

# REDD: putting women at risk or providing opportunities?



Women with tree seedlings, Bangladesh

**Jeannette Gurung** of WOCAN highlights some of the gender differentiated impacts of REDD.

While REDD presents opportunities for positive social outcomes, it also brings risks of serious negative outcomes. The current discussions on REDD mechanisms and impacts have paid little attention to the gender differentiated impacts of REDD, in terms of the increased vulnerability of rural women to its negative consequences and the opportunities that REDD presents for women. There are a number of concerns here that relate to the different roles, responsibilities and rights of women's and men's use of forest resources. Three of the main issues are:

**1. Women as farmers:** Due to existing gender roles that are defined by cultural norms and practices and women's primary responsibilities for food production/preparation and household care, women's roles in forest management are usually limited to those of subsistence needs for fuelwood, medicinal products, fodder for livestock, and selling small quantities of fuelwood in local markets while men's roles are more likely to be linked to timber and NTFP extraction for commercial purposes. Women's greater responsibilities for crop and food production in most of the developing world render them more

susceptible to the impacts of climate change, such as declining water supplies and increasing pest outbreaks.

## **2. Women as fuelwood collectors:**

The depletion of forest resources often severely increases women's labour and time for fuelwood collection for cooking and heating. Conservation measures that bar entrance into protected forests (as part of a nation's REDD program, for example) also increase women's labour and time demands, sometimes forcing parents to remove their children from schools to help with collection tasks. Monoculture tree plantations (as included in REDD programs) generally have negative impacts on women's livelihoods as they cannot provide the multiple benefits of fuelwood, fodder, medicine, water and soil nutrient retention, etc.

**3. Women's land rights:** Women are commonly without any formal rights to land or forests. Under statutory or customary laws, most tropical forests are owned by indigenous peoples or forest dependent communities but it cannot be assumed that women have equal rights with men to these lands. Land claims may be affected by

privatization as corporations, international conservation agencies and governments scurry to acquire land for REDD.

There are many cases of women's groups successfully managing forestry and agroforestry projects, nurseries and woodlots, yet women continue to be nominal stakeholders in decision-making and planning. What assurance, therefore, exists that they will receive equal benefits and participation in REDD mechanisms? If decision-making processes of REDD fail to acknowledge the roles, skills and knowledge of women, the sustainable use and management of forest for climate change mitigation will be severely constrained.

## **Opportunities**

Despite the very real risks that REDD poses to rural women, there are opportunities for it to make significant immediate and direct contributions to their livelihoods. It holds out the hope of rewarding the managers of forests for their efforts to protect, nurture and rehabilitate forests, while expanding community-based forestry systems that address the basic livelihood concerns of women and other forest-dependent groups. Thus it could reduce the vulnerability of women to climate change while also creating new financing and mechanisms to address poverty alleviation goals. REDD can reward women for their biodiversity stewardship (especially regarding saving seeds and nurturing trees) through targeted and effective public governance measures that pay them for their time.

It could provide a renewed focus on reforms to decentralize forest management and institutions, to make them more accessible and responsive to the needs of rural women, and to assure appropriate and equitable benefit-sharing for women of communities that are both forest-dependent and forest-enhancing.

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Jeannette is Director of WOCAN (Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and NRM). WOCAN, IUCN and the Global Gender and Climate Alliance hosted a workshop on 'Engendering REDD' in May. The aim of the workshop was to produce criteria and standards for making REDD initiatives more gender-sensitive. A report on the workshop is available from [www.wocan.org](http://www.wocan.org).