



# Messiness of forest governance: How technical approaches suppress politics in REDD+ and conservation projects



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## ABSTRACT

Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) was originally conceived to address the global problem of climate change by reducing deforestation and forest degradation at national and subnational levels in developing countries. Since its inception, REDD+ proponents have increasingly had to adapt global ideas to local demands, as the rollout process was met with on-the-ground realities, including suspicion and protest. As is typical in aid or 'development' projects conceived in the global North, most of the solutions advanced to improve REDD+ tend to focus on addressing issues of justice (or 'fairness') in distributive terms, rather than addressing more inherently political objections to REDD+ such as those based on rights or social justice. Using data collected from over 700 interviews in five countries with both REDD+ and non-REDD+ cases, we argue that the failure to incorporate political notions of justice into conservation projects such as REDD+ results in 'messiness' within governance systems, which is a symptom of injustice and illegitimacy. We find that, first, conservation, payment for ecosystem services, and REDD+ project proponents viewed problems through a technical rather than political lens, leading to solutions that focused on procedures, such as 'benefit distribution.' Second, focusing on the technical aspects of interventions came at the expense of political solutions such as the representation of local people's concerns and recognition of their rights. Third, the lack of attention to representation and recognition justices resulted in illegitimacy. This led to messiness in the governance systems, which was often addressed in technical terms, thereby perpetuating the problem. If messiness is not appreciated and addressed from appropriate notions of justice, projects such as REDD+ are destined to fail.

## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, important new global conventions and initiatives such as Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals have been launched to address climate change and development. These initiatives advance international strategies for addressing global problems that have profoundly localised effects. They are therefore likely to generate friction among actors operating at multiple levels with myriad different interests, concerns, and

perspectives (Sanders et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2016). In this contribution, we focus on conservation, payment for ecosystem services (PES) and REDD+. With climate change increasingly on global agendas, there is a growing morass of actors involved in large-scale initiatives to align land and forest use with climate mitigation goals. Therefore, examining the ways in which actors interact with one another, and the logics with which arguments are framed, is especially prudent in order to better understand on-the-ground outcomes of emerging programs that aspire to improve environmental, social, and governance outcomes.

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In this contribution, we seek to understand more clearly what appears to be a fundamental contradiction: global actors continue to apply problematic large-scale technical solutions (Sunderlin and Sills, 2012; Blom et al., 2010; DeShazo et al., 2016) to issues that are broadly recognised as deeply political (Doolittle, 2010). We explore the manifestations of this problem using data from a qualitative, nested comparative study of 54 land use change initiatives in 11 subnational regions in five countries, and analyse them by linking diverging concepts relating to the ‘technical’ and ‘political’ aspects of governance with notions of environmental justice and legitimacy. We use ‘legitimacy’ in a sociological sense, pertaining to the extent to which others believe an institution to have the right to authority, rather than in the normative sense, which is related to the right to rule (cf. Buchanan and Keohane, 2009). These cases were selected to contrast emerging initiatives to reduce deforestation with sites where conventional agricultural and extractive economic activities are causing or threatening to cause deforestation. Because the initiatives to reduce deforestation were undergirded by global environmental politics, including ambitious multilateral initiatives like REDD+, they provide an opportunity to examine theories that link multi-level governance institutions and environmental justice in an urgent context. The research was not designed with such a task in mind. Rather, the ideas and model presented here should be considered exploratory, emerging from the analysis of the cases, in light of existing theory. Our goal is to advance theoretical ideas that implore different actions by governments, NGOs, activists, and researchers, both echoing and clarifying long-standing calls by other scholars and activists.

The word ‘governance’ is sometimes used as a technical alternative to the more political ‘reform’ or ‘social change’ (de Alcantara, 1998), but we consider governance to be both technical and political. The case can be made that the term ‘governance’ proliferated throughout the global development apparatus in the 1980s and 1990s precisely because it offered a cozy alternative to the term ‘politics’, which international aid agencies were not permitted to discuss (Leftwich, 1994; Rose, 1999). Technical perspectives of governance include apolitical and inoffensive (at least to a quorum of hegemonic powers) terminologies and logics of rules and standards. This may involve an emphasis on ‘safeguards’ for example, for which technical definitions exist to ‘protect vulnerable populations’, or ‘sustainability’, which some see as a technocratic diversion from land tenure rights (cf. Bending and Rosendo, 2006). Technical governance perspectives seek legitimacy in rules, and sometimes narrow considerations of fairness.

Political perspectives, on the other hand, are more elusive to definition, more contested, and legitimised through tradition, culture and power relations (Fraser, 2009; Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001). Contestations over rights, for example, exemplify political negotiation (Larson, 2011). Technical perspectives are sometimes required in order to focus complex discussions among disparate actors to come to some form of action, but in the process, political notions are often lost, or obscured deliberately, by negotiators.

Land rights and land use decisions are necessarily political in the traditional sense that they have a bearing on “who gets what” (Lasswell, 1950), but they also have profound implications for justice, as different land use decisions and decision-making processes privilege particular notions of justice. Some land use decisions, such as performance-based payments for conservation outcomes, view justice as primarily ‘distributive’, in that an equitable distribution of material resources is largely equated, at least implicitly, with justice (Martin et al., 2013). Other approaches to conservation, such as rights-based strategies, privilege notions of justice built around “recognition” of rights and “representation” in political spaces (Brockington et al., 2006; Ribot, 1996; Brockington et al., 2008).

Further complicating issues of justice embedded in the politics of land use are questions of scale (Fraser, 2009). As the politics of land use involve negotiations between actors from many different levels and with diverse interests - from smallholder farmers who struggle to meet

their basic needs, to regional and national government officials with mixed mandates to promote both environmental conservation and economic development, to donors and environmentalists operating both locally and internationally- who should even be considered in questions of justice, whether distributive or recognition-oriented, is itself contested.

In the following section, we explore the ideas of ‘rendering technical’, environmental justice, and legitimacy. Following our introduction of theory, we present empirical evidence on land use changes in five countries. Through our analysis, we show how the concept of ‘messiness’ provides insight into how projects behave and what we might learn from them to improve effectiveness, efficiency and equity in attempts to address global climate change through forest conservation.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Rendering technical and anti-politics

We use Li’s (2007a,b) turn of phrase ‘rendering technical’ to describe the ways in which the political is made technical (see also Colchester, 1994; Ferguson, 1994). Li (2007a), p.263 identifies six ways in which actors are brought together in an assemblage, which we specify here to mean a project aiming to reduce carbon emissions from, or conserve, forests. She shows that such assemblages feature the following: 1) forging alignments, 2) rendering technical, 3) authorising knowledge, 4) managing failures, 5) anti-politics, and 6) reassembling. These processes are conducted by a range of actors, and from divergent perspectives. Rendering technical involves investigating, mapping, classifying, and documenting local communities, sometimes using ‘participatory processes’ that make assumptions about who should participate, where boundaries should be drawn, and the nature of the problem being one that can be solved through technical means (Li, 2007b, 2011). Milne and Adams (2012) show an analysis of how REDD+ projects in Cambodia are made anti-political through rendering technical in order to set clear boundaries and limit participation in the project decision-making processes, thereby affecting suggested evaluation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency and equity (the so-called 3Es, focussing on benefit-sharing following Stern (2006), which considers equity in highly technical and distributional terms. See Angelsen (2008, 2009)). The aspects of rendering technical and anti-politics are key for de-politicising the context that the project aims to address and through authorising knowledge (of climate change or markets for example). Anti-politics is therefore the process of separating direct technical objectives, such as conserving forests or increasing carbon sequestration, from social transformation and political change (Bebbington, 2005; Büscher, 2010).

We see analyses of rendering technical and anti-politics in the works of Ferguson (1994) who critiques technical approaches in the ‘deployment of development’ and Li (2007b) who explores “expert” interventions that attempt to improve the welfare of the poor through “development”. Bernstein (1996) addresses the political nature of markets by calling for a deeper exploration into “real markets”. Sikor and Pham (2005) and Bourdieu (2005) show that just as markets are not simply economic agreements among actors, land use decisions are highly political and cannot function without politicised relations. Rules around these projects and markets are highly technical, guided as they are by complex international laws, conventions and treaties. REDD+ is also highly technical in its conceptualisation (ie. carbon stock and markets, mapping, jurisdictional approaches, benefit sharing) and language (ie. trade-offs, decarbonisation, biomass, additionality, biotrade) (UN-REDD, 2015).

The process of bringing diverse interests together on a global scale requires making some ‘trade-offs’ (to use a technical term) in order to come to consensus around the points on which actors can agree. These trade-offs result in critiques of global agreements as ‘watered down’ or

‘toothless’; however, without rendering technical and anti-politics, these initiatives may not take root at all. Anti-political policy discourse is “required to conceal ideological differences, to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests, to build coalitions, to distribute agency and to multiply criteria of success within project systems” (Mosse, 2004, p.663). It is therefore sometimes necessary in order to galvanise actors with divergent perspectives around a trajectory of change, be it reduction of deforestation, improvement of production, or increased ‘social responsibility’. Global entities such as the United Nations, World Bank, and World Trade Organization are limited in their mandate to become engaged in the politics of the countries in which they work, even if they recognise the importance of politics and political solutions. As Li (2007b) shows, accounting for politics in projects is inherently challenging. We understand the difficulty in problematising political quagmires in practical arrangements that can be addressed and reported on under the auspices of “development” projects, and analyse some of the implications for REDD+ and other global climate change initiatives.

## 2.2. Justice and legitimacy

Conservation, PES and REDD+ projects are often framed in distributive terms (Walker, 2009; Fraser, 2003), conceptualising justice, or fairness (Rawls, 1999; Clayton, 1998), as the equitable distribution of economic benefits and costs (Fraser, 2009). Several studies on equity within REDD+ take this approach (eg Nathan and Pasgaard, 2017). More fundamentally, however, distributive justice refers to the equitable distribution, or redistribution, of wealth and resources (Fraser, 2000). McDermott et al. (2013) argue that PES project implementers ought to conceptualise justice more broadly than simply distributive notions of fairness or equity. These larger notions of justice, which are trickier for projects to operationalise, include recognition and representation (Fraser, 2009; Walker, 2009; Schlosberg, 2007; Forsyth and Sikor, 2013; Faye, 2015; Taylor 1994; Nikolakis et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2016; Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Recognition refers to social status, and overcoming subordination (Fraser, 2000). Representation refers to political participation, or participation in decision making more broadly (Fraser, 2009). Recognition and representation are central notions of justice, which we link to the legitimacy of projects below. They are political in the sense that different actors and stakeholders may define recognition and representation justice differently, and may contest whether or not they have been achieved (Fraser, 2003).

Sikor and Stahl (2011) found that representation (in a procedural sense) was lacking in forest governance projects because local forest users were not invited to participate in making decisions affecting forest governance (see also Mosse, 2004). At a deeper level, projects are often pushed to be apolitical, or even anti-political, by foundations and bilateral donors. Li (2007b) and Ferguson (1994) show how large-scale projects, especially implemented by the State or multilateral development actors, do this in order to nudge the initiatives forward, but fail to realise that the delays and failures they experience are rooted in ignoring political processes rather than pulling the right technical lever. As a result, project proponents are actively discouraged from identifying and incorporating these political dimensions of justice, which deal directly with power and require socio-political transformations far beyond what, say, a coffee agroforestry project would provide on its own.

We understand recognition and representation as fundamentally about meaningful participation in decision-making, including having a seat at the table, having a voice, and ultimately having power (Lidskog and Elander, 2007; Fraser, 2009). Fraser (2003, 2009) argues that justice is ‘parity of participation’ and that parity of participation requires that conditions of material distribution, representation, and recognition be met. In this framing, participation is not merely a procedural activity that leads to justice, but justice itself, because participation necessarily implies having a voice and the power to secure material and non-material objectives.

There are risks, though, that projects may *appear* to be inclusive and participatory by meeting certain technical criteria but nevertheless exclude or fail to represent all ‘stakeholders’, another technical term (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009). It is not enough to have merely ostensible representation in decision-making spaces, or even necessarily a seat at the table; citizens or project stakeholders also need to have real mechanisms to elect their leaders and hold them accountable, ensuring that their interests, including material resource distribution and recognition of rights, are represented and backed by powers (cf. Ribot, 2011). The relationships among these dimensions, or notions, of justice are complex (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). For example, in our cases, recognition is tied to both the social status of marginalised populations and to their rights to land and natural resources (distributive justice), as well as to their right to participation and representation.

Sikor and Newell (2014) suggest that justice is a ‘constitutive element’ of legitimacy. Distinctions between different notions of justice and legitimacy are neither fixed nor independent of one another. One conceptualisation of legitimacy is that it is a confirmation of recognition (Morris, 1998; Kowler, 2013). Legitimacy refers to “the way in which rules and outcomes are negotiated, administered and accepted by stakeholders, including a fair distribution of decision-making power” (Corbera and Schroeder, 2011, p.94). In this way it refers both to the process and its outcomes, and a legitimate process is more likely to lead to a legitimate, or valid, outcome.

The extent to which different notions of justice are employed has a direct influence on legitimacy. Following Fraser’s idea of justice, we propose that more legitimate outcomes will be associated with projects or initiatives that address not only the technical aspects of distribution, but also its political aspects, together with recognition and representation. Failure to address political notions of justice leads to illegitimacy. Legitimate processes are more likely to lead to a match between the notions of justice employed by projects and those considered important by local people.

The question of why some notions of justice (if any) are incorporated into project design and implementation and others are not has to do with politics, and how compatible these notions of justice are with the project implementers’ and funders’ objectives (cf. Mosse, 2004). Specifically in REDD+, the process of rendering technical has established the sources of authority in REDD+ at a global scale, which McDermott et al. (2012) argue are government sovereignty, finance and market-based mechanisms (voluntary carbon markets). These sources of authority are particularly prone to rendering projects technical and advancing an anti-politics agenda, because they are ostensibly politically ‘neutral’ and are guided by anti-political discourses (cf. Li, 2007b; Ferguson, 1994). On the ground, these sources of authority are subject to re-interpretation and “translation” (Sanders et al., 2017) by multiple intervening actors. These re-interpretations may be subject to more divergent understandings the larger the project and the more global actors involved (Martin et al., 2016). Although anti-politics may be perceived by policy-makers as the only way to operationalise their initiatives, is this the Achilles’ heel of conservation and REDD+ projects?

We use these theories to frame and understand our data, and come back to them in our discussion section, which suggests the ways that these theories may work together toward what we understand as ‘messiness’. All of the cases studied share two common features: (1) they are heavily influenced by global-level actors and (2) they have direct impact on both local people and the forests on which they depend. We conduct an empirical analysis of multi-level governance systems to better understand why (some) projects fail and why there are so frequently claims of injustice that serve to de-legitimise projects and authorities, leading to ineffectiveness if not immediately, over time. Before sharing our results, we explain the methods we used to collect and analyse data.

### 3. Methods

Our data are from 742 semi-structured interviews from 54 cases of land use and land use change in Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Tanzania and Vietnam with actors from local communities, governments from local to national, companies, NGOs and indigenous peoples' organisations collected from 2013 to 2015. The purpose of the research was to understand how land use change occurred and the role and influence of initiatives to control deforestation and forest degradation. The dataset was derived from interviews regarding authority, benefit sharing, legitimacy, 'fairness', drivers of deforestation and relationships among actors from a multi-level governance perspective in land use changes. Interview questions (see [Burga et al., 2015](#)) were informed by a detailed literature review (see [Saito-Jensen, 2015](#)) and crafted into key informant and case study instruments specifically tailored for government officials, village leaders, corporate project proponents, and civil society. Interviewers were then trained and had access to a field research training guide.

In each country, we selected two to three sub-national jurisdictions (provinces, states, or districts) that key informants identified as having a mix of activities driving deforestation as well as initiatives aimed at conservation and/or decreasing carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. Within each sub-national jurisdiction, we selected about five sites based on key informant interviews: both REDD+ and non-REDD+ project areas, as well as sites of deforestation. Further details on the cases are available in the country reports for Indonesia ([Myers et al., 2016](#)), Peru ([Kowler et al., 2016](#)), Mexico ([Trench et al. forthcoming](#)), Tanzania ([Kijazi et al., 2017](#)) and Vietnam ([Yang et al., 2016](#)). [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the cases in each country by type of land use change.

Interview notes were entered into QSR NVIVO and coded by researchers in each country using a common coding tree with the main concepts we analysed based on an extensive literature review (see [Ravikumar et al., 2015](#)). Each country developed a working paper, which analysed the main findings from the eight to 14 cases studied in each country.

For this contribution, we analysed interview notes by querying land use conflict, procedural legitimacy, and outcome legitimacy codes. This resulted in 361 interviews (Indonesia  $n = 98$ , Mexico,  $n = 52$ , Peru  $n = 112$ , Vietnam  $n = 99$ ) for analysis, covering all countries in our study. Within these interviews, we also performed some free text searches of keywords such as 'expectation' (22 interviews), 'promise' (19 interviews) and 'fair' (123 interviews). At the time of drafting this document, data from all countries except Tanzania were entered in the database. Therefore, we used the country report to include data from Tanzania.

### 4. Results

We organise our findings by three overarching features of the governance systems of projects that we identified across countries and land use types. First, concerns regarding distribution were limited to the technical lens of 'benefit sharing'. Second, and related to the first, the focus on the technical most often came at the expense of recognition of

local people, and importantly of their rights to territory or land, and of their representation or meaningful participation. Third, the lack of representation and recognition justices resulted in illegitimacies. We explore these three findings here using empirical evidence from the cases.

#### 4.1. Distributive justice as 'benefit sharing'

Benefit-sharing is a central tenet of REDD+ ([Luttrell et al., 2013](#)). Most of the projects (REDD+, conservation, and non-conservation) we studied had some sort of benefit-sharing scheme, often framing 'co-benefits' in anti-political terms, aimed either at compensating community members for losses (eg. restricting access to a conservation area and giving seedlings to plant on farmland) or providing incentives intended to change behavior (eg. developing livelihood options that encourage activities that avoid deforestation). Specific measures included the distribution of cash benefits, as well as non-cash co-benefits such as capacity-building, livelihoods development and so on. We are careful not to frame these distributive (or even technical) solutions as necessarily negative, and understand them as part of realising solutions to complex problems. Nevertheless, benefit sharing was a primary source of conflict, and the legitimacy of technical solutions depended largely on the extent to which they aligned with local notions of justice and political realities.

A few of the projects provided some kind of cash benefit although more were set up to do so pending funding, such as from REDD+ or carbon agreements, in the future. Tanzania is probably the country where cash payments at a number of REDD+ pilot project sites were designed most explicitly as experiments. The various pilot projects took different approaches. The MJUMITA/TFCG project may have done the most to assure alignment with the preferences of villagers: specific distribution rules were made by community members via village assemblies and set in village by-laws; project implementers organised meetings at the sub-village level prior to these larger assemblies, including with women and other relatively marginalised community members, to improve overall participation and representation ([Kijazi et al., 2017](#)).

Cash payments in Vietnam's national PES program, which was not designed with community input, were more problematic. In Dien Bien, a respondent found it difficult to assess the fairness of the distribution of benefits from the project. "People who get higher payments think that this is a fair arrangement. Meanwhile, local people, who get small payments, think that this arrangement is unfair," he commented. Furthermore, intra-village benefit sharing is commonly perceived as fair, as each household received an equal payment per hectare. Inter-village distributions resulted in perceived injustices from a wider perspective as there could be large disparities in payment amounts between villages (cf. [Loft et al., 2017](#)).

Non-monetary benefits were more common across the cases. In some sites, respondents emphasised that their so-called 'co-benefits' were in fact the most important benefits that initiatives delivered to communities. Co-benefits included increased knowledge about ecosystem services, technical skills for improved production systems such as agroforestry, conservation management, leadership skills, awareness of laws and standards, livelihood development and territorial planning. These benefits were disproportionately mentioned by project implementers rather than by community members themselves. Two-thirds (102/153) of respondent mentions of capacity building as a co-benefit came from State respondents. Another 12 per cent came from national NGOs. Consequently, several of the espoused 'co-benefits' included "awareness of the park and processes" as mentioned by a State official in San Martin, Peru. Forest-protection projects in Vietnam also highlighted awareness of rules as a benefit.

Aside from different notions of what constitutes a 'benefit', project implementers and communities did not always have the same interpretation of what is equitable or fair. For example, unequal distribution of land in a community forest project led by local actors in West

**Table 1**

Total of cases by country and dominant land use change.

	Indonesia	Mexico	Peru	Tanzania	Vietnam
Conservation non-REDD+	3	2	3	–	3
Conservation REDD+	3	4	6	7	1
Non-conservation (agriculture, plantations, livestock, hydropower, mining, charcoal production and mining)	4	4	5	5	4

Kalimantan, Indonesia, was justified by community members because it was based on customary land tenure and the areas of land cultivated by their ancestors. Even though the distribution was uneven, it was considered fair because decisions were embedded in customs and politics. In Mexico, a PES project recognised the land tenure status quo established by a system of seniority, and was largely considered legitimate by ejido (common land parcel) members, even by some of those who were excluded. Initiatives that failed to take local interpretations of equity into account were more contested.

The implementation, or even prospective implementation, of land use change is not only interpreted politically at many levels, but also shapes the politics among actors affected by the change. We saw this in all types of land use change and starting at early planning stages. Local politics, which may have included dormant contestations, came to the fore when new opportunities to derive benefits were presented as part of the (technical) rollout of REDD+ initiatives. This happened in the case of a REDD+ pilot in Central Kalimantan, which spurred contestation among communities when project implementation began. We found more mentions of conflict in this case than any other in our study. The majority of conflicts were between communities and the national government's REDD+ project implementer and were rooted in historical relations (Sanders et al., 2017). Other issues, as we found in a functioning PES project in Mexico, relate to struggles to ensure that cash benefits were not captured by local elites, which proved to be deeply political.

Benefit-sharing challenges were commonly characterised by conflicts among actors (31% of conflicts mentioned by respondents), primarily related to issues between communities and the State or companies, and often over land claims. Other challenges commonly mentioned included lack of clarity or information (22%), financial issues regarding distribution, payment terms etc. (19%) and differing interpretations of the process or aims of the land use change (15%). Differences of understanding between local communities and project implementers and/or the State were common. As one respondent from Central Kalimantan mentioned, doing business with the State is difficult for local communities, because the bureaucracy is too complicated.

Nevertheless, is it important to note that technical solutions, in some cases, equipped local communities to align with legal requirements to make claims based on customary land use. For example, some projects included mapping exercises, which supported land claims by communities in Indonesia and Peru (although none of these mapping exercises led directly to the transfer of ownership rights to communities). Although intended for land use planning in the projects, community groups aspired to use them as explicitly political tools, or at least perceived that their claims to land might be more secure after being 'officially' mapped. Processes that included participatory, community-led exercises were not always free of contestation, but when negotiated through discussion and when customary land use allocations were incorporated, they were near-universally considered to be legitimate. We also saw the inverse, in which social forestry mapping recognised only a portion of claimed customary land and was therefore seen by some community members as illegitimate and a barrier to future customary claims (see Myers et al., 2017).

One case in particular demonstrates the conflicts between the technical benefit-sharing approach and more substantive distributive justice (also associated with recognition justice, in this case). In a national park case in West Kalimantan, community members refused 'benefit sharing' and compensatory payments of employment, payment for environmental services, and infrastructure development as they interpreted acceptance of any compensation to signify an admission of State authority over what they claimed as their customary forest land – a claim that the state refused to recognise (Myers and Muhajir, 2015). In this case, recognition of their land right was the only legitimate solution.

#### 4.2. Representation and recognition

Representation and recognition are salient issues across the cases, yet many projects failed to address them in substantive ways. This section highlights the nature and importance of these two concerns in the study sites, while the next section focuses on the illegitimacies resulting from the failure to address them.

Our findings most relevant to representation justice are probably those related to the ways in which local people were involved in projects such as through free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) mechanisms, or beyond consent, to full engagement (through accountable representation) in project design and decision making. Many projects sought some form of community consent, but this ranged from door-to-door household discussions to communications only with community leaders. In a few cases, project implementers did not provide full information because they did not want to generate unreasonable expectations, specifically with regard to REDD+, or they failed to provide information that was understandable, due to the complexities of REDD+. The legitimacy of these processes appear closely related to the depth of engagement, as well as to historical relationships. Where these relations were problematic, as in some areas near nature reserves in Tanzania or in the former Mega Rice project areas in Central Kalimantan, communities were considerably more distrustful.

In a REDD+ case in Ucayali, Peru, project proponents created a 'representative organisation' made up of community indigenous authorities to avoid dealing directly with the broader community. The communities agreed because it would provide them a voice to which the project proponents would listen. The solution was efficient for the project proponents, but hardly effective for communities, as they saw their perspectives filtered through a small group that had little decision-making power and struggled to communicate technical project information to the local farmers they represented.

As mentioned previously, recognition of forest-based populations is closely tied to land rights. And other studies have noted the importance of land tenure particularly for REDD+ (Sunderlin et al., 2014) and many PES schemes. Yet across the sites, land tenure, if addressed, was often seen more as an instrumental or technical concern than as an issue of justice based on recognition and social inclusion (cf. Larson et al., 2013); this contrasts with grassroots demands, but it does not mean that local people do not take advantage of mapping initiatives as political tools. A notable exception was a community-based forestry project in West Kalimantan facilitated by a national NGO in which great efforts were made to encourage a wide range of community stakeholders to participate in the scheme. A map was developed using customary land allocations and all but two households in the community participated in the mapping, rule-making, and planning of the scheme.

Some of the pilot REDD+ projects in Tanzania pushed successfully for the reinterpretation of existing land laws to allow for the recognition of village lands that had previously been classified as general public lands. Several of the Peru cases demonstrated efforts to reduce threats to land-tenure security by setting up mechanisms to stop encroachment into project areas. Local people control these areas in return for other benefits, but also benefit from the collective effort to secure their own properties. However, in only a few cases (in Peru and Tanzania) did the project proponent make a concrete commitment to secure land titles for local people.

The most salient challenge for projects was addressing land conflicts. A provincial government official in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia mentioned that forest governance systems (regulations) had failed due to land conflicts. Across the cases, both REDD+ and non-REDD+, these conflicts were primarily between local communities and government (n = 201), followed by communities and companies (n = 51, mostly in non-conservation cases) and communities against communities (n = 43).

Vietnamese, Peruvian and Indonesian cases exemplified community against community struggles involving migrants. As one village level

respondent in Vietnam explained, “In the last few years, there have been 11 households of H’mong ethnic group newly migrated to Huoi Vang village. These households have destroyed around 10 ha of forests for their agricultural cultivation.” Further conflicts among communities were often based on customary claims that had dormant contestations triggered by the implementation of a project. In Tanzania, communities claimed forest areas for REDD+ that other villages had previously accessed, leading to conflict. Community against community land conflicts in all countries reflected contested boundaries and land resource uses for ranching, agriculture, and forests. In some cases, such as in Muong Pon, Vietnam, community members were pitted against one another on ideological grounds: preventing land degradation on sloping lands versus agricultural expansion for livelihoods. In others, communities wanting agricultural production were united against the State, which wanted to protect forests as in Con Ken, Vietnam, and against a company on deforested rubber plantations as in Tin Toc, Vietnam.

REDD+ cases showed some ability to respond to conflict even when they stemmed from lack of attention to recognition and representation. A REDD+ case in Vietnam showed that the project implementers worked with local communities to ensure systems of clear communication and problem solving that ensured better representation. Similarly, in Indonesia, procedures for communicating and working with communities were changed in a REDD+ project that experienced significant resistance by some communities and grassroots NGOs. The change, in the form of community consultations and agreements that ensured better clarity and participation in decision-making processes, motivated some disconcerted communities to continue with the project.

In the Peruvian Alto Mayo REDD+ project, an NGO partnered with the government to make conservation agreements with local settlers who were occupying a protected area and would otherwise be threatened with expulsion. Local communities initially resisted the deal because they believed their land was being bought up by the NGO and its corporate partner. Responding to these charges, the NGO carried out a much more far-reaching participatory information sharing process, to ensure that local people understood the project. The process won over many people living in the area, who, based on their limited options, saw the process as legitimate and the project as their best option. The project now signs conservation contracts with households, renewed annually, which grant them technical support to improve coffee production in return for zero deforestation. Nevertheless, some people did not wish to participate in the program - another case demonstrating how distribution options have been rejected by those who still believe their land rights should be recognised.

#### 4.3. Legitimacy

Legitimate initiatives to change land use practices required much more substantial attention to social justice. When projects failed to address recognition and representation, or addressed deep-seated problems only with technical responses, conflicts tended to bubble to the surface and claims of illegitimacy were made by some stakeholders. Failures of recognition included a lack of attention to cultural practices and territorial claims. Failures of representations comprised a lack of voice or power in decision-making processes, which often included coerced or extremely limited participation (including an over-reliance on a small number of leaders to represent local community interests) for so-called consent. Several of our cases demonstrate clearly flawed processes, including for obtaining consent, as well as confusion and lack of transparency that affected the overall legitimacy of the project.

We can learn about this from non-REDD+ cases. In San Martin Peru, conflict arose between migrants and Awajun indigenous people. The 14 Awajun communities in the area existed in relative peace with migrants since they started arriving in the 1960s, fostered by State settlement programmes. The Awajun benefitted from rents they charged the migrants for access to land for agriculture, whilst the Awajun people continued to subsist primarily on hunting and

gathering, as they had done historically. As a local Awajun resident explained, there were few problems until the Awajun became more aware of the effects of renting out land, specifically deforestation and commensurate loss of wildlife, and sought to evict migrants from their land. The migrants claimed use rights and the framing of migrants by the Awajun shifted from one of co-existence based on land rents to a discourse of ‘invasion’. Therefore, while outcomes were once considered legitimate, they now consider the migrants as illegitimate invaders. Similarly, in a national park case in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, prior ‘consent’ by community leaders was based on suppressing an immediate threat (real or perceived) of logging in the area. A State forestry official obtained the signatures of local communities required to enact the park in the 1970s and 1980s, and villagers report that there was little visible discontent in the communities until almost 20 years later, when conflict arose based on claims of customary ownership over now protected forests and the right to engage in livelihood activities on those lands. In these cases, the messiness of political realities arose from the implementations of distributive notions of justice based on illegitimate processes, which ignored recognition and representational notions of justice.

In many cases, promises were made by project proponents, but were not fulfilled. As one Indonesian village level actor commented, the REDD+ implementer “always said yes to us every meeting, but in practice [they] started to implement differently to what was said in the meeting.” Project implementers used “sweet words”, according to community members in Indonesia, to entice community consent to the project, but when local communities realised that promises of financial benefit-sharing and co-benefits are either delayed or ‘forgotten’, legitimacy became severely compromised. Some villagers described the promises as having been “forgotten” and regretted not documenting the pretenses under which the communities issue ‘consent’ to the land use change. Another form of broken promises mentioned by community members was politicians making promises during elections. Frustration also arose from differing promises between lead actors. In Dien Bien, Vietnam, villagers were left confused by competing promises made by a rubber plantation company, district government and provincial governments. In Chiapas, Mexico, the state government unilaterally launched a ‘REDD+’ programme in 2011, exclusively favouring one extensive agrarian community in the Lacandon Forest in a clear bid to win political capital and cement political loyalties in a region with a history of armed insurgency. This program distributed cash payments amongst the 1700 rights holders with no mechanisms for MRV (monitoring, reporting and verification) and was seen as unjust by other regional actors; it severely affected the legitimacy of REDD+ in the state, to the extent that for several years most actors preferred to talk of low emissions development and not REDD+.

Corruption, coercion and omissions of information were also frequent causes of claims of injustice and procedural illegitimacy. These issues arose with the allocation of land, questionable permissions issued to land users (mostly companies) by local leaders and government officials, and preferential distributions of benefits. In Mexico, a landholder in a REDD+ scheme stated, “I know that [the project implementer] has been giving out higher payments, up to 1000 pesos per hectare. But they only accept their personal friends into this program. That’s because, in the neighbouring community of Nuevo Mundo and Tekal, there are government officials who have personal interests. One government counsellor has 400 ha there that are in the PES scheme, along with another 600 ha in PES in Campeche: this means he receives in only one payment a million pesos! Corruption is really a mess.”

Problems related to transparency featured prominently. In an attempt to temper the expectations of villagers, implementers of a REDD+ case in Peru withheld information pertaining to the project. Although done to ‘protect’ communities, this strategy of omissions ultimately backfired and resulted in distrust among community members of the company, which had to be dispelled later. In more suspect cases, such as the national park case in Indonesia, failure to disclose

implications of the creation of the park resulted in intense conflict between the State and communities. At times, lack of information was about the proposed land use change (including local communities being misled) and in others, about possible alternatives that communities could consider along with potential burdens from associated land use change. We therefore found several cases of illegitimacy stemming from incomplete information and omissions by project proponents. Although communities were ‘informed’, the information was incomplete and often insufficient for informed consent.

Though identifying illegitimacy is fairly straightforward, due to contestation or conflict, legitimacy is more problematic, as citizens may accept their circumstances without open complaint or conflict for a variety of reasons, such as fear, lack of viable solutions or hopelessness. Claimants of illegitimacy and injustice were also found to sacrifice the political, sometimes seen as too messy (or perhaps risky), in order to obtain technical distributive benefits. For example, a villager involved in the development of a community forest (a form of temporary forest management rights supervised by the State) in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, understood that management rights fell short of the community’s primary claim of customary ownership of the forest, but suggested that management rights are “better than nothing”. In Vietnam, allocation of forest rights is equated to decentralisation of forests to local people, but forestland was originally seized by the government as State property, and overall allocation shows preferences still towards state organisations (Phuc and Nghi, 2014). In most cases, poorer quality forests have been returned to communities in comparison, but with heightened usage restrictions and burdens (thereby less rights). Communities accepted this transition as it provides them with technical authority over forests, but fails to satisfy political customary claims that affords communities with control over customary lands. In all of these examples, there is clear evidence of legitimacy, but the expectations of community members have been tempered, leading to acceptable (for the moment) outcomes achieved through lackluster procedures resulting from multiple negotiated trade-offs.

Projects regarded as more legitimate by local communities often featured discussions among community members and project proponents about risks and alternatives, and were careful not to set false expectations. By engaging community-members in decision-making (albeit with likely differential powers), and using customary logics regarding resource access rights, projects were viewed as more legitimate by community members. This was especially clear in projects with reduced roles for global actors. In El Ocote, Chiapas, Mexico, the local NGO organising carbon valuation explained the potential for carbon sales, but was cautious to ensure that expectations were not raised. In West Kalimantan, community members agreed to set up a social forestry project understanding the risks that carbon sales may not be feasible. At the same time, local people achieved this level of participation by insisting upon it with their allies. The bilateral REDD+ pilot project in Central Kalimantan changed its approach part way through its implementation amidst resistance from some villagers and NGOs about the rigid implementation structure of the project, and emphasised the importance of transparency and expectation management.

## 5. Discussion

We now turn back to the theories we introduced in the beginning of this contribution and consider how our findings relate to rendering technical and distribution, lack of representation and recognition, and illegitimacy. We focus this discussion on how our findings relate to one another in a framework we suggest can be understood as messiness. We first provide an analysis of our empirical data and then show our proposed model of messiness, on which we invite feedback from other scholars.

### 5.1. Analysis of empirical data

The focus on ‘benefit sharing’ by project implementers shows a preference for the technical. Disproportionate reporting of benefits by project implementers indicates the differences in definition of what a benefit is. The state official in San Martin, Peru who cited awareness of park rules as a benefit to local people illustrates this point well. In any case, receiving a project benefit is far from addressing underlying economic inequities. This is epitomised in the national park case in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, where local people refused the benefits offered to them by the park authorities on the basis that accepting these benefits would compromise their more fundamental objective of forcing the state to recognise their customary land claims.

We observed less conflict when distribution was based on custom, or embedded in local notions of equity, rather than external ideas that would disruptively transform them, in the sense that Polanyi (1945) discusses. Even when distribution was unequal, it was sometimes understood as ‘fair’ on the grounds of custom. We found that many local people considered custom to be a sufficient justification for allocating compensation. At the same time, we understand that while recognition of custom is an important component of justice, it is not sufficient, and may have its own embedded injustices (including injustices that fall along gender, ethnic, or kinship lines). While this applied in Indonesia and Mexican *ejidos*, Peru and Vietnam included several cases of migration in which migrants were framed as ‘invaders’ by indigenous communities. We saw in Peru that migrants claimed rights in different ways than indigenous peoples- based on contractual arrangements (distribution) rather than on customary land claims (recognition). This technical argument by the migrants was argued in political terms by indigenous peoples, resulting in messiness that will be challenging to resolve as each party applies different logics to their claims of justice. Moreover, in Peru, different sets of laws and norms are deployed to secure recognition of private agricultural parcels or of collective indigenous territories; which of these institutions should govern contested lands is of course itself subject to political contestation. In Vietnam, relocations of populations were justified by the State, however claims to forest lands were contested from customary perspectives, whose proponents were not involved in land use allocations.

Lack of complete information also jeopardises the freedom with which community actors provide consent for land use change, if they are afforded the opportunity. Freedom is subject to a number of conditions that can restrict or enable the extent to which actors have choices (cf. Sen, 1999). With no other choice, or no awareness of another choice, communities may be forced to consent to projects for lack of other options. Instances of community members surprised by changes, or experiencing outcomes inconsistent with promises and expectations, were found throughout our study. Limited community consultations with village leaders sometimes resulted in consent, but we found that even when protest was not evident in early stages of the project, it arose several years, or even a generation, later, as in a national park case in Indonesia (Myers and Muhajir, 2015). In these cases, we saw agreements that had often been made with dubious representation and participation of local community members and that decisions were anti-political. REDD+ cases were no exception, and we found cases in which several community members, sub-national government officials and NGOs claimed that they had inadequate information or access to fora for participation (see also Cromberg et al., 2014; Suiseeya and Caplow, 2013). While initial decisions may have been uncontested, over time, they became messy as unclear rules were enforced, and unmentioned restrictions to access to land or benefits were implemented. These claims of injustice could be understood as a kind of backward looking generational justice (cf. Page, 2007) in which claimants in the present contest the processes and outcomes made in the past regardless of how they were interpreted at the time (see Myers and Muhajir, 2015 for more detail).

While the extent to which communities were free and informed is

questionable in many cases, we also showed that prior consent, or consent at any time, was absent from many of the initiatives. These cases may represent the most overt forms of illegitimacy; they are the most recognisable at early stages of project implementation. Over time, however, as unkept promises become apparent, or communities learn about other possible land use options, other illegitimacies can also come to light.

Meanwhile, we saw that while ‘participation’ was valued by a range of actors across the cases and countries, understandings of participation varied considerably. Project implementers and authorities often interpreted participation as meeting a minimum standard (legal, or otherwise accepted), which might be, for example, holding an informational meeting or obtaining the signature of an elected leader. However, the authority of the leader to consent was often contested, thereby dis-equating to representation. Community members voiced concerns that they were not represented in decisions even when there was compliance with statutory laws. In other instances, we saw consent by coercion and mandatory participation which ensured the illusion of participation through attendance, but, as respondents reported, little space to voice opinions, let alone effect change.

Recognition was elusive across the cases. Even though community members were sometimes afforded rights to manage forest areas (based on technical agreements and monitoring), claims over forest ownership based on customary rights were often met with resistance by the State. Yet the contestations and conflicts that were reported by respondents were often framed in recognition terms based on cultural heritage, custom, and land rights. At the same time, there were some conservation and REDD+ cases that exemplified the need for clear and secure land tenure not as an end in itself, or as a matter of recognition justice, but as a precondition for efficient and equitable distributions of market-derived monetary benefits.

Addressing custom and local recognition requires a level of flexibility that is challenging for projects heavily influenced by global actors, like REDD+, which renders technical in order to come to global consensus and constitute a ‘project’. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the contestations that emerge precisely as a result of negotiating ‘messiness’ can lead to political wins for historically marginalised groups. REDD+ and its market-driven logics were opposed globally by the environmental left and some indigenous rights coalitions on the grounds that commodifying forests for their stored carbon would lead to land grabs (among other reasons). We have yet to see REDD+ result in widespread land grabs. Yet, concerns with land grabs have galvanised political organisation to support indigenous rights, and this international movement has forced at least some governments to think seriously about recognising customary land rights for local people. One major policy win for indigenous peoples that emerged from this movement was the Indonesian constitutional court ruling of 2012 requiring that customary land rights be legally recognised, even though the details of precisely how they will be recognised remain unclear (Myers et al., 2016).

## 5.2. The concept of messiness

We refer to the mismatches between different stakeholders’ preferred notions of justice and legitimacy, and the notions of justice that conservation and development projects deliver in practice, as ‘messiness.’ In this context, ‘messiness’ refers to the political leakage from a system rendered technical. Li (2007a) refers to “messiness” as the complexity of the social world that is rendered technical. Our focus is more on the remnants of a system rendered technical. Similarly, Cleaver (2017) refers to messiness as complexity, where our use of the term is specifically anti-political. For us, ‘Messiness’ is the manifestation of illegitimacies bubbling beneath the surface of initiatives, sometimes showing itself in the forms of protest and conflict. Rendering technical is difficult to implement perfectly, and is surely aimed to simplify, to avoid conflict, and to avoid the messiness of politics. Yet, failure to

address the logics of a wide range of stakeholders in a multi-level governance system results in dissatisfaction, injustices, and questions about the legitimacy not only of the project, but also of those who authorise knowledge within the project and the sources of their authority (see also McDermott et al., 2012). These failures, in turn, breed “messiness”. While our framing is based on robust literatures on justice and legitimacy discussed in Section 2, our concept of messiness both suggests how justice and legitimacy can relate to one another and adds some detail about the effects of focussing on technical approaches and ignoring political ones. We explain the relationships among justice, legitimacy and messiness below.

Projects that fail to appreciate the complexity of politics are setting themselves up for failure (Chhotray, 2007; Kashwan, 2013; Ferguson, 1994). As Rondinelli (2013) shows, the bigger the project, the more technical and messy it will become. We argue that messiness can be constructive by serving as an indicator that something in the governance systems needs to be corrected, which if addressed in a way that actors consider just, could alleviate more significant injustices. Since multi-level governance is a process of constant negotiation (Marks, 1992), fissures in project legitimacy are inevitable as powers shift among actors. Messiness highlights these fissures and provides an opportunity for actors to address underlying problems; however, as we will show, anti-political fixes can serve to perpetuate messiness and illegitimacy.

Anti-politics is co-produced by both the project implementers and the ‘subjects’ who may not see the project in the same way (Bending and Rosendo, 2006; Büscher, 2010). As Chhotray (2007) found, depoliticised natural resource user groups eventually run into conflicts when politics resurface. The technical nature of REDD+ accentuates anti-politics, and therefore messiness, by working on issues directly pertaining to land on which local people lay customary claims. Indigenous rights discourses that stood in opposition to REDD+ have in some ways been co-opted by the project itself, enlisting indigenous people in technical and market-oriented activities such as monitoring carbon stocks in their communities. At the same time, REDD+, PES and conservation projects feature their own terms, lexicon, conditions, and notions of development and environmental management (cf. Gregorio et al., 2015; Westholm and Arora-Jonsson, 2015; Sunderlin and Atmadja, 2009). REDD+, for example, includes embedded notions of forests: that they are assets to be protected, and that there are ways to measure and make payments based on standards of management performance (Sunderlin and Atmadja, 2009). Messiness therefore explains why some actors shift to the logics of the technocrats in order to make progress on their objectives or claims which might otherwise be hard to couch in the political language and logics of the State or other actors who influence land use.

Another source of messiness is politically-motivated (conscious or subconscious) divergent interpretations of rules, processes, and objectives (cf. Sanders et al., 2017; Pasgaard, 2015). When actors believe they are addressing the same issue in the same ways, but actually have different interpretations, a latent form of messiness can emerge that may only be evident once a different perspective is adopted by a range of actors. Projects can therefore be viewed as a success from one perspective but a failure from another (see Sanders et al., 2017 as an example).

We suggest that messiness is at the same time an indicator of failures to appreciate the political nature of projects (especially the through recognition and representation, but also through distribution), and a cause for what Li (2007a) calls ‘managing failure’, ‘anti-politics’ and ‘reassembling’ and we refer to as ‘fixes’, which are often technical in nature and perpetuate the cycle of messiness. Overt messiness may result in protests that threaten the very existence of the project. In the case of REDD+, for example, customary land rights claimants have used the ‘No Rights, No REDD+’ mantra. In this call, claimants and activists demand that land tenure rights be clarified and secured before REDD+ moves ahead. As a politically-charged demand, the complexity



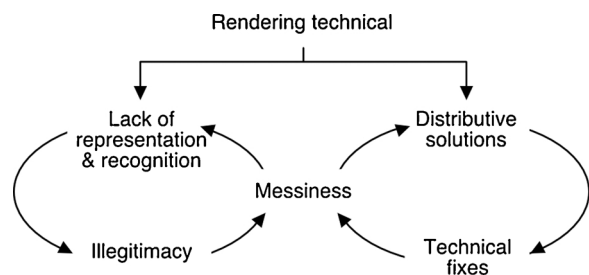


Fig. 1. Theoretical underpinnings of messiness.  
Source: original by authors.

of which must be dealt with in political terms, it presents a major obstacle to REDD+ as a whole (see Sunderlin et al. (2014) for more on the obstacle that land tenure security presents to REDD+ implementation). As messiness becomes evident to actors in decision making roles, these actors have impetus to adjust the system to reduce the messiness. The ways in which the system is adjusted may result in more or less messiness, depending on what perspectives are taken into account, and how open the project proponents are to engaging in politics.

We consider the links between the concepts in Fig. 1, which diagrams how REDD+, PES, and conservation projects, often guided by global notions of justice, tend toward distributive solutions if they attempt to address justice at all (cf. Sikor and Câm, 2016; Luttrell et al., 2013), thereby negating issues of representation and recognition. These omissions result in illegitimacy from the perspectives of actors that claim injustice. Lack of legitimacy leads to messiness though direct discontent with representation and recognition in projects while technical fixes to address protest and claims of injustice perpetuate these cycles. Our argument is not that all distribution justices are technical, but that they tend to be more operational than representation or recognition in systems rendered technical.

As we see in our data, distributive notions of justice do not rely on representation or recognition and are often used by authorities and project implementers as the sole justice perspective in the projects, if any justice lens is applied at all. This is to say that it is possible to have a distributive notion of justice without any acknowledgement of non-distributional claims that people make (Martin et al., 2016). Claims for recognition can also be operationalised by authorities and project implementers in distributional terms, resulting in offering compensatory economic benefits for the loss of rights or access to resources, as we saw in many of the cases. In this way, distribution served as a means to placate claimants in order to bury more challenging justice claims. Although the translation of non-distributional claims to distributional claims tends to obscure more highly contested political demands, such as for land rights recognitions, distribution can itself be political. This is because the process of determining who gets what is a result of negotiation among competing interests, with different groups exercising power to secure their material objectives: in other words, through politics. The results of distribution are also highly political, especially where equity is compromised (cf. Pasgaard and Chea, 2013). These inequities can perpetuate or further formalise the status quo as in the case of Mexican *ejidos* or in initiatives that are highly unfavourable to specific groups such as land grabbing. We saw this in the ways in which distributive notions of justice precipitated conflict as actors vied for their share of the benefits on offer.

Our analysis informs the understanding of messiness by examining justice and legitimacy as explanatory factors. It also points to several indicators of messiness that would serve to make scholars and policy makers more aware of the extent to which a project may be messy or result in messiness. Messiness is manifested when there is injustice and when injustice leads to illegitimacy.

## 6. Conclusion

Our central argument is that multi-level governance is not only messy, but that messiness arises precisely from attempts to avoid it through rendering technical and the lack of attention to political dynamics. We focus on land use change where we observe a preference for technical approaches, especially in projects involving global actors such as REDD+. Preferences for technical approaches contribute to messiness by ignoring representation and recognition notions of justice, as well as political dimensions of distributive justice. Global influences in governance assemblages add complexity, and a propensity to manage the confines of justice notions and objectives. Nominal understandings of justice, whether or not they are articulated as such by governance actors, tend toward technical distributive notions, based on financial compensation and benefit sharing. Representation and recognition are more difficult to incorporate into global projects because of their inherently political nature. This results in legitimacy issues for a wide range of actors, but usually for the less influential ones (communities and some lower level governments).

One of the ways in which recognition and representation can be better integrated into governance systems is through the transformation of the institutions defining ‘justice’ (or whatever equivalent they use) (Fraser, 2009). To achieve parity of participation, thereby ensuring legitimate governance institutions and processes, these more elusive notions of justice must be incorporated into practices and institutions with the power to influence both global and local conceptualisations of justice. This requires challenging conservation and development theories that are rooted in economic, punitive and technical distributive notions of justice. By definition, achieving parity of participation in land use change requires deliberation, a re-examining of positions of actors to influence notions of justice and a challenge to existing institutions (both statutory and customary) that determine justice and legitimacy at both local and global scales. Doing so would mean ‘embracing the political’ in projects. Rather than putting the emphasis on efficiency, protracted dialogue would allow space for recognition and representation claims of justice to be voiced at the conceptualisation, review and evaluation stages of global projects.

We have acknowledged that cleaning up the mess in systems rendered technical and anti-political is a challenge. Projects, especially global projects, are structured in such a way as to appeal to the broadest range of actors possible, which may result in agreeing to the lowest common technical denominators in order to ‘get something done’. We argue, however, that the failure to deal with local politics has detrimental effects on the legitimacy of REDD+ and conservation initiatives. If lack of attention to representation and recognition results in messiness, as we argue, incorporating these dimensions into project planning and implementation would serve as an antidote to messiness. This would require additional up-front efforts to appreciate the claims made by local actors living in forests and to design interventions, together with these actors, that address these challenges and feature responsive mechanisms that have the ability to influence future implementations and policy. It remains to be seen if exceptional climate initiatives such as the Dedicated Grant Mechanism for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (DGM) of the World Bank’s Forest Investment Program (FIP), or the Amazonian Indigenous REDD+ (RIA) proposal in Peru and elsewhere, will present such an opportunity to demonstrate what Li (2017) might call ‘transformative politics’ and in which we emphasise political notions of justice.

REDD+ presents a special opportunity to shift the ways in which institutions consider justice.

Although REDD+ is polycentric in the sense that it does not have a singular leader that makes the rules (Sunderlin et al., 2015), and it has come to refer to many things in practice, it does involve influential global agencies such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the Global Climate Fund. This means that with a deliberate effort, coalitions supporting indigenous and local peoples’ land rights and

participation can insist that the “+” portion of REDD+ inherently require parity of participation by better integrating recognition and representation with distributive notions of justice. Larson and Ribot (2009) connected distribution and representation with the legitimacy of REDD+, which our data reinforces. As governance scholars, we find in REDD+ an opportunity to enhance the sophistication with which justice might be considered, setting a precedent for reducing the messiness of other types of global projects, through reducing the complexity of technical systems and language, increasing parity of participation, engaging proactively with harder political problems such as land rights, and leading toward more legitimate governance arrangements.

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