Participation and contextual equity in REDD implementation: A qualitative case-study from Gola, Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) is a global framework that promotes climate, social, and biodiversity goals through tropical forest management. An ongoing challenge is integrating equity for "full and effective" participation of local actors. REDD research suggests that underlying socio-cultural determinants of power and capabilities are central to equity. However, the literature is largely focused on early-stage program design and implementation, with much less knowledge about the established programs. We investigate contextual equity and participation in the long-running Gola REDD program in Sierra Leone, using ethnographic methods during a 3-year forest conservation project. We found hierarchical governance systems channeled project implementation toward top-down positioning, mediating trust and forms of participation. Socio-cultural obligations to comply with decisions made by authorities constrained actors' roles, while complex power dynamics meant town leaders had variable influence over forest use. Intermediary institutions and interpersonal relationship-building helped counteract these processes. Participation influenced project effectiveness via attitudes tied to benefit sharing, socio-cultural norms of reciprocity, and experiences with development and aid. We recommend REDD proponents: 1) prioritize socio-cultural familiarity and relationship-building to navigate power complexities; 2) define social equity/participation goals to manage trade-offs; and 3) ensure effective two-way communication for trust-building.

Keywords: REDD; social equity; tropical forest conservation; ethnographic approach; Upper Guinea Rainforest; Sierra Leone

Résumé

La réduction des émissions dues à la déforestation et à la dégradation des forêts (REDD) est un cadre mondial qui promeut les objectifs climatiques, sociaux et la biodiversité à travers la gestion des forêts tropicales. Elle n'a pas toujours été équitable, avec une participation « pleine et effective » des acteurs locaux. Cela s'explique notamment par les déterminants socioculturels du pouvoir et les capacités variables. La plupart des études ont

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porté sur la conception et la mise en œuvre du programme REDD à ses débuts. Nous avons examiné l'équité et la participation dans le cadre du programme REDD Gola, mené depuis longtemps en Sierra Leone, dans le cadre d'un projet de conservation des forêts d'une durée de trois ans. Nous avons constaté que les systèmes de gouvernance étaient hiérarchiques, ce qui affectait la confiance et la participation des acteurs locales. Il était difficile de contester les décisions. En raison de la complexité des rapports de pouvoir, les dirigeants locaux avaient une influence variable sur l'utilisation des forêts. Le partage des bénéfices, la réciprocité, l'aide au développement et les institutions intermédiaires ont contribué à contrebalancer les tendances hiérarchiques. Nous recommandons aux promoteurs du programme REDD: 1) donner la priorité à la familiarité socioculturelle et à l'établissement de relations afin de naviguer dans les complexités du pouvoir; 2) définir des objectifs en matière de participation et d'équité; et 3) d'instaurer la confiance grâce à une communication bidirectionnelle.

Mots clés: REDD, équité sociale, conservation des forêts tropicales, approche ethnographique, forêt tropicale humide de Haute-Guinée, Sierra Leone

Resumen

La reducción de las emisiones debidas a la deforestación y la degradación forestal (REDD, por sus siglas en inglés) es un marco global que promueve objetivos climáticos, sociales y de biodiversidad a través de la gestión de los bosques tropicales. Un desafío persistente es integrar la equidad para lograr la participación "plena y efectiva" de los actores locales. Las investigaciones sobre REDD sugieren que los determinantes socioculturales subyacentes del poder y las capacidades son fundamentales para la equidad. Sin embargo, la literatura se centra en gran medida en las etapas iniciales de diseño e implementación de los programas, con un conocimiento mucho más limitado sobre los programas ya consolidados. En este estudio investigamos la equidad contextual y la participación en el programa REDD de Gola, ya de larga duración, en Sierra Leona. Empleamos métodos etnográficos durante un proyecto de conservación forestal de tres años. Encontramos que los sistemas de gobernanza jerárquicos orientaron la implementación del proyecto hacia un enfoque de arriba hacia abajo, lo cual afectaba a la confianza y las formas de participación. Las obligaciones socioculturales de acatar las decisiones de las autoridades restringieron los roles de los actores, mientras que las complejas dinámicas de poder supusieron que los líderes comunitarios tuvieran una influencia variable sobre el uso del bosque. Las instituciones intermediarias y la construcción de relaciones interpersonales ayudaron a contrarrestar estos procesos. La participación influyó en la eficacia del proyecto a través de actitudes relacionadas con la distribución de beneficios, las normas socioculturales de reciprocidad y las experiencias previas con el desarrollo y la ayuda internacional. Recomendamos a los proponentes de REDD: 1) priorizar el conocimiento sociocultural y la construcción de relaciones para navegar las complejidades del poder; 2) definir objetivos de equidad social y participación para gestionar los compromisos y tensiones; y 3) garantizar una comunicación bidireccional efectiva para fomentar la confianza.

Palabras clave: REDD; equidad social, conservación de bosques tropicales, enfoque etnográfico, selva lluviosa del Alto Guinea, Sierra Leona

1. Introduction

Social objectives of environmental policy are receiving increasing attention (Friedman *et al.,* 2018; McDermott *et al.*, 2023; Ongolo *et al*., 2021) yet transforming internationally recognized environment and development goals into mechanisms and policies that are equitable from local perspectives remains a major challenge (Moeliono *et al.*, 2020). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples places "full and effective" participation of local actors centrally in social equity standards and was adopted by the Kunming-Montreal protocol of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Equity is, first and foremost, a moral goal, seeking the avoidance of harm and socially just outcomes. However, incorporating equity considerations into environmental decision-making can also be pragmatic, since it can improve the delivery of environmental goals (Pascual *et al.*, 2014; Sheng 2023) by promoting wider participation. Both opportunity and inclination to participate in policy-based programs are deeply rooted in issues of equity (Pham *et al.*, 2014), while local support is critical to environmental targets that often rest on land-use or livelihood transitions (Dawson *et al.*, 2021; Pascual *et al.*, 2014). Thus, people's relationships and interpretations of the narratives and institutions of externally-driven programs merit close critical attention (Leach and Scoones, 2015; Thung, 2024).

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) is a global-scale climate change mitigation scheme to create financial value for forest carbon, and incentives for reducing carbon emissions (Angelsen *et al.*, 2018). REDD has attracted equity concerns, not least because incentive structures favor top-down control of resources used by rural populations with poorly-protected land and resource rights (Brown & Corbera, 2003; Phelps *et al.*, 2010). Sets of principles, standards, and policies have been developed as harm-preventing social safeguards, with some aimed at transformative social change (Arhin, 2014). To access REDD funding, countries must develop systems to promote and monitor safeguards (UNFCCC, 2011), but these mechanisms are often limited in practice (Sills *et al*., 2014). Unclear definitions of social equity goals or how to operationalize "full and effective" participation pose significant challenges (Dawson *et al.*, 2018).

Critics have observed that REDD can favor "technical rendering" of land and resource use that constrains local participation and risks forestalling serious engagement with the political elements of social justice (Dawson *et al.*, 2018; Myers *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, market-based policy mechanisms, such as REDD and other Payments for Ecosystem Services approaches, emphasize transactional, economic values and cost-benefit distribution. This may distract from issues such as recognition and representation (Nathan & Pasgaard, 2017; Satyal *et al.*, 2018), and marginalize local priorities or non-economic worldviews. Equity conceptualizations can be problematic when imposed externally, rather than being understood through existing socio-cultural worldviews (Pascoe & Minnegal, 2023). Moreover, the underlying logics of international policy instruments often present narrow framings of complex social-environmental issues divorced from local realities (Leach & Scoones, 2013). It is widely observed that underlying socio-political contexts of equity need greater attention for REDD to transform, and not reinforce, existing inequalities (Corbera, 2012; Di Gregorio *et al.*, 2013; McDermott *et al*., 2023; Nathan & Pasgaard, 2017).

The framework developed by McDermott *et al.* (2013) defines why equity matters, alongside who and what counts when applying the lens of global values for 'ecosystem services.' Based on three equity dimensions—distributive, procedural, and contextual—this framework has provided valuable insights into REDD outcomes across diverse settings (*e.g.,*, Ituarte-Lima *et al.*, 2014; Ramcilovic-Suominen *et al.*, 2021; Saeed *et al.*, 2018; Tegegne *et al.*, 2021). Distributive equity captures the principles by which material and non-material benefits, costs, and risks are shared, as well as the subsequent outcomes. Given the centrality of benefit-sharing arrangements for REDD schemes, this distributive dimension has perhaps received most attention in REDD equity evaluations (Pascual *et al.*, 2014; Wong *et al.*, 2019). Procedural equity concerns decision-making processes, institutions, and governance systems, encompassing how marginalized groups are recognized and enabled to participate within a socio-political system, and how institutional arrangements may undermine or strengthen local structures (McDermott *et al.*, 2013). Issues of inclusivity, transparency, and representation are key considerations in REDD processes (Isyaku *et al.*, 2017; Satyal *et al.*, 2018), especially in defining stakeholders and rights holders for equitable benefit-sharing.

In this article, we focus on contextual equity, or the underlying individual capabilities to effectively participate and benefit. We also examine the social dynamics of access and power that shape such capabilities (McDermott *et al.*, 2013). Individual capabilities encompass the capacity to function in one's daily life and the freedom to pursue a preferred lifeway. The ability to benefit from natural resources depends on how power is exercised through the social relations and institutions that govern access (Magessa *et al.*, 2020). Power asymmetries influence capabilities and representation in decision-making processes, for example, by amplifying certain voices over others (Satyal *et al.*, 2020). Understanding contextual equity is crucial for revealing how existing structures, access, and power relations influence and transform how different actors win or lose, and whether these systems exacerbate or alleviate social disparities.

Equity dimensions also include participatory parity, defined as discrepancies in actor's opportunities to shape decisions and cost-benefit outcomes. The 'who, how, and why' components of participation (Hofer & Kaufmann, 2023) play out in real time during REDD implementation, making it useful to ground equity insights in the daily realities of program management.

Equity in REDD

A substantial body of work examines REDD equity, particularly at the global and national scale (Krause & Nielsen, 2014; Mahanty & McDermott, 2013; McDermott *et al*., 2023; Moeliono *et al*., 2020). Findings highlight the importance of contextual equity. For instance, the enactment of procedures for Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in the international mining and logging sectors is strongly influenced by national contexts, indicating the need for flexible ongoing FPIC review in REDD policy that offers the means for disaffected parties to pursue justice through (often imperfect) legal systems (Mahanty & McDermott, 2013). At national scales, uneven power relations embedded in institutional structures can combine with governance settings to contribute to under- or misrepresentation of marginalized groups and civil society (Mustalahti *et al.*, 2017; Satyal *et al.*, 2018) while policy-actor relationships may further influence decision-making (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2014). For instance, in Indonesia's REDD program, poor information flow between the state, civil society, and external NGOs contributes to a lack of civil society input (Moeliono *et al.*, 2020), a concern echoed elsewhere (Mustalahti *et al.*, 2017; Pham *et al.*, 2014). These studies illustrate the context-dependent emergence and translation of REDD logics into national policies, and how the framework itself predetermines participation. By contrast, we focus on the sub-national implementation space, involving localized power dynamics and lived experience as a program is negotiated on the ground.

Case studies applying ethnographic approaches can provide in-depth insight into on-the-ground realities of REDD delivery, indicating how programs map onto pre-existing socio-political power structures, leading to ineffective or inequitable outcomes (Milne *et al*., 2019). REDD proponents are typically state-sponsored or international organizations whose engagement with local actors and customary processes can entail complex trade-offs (Sills *et al.*, 2014). Integration with customary institutions may provide legitimacy but compromise social or environmental goals, which themselves involve trade-offs (Krause & Nielsen, 2014). For instance, Nathan and Pasgaard (2017) unravel socio-political tensions that arise as projects operate through powerful local leaders, potentially strengthening pre-existing power structures and resource-capture by elites through benefit distribution. Saeed *et al.* (2018) highlight the impacts of colonial policies on distributive and procedural equity at the local level in Ghana, concluding that despite sound policy, the practical implementation of equity goals was limited by legal and socio-political contexts impacting local capabilities and power. In Madagascar, household's socio-political standing mediated access to REDD compensation, due to factors including physical inaccessibility, government sanctions discouraging shifting agriculture, and assessment processes reliant on non-representative institutions (Poudyal *et al.*, 2016). Sub-national case studies emphasize how contextual equity is instrumental in how REDD is delivered, foregrounding land tenure, resource rights, and recognition of different groups as key equity challenges (Awono *et al.*, 2014; Isyaku *et al.*, 2017; Satyal *et al.*, 2018; Thung, 2024). However, these studies largely concern the early implementation phases of sub-national programs, where benefit-sharing is not fully operationalized (Milne *et al.*, 2019; Wunder *et al.*, 2020). Less is known about equity issues in mature REDD programs, when shifting power relations, latent social conflicts, or unanticipated external influences can emerge (Otto, 2019; Soliev *et al.*, 2021).

Our case study concerns the Gola REDD program, Sierra Leone, the longest-running program in the region, verified in 2014 (Malan *et al.*, 2024). We examine the 3-year project that sought local participation to reduce forest loss through community-based management and improve socio-economic outcomes from sustainable agriculture. As a pilot, the project operated within a portion of the REDD area, and, unusually, employed a full-time researcher (the first author Sorrell Jones, SJ), enabling sustained and embedded observation of participation dynamics and implementation processes. This positioning guided the research scope to examine the situated, relational nature of participation, and how equity unfolds within rather than outside the boundaries set by REDD as it is currently operationalized.

2. Methods

Although long-term ethnography was beyond our scope, ethnographic approaches are well-suited for understanding the complex interrelations among multiple actors and issues that span social, cultural, historical, political, and environmental aspects (Chua *et al.*, 2022). We used ethnographic techniques, centered on participant observation and interviews (Riemer, 2011; Seim, 2024). Participant observation involves researchers

immersing themselves in people's lives and activities, which can reveal who is included or excluded, how power is exercised, and whether participation is meaningful or symbolic, as well as informal dynamics and discrepancies between official narratives and lived experiences (Seim, 2024).

Data were collected between August 2020 and September 2022 principally by SJ, a female British researcher contracted by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to undertake research components of the project. SJ spent a total of 13 months in Sierra Leone, based in the office of the lead implementing organization, Gola Rainforest Conservation (GRC). She spent 60 days in project communities over nine trips, accompanied by the other authors Fomba A. Kamara (FAK) and Fomba Kamara (FK), and/or project staff who performed translation and facilitation. FAK and FK, both from the study region, had previously held short-term and voluntary roles at GRC. Close familiarity with communities and local histories enabled them to effectively interpret socio-political and cultural nuances imperceptible to SJ. The researchers were presented to GRC staff and community members as observers tasked with learning about people's lives and how the project operated, to guide ongoing and future work.

Research topics evolved inductively, and data collection methods were developed iteratively. Participant observation of project implementation activities focused on actor relationships, public discourse, and how different project components were delivered and received. Beyond planned project activities, field observations and interviews were conducted in communities to deepen contextual understanding, especially regarding resource governance, local histories, livelihood challenges, and local interpretations of REDD.

Data collection incorporated a desk-review of program documents; semi-structured interviews with GRC staff (n=10), community members (n=14), local NGO staff (n=2), and Gola Community Development Committee members (n=3); key informant conversations regarding sensitive governance topics (n=6); women-only focus group discussions (n=9 groups); a structured questionnaire (n=26 households); and facilitated workshops with project staff (n=5). Repetition in underlying themes raised by community members and GRC staff was observed toward the end of data collection efforts, indicating reasonable data saturation.

Analysis

Content analysis, informed by fieldwork insights, was performed on transcripts and field notes by SJ, guided by discussion with FK and FAK. Open coding identified overarching themes and sub-themes relating to participation and contextual equity. These were developed in two subsequent coding rounds to capture a range of contexts and scales. Coding was performed in Microsoft Word by SJ. At each coding round, themes and sub-themes were discussed and collaboratively developed with co-authors (FK, FAK, NC) and, at the first coding round, with the project staff who had been present during data collection in project communities. The final round of coding was applied to the resulting sub-themes.

3. Socio-cultural context

Demography

The major ethno-linguistic group in the study area is Mende (approximately 86%), followed by others, including Gola, Fula, Mandingo, Vai, Kissi, Limba, Gbandi, and Temne. The predominant religion is Islamic (over 90%), followed by Christianity (Bulte *et al.*, 2013). Many communities were depopulated during the civil war (1999-2002), and few have regained their former populations (Bulte *et al.*, 2013). The 14 communities in the project area ranged from 3 to 50 households. The nearest motorable roads and telecommunications were a 2-10 hours walk away. Healthcare facilities were an additional 1-2 hours away by motorbike. Only one community had a school, staffed by a volunteer, therefore many children stayed with relatives in larger towns for school education.

Governance and social structures

In Sierra Leone, customary institutions operate alongside national government structures (Manning, 2009). The country is organized into Provinces, subdivided into Districts, and then into Chiefdoms. Project

communities were situated in one Chiefdom. In Chiefdoms, Paramount Chiefs occupy the highest customary office and are elected by a Council of Tribal Authorities. This lifelong position is restricted to members of the ruling houses defined during colonial times. Districts are governed through elected Councils, and one Paramount Chief per District (except Freetown) represents traditional authorities as a member of parliament.

Pre-colonial social trends and then colonial rule (approximately between 1896 and 1961) shaped the chieftaincy institution, as the British administration co-opted existing governance structures to enable 'indirect rule' (Wylie, 1969; Conteh, 2013). Pre-colonial 'kingdoms' were ruled by descendants of their founders, with the support of sub-chiefs and elders. Colonial administrations divided these into smaller chiefdoms, with appointed Paramount Chiefs given specific judicial and taxation powers (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2014; Conteh, 2013). Following independence, Paramount Chiefs gained a constitutionally guaranteed governance role, and vacant Chieftaincies were immediately reinstated post-war, consolidating their power (Albrecht, 2017). The Local Councils Act (2004) aimed to transfer governance powers to Local Councils, but Traditional Councils and Paramount Chiefs remained central power-holders (Jackson, 2005). Paramount Chiefs are land 'custodians', not owners, but they have the authority to set chiefdom-wide regulations and penalties (by-laws) and authorize commercial resource uses, such as logging or agribusiness.

Within Chiefdoms, communities are grouped into sections governed by Section Chiefs (Figure 1). Each community has a Town Chief, with larger settlements subdivided into quarters with Quarter Heads. Each hierarchical governance level (Chiefdom, Section, Town) has a Speaker, who acts as the deputy, and several other offices, including a Women's leader, a Youth leader, and a Council of Elders. Significant social influence lies outside political structures through the men's and women's secret societies (*Poro*), which are deeply embedded in Mende cultural history (Wylie, 1969). Society leaders hold mystic power through esoteric knowledge transmitted in ceremonies and rituals. Secret societies are apolitical, membership transcends community boundaries, and leaders' authority may surpass that of Chiefs in certain spheres of cultural practice.

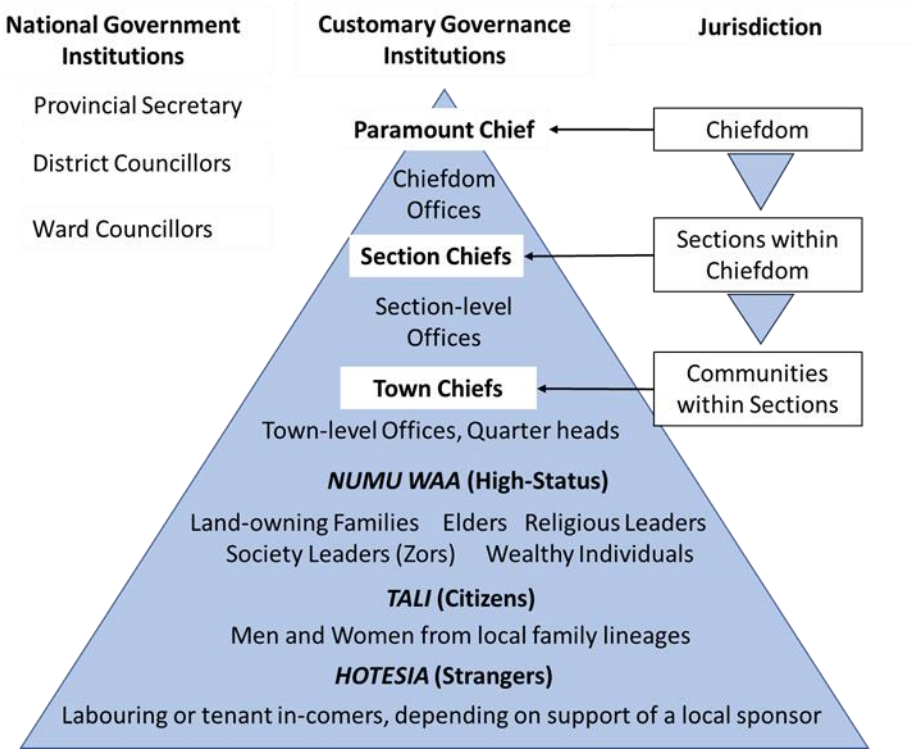

Figure 1: The governance structure.

Governance and power structures

Within the town, social standing is closely tied to family lineage and traditionally linked to control of land and labor resources (Mokuwa *et al.*, 2011). Family heads hold the family land in trust and can allocate it to members. Heads of powerful lineages often hold customary offices such as Quarter heads. Wealthy individuals normally enjoy high social status (*Numuu waa*). Mende women have historically been politically powerful (Hoffer, 1972) and may become family heads or occupy chieftaincy positions, albeit far less commonly than men. 'Strangers' (*Hota*) without family connections to an area must access land via a local sponsor or 'stranger-father', to whom they remain indebted. Unless independently wealthy, strangers can be among the most marginalized social groups, as exemplified by itinerant laborers (Davies & Richards, 1991). Strangers may constitute about one-third of the population in the REDD area (Bulte *et al.*, 2013).

As with family lineages, towns have hierarchies with a historical basis. Recently established villages are 'under' a parent town, and complex alliances are formed through intermarriages (Davies & Richards, 1991). Community work remains a longstanding feature of Mende communities, and citizens can be fined if they fail to contribute to public works such as road maintenance or collective agriculture; though such practices vary substantially according to the Town Chiefs' leadership styles.

Livelihoods and labor

Shifting rice cultivation, which can be efficient but labor-intensive, has shaped Mende social systems. Historically, polygynous family heads controlled the labor of their sons and sons-in-law to cultivate large areas, but the arrival of income-generating opportunities such as cocoa and motorbike taxis shifted this dynamic (Jenkins *et al.*, 2021). Rice cultivation is now more typically practiced on smaller, household-scale farms under a rotational model with well-defined gender roles. Land is cleared, burned, and cultivated with rice, followed by other crops that are solely the preserve of women (Leach, 1994). Rotational or for-hire work gangs help meet labor demands, but shortages remain a common problem.

An agricultural lean season precedes the rice harvest, peaking in August-September (Johnny & Mansaray, 2019). Food shortages are exacerbated as rice is sold to cover household expenses or to mitigate economic shocks (Binns & Bateman, 2016). Cocoa is a locally important cash crop and is often pre-sold to brokers to obtain rice.

International development aid

Foreign development aid inputs have been relatively high in Sierra Leone, peaking dramatically after the war (Kargbo, 2012; Zack-Williams, 2002). It was accompanied by the proliferation of international and national NGOs. Relief efforts focused on ex-combatant rehabilitation and restoration of food production (Bolten, 2009). Village Development Committees emerged as contact points for aid organizations but were reportedly often dominated by leading family lineages (Richards *et al.*, 2004). Bolten (2009) notes that inputs (*e.g.,* seeds and tools) were often distributed to farmer collectives, not individuals, and organizations sometimes withdrew support if use of inputs didn't match their ideologically-framed expectations.

Development agencies still operating in the study region include the UN World Food Programme, Welt Hunger Hilfe, International Rescue Commission, GOAL, Restless Development, Solidaridad, One Village Partners, and Medecins Sans Frontières. These programs typically focus on water, hygiene and sanitation, education, healthcare, and support for livelihoods, including agricultural development.

Gola Rainforest National Park (GRNP), REDD establishment and benefit-sharing

Sections of GRNP were declared forest reserves in 1926 and 1930, with extensions added into the 1960s (Davies & Richards, 1991). By the 1990s, conservation management was proposed by The Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) and RSPB, leading to a partnership agreement with the government and the establishment of the management body, Gola Rainforest Conservation (GRC). The National Park was finalized post-war, in 2010 (Table 1), with publication in the official gazette. Within GRNP, logging, hunting, mining, and farming are prohibited, while non-destructive harvesting of non-timber products and fish are allowed. A

Paramount Chief from the seven chiefdoms, with land in GRNP, represents communities on the GRC board of directors (Figure 2).

Date	Brief details
1926 – 1930	Gola Forest Reserves designated by the Government of Sierra Leone (58,923.40 ha).
1956-1963	Extensions to Gola North designated. Total reserve area increased to 74,903.05 ha.
1960s to 1980s	Commercial logging across some of the Gola forest reserves, peaking in the 1980's.
Late 1980s - present	Collaborative research and conservation work carried out by RSPB, CSSL and the Government of Sierra Leone.
2002	Gola Conservation Concession Framework officially established to develop a multi-stakeholder approach to the conservation and management of the Gola Forest Reserves.
2003	Local communities' cooperation agreement signed.
2004	First Forest rangers begin patrols on the ground. Within the protected area hunting, logging or artisanal mining are not permitted. Non-timber forest product harvesting and fishing are permitted, using sustainable practices (e.g. no poison fishing). The process to develop benefit-sharing agreements begins.
2006	Scoping study carried out to investigate long term financing strategies for protected areas in Sierra Leone concludes that REDD financing has potential
2007	Cooperation and Benefit Sharing Agreement (BSA) between the local communities and partners (National Commission on the Environment and Forestry – NaCEF, RSPB, CSSL and the seven Chiefdoms) signed. The BSA entails: payments to District Councils, Paramount Chiefs and landowning families, scholarships, livelihood support inputs, a community development fund.
2008	First REDD feasibility study carried out for Gola forests by Eco-securities concludes that REDD could create sustainable funding for the management of the GRNP. The Gola Community Development Committees are established, with 10 members per chiefdom, to administer the community development fund.
2009	First comprehensive management plan finalised (2007-2012)
2010	Gola Rainforest National Park declared on 25 November.
2011	Second REDD feasibility study and preparations begin to develop a REDD project
2012	1st August, Gola REDD Project start date
2012-2013	Agreements signed between landowner representatives and the Government to exchange carbon rights for project benefits. National Park boundaries are demarcated on the ground in agreement in the 86 Forest Edge Communities sharing a direct border. Meetings and dialogue held with Forest Edge Communities and other stakeholders to develop the Gola REDD project activities such as livelihood support inputs targeting the forest edge communities.
2013	Livelihood support inputs started to be implemented across 122 forest edge communities within a roughly 4Km zone around the protected area, with purpose of improving socio-economic conditions of those most likely to be impacted by the protected area. The support is focussed on thematic areas of crop intensification, cocoa farm rehabilitation and market integration, and financial supports through Village Savings and Loans Associations and scholarships. Support is given via 2-year rotations across the 7 chiefdoms (except for scholarships that are given across all chiefdoms annually).
2014	Gola Rainforest Conservation LG established to act as project proponent for the Gola REDD project and enable the sale of carbon credits validated by the Verified Carbon Standards (VCS) and by the Climate Community and Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA) to provide a stream of sustainable revenue sufficient to significantly reduce emissions from unplanned deforestation activities through effective forest protection and sustainable management of natural resources. REDD+ Benefit sharing agreement signed by GRC LG and the 7 Chiefdoms.
2019 - 2022	Implementation of the Darwin project.

	2019-2020: • Public meetings held with Chiefdom level stakeholders and government officials to introduce the project and its aims, at the chiefdom headquarter town. This is followed by meetings in the participating towns to introduce the project and its aims at the town-level. • A baseline household survey to measure food security is carried out across all participating villages. Camera traps to monitor distribution of high conservation value wildlife are set up in community forests. • Project staff conduct a Rapid Rural Appraisal in each village, involving a community mapping exercise and transect walks to identify community resources. Communities are consulted on preferences for agricultural support demonstration projects, from options of swamp-rice development, cocoa support, cocoa agroforestry, or other income-generating crops. • Concepts of land-use planning and sustainable forest use are introduced in village meetings, and a five-person Natural Resource Management Committee is established in each village. Training workshops with committee members and town leaders are conducted to define roles. • Livelihood projects are initiated in communities: peanut-planting projects and village savings and loans groups established. Road rehabilitation is supported by cash-for-labour inputs. • Ethnographic data collection begins from August 2020. 2021-2022 • Project staff work with town leaders to identify and map no-deforestation zones in community forests. • Livelihood support projects are ongoing, with agricultural demonstration sites established in participating villages. • Local 'Species Champions' are provided a small stipend in each village and trained to do wildlife monitoring in community forests. • End of project survey of household food security is conducted. • Project ends September 2022.

Table 1: Key dates in the history and management of GRNP (partly adapted from GRNP Management Plan 2014-2018).

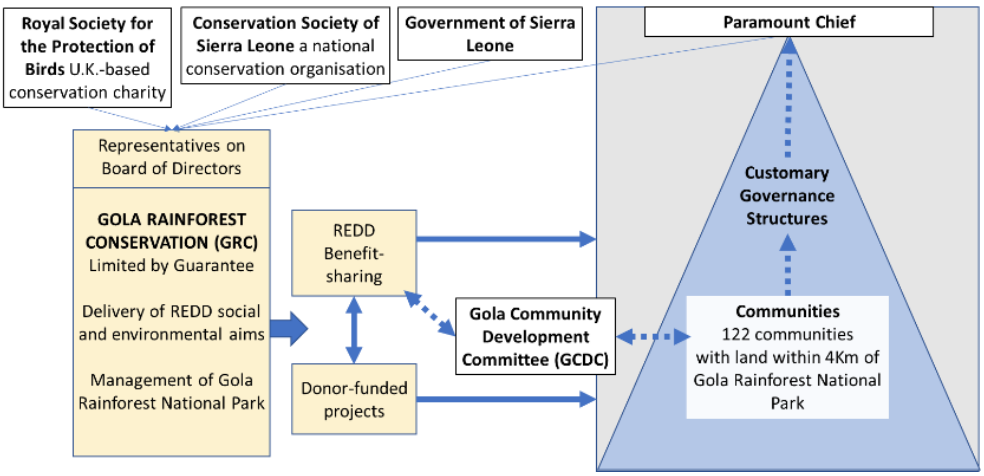

Figure 2: Gola REDD structures and engagement pathways.

The Gola REDD program began in 2012 to finance the management of GRNP and was verified in 2014. Accreditation is based on demonstrating that forest loss has not accelerated in a four-kilometer zone around GRNP and that 122 'forest-edge communities' in this zone suffer no negative socio-economic impacts (Malan *et al.*, 2024). Gola carbon credits gain a premium through delivery of biodiversity and social development co-benefits. Initially slow, revenue from sales increased from US$45,000 in 2016 to over US$500,000 in 2020, increasing further by the beginning of the study period (Gola REDD verification report, 2023).

Benefit-sharing agreements were developed in 2004 to compensate rights-holders for opportunity costs, promote local socio-economic development, and garner local support. Consultations involving customary and government leaders resulted in an initial funding package of over US$70,000 annually from 2007-2012, and a one-off US$35,000 payment to affected communities (Bulte *et al.*, 2016). The package is revised every five years and includes: payments to District Council, Paramount Chiefs and land-owning family heads (as the land rights holders), scholarships for local children, and a 'Chiefdom Development Fund' (CDF) that regularly disburses funds to each chiefdom for social development projects, such as the construction of public facilities (Figure 3).

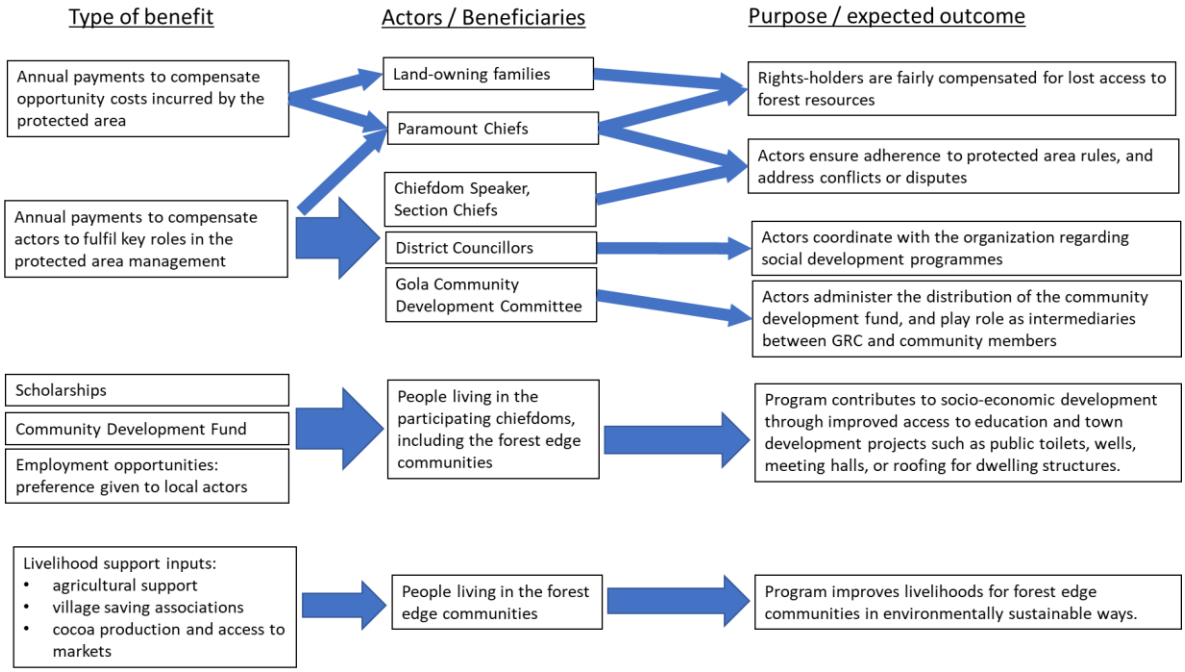

Figure 3: Overview of the Gola REDD Benefit-sharing Agreement at the time of the study.

The CDF has been administered since 2008 through Gola Community Development Committees (GCDC), comprising citizen representatives elected at five-year intervals in each chiefdom. Communities nominate 7 GCDC members, and three are nominated by local authorities. GCDCs act as intermediaries between GRC and communities, relaying concerns, grievances, or requests, and disseminating information about benefit-sharing or REDD activities. Allocation and use of the CDF varied across chiefdoms. In the study chiefdom, funds were awarded to communities for specific projects (six per two-year cycle) through a two-stage raffle process. Livelihood support components of REDD benefit-sharing include agricultural extension, village savings and loans services, and a program to improve cocoa producer incomes.

Case study project

The three-year project "Linking food security with forest protection under REDD" funded through the Darwin Initiative (ref: DIR25S1\100186; https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/project/DAR26004), sought to progress social development goals while reducing community forest loss, by increasing yields on existing farmlands while establishing community no-deforestation zones through land-use planning (Dixon, 2023). The project site was selected due to its high forest coverage with poor road access, exacerbating the community's development needs. The project was implemented by GRC, with CSSL delivering outreach activities, and the RSPB contributing to ecological and social research as well as project management.

4. Results

Themes relating to contextual equity and participation included: a) customary power structures operating in the local socio-political setting; and b) relationships and attitudes toward the implementing organization (GRC) and REDD program, which comprised two sub-themes: a) how the community-GRC relationship was framed; and b) negative or positive views toward REDD and GRC. Geographic remoteness and communication barriers were important cross-cutting elements (Figure 4).

Project participation

Project-community engagement occurred in public spaces (*Barrays*) through open meetings presided by community leaders. Contexts included: information-sharing, permission-seeking and activity selections, training workshops, and formation of groups or committees (Figure 4). Committee and group roles were filled by community consensus, following criteria provided by project staff (e.g., on gender balance). Scheduling was largely dictated by project timelines and subject to logistical constraints, including unforeseen COVID-19 travel restrictions. Unexplained delays caused frustration and misinformation, which were exacerbated by communication barriers resulting from distance and a lack of mobile phone network coverage.

Two notable non-participation issues arose. Firstly, selective logging by operators based in urban centers was authorized in the forests of seven communities, contradicting leaders 'public support of the project's aims. Chiefdom leaders, especially the Paramount Chief, ultimately controlled logging permissions. The roles of town-level leaders varied: a minority of Town Chiefs actively pursued logging-operator agreements; elsewhere, the process was driven by elites residing in larger towns, and Town Chiefs had minimal involvement in the negotiations. Agreements comprised of written documents, signed by Town- to Chiefdom-level leaders, and the verbal agreements reportedly made in the presence of Chiefdom-level authorities. Participation in logging negotiations was related to social standing among communities and individuals, shaped by complex interplays of history, family lineage, wealth, alliances, and personality. In response to the emergence of community-forest logging, project staff held one-on-one dialogues with community leaders to negotiate the preservation of unlogged areas.

The second non-participation issue involved two Town Chiefs temporarily withdrawing permission for the project activities in their communities, citing grievances over REDD benefits. These included: not being prioritized for Chiefdom Development Fund projects (allocated through a raffle process), insufficient land-owner payments, and unmet requests for road construction and rice-hulling machines. Staff were turned away from communities, and chiefs publicly announced the cessation of their towns 'cooperation' with GRC. Project participation was restored in both towns following dialogues involving senior GRC staff, mediated by the chiefdom-level actors.

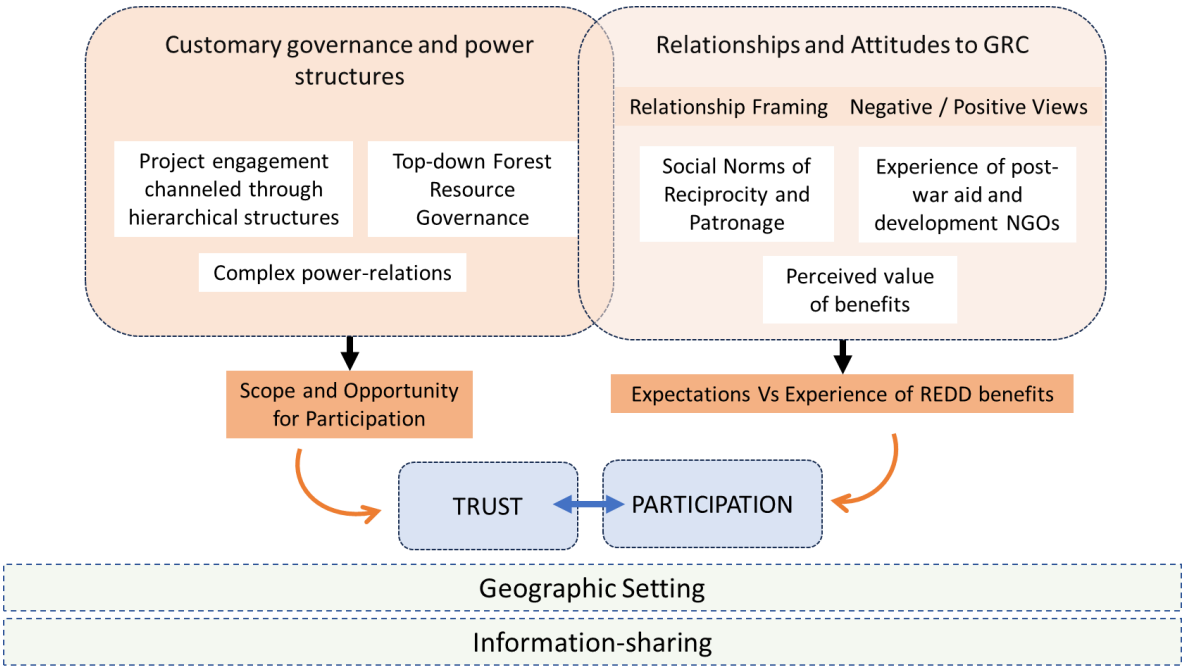

Figure 4: Observed themes influencing project participation.

The underlying triggers of the Chiefs' withdrawals were related to project cash transactions and logging interests. In one community, withdrawal occurred immediately after the payment of a stipend to the project's "Species Champion," of which the chief received no share, while a recent outreach event had not provided "transportation reimbursements" to hosting participants, both seen as disrespectful. Both Chiefs were negotiating logging agreements, which were seen as conflicting with their ongoing project participation. One of the Chiefs used this fact to bargain, stating they would halt logging if GRC provided a community rice-hulling machine. In the second community, the lack of REDD benefits was cited to justify logging:

> The promise between the community and Gola, Gola supposed to construct Barray and promised to give them rice milling machine and livestock and Gola has not yet done nothing. So, the same request they give to [the logging operator]. After constructing the road [they should] make a meeting place, lodging and a mosque. (Prominent community member)

Withdrawal of permissions was framed as an act of protest, apparently intended to force GRC into negotiations. Conducted through dramatic public performance, it may also have served to consolidate the Chiefs 'power, demonstrating status by resisting a Chiefdom-backed organization. A narrative of the resolution process (after permissions to set camera-traps were refused) was revealing:

> [GRC staff] …even plea to the community people, we don't accept. Gola [GRC] go back to the Paramount Chief. Gola sent the officer to the Speaker. They decided to go back to the Paramount Chief and the Paramount Chief ask me: Gola ask you to fix camera in your community forest and you refuse? I boldly answered: yes.
>
> […] I said […] Can you please ask Gola what is some of the things that they have done in our community. Now the forest is with us and we own the large portion of this forest and we don't

> have any access to road or any other thing. Now Gola has to please us because we have the large portion of this forest.
>
> They [GRC] continued to plead to us […] So we later agree.
>
> […] We talk all that thing in the Barray. Gola say let's go ahead we will go and decide what to do. They are still in our community no good response yet. So Gola did not say I'm not going to do something or I am going to do something, but we are still sitting waiting. (Prominent community member)

Non-participation was used as leverage for negotiation and, in the narrator's view, placed GRC under obligation to the community. This further illustrates observations that expectations of benefits and processes to secure them were culturally grounded in norms of reciprocity and patronage, which were not necessarily recognized by project proponents.

Power structure context

> Local hierarchical power structures channeled project engagement and participation. Community members viewed GRC as coming from a top-down position. Regarding GRNP establishment history, one noted: "At the time Gola come to this community they come and tell them that let their great people just do business with this land through them." (Community member)

Mistrust of elites extended to GRC, manifesting in misinformation such as rumors that GRC profited from diamond mining. Opportunity to access information, training, and other project resources was mediated by social status. For instance, leaders were reimbursed for attending meetings, but rarely relayed information to citizens. Staff observed 'the same faces' tended to be seen in REDD meetings or workshops. One community member commented: "I've attended so many trainings from Gola" (Prominent community member).

Workshop participants, meeting representatives, and livelihood or resource-group committees were selected by communities through customary processes that involved both public consensus and top-down decision-making. The latter became dominant when the leaders expected financial gain. Staff viewed communities as best placed to nominate candidates for roles, and ideal qualities often coincided with higher social standing. For instance, committee members needed sufficient literacy, time, and respect to motivate group members. As one livelihood-group chairperson explained: "I am leading the women, but whenever the women refuse to do the job I beg them." (Prominent community member)

Vulnerability to elite resource capture was regularly mentioned as being exacerbated by geographic remoteness and customary hierarchies:

> The elders in front of us [i.e. closer to drop-off points] they receive all ... We don't have no other option we receive what we get.
>
> …they [GRC] have different step of giving us money in this community, they have the chiefdom ownership money, they have the landowning and even those that sitting closer to the forest they have some package for them – but all when they come with that it just left [remains in larger town]. They [community representatives in chiefdom headquarter towns] receive all of that money and the money will not reach [to the community]. (Community Member)

Some perceived social-behavioral contexts as preventing distributive equity: "Gola always consider me, they always think about me, the only problem is from our own community people. The only problem is from our own brothers and sisters in this community" (Community member).

An important role of the GCDC was to mitigate elite capture and relay community members' concerns directly to GRC (and vice versa) without passing through customary decision-making hierarchies. GCDC

viewed itself as independent of both GRC and local authorities, tasked with representing ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, visibility in communities was limited; many households reported having little knowledge about the committee or its role. Contrastingly, GCDC members believed their role was widely understood, but recognized geographic inaccessibility and a lack of mobile phone network as engagement barriers—a view echoed by GRC staff.

Natural resource governance context

Chiefdom leaders held substantial control over rights for commercial use of natural resources in the communities' forests. Logging operators or seasonal commercial fishermen would first seek authorization from chiefdom leaders, which Town Chiefs were obliged to accept: "There is shortage of fish in rivers. They [commercial fishers] bring letters from [chiefdom headquarters] and the chief doesn't have power to control the fishermen" (Community member).

These resource-use arrangements entailed a concession for communities: fishers typically gave one basket of fish weekly, while loggers usually owed three planks out of every 13, valued at US$1-3 each, depending on timber type. Some communities received less:

> The community will come together and ask you how many total amount of stick [trees] do you need. If it reach up to hundred, the community have interest there…when you saw 50 board [planks] you give the community 1 leaf [plank]. (Community leader)

Such benefits were considered of little value to community members, with loggers' payments often accrued to elites in other towns. The exception was when loggers promised roads, which felt to be a major societal need. When asked if the community benefited from their forest, one respondent noted:

> Yes we are getting some amount of benefit, in our own chiefdom we have one of our brothers that has promised that they want to come and saw board, so we asked him to come and build road. So if ever he accept it and agree that is one of the benefit the community can get. Besides that there is no other benefit from community bush. (Prominent community member)

While resource rights were held by Paramount Chiefs, a logging dispute revealed complex decision-making processes. One community leader complained that loggers encroached on their forest without permission, leading to a public hearing with section-level authorities. Proceedings were delayed until the arrival of two prestigious community members who resided in urban centers and derived their social standing from their wealth, education, travel experience, and founding a school and a mosque, respectively. The hearing was dominated by these "opinion leaders" who advised logging should cease pending formal arrangements, and this was ruled as the hearing's outcome by the Sectional representative. However, a different ruling was issued by the same authorities in a letter to the complainant, stating that the logging would continue, and they should attend a private meeting in the Chiefdom's headquarters. It was not considered unusual for such decisions to be acted out in public forums but ultimately decided privately by elites "in the corner."

REDD attitudes

Community relations with GRC were described in the language of interpersonal relationships, in terms of reciprocal exchange, and framings such as "broken promises" or "pleas for help." The effort and cost of participating in project activities were emphasized, with the (usually unspoken) implication that GRC owed communities something in return. There was a view that the success of livelihood-support groups would prompt GRC to increase community investment. One chairperson explained:

> I continue to talk to the women so that we can do the job and get more yield so that Gola can know that we are doing a good job in our community. Why, because we can get some benefit from that one. (Livelihood-group Chairperson)

Assumptions about increased support for "good results" invoked experiences with development NGOs. GRC and NGO staff commented that post-war aid had shaped community expectations. Preconceptions were revealed in an interview with one leader who sought to convey the predominance of group work in their community, through comments that contradicted other sources and were unrelated to the interview questions. A later comment, "NGO's love to work in communities that have group work", suggested answers were aimed at leveraging support.

Expressions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction were inseparable from the views of fairness in REDD benefit-sharing. Benefit valuation differed slightly by social standing. Community members frequently cited school-fee support and cocoa-farming support as positive, while crop-raiding by wildlife (primates, elephants) was a widespread frustration. Town leaders who had not received a Community Development Fund project frequently highlighted this grievance. Visibility of facilities constructed through this fund elsewhere exacerbated frustration, since despite being "closer to the forest," their town hadn't been prioritized under the raffle-selection process, which also ignored inter-town hierarchies, history, and social standing.

Some Town leaders felt that, given their priority concern of road construction, project inputs had little value. One leader dismissed the project's community land-use planning goals: "Our own community forest is well arranged; if you want to plant cash crops you have to see people and go through the correct process."

The historical, pre-war status of communities shaped leaders 'expectations for being prioritized in REDD benefit sharing. One leader noted: "As you can see that the town is really small but for history it is a very big town." While community leaders often emphasized having leverage over GRC as rightful forest owners, other community members viewed themselves as having little power over REDD processes. "We accept Gola because we don't have anywhere to go," said a Community member.

GRNP was commonly referred to as belonging to GRC ("your Gola forest"), as were (less frequently), livelihood-support inputs (e.g., "your groundnuts"). Such framings formed part of the wider perception that REDD decisions were channeled from the top down through the existing social hierarchy, starting with the Chiefdom leadership.

5. Discussion

This research has examined contextual equity and participation within the everyday implementation of an established REDD program, focusing on localized, relational dynamics that took place almost ten years after its introduction. Though we do not focus on the role of REDD as a global policy instrument, it is worth framing this discussion by acknowledging the narrow participation constraints already imposed through the logics and priorities embodied in its rationalities (Leach & Scoones, 2015). "Ethical distance" (Sanders *et al.*, 2025) conceptualizes how globally driven policy implementation intersects with people's lives, raising several ethical dilemmas. Interactions with local power relations and foregrounding of transactional benefit-sharing arrangements observed in our case study exemplify how participation is shaped by how stakeholder engagement and market-based mechanisms are conceived in global policy. As Fletcher and Büscher (2017) put it, attention is warranted on "the ways in which capitalist and neoliberal rationalities, ways of seeing and modes of being are diffused and potentially internalized in the course of program implementation." Our research explored how community actors are positioned with respect to REDD proponents, and among each other (Mathur *et al.*, 2004), with a view to developing actionable insights. However, the relative positioning of local versus global and national-scale systems of decision-making constitutes a wider equity context that delimits the scope of participation.

Local power structures, attitudes toward REDD proponents, and the historic, cultural, and geographic setting that contributed to these factors were prominent in shaping participation, and closely intertwined. For instance, geographic inaccessibility promoted mistrust through perceived vulnerability to elite resource capture. Expectations were built on cultural-historical assumptions in the absence of reliable communication channels,

as evident in "broken promise" narratives, which were used to justify logging decisions that provided little public benefit while impacting REDD outcomes. These contextual equity themes wove across the other equity dimensions of McDermott *et al.*'s (2013) framework. Participation was shaped by narratives of (dis)satisfaction that centered on community benefits (distributional equity) and distributional arrangements (procedural equity), while mistrust was exacerbated by representational roles of chiefdom stakeholders when arrangements were negotiated.

Customary institutions of governance strongly mediated procedural and distributional equity, channeling decision-making towards those with authority in a system developed through pre- and post-colonial political history. Top-down governance systems pose prevalent and complex challenges for REDD equity (Gross-Camp *et al*., 2019, Soliev *et al*., 2021). Operating through existing social systems can risk entrenching power imbalances, while operating outside such structures may jeopardize local legitimacy and support of disproportionately influential actors (Myers *et al*., 2018). This dilemma played out in our case study; Chiefdom authorities were instrumental stakeholders sanctioning REDD activities and ensuring political support from the community-level upwards. As rights-holders, they received substantial REDD payments yet proved unreliable, allowing logging in community forests. While Paramount Chiefs formally represented communities on GRC's board, the power-gap rendered this largely meaningless from the perspectives of community members. Public cynicism of elite decision-makers transferred onto GRC, undermining trust. Nevertheless, chiefdom leaders were called on to mediate disputes between town leaders and project interests, illustrating the complex interplay of legitimacy, trust and power. Intermediary institutions, in our case GCDC, may mitigate top-down power-imbalances and facilitate more equitable representation. However, meaningful political integration without elite co-option is challenging and context-dependent (Gross-Camp *et al*., 2019). Though offering an alternative channel for information-flow and resource-sharing accountability, many in remote communities had little knowledge of the GCDCs role. With low public trust, motorbikes and fuel allowances to facilitate community engagement also bolstered narratives that members were "sponsored" agents of GRC.

Our case study highlights how in-depth socio-cultural understanding, especially regarding power-relations, is indispensable for equitable REDD implementation. For instance, subtle social obligations imposed by social standing were relevant to the FPIC process: Chiefdom-level authorization meant Town leaders were expected to accept projects, while citizen attendance in livelihood-development groups recalled Mende community work obligations. Project delivery relied on staff interpreting complex pathways of social influence, encapsulating family, wealth, and history. For instance, Town Chiefs' personal status determined their roles in logging decisions while some used project non-participation to consolidate their authority. Meanwhile resource disputes were mediated by citizens without formal seats of office, yet these public performances of decision-making were re-enacted behind-closed-doors (Murphy 1990). Thus, the intimate cultural familiarity of these staff was indispensable in discerning who to engage and in what forum.

Our findings mirror other research in showing how expectations, attitudes, trust and participation are linked and instrumental (Myers *et al*., 2018, Bartholdson *et al*., 2019, Milne *et al*., 2019, Otto 2019). Over time, expectations grew from culturally grounded notions of reciprocity and patron-client relations layered onto experience of post-war aid and NGO-led programs. More deeply, expectations of the role of communities as REDD 'partners' were powerfully determined by the positioning of REDD proponents as internationally backed entities aligned with national government and global markets. Local political realities and notions of justice, as well as the global context involving colonial history, shaped expectations which in turn highlighted underlying tensions between REDD social and environmental goals. The management of expectations in the face of unspoken assumptions, misinformation, conflicting priorities and diverse views on what constituted a "benefit" or "cost", relied on effective two-way communication. Barriers to communication were therefore consequential, exacerbating concerns of elite capture, contributing to unequal information access and limiting face-to-face interactions with project staff to build trust. Lacking accurate, up-to-date information, misinformation could easily spread, amplified by self-interested actors. The geography of the region limited opportunities for communities to influence project planning, which was dictated largely by logistics. Effective information-sharing can thus be pivotal for promoting fair and equitable participation, but it demands substantial resourcing – beyond what is typically allocated by funding agencies.

The researchers' embedded positions as project staff, and affiliated with a key REDD program partner, are relevant to the scope and findings of our case study. The themes we have highlighted reflect the topics that respondents wished to portray, such as maximization of future project inputs, with sensitive issues potentially remaining obscured, such as illegal activities or poor outcomes. The research remit included generating insights to guide program delivery, shaping the focus toward the everyday realities of REDD implementation. Future research centered on perspectives of community actors remains under-represented in REDD literature but would constitute an important complement to the perspectives that our work could provide.

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