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Stakeholder Participation in REDD+ Readiness Activities for Three Collaborative Projects in Lao PDR

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Abstract: A key challenge for reducing emission from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) in developing countries is to balance the power of various stakeholders in decision making. This study explores the forms of stakeholder participation in the implementation of three pilot projects in Laos, with a focus on who actually makes decisions on project activities. We found that stakeholder roles in making decisions were imbalanced. The central government and development partner organizations were the ones who actually fulfill the roles of decision-makers in most project activities. Although local communities were not the key stakeholders in decision making in most activities, their roles seem to have increased in the activities where participatory approaches were applied. Participation of the private sector, non-governmental organizations, academic and research institutes and mass organizations was limited. Opportunities to reach decision-makers regarding project activities came through service contract agreements. Our findings suggest that an understanding of who fulfills the key roles will support a decentralization of decision making by balancing power and redistributing the roles from dominant to weaker stakeholders. In addition, the private sector's participation may enhance opportunities to harmonize their investments for supporting REDD+ development and reduce the negative impacts on the forests and the environment.

Keywords: stakeholder participation; decision-making power; REDD+; collaborative project; CliPAD; PAREDD; SUFORD-SU; Laos

1. Introduction

Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) [1] and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries (REDD+) were proposed at the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2007 [2]. REDD+ referred to mechanisms to mitigate the global warming caused by deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries. Under it, developing countries receive financial support from developed countries and international organizations to protect forests, reduce deforestation, and support poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation [3].

The importance of stakeholder participation in REDD+ schemes is well recognized both at UNFCCC negotiations [2,4] and in several REDD+ projects [5]. In 2007, the COP recognized that the needs of local and indigenous communities should be addressed when action is taken to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries [2]. Guidance and safeguards for policy approaches and positive incentives on issues relating to REDD+ (Appendix I, COP decision 1/CP.16, 2010) stipulate “the full and effective participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular indigenous peoples and local communities” for undertaking REDD+ activities [4]. Stakeholder participation in REDD+ builds trust among and reduces conflict between stakeholders, and supports the empowerment of local stakeholders [6]. Policy formulation and implementation by stakeholders with different interests can support REDD+ to achieve its goals [6].

Indeed, it has been generally recognized that better stakeholder participation can contribute to sound environmental and natural resource management and policy development. Stakeholder participation enhances transparency, accountability and effectiveness of public actions [7,8]. It strengthens stakeholders’ sense of ownership of policies and projects [8], supports stakeholders’ capacity building, and improves the quality of decision making by reflecting the values and interests of stakeholders [9], by integrating local and non-local socio-cultural knowledge and technologies [10].

“Participation” has been defined and interpreted in various ways. For example, Reed [10] defined participation as “a process where individuals, groups and organizations choose to take an active role in making decisions that affect them”. Participation has been seen as a means to increase efficiency or as a fundamental right, which relates to empowerment and institution building [8]. Participation is associated with the redistribution of power among citizens or groups of power-holders or stakeholders [11]. Different types and degrees of participation have been developed and applied by many groups and development organizations for implementing various projects. Reed [10] showed the different typologies of participation based on, for example, “different degrees of participation on a continuum”, “the nature of participation based on the direction of communication flows”, and “theoretical basis, essentially distinguishing between normative and/or pragmatic participation”. Arnstein’s [11] “ladder of participation” described the degree of participation from the level of non-participation to active participation, where the level of participation ranges from “manipulation” to “citizen control”. In addition, Pretty [8] has defined seven types of participation, ranging from “manipulative participation” to “self-mobilization”. Likewise, Foti et al. [9] showed five types of participation, ranging from “sharing information” to “empowerment”.

Much literature supports the idea that stakeholder participation in decision making will contribute to the successful implementation of REDD+ activities. At the national level, it can provide a platform for affected stakeholders and rights holders to participate in and have access to decision-making processes [5,12]. Stakeholder participation not only promotes the mitigation of risks with regard to corruption and conflicts [5,13], but also supports the designing of appropriate benefit sharing schemes [14] and is essential for ensuring “procedural equity” of REDD+ benefit sharing systems [15]. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the participation of multiple stakeholders in decision making is essential to support REDD+ fund development [13].

At the project level, in the case of a REDD+ pilot project based on a community carbon enterprise (CCE) model in Tanzania, local community members who are considered to be from disadvantaged groups (e.g., poor, sick, disabled, etc.) have limited roles in decision-making processes and are less powerful in influencing project-related processes [16]. However, in the case of participation in the decision-making processes for funding distribution in a REDD+ pilot project site in Nepal, the leadership of the community forest user group determined the allocation of funds for their community members [17].

However, stakeholder participation in decision making for REDD+ activities involves some hurdles. The effectiveness of participation in REDD+ decision making is determined by the scope of political power and social freedom [12]. Stakeholders have different characteristics and interests relating to decisions, and the differences may create potential risks or conflicts [5]. Some stakeholders who may be affected by a decision’s outcome have not participated in the decision-making processes for the creation of REDD+ related activities [18,19]. For instance, in the case of Vietnam, REDD+

decision-making processes are centralized in the central government, and space for other stakeholders to participate in the processes is limited [20]. Thus, issues of stakeholder participation in REDD+ participation cannot be discussed in isolation from power structures underlying REDD+ policy networks [21].

In the context of Laos, many individuals, groups and organizations are interested in managing and utilizing natural resources, especially the land and forests [22]. Private investors from both Laos and neighboring countries are interested in accessing the country's land and natural resources through hydropower, mining, agriculture and forestry development, and investment [23–25]. High demand for and competition over natural resources have created challenges for the sustainable management of forests, including REDD+ development [24,26,27].

Currently, in Laos, the main organizations that play leading roles in developing REDD+ readiness are the Department of Forestry (DOF) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and the Department of Forest Resource Management (DFRM) of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), and in their roles they are supported by international donors, and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [24,28].

Since 2008, the national REDD+ program has been formulated with support from the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility and the Forest Investment Program of the World Bank [29–31]. Its formulation has been followed by the development of several REDD+ pilot projects: the Participatory Land and Forest Management project for Reducing Deforestation (PAREDD); the Climate Protection through Avoided Deforestation project (CliPAD); the Scaling-Up Participatory Sustainable Forest Management project (SUFORD-SU); REDD+ pilot activities at the Xe Pian National Protected Area; a Lao Public–Private sub-national REDD+ pilot project proposed by the New Chip Xeng Group Co., Ltd; the avoidance of deforestation and forest degradation in the border area of southern Laos and central Vietnam for the long-term preservation of carbon sinks and biodiversity (CarBi); and Lowering Emissions in Asia's Forests (LEAF) [32–34].

Institutional setting and coordination among central, provincial and local government organizations, as well as among cross-sectoral organizations, are challenges [24,28,35]. In particular, the participation of non-forestry industry sectors is challenging [27]. Moreover, participation of NGOs and the private sector is limited at the policy level, and in some cases the government is monitoring the movement of the NGOs [24]. Local community participation appears mostly in the implementation of project activities [24,26].

However, the situation of stakeholder participation in REDD+ readiness activities in pilot projects in Laos remains to be further analyzed. We aim to explore the forms of stakeholder participation in the implementation of the REDD+ readiness activities in three pilot projects in Laos, with the principal focus on who actually participated in decision making for each activity. We examine the types of stakeholders and their forms of participation in the three collaboration projects. We then argue that an understanding of the roles of stakeholders in decision making will support and aid in streamlining roles in decision making from dominant to weaker stakeholders, resulting in a decentralization of decision-making power. It is hoped that this analysis will provide useful lessons for the future of REDD+ implementation.

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Overview of Three Selected Projects

Table 1 shows an overview of three collaborative projects at both sub-national and national levels. CliPAD is a sub-national pilot project in Huaphanh Province based on the jurisdictional and nested REDD+ (JNR) approach, for which the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) is being applied in the project activities [36]. Since 2014, CliPAD has been led by the DFRM under MONRE working with international, provincial and district organizations, as well as local villagers [37]. The project was started in 2009 in Xayabury Province but was stopped there in 2012 for security reasons [31]. Recently, CliPAD has been implemented in two districts of Houaphanh Province, including the Nam Et-Phou Louey National Biodiversity Conservation Area.

Table 1. Overview of three selected pilot projects.

Project	Scale	Donors	Period	Target Province	Executing Agency
CLiPAD	Sub-national	KfW, GIZ	2009–2018	Xayabury ** Huaphanh Laungnamtha ***	DFRM *
PAREDD	Sub-national	JICA	2009–2014	Luang Prabang	PAFO
SUFORD-SU	National	WB/ FIP, Finland	2014–2018	PFA in 13 of 17 provinces	DOF

* The role of executing organization of the project was transferred from Department of Forestry (DOF) to Department of Forest Resource Management (DFRM) in 2014, based on an announcement from the Prime Minister’s Office, number 314/PMO.2013; ** The project was halted in March 2012, based on Prime Ministerial enforcement decree number 111/PM on security issues. In 2016, the project resumed in Xayabury Province for the preparation of a provincial REDD+ action plan (PRAP); *** The project has expanded the activities to Laungnamtha Province for the PRAP in 2016; PFA = Production Forest Area.; KfW= Kreditanstalt Für Wiederaufbau (German Development Bank); GIZ = Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH; JICA = Japan International Cooperation Agency; WB= World Bank; FIP= Forest Investment Programme; PAFO= Province Agriculture and Forestry Office

Figure 1 shows the updated institutional setup and implementing organization in 2015, before responsibility for the project was transferred from DOF to DFRM. CLiPAD is comprised of two modules: the Technical Cooperation Module (TC module) from 2009 to 2012 and the Financial Cooperation Module (FC module) from 2011 to 2018 [38]. The project scope covers the forest area both inside and outside the national protected area (NPA), with the latter being threatened by conversion to other land uses [32].

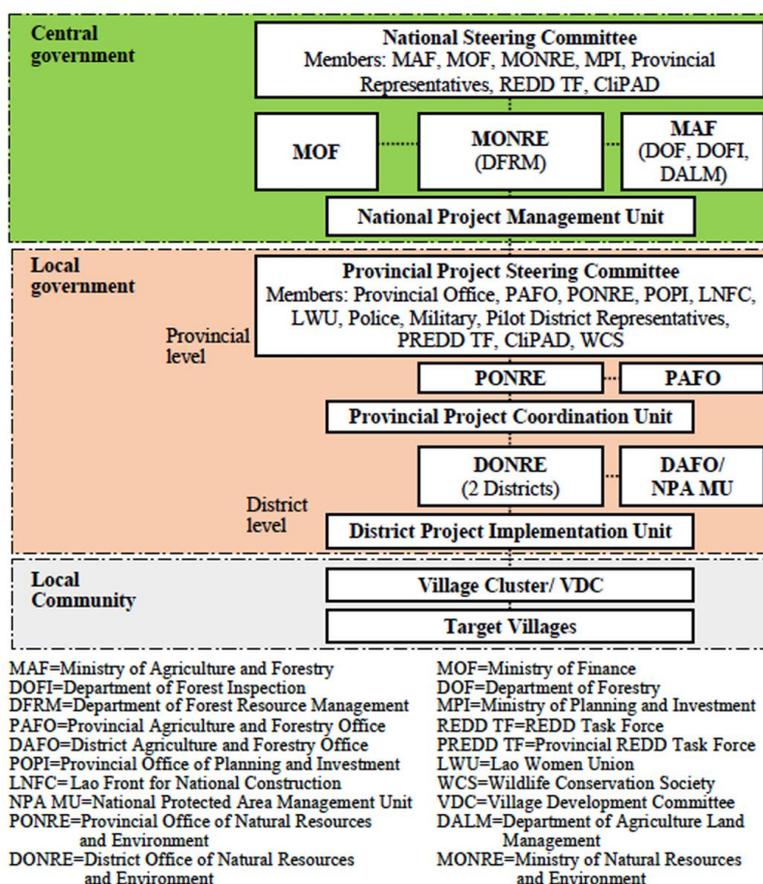


Figure 1. Institutional structure and implementation arrangements of CLiPAD. Source: adapted from CLiPAD Progress Report No. 7 [39].

The main purposes of the project are to implement strategies for the protection of forest landscapes, to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and to provide alternative livelihoods for the rural population in the project site [37]. The project also supports key local stakeholders in several processes, such as all land use planning based on participatory land use planning (PLUP) procedures, development of local strategies in supporting rehabilitation activities, and enhancing usage rights of local communities [34]. Some CliPAD project activities are intended to be implemented with other collaborative projects; for instance, the Land Management and Decentralize Planning program (LMDP), and the Promotion of Climate-related Environmental Education program (ProCEED), which are being implemented and supported by GIZ [37].

The PAREDD project was also a sub-national pilot project implemented in two districts of Luang Prabang Province. It aimed to reduce deforestation by introducing the Community Support Program Tool and developing a participatory land and forest management system [33,40]. The PAREDD project duration was five years and was completed in 2014. The project applied the system with the local communities and villagers [40] based on the Forest Management and Community Support Project, which was implemented in Laos 2004 to 2009 [41].

Alternative livelihood activities, particularly in the local community's agriculture farming system, were supported by the project. Participatory land use planning of the village, as well as various capacity-building and training activities, were implemented as part of the project. PAREDD was supported in setting up a Land and Forest Management Committee (LFMC) in the local community. The LFMC was selected to be representative of the community for the implementation of the project activities [40].

Figure 2 shows the PAREDD project's implementation agencies as of 2012, slightly modified from the project document.

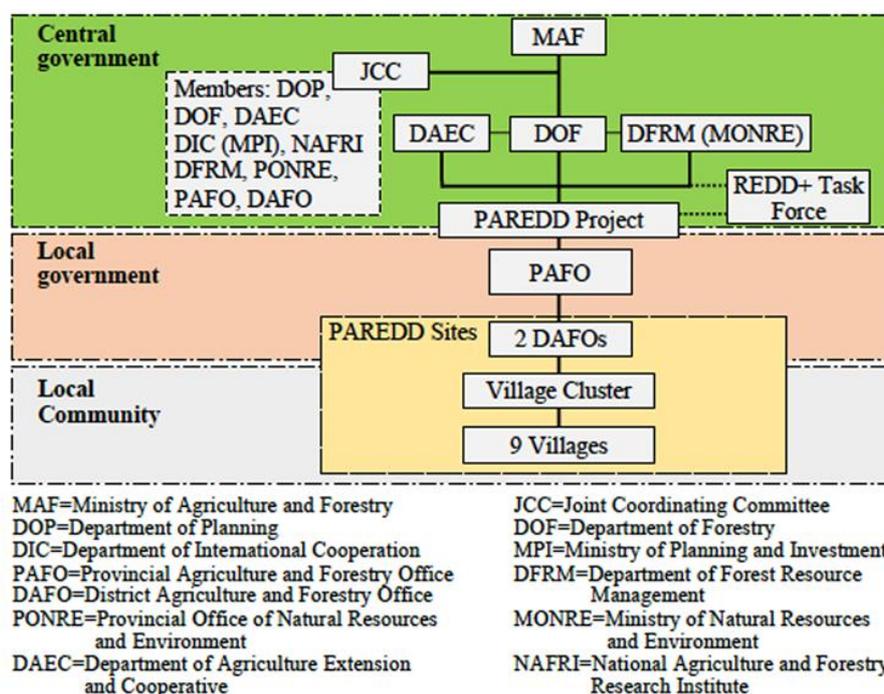


Figure 2. Current institutional structure and implementation agencies of PAREDD. Source: adapted from terminal report [42].

The SUFORD-SU project is being implemented across the country's production forests under Participatory Sustainable Forest Management (PSFM) concepts, including supporting frameworks of the REDD+ scheme. SUFORD-SU is being implemented in 41 Production Forest Areas (PFAs), covering around 2.3 million hectares in 13 provinces [43].

The project was originally developed from the former Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP), which was implemented in Laos from 1995 to 2000 [44]. During the years 2003

to 2008, the project supported PSFM in the PFAs and was implemented in four southern and central provinces. During the years 2009 to 2012, SUFORD Additional Financing (SUFORD-AF) was expanded to five central and southern provinces, and that evolved into SUFORD-SU by expanding to include three northern provinces [45,46].

The SUFORD-SU development objective is to execute REDD+ activities through PSFM in priority areas and to pilot forest landscape management in four provinces [45]. The project consists of several components, such as the strengthening of PSFM, piloting forest landscape management, and creating an enabling legal framework in the environment, including REDD+ [47].

Figure 3 shows the SUFORD-SU institutional arrangements, from the national to the village level.

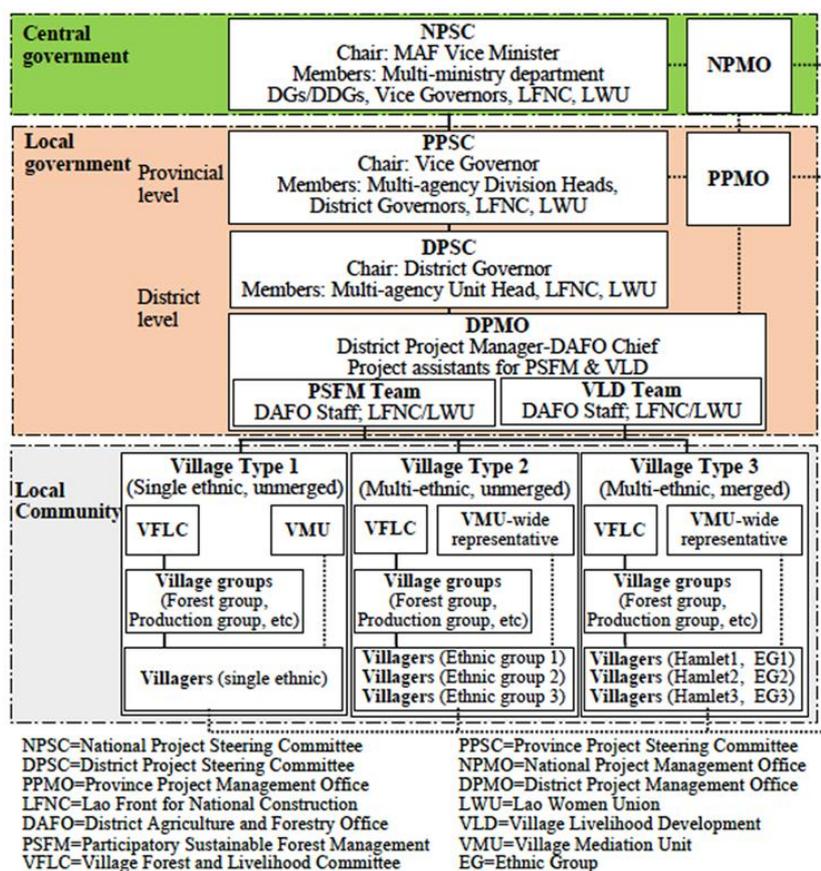


Figure 3. Institutional structure of SUFORD-SU. Source: adapted from annual working plan [43].

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, three REDD+ pilot projects CliPAD, PAREDD and SUFORD-SU were chosen to explore the types of stakeholders and their form of participation in the implementation of project activities. These projects were initiated by the government, in collaboration with many international development partner organizations. CliPAD is a new approach that introduces REDD+ concepts that link to the system of local government jurisdiction. PAREDD is a project built from the Forest Management and Community Support (FORCOM) project during the 2000s, which was related to the mitigation of deforestation and degradation activities. SUFORD (the predecessor of SUFORD-SU) has been implemented in Laos's production forest since the 1990s, and the project adopted REDD+ concepts when additional funds came in for SUFORD-AF, which then became SUFORD-SU.

Although other pilot projects are also being tested in Laos, we did not select them for this study since they have conducted only the feasibility and planning stages so far. For instance, REDD+ activities at Xe Pian National Protected Area, initiated by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and DFRM, link the REDD+ concepts to previous conservation activities related to the Biodiversity

Conservation Corridors Initiative (BCI). A feasibility study was conducted and a project-design document was developed, but actual REDD+ activities at the field site have not yet been implemented. The activities of CarBi were managed by WWF and focus on biodiversity conservation and monitoring of the trans-boundary forest resources between Laos and Vietnam. WWF carried out a feasibility study, but no actual REDD+ activities were implemented. A REDD+ project proposed by the Chip Xeng Group Co., Ltd also conducted feasibility studies since 2011, but no progress update has yet been released. LEAF is a regional demonstration joint project involving various stakeholders from other countries in the region [24,27,31].

We obtained the series of annual working plans, annual progress reports (including quarterly reports), project evaluation reports, and both academic and grey documents related to the projects and stakeholder engagement in REDD+ readiness. Documents related to the projects were analyzed and combined with the interview results from representatives of the three selected projects and staff members of the DOF, DFRM, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Laos, WWF Laos and related organizations. In addition, we defined stakeholder(s) as the individual(s) or group(s) in an organization that are related to the pilot project. Some of them participated only in a specific project, and some in all of the project activities, and their roles in any project may vary significantly. Some stakeholders may have also influenced each other over decisions made for project activity implementation [5]. To identify the groups of stakeholders related to the project activities, we defined the types of stakeholders (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of stakeholders in the projects.

Stakeholder Types	Name of Organizations		
	CLIPAD	PAREDD	SUFORD-SU
Central government organizations (CGOV)	DFRM, DOF, DOFI, DALM, representative from MAF, MONRE, MOF, MPI	DOF, DAEC, DFRM, JCC	DOF, representative from MAF, MONRE, MOF, MPI, MOIC
Local government organization (LGOV)	PONRE, PAFO, POFI, DONRE, DAFO	DAFO	PAFO, POFI, DAFO
Development partner organizations (DPOs)	GIZ, KfW, GFA Consulting GmbH	JICA and related consulting teams	World Bank, Finland's Embassy in Vientiane
Local community (LCOM)	Village cluster, VDC, Villagers	Village cluster, LFMC, Villagers	Village cluster, VFLC, forest groups, villagers
Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs)	WCS, LBA	RECOFTC	WWF, VFI, LIWG
Private sector (PS)			Wood factory or logging company, NTFPs traders
Mass movement organizations (MO)	LWU, LFNC	LWU	LWU, LFNC
Academia and research institute (AR)	NUOL	NAFRI	NAFRI, NUOL, Champasak University, and agriculture and forestry colleges

Remark: JICA = Japan International Cooperation Agency; GIZ = Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH; WCS = Wildlife Conservation Society; WWF = World Wild Fund for Nature; RECOFTC = Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific; VFI = Village Focus International, LIWG = Land Use Issue Working Group, LBA = Lao Biodiversity Association; LWU = Lao Women Union; LFNC = Lao Front for National Construction; NAFRI = National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute; NUOL = National University of Laos.

Since the project activities are diverse and being carried out over different periods of time, with differences in stakeholders' roles, we categorized the project activities implemented by selected projects into eight categories (Table 3).

Table 3. Categorization of selected project activities.

Categories	Description
Supporting community livelihoods	Activities which aim to achieve outcomes such as village socio-economic development, livelihood improvement and poverty alleviation, and securing local people's rights. In order to achieve the outcomes, the activities expect outputs e.g., community-needs assessment, establishing a village development plan, community engagement framework, the free prior informed consent (FPIC), and setting up village development fund
Zoning and mapping of village land use	Activities for village land-use zoning and resource mapping
Identifying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation (DD)	Activities of identifying the drivers of DD on project sites
Assessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon	Activities for quantifying changes in carbon and biomass stocks, which include analysis of land use and forest cover change
Strengthening policy and legal framework	Activities supporting forest related law enforcement and planning (e.g., forest protection, rehabilitation/restoration, patrolling, harvesting, logging, non-timber forest products collection, forest certification, tenure issues)
Supporting REDD+ policy	Activities for REDD+ institution and technical arrangements such as Jurisdictional and Nested REDD+ (JNR) approach, REDD awareness raising for stakeholders, setting up emission reduction levels, supporting REDD+ task force meetings, REDD+ technical working groups
Enhancing ecosystem-related benefits	Activities related to biodiversity and ecosystem service monitoring
Project planning and evaluation	Activities for ensuring each project component proceeds successfully (e.g., yearly planning, mid-term review, annual progress report)

All project activities do not necessarily require every stakeholder's participation in decision making. Rather, stakeholders can participate indirectly in decision making for the implementation of project activities [5]. Therefore, we applied the typologies of participation (Table 4), which range from information sharing (where stakeholders are informed through one-way information flows) to empowerment (where initiators such as the central government and development partner organizations have transferred or decentralized their roles in decision making to other stakeholders, such as local community, local government, or civil society organizations) [9].

Table 4. Forms of stakeholder participation in the implementation of project activities.

Forms of Participation	Description
Information sharing	A one-way flow of information. Information sharing serves to keep actors informed, to provide transparency, and to build legitimacy. From government to the public, examples are dissemination of written material through official documents, newspapers, or magazines; distribution of documents from local government offices; press conferences; radio or television broadcasts; or establishment of websites. From the public to government, examples include responding to questionnaires and surveys; accessing toll-free telephone "hot lines"; and providing various kinds of data, opinion surveys, or analyses.
Consultation	A two-way flow of information and the exchange of views. Consultation involves sharing information and garnering feedback and reaction. Examples include beneficiary assessments, participatory poverty assessments, town hall meetings, focus groups, national conferences, round tables, and parliamentary hearings.
Collaboration	Joint activities in which the initiator invites other groups to be involved but retains decision-making authority and control. Collaboration moves beyond collecting feedback to involving external actors in problem-solving, policy design, and monitoring and evaluation. Examples include public reviews of draft legislation, government-led working groups, and government-convened planning sessions.
Joint decision making	Collaboration where there is shared control over decisions made. Shared decision making is useful when the external actor's knowledge, capacity, and experience are critical for achieving policy objectives. Examples are joint committees, public-private partnerships, advisory councils, and blue-ribbon commissions or task forces.

Empowerment	Transfer of control over decision making, resources, and activities from the initiator to other stakeholders. Empowerment takes place when external actors, acting autonomously and in their own interests, can carry out policy mandates without significant government involvement or oversight. Examples are local natural resource management committees, community empowerment zones, water user associations, some forms of partnerships, and civil society ‘seed’ grants.
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Sources: from Brinkerhoff and Crosby cited in [9].

3. Results

Table 5 shows the different forms of stakeholder participation in the three selected projects. Hereinafter, we refer back to Table 5 when describing the roles of the stakeholders in joint decision making and other roles relating to project implementation activities.

The three selected projects utilize a collaborative approach, where the central government organization and the development partner organizations are the key stakeholders in leading and supporting most of the project activities. International development partner organizations include donors providing both financial and technical support. Stakeholders tasked with implementing the project activities were already proposed during the project document preparation phase. However, in the implementation phase, the number of stakeholders who conducted the project activities was slightly changed.

Table 5. Forms of stakeholder participation in three selected projects.

Stakeholder Type	CliPAD								PAREDD								SUFORD-SU							
	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h
CGOV	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
LGOV	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	3
DPOs	4	4	4	4		4	4	4			4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
LCOM	3	3	1	2	3	1			4	4	3	4					2	4	1	1	2			3
NGO/CSO	4		4	4	4	3	4	3	4					4			3				3			
PS																	2							
MO	3																3				4			
AR	3								3					3			4			3				

Forms of Participation: 1 = Information sharing; 2 = Consultation; 3 = Collaboration; 4 = Joint decision making; 5 = Empowerment; Categorization of Activities: a = Supporting community livelihoods; b = Zoning and mapping of village land use; c = Identifying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation; d = Assessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon; e = Strengthening policy and legal framework; f = Supporting REDD+ policy; g = Enhancing ecosystem-related benefits; h = Project planning and evaluation; Stakeholder Types; CGOV = Central government organization; LGOV = Local government organization; DPOs = Development partner organizations; LCOM = Local community; NGO = Non-governmental organizations; PS = Private sector; MO = Mass movement organizations; AR = Academia and research institute. Sources: based on information from [31,34,37,38,40,42,45,48–58].

Several stakeholders participated in the CliPAD project. Many project activities were designed by organizations of the central government and development partner organizations. The local government performs the decision-making role in most of the activities, as well as leading the project, but they are still guided by the central government, based on the vertical institutional structure. Local community participation is mostly guided by the local government. NGOs contributed and implemented several activities as participants through consultant service contracts; in particular, WCS signed a service contract agreement with CliPAD. The international development partner organization has provided capacity building for central government and local government, including the local community. The financial allocation for the CliPAD project activities is funded by the KfW, which is being managed by the GFA Consulting GmbH. Technical support is managed by the GIZ.

Stakeholders who participated in PAREDD were not as diverse as in CliPAD and SUFORD-SU. Most stakeholders were related to the agriculture and forestry sectors. Several project activities had joint decision making between the central government and development partner organizations, in conjunction with the local government. Moreover, the local community participated in a wide range

of activities, including technical aspects. JICA managed funding and provided the technical support for the project activities' implementation, including capacity building for all related stakeholders of the projects. The private sector joined in project activities as part of a JICA consulting team.

Stakeholders participating in SUFORD-SU are diverse, but the central government and development organizations have dominated and led the implementation of project activities. Other stakeholders have limited participation in decision making. The local government follows guidance from the central government, because the project targets national production forests, for which legal responsibility is centralized and managed by the central government. The World Bank is providing the funding for the project activities' implementation, including hiring the consultancy firms. The government of Finland is providing the technical support for the implementation of project activities.

Most of the implementation of project activities is led and decided by the central government organization (CGOV) as a stakeholder. All categories of activities in CliPAD and SUFORD-SU have had the participation of CGOV with joint decision making, except in zoning and mapping of the village land use in PAREDD. Development partner organizations (DPOs) are also main stakeholders, with roles in joint decision making of several project activities, and playing particularly important roles in technical areas, except the policy and legal framework enhancement of CliPAD, supporting community livelihoods of PAREDD and zoning and mapping of the village land use of PAREDD and SUFORD-SU.

The results also show that project planning and evaluation were decided jointly by several stakeholders, especially the central government and development partner organizations. DPOs have handled the project management, especially the selection of technical advisors and the consultant team, including setting terms of reference for technical experts, by requiring other stakeholders to follow the development partner organization's guidelines. Likewise, the supporting financial system for experts or technical assistance is also managed by the DPOs (e.g., JICA experts that participated in the project were organized by JICA, while selection of technical experts for CliPAD was done by GIZ). As shown by an interviewee of the project with the question, "Who actually decided what activities to be implemented in the project?" the respondent notes:

"Actually, most of the project activities, including the implementation guidelines of the project activities, were prepared by our project technical support team or our project experts, including international and national consultants. After that, we presented the activities to the government side for agreement and approval. And then those activities will be implemented at the project site. For example, we have carried out the FPIC at the target villages two or three times for a village to understand what project activities will support their village... We also carried out several training and capacity-building sessions for the local community and for raising awareness..."

CliPAD officer, 2016.

Another CliPAD officer also responded that:

"Our expert team, especially consultants, conducted the activities for the project based on the term of reference (TOR). They have to finish their tasks on time per the donors' requirement... Several activities were also proposed and planned by them... Of course, they consulted with local government staff and the community, but, finally, the output led by the expert team will be put on the table of the central government office for final approval..."

Another question related to the funding asked, "Who decided to allocate the funding for supporting the local community livelihood improvement as the incentive for protecting the forest?" To this question, a respondent at the GFA Consulting GmbH responded that:

"We allocated funding for the target villages to support the incentive payment, dividing the money for each village equally, because we know how much money is available from the bank. But this should be agreed upon by the government side, including the province authority, too... After that, we provided the capacity building on how to use and manage the funding, providing tools to support them as well... So far, many villages have increased their village funding after receiving money from the project, but some villages have not used the money that we allocated..."

It should be noted that, in the case of the PAREDD project funding, allocation was based on the need and the information provided by the villagers or households.

Local governments (LGOV) also play important roles in facilitating and decision making for the implementation of several project activities in CliPAD and PAREDD, except the roles of decision making in identifying drivers of deforestation and degradation, and project planning and evaluation of CliPAD. In contrast, they only fulfilled the roles of decision-makers in strengthening the policy and legal framework of SUFORD-SU. In SUFORD-SU, the LGOV is more likely to play a cooperative role, with guidance from the CGOV. Since the project is being implemented in many provinces, the CGOV is directly leading the project. One interviewee commented as follows:

“The activities’ design and implementation were led by our technical advisors (both international and national experts) for each focal area...”

SUFORD-SU staffs, 2016

Local community (LCOM) roles in joint decision making for activities in CliPAD and SUFORD-SU are not as numerous as in PAREDD, which included supporting community livelihood, zoning and mapping of village land-use, and assessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon. In particular, the roles in CliPAD activities are limited. Instead, many activities that involve the LCOM are “collaboration type” in supporting community livelihood, zoning and mapping of village land-use, strengthening policy and legal frameworks in CliPAD, identifying drivers of deforestation and degradation in PAREDD, and project planning and evaluation in SUFORD-SU. Several activities involving the LCOM are “information sharing” and “consultation” types.

While NGOs play important roles in joint decision making of several activities of supporting community and livelihood improvements in CliPAD, supporting REDD+ policy and related activities in PAREDD, they have no role in joint decision making for activities in SUFORD-SU. The NGOs participated in PAREDD and SUFORD-SU mainly for information sharing and to support capacity building, and policy and legal framework strengthening activities. One interviewee commented as follows:

“We participated in the project activities meeting, progress or workshops in Vientiane when our organization received the invitation”.

WWF Laos officer, 2016

But, in case of the WCS Laos, a respondent stated that:

“Our organization has a contract agreement with the CliPAD project, and we have carried out the feasibility study at the project site as you have seen in our technical feasibility assessment reports of the Nam Phui and Nam Et Phou Leuy National Protected area...”

WCS Laos officer, 2016

The project activities lack participation from the private sector (PS). The PS participated only in supporting community livelihood improvements in SUFORD-SU. When DOF and DFRM staff were asked, “Why is there a lack of private sector participation in project activities?” a respondent from the DOF responded as follows:

“As you may know, several companies have their own businesses at the field sites where the REDD+ pilot project is being implemented. I think they might not care about the project activities, but they may care about doing business with local villagers for buying agricultural products, timber and non-timber forest products, etc.”.

A similar response was given from a DFRM staff member:

“The companies can join the projects when they see that they can get some benefit from the project... On the other hand, our side (the government) still does not have any framework for the private sector to join the REDD+ preparation activities”.

Mass movement organizations (MO) have been involved in collaborative types of participation for supporting community livelihood improvements in CliPAD and SUFORD-SU, and took the role of joint decision-makers in strengthening the policy and legal framework in SUFORD-SU. MOs that participated in the three projects are mainly following the community and gender engagement framework, especially in SUFORD-SU. Their involvement is likely encouraged by the CGOV and LGOV to fulfil requirements of donors—in particular, regarding social safeguard issues. Academic and research institutions (AR) also participated in collaboration forms for supporting activities for community livelihood in CliPAD and PAREDD, assessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon in SUFORD-SU, and supporting REDD+ policy in PAREDD. Furthermore, AR representatives have joined several consultation meetings, and have been involved in capacity-building and training workshops organized by the projects.

4. Discussion

4.1. Distribution of Different Stakeholders' Roles in Decision Making

In the context of REDD+ pilot activities implementation in Laos, the final decision-making power is held by the central government, with support from the development partner organizations. They may have influenced each other in implementing the project activities. However, almost all play roles in joint decision making. Dominant stakeholders are inflexible in redistributing their power of decision making to other stakeholders, such as LCOM, CSOs and/or NGOs. CGOV and DPOs may worry about losing their reputations, and they may fear losing the opportunity to access, control and manage resources and capital if other stakeholders are given greater power in the decision-making process. Therefore, the decision-making roles of the relevant stakeholders could be subject to various constraints, because they will engage in decision making under the framework or plan that was designed by the expert team.

The LGOV have increased their role in decision making in PAREDD, which provided the opportunity and responsibility to the local government to lead the project. They were closer to the project sites and could probably understand the local situation better than the central government. They also had more chance to interact with the local community and other stakeholders related to the projects. Therefore, some project activities may not need decision making by the central government, such as those linked to community livelihood improvement and development activities.

Furthermore, the redistribution of powers among unique stakeholders could lead to the slower progress of handling the complex issues in forest management, including REDD+ preparation. Due to the fact that many of the LCOM are considered as liabilities in terms of abilities, and their capacity to understand and proceed with REDD+ activities. The CSOs and NGOs may have some certain level of capacity and abilities, but their organizations' goals and targets may not go along with the government interest. In Laos, many NGOs and CSOs' operational activities are being monitored by the government [24]. Many local CSOs and NGOs were not founded with REDD+ activities in mind. Some CSOs are operated by government retirees or staff who retired from the government organizations. Some CSOs are not operated as true non-profit associations or organizations.

The LCOM would have the right to take on the roles in decision making, with local government guidance and support. It is important to build ownership and responsibility among stakeholders, especially with the local community being one the key stakeholders to manage and protect forests [24]. Decentralization not only provides local community access to the decision-making process, but also will strengthen capacity in implementing project activities and other activities related to REDD+. Decentralization ensures local stakeholders' decision making and supports transferring power of the central government to the local community [59]. When a project is being phased out, other stakeholders (e.g., DPOs, CGOV, etc.) may dissociate themselves from the remaining activities (e.g., livelihood improvement and development, deforestation and degradation mitigation activities, etc.), with the result that the LCOM, which will be most affected by the project, would be responsible for the activities. Decentralization can also create ownership and the right for the local community to participate in future REDD+ activities, although many decentralization attempts have not improved

the ability of the local community to manage a project [60]. Further, it could also help re-balance decision-making power among stakeholders [61], especially CGOV, LGOV and local communities.

LCOM for PAREDD's peculiarity may be that the concept of PAREDD is different from that of CliPAD and SUFORD-SU. The PAREDD approach is more likely to encourage local community participation in the wide range of activities shown above. LCOM could play important roles in forest biomass inventory and monitoring activities through the project's capacity-building program. The involvement provides the opportunity and rights for the local community to take the lead and responsibility in implementing the activities. This is an important step for enhancing and empowering local villagers in future REDD+ activities. In contrast, several of CliPAD activities do not involve the LCOM particularly, because many focus heavily on remote sensing [27]. If experts and representatives of other stakeholders decide most project activities, the LCOM will join project activities only when other stakeholders or project proponents encourage them to participate. Limited roles for LCOM in decision making could reduce livelihood improvements and the efficiency of project management [62]. For SUFORD-SU, since a community engagement framework is being implemented [43], there are various types of local participation and communities may have the opportunity to access and participate more in decision-making processes.

Moreover, LCOM should have further roles in analyzing the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation and in developing REDD+ incentive schemes, from both pragmatic and normative perspectives. First, deforestation and forest degradation are actually driven by local farmers' shifting cultivation and agriculture expansion, as well as forest fires [63]. Local farmer participation in analysis provides project proponents the opportunity for further understanding of the mechanisms of deforestation and forest degradation. Local farmers' knowledge could also help make livelihood improvement activities more effective. Livelihood support activities and incentive mechanisms for LCOM to reduce deforestation could function better if they are flexible and implemented in a democratic way [64]. Second, the LCOM should have more rights in deciding and prioritizing proper activities that affect their livelihoods, especially relating to the long-term utilization of forest resources [65].

NGOs participated in the projects based on linkages between REDD+ pilot activities and previous intervention activities of NGOs. For instance, CliPAD's project sites are linked to previous project sites where WCS has been implementing a tiger conservation project in the Nam Et-Phou Louey National Biodiversity Conservation Area for many years [38]. WCS has also provided and shared experience, as well as lessons learnt and technical support for specific activities of the projects. Likewise, WCS influenced the decision making of project activities based on the terms of reference mentioned in the contract service agreement with the government. In contrast, there has been a lack of NGO intervention at PAREDD and SUFORD-SU sites. A reason for this could be limited space for embedding the experiences and knowledge of NGOs and other stakeholders in projects, coupled with a persistent top-down political culture in decentralizing administrative services and development planning in Laos [24], which could lead to the weakening of other stakeholders' voices.

Regarding the private sector, it is possible that the private sector is not interested in other project activities that do not offer them any benefits, or that the private sector avoids project activities that might limit or negatively affect future business operations. It can also be assumed that project stakeholder analyses have not paid much attention to the private sector in the project designing phase, since the private sector may not have experience or knowledge about REDD+, or no networks relating to conservation activities [66]. Private sector participation could potentially provide opportunities for harmonizing private sector investment and future business operations with REDD+ activities, by sharing environmental and social responsibilities with the project activities. The private sector could be a key source of investors to buy carbon credits from projects. Furthermore, future monitoring of forests and related resources at project sites would be difficult without full participation from the private sector. This is because the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation are often related to the private sector's development and investment activities. Examples include hydropower dam construction, mining, infrastructure development, unsustainable logging, and industrial tree plantations [24,63]. Participation of the private sector could affect the "political

agenda in a significant way” [3], although its participation may also hamper efforts to address the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation [67].

Likewise, academic and research stakeholders could participate in several project activities. First, lessons learnt, knowledge and experience gained from a project could be shared throughout academic platforms and research forums. Meanwhile, information from pilot activities may be able to support capacity building in the forestry sector, especially for topics related to REDD+. Outcomes from the projects could create an important space for many stakeholders to access the information and discuss future directions for REDD+ activities [66]. Second, since most progress and output reports of project implementation were not written in local languages, the abilities of local staff and communities are limited. Educational and research institutes could provide alternative support to local government officers and community members through capacity building and training activities related to REDD+.

As shown above, all stakeholders do not necessarily participate in the implementation of all project activities. The degree of participation in the decision-making process not only depends on the type of project, but also on the institutional structure of various stakeholder groups. For instance, government organizations are likely to be active in the decision-making process based on their tasks and mandates. Other organizations also have to follow their own terms of reference (TOR). Likewise, local community participation is also based on the local community participation framework. Normally, in activities that need a high level of expertise, it may not necessarily be suitable for the community to participate in the decision-making process—for example, quantifying forest carbon by computer system.

4.2. REDD+ Decision Making at the National Level and Changes in Institutional Arrangements and Settings

Since the selected pilot projects were initiated by the government, with support from international development partner organizations, most of the stakeholders participating in the projects came from the government—from the central to local government level—mainly from the forestry sector. However, the institutional arrangements and settings for forestry sectors were complex and inconsistent as they relate to the current situation for the country’s REDD+ development. For instance, the government has created two REDD+ offices (REDD+ Office in DOF and REDD+ Division in DFRM), and changed the personnel in charge of national REDD+ taskforce members. Organizational changes have also directly influenced the projects. For example, the CliPAD project was transferred from DOF (under MAF) to DFRM (under MONRE), and then transferred back to DOF. The three selected REDD+ pilot projects were separated for implementation by two overlapping REDD+ offices. Moreover, overlapping mandates of government organizations (DOF and DFRM) resulted in slower progress of REDD+ policy development, so the implementation of several REDD+ activities was delayed [26,68]. However, after restructuring of government organization in 2016, DOF and DFRM are being merged, and the REDD+ office and REDD+ division will also be merged [69]. As one can see, improper institutional arrangements and settings could hamper or limit options to promote the REDD+ decisions.

Furthermore, although stakeholders’ participation in the three selected projects also comes from non-forestry departments in the government, such as mining, energy, transportation and infrastructure development, their participation in implementing the activities is very limited. At the national level, non-forestry participation and coordination are also limited. Therefore, both projects and national REDD+ preparation may have missed valuable opportunities for the participation of key decision-makers in non-forestry sectors [27]. REDD+ development in Laos is beyond the mandate of forestry sectors [35,68]. Non-forestry sectors—particularly the mining, energy, and transportation sectors—could play important roles in project implementation and provide alternative solutions for conflicts that might occur at the project site in terms of mining, road construction and hydropower dam development, given that those activities are actually the main drivers of deforestation and degradation in Laos [27,63].

In addition, stakeholders from non-forestry sectors are expected to follow their own sectors’ goals and strategies, which might not be the same as REDD+ goals. They may see REDD+ activities

as providing low economic incentives to their organizations. Hydropower dam development and mining operations have provided more economic value to the country's economic development, and will be higher revenue than the funding that the government will receive in the REDD+ program. For example, there could be a loss of opportunities to harvest timber from project operation sites or concession areas. Likewise, stakeholders that are not particularly interested in the REDD+ development process may fear losing benefits such as the power to access, control and manage natural resources.

5. Conclusions

Finding fairness in stakeholder participation is one of the key challenges for the successful implementation of REDD+ activities. Stakeholder participation in REDD+ activities has various forms and levels. Understanding the types of stakeholder participation in the implementation of pilot project activities, especially the composition of decision-making power, is important for REDD+ readiness activities to progress. This study explored the forms of stakeholder participation in implementing pilot project activities and who took the key roles in decision making.

Our findings showed various types of participation by multiple stakeholders in the CliPAD, PAREDD and SUFORD-SU REDD+ pilot projects. There was only limited participation from the private sector, educational and research institutes, and mass movement organizations. We argued that the participation of stakeholders in implementing these three projects was imbalanced. The central government and international development partner organizations were the dominant stakeholders, holding the most decision-making power. Other stakeholders (including the local community, local governments, and NGOs, etc.) had limited roles in joint decision making.

The low levels of private sector and NGO stakeholder participation in the projects initiated by the government are not surprising. Internationally, for a number of reasons, there is a very limited likelihood in the foreseeable future for a private-sector-driven REDD+. In the context of Laos, the government opened the floor to all stakeholders to participate in the REDD+ development, including the private sector and NGOs. However, the government may still have to develop several strategies, frameworks, and regulations to encourage greater private sector participation in the creation of a fair, mutually beneficial public-private partnership framework for REDD+. Private sector participation in government-initiated projects would likely emphasize business, although private sector stakeholders may have the opportunity to reduce the rates of deforestation and forest degradation caused by their business operations. In the case of NGO participation, they could take the lead in implementing several project activities, but decision making should be done in concert with government organizations. The NGOs would not make decisions based on their interests alone, even though they may be highly experienced and knowledgeable in the field of REDD+ and relevant areas.

It is worth noting that REDD+ readiness in other developing countries has successfully developed to have participatory decision-making frameworks among stakeholders. Examples include Brazil and Indonesia, where NGOs and communities are strongly leading the decision-making processes. However, applying those countries' models to Laos would be difficult, because REDD+ development is complex. REDD+ requires several fundamental conditions to be prepared in advance, such as safeguards, Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV), capacity building, financial planning, etc. Also, REDD+ is a new concept for many stakeholders in Laos. In addition, the participatory framework for the national level and local stakeholders has not yet been well developed, although, so far, some projects have developed their own frameworks. For instance, SUFORD-SU developed a "Community Engagement Framework" based on the donor requirement.

We also observed that there is no decentralization of decision-making power over project activities, with no power flowing from the most dominant to least dominant stakeholders in these three projects. However, power imbalances among stakeholders could be improved through access to decision making in ways that are democratic, equitable, have legal standing, and are transparent [12,13,15]. The central government and international development partner organizations could redistribute their roles in decision making to other stakeholders who should have more rights in

making decisions, especially the local community. Rather than dominating, the central government could do more to advise or encourage other stakeholders to join decision-making processes.

Redistribution and balancing of decision-making power could be important not only for the success of REDD+ projects, but also for creating knowledge and building networks and trust among institutions, including NGOs and the local community. These approaches could also provide good lessons for REDD+ developers to utilize the experience of stakeholder participation in pilot projects, to further develop legal and policy frameworks for the REDD+ implementation phase. Redistribution of decision-making power among stakeholders could be optimized, but such a process could take years, because the organizations involved in REDD+ are unique and unequally structured [27,35]. Thus, the redistribution and re-balancing of decision-making powers among stakeholders remain challenges.

However, empowerment of stakeholders in decision making could provide a platform and open more space for concerned stakeholders, giving them more opportunities to participate in the implementation of project activities. Fairness in the distribution of decision-making power among stakeholders could improve their contributions to REDD+ progress, and could enhance sustainability in natural resources management.

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