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**Article:**

Khatri, DB, Pham, TT, Di Gregorio, M [orcid.org/0000-0003-2545-217X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2545-217X) et al. (4 more authors) (2016) *REDD+ politics in the media: a case from Nepal*. *Climatic Change*, 138 (1). pp. 309-323. ISSN 0165-0009

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-016-1731-0>

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## **REDD+ politics in the media: a case from Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes public discourse on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) as it is portrayed in the media and examines how this influences effective and equitable outcomes of REDD+ in Nepal. It draws on analysis of articles in three national newspapers and interviews with radio and newspaper journalists, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, and technical experts. Findings show that REDD+ coverage has been limited in the Nepalese print media and overall reporting on REDD+ has declined over time. The discourse is currently dominated by a small number of experts and development project implementers who portray REDD+ optimistically as an opportunity to benefit from carbon markets, while contributing to sustainable forest management. There was limited representation of the interests and concerns of marginalized groups and local communities in the public debate, thus underplaying the complexities and challenges of REDD+ development and implementation in Nepal. While the absence of debate on potential negative impacts can be explained partly by the dominance of optimistic voices in the media, it was also attributed to journalists' limited access to independent knowledge and understanding of the issue. The resulting lack of balanced information in the public domain could undermine both the effectiveness of REDD+ implementation and its equitable outcome.

**Keywords:** REDD+, Nepal, media discourse, policy process

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Globally, the media has played a key role in shaping public discourse and policy agenda around climate change issues (Boykoff 2008, 2014; Anderson 2009; Schmidt et al. 2013). On one hand, the media can act as an effective public forum for citizens to communicate their concerns, express opinions and exert influence on public policy formulation (Crow 2010; Pham 2011). On the other hand, it can act as a mirror reflecting the voices, interests, concerns and political power of different social groups (Billett 2010; Boykoff and Yulsman 2013). There is growing interest in using discourse analysis of media sources to understand views and perceptions about climate change, in general, and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), in particular (Cronin and Santoso 2010; Boykoff and Yulsman 2013; Di Gregorio et al. 2013, 2015).

The aim of REDD+, a climate change mitigation initiative introduced under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2005, is to curb deforestation and forest degradation and to promote the sustainable management of forests in developing countries. During its development, the debate on REDD+ largely focused on international-level issues with limited discussion of national-level processes. With the shift of attention toward implementation, REDD+ discourses now focus on national- and local-level issues.

Nepal was an early adopter of REDD+ and is developing policies, a legal framework and organizational structures for its implementation. As the REDD+ readiness process has recently been accomplished and the country is moving toward adopting policies and measures, it is important to understand how REDD+ is perceived and promoted by different stakeholders in Nepal. Consideration of the extent to which voices and concerns of different actors are reflected in public debates and policy-making processes is needed.

This paper examines stakeholder perceptions of issues related to REDD+ in Nepal based on analysis of selected newspapers, interviews with radio and newspaper journalists and key stakeholders involved in REDD+. We investigate two key questions: (i) What are the dominant media discourses surrounding REDD+? (ii) Who are the actors representing the various interests that are promoting such discourses? Based on the

results and analysis, we draw implications for the future implementation of REDD+ in Nepal and the potential for developing an effective, efficient and equitable REDD+ scheme.

## **2. THE CONTEXT OF REDD+ READINESS IN NEPAL**

Nepal's REDD+ readiness process, initiated in 2008 under the leadership of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MOFSC) and the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), initially gained support from a variety of stakeholders. These included government agencies, donor organizations and key civil society organizations (CSOs) in the forest sector, such as the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN)<sup>1</sup> and the Nepalese Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).<sup>2</sup> Together, the stakeholders formed the REDD Working Group, a key decision-making body set up to steer the readiness activities. The overall national REDD+ readiness process was outlined in the Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP), approved by the World Bank in October 2010, which noted the stakeholder participation.<sup>3</sup> As we demonstrate in this paper, REDD+ was portrayed in public discourse as funding that a country could access and invest in accelerating its efforts to conserve and manage the forest. More specifically, REDD+ funds were expected to expand and strengthen traditional community forestry in the country (Khatri and Paudel 2013).

### **Insert Figure 1**

The readiness process focused on implementation of the R-PP and the development of a REDD+ Strategy for Nepal. It included technical studies concerning drivers of deforestation and forest degradation; setting reference levels and the development of a monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) system; possible institutional arrangements for fund flow; and mechanisms for social and environmental safeguards. Besides the FCPF-led process,

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<sup>1</sup> FECOFUN is a formal network of more than 15,000 community forest user groups across Nepal that has the core objective of defending community rights in forest resources.

<sup>2</sup> NEFIN is a national-level umbrella organization of indigenous people/ which consists of 48 indigenous member organizations across Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> Official from the REDD-Cell (interview in 2011), referred to an internal assessment note of the World Bank, 'the bank appreciated the Nepal's R-PP for [its] level of stakeholder participation during its preparation'.

other initiatives involved implementation of a demonstration project, capacity development and outreach activities. One demonstration project was implemented during 2009–2013 in three watersheds in Dolakha, Gorkha and Chitwan districts to pilot REDD+ implementation in community forests (Shrestha et al. 2014). After the readiness process was accomplished, the government embarked on a results-based payment scheme pilot at a sub-national level, which covered a primary forest area in the country (Terai Arc Landscape). Currently, the government is working on the Emission Reduction Programme Design (ER-PD) (see Figure 1).

As the REDD+ process in Nepal moved slowly toward implementation of the R-PP, a report suggested that the level of stakeholder enthusiasm and participation seen at the beginning of the readiness process had gradually declined (Khatri and Paudel 2013). This decline in interest was explained by the dominance of experts and external drivers such as the FCPF framework (Ojha et al. 2013). Paudel et al. (2015) argued that the REDD+ readiness process focused on technical studies, such as reference levels and MRV systems, and paid limited attention to pertinent policy and governance issues. Though CSOs such as FECOFUN and NEFIN were involved in the key decision-making forums, concerns were raised that the process did not effectively represent the voice of local communities (Ojha et al. 2013).

### **3. APPROACH AND METHODS**

This paper is part of the research conducted under the Global Comparative Study on REDD+ (GCS REDD+), led by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) (Brockhaus and Di Gregorio 2012). The methods applied are based on the comparative research methods developed by Di Gregorio et al. (2012), building on a detailed code book for content analysis of print media articles, and complemented with a guide for interviews with journalists and other stakeholders. The methods are described in further detail in Di Gregorio et al. (2015), Vijge et al. (2016) and Cronin et al. (2015) for the case of Indonesia.

Our analysis focuses on the content analysis of articles from three key national daily newspapers in Nepal – Kantipur, Gorkhapatra and The Himalayan Times – covering January 2005 to December 2015. The newspapers were selected according to circulation,

diversity of political positions in the reportage and the degree of government influence on the newspaper. Kantipur, the largest-selling Nepalese daily and the country's first commercial newspaper, was launched in February 1993. Gorkhapatra was the nation's first daily newspaper, and is still owned and controlled by the government. The Himalayan Times, launched in 2001, is the biggest-selling English-language daily in the country.<sup>4</sup> We chose to include an English-language daily because many experts and representatives of donor agencies write articles for English-language newspapers.

From the selected newspapers, we identified articles related to climate change.<sup>5</sup> A keyword search was performed on these using terms such as 'climate change', 'climate change and forest', 'forest', 'forest carbon' and 'REDD'. Detailed coding and analysis was applied to articles identified as covering issues directly related to REDD+.

The newspaper content was analyzed using the Code book for analysis of media frames (Di Gregorio et al. 2012). In this paper, the 'media frames' are understood as '[the] ways in which elements of discourse are assembled that then privilege certain interpretations and understanding over others' Goffman (1974, cited in Boykoff 2008, p. 555). This definition suggests that media 'framing' is used to highlight a specific understanding or interpretation of a particular issue. For this study, we considered both the 'frames' of the media and, within those frames, the statements of specific policy actors as reported in the media. The materials were coded by identifying a number of characteristics of the media frames (Di Gregorio et al. 2012).

For each frame, we identified the main topic such as 'ecology', 'economics and markets', 'political and policy-making processes', 'civil society issues', 'governance', 'science' or 'culture' (Boykoff 2008). Then the frames were coded accordingly. In the analysis of policy actors' statements mentioned in the media, we identified the type of actors, whether they had

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<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Kantipur, Gorkhapatra and The Himalayan Times published 3,80,000, 45,000 and 71,000 copies per day respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Note that, in the first research phase, we identified and coded articles from 2005–2011, and updated the database in early 2016 to cover articles up to the end of 2015. The same methods were applied, and calibration of the coding was conducted by the same researchers.

focused primarily on effectiveness (e.g. carbon emission reduction), equity or cost-efficiency, and whether they had an optimistic or pessimistic outlook on REDD+.

Content analysis of the print media was supplemented by an analysis of the perspectives of journalists and stakeholders. A total of 26 semi-structured interviews<sup>6</sup> were conducted with journalists (four journalists were associated with FM radio stations, particularly community radio networks), government officials, representatives from key CSOs (including FECOFUN and NEFIN) and experts involved in REDD+. In addition, stakeholders' views on media reporting on REDD+ were also gathered in a workshop organized in December 2013 that was attended by 20 representatives from government agencies, citizen networks and non-governmental organization (NGOs), and included donors, journalists and independent experts.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1 Limited coverage of climate change and REDD+ in the Nepalese print media**

Media attention on climate change in Nepal was rather limited (557 news articles and features over 10 years in three key national newspapers) and only increased notably in 2007 (26 news and articles). Figure 2 shows that the coverage of REDD+ in the Nepalese print media increased gradually over the years and remained relatively high during the period between 2009 and 2011. Reporting dropped almost completely after 2011.

Reporting on climate change, in general, and on REDD+, in particular, tended to be concentrated around a few major national and international events. Media reporting on the role of forests in climate change first appeared in 2007, after the 13th Conference of Parties (COP) of the UNFCCC, held in Bali in 2007, launched REDD+. The 15th COP of the UNFCCC, held in Copenhagen in 2009, which was expected to formulate a new climate agreement, was the most widely covered by the media to date (Painter 2010). Reporting on climate change in Nepalese print media also reached to its peak in 2009 (136 articles). In the

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<sup>6</sup> Fifteen interviews were conducted in 2011–2012 that included journalists (9), government officials (1), CSO representatives (2) and experts (3). In 2015, we conducted 11 interviews with journalists (6), experts (2), a government official (1) and CSO representatives (2).

same year, the Government of Nepal held its cabinet meeting near the Mount Everest base camp, a few days ahead of the Copenhagen summit.

The relatively higher media attention in 2009 and 2010 was also partly because of the Government of Nepal's decision to participate in two major climate change programs: climate change adaptation and REDD+. The preparatory work for development of the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) and the R-PP was initiated in 2009.

### **Insert Figure 2**

Within the broader coverage of climate change in selected newspapers over the last 10 years, REDD+ received relatively little coverage. Of the 557 news articles and features related to climate change, only 43 were about REDD+ (7.7%). This is relatively low compared to other REDD+ countries such as Brazil and Indonesia (Di Gregorio et al. 2015). The first appearance of REDD+ in the Nepalese print media was a news article in the Kantipur Daily, published on 19 December 2007, reporting on the consensus reached on REDD in COP 13.

There are explanations for the limited media coverage on issues related to climate change and REDD+. First, climate change has not been part of the major political agenda in Nepal. The media houses consider climate change, including REDD+, to be an agenda item sponsored by international and national NGOs that has limited political clout. As a result, journal editors do not prioritize media coverage on these issues. For example, a journalist<sup>7</sup> commented that, 'some I/NGOs sponsor the media persons to write on the issue of REDD+ and want to highlight positive aspects and their achievements only'. Moreover, climate change, seen more as an environmental and developmental issue, is not a priority issue among politicians in Nepal compared to the pressing political agenda of new constitution making.

Second, despite the interest of journalists in climate change issues, comprehension and reporting is a daunting task. Interviewees claimed that both climate change and REDD+ are too technical, and it is still uncertain how they might impact the public. About 75% of the

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<sup>7</sup> During a workshop organized to share finding of this research in December 2013 (ForestAction and CIFOR 2013).

journalists interviewed asserted that REDD+ is a new and complex topic that is difficult to report on. For example, a senior reporter for a national daily newspaper (interviewed in December 2009), said: ‘REDD+ is difficult to understand by ourselves. If we write something on it and send it to the editorial team, they find it highly complex and very often dump the news.’

One plausible explanation behind the higher level of media attention on REDD+ during 2009–2011 is the increased international attention given to the REDD+ debate during this period. In addition, the country also started gaining momentum toward the national readiness processes during this period: the national-level structures for REDD+ readiness were created, R-PP was developed and approved by the World Bank and its implementation began. During the initial days of the REDD+ process, many international and national actors shared information in the media. Journalists were invited to visit different projects, including the pilot project implemented in three districts, and were encouraged to write about REDD+. For example, one senior journalist (interviewed in December 2015) said, ‘Projects sponsored the journalists to visit their sites and write news and stories focusing on their activities. Many such articles were written on payments made under the pilot project scheme. They wanted to highlight the positive aspect of the REDD+.’

As it matured, REDD+ attracted less attention in the media. Journalists considered that the REDD+ process focused on technical studies and reports that were not easily accessible to the media. A journalist from a national daily (interviewed in December 2009) noted, ‘Between the period 2012 and 2015, there have been several studies on REDD+, but they simply end up in a workshop. Those reports were not comprehensible for journalists because they were too technical to understand. So, there was limited media coverage on those studies.’

Gradually, with the phasing out of some projects including the pilot project, media attention shifted toward other forest-related issues of national interest after 2012. For instance, Chure attracted national interest since it involved friction between civic networks, including community forest user groups (CFUGs), and the government. A reporter from Kantipur Daily (interviewed in December 2015) opined, ‘The issue of

Chure dominated policy level debates in forestry sector in recent years. The government's new Chure conservation policy was highly contested among the stakeholders and it faced protest from the CFUGs and FECOFUN'.

#### **4.2 The dominant discourses of REDD+ in the media**

The discourses around REDD+ in Nepal are dominated by the narrative that REDD+, through increased financial flow, would help strengthen current efforts on conservation and sustainable forest management. Most of the articles link forest conservation with increased funding which is expected to strengthen existing community-based forest management. For example, in 2008, Kantipur published a front-page article about REDD+ with the headline, 'Nepal's forests listed on carbon trading'. The article noted that Nepal could earn more than Nepalese rupees (NPR) 4 billion<sup>8</sup> annually. Similarly, a senior officer from MOFSC wrote in *The Himalayan Times*, published on 1 April 2010: 'First, the country can benefit from checking or retarding its deforestation trend, which currently stands at 1.7 per cent annually. The second range of benefits might come from community forests, which are found to sequestrate 1.8 tons per ha/year.' A climate change expert also wrote in *The Himalayan Times*, published on 11 October 2010: 'Community-based forest management in Nepal has been in the mainstream forest policy for almost two decades [...]. If [REDD] is adopted, it opens the possibility for communities that are engaged in forest management to earn revenue for carbon sequestration and to participate in the global carbon market.'

The positive portrayal of REDD+ as a potential source of financial flow was primarily the perspective of the experts, who are either cited or write articles in the newspapers. However, a few CSOs and researchers were skeptical about whether REDD+ benefits would trickle down to the local level, particularly to forest-dependent communities and marginalized groups. In an article in *Gorkhapatra*, published on 13 March 2011, a representative from NEFIN was quoted as saying: 'We do not know whether REDD+ would really benefit indigenous people who live close to the forest and, not only depend on it for forest products, but [are] also culturally associated with the forest.'

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<sup>8</sup> 1 USD was equivalent to 105 Nepalese rupees in 2015.

Yet the discourse that questions the actual benefits of REDD+ is marginalized in current media debates. Of the 43 articles that were written on REDD+, only four covered the challenges of REDD+ implementation and questioned the expected benefits from it.

### **4.3 Framing of REDD+ in the Nepalese media**

The analysis of topics (Figure 3) shows that REDD+ is currently framed in the media predominantly as an ‘economics and markets’<sup>9</sup> issue (10 articles), ‘ecology’<sup>10</sup> issue (nine articles) and ‘politics and policy-making’<sup>11</sup> issue (eight articles). This is followed by a lower number of frames on ‘civil society’ issue (four articles) and ‘governance’<sup>12</sup> issue (four articles).

#### **Insert Figure 3**

About half of the articles written on REDD+ were on conservation of forests as a means of earning foreign currency. They stressed the significance of forest management and the possibility of getting REDD+ benefits. For example, in an article published on 24 August 2009, a journalist wrote that ‘if the forests in the nation are protected, then there is the possibility of getting millions of dollars under REDD+’. Some articles highlighted the role of forests in sequestering carbon and hence their contributions to climate change mitigation.

Our analysis and interviews conducted with journalists also highlighted that when REDD+ is framed in ‘politics and policy-making’ and ‘economics and markets’ issues, this again highlights the financial gain that Nepal could potentially earn from selling carbon, as well as

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<sup>9</sup> Economics and markets: The topic refers mostly to economic aspects related to industry, commerce, markets (including carbon markets), business groups, business lobbyists, specific products or spokespeople of business interests. It includes economic impacts upon society.

<sup>10</sup> Ecology: The topic refers mostly to ecological or ‘green’ issues such as forests, plants, biodiversity, conservation and forest protection, or CO<sub>2</sub> emissions/stocks/sequestration in relation to deforestation and forest degradation. This topic is primarily concerned with the natural science aspects reported in the media following the categorization used by Boykoff (2008).

<sup>11</sup> Politics and policy making: The topic refers mostly to individuals, processes or claims of governments and other political actors (parties), whether international, national, opposition, the civil service, quasi-NGOs or local authorities. This includes policy design and implementation.

<sup>12</sup> Governance: This refers mainly to general governance conditions (corruption, law enforcement, monitoring and verification mechanisms) in a country and their implications for REDD+.

the country's political position with respect to the idea of developed countries paying for developing countries to protect forests. An article entitled 'Politics in climate change', in Kantipur, published on 14 December 2009, stated that '[d]eveloped countries are going to pay for REDD+, which clearly means that they want to impose all the burden of carbon dioxide reduction on us by paying some money.' The article went on, 'Our high-level bureaucrats and politicians are struggling to get the money, but they should know that it is our right, not a grant that developed nations are providing us.'

#### **4.4 Actors, interests, and outlooks expressed in REDD+ discourses**

Although diverse actors have been involved in Nepal's REDD+ process, including government agencies, international and domestic NGOs, forest users' associations, indigenous communities and individual experts, only a small number of individuals from those organizations emerged as shapers of REDD+ public discourse and policies. For example, 18 (41%) of the actors represented in the media were individuals, comprising 11 journalists and 7 individuals affiliated to interested organizations. The experts working in key CSOs and international organizations were also identified in the media. Those individuals, including journalists and experts, were largely optimistic about the potential benefits from REDD+ and conveyed simple messages that REDD+ will bring benefits for the conservation of forests. There was limited focus on the possible challenges of REDD+ implementation and concerns related to equitable distribution of the benefits (see Figure 4). A representative of FECOFUN mentioned, 'there is little discussion on possible risks or trade-offs of the REDD+'. On the other hand, a science writer, interviewed in December 2015, noted that 'there is no evident opposition to REDD+ and all major actors, including government agencies, forest users association (FECOFUN) and association of indigenous communities (NEFIN) have become part of the REDD+ projects'.

#### **Insert Figure 4**

The actors' views on the future of REDD+ reported in the media also varied. The forest users' association (primarily FECOFUN) had the second highest number of mentions (21%). However, the views of FECOFUN represented in the media tended to be related

to its engagement in REDD+ activities. As indicated in Section 2, FECOFUN was involved in number of REDD+-related activities including a pilot project in community forestry and capacity development. High-level bureaucrats who aimed to establish REDD+ as a viable option for conservation published articles in newspapers or were interviewed in the media. Other advocates were found among national NGOs, research institutions/think tanks, international non-governmental organization (INGOs), indigenous communities and the private sector. As shown in Figure 5, these are the main actors promoting an optimistic stance about the benefit of REDD+. If we consider actor categories, the government agencies, INGOs and international research organizations seem optimistic about the benefits that REDD+ can bring to Nepal (Figure 5). About 66% (27 out of 41) of actors, particularly government officials, said they viewed REDD+ both as a means of climate change mitigation and of earning foreign currency.

### **Insert Figure 5**

Overall, Kathmandu-based experts and organizations dominated the REDD+ debate in the media. Journalists pointed out that those actors have strategic interest in securing REDD+-related projects or funding. For example, a producer for Radio Sagarmatha<sup>13</sup> (interviewed in December 2009) said, ‘REDD+ is nothing more than elites’ discussions in the capital city and district headquarters’. A senior reporter from the Kantipur Daily (interviewed in December 2015) concurred, adding, ‘REDD+ is no more than workshops and seminars’. Agreeing with these views, a reporter from Rajdhani Daily (interviewed in December 2015) noted ‘the REDD+ process has been limited to some technical studies, talks from experts in the workshops in Kathmandu’.

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<sup>13</sup> Radio Sagarmatha was the first community radio in South Asia to prioritize environmental issues.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### ***REDD+ as an important policy agenda item in Nepal's political arena***

Despite the increasing trend of media engagement in climate change issues (Boykoff 2010), particularly since the 2009 COP 15 of the UNFCCC, we found that climate change in general and REDD+ in particular received relatively limited attention in the Nepalese media. The major drop in reporting on REDD+ after 2011 can be partly explained by the increasing technical nature of REDD+ implementation in Nepal. Journalists found the issue of REDD+ too technical and complex to understand and report. This is not been a country-specific problem though. As Boykoff (2010) argues, journalists generally find the science behind climate change difficult to comprehend and report on. In addition, our findings from Nepal suggest that the climate change issue, in particular REDD+, received less attention from political actors, as other issues were considered more pressing. During the period covered by this study (2005–2015), Nepal went through significant political change as part of the settlement of a 10-year-long armed conflict (Byrne and Shrestha 2014). As we discuss below, it seems that REDD+ is considered more a technical development experiment than an issue of national (political) concern, especially so after the initial attention given to early multi-stakeholder processes faded away from 2011 onwards.

This is supported by our findings that the REDD+ discourse in the media was dominated largely by the experts from international and national organizations. These experts were generally optimistic about the benefit that REDD+ can provide and stressed the significance for conservation of forests (i.e. more emphasis on issues related to ecology). Less attention was paid to issues related to governance (i.e. inclusive representation) and equity (equitable benefit-sharing and trade-offs). REDD+ has not been perceived as a domestic political agenda, instead, it has been taken as an agenda framed by the international development discourse, funded by donor agencies and implemented by INGOs usually outside the government system.

The decline in media coverage after 2011 also resonates with other studies that have shown declining stakeholder engagement and enthusiasm in the REDD+ debate (i.e. see Khatri and Paudel 2013). The REDD+ readiness process in Nepal is focused on technical issues, such as

establishing the framework and methods for carbon monitoring, marginalizing other important issues related to policy and governance (Paudel et al. 2015). Further, Ojha et al. (2013), drawing on the review of national readiness process in Nepal, argued that the REDD+ process has been largely led by experts and driven by the FCPF framework. The voice of stakeholders, particularly local communities, has not been represented (Ojha et al. 2013).

### **Inclusive representation in policy process for equitable REDD+ outcomes?**

While media coverage often reflects state actors more prominently than non-state actors (Boykoff 2008; Di Gregorio et al. 2015), Nepal is a unique case. Although experts have dominated discussions, representative organizations of local forest user groups (i.e. FECOFUN) and indigenous communities (i.e. NEFIN) have also been central in both policy processes and project implementation. These two organizations were represented in the national REDD+ decision-making forum known as the REDD Working Group. The REDD+ readiness, led by the World Bank, has recognized those actors and sought to build on the successful experience of community forestry in Nepal (GoN 2010; Poudel et al. 2013).

However, our findings showed that the representation of those CSOs in the media was primarily related to the implementation of different projects rather than a way of including the voices of forest-user groups and forest-dependent people. Ojha et al. (2013) argued that the involvement of these groups in the implementation of REDD+ activities has affected their capacity to represent the voices and concerns of their own constituency. The voice and interests of those marginalized people, who are considered to be the most vulnerable (O'Brien et al. 2007) and likely to be most impacted from the REDD+ (Ojha et al. 2015) do not seem to be adequately represented in the final decisions made, neither in the REDD+ readiness process (Ojha et al. 2013), nor in the climate change policy process in Nepal (Ojha et al. 2015). It could be argued (as proponents of REDD+, such as the government and the World Bank, argue) that through CSOs, such as NEFIN and FECOFUN, civil society interests are voiced in the media, for example. Other studies question the degree to which representation of smaller groups within these umbrella organizations actually took place (see Ojha et al. 2013; Bushley 2014).

Many scholars have raised the importance of procedural equity in the context of REDD+ and the need to integrate voices of all relevant stakeholders in the policy-making process (McDermott et al. 2013; Schroeder and McDermott 2014). The domination of a few experts in the national REDD+ debate and the lack of representation of the voices of the local community, can limit the delivery of equitable outcomes in REDD+ (Di Gregorio et al. 2013; McDermott et al. 2013). As Lawoti (2008) pointed out, different marginalized social groups (women, Dalit, poor farmers) have historically been kept at the margin of policy processes.

Some critiques have even warned that the implementation of REDD+, because of its market-based logic and goal of global emission reduction, might undermine decentralized practices of forest management affecting the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities (Phelps et al. 2010). Other studies have indicated the risk that REDD+ might promote carbon-centric forest management and will have trade-offs with people's livelihoods (Chhatre and Agrawal 2009). This emphasizes the need for representation of forest-dependent people in the development and implementation of REDD+ to achieve distributive equity (i.e. equity in sharing of REDD+ benefits and burdens) (McDermott et al. 2012; Di Gregorio et al. 2013; Luttrell et al. 2012). This is especially important in a country like Nepal, where about one-third of the country's forest lands are managed by local communities (Ojha et al. 2013).

### **How realistic is the current optimistic picture of REDD+ and what are the implications for equity and effectiveness in the policy design?**

REDD+ has largely been portrayed as a win-win approach in the media, one that addresses climate change by promoting forest management along with development objectives (Cronin et al. 2015; Di Gregorio et al. 2015). This portrayal is reflected in the reporting of REDD+ in Nepal, where the most promising aspects of REDD+ tend to be featured in the media. The media has mainly featured experts' assessment of positive aspects of REDD+ or has reported specific activities of the I/NGOs in the context of REDD+. However, many questions have not yet been asked in the media. For example, what benefits can REDD+ deliver and how much will this cost (Luttrell et al. 2013)? Moreover, the optimistic picture of REDD+ and the limited understanding of more critical issues related to REDD+ implementation (e.g. complexities of addressing drivers of deforestation and forest degradation; cost of implementing REDD+, particularly in community-based forest management; MRV) among

stakeholders might eventually affect implementation outcomes, resulting from the recently agreed the Emission Reduction Project Idea Note (ER-PIN) and the commitment to pilot subnational-level projects.

### **Forging an effective role for mass media to enhance participation of weaker actors in the national REDD+ policy process**

It is widely acknowledged that the mass media can play a role in communicating science to the public in a simplified way and contribute to informed policy decisions (Weingart et al. 2000; Billett 2010; Boykoff and Yulsman 2013). However, in the case of climate change and REDD+, media involvement is limited. As shown in this paper and argued elsewhere (e.g. Boykoff 2010), journalists have limited knowledge and capacity to understand the science behind climate change and report on it. This has constrained the media's role in informing the public and hence enhancing the capability of diverse actors and citizen at large. The capacity of journalists to deal with technical issues such as climate change and REDD+ needs to be developed. However, the responsibility does not lie solely with the media. Stakeholders should take a proactive role in engaging the media and creating an environment where the media can develop a balanced understanding of different issues associated with REDD+. This requires developing capacity and facilitating free access to information. Such capacity development interventions would support the media in its role of educating the public about climate change and fostering science policy linkages (Boykoff and Yulsman 2013).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This paper analyzed how the public discourse on REDD+ in the Nepalese media was framed and by whom. Drawing on the case of Nepal, we articulated how the framing of particular discourses by certain actors can have implications for the development of REDD+-related policies and actions and their effective and equitable outcomes. We argue that the optimistic picture of REDD+, as a potential source of funding to support forest conservation might unjustifiably inflate public expectations and at the same time downplay the possible challenges and complexities associated with the development and implementation of REDD+.

Findings also showed that the REDD+ discourse was dominated by a small group of experts with limited representation of local communities involved in the management of forests, despite the involvement of some citizen networks in the REDD+ policy process. There has been little discussion in the media on issues related to equity, in terms of both representation of all actors and sharing of benefits. Domestic equity issues have been overshadowed by an optimistic view that selectively presents the potential benefits that REDD+ could bring to the country, while ignoring the risks or other problems related to governance. Moreover, there was limited critical reflection on the possible risks and trade-offs by actors in the media.

These findings have important insights for developing REDD+-related policies and actions. First, achieving effective and equitable REDD+ outcomes requires a critical debate among all stakeholders about potential benefits, as well as challenges and complexities, beyond an exchange by technical experts. Second, effective stakeholder participation is a key to achieving REDD+-related outcomes. REDD+ policy makers in Nepal, as well as the media, need to make a greater effort to inform the public. The voice of the local community needs to be better represented in this process. Media has an important role in informing stakeholders and empowering them to articulate their voices and concerns in REDD+ processes. To facilitate this we would call upon experts and decision makers at all levels to foster a dialog with journalists enhancing the capacity of the media to unfold the complexities of the REDD+ process in the public domain.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research is part of the policy component of the Global Comparative Study of REDD+ of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) (<http://www.forestsclimatechange.org/global-comparative-study-on-redd.html>). We would like to thank Niru Gurung and Lochana Rana for their contribution in terms of media content analysis. Funding for CIFOR's research was provided by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Australian Agency for International Development, the UK Department for International Development, the European Commission and the US Agency for International Development.

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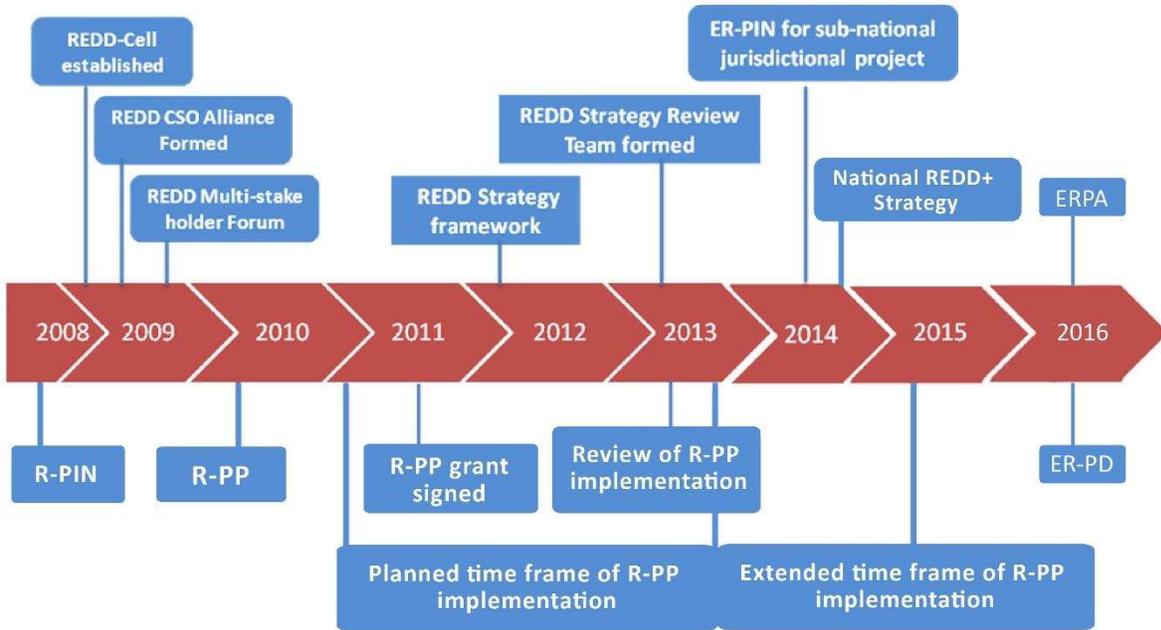
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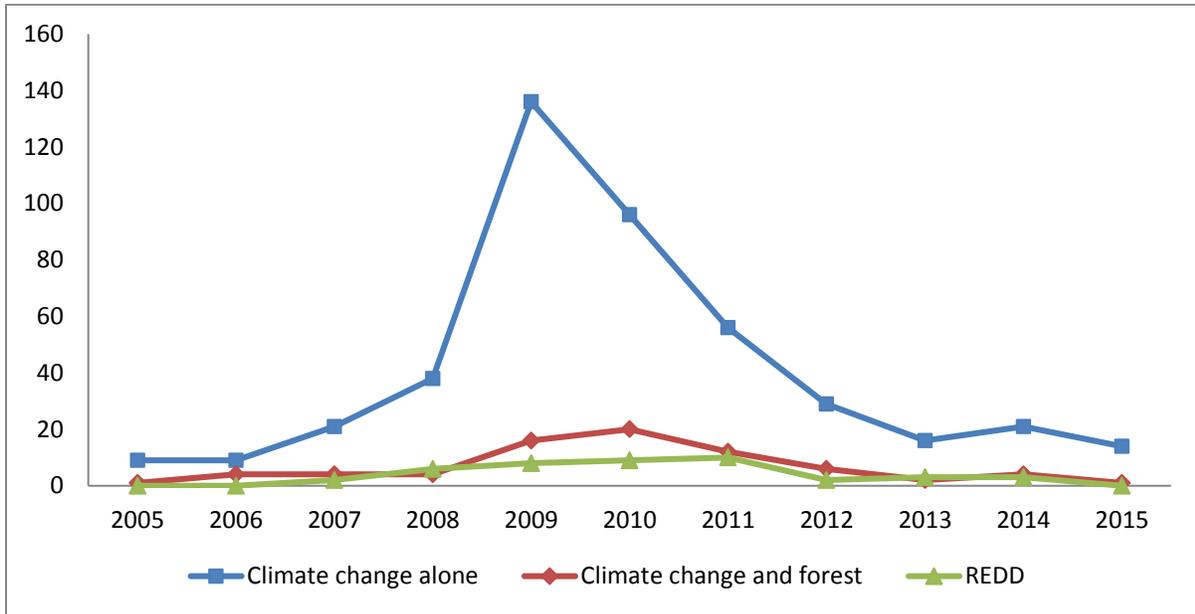
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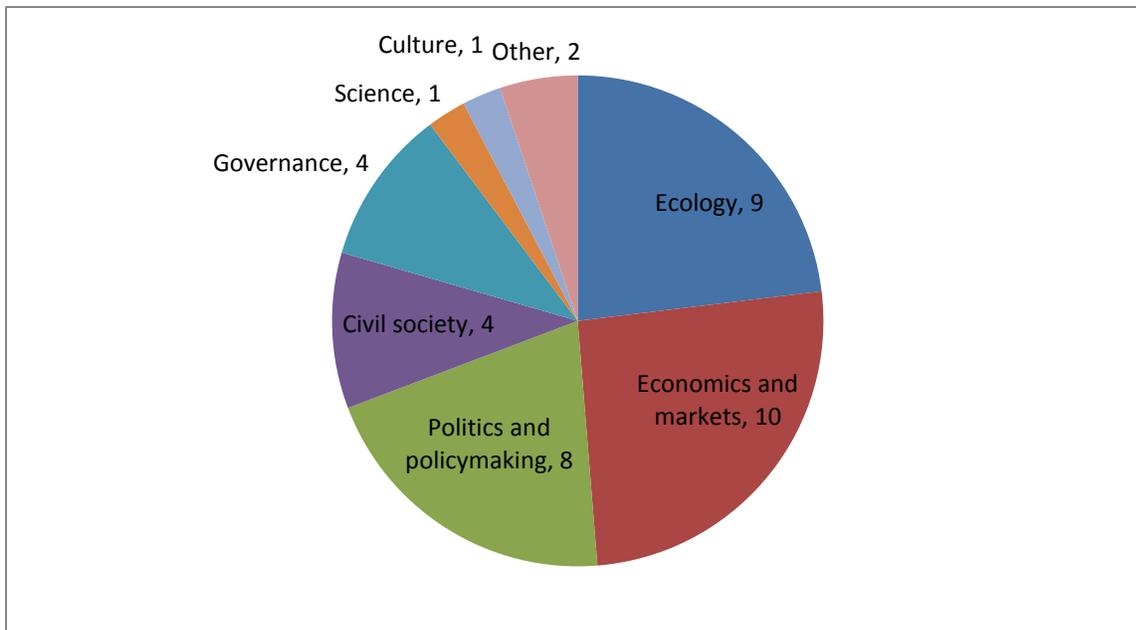


**Figure 1. Time line of REDD+ readiness in Nepal<sup>14</sup>.**

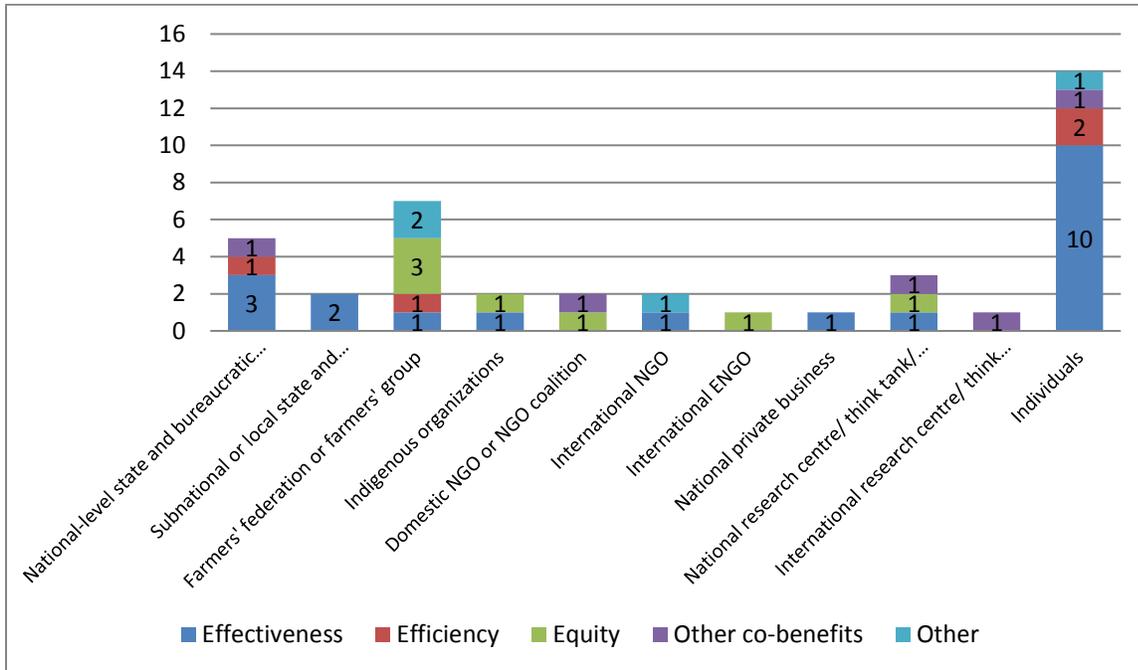
<sup>14</sup> In Figure 1, R-PIN, ER-PIN, ERPD and ERPA stand for Readiness Plan Idea Note, Emission Reduction Program Idea Note, Emission Reduction Program Document and Emission Reduction Payment Agreement respectively.



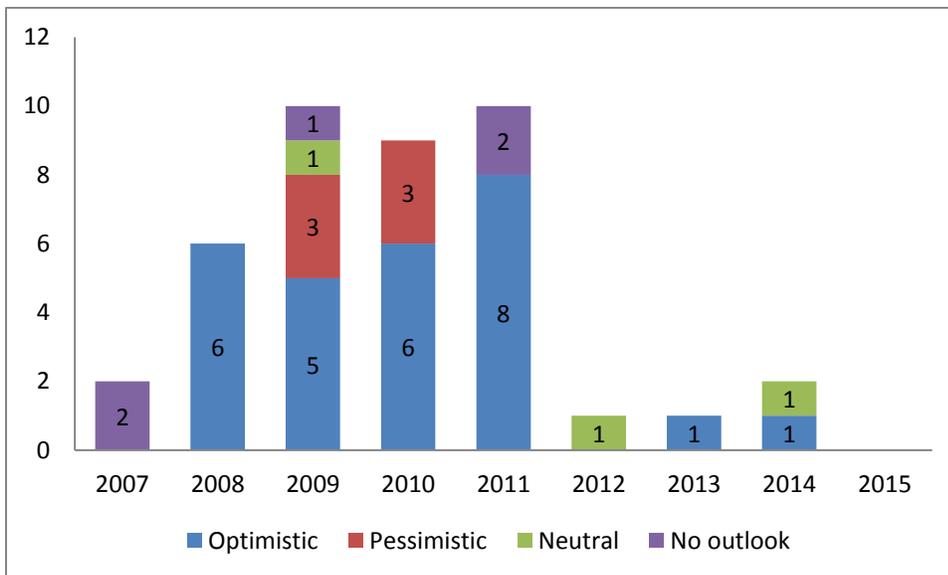
**Figure 2. Coverage of climate change and REDD in the Nepalese print media.**



**Figure 3. Main topics of the media frames.**



**Figure 4. Focus of policy actors on effectiveness, efficiency and equity of REDD+.**



**Figure 5. Policy actors' views on the future of REDD+.**