

The Participation Illusion: Questioning Community Participation in a REDD+ Pilot Project in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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The participation illusion: questioning community participation in a REDD+ pilot project in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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SUMMARY

This paper investigates the introduction of REDD+ in two pilot sites in the Équateur province of the DRC, focusing on the issues of community participation. Using information collected through household questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions, the paper shows that community participation at both sites was characterized as ‘tokenism’ whereby the communities were consulted and informed, but never achieved managerial power or influence over the REDD+ pilot project. The decision for the communities to join REDD+ was not democratic and the information provided during the process of introducing REDD+ was not sufficient for the communities to make an informed decision to join or not. The project organizer had full control over the dissemination of information. Community participation in the REDD+ project did not extend beyond labour supply in activities and attending meetings for per diems. The institutional basis for enabling ‘full and effective community participation’ is weak and excludes women. The paper argues that ensuring meaningful participation as defined by the REDD+ social safeguard guidelines might be difficult to achieve if social inequalities and local power relations are not acknowledged and addressed in the implementation of REDD+.

Keywords: community participation, effectiveness, empowerment, REDD+, the DRC

L’illusion de la participation: mise en question de la participation communautaire dans un projet pilote REDD+ dans la République démocratique du Congo

R.A. SAMNDONG

Ce papier examine l’introduction de la REDD+ dans deux sites pilotes dans la province Équateur de la République démocratique du Congo, concentrés sur les questions de participation communautaire. Utilisant l’information recueillie dans des questionnaires soumis aux foyers, des interviews et des propos de groupes discussion, le papier montre que la participation communautaire dans les deux sites était considérée comme superficielle, les communautés ayant été consultées et informées; mais sans jamais être habilitées à exercer une gestion ou à influencer le projet pilote de la REDD+. La décision qu’une communauté se joigne à la REDD+ n’était pas démocratique, et l’information partagée durant le processus d’introduction de la REDD+ était insuffisante, ne permettant pas aux communautés de prendre une décision informée pour pouvoir décider de se joindre ou non au projet. L’organisateur du projet exerçait un contrôle total sur la dissémination de l’information. La participation communautaire à la REDD+ n’allait pas au-delà de fournir du labeur aux activités et d’assister à des réunions journalières d’information sur le déroulement du projet. La base institutionnelle pour faciliter une «participation pleine et efficace de la communauté» est faible et exclut les femmes. Le papier démontre qu’il pourrait être ardu d’assurer une participation valable, telle qu’elle est définie dans la protection sociale de la REDD+, si les inégalités sociales et les relations locales du pouvoir ne sont pas prises en compte et mises en question lors de la mise en pratique de la REDD+.

La ilusión de la participación: el cuestionamiento de la participación comunitaria en un proyecto piloto de REDD+ en la República Democrática del Congo

R.A. SAMNDONG

Este documento investiga la introducción de REDD+ en dos sitios piloto en la provincia de Équateur de la RDC, centrándose en las cuestiones de la participación comunitaria. Mediante el uso de información recolectada por medio de cuestionarios, entrevistas y grupos focales, el artículo muestra que la participación comunitaria en ambos sitios se caracterizó como ‘simbólica’, donde las comunidades fueron consultadas e informadas, pero nunca lograron el poder de gestión o influencia sobre el proyecto piloto de REDD+. La decisión de las comunidades de unirse a REDD+ no fue democrática y la información provista durante el proceso de introducción de REDD+ no fue suficiente para que las comunidades tomaran una decisión informada sobre si unirse o no al proyecto. La organización del proyecto mantuvo un control total sobre la

diseminación de información. La participación de la comunidad en el proyecto de REDD+ no se extendió más allá de las ofertas de trabajo en actividades y la asistencia a reuniones a cambio de dietas. La base institucional para permitir una 'participación comunitaria plena y efectiva' es pobre y excluye a las mujeres. El artículo argumenta que garantizar la participación significativa, tal y como se define en las pautas de protección social de REDD+, podría ser difícil de lograr si en la implementación de REDD+ no se reconocen y abordan las desigualdades sociales y las relaciones de poder locales.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, community participation in forest conservation and development interventions have undergone increased interest (Brosius *et al.* 1998, Sandbrook *et al.* 2010). Increasing concern about the effectiveness of community participation has made it subject to strong critical analysis (Hickey and Mohan 2004, Penderis 2012). There is evidence that in some community participation exercises, community involvement is managed strategically in order to avoid conflict and dissent and to exert control over local knowledge and actions (Cleaver 1999, Cornwall 2008, Brown 2002). In many of these interventions, local people's voices were undermined in decision-making processes and planning, but their participation was used as an instrument for legitimation and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of projects (Cooke and Kothari 2001, Mohanty 2004, Baviskar 2005).

The development of a social safeguard under the international climate regime, known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation and Enhancing Carbon Stock in tropical forests (REDD+), re-emphasize the importance of 'full and effective participation'¹ of local people in design and implementation of REDD+, and in the equitable distribution of benefits (UNFCCC 2010). This safeguard recognizes community participation as an important element for creating legitimate REDD+ policies at the local level (Gebara 2013, Jagger *et al.* 2012). Early studies on community participation in REDD+, as well as studies on Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), have mostly focused on community rights and access in decision-making processes related to the project introduction, land use planning and benefit sharing (Gebara 2013, Aguilar-Støen 2015, Krause *et al.* 2013, Brockhaus *et al.* 2014). By focusing on decision-making processes, these studies implicitly focus on power and the exercise of power in the spaces constituted by REDD+ to enable community participation (Gaventa 2006). Power might appear to be structural since REDD+ is initiated from the outside and a top-down approach seems the only mechanism for instituting REDD+ at the local level (Resosudarmo *et al.* 2012, Vatn *et al.* 2017). This approach might enable REDD+ initiators to conceal certain information in an attempt to shape the outcomes of decision-making. The overarching issue here is how such a process is structured to ensure that local voices and rights are reflected in the outcomes of decision-making. Nevertheless, achieving full and effective participation is not easy; indeed, many community participation processes in most REDD+ pilot initiatives are being implemented poorly

(Dooley *et al.* 2008, Ribot and Larson 2012). In cases where community participation has been effectively implemented, it has proven to be a key element for the success of REDD+ in terms of both empowering local stakeholders and addressing some of the underlying social drivers of deforestation (Hajek *et al.* 2011).

In view of this, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has developed social and environmental standards for REDD+ aimed at the 'full and effective participation' of a wide range of stakeholders within the country (Kipalu and Mukungu 2013). As the country's REDD+ strategy moves to its implementation phase with the initiation of many REDD+ pilot projects, it is critical to examine to what extent effective participation of local people is carried out in practice. To help inform the policy debate and the implementation of future REDD+ initiatives in the DRC, this paper analyses community participation in the decision-making processes of two REDD+ project pilot sites in the Équateur province of the DRC. The paper asks the following questions: 1) Who were involved in the introduction of REDD+ in the pilot sites and how was this involvement organized?; 2) How do local people perceive the introduction process of REDD+ in their communities; and 3) What are the challenges in promoting meaningful local participation in the REDD+ process of the DRC? The paper argues that there are barriers to local participation and these barriers need to be recognised and addressed to promote full and effective participation of local people in DRC's REDD+ program.

The paper is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, section two presents the theoretical framework employed. Section three provides the context of community participation in forest governance in the DRC and its implication for the country's REDD+ program. Section four provides geographical context and explains the research methods used for the study. Section five presents the findings about community participation in the introduction of REDD+ and their perception toward this process. Section six discusses the findings in relation to the challenges of ensuring meaningful local participation in REDD+ implementation in the DRC.

CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Local communities are not homogenous, rather they are composed of people with different social statuses and characterized by relations of power and privileges. Acknowledging

¹ See the 2010 Cancun Agreements: http://unfccc.int/meetings/cancun_nov_2010/meeting/6266.php

heterogeneity within a village or community, this paper defines participation as “the involvement of a significant number of persons in events or actions which enhance their well-being, e.g. their income, security or self-esteem” (Cohen and Uphoff, 1980: 214). This definition places participation within a tradition that emphasizes the importance of enhancing capabilities—the ability of ordinary people to manage conservation and development initiatives and to influence, implement and control activities that are essential to their wellbeing (Chambers 1997, Sen 1999). The key idea of community participation in interventions is inclusiveness—the inclusion of people in decision-making, formulating plans, controlling resources and implementing decisions over their own lives (Agarwal, 2001). Based on this idea, governments, donor agencies and NGOs have placed increasing emphasis on community participation in all forms of development and conservation interventions (Cornwall 2008, Penderis 2012).

However, the approaches of inclusion of local people seem to vary within these interventions. On the one hand, local people might be included through provision of information and engagement in activities to achieve the aims and objectives of development programs and projects more efficiently and effectively (Nelson and Wright 1995, Cooke and Kothari 2001). On the other hand, they might be included through a social process of empowering and transforming individuals and communities in terms of acquiring skills, knowledge and experience, leading to greater self-reliance (Burkey 1993, Hickey and Mohan 2004). These two distinct approaches of inclusion have been conceptualized as the “effectiveness” and “empowerment” types of community participation in development and conservation interventions (Cleaver 1999). The *effectiveness* approach views participation as an instrument to achieve better project outcomes, with reduced cost, while external actors make the key decisions. The *empowerment* approach views participation as a process which increases the capabilities of individuals or groups to enable them to improve their own lives and facilitate social change to the advantage of the local people in general and marginalized groups more specifically (Cleaver 1999, Brown 2002). These two approaches of participation are neither clear-cut nor mutually exclusive, but represent different purposes to promote community participation in development interventions (Cornwall 2008).

Central to the idea of inclusion, is who to include in decision-making and how to achieve this? What information should be offered and by whom. There is also the issue of who should control the process of information and decision-making? These questions imply emphasizing power relations among the actors involved in community participation processes taking into account the forms of power being exercised (Gaventa 2006, Lukes 2005). An important dimension here is the complex relationship between human agency and social structures (Cleaver 1999, Cornwall and Gaventa 2000,

Penderis 2012). The effectiveness argument typically implies less focus on the complex relationship between human agency and social structures, hence, reproducing inequality (Penderis 2012). This dynamic is articulated by Bourdieu (1989: 16) when stating, “that the construction of social reality by agents is determined by their perceived position in social space and hierarchical status, which are shaped by the economic, social, cultural and symbolic power they possess and the multiplicity of interaction in their personal life”. In line with this argument, Giddens (1984: 16), notes that “knowledge, power and capability play a crucial role in both the actions of agents and the structures that are created over space and time”.

In the context of this paper, the inclusion of local people in the introduction of REDD+ is characterized using the Arnstein (1969) typology² of participation. Citizen control appears at the top of the ladder and non-participation at the bottom, spanning a range from empowerment to instrumental use of participation (Figure 1). In between these two categories is ‘Tokenism’, which includes information, consultation, and placation and according to Arnstein, tends to be the form of participation most typically promoted by development organizations.

For Arnstein, consultation is used as a means of legitimating already made decisions. She associates citizen power, which includes citizen control, delegated power and partnership, as empowerment. Arnstein argues that participation at higher levels is empowering and fair to citizens who then have genuine control and influence in decision-making and the broader political and social processes. For empowerment and equity to occur, citizens must be able to exercise agency and influence the wider structural factors shaping the REDD+ interventions.

The operationalization of this framework takes into consideration both the effectiveness and empowerment argument of participation. Thus, it goes beyond the provision of information and involvement in decision-making to investigate the broader context of understanding the socio-political nature of the communities. Therefore, in the context of REDD+, for empowerment to occur at the local level, communities must exercise their agency to control and influence REDD+ project decisions. The ability to influence decisions depends on the complex relations between actors’ interests, power and institutions.

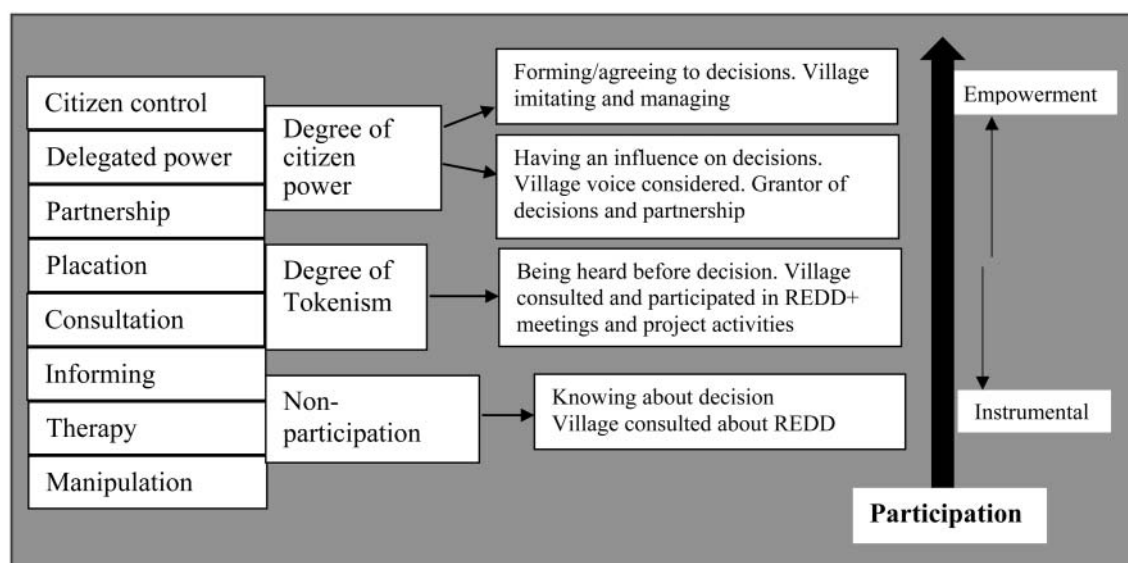
GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

Geographical context

The REDD+ pilot project in the Équateur province known as *projet Zamba Malumu*³ was initiated in 2011 by the Woods Hole Research Center (WHRC) in collaboration with the

² PRETTY, J.N. 1995. Participatory learning for sustainable agriculture. *World development* **23**: 1247–1263. and WHITE, S.C. 1996. Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation. *Development in practice* **6**: 6–15. offer further typologies of participation.

³ Zamba Malumu means the forest is good.

FIGURE 1 *Characterizing community participation in REDD+ implementation adapted from (Arnstein 1969)*

Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of the DRC with financial supports from the Congo Basin Fund (CBFF). The key objectives of the pilot project is to increase the capacity of provincial stakeholders for the development of REDD+ strategies and to design and implement community based REDD+ pilot projects with potential for continued carbon financing. To achieve these objectives, WHRC signed partnership agreements with four regional actors (Bureau Diocésain du Développement (BDD), Communauté Evangélique de l'Ubangi, Mongala de Gemena, Jardin Botanique d'Eala and Université du CEPROMAD) to implement different components of the pilot project in the two pilots areas. In addition, a project consultant was hired to support the local people in one of the pilots—that of Bikoro—to facilitate initial REDD+ demonstration activities.

The REDD+ pilot project is located in both Bikoro and Gemena territories (see map 1). These territories were selected because they host diverse huge intact block of primary rainforest that is dominantly regulated using customary tenure in practice. The Bikoro territory lies in the southwest of the Équateur province⁴. Its dominant vegetation is equatorial swamp rainforest inundated with water throughout the year, making road construction and maintenance difficult (Yamba 2009). The Gemena territory lies in the northwest of the Équateur province⁵. Here the dominant vegetation type is dense and humid, while equatorial lowland rainforest transits into evergreen savannah woodland and grasses in the north. The populations of both pilot sites practice slash and burn

shifting cultivation, extracting non-timber forest products, fishing, hunting and producing charcoal for their livelihoods.

The WHRC REDD+ pilot project only covers Buya 1 village in Bikoro territory. This village is made up of two main ethnic groups—the Bantu and the Batwa Pygmies⁶. The Bantu is divided into different tribal groups—the Mongo, Ntomba, Ekonda and other groups. The Mongo tribal group in the village are considered as the customary landowners (*ayant droit*) while the other groups including the Batwa Pygmies are considered the migrants with limited rights to forestland. In the Gemena pilot area, the project covers only Bokumu-Mokola/Mbongo village, which is made up of a dominant Bantu tribal group known as *Ngwaka* and other Bantu tribal groups from neighbouring territories.

Both pilot sites are governed by two authority structures—statutory and customary. The two pilot sites are different in terms of their landscapes, economic activities, accessibility and external interventions. The Bikoro pilot site has experienced several interventions related to agricultural development, forest governance and conservation from different international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These interventions have resulted in the establishment of village organizations known as Peasant Development Organizations (OPD) that combine informal and formal elements of collective action, in coordinating delivery of e.g., development-oriented agricultural services.

The Gemena pilot site has, for political reasons⁷, experienced very little of these interventions. The local people

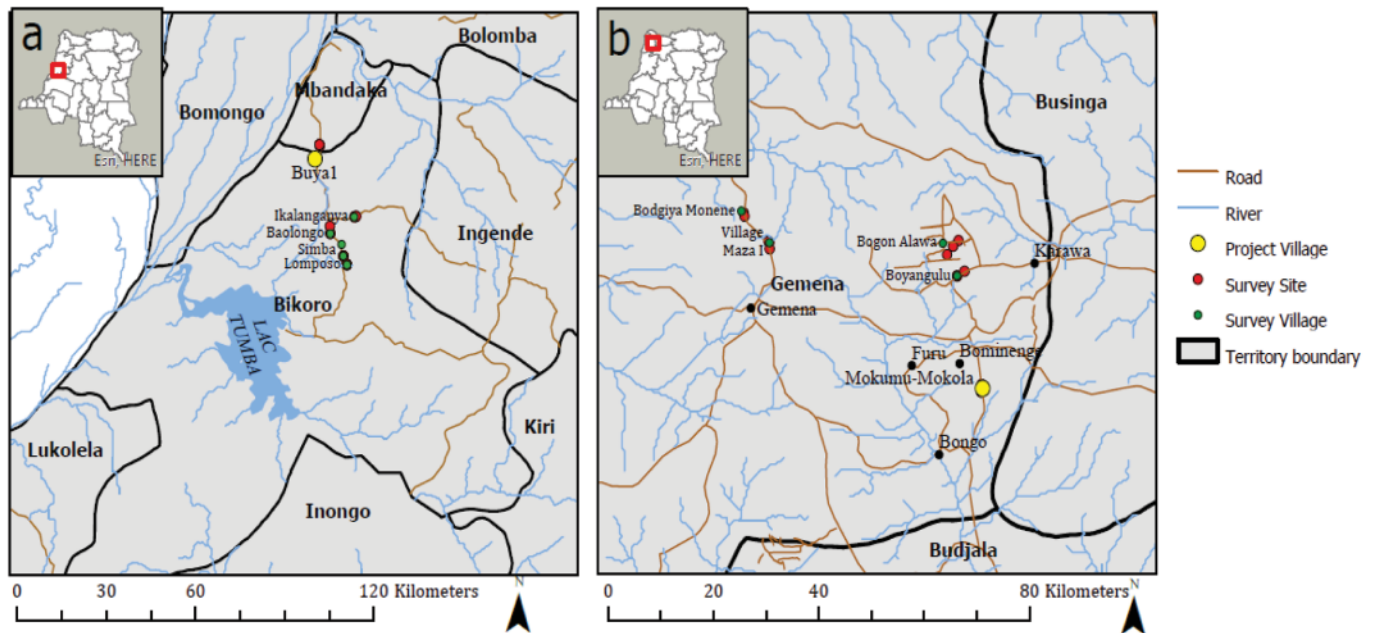
⁴ The Equateur province was divided into five new provinces in July 2015, following the national decentralization reform, but our analysis is based on the province political and governance structure before the division. The province where Bikoro territory lies is still called Equateur.

⁵ The Gemena territory is now localized in the Sud-Ubangi province, one of the new provinces

⁶ The Batwa is an ethnic group more commonly referred to as “Pygmy” in the region. They are also referred to as *Peuples Autochtones* (PA) in French, which means indigenous people.

⁷ The region has witnessed limited presidential supports under the Kabila administration because it is the strong hold of the opposition party Mouvement de Liberation de Congo (MLC) and a strong hold of the formal president Mobutu.

FIGURE 2 Map of the two pilot sites in Équateur province: a) Bikoro territory, Buyal project village, b) Gemena territory, Bokumu-Mokola project village Source: Chapman (2016)



are organized around voluntary church organizations and grassroots mutual aid groups. These organizations are self-sustaining voluntary organizations and while few in number are more trusted by the local community compared to the customary and statutory authorities. The church organizations provide social services, including schools, healthcare and food security initiatives.

Research methods

Field research was conducted from July to August 2014, July to August 2015 and July to August 2016. Information was obtained through household questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations. The list of households obtained from the village leadership shows that there are 370 households in Buya 1 village while there are 210 households in Bokumu Mokola and 150 households in Bokumu Mbongo making a total of 360 households. 75 households from Buya 1 village in Bikoro pilot and 76 households from Bokumu-Mokola/Mbongo in Gemena pilot were surveyed. The questionnaire collected data on local people's knowledge about REDD+, their participation in the REDD+ introduction, the establishment of a REDD+ village organization and the implementation of early REDD+ demonstration activities. It is important to note here that the REDD+ demonstration activities were only being implemented in Buya 1 village at the time of the field research. Purposive and stratified random sampling were used to select the respondents for the survey. The intention was to ensure that 70% of the survey sample covers people who participated in REDD+ meetings and activities and the rest selected among non-participants. Random selection was done with these groups based on the attendance list and a list of village households respectively. The stratification was to ensure a

good representation of the sample and good coverage of those involved in the REDD+ meetings and activities. The stratification also ensured that 'Batwa Pygmies' in the Bikoro pilot site were represented in the total sample.

In total, 72 in-depth interviews were conducted in French and Lingala with six different types of actors—including customary authorities, local administrative authorities, staff of the different intervening agencies, executive members of village associations, staff of the REDD+ pilot project and logging operators. The intention was to gather information on the transfer of power and resources to local authority structures by intervening agencies, and to examine how these powers and resources have influenced how authority structures include local people in decision-making processes, project implementation and benefit sharing.

To capture local people's insights about their inclusion or exclusion of the REDD+ introduction process, focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized in each pilot village. The focus groups considered issues related to power relations and access to resources. The FGDs provided information about local people's knowledge of REDD+, participation in REDD+ project activities, the distribution of benefits, their perception of REDD+, their interactions with the local authorities and with the REDD+ project organizer. In Buy 1 village, five focus groups were organized—one each for men, women, landowners, migrants and Batwa Pygmies (12 participants per group). In the Mokumu-Mokola/Bongo village, separate focus groups were organized for men, women, landowners and migrants. The Batwa Pygmies in the Buya 1 village and women in both pilots were treated in separate groups because they socially and economically marginalized and cannot voice their concerns in front of men and customary landowners.

LEGAL STRUCTURES AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN FOREST GOVERNANCE AND REDD+ IN THE DRC

Forest governance in the DRC has been centralized with an emphasis on regulating industrial logging (Debroux *et al.* 2007, Fétiveau and Mpoyi 2009). Land and forest ownership and utilization is defined by the 1973 Land Ordinance and the 2002 Forest Code. These two legal texts codified the state as the sole guardian of all land and forest resources with the authority to exclude and allocate rights to use to the local population and logging companies (GDRC 2002). Despite the establishment of state ownership of all land in the DRC, a significant portion of the forestland remains under the control of customary authorities (Oyono and Nzuzi 2006).

The Forest Code makes provision for community forest management as a means to empower communities and promote community participation in resource management. This provision was enacted as late as August 2014, and the procedures and guidelines for implementation are still being developed.

Article 89 of the Forest Code makes provisions for local people to be involved in forest governance via a social agreement (*cahiers de charge*), with logging companies (GDRC 2002). This agreement should specify actions to improve the social infrastructure of communities living around logging concessions and provide direct compensation to the clans with customary claims to the forestland. The guidelines for the negotiation of social agreements lack clear descriptions of the rights and obligations of the logging company, the state and the local population. The Forest Code places the right to negotiate the social agreement with the logging companies to the customary authorities, on behalf of their local communities. Experiences shows that the agreement benefits only families and clans with customary claims to forestland (Samndong 2015). In the absence of an institutional structure, ensuring negotiations and management of logging compensation from the social agreement, a ministerial text was enacted in 2010 for the creation of *Comité Local de Gestion* (CLG), known in English as Local Management Committee, to take care of this at the local level (Samndong and Nhantumbo 2015). This administrative text still recognizes customary authority as the main supervising authority for the CLG.

In the absence of a competent organizational structure at the local level, intervening NGOs partner with Peasants Development Associations (OPD). OPDs are based on the law of association (*Loi de l'Association, N° 004 du 20 juillet 2001; décret de 1956 sur coopératives*) to implement rural development projects. In addition, the government has set up Agricultural and Rural Management Councils (CARGs), at the local level as platforms for communities to participate in the design of local agricultural programs (Samndong 2015).

In addition to this legal framework, the DRC embarked on a decentralization reform in 2006, with the intention to transfer power and fiscal resources to the regional and local levels (GDRC 2006). However, this reform process is proceeding slowly; at present elected governments only exist at the province level and are yet to be established at the level of *secteur/chefferie* or *groupement* (Samndong and Nhantumbo 2015). Following the decentralization reform, tribal chiefdom (*groupement*) is the lowest level of state administration and defined as a territory with homogenous traditional community organized by custom, headed by a tribal chief and recognized by the provincial governor (GDRC 2006). The tribal chiefdom is therefore the administrative unit where local government is expected.

In the context of REDD+, the DRC has made significant progress in its national REDD+ program with the endorsement of its national REDD+ strategy, a REDD+ investment plan and the formulation of social safeguards (Mpoyi *et al.* 2013, Aquino and Guay 2013, Fobissie *et al.* 2014). The national REDD+ strategy recognizes the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). FPIC implies that local communities have the power to give or withhold their consent to any project which may affect their customarily owned land, their natural resources, their mode of living and their livelihoods (Kipalu and Mukungu 2013). However, as the DRC REDD+ programs move to the implementation phases with many pilot projects, the REDD+ national strategy provides no details on practical arrangements for its implementation at the local level (Aquino and Guay 2013). Given the existing legal framework and the lack of practical arrangements regarding the FPIC principle in REDD+ implementation at the local level it is therefore challenging to anticipate community participation in REDD+ initiatives.

Civil society organizations are advocating the development of an operational national guide for FPIC and community participation applicable to all kinds of projects related to the lands and the livelihoods of communities (Kipalu *et al.* 2016). In the absence of a decentralized governance structures, REDD+ pilot projects are working with communities to establish new REDD+ organizations known as Local Development Committees, *Comité Local de Développement* (CLD) recognised by an administrative text⁸ to ensure collective choice arrangements that actively involve the majority of community members impacted by the REDD+ projects. The process of establishing the CLD is driven by the NGOs implementing REDD+ in relation with community authorities. The government officials at the regional and local level are somehow excluded in this process and only consulted for the legal recognition of these structures. The corrupt nature of these local government officials, their lack of social skills and trust from the communities to engage and interact with communities are some of the reasons for their exclusion (Mpoyi *et al.* 2013).

⁸ Loi organique n° 08/016 du 7 octobre 2008 portant composition, organisation et fonctionnement des entités territoriales décentralisées et leurs rapports avec l'Etat et les Provinces.

TABLE 1 *Community knowledge about what REDD+ is about (N=151)*

Knowledge about REDD+ ¹	Bikoro % (N=75)	Gemena % (N=76)	Total % (N=151)
Forest protection	41.3	55.3	48.3
Restrict forest use	8	1.3	4.6
Provide alternative livelihoods	21.3	28.9	25.2
Provide village development	8	6.6	7.3
Payment mechanism	0	5.3	2.6
I don't know	21.3	2.6	11.9

1= these categories were predefined in the questionnaire and the respondents were allowed to choose only one option.

RESULTS

Local knowledge of REDD+

Across both pilots, the awareness of REDD+ was high: 94.7% (N=151) of the survey respondents knew about it. All the respondents of the survey in Gemena pilot confirmed that they had heard about REDD+ while 89.3% of respondents in Bikoro pilot (N=75), confirmed the same. Table 1, shows that significant number of respondents (48.3%) in both pilots, understood REDD+ as a forest protection project, while 25.2% understood REDD+ as a project that will provide them with alternative livelihoods. Very few respondents (2.6%), understood REDD+ as a payment mechanism, while 11% of the total respondents in both pilots had no knowledge about REDD+.

Regarding information about REDD+, of the respondents who knew about REDD+, all stated that they were informed about REDD+ by the project organizer (WHRC); some (39.5%) also got additional information about REDD+ from the media (radio). However, the local people's knowledge of the actors responsible for REDD+ in their communities varied significantly between the pilot sites. While 58.7% of the respondents in Bikoro indicated that WHRC is responsible for REDD+, 38.2% in Gemena reported that the REDD+ village organization is responsible for REDD+. A majority of the respondents (82.8%) in both pilots together reported that their communities were consulted before the design of the REDD+ project activities. This consultation process aimed to follow the principle of FPIC in which village meetings and workshops are organized to explain the project and solicit inputs and the consent of the local people.

Community participation in the introduction of REDD+

The REDD+ introduction process started with a village assembly meeting, followed by a workshop and the final process of deciding whether to join REDD+ or not. The introduction process was initiated in the two pilot sites at different time intervals. The process was initiated in Bikoro pilot in July 2013 and in Gemena pilot in October 2013. Following from our sample selection procedure, 76.2% of the total respondents in both pilots reported that they participated in the village assembly meeting.

The meetings were organized in both pilots by WHRC in collaboration with the village authority—an invited space open to inform the local people about the REDD+ pilot project objectives, activities and their potential benefit to the communities. The meetings were free and open for all village members to express their views concerning the REDD+. The meeting took four to five hours and the information provided outline of the importance of protecting the village forest to sequester carbon and regulate global climate, the danger of climate change to the locals, the need to ensure sustainable forest management, improve local agricultural practice, community development and alternative livelihoods activities. There was no information concerning forest tenure, the risks or costs of the project to the locals and how the project activities would be implemented and monitored at the village level. No timeframe for the project was given. Although the local people who attended the village assembly meeting were fully aware about the REDD+ pilot project, the information provided did not improve their capacity to influence how the project should be implemented. The project organizer and customary authorities had full control over the space created to inform the local people and control over the dissemination of information. Hence, it provided only information that would motivate the local people to accept the project.

After the village assembly meeting, a workshop was organized for 2 days in both pilots to map out the local people's livelihood activities, constraints, coping strategies and village development challenges as a mechanism to identify project activities as alternatives to reduce local pressure on the forests. The workshop was organized in the form of focus group discussions and the participants were selected based on gender, clans and whether they were migrants or not. 15 participants were selected from each category of the groups (gender, clans and migrants). The intention was to gather the perspectives of these different groups concerning the village livelihood situation.

More men participated in both the village assembly meetings and workshop compared to women in both pilots. This is because the men are the first to receive information about village meetings since following the household division of labor in the project area, men have more leisure time during the day while the women are either in the fields or working in the home. In addition, the village assembly meeting was organized during the day when most women had gone to their farm fields or forest.

TABLE 2 *Source of information about REDD+ in the pilot sites (N=151)*

Source of information about REDD+ ¹	Bikoro % (N=75)	Gemena % (N=76)	Total % (N=151)
WHRC	78.7	73.7	76.2
Customary authorities	42.7	31.6	37.1
Hearsay in village	74.7	47.4	60.9
Local state authority	0	0	0
Project intervening NGOs	12	2.6	7.3
Village organizations	9.3	0	4.6
Media (radio)	13.3	10.5	11.9
Research student	25.3	15.8	20.5

1= The respondents could tick more than one option.

In the Gemena pilot, the village general assembly meeting was held in front of the village church and the workshop in the village school. In the Bikoro pilot, both the village assembly meeting and workshop were held at a meeting ground located at the residence of the customary chief. In Bikoro, 28% of respondents were not happy with the meeting venue. The most important reason given was that it is a private place owned by the customary chief. Many Batwa Pygmies noted in the focus group discussions that they are often uncomfortable to voice their concerns in meetings held at the residence of the customary chief. Some village members also noted that the customary chief often chases non-invited people away from his residence when there are visitors or project meetings. The selection of the workshop venue in Bikoro pilot shows that the project organizer and customary chief had full control of the process, setting the agenda and choosing whom to invite.

While WHRC provided information about REDD+ in the village assembly meeting, Table 2 shows that the local people had other sources of information about the project. Significant number (60.9%) of respondents in both pilots together received information from hearsay (rumours) in the village, while 37.1% of total respondents in both pilots received information from the village leaders (customary chiefs).

More than half of respondents in both pilots trusted the information provided by the customary authority (66%) and WHRC (64.2%). A Chi square test shows, however, a significant difference between the pilots regarding their trust in information provided by customary authorities ($\chi^2=21.66$; $df=1$; $p=0.000$). In Gemena, 84% trusted the information provided by the customary authorities while 48% of the respondents in the Bikoro pilot trusted the information provided by these authorities. The customary authorities in the Gemena pilot have strong local legitimacy since the communities are traditionally homogenous with one dominant ethnic group. The communities in the Bikoro pilot are more heterogeneous with more migrants, while the increased presence of state agents and powerful external interests have weakened the legitimacy of the customary authorities in certain decision-making arenas (see Samndong 2015).

The men—in the male focus groups in both pilots—confirmed that they understood the objectives and goals of the project based on the information provided in the meeting and

workshop. The men in the Bikoro pilot noted quite universally that the REDD+ pilot project would provide them with alternative livelihoods to avoid deforestation and protect the forest for carbon dioxide and thus help regulate global climate. This understanding about the REDD+ pilot project reveals what kind of information was disseminated to the local people during the introduction process. Since the project organizer was the main source information about the project, they had control over the dissemination of information and provided only information that could shape local people's perception and preferences for forest conservation and development as indicated above. Not all women's responses in the focus groups for the two pilots indicated they understood the objectives and goals of the project.

In the women focus group in the Gemena pilot, participants who claimed to understand the project noted that the project was named 'Zamba Malamu'—a new project that aims to reduce poverty in the village and protect the forest by helping the local people to improve agricultural production on fallow land. In the Bikoro pilot, the women reported that not all the local people are happy about the project. Some people believed, based on their experience from past projects, it would be difficult for this project to benefit all households in the village. Some were skeptical about the project and perceived the project like previous development projects that have deceived them with empty promises without any benefits and concrete activities. The Batwa Pygmies in the Bikoro pilot were also skeptical about the project, because they had been excluded in many past development projects in the village.

Although the local people confirmed that the information provided during the meeting and workshop motivated them to favour the REDD+ pilot project, no meeting was organized in either pilot for the local people to decide whether to join REDD+ or not. The decision for the villages to join REDD+ was made by the project organizer in consultation with the customary authorities in both pilots without any signed agreement. The local people were not involved in the decision and were only informed about the decision and not who made the decision. By excluding the local people from the decision to join REDD+ and not informing them of who made the decision, community participation in the introduction process

TABLE 3 Respondents' response to who they believed made the decision for the village to join REDD+ in the pilot sites (N=151)

Actors believed to make the decision to join REDD+ ¹	Bikoro % (N=75)	Gemena % (N=76)	Total % (N=151)
Project organizer (WHRC)	33.3	60.5	47
Customary authority	44	27.6	35.8
Village general assembly	12	5.3	8.6
Local state authority	4	0	2
Village traditional council	1.3	0	0.7
Village organizations	5.3	0	2.6
Project intervening NGOs	0	6.6	3.3

¹= these categories were predefined in the questionnaire and the respondents were allowed to choose only one option.

TABLE 4 Respondents' motivation to participate in REDD+ village meetings in the pilot sites (N=151)

Motivation to participate in meetings ¹	Bikoro % (N=75)	Gemena % (N=76)	Total % (N=151)
Information	45.3	64.5	55.0
Per diems	76.0	73.7	74.8
Participate in decision	12.0	5.3	8.6

¹= The respondents could tick more than one option.

was more instrumental than empowering. The information provided by WHRC in the process was linked to a set of formulated incentives to promote goals predetermined to be achieved through participation by the local people.

The local people were confused about who made the decision for their village to join REDD+. There was significant difference between the pilots in who the local people believed made the decision for the village to join REDD+ ($\chi^2=23.79$; $df=6$; $p=0.001$). In Bikoro pilot site, 45.3% of the respondents believed that the customary authority made the decision for the village to join REDD+ while in Gemena pilot site, 60.5% of the respondents believed that WHRC made the decision for the village to join REDD+ (Table 4).

Information gathered from the interviews and focus group discussions reveals that very little was discussed in the workshop concerning local people's access to and use of forest in the project. This again shows that the project organizer had full control over the process: what should be discussed in the workshop that could shape local people's perception towards a particular objective. There was rather more discussion on the needs and interests of local people that fitted well into the project expectations. For example, the women in the focus group in Bikoro noted that the most important question for them was how they should protect the forest when they live from the forest? Could REDD+ mean that they would not have access to the forest again? While the local needs and interests crowded the discussion, for the women in Bikoro pilot, their main interests regarding the project was to acquire financial help, agricultural support, livestock keeping and access to drinking water. For the Batwa Pygmies, access to land, equal distribution and inclusion were very important. These findings reveal that the discussions in the workshops were concentrated on measures to achieve the project goals

rather than assessing local conflicts related to access and use of forests in the pilots.

The people confirmed in the focus groups that the REDD+ introduction process was recorded and that all the documents are with WHRC. Although the local people were motivated to favour the project, no agreement was signed between the local people and the project organizer. The youths in Bikoro pilot stated that after the workshop, they did request for an agreement from the project organizer, which was not done. At the end of the workshop, some activities were discussed and planned to be implemented in the pilot villages as community benefits from the project. In the Bikoro pilot, these included a village land-use map, construction of a village school, construction of three water boreholes to provide drinking water to the local people, construction of a nursery for fruit trees to be distributed to the local people to support their agricultural production. In the Gemena pilot, the planned activities included the production of a village land use map, construction of water boreholes and the provision of support and training for improved agriculture.

Community participation in the establishment of a REDD+ village organization

According to the survey, 44% (N=151) of survey respondents reported that the idea to establish the REDD+ village organization came from WHRC. This is because existing village organizations in the pilots serve different interest groups and the REDD+ pilot project was an opportunity to establish village organization that represents all interests (see Samndong and Bush, 2017). Before the establishment of these organizations in both pilots, meetings were organized to inform the local people and to set up the process. The majority of the

respondents (74.8%, N=151), confirmed that they were motivated to participate in these meetings because of the per diems they received for their participation (Table 4).

According to the WHRC representatives, these meetings were organized to inform the local people and ensure that they participate in the process. For WHRC, establishing a village organization for REDD+ is the only way to ensure meaningful local participation and to empower the local people in the pilot project. The organization is important to ensure an effective information flow in the pilots to create awareness among village residents regarding the project and project activities. The organizations shall ensure that all the households in the village are included in the project activities and benefit streams.

While the intention of WHRC was to assist the local people in the pilots to establish the REDD+ organization, WHRC had full control of deciding how the groups should be composed and who should be elected or included in the groups. Local people on the other hand, participated in these meetings as listeners without any power to influence the process since WHRC had already decided the composition of the groups.

In the Bikoro pilot, 37 groups were created using the list of household heads in the village as decided by WHRC. Each of these groups then selected two members to represent them in the REDD+ village committee. This committee of 74 members then elected an executive committee of four members (President, vice president and two technical advisers) known as the REDD+ Focal Point of the village. The customary chief became the president of the executive committee and all the REDD+ meetings were held at his residence. The vice president is a woman; this was a prerequisite from WHRC that a woman must be a member of the executive committee. To WHRC, this was intended to ensure some degree of gender empowerment and equity. This finding reveals a real dilemma and challenge faced by WHRC to empower women in the established REDD+ organization, where customary authorities are dominated by men.

In the Gemena pilot, 36 groups were created from the list of household heads as decided by WHRC. Each group then selected two members to represent them in the REDD+ village committee, which followed the same process as above. The executive committee president is a customary landowner. There is no woman in the Gemena executive committee. The WHRC staff who supervised the process noted that no woman was willing to join the executive committee. The women in Gemena perceived the REDD+ as the men's affair because it is related to the management of forests.

The mechanism to establish the REDD+ village organization favoured men over women as more than 80% of household heads who make up the organization are men. In addition, information for the establishment of the REDD+ village organization was not very clear to the local people. From the survey, 54% (N=151), of the respondents reported that the organization was created to educate the local people about REDD+, 47.7% reported that it was established to implement REDD+ activities in the village while 24.5% did not know the reason why this organization was established.

Information from interviews confirmed that the idea to elect either the village customary chief or a customary landowner to lead the organization came from the project organizer. According to WHRC, it was a way to 'harmonize' the new village organization with customary institutions in order to build local trust and legitimacy in the village REDD+ organizations. According to the survey, 51% (N=151), of respondents indicated high or very high trust in the executive committee of the REDD+ village organization.

Information gathered from the interviews and focus groups confirmed that the established REDD+ organizations in the pilots are yet to function. The organizations still lack rules and bylaws, and require formal recognition. According to the survey, only 18.7% of respondents (N=75) in Bikoro believed that the organization functions because some members have participated in several meetings at the residence of the customary chief together with WHRC team. This finding reveals that the organization is actually functioning in Bikoro pilot despite the lack of by-laws but very few people are aware. Such a closed process of functioning could influence the transparency and accountability of the organization.

Community participation in early REDD+ activities

As noted above, no REDD+ activity was being introduced in the Gemena pilot during the field research. This section therefore, analyses community participation in the early REDD+ activities introduced in the Bikoro pilot site. Before these activities were implemented, a number of meetings were organized to inform the local people about the type of activities to be implemented in the village. Following the sample procedure, 64% of respondents in Bikoro pilot reported that they participated in these meetings. Those that did not participate complained that the information about these meetings was not circulated to all the households in the village.

Information from the focus groups confirmed that many people only learned about these meetings and activities through hearsay and gossip. Many people noted in the focus groups that the customary chief had strong influence over the projects since he controlled all the information about them. He was in contact with the project team; the team always visited him and all project meetings were organized in his residence. Therefore, if some households were not informed of the meeting preceding the early REDD+ activities, the chief has to be held accountable. These findings suggest that by making the customary chief president of the REDD+ village organization reinforces his position and the information he received strengthened his capacity to control the REDD+ activities. This shows the dilemma of recognizing customary structure in project implementation in the absence of effective local government.

Among those that participated, 41.3% confirmed that they were motivated to participate by the per diem they received in the meetings, while 30.7% were motivated to participate by the information they received. Following our sample procedure, majority of the respondents (62.7%, N=75) indicated that they were involved in these activities. Their types of

involvement also varied. While 56% of respondents indicated that they were involved as labourers, only 12% of the respondents were involved in the planning of these activities in the village. This indicates that community participation in the REDD+ activities was more instrumental than empowering.

Information collected from interviews and focus groups reveal that many REDD+ activities were being implemented in the Bikoro pilot site: participatory land use mapping, construction of water points, manufacture of bricks for school construction, establishment of fruit tree nurseries, introduction of *Mucuna* plant (*Mucuna pruriens*) for soil enrichment, introduction of improved stoves, introduction of locally-made solar dryers for cassava, and the establishment of lowland rice fields. The local people complained that some of the activities were never discussed in the REDD+ introduction process, while those discussed are yet to be implemented or completed. In an interview with the project manager from WHRC, he noted that the project has experienced delays in the disbursement of funds to implement the project activities discussed in the in the REDD+ introduction process. Due to this delay, the project organizer decided to experiment with different activities in the pilot to keep the project active.

Local people also complained about their participation in these activities. For instance, one complaint brought up in the both the men and women focus groups was the water project implemented in 2014 by the project's local partner Bureau Diocésain du Développement (BDD). The three boreholes constructed were unable to provide water to the villagers during the first dry season in 2014. BDD hired local technicians for the project and used low quality materials. Local people complained that they were not involved in budgeting for the designing of the well, and that they were not involved in decisions about the hiring of local technicians and purchase of materials for construction. However, the village customary chief was involved in supervising and monitoring the activity.

A few of the local people were hired to work as labourers for the well construction activity. These labourers complained that they were poorly paid and in a few cases, some claimed they were not paid at all. In the male focus group, one man reported that the tools provided by BDD were distributed to the customary chief and some selected village members. A number of them complained about using their own tools in the well construction activity without compensation. One member of the female focus group confirmed that she was injured in the construction work and was not taken care of by BDD or the village authority. Members of the women's focus group noted that the water project was very important to them since they are responsible for fetching water for the households, but they were unhappy that it was poorly implemented. Similar complaints were made about the brick production activity.

The establishment of the fruit-tree nursery involved mainly the customary landowners as labourers. The migrant population, especially the Batwa Pygmies, were reluctant to participate because they felt that the fruit tree nursery would not benefit them as they do not have customary rights to land in the village. This finding reveals that ethnicity might influence local people's ability to participate and benefit from

REDD+ land-use activities. In the case of the introduction of improved stoves, many local people were interested, but soon realized that the stoves could not be adapted to their cooking habits. The improved stove required big cooking pots and consumed more firewood than they expected. Therefore, many of the local people that opted for the stoves have abandoned them and returned to their traditional cooking style. They state that the improved stoves maybe more useful for households with big cooking pots and to prepare food for parties or big ceremonies in the village.

The rice production activity is ongoing, but in both the men and women focus group discussions, some participants noted that the rice field belongs to the customary chief, others said it is owned by the REDD+ project, and others claimed that it is owned by the project consultant. Many people in the village were upset that the customary chief consumed the first harvest from the rice field without sharing it with village members. This clearly shows that the customary chief had control and influence over the early REDD+ activities in the village. In addition, the local people noted that no open meeting was organized in the village to discuss the rice project. In an interview with the project consultant, he explained that WHRC had planned to train the local people on how to cultivate rice in the swamp forest to improve their food security and income. He further stated that the project organized a meeting in the village to inform the local people about the rice project. During this meeting, the WHRC project team asked for volunteers interested in cultivating rice in their swamp forests, but only a few opted for this. The customary chief was the most enthusiastic. This may be because he had complete information about this activity compared to the others.

Those who participated in the focus group meetings disagreed with the project consultant's version of events. They maintained strongly that no general meeting was organized in the village. Only the customary chief and a few village members were involved in the planning activities organized by the project consultant. In addition, they noted that the project consultant could not speak Lingala (the local language of the population) and this limited his everyday interaction with the local people. He only discussed all the project activities with the customary chief and the chief's friends. Thus, the local people were not well informed about project activities. This was worsened by the fact that the groups created to communicate about the project activities in the village have not yet been made operational.

DISCUSSION

Following the analytical framework above, the provision of adequate and sufficient information empower communities to have a voice and influence on decision-making. This was not the case of REDD+ introduction in Équateur province. In addition, the type of information provided has a bearing on community agency to control and influence decision-making.

The findings show that the information provided by the project organizer during the introduction process was undertaken using a conservation and development discourse (see Adger *et al.* 2001). This was troubling to the local people because issues about land rights and user rights were not prioritised. The project organizer had full control over the process and chose what information to disseminate. This demonstrates the dimensions of powers that are exercised in participatory processes (see Lukes 2005, Gaventa 2006). The introduction process created local awareness, but did not convince them to give their consent to the REDD+ project. Local support for the project was based on limited information disseminated and trust in their leaders, who had consented to the project without full information. The introduction process was more of a consultation than a genuine effort to seek local consent and empower community to have control and influence on project decisions. A consent seeking process requires well-informed decision making by local people and the signing of an agreement of intention that motivates both partners to engage confidently in the REDD+ process (Mahanty and McDermott 2013).

This study finds that the project organizer and the customary authorities made the decision for the village to join REDD+ without a signed agreement. However, a consent seeking process that empower communities can be both time consuming and costly (see Sunderlin *et al.* 2014). Thus, the REDD+ pilot projects, seemingly in order to avoid these costs, conduct a few days of consultation meetings, which end up providing only information that will motivate the local people to accept the project. This has been observed here, and in other similar studies of REDD+ processes (Resosudarmo *et al.* 2012).

To characterize community participation in the REDD+ pilot project, it is important to assess the local institutional arrangements for project implementation. The main findings in this regard is that the REDD+ village organizations established by the project to create local awareness and implement REDD+ activities in the pilot sites, were unable to ensure full and effective community participation in the REDD+ project. First, although the idea to establish these village organizations came from the project organizer, they did not give space for self-organizing. The project organizer had full control of the process and decided how the organizations should be established. By controlling the organization process, the project organizer was faced with the dilemma to either strengthen or weaken existing local power structures embedded in customary institutions. Secondly, the mechanism used to create these REDD+ village organizations excluded women because the membership was drawn from head of households who are mainly men. This also illustrates the dilemma that WHRC face by trying to empower women in the REDD+ organization in the context of patriarchal domination. Thirdly, the organizations are still lacking the bylaws and internal regulations to function. Fourthly, local people do not know what project activities these village REDD+ organizations were established to facilitate and how they will do this.

The REDD+ project organizer also faced another dilemma by choosing to allow the customary authority and indigenous

landowners to lead. The REDD+ village organizations ultimately decided to do so, probably in order to harmonize their activities with customary institutions. However, this decision strengthened the customary chief in the Bikoro pilot and gave him more control over the project than the other local people. This is happening because there is no decentralised local government structure in the DRC. This is not to say that decentralised local government structures are panacea for community participation. They seem to provide a better framework to promote participatory forest management ((Lund *et al.* 2018). Where such decentralized local government structures exist, like in Tanzania, they have been used to involve communities in REDD+ decision-making processes (Blomley *et al.* 2016, Mustalahti and Rakotonarivo 2014). However, the absence of the REDD+ village organizations bylaws have enabled the customary chief in the Bikoro pilot, to capture and control the REDD+ activities.

The customary chief, as leader of the REDD+ village organization, controls all the information about the village REDD+ activities, organizes meeting about the project and invites his friends. Furthermore, the information about these meetings are not circulated to the entire village. Since downward accountability of customary authorities in the DRC is weak to non-existent (Nuesiri 2012), chiefs exercise their authority in an autocratic manner. It comes as no surprise therefore that the village chief, who is president of the REDD+ village organization in Buya 1 village, is not accountable to the people. Furthermore, given that local people lack adequate information about the project activities, they are not able to influence or demand accountability from the customary chief.

The activities introduced had predetermined objectives, specific timeframes and ways of engaging the local people to manufacture success (see Lawlor *et al.* 2013). The local people were not included in deciding which activities to implement. The activities are linked to the project budget and timeframe and local people are only consulted in identifying potential activities, but not deciding which to establish or how they are implemented. In this light, community participation can be interpreted as a means to achieve the project outcomes—an instrument to increase project effectiveness. While participation can be a process of empowering and facilitating social change, the effectiveness model of participation motivates the REDD+ project in this study.

This dimension of participation, which serves as a means to achieve the REDD+ project objectives rather than to transform and empower local people in the process, limits local people's ability to influence the wider structural factors shaping their use of the forest. Local people are rendered passive consumers of predetermined goals and objectives about forests, rather than makers and shapers of these goals and objectives as articulated by Cornwall and Gaventa (2000). Given the high level of poverty in the study area, participating in meetings to earn per diems and working as labourers in project activities provides financial relief to local people (especially the marginalized Batwa Pygmies), but their sense of inclusion in the project is very low.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that despite the rhetoric surrounding the value of community participation in REDD+ policy, programs, and project documents, the transformative dimension of participation as empowerment is not achieved in the REDD+ pilots. Participation as empowerment is often undermined by relations of power, both among the actors and within the institutional spaces of participatory processes. The introduction process associated with the REDD+ pilot project was not sufficient for local people to give their consent to—or reject—the REDD+ pilot project. Nevertheless, the local chief gave his consent to the project organizers and his local subjects did not oppose him despite many not being in agreement with him. Thus, the decision to join REDD+ was not participatory and was not democratic. This demonstrates the dilemma of introducing REDD+ in a context of weak ineffective democratic institutional arrangements. The information provided in the introduction process focused on conservation and development trade-offs, while issues of local interests like land rights and forest use rights were avoided. Perhaps most troublingly, it seems the control of information by the project organizer during the introduction process was a mechanism used to manipulate local people from opposing the REDD+ project.

Furthermore, the local institutional arrangements to enable full and effective community participation in REDD+ in Bikoro and Gemena REDD+ pilot projects in the DRC are weak and exclude women from participatory decision-making. The REDD+ village organization created by the project organizers are lacking bylaws and other functional regulations to guide their operations. Coupled with the lack of effective ways of disseminating information about the REDD+ project to the local population, this limits local people's ability to influence the leaders of the REDD+ village organization.

The REDD+ project was more concerned with effectiveness in project execution than with empowering the local communities. Thus, project goals, budget, timeframes, local partnerships and activities were externally decided without input from local people. The communities have little or no control over the project; their participation does not go beyond labour supply and attending meetings for per diems to help alleviate their financial needs.

Using the Arnstein (1969) typology of participation, community participation in the studied REDD+ pilot projects is best characterized as 'tokenism'. Full and effective participation of local people in REDD+ implementation as prescribed in the REDD+ social safeguards would be difficult to achieve in practice, if social inequalities and local power dynamics are not recognized and addressed. REDD+, like other interventions, might further exacerbate these inequalities, adding insult to injury (Fraser 2008), already being suffered by vulnerable segments of local populations in poor forest dependent communities.

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