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Research Article

Indigenous Identity in the Global Sustainable Project: A Case Study of the Implementation of REDD+ in Cardamom, Cambodia, and Hieu, Vietnam

[1]* Yusril Ihza Mahendra, [2]Eduardus Andhika Kurniawan, [3]Balya Arung Segara

[1]Department of International Relations, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta - Indonesia
*Corresponding email: yusrilihzamahendra@mail.ugm.ac.id
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Abstract

REDD+ is an international initiative focused on mitigating the adverse effects of climate change. Developing countries can secure funding from developed countries to preserve their forests. However, despite the ideal goals set, the project's achievements varied due to differences in responses among local communities in several areas. This research employs anthropological perspectives and ecological knowledge of worldviews to analyse the factors that contribute to these discrepancies. By analysing REDD+ in Cardamom and Hieu Commune, it was discovered that there are variations in how indigenous people perceive their relationship with the environment. In this case, the Cardamom community perceives the environment as a source that will provide all their essential needs. Meanwhile, in Hieu Commune, people follow traditional methods to manage the natural woodlands, embracing the concept of a sacred forest, where taboos, spiritual beliefs, or religious convictions protect nature. These distinctions subsequently lead to variations in locals' responses to REDD+, which in turn can impact the success of project implementation.

Keywords: REDD+, Indigenous People, Worldviews, Ecological Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is the term used to describe the occurrence of a substantial rise in global temperatures, which has now become a matter of concern for the international community. This situation is mostly attributed to anthropogenic activity, with deforestation being one of the main factors (Fankhauser, 2012). Other human actions, such as excessive use of natural resources, livestock farming that produces greenhouse gases, and the increasing prevalence of consumerism habits, are significantly hastening climate change's pace. Consequently, Dr. Gavin Schmidt from NASA estimated that humans were responsible for approximately 110% of observed warming, with a similar conclusion found by the U.S. Fourth National Climate Assessment, which stated that 90% to 123% of warming was due to human activities (Pearce, 2017).

Forests are vital assets in the battle against climate change, serving as essential ecosystems that provide habitats for most of the Earth's species and livelihoods for approximately one billion people. They play a crucial role in mitigating climate change by acting as carbon sinks, absorbing billions of metric tons of CO_2 each year. However, forests

face significant threats from deforestation and environmental degradation, which release stored carbon back into the atmosphere (UNDP, 2023). Land use changes, particularly deforestation, account for 12–20% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Watson and Schalatek, 2021). Therefore, restoring forests is essential for both mitigation and adaptation efforts. The global initiative to restore 350 million hectares of degraded and deforested land by 2030 aims to sequester approximately 1.7 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually, making a substantial contribution to achieving climate goals (IUCN, 2021).

Fankhauser (2012) emphasized that it is necessary to implement mitigation strategies aimed at reducing emissions and preventing further warming, as well as adaptation measures to adjust to climate change impacts which are expected to effectively address the challenge of climate change. Therefore, the complexity of climate change requires extensive collaboration and action across multiple sectors and actors at different levels, particularly at a global magnitude, which serves as a platform for cooperation among both state and non-state entities. Global sustainable projects have emerged as a response to the need for corporations and potential exacerbation of climate change issues. These initiatives are necessary to promote sustainable practices that could effectively address environmental, social, and economic challenges while ensuring long-term viability by prioritizing sustainable practices that minimize environmental damage and preserve ecosystems. One of them is the REDD+ project, which focuses on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. The framework was developed in accordance with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to guide forestry sector activities. The "+" sign represents the importance of conservation, sustainable forest management, and enhancing forest carbon stocks.

The primary objective of REDD+ is to provide financial incentives to developing nations in order to encourage them to decrease emissions from forested areas and promote the adoption of low-carbon strategies for sustainable development (Duchelle et. al., 2019). Financial incentives are expected to enhance the economic capacity of developing countries in the conservation efforts, making forest protection more economically advantageous than clearing forests for other purposes. Therefore, financial resources, whether from bilateral or multilateral agreements, public or private, and international or domestic sources, play a crucial role in motivating and carrying out REDD+ initiatives, including through the system of results-based finance and voluntary carbon markets (Morita and Matsumoto, 2023).

REDD+'s collaborative initiative can effectively combat climate change by protecting biodiversity and supporting populations that depend on forests. Undoubtedly, local communities have a pivotal role in attaining sustainable goals. Ensuring fairness in the project's benefits necessitates the implementation of participatory forest management (PFM), which guarantees community members' involvement and rights. In order to ensure equitable distribution of benefits among indigenous communities that rely on forests, it is essential for REDD+ to establish a dependable system that can accurately monitor and validate the reduction of deforestation. This system should guarantee that the program successfully accomplishes its goals without generating any unintended adverse effects.

REDD+ is a complex program that presents inherent challenges. Despite its positive impacts and potential, REDD+ has also had negative effects on local communities, who directly experience the consequences of forest conversion. For example, the limited participation of local communities in different regions has been a significant problem. Some projects fail to adequately consider the integration of local needs and perspectives, and they lack the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), which is significant as it empowers locals to either accept or reject resource development activities on their traditional territories (Tysiachniouk et al., 2022). The Ulu Masen REDD+ project in Indonesia serves as an example where there is a failure to consider the interests of indigenous communities. The project primarily excluded indigenous people from the decision-making process, disregarding their rights as forest-dependent communities (Kurniadi, 2017). In Peru, the Constitution, international legal standards, and certain laws serve as the foundation for the legal recognition of indigenous peoples. But this recognition is limited, raising questions about the structure of significant foreign control over their common territories (UN-REDD, 2022). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), there is no explicit legislation that formally acknowledges the designation of "Indigenous Peoples." Instead, alternative categories, such as "local communities," often classify them, leading to their assimilation (Lasheras et al., 2023).

A number of studies have tried to delve into how this project affects local communities. Hajjar et al. (2021) conducted research that analyzed how REDD+ affects the social-ecological resilience of forest communities. The study revealed that the project had both positive and negative effects on forest communities. In particular, the REDD+ led to an increase in network embeddedness, connection at different levels, and local community involvement in policy making. However, this project has the potential to restrict the activities of local communities through rigid rules, and the transformation of forests into carbon trading areas may present challenges for communities in effectively managing their forests. Similar to Hajar et al., Sharma et al. (2017) argue that even though global carbon markets offer the potential for increased income for local communities, they also pose significant hazards due to the unpredictable nature of revenue and the fact that communities have varying preferences regarding various forest goods and services.

Additionally, a study by Milne et al. (2018) analyzed the economic effects of REDD+ on the local people in Laos. They found that farmers are facing difficulty obtaining enough revenue from livelihood co-benefit programs (such as raising livestock and agro-forestry) to cover the expense of additional forest-use limitations, which in turn encouraged further forest removal. The study also suggests that the economic consequences of REDD+ include the need for prompt funding at the local level to guarantee the realization of local financial advantages, as evidenced by studies on sub-national REDD+ initiatives. Low (2020) conducted another research that concentrated on the social effects of the project. He identifies significant gender inequality and discrimination issues in the implementation of REDD+. Despite the active participation of numerous indigenous women in forest work and forestry, their contributions often remain undervalued and lack recognition. Past

research on REDD+ frequently adopts a gender-specific perspective, perceiving forests as primarily a male domain and REDD+ as solely a technical issue.

Unlike the initial study, Alosiola et al. (2021) focused on the investigation of how the REDD+ generated conflict between local people and other actors. They identified that the establishment of a new forest government, limitations on access to forest resources, changes in land tenure, the exclusion of community members from participation, and the failure of programs had been the causes. Therefore, the REDD+ programs should prioritise the rights, livelihoods, and advantages of local communities to prevent the escalation of conflict. Lestari (2019) conducted more specific research into the causes of REDD+ implementation failure. By focusing on a case study in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, he found that there are two key challenges underlying the failure of REDD+ implementation. The first is the difference in perspective between the government and NGOs in implementation, which fosters distrust between the implementing parties. The second issue is the inconsistency between the implementation of REDD+ and its intended goal of reducing deforestation, which hinders the achievement of the program's goals.

Nevertheless, previous studies have not extensively explored the non-material aspects of how local communities understand their connection with the environment, which ultimately shapes their response to the adoption of REDD+ in their area. As a global sustainable project that carries ideal goals, it is interesting to see how local communities will be affected and respond to the implementation. This research will specifically examine the implementation of REDD+ in Cardamom, Cambodia, and Hieu, Vietnam. These two cases were chosen because of the differences in community responses to REDD+ in the two regions. In Hieu, Vietnam, where the M'nam tribe resides, the community is more inclined to embrace and support the implementation of REDD+, which ensures its optimal efficiency. Meanwhile, in Cardamom, Cambodia, home to the Chong tribe, the implementation of REDD+ has faced challenges due to the ban on using natural resources that have traditionally supplied the community's livelihood.

Therefore, the focus of this research analysis will be on the question, "What is the reason for the disparities in responses between communities in Cardamom, Cambodia, and Hieu, Vietnam, in response to the implementation of the REDD+ project?" The author aims to provide a radical, comprehensive, and unbiased analysis of the complexity of the implementation of global sustainable projects by utilizing the concepts of cosmopolitanism and world-view ecological knowledge.

METHOD AND THEORY

This study is qualitative research, which means that the focus will be on a broader spectrum, including intangible or immaterial things rather than measuring quantity, amount, frequency, or intensity. This kind of procedure emphasizes the importance of social reality as a factor that influences and molds research (Nugrahani, 2014). We will employ explanatory research methods to specifically explore the causal relationship between variables to understand how the perception of nature affects how people react to REDD+ in certain areas. The main goal is to evaluate the principles or predictions of a

theory, expand it to address new concerns, and validate or refute an explanation (Hamdi & Ismaryati, 2021). We use library research as a data collection technique to gather and analyze various documents, such as books, journals, theses, dissertations, reports, internet articles, and other references that are relevant to the topics of indigenous involvement in the REDD+ project.

Modern Anthropology vs Traditional Anthropology

Anthropology is a comprehensive field of study that investigates the many facets of human existence. This area of research aims to gain knowledge of the factors that influence human behavior. Anthropology is distinguished from other fields of study by the distinctive approach it takes to the investigation of human life and culture. Because there are a large number of human cultures and a significant number of elements that impact these cultures, it is essential to employ methodologies that are holistic, comparative, and relative (Department of Anthropology, 2022). Appiah, in his book "Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers," delves into the concept of anthropology by examining the perspectives of modern and traditional anthropology. Both points of view are founded on different ideas involving the perception of universal values and the connection between those values and the complex character of local communities all over the world.

Modern anthropology, often known as positivism, is characterized by its use of a scientific methodology and its ability to differentiate between beliefs and wishes. The purpose of beliefs is to provide an accurate representation of the current state of the world, and they are based on evidence. Another point to consider is that there are well-established reasoning standards that define what kinds of views are considered reasonable. On the other hand, desires are subjective representations of our preferences and are similar to matters of personal taste, making them impossible to quantify or explain (Appiah, 2006). Therefore, wishes are difficult to describe or measure. As such, beliefs can be classified as either "right" or "wrong," and it is possible to criticize the views of other people by arguing that they are either illogical or factually incorrect. On the other hand, one cannot categorize a person's desires as "right" or "wrong" because they are subjective. People's desires are not just responses to the world; they aim to transform it, not simply replicate its current state.

As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961) stated, "The world is a totality of facts, not of things." Positivists, in general, tend to reject the existence of values, particularly in circumstances that are related to the world. Because the world is a factual reality regardless of our personal opinions, it is possible for the world to coerce us into believing in something. On the other hand, reality lacks the ability to compel our desires because it is unable to present explanations for why we ought to or ought to not desire anything (Appiah, 2006). Because positivists believe that values are tightly related to particular desires, this way of thinking presents them with a number of obstacles. They define universal values as anything that every individual desires. On the contrary, the question that needs to be answered is, "What exactly are these desires?" and who can give evidence that they are widely desired by everyone? It is possible for people to have fundamental needs, such as

the desire for "kindness," in which they make an effort to be nice and subsequently receive compassion in return. However, there is no rational basis to back up the assertion that their viewpoint is accurate (Appiah, 2006). Furthermore, if the definition of valuing something is the pursuit of a universal desire for it, then this could potentially be considered imperialistic in nature.

Traditional anthropology, which is based on relativism, does not encounter these problems. These anthropologists may have a cosmopolitan interest in other cultures, but they emphasize that it is necessary not to interfere with the lives of other societies (Appiah, 2006). Despite their interest in other cultures, they maintain this stance. Historical evidence indicates that previous interventions have frequently negatively impacted lives without offering superior alternatives, which fuels the skepticism surrounding intervention. As we can see, a great number of countries that were formerly colonized in Africa and Asia continue to endure the adverse effects of colonialism, rather than reaping any of the wonderful benefits that colonialism had bestowed upon them. Furthermore, the theory of relativism suggests that other societies may interpret what we perceive as failures differently. Consequently, traditional anthropologists have the impression that interventions are largely misinformed and demonstrate a lack of comprehension.

According to the concept of relativism, our ideas of what constitutes "right" and "wrong" are dependent on the traditions or cultures that we belong to. The impression of something as being either positive or negative is conditioned by the intersubjective consciousness or consensus that exists inside a certain society. Burton (1880/1974) articulated this in his book "The Kasidah of Haji Abdu Al-Yazdi."

"There is no Good, there is no Bad; these be the whims of mortal will:
What works me weal that call I 'good,' what harms and hurts I hold as 'ill:'
They change with place, they shift with race;
and, in the veriest span of Time,
Each Vice has worn a Virtue's crown;
all Good was banned as Sin or Crime"

An understanding of this perspective is particularly crucial when it comes to identifying the diverse characteristics that prevail among indigenous peoples around the world. A common misconception is that the concept of sustainability, which is often referred to as "universal," is universally applicable. Nevertheless, this is not the case. Consequently, it is imperative to employ a more adaptable approach in this research to elucidate the local community's perspective on their relationship with the environment.

World-Views Ecological Knowledge

The contemporary environmental justice movements often arise from two political perspectives: disinterested politics and identity politics. Disinterested politics depend on the objective knowledge of scientists and the expertise of experts. They are referred to as materialist worldviews that prioritize the material world over the mind and consciousness. Identity politics, on the other hand, rely on personal experience and subjective knowledge

to support their arguments. This worldview is unique in that it prioritizes mind and consciousness as primary realities, with material being of secondary importance (Woollacott, et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the differing assumptions about the nature of scientific knowledge in each political perspective currently lead to their mutual undermining (Tesh & Williams, 1996).

It should not come as a surprise that, despite the fact that information on climate change and other environmental issues is easily accessible, there are still significant differences in the environmental ethics of scientific organizations, individuals, and groups of people regarding their beliefs and perceptions about environmental risks. In this case, worldviews can significantly shape human relationships with the environment, often referred to as our responsibility for the planet. The concept has the potential to influence a society's environmental ethics by affecting how we evaluate and react to environmental dangers (Woollacott et al., 2023). As a result, acknowledging the numerous forms of indigenous identity that exist across the globe is critical to understand indigenous peoples' viewpoints regarding their connection to the natural world.

Van Leeuwen (1998) has identified various worldviews that are associated with traditional ecological knowledge. These worldviews are frequently embraced by indigenous cultures all over the world. The first is the perspective of the giving environment, which considers nature to be a constant and unrestricted provider for people's subsistence needs. The second kind of environment is known as the reciprocating environment, which also considers nature to be a never-ending source of giving but also demands contributions from humans in order to preserve ecological balance. The third theory, which is referred to as the disposable environment, proposes that when people are under a great deal of pressure and their resources are limited, they usually resort to exploitative management tactics and cause damage to their environment as a means of surviving. People often perceive nature as transient and anticipate its eventual destruction in such circumstances. The final category, the prohibiting environment, perceives nature as shielded by taboos, spiritual beliefs, or religious convictions. As a result, it is of the utmost importance for individuals to abstain from actions that are detrimental to the natural world in order to forestall the appearance of malevolent forces and curses. Despite this, we must recognize that we may need to expand this classification to accommodate the potential existence of undiscovered indigenous groups or tribes.

Consider that these worldviews are not mutually exclusive and can interact within a single culture or individual perspective, illustrating a dynamic approach to environmental interactions. These worldviews also have implications for both nature and the humans who hold these perspectives. While providing environments to celebrate nature's bounty, overexploitation is at risk if it is not balanced with sustainable practices. On the other hand, reciprocal environments value both giving and receiving relationships through rituals. Conservation efforts that promote ecological balance through selective harvesting and seasonal restrictions are examples of reciprocal environments. Disposable environments are created as a survival mechanism in response to external pressures, such as scarcity or resource displacement that implies challenging circumstances. Prohibitive environments highlight the significance of spiritual beliefs and taboos in safeguarding

biodiversity, with sacred sites serving as efficient conservation zones. However, we have to note that certain indigenous cultures might hold more nuanced worldviews that defy categorization. For instance, they might perceive nature as cyclical or dynamic. The growing global environmental challenges have led to an increasing recognition of the value of traditional ecological knowledge in the context of sustainable practices and fostering resilience. Therefore, we must recognise this knowledge as indigenous peoples' property and ensure its application benefits both the community and the environment.

Linda Smith, an indigenous scholar, has provided valuable insights into the unique epistemological traditions of indigenous peoples, noting that "we have a different epistemological tradition that frames the way we see the world, the way we organise ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions we seek." This statement highlights the significant impact that diverse epistemological methods can have on our acquisition and interpretation of knowledge. Epistemology, which concerns itself with the nature and foundations of knowledge, raises fundamental questions relevant to traditional ecological knowledge: What are the sources of knowledge? What can one truly know? And how does one determine if something is true? As Chilisa (2012) points out, these enquiries are not merely academic but have real-world implications for how different cultures approach environmental management. The answers to these questions can vary significantly based on an individual's identity, cultural background, and lived experiences, particularly in ecological knowledge, where indigenous and local communities often possess deep, context-specific understandings of their environments.

This study will apply the worldview ecological knowledge concept to compare and contrast the responses of two distinct communities, the Cambodian Cardamom and Vietnamese Hieu, to the implementation of the REDD+ project. This comparative approach will allow for a nuanced examination of how different epistemological traditions and ecological worldviews can lead to varying interpretations of and responses to the same environmental management initiative. By exploring these differences, we can gain valuable insights into the complex interplay between cultural knowledge systems, environmental perceptions, and conservation practices in diverse settings. This understanding is essential for fostering effective collaboration and promoting sustainable development strategies that respect and integrate indigenous perspectives.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Emerging of Sustainable Ideas and Projects

In recent decades, sustainability has gained prominence, spurring numerous concepts and initiatives. The 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm is often credited with initiating sustainable development ideas, marking a significant milestone in advancing the agenda. The Stockholm Declaration outlined 26 principles for effective environmental management, providing a framework for addressing environmental issues and utilizing the earth's finite resources in a more sustainable way.

The need to address environmental challenges, particularly deforestation, intensified in the years following, as the link between deforestation and climate change

became clearer. From June 3 to June 14, 1992, Rio de Janeiro hosted the Earth Summit, also known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). This international conference brought together representatives from 178 nations and numerous non-governmental organizations to collaboratively examine the environmental consequences of human socioeconomic activities (European Environment Agency, 2024).

The 11th session of the Conferences of the Parties (COP) in Montreal, Canada, saw the introduction of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) alongside the inaugural session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) 1 of the Kyoto Protocol. The initiation of REDD sparked extensive discussions about financial incentives to encourage developing nations to conserve forests. In 2008, negotiations in Poznan led to REDD's evolution into REDD+, which broadened the initiative to encompass a wider array of forest preservation strategies, including sustainable forest management and conservation efforts (Clouse, 2020).

Since then, REDD+ implementation has spread globally, with Brazil receiving significant financial assistance due to its ability to meet requirements and its extensive tropical forest area. In Asia, China and Indonesia are primary participants in REDD+, though their approaches differ significantly. China has relatively few REDD+ initiatives but ranks third globally in implementation due to its unique characteristics, such as moist forests with high carbon sequestration potential. China executed 87% of its 31 REDD+ projects through domestic collaboration, while only 13% involved international partners. In contrast, Indonesia's approach is more internationally oriented, with 89% of its 35 projects implemented within transnational cooperation frameworks.

South America accounted for 43% of all initiatives, while Africa and Asia accounted for 30% and 25%, respectively. This distribution highlights a concentration of REDD+ efforts in areas with significant tropical forest cover. In South America, Costa Rica stands out as a model for successful REDD+ implementation due to strong governance institutions and clearly defined land ownership legislation. These factors have enabled the government to incorporate indigenous people into various programs, such as the "Cultural Mediators Program" (Villhauer & Sylvester, 2021).

The impact of REDD+ on developing countries has been substantial. Collectively, 17 countries have recorded a decrease of 11.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, significantly contributing to global greenhouse gas reduction efforts. REDD+ has also facilitated improvements in analytical capabilities, including uncertainty analysis. The implementation of National Forest Monitoring Systems (NFMS) has enhanced countries' understanding of their forests' conditions and their ability to address deforestation issues.

Effective implementation is paramount for REDD+ to succeed. However, progress can be undermined by inadequate institutions, corruption, and weak enforcement, particularly in developing countries, hindering efforts to reduce deforestation and forest degradation. Even when these challenges are addressed, equity concerns persist regarding the distribution of benefits. Often, influential entities capture a disproportionate share of the financial gains compared to local or indigenous communities who bear the brunt of

deforestation's impact. Furthermore, land tenure insecurity at the local level presents a significant hurdle. Ultimately, the success of REDD+ initiatives depends on how well they are tailored to the unique circumstances of each nation and community, including their specific social, economic, and environmental contexts.

Sustainability Goals and Indigenous Values: The Case of Cambodia and Vietnam

This section will analyze REDD+ implementation in Cambodia and Vietnam to illustrate how differing societal contexts influence the program's effectiveness. By examining these two distinct cases, we aim to better understand how different societal perceptions of REDD influence its overall success.

REDD+ in Cardamom, Cambodia

The REDD+ program in the Cardamom region contributes to Cambodia's broader aim of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. This aligns with the country's long-term objectives of forest protection and emissions reduction, with the goal of becoming a leader in environmental commitments in ASEAN. Similar to other developing nations, Cambodia is exploring the potential of its forest regions to generate carbon credits that can be sold in the global market. These credits would support forest conservation initiatives and contribute to reducing global carbon emissions. However, the implementation of these projects faces obstacles, especially concerning the rights and sustainability of the indigenous communities residing in these forest regions.

The dramatic loss of forests places a heavy burden on forest-dependent peoples, seriously impacting their livelihoods, local economies, social fabric, and cultures, as well as adversely affecting local food systems (World Rainforest Movement, 2023). Therefore, Cambodia has started to implement forest conservation projects to stop deforestation and kick off restoration processes. However, the effort for conservation and carbon neutrality has frequently ignored indigenous participation, with socio-ecological consequences. Indigenous groups face barriers to accessing land and natural resources essential for survival and cultural identity (Bourdier, 2024).

According to research by Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Cambodian government has constructed national parks over the last thirty years without considering the impact on local communities and indigenous peoples, disrupting customary acknowledgment and official recognition of the land (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The government's approach to safeguarding forest land involves implementing carbon offset programs, such as the Southern Cambodia REDD+ Project, which consists of the sale of carbon credits. In the first half of 2023, Cambodia emerged as a significant source of carbon credits from natural projects.

The Southern Cambodia REDD+, carried out by the Ministry of the Environment and the conservation organization Wildlife Alliance, is one of Cambodia's most extensive carbons offset projects. Despite the project's positive environmental effects, it has faced criticism for its detrimental effects on indigenous populations involved in the initiative.

There are claims that the project engaged in activities for an extended duration without first consulting with the Chong Indigenous population, breaching the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), which is important to warrant the involvement of local people.

The FPIC principle in the REDD+ context aims to provide communities, especially Indigenous people and local communities living in and around the forests, with sufficient information about activities that will impact them, giving them the chance to approve or reject these activities before they begin (Tysiachniouk et al 2022). FPIC requires that consent be obtained without coercion or manipulation, sufficiently in advance of any authorization or commencement of activities, and with full information regarding the nature and impacts of the planned actions. The principle is grounded in the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights to land and resources, as well as their right to self-determination. However, this is not always the case in the Cardamom region. According to HRW, the assessment is based on yes or no questions asked in meetings attended by a small percentage of individuals (Flynn and Vantha, 2024). This procedure reduces the ability of the people to express their concerns about the complexity of the project's impacts on their lives.

Furthermore, this project raises concerns over its effect on the lives of Indigenous people, as it involves the criminalization of practices such as swidden farming and the traditional harvesting of sustainable forest products by local communities. Authorities have also arrested and detained Indigenous peoples for gathering sustainable forest products that do not contribute to deforestation or forest degradation (Chávez, 2024). So far, a patrol led by MOE rangers and WA officials apprehended Indigenous residents from the O'Som commune for collecting sustainable forest products – especially resin from trees - within the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project's conservation area.

This issue has sparked a discussion about the consequences of REDD+ on local communities' culture and ways of livelihood. Throughout history, resin trees have been considered a prominent product within the category of non-timber forest products (NTFP) in eastern Cambodia (Coad, Lim, & Nuon, 2019). Numerous Indigenous peoples, including in the Cardamom region, consider tapping resin trees not only to fulfill their economic needs but also as a customary practice. Hence, the people have viewed the actions of the security forces as harmful and responded robustly. The residents claim that the security forces have restricted their ability to engage in their customary agricultural activities and instilled terror, as expressed by a spokesperson for the Chong People. "It scares us; we want to farm, we want to plant, we want to grow crops for the family's livelihood, but we cannot do it. We are trapped in a state of constant fear" (Kern, 2024).

The REDD+ initiative in Cambodia has limited cultural practices and restricted access to natural resources essential for the survival of indigenous communities. These people feel their rights are being suppressed, which prevents them from governing their own lives. Often, the protection of forests is prioritized over the rights and needs of these indigenous groups. This situation creates ethical dilemmas that demand careful

consideration and resolution to ensure development practices are fair, equitable, and sustainable.

REDD+ in Hieu Commune, Vietnam

Despite significant economic and industrial expansion, Vietnam continues to grapple with deforestation. According to Global Forest Watch, Vietnam lost 756 thousand hectares of humid primary forest between 2002 and 2023, accounting for 22% of the country's total tree cover reduction during the same period. The primary causes of deforestation in Vietnam were the conversion of land for agriculture, particularly industrial perennial crops, along with infrastructural development, unsustainable logging, and forest fires. From 2012 to 2017, research indicated consistent findings, noting no favorable changes in the frequency and effects of these factors. Logging, both legal and illicit, forest-land conversion for infrastructure development such as hydropower plants and aquaculture, and the cultivation of commercial crops continue to be the primary causes of deforestation.

However, since implementing REDD+ in 2009, Vietnam has been considered a pioneer country. The National REDD+ Action Plan (NRAP) submitted in 2012 marked the beginning of applying REDD+ principles and practices, both contextually and institutionally. Chosen as one of the pilot nations for the program, Vietnam established multiple pilot projects in different provinces, such as Lam Dong and Kon Tum. The primary objective of these pilot projects was to develop methodologies for the measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) of carbon emissions. Additionally, these projects aim to establish mechanisms for sharing the benefits derived from these efforts and to enhance the capabilities of local stakeholders (Pham et al., 2012).

One of Vietnam's first REDD+ projects was located in Hieu Commune, home to Xe Dang and M'nam ethnic groups. The initiative was expected to address challenges such as land tenure, low funding, and the need for continued community involvement by developing innovative solutions in conjunction with NGOs, government agencies, and foreign organizations. The specific steps taken include capacity building through training efforts focused on sustainable agriculture and forest monitoring, participatory forest management, and the implementation of alternative living practices to reduce reliance on forest resources. The goal was to make substantial reductions in deforestation and forest degradation, which aim to help combat global climate change by promoting sustainable land use practices and offering financial incentives for forest conservation. Additionally, these initiatives ideally seek to improve the livelihoods of local communities.

Different from Cambodia, the participation of indigenous peoples is essential for the effectiveness of REDD+ in Vietnam, as these groups have a significant role to play in planning and decision-making processes. In addition, there is a notable alignment between REDD+ ideals and the cultural values of the local community. In accordance with REDD+, the people have adopted traditional methods for managing the natural woods, such as upholding sacred forests and safeguarding watershed protection forests. Thus, the practice of illegal logging, conducted both by local villagers and others from

outside the community, is acknowledged as a serious problem inside the commune (Tu & Mayrak, 2014).

Sacred forests are designated areas that possess substantial cultural, spiritual, and religious importance for indigenous groups. Local communities traditionally safeguard and oversee these forests, as they hold the belief that these areas are inhabited by deities, ancestral spirits, or other supernatural beings. The preservation of sacred forests is firmly established in indigenous customs, prohibitions, and ancestral wisdom, which have been transmitted across successive generations. These forests are typically small parcels of land that are conserved within larger landscapes that may be susceptible to logging or agricultural practices. The conventional ideologies associated with these revered areas have played a substantial role in their preservation, providing valuable insights for incorporating cultural customs into contemporary conservation approaches (McElwee, 2016).

Therefore, the Hieu community is more well-suited for the implementation of REDD+ due to its socio-ecological characteristics that match closely with the principles of efficient forest management and sustainability (Bayrak & Marafa, 2017). Incorporating sacred forests into conservation and REDD+ projects is seen as a way to leverage traditional knowledge and cultural values in order to accomplish modern environmental goals. By acknowledging and appreciating the cultural significance of these forests, REDD+ projects can obtain community support and ensure more effective and long-lasting outcomes. Sacred forests provide a structure for community-level forest management that aligns with the goals of REDD+, which aim to decrease carbon emissions, conserve biodiversity, and support sustainable livelihoods (To et al., 2012).

While Vietnam's progress in forest conservation through REDD+ initiatives is commendable, challenges remain. Greater integration of community-based forest management is essential to ensure local communities actively participate in decision-making and resource management. This approach would also help preserve sacred forests, which hold significant cultural and spiritual value for local indigenous communities. Recognizing the traditional ecological knowledge and practices of these communities can lead to the development of practical and culturally sensitive conservation strategies.

Localizing Sustainability: Connecting Global Goals and Community Values

The issues discussed highlight the importance of a traditional anthropological perspective, which recognizes that the contemporary understanding of sustainability is neither universally applicable nor uniformly implementable. The diverse expressions of identity, encompassing values and norms, within local communities significantly influence their perceptions of their relationship with the environment. By emphasizing identity, rather than solely relying on the findings of a purportedly objective approach, we can respond to the needs and concerns of individuals by leveraging their lived experiences, collective knowledge, and shared values. This approach holds considerably greater

significance and promotes more equity than solely focusing on the promotion of new laws, regulations, guidelines, and protocols.

It is undeniable that REDD+ has introduced innovative strategies that can assist developing nations in preserving their forest ecosystems. The financial support provided by the Results-Based Payments (RBP) scheme is expected to motivate these nations to adopt forest conservation and preservation policies that align with internationally recognized standards. Nonetheless, the tangible outcomes of these initiatives vary considerably at the local level. It is evident that while some communities positively accept its implementation, others vehemently oppose and denounce it.

Examining the implementation of REDD+ in Cardamom, Cambodia, and Hieu Commune, Vietnam, reveals significant issues. The residents of Cardamom perceive nature as an essential source of livelihood that underpins their daily existence, believing that the environment can meet their fundamental living needs. Consequently, the REDD+ initiative, which enforced regulations limiting the ability to gather and utilize agricultural resources, resulted in conflict. In contrast, the Hieu Commune in Vietnam employs traditional methods to manage natural forests, embodying the concept of a sacred forest, where taboos and spiritual or religious beliefs safeguard nature. People view human actions, such as deforestation and other detrimental activities as violations, which aligns well with REDD+ implementation.

Hence, the values and cultural practices upheld by the local community in Hieu Commune are more favorable to the REDD+ initiatives compared to Cardamom, Cambodia. This finding emphasizes the concept of relativism in traditional anthropology, that what constitutes "right" and "wrong" depends on the particular traditions or cultures to which people belong. It is true that REDD+ introduces a notion of "ideal" sustainability, in which nature must be protected and humans must coexist with it. However, the framework built upon protection regulations is sometimes not in line with how indigenous people perceive their relationship with nature. Consequently, the positive or negative perception of REDD+ hinges on the shared beliefs and understandings within a specific community.

Understanding indigenous peoples' worldviews is critical for global sustainability projects because their cultural values and experiences profoundly shape their relationship with nature, influencing how they interpret and respond to sustainability initiatives. Therefore, more inclusive strategies, such as guaranteeing the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), are essential to increase local participation in decision-making. Unfortunately, some REDD+ initiatives worldwide have faced implementation challenges, as evidenced by cases in Cardamom, Cambodia, where limited access to information on REDD+ and ineffective consultation processes have been identified.

Furthermore, one of the biggest obstacles in global sustainable projects, which often poses a challenge to a more locally based interest approach, is the implementation of green policy that continues to be significantly shaped by financial factors. Mechanisms such as green financing, carbon taxation, and carbon trading initiatives primarily benefit more powerful actors, leading to an uneven sharing of the burden and benefits in the pursuit of

sustainability. It has also been argued that carbon markets can incentivize corporations to emit more emissions without taking environmental responsibility by avoiding a decarbonized agenda (Pearse and Böhm, 2014). Although these financial strategies aim to promote environmental responsibility, they often ignore the needs and voices of the communities directly impacted by the projects they support. Green financing, for instance, may provide substantial resources for large corporations capable of navigating complex funding landscapes, while smaller enterprises and grassroots organizations struggle to access similar opportunities.

It is widely recognized that forest conservation plays a crucial role in mitigating climate change impacts. However, a lack of awareness regarding the social implications for local communities can lead to unintended consequences. To ensure the success and sustainability of conservation efforts, it is essential not only to increase local community involvement but also to strengthen the implementation of sustainable projects based on integrated environmental and social principles.

Several international initiatives have emerged to address these challenges, such as the introduction of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria. ESG is a set of methods and standards for evaluating businesses beyond their financial performance that has gained significant traction in recent years. This framework encourages companies to consider their environmental impact, stakeholder relationships, and governance practices, potentially driving more responsible corporate behavior and leading to improved outcomes for both the environment and local communities affected by conservation projects.

This holistic approach to business evaluation is expected to drive more responsible corporate behavior, potentially leading to better outcomes for both the environment and local communities. ESG serves as a framework for evaluating the sustainability practices of companies, providing investors with crucial information to assess how organizations manage risks and opportunities associated with environmental, social, and governance indicators. Environmental indicators encompass a company's energy consumption, pollution levels, and climate change strategies, directly relating to forest conservation efforts. Social indicators include community engagement, diversity, inclusion, and labor practices, which are particularly relevant when considering the impact on local populations affected by conservation projects. Governance indicators assess a company's transparency, executive compensation, and leadership, which influence the overall implementation of sustainable practices. These will inform investors' decision-making processes, guiding the allocation of funds to specific projects that demonstrate strong ESG performance and alignment with sustainable forest management principles.

Adopting a more inclusive framework, such as ESG principles, can significantly enhance the participation and awareness of actors, including donor countries, investors, and companies. This approach is crucial for sustainable projects like REDD+ because it encourages them to evaluate their roles and responsibilities through the lens of environmental, social, and governance factors. Therefore, implementing this kind of strategy is essential to achieving inclusivity in sustainable projects by ensuring that all stakeholders, including indigenous peoples, have fair access to the benefits derived from

global sustainability initiatives, whether in the short, medium, or long term. This approach not only aligns with global sustainability goals but also promotes social equity and justice by recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of the local people.

CONCLUSION

The contrasting responses in Hieu Commune, Vietnam, and Cardamom, Cambodia, toward REDD+ stem from their distinct understandings of the relationship between humans and the environment. The M'nam people in Vietnam hold a sacred view of the forest, considering it a protected environment where exploitation is strictly forbidden by their customary law. This cultural value aligns well with REDD+ objectives, potentially making implementation more successful. In contrast, the Chong community in Cambodia views the forest through a reciprocal lens, seeing it as an essential resource for fulfilling basic human needs. They acknowledge the forest's importance but do not inherently prohibit its use, potentially leading to conflicts with REDD+ initiatives that restrict resource exploitation.

These divergent worldviews significantly impact how REDD+ projects are perceived and received. The M'nam community's sacred forest principles naturally complement REDD+ goals, potentially facilitating smoother project execution. On the other hand, the Chong community's more utilitarian view may lead to challenges, as restrictions could conflict with traditional practices and cultural norms. These findings highlight the diverse values that indigenous groups hold, highlighting the importance of localized approaches in global sustainability initiatives. Aligning project implementation with local cultural values allows the initiatives to provide more benefits to the local communities in the short, medium, and long term, ensuring respect for indigenous knowledge and fostering greater community engagement in forest conservation.

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