

Re-territorializing Climate Governance

The REDD+ Initiatives in the DR Congo

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ABSTRACT

The Congo has long been a site of contestation for global environmental governance strategies, with Indigenous Batwa, Bambuti, and Baaka groups at the center of transnational climate discourse. One such strategy, the REDD+ initiative (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), has come to the fore as a carbon-trading-based solution to the environmental challenges facing the Congo Basin. This article critiques the REDD+ initiative's deterritorialized approach, which favors the voices of international stakeholders over forest-dependent peoples Indigenous to the region. Taking a political ethnographical approach to the area of Mai-Ndombe, this research is based on formal and informal interactions with international actors, local communities, and Indigenous peoples. The strengths and weaknesses of mitigation methods like community forestry, institutionalized participation, and participatory mapping are explored. Ultimately, it is asserted that Indigenous decision-making, rather than institutionally imposed hegemony, must be integrated into the REDD+ initiative.

Keywords: REDD+ initiative, Congo Basin, Indigenous peoples, forest conservation, climate change, carbon trading, Batwa, Bambuti, Baaka groups, deterritorialized approach, political ethnography, Mai-Ndombe, community forestry, participatory mapping, Indigenous decision-making

Figure 1

A village in Lake Mai Ndombe



Note. Lake Mai Ndombe is located in the western part of the Congo Basin. From *Congo 2010-2011* [Photography album], by Jane Boles, 2010, Flickr. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/janeboles/4857176457/in/album-72157624485450123>). CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Introduction

Over the past twelve years, Indigenous peoples in the Global South, particularly in the Central African Basin, have increasingly found themselves at the center of international environmental governance strategies aimed at mitigating climate change. These communities, whose lives, cultures, and identities are deeply intertwined with the forests they inhabit, are now recognized by international organizations as critical stakeholders in the fight against deforestation and biodiversity loss. Among these Indigenous groups are the Batwa, Bambuti, and Baaka of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), who have long depended on the Congo Basin's rainforests for their livelihoods, practicing sustainable forms of agriculture, hunting, and gathering that have preserved these ecosystems for centuries.

However, the recent surge in global interest in these forests, driven by climate change concerns, has introduced new challenges and opportunities for Indigenous peoples. International initiatives, particularly the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) mechanism, have been promoted as solutions that not only aim to curb deforestation but also offer potential socio-economic benefits to forest-dependent communities. REDD+, developed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), seeks to financially incentivize countries like the DRC to protect their forests by channeling funds from Northern nations and investors toward conservation efforts.

While REDD+ has been hailed as a progressive step in global environmental governance, its implementation has also raised significant concerns, especially regarding its impact on Indigenous peoples. The REDD+ framework, by design, acknowledges the importance of Indigenous peoples in achieving its goals, yet the realities on the ground often paint a different picture. In many cases, the introduction of REDD+ has led to the commodification of forests, where carbon is treated as a marketable asset, sometimes at the expense of Indigenous land rights and traditional practices. This shift from local stewardship to global carbon trading has the potential to marginalize the very communities that have historically safeguarded these ecosystems.

In Mai-Ndombe, a province in the DRC designated as a "REDD+ laboratory," these dynamics are playing out in complex and often troubling ways. Indigenous peoples in Mai-Ndombe have found themselves navigating a new regime complex where international organizations, state agencies, NGOs, and private actors converge, each with their own interests and agendas. The province, originally selected for the World Bank's Emission Reduction Program, has become a focal point for REDD+ initiatives, attracting significant investment and international attention. However, these developments have also brought about substantial risks for the 1.8 million forest-dependent people in the region, including the erosion of their land rights and exclusion from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

This paper critically examines the risks and potential benefits that REDD+ poses to Indigenous peoples in Mai-Ndombe, focusing on how their rights and livelihoods are being addressed—or overlooked—within this emerging governance framework. By employing a theoretical approach that bridges regime complexity with postcolonial analysis, the study explores the extent to which REDD+ can truly support Indigenous interests or whether it perpetuates existing power imbalances. The paper also considers possible mechanisms to enhance Indigenous participation and benefit-sharing, emphasizing the need for grounded, territorialized approaches that genuinely reflect the voices and needs of Indigenous communities.

The Upsurge of “Indigeneity” on the REDD+ Scene in DRC

In Central Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the concept of “indigeneity” is not grounded in a historical narrative of colonization but rather in the complex power relations between different tribes. The Congo Basin is home to hundreds of tribes with intricate and often unequal power dynamics. The dominant ethnolinguistic group, the Bantu, consists of numerous sub-groups, among which power relations can be both unequal and conflictual. Minority groups such as the Batwa, Bambuti, and Baaka, collectively known as pygmies, meet the criteria for indigeneity and have therefore been recognized as “Indigenous peoples” by international organizations (IOs), in contrast to other groups referred to as “local communities” in REDD+ project documents and policies.

This recognition of pygmies as Indigenous peoples was bolstered by an existing international and African civil society movement dedicated to promoting local knowledge in natural resource governance (Bellier, 2016). Local and international NGOs quickly tied climate governance to Indigenous peoples, using it as a global framework to analyze their situation and to advocate for their recognition and the protection of their rights (Crawhall, 2011). However, the DRC government—and often international bureaucrats, even those within IOs that actively promote the recognition of pygmies as Indigenous peoples—argue that all African citizens are Indigenous, often referring to the original definition linked to pre-colonial history, as both Bantu and Pygmy tribes inhabited the region long before the arrival of Arabs and Europeans. The concepts of “self-determination” and “ethnic claims” are met with strong resistance from many African governments, as they evoke a painful history of secessionist movements and civil wars. Thus, the introduction of this new category of stakeholders by international bureaucracies unfolds within a context of significant discrepancies between national and international legislation. As a result of these long and sometimes contentious debates, all national REDD+ strategies and projects in the Congo Basin now explicitly mention and target Indigenous peoples, not only as beneficiaries but as stakeholders with valuable knowledge, expected to actively participate in REDD+ policymaking.

The debate on “indigeneity” has been particularly pronounced in the Democratic

Republic of Congo in recent years. The concept has been the subject of extensive discussion, both within and outside the context of REDD+, gradually becoming integrated into several national policies and programs. This process culminated in the passage of a law in 2020 recognizing the existence of Indigenous Peoples and their traditional rights to land. The DRC is also the Central African country where the connection between Indigenous peoples' rights and REDD+ has been most thoroughly explored. The DRC is seen by the international community as one of the leading REDD+ pilot countries. After formally adopting its REDD+ Investment Plan in December 2015, the DRC became the primary recipient of funds from the Central African Forest Initiative, a consortium of donors hosted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in 2016. The DRC also became the first country to sign an "Emission Reduction Payment Agreement" under the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility hosted by the World Bank in 2018. In both of these funding initiatives, the government of Norway has been a major donor, having made REDD+ one of its international cooperation policy priorities.

The focus of International Relations on pre-existing authority has often failed to consider the interests of marginalized stakeholders, particularly Indigenous peoples, within the REDD+ regime complex. While Indigenous peoples are acknowledged as part of this complex, they are frequently categorized as a "vulnerable group" with limited impact on decision-making processes (Zelli, 2017). This oversight stems

from a focus on the functions and authority of dominant actors, neglecting the power dynamics that shape the experiences of more marginalized communities.

Environmental governance scholars, such as Young (1994) and Wapner (1996), have highlighted the empowerment of new actors within the climate realm, noting how climate governance has expanded the boundaries of policy-making and increased the number of engaged actors. This growing pluralization of actors has created opportunities for more inclusive governance, yet it has also revealed the limitations of existing approaches to integrating Indigenous peoples. While regime complexity provides a useful framework for understanding the interactions between different stakeholders, it often overlooks the power asymmetries that hinder equitable participation.

Postcolonial scholars argue that understanding power dynamics in climate governance requires a historical perspective that accounts for colonial and postcolonial relations. The concept of "eco-colonialism" has been used to critique environmental projects that reinforce colonial power structures, particularly in the context of REDD+, which some view as perpetuating these asymmetries (Girvan, 2017). Despite significant investments in climate mitigation, the rights of Indigenous peoples often remain inadequately protected, leading to concerns that REDD+ may exacerbate existing inequalities.

Critical anthropology provides valuable insights into how Indigenous peoples are

integrated within the UN framework. While the rhetoric of empowerment is prevalent in programs like UN-REDD and the World Bank, ethnographic observations reveal that participation is often constrained by power dynamics that prioritize order over dissent (Hönke, 2018). Participation can reinforce existing hierarchies, as those selected to participate often align with the goals of dominant actors, leaving dissenting voices marginalized.

Moreover, the concept of participatory development has been critiqued as a “new tyranny” (Cooke and Kothari), where the inclusion of Indigenous voices is superficial, and the process ultimately serves to support mainstream stakeholders rather than redistribute power. This critique highlights the need to question the power dynamics behind participatory governance and to seek more meaningful ways to integrate Indigenous perspectives.

Postcolonial critiques of REDD+ focus on the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly in the context of private actors and market-based approaches to climate governance. However, these critiques often lack practical solutions for addressing these challenges. While it is crucial to highlight the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, there is also a need to propose pathways for more equitable climate governance.

To bridge the gap between postcolonial analysis and regime complexity, this research combines both approaches to examine how

institutional actors have addressed Indigenous peoples’ access to REDD+ benefits. By integrating historical perspectives on power dynamics with an analysis of multi-stakeholder structures, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Indigenous interests can be better represented within the REDD+ framework.

A Political Ethnography of REDD+ Stakeholders in the Mai-Ndombe

This political ethnography of REDD+ stakeholders in Mai-Ndombe is grounded in extensive professional collaboration with a diverse array of actors, including civil society representatives, NGOs, local communities, and Indigenous peoples. Conducted between 2012 and 2019, the research is based on numerous multi-stakeholder interactions in a highly conflictual and fragile social environment, where building trust over seven years was crucial to gaining access to REDD+ stakeholders. The fieldwork involved six missions, each lasting between 10 and 30 days, during which I visited over 20 villages and the provincial capital, Inongo. This ethnographic approach allowed for the collection of rich, triangulated data through both formal and informal interactions, which provided insights into Indigenous peoples’ interests and reactions to REDD+ initiatives.

The research methodology included participating in more than 15 village assemblies and 10 focus groups organized by international organizations (IOs), as well as attending numerous REDD+ meetings at the provincial, national, and international levels. One-on-one

discussions with key stakeholders, including technical and financial partners, project holders, national civil society representatives, international NGOs, IO representatives, and government officials, further enriched the data. This diverse range of voices contributed to a nuanced understanding of the various risks and interests at stake in the REDD+ process. Additionally, the research involved a deep reflection on my own positionality as a white European woman, an international consultant, and a doctoral researcher in International Relations. This self-interrogation, inspired by Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity, was essential to mitigate bias and to approach the research as an emancipatory normative project.

The analysis also incorporated a thorough review of REDD+ program documents, including all Programme Documents of the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI), the World Bank's Emission Reduction Programme, the PIREDD documents, the national Safeguards document, the national Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) guidelines, the national REDD+ strategy, and the REDD+ investment plan. Additionally, 12 official complaint letters from civil society organizations were included as ethnographic data. Observing the processes of document elaboration and consultation procedures provided valuable insights into how different interests and risks were identified and addressed, as well as the constraints faced by various stakeholders.

This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of the contextual risks linking REDD+ to human rights and an

evaluation of the cumulative impacts of the initiatives pursued to date. It also facilitated an examination of the conflicts present at different scales and the strategies implemented at both the national and local levels to mitigate negative effects. While the research considered various REDD+ initiatives, the focus was placed on larger programs, such as the World Bank's Emission Reduction Programme, the regional REDD+ Integrated Programme (PIREDD), and the Central African Forest Initiative. Special attention was given to the WWC conservation concession, the only REDD+ project certified to date, and the REDD+ Novacel-South Kwamouth pilot project, which aims to test the implementation of REDD+ on the ground and eventually generate carbon credits.

Direct and Indirect Risks Hinder the Regime's Ability to Benefit Indigenous Peoples

To thoroughly assess the impacts of the REDD+ regime complex in Mai-Ndombe, it is essential to delve into the various risks that threaten its ability to benefit indigenous peoples. The complexity of these risks is tied to the socio-economic, political, environmental, and legal contexts of the province. By analyzing these factors through ethnographic interviews with indigenous peoples, experts, and practitioners, as well as reviewing field studies and project documents, we can identify significant challenges. These challenges are not only structural but also operational, raising concerns about how well REDD+ initiatives can fulfill their dual objectives of reducing deforestation and providing

co-development benefits to the Congolese population, particularly indigenous communities. This comprehensive analysis reveals a series of critical risks that REDD+ must address to ensure that it does not harm indigenous peoples and instead contributes positively to their livelihoods.

1. Fragile Governance and the Risk of Land Grabbing and Corruption

A major concern regarding the REDD+ initiatives in Mai-Ndombe is the fragile and incomplete governance infrastructure that underpins the program. Despite the legal framework defining a national governance structure for REDD+, the implementation has been far from operational. This lack of effective governance is evident in the absence of coordination among the numerous REDD+ initiatives currently being developed in the province. The governance tools intended to provide oversight and accountability remain incomplete, and no independent observer has yet been mandated to monitor the program's implementation. Additionally, the local governance structures, particularly the local development committees (CLDs), suffer from a lack of representation and legitimacy, as they do not adequately reflect the communities they are meant to serve.

In this context, the risk of REDD+ benefits being captured by the most powerful groups becomes increasingly likely. The delay in implementing land reforms and the lack of customary forest owner identifications exacerbate this risk. The absence of a national land use

planning policy, coupled with the devolution of planning to project-level initiatives, creates opportunities for corruption. Each local development plan, driven by significant financial stakes, is vulnerable to illegal influence from various actors, including logging companies, project promoters, and agribusiness operators. These entities may manipulate the REDD+ process to include or exclude certain lands from the program, depending on their interests. This scenario raises fears among Indigenous communities that REDD+ could perpetuate “business as usual” mechanisms, favoring private actors over the poorest and most vulnerable populations.

The historical context of exploitation and marginalization in Mai-Ndombe further fuels these fears. Indigenous communities, having witnessed multiple waves of external intervention—from colonial exploitation to conservation efforts—express skepticism about the potential benefits of REDD+. A villager's poignant question during a REDD+ consultation meeting, “The Belgians came, the people who cut the forest came, the Park people came, now the REDD people. What difference does it make for us?” encapsulates the deep-seated distrust towards yet another external initiative. Before any financial support is provided to the Emission Reduction Payment Agreement (ERPA), civil society organizations have called for transparent recruitment processes for managing REDD+ programs, free from political patronage, and a clear system for issuing licenses and concession contracts. These demands highlight the broader

risk associated with regime complexes: the introduction of confusion over authority and rule uncertainty, which can reduce accountability and compliance with international commitments, as noted by Raustiala (2012).

2. De-territorialized Approach and the Neglect of Local Drivers of Deforestation

Another significant risk within the REDD+ regime in Mai-Ndombe is its de-territorialized approach, which fails to address the local structural factors responsible for deforestation and threats to indigenous livelihoods. The REDD+ study on deforestation drivers has been criticized for its generalized approach, which overlooks the specific socio-economic and environmental conditions in Mai-Ndombe. This approach assumes that the causes of deforestation in Mai-Ndombe are identical to those identified at the national level, which limits the program's ability to implement effective, context-specific solutions.

One of the key criticisms from civil society has been the emphasis on shifting slash-and-burn agriculture as a primary driver of deforestation while largely ignoring the impact of industrial logging. Despite evidence from communities and GIS mapping analysis pointing to industrial logging as a significant source of deforestation, REDD+ project documents have failed to adequately address this issue. Moreover, the list of deforestation drivers does not account for potential future threats, such as the exploitation of untapped resources like oil, coltan, and

diamonds, which could become major drivers of deforestation as infrastructure improvements are funded by REDD+ initiatives.

The neglect of migratory patterns and the resulting land-use changes further compound the issue. Processes such as the non-permanence of forestry or agricultural activities and the displacement of emission sites are not sufficiently considered in the current REDD+ framework. This oversight could result in REDD+ projects functioning as “virtual emission reduction machines,” which inflate the production of carbon credits without addressing the underlying economic and environmental factors driving deforestation (Sellier, 2016). Such an approach risks undermining the long-term sustainability of REDD+ and its ability to deliver real benefits to Indigenous communities.

3. Inadequate Land Rights and Conflict-Sensitive Planning

The absence of concrete measures to secure land rights and the lack of conflict-sensitive planning within the REDD+ framework pose significant risks to indigenous communities in Mai-Ndombe. Land tenure is a central issue in the region, and failure to adequately address it within REDD+ initiatives could exacerbate existing conflicts. Land ownership in Mai-Ndombe is often unclear, with overlapping claims from various stakeholders, including communities, the state, and private companies. This ambiguity creates a fertile ground for land grabs and disputes, particularly as the value of land increases due to the prospect of REDD+ benefits.

Without clarifying land ownership, the question of carbon ownership remains unresolved, allowing REDD+ project holders—often companies that have purchased land—to claim the majority of benefits. Indigenous communities, who have traditionally owned and managed these lands, are relegated to secondary beneficiaries, receiving only a small share of the profits. This arrangement undermines the principles of equity and justice that REDD+ is supposed to uphold. Furthermore, the complex land dynamics in Mai-Ndombe, including customary practices and sharecropping, are not adequately addressed by REDD+ initiatives, increasing the risk of land conflicts and the unlawful capture of REDD+ benefits by more powerful actors.

The lack of attention to land rights is particularly concerning given the history of land-related conflicts in the region. The introduction of REDD+ projects into this already volatile context is likely to amplify existing tensions, especially as the improvements proposed by the projects, such as infrastructure development and agro-forestry initiatives, lead to an increase in land prices. This price inflation limits small producers' access to land, favoring industrialists who may convert land into immovables for speculative purposes. The safeguards currently in place to mitigate these risks are insufficient, leaving major gray areas in their operationalization. For example, these measures fail to account for the impact of customary law on land tenure and provide no clear guidance on addressing the risks associated with carbon rights ambiguity.

Conflicts have already begun to emerge, with reports of community members being arrested, disputes between project holders and communities, and testimonies of the negative impact of REDD+ concessions on traditional activities and ways of life. These conflicts underscore the urgent need for REDD+ initiatives to adopt a more comprehensive approach to land rights and conflict-sensitive planning. Without such measures, REDD+ risks not only failing to deliver its promised benefits but also worsening the situation for Indigenous communities.

4. Limited Integration of Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities, and Women

Despite the growing discourse on the importance of indigenous peoples' participation in REDD+, the reality in Mai-Ndombe is that these marginalized populations remain on the periphery of decision-making processes. The limited integration of indigenous peoples, local communities, and women within the REDD+ regime complex is a significant barrier to the program's success. This marginalization is evident in several aspects of the REDD+ process, from the constitution of Local Development Committees (CLDs) to the application of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).

CLDs, which are supposed to serve as the primary structure for community engagement in REDD+, have been criticized for their lack of representativeness and effectiveness. These committees are often composed of land chiefs, who do not necessarily represent the broader

community's interests. Indigenous peoples, who are estimated to make up between 1 and 50 percent of the local population, depending on the locality, are underrepresented in these committees, with only 10 percent of CLD representatives being Indigenous. Similarly, the goal of having 30 percent women in CLDs is rarely achieved, reflecting the broader exclusion of women from decision-making processes within REDD+.

The uneven application of FPIC further compounds these issues. While FPIC is intended to ensure that Indigenous communities have a say in REDD+ initiatives that affect their lands and resources, its implementation in Mai-Ndombe has been partial and inconsistent. Many communities are poorly informed about REDD+ processes, which have been largely conducted in Kinshasa, far from the communities they are supposed to serve. This disconnect between the decision-makers and the affected communities undermines the legitimacy of REDD+ initiatives and raises questions about the extent to which Indigenous peoples' rights and interests are truly being considered.

The exclusion of women from meaningful participation in REDD+ is particularly concerning, given the crucial role they play in traditional forest management and practices. The family planning program associated with REDD+, which targets demographics as a driver of deforestation, does not adequately address the diverse challenges faced by different categories of women, including rural women, Indigenous women, urban women, and girls. Without specific

and systematic support for women's leadership and participation, REDD+ risks perpetuating existing gender inequalities and failing to fully harness the potential of women as key stakeholders in forest conservation.

The limited integration of marginalized populations within the REDD+ regime complex is a reflection of broader power dynamics that favor more powerful actors, such as international NGOs and project developers, over indigenous communities and local women. This imbalance of power hinders the ability of REDD+ to deliver on its promise of equitable benefit-sharing and sustainable development.

5. Uncertainty Regarding Beneficiaries and Co-Development Objectives

The uncertainty surrounding the beneficiaries of REDD+ and the achievement of co-development objectives further complicates the program's ability to deliver meaningful benefits to indigenous communities in Mai-Ndombe. The concentration of REDD+ activities in the area has led to multiple overlaps in beneficiaries, geographical areas, and themes addressed, creating confusion and reducing the program's overall effectiveness. Given the history of poor natural resource revenue sharing in the DRC, there is a legitimate concern that REDD+'s neoliberal approach may exacerbate rather than alleviate, existing inequalities.

The privatization of REDD+ initiatives, as seen in the case of the WWC conservation concession, raises significant concerns about the equitable distribution of benefits. This concession, the

only Congolese REDD+ project authorized to sell carbon credits, exemplifies how REDD+ can lead to “green-grabbing,” where land and resources are appropriated by private actors at the expense of local communities. In this context, indigenous communities may receive only a small share of the benefits without their direct contribution to national deforestation reduction efforts being recognized or adequately compensated. This two percent strategy, which allocates only a minimal portion of benefits to communities, is a dangerous approach that avoids addressing the critical issue of land security.

The benefit-sharing plan currently proposed within REDD+ is likely to undermine ongoing land reform efforts at the national level, which are intended to clarify the duality between legal and customary rights. Without securing land tenure for communities, REDD+ risks creating a system that benefits private sector actors, who can easily obtain land and claim carbon rights while leaving Indigenous communities marginalized and disenfranchised. The exclusion of non-rights holders, such as women, migrants, and young people, from benefit-sharing mechanisms further exacerbates the inequities within REDD+ and undermines its effectiveness.

Community forestry, which could serve as a tool for securing communities’ land tenure and reducing deforestation, is not prioritized within REDD+ initiatives despite being classified as an enabling pillar of the program. No community tenure clarification tools, such as local communities’ forest concessions, are planned at the provincial level in Mai-Ndombe.

This oversight makes the REDD+ process and its benefits inaccessible to communities while offering a significant advantage to private-sector industrial project owners who are able to secure land and benefit from carbon rights. The current approach to community forestry in Mai-Ndombe, which focuses more on reinforcing territorial administration than on securing customary tenure, further limits the potential for REDD+ to empower local communities and contribute to sustainable forest management.

6. Institutionalized Participation as a Double-Edged Sword

REDD+ aims to reconcile forest conservation, indigenous peoples’ rights, and market-based logic, three elements that are often in tension with one another. The program’s emphasis on institutionalized participation is intended to integrate indigenous peoples as beneficiaries within the REDD+ regime complex. However, this approach often acts as a double-edged sword, offering both opportunities and constraints for indigenous communities.

On the one hand, institutionalized participation provides a platform for Indigenous representatives to engage in decision-making processes, potentially enabling them to influence outcomes and secure benefits for their communities. The establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform by the UNFCCC in 2019 is an example of such efforts to enhance Indigenous participation in climate governance. This platform aims to

strengthen the knowledge, technologies, practices, and efforts of local communities and indigenous peoples related to addressing and responding to climate change.

On the other hand, institutionalized participation tends to essentialize Indigenous identities, reducing them to a single narrative of “rainforest guardians” or “traditional hunters and gatherers.” This oversimplification of Indigenous culture and identity hinders a deep analysis of their diverse interests and dynamic cultural practices. By promoting a romanticized and static view of Indigenous peoples, institutionalized participation risks perpetuating colonial stereotypes and limiting the scope of Indigenous participation.

The strategic use of essentialism by indigenous civil society organizations can be an effective tool for securing recognition and rights, but it also comes with significant drawbacks. The reliance on a single narrative of indigenous identity can exclude those who do not fit the traditional mold, such as urbanized or educated indigenous individuals, from being recognized as legitimate representatives. This narrow representation limits the scope of Indigenous participation and reinforces existing stereotypes, ultimately weakening the potential for meaningful engagement in REDD+ processes.

Moreover, the institutionalized participation of indigenous peoples within REDD+ often fails to address the underlying power dynamics that continue to marginalize these communities. While indigenous representatives may gain access to decision-making arenas, their participation is

often constrained by the very structures that are supposed to empower them. The emphasis on formal, top-down consultation processes, such as those prescribed by FPIC, does not always align with the decision-making practices and cultural norms of Indigenous communities. As a result, institutionalized participation can serve to co-opt indigenous voices rather than genuinely empower them.

Opportunities: Indigeneity as a Stepping Stone to Re-Territorialize REDD+

The promise of Indigenous participation within REDD+ lies in its potential to re-territorialize climate governance and address the “reality schism” that often characterizes top-down approaches to environmental management. Indigeneity, in its definition and experience, is inherently linked to territory. Indigenous communities in Mai-Ndombe, like elsewhere, have a deep connection to their lands, which are central to their cultural and physical survival.

In Mai-Ndombe, pygmy communities are regarded as the original landowners, with a unique relationship to their ancestral territories. This connection is reflected in the ceremonial practices that involve pygmy participation in appointing Bantu chiefs, albeit symbolically, as well as in the mental maps that pygmy communities maintain of their traditional lands. These maps, which include detailed knowledge of the land’s geography, resources, and sacred sites, are invaluable for understanding the territory’s significance and for planning sustainable development.

Participatory mapping, a methodology that involves indigenous communities in the process of documenting and mapping their territories, has emerged as a crucial tool for re-territorializing REDD+. This approach allows communities to represent their territories in a way that reflects their cultural values and traditional knowledge, rather than relying solely on external data and standardized mapping tools like GIS. Participatory mapping not only uncovers unknown or invisible territorial information, such as clan boundaries and sacred sites but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the community members involved.

Despite its potential, major REDD+ stakeholders have not fully embraced participatory mapping. While local civil society organizations have championed the methodology, larger organizations like WWF have implemented it in a more superficial manner, often due to time and resource constraints. For participatory mapping to be truly effective, it requires time, resources, and a commitment to engaging with communities on their own terms. This means spending extended periods in the field, involving all segments of the community in the mapping process, and ensuring that the resulting maps are used to inform REDD+ planning and decision-making.

The use of participatory mapping as a tool for re-territorializing REDD+ highlights the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge into climate governance. By grounding REDD+ initiatives in the specific cultural and environmental contexts of indigenous

communities, the program can move beyond the limitations of a de-territorialized, top-down approach. This re-territorialization is essential for ensuring that REDD+ initiatives are not only effective in reducing deforestation but also equitable in their distribution of benefits.

Opportunities: Addressing Power Inequities Through Grounded Participation

To fully realize the potential of REDD+ to benefit indigenous communities, it is necessary to address the power inequities that have historically marginalized these groups. Indigeneity, as it is experienced locally, is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and domination mechanisms that continue to shape the distribution of resources and decision-making authority.

Institutionalized participation, as currently structured within REDD+, does not adequately address these power inequities. Instead, it often perpetuates the exclusion of marginalized groups, such as indigenous peoples, rural women, and youth, from meaningful participation in REDD+ processes. To overcome these challenges, REDD+ initiatives must be designed in a way that systematically supports indigenous leadership, recognizes their rights, and empowers communities to define their own participation structures.

This requires a shift away from the thematic silos that currently characterize REDD+ participation mechanisms. Indigenous representatives should not be confined to discussions on Indigenous issues alone but

should be involved in all aspects of REDD+ policy-making, including those related to land tenure, resource management, and extractive industries. Similarly, the participation of women and other marginalized groups should not be limited to gender-focused committees but should be integrated across all areas of REDD+ governance.

The implementation of FPIC, when done properly, offers a pathway to grounded participation that respects the autonomy and diverse interests of indigenous communities. FPIC allows indigenous peoples to receive sufficient information prior to the commencement of projects, enabling them to make informed decisions about activities that impact their territories and resources. However, for FPIC to be effective, it must be implemented in a way that aligns with the decision-making practices and cultural norms of Indigenous communities rather than being constrained by the timelines and priorities of external actors.

Grounded participation also requires the integration of local conflict management mechanisms within REDD+ initiatives. Given the contentious and conflict-prone nature of land tenure in Mai-Ndombe, it is essential that REDD+ projects include measures to clarify and secure land rights before any activities commence. This includes piloting land reform projects that address the complex dynamics between Bantu and pygmy communities, as well as developing community management structures that prevent the appropriation of REDD+ benefits by local elites.

A participatory support plan for the creation of community forest concessions within the framework of REDD+, based on customary tenure and developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities and civil society, could serve as a model for ensuring that REDD+ initiatives are grounded in local realities. Such a plan should be accompanied by efforts to strengthen indigenous women's leadership and empower project beneficiaries as active stakeholders in the REDD+ process.

Conclusion

REDD+ represents an unprecedented encounter between indigenous peoples and climate mitigation programs in Mai-Ndombe. While it offers a unique opportunity for climate governance to bring about positive change and benefit marginalized communities, the program's current structure and implementation raise significant concerns. The unbalance of power between Indigenous peoples and other REDD+ stakeholders, coupled with the risks identified in the program's governance, participation, and benefit-sharing mechanisms, threatens to undermine the potential benefits of REDD+ for Indigenous communities.

The REDD+ regime complex has undeniably contributed to raising the profile of indigenous peoples' issues on the political agenda in the DRC. The passage of the first law recognizing the existence, indigeneity, and customary rights of pygmies in 2020 is a testament to this progress. However, the program's reliance on institutionalized participation as a means of

integrating Indigenous communities into the REDD+ process has proven to be a double-edged sword. While it provides a platform for Indigenous participation, it also risks reinforcing postcolonial frameworks and perpetuating existing power dynamics.

To move from hindering to helping, REDD+ must adopt a more grounded and territorialized approach that truly integrates indigenous knowledge, addresses domination mechanisms, and empowers marginalized communities. This requires a shift from top-down, de-territorialized governance to a model that values local participation, recognizes the

diversity of Indigenous interests, and supports the development of community-led REDD+ initiatives.

Through such an approach, Indigenous peoples can become experts in their own right, shaping the REDD+ process in ways that reflect their cultural identity and interests. By embracing the full range of these interests and integrating them into the design of REDD+ projects, the program can create more effective and equitable policies that benefit the most local rung of climate governance—on indigenous lands, where the carbon is being stored.

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