Lessons on social inclusion for transformative forest-based bioeconomy solutions

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Key messages

• The transformational potential of bioeconomy solutions to advance environmental sustainability rests on whether they can deploy strategies for social sustainability.
• Bioeconomy can learn important lessons on social inclusion from previous research on redistribution, recognition, and representation concerns in forest-based climate initiatives.
• Initiatives should recognize Indigenous Peoples and local communities as right-holders in their design and implementation.
• They should ensure that enabling conditions are in place for women, youth and Indigenous Peoples and local communities to participate effectively throughout an initiative’s lifetime.
• Initiatives should also provide mechanisms to promote a just and fair distribution of costs and benefits between stakeholders.

Introduction

Growing awareness of the climate crisis has led to calls for transformation: large-scale, sustainable shifts toward a climate-resilient future (Atmadja et al. 2021). Forest-based bioeconomy solutions are one such transformational idea, defined broadly as “the utilisation of forests to create products and services that help economies to replace fossil-based raw materials, products and services” (Wolfslehner et al. 2016: 5). Such solutions draw heavily on innovations in biomass production and processing involving trees, forestry, and agroforestry. With regard to climate action, they could provide a decarbonization option for the global economy, as well as an opportunity to find common ground on production, land use, and emissions goals (Rodríguez et al. 2019). The bioeconomy approach takes into account risk-taking, innovation, and cross-sectoral collaboration that can help ensure large-scale adoption (Atmadja et al. 2021).

Bioeconomy solutions are fundamentally a strategy to increase use and re-use of renewable resources in economic processes. In the Global North, the European Commission adopted Europe’s initial Bioeconomy strategy in 2012 (revised in 2018), and Bioeconomy Facilities are being promoted throughout the European Union. At the national level, Finland’s Bioeconomy Strategy has set ambitious targets to create jobs and innovative products and services (Suomala 2019). In the Global South, Brazil has been a frontrunner on bioeconomy policies, including relevant legislation and the National Plan for Promoting the Chains of Products from Socio-biodiversity. Likewise, a recent review shows policy efforts in Sub-Saharan African to develop and promote bioeconomy solutions (Rosa and Martius 2021).

While bioeconomy solutions can be transformational - in terms of achieving the scale and speed needed - proponents have yet to take into account some of the more structural issues that need to be addressed to advance towards sustainability (Székács 2017; D’Amato et al. 2019), particularly the risks that could emerge if social sustainability concerns are not addressed (Rosa and Martius 2021). Consequently, it is not yet clear whether bioeconomy solutions will enable (or even protect) the rights and social inclusion concerns of the Indigenous Peoples and local communities that are the stewards of the forests targeted by bioeconomy applications (Díaz-Chavez et al. 2019). As the evidence from past initiatives demonstrates, an overriding emphasis on technical and economic factors takes for granted that social impacts will be beneficial and ignores potential trade-offs (Bussher et al. 2017; Kothari 2021). Ample evidence demonstrates what can happen when forest-based initiatives neglect social inclusion concerns and fail to analyze their footprint on the wellbeing of the women and men of forest communities (Larson et al. 2021). Given that 1.6 billion Indigenous Peoples and local communities live in and around forests (Newton et al. 2020), with different management responsibilities over territories that store almost 300,000 million metric tons of
Bioeconomy solutions may bring about:

1. Changing resource allocation, by proposing a shift of public and private financial, research, and policy support from (non-renewable) fossil fuels into renewable forest-based substitutes. Such changes could include state subsidies to help households shift from diesel fuel to wood pellets for home heating, or support research and private investment in wood and bamboo products to replace single-use consumer plastics. With forest-based bioeconomy, land tenure and forest governance will determine who benefits from the reallocation of public and private resources. Most forested countries in the Global South have weak land tenure systems and forest governance, unlike the developed countries where the bioeconomy concept originated.

2. Changing processes, by focusing on changing consumption and production processes from linear (extract – produce – consume – dispose) to circular. Technical and financial innovations have been driving this process, such as creating markets for reuse/ recycling/ reconditioning services and up-stream design solutions for products to ensure their end-life circularity. These innovations have not clearly addressed the social issues of changing these processes, and whether those changes will improve or worsen inequities across peoples and places. For example, land...
scarcity for producing forestry materials in the Global North may move such production to the Global South. If the consumption and reuse/ recycling/ reconditioning processes take place in the North, this globally circular bioeconomy may lead to a linear depletion of biomass from one location to another. Effects on wellbeing are likely to be exacerbated in areas with weak land and forest tenure and governance.

3. Changing the legitimacy of public policy and discourses, from ensuring the wellbeing of the current generation at the expense of the future’s, to ensuring the wellbeing of all generations including that of the future.

These discourses have not, however, been clear about whose future generation is being considered in light of the changes represented by the bioeconomy. The -largely technical-processes represented by the forest-based bioeconomy may favor the wellbeing of some (e.g., consumers in the Global North) at the expense of others (e.g., producers of raw materials in the Global South). This is especially serious where there are gender inequalities and barriers to rights recognition.

4. Changing the norms of development, by elevating the status of agriculture and forestry as a post-industrial rather than pre-industrial solution.

This can have deep implications on how developing countries envision themselves in the future. Many low-income countries see an escape from their land-based economies towards industrialization as the key to achieving middle-income status. With its bioeconomy strategy, EU and many developed countries are disrupting that logic by proposing that moving in the opposite direction will lead to sustained high-income status. There is little analysis on the implications of this reversal for communities and smallholders in developing countries, and their access to participating in relevant decision-making processes.

Lessons for social inclusion: redistribution, recognition, and representation

This section summarizes lessons from research on other forest-based initiatives by examining redistribution, recognition and representation in relation to land tenure, gender and participation, respectively.

Redistribution and land tenure

Redistribution refers to the practices and structures that drive inequality, and the unequal distribution of resources and of the costs and benefits of initiatives, including entitlements and the ability to influence how distribution is decided. Acknowledging the lessons learned from REDD+ initiatives regarding the importance of clear land and resource tenure rights for communities is key to advancing initiatives promoting bioeconomy solutions in the Global South. Secure access to and control of land and resources is a key enabling factor for the potential of climate actions to make significant contributions to mitigation, adaptation, and the conservation of tropical forests, as it enables communities to influence decision-making and distribution mechanisms (Sunderlin et al. 2014; Monterroso and Sills 2022). Tenure interventions have been promoted widely to formalize community tenure rights through massive titling initiatives (Deininger et al. 2012; Monterroso and Sills 2022). Secure land tenure for Indigenous Peoples supports the effectiveness of climate change initiatives, as areas they occupy are more likely to be conserved than those that are not (Blackman et al. 2017; Schleicher et al. 2017). Nevertheless, formalization of rights has not granted Indigenous Peoples automatic use rights over forest resources, and in some cases key resources such as subsoil or carbon rights remain under state ownership; hence the redistribution process is incomplete (Monterroso et al. 2017). Two main challenges will affect the forest-dependent communities in which bioeconomy initiatives are implemented. First, on the ground, there is little acknowledgment that the forest landscapes where many climate change solutions are implemented are the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, despite the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Larson et al. 2013; Monterroso et al. 2019). Second, even in countries with tenure reform interventions, legal frameworks tend to regulate rights to land, forests and carbon separately (Monterroso and Sills 2022). This not only results in legal overlaps and conflicts but also in formalization processes where Indigenous Peoples and other resource dependent people forfeit land, lose customary rights and accept new risks (Notess et al. 2020).

Recognition and gender inequalities

Recognition refers to the acknowledgement of diversity, and addresses structures and practices that influence how different forms of identity, interests, and knowledge are understood, valued and respected. There are multiple sources of differentiation, including gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, disability, and age. Bioeconomy solutions should specifically aim to identify and address the barriers that prevent less powerful groups from effective participation, and support equitable engagement with different knowledge systems. Approaching gender roles and relations in terms of recognition reveals how mainstream climate initiatives often fail to recognize and plan for engagement, neglecting to unpack how patterns of differentiation intersect and impact differently on individual and group identities (Bee and Basnett 2017). The failure to consider differences internal to forest-dependent communities, including power asymmetries along gender lines, may reproduce and reinforce the structures of inequality within them (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020). These asymmetries, built on socio-cultural practices and norms that constrain the effective participation of women and other marginalized groups, lead to differential access to decision-making in territorial governance (CIFOR and ONAMIAP 2020) and to the unequal distribution of benefits
These asymmetries are recognized in SDG 5 (on gender equality and women’s empowerment) and can be explained by men’s domination of both forest resources and decision-making spaces, both part of the public sphere, whereas women are more constrained to the private sphere of home and family (Bee and Basnett 2017). This constitutes a double bias: the gendered distinctions made by community members themselves and the gendered expectations of those implementing projects. As noted by the UNFCCC, women are more vulnerable to climate change, hence they need more than being present to legitimize an initiative (Djoudi et al. 2016). Considering gender as an add-on to initiatives or seeing the “gender problem” as one that can be solved by solving women’s economic poverty create the risk of reinforcing or exacerbating women’s experiences of exclusion. Emphasizing equity goals that address the intersecting dimensions of social differentiation, rather than a single lens (e.g., gender, poverty), is needed.

Representation and participation

Representation refers to issues of procedural justice, including the rules and practices that frame the access that groups (or individuals within groups) have to effective participation in different processes. This is an important consideration for bioeconomy solutions as different multi-stakeholder platforms and networks have been organized to develop bioeconomy actions, with little engagement with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. It is important to consider that social exclusions related to participation happen both inside communities and in their engagements with outsiders. Internally, there is evidence of women’s exclusions from decision-making, as these tend to reproduce sociocultural norms that grant women unequal access to participation (Evans et al. 2021). These exclusions can exacerbate the already precarious positions held by women within their communities. Externally, it is accepted—at least discursively—that the participation of communities throughout the planning, implementation, and monitoring processes of initiatives in their territories is vital to their success and resilience over time (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020). This is also linked to Indigenous Peoples’ recognized right—in International Labour Organization Covenant 169 and UNDRIP—to free, prior and informed consent regarding initiatives that affect their lives and territories. Generally, where participation has been recognized, it has commonly been applied only to implementation activities and not to the previous steps of the process (Saeed et al. 2017). Furthermore, there is also a growing interest in multi-stakeholder participatory platforms—bringing community representatives in collaboration with other actors—to collaborate towards better and more legitimate outcomes than those produced by top-down or unilateral decision-making processes (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020; Hewlett et al. 2021). However, despite the discursive inclusiveness of these platforms, they are challenged by the power inequalities inherent to the interactions between their participants (Londres et al. 2021; Palacios Llaque and Sarmiento Barletti 2021). Power inequalities are especially challenging for platforms organised to address unsustainable land and resource use in the Global South, in forest contexts framed by histories of inequality, conflict, and land dispossession (Gonzales et al. 2021). Unchecked power inequalities may limit the possibility of equitable collaboration among equals and may lead to agreements that benefit powerful actors, and that are legitimised by the participation of less powerful actors (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2019). There are also questions regarding the appropriateness of platforms as mechanisms to foster respect for the recognised rights of vulnerable peoples, and to promote a productive and equitable relationship between their rights and mainstream development interests (Rodriguez and Sarmiento Barletti 2021).

Lessons for more inclusive forest-based bioeconomy solutions

Research on forest-based initiatives in the Global South highlights the need for bioeconomy solutions to have strategies to support and enable the rights recognition and social inclusion concerns of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, with a special focus on the women in those groups.

To support transformational change, initiatives must:
1. Recognize Indigenous Peoples and local communities as right-holders in the design and implementation of bioeconomy solutions.
2. Ensure enabling conditions are in place for the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities—and women and youth in those groups—in all relevant decision making processes.
3. Provide clear mechanisms that allow for a just and fair distribution of costs and benefits stemming from bioeconomy applications.

CIFOR’s research on social inclusion with forest-based climate initiatives led to the participatory development of a toolkit with materials for different stakeholders to assess the context where initiatives are to be introduced, and to monitor their participatory aspects over time. These tools, developed to support and enable social inclusion through adaptive and reflexive learning in different settings, are available on https://www.cifor.org/toolboxes/tools-for-managing-landscapes-inclusively/

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Anne M. Larson and Christopher Martius for their deep engagement and help in improving the clarity of our message. This work was supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation; and the CGIAR Research Programs on Forest, Trees, and Agroforestry (FTA). This work has been carried out under the CGIAR GENDER Platform.
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This research was carried out by CIFOR as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA). FTA is the world’s largest research for development program to enhance the role of forests, trees and agroforestry in sustainable development and food security and to address climate change. CIFOR leads FTA in partnership with Bioversity International, CATIE, CIRAD, INBAR, ICRAF and TBI. FTA’s work is supported by the CGIAR Trust Fund: cgiar.org/funders/

This work has been carried out under the CGIAR GENDER Platform, which is grateful for the support of CGIAR Trust Fund Contributors. www.cgiar.org/funders

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