

FOREST DEPENDENCE, REDD+ AND WELFARE OF THE POOR: A CASE STUDY FROM INDIA

SUMANA DATTA DATTA
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.

With the emergence of Reduced Emission from Degradation and Deforestation (REDD+) in global climate forum concerns on forests' role in local livelihood came into sharp focus. Forests serve the vital inputs to rural subsistence and income generation to nearly 800 million people live in forests in the tropical regions. The critical question is whether forests could meet these local demands, while at the same time mitigation climate change. Whilst the policy on REDD+ proposed by the UNFCCC seeks to emphasize the synergies between carbon storage (for global benefits) and livelihood benefits (for forest poor) inherent trade-offs between the two goals might be inevitable. In this context a better understanding on livelihood contribution of forest in tropical countries has been attracting growing attention.

The current paper has explored the livelihood dynamics of forest dwelling communities through case studies of two forest villages in West Bengal state of India through repeat household surveys and ethnographic observations over 13 months. The results highlight three insights in particular, and review their relevance to the emerging REDD+ mechanism. First, the income figures provide evidence of widespread poverty amongst the majority of populace in forest areas. Whilst REDD+ is projected as 'a way out of poverty' the big question is whether the committed investment and/or potential benefits through market mechanism will be able to channel sufficient funds to address this poverty effectively. According to an estimate by the Government of India more than US\$ 3 billion will be available as carbon services under REDD+ in India. Nevertheless there is skepticism that REDD+ benefits will be another 'piecemeal' effort towards poverty alleviation as this attractive aggregate figures will turn into meager when disaggregated at the village as well as household level.

Secondly, the paper highlights the importance of analytical lens that greatly determines 'what is seen'. The rich households appear to be insignificantly dependent on forests compared to the middle and poor families while analyzing forests' contribution in household cash earnings. But an opposite trend has been evident as I quantified/monetized benefits such as firewood use at home and fodder dependence of livestock. The forest dependence was highly differentiated within a single village community and was varied with asset profiles. Rich and the middle class families with their higher ownership of lands and livestock were ultimately higher users of forests than the landless or marginally landholding families. The rich and middle households also had disproportionate access to government patronage benefits such as wage work and monetary share from timber felling. The crucial challenge for REDD+ would be to create a synergy so that the richer and poorer villagers gain equitably from the system or else REDD+ would be one more way to marginalize the poor.

The last insight from this study concerns the methodological issue for understanding livelihood in forest areas. Distinct methods were used to understand forest earnings. Besides, local conditions (e.g. right and access to forests) priorities and perception of the researchers also led to differences in methods. It is evident that the assessment of livelihood impact will be critical in REDD+ especially in the context of above concerns. Therefore, it is important to develop a common analytical framework for understanding livelihood profiles of forest areas.

