

Rethinking Pathways to Shared Prosperity for Forest Communities: A Case Study of Nigerian REDD+ Readiness Project

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Abstract : Critical institutional approach for understanding pathways to shared prosperity among forest communities enabled questioning the underlying rational choice assumptions that have dominated traditional institutional thinking in natural resources management. Common pool resources framing assumes that communities as social groups share collective interests and values towards achieving greater development. Hence, policies related to natural resources management in the global South prioritise economic prosperity by focusing on how to maximise material benefits and improve the livelihood options of resource dependent communities. Recent trends in commodification and marketization of ecosystem goods and services into tradable natural capital and incentivising conservation are structured in this paradigm. Several researchers however, have problematized this emerging market-based model because it undermines cultural basis for protecting natural ecosystems. By exploring how forest people's motivations for conservation differ within the context of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) project in Nigeria, we aim to provide an alternative approach to conceptualising prosperity beyond the traditional economic thinking. Through in depth empirical work over seven months with five communities in Nigeria's Cross River State, Q methodology was used to uncover communities' perspectives and meanings of forest values that underpin contemporary and historic conservation practices, expected benefits, and willingness to participate in the REDD+ process. Our study finds six discourses about forest and conservation values that transcend wealth creation, poverty reduction and livelihoods. We argue that communities' decisions about forest conservation consist of a complex mixture of economic, emotional, moral, and ecological justice concerns that constitute new meanings and dimensions of prosperity. Prosperity is thus reconfigured as having socio-cultural and psychological pathways that could be derived through place identity and attachment, connectedness to nature, family ties, and ability to participate in everyday social life. We therefore suggest that natural resources policy making and development interventions should consider institutional arrangements that also include the psycho-cultural dimensions of prosperity among diverse community groups.

Keywords : critical institutionalism, Q methodology, REDD+, shared prosperity

Conference Title : ICGG 2015 : International Conference on Geography and Geosciences

Conference Location : Osaka, Japan

Conference Dates : October 08-09, 2015