

Local Participation in Natural Resource Management Initiatives

– A Case Study of the Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone

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Local Participation in Natural Resource Management Initiatives – A Case Study of the Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The United Nation's program, Reducing Emission from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) is an international policy mechanism to mitigate global climate change. REDD+ has a significant global impact that is changing how forests are managed around the world, particularly in developing countries and where natural resource dependent communities live. Most REDD+ projects are expected to be participatory, and this builds on existing trends in natural resource management. Nevertheless, existing research has shown that participation in REDD+ is uneven, while the benefits from projects are often inequitably distributed. Using a case study of the Gola REDD+ project in Sierra Leone, this study aims to understand how local-level decision-making for forest management happens under REDD+ and the distribution of benefits for REDD+ projects at the local community level.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observations to capture the views and experiences of participants in their local setting. Drawing on existing theories on Community-Based Natural Resource Management, I used the Concepts of Political Representation and Bourdieu's Notion of Capital to analyse how entrenched power relations influence the ability of local people to meaningfully participate in natural resource management initiatives. Analysis shows that project implementers' choice of empowering non-elected institutions as representatives of the local people in natural resource management initiatives has undermined opportunities for the inclusive public participation in decision making, thus, leading to an inequitable distribution of benefits among the target population. The findings reveal that decision-makers i.e., the project implementers and non-elected local elites used their positions of power within the social field to gain control of the forest management system. As a result, benefits shared during such initiatives do not fully compensate the local people for the loss of livelihood opportunities. On this basis, it is recommended that there should be a review of the policies to ensure that intervening agencies work directly with elected local institutions instead of non-elected local authorities. This will empower elected local institutions to formulate responses and negotiate bureaucratic procedures in natural resource management interventions to better address local needs.

Keywords: Local Participation, REDD+, Natural Resource Management
Sierra Leone, Gola Rainforest National Park

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List of Abbreviations

FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
CCBA	Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance
COP11	11 th Conference of the Parties
CSSL	Conservation Society of Sierra Leone
CTF	Conservation Trust Fund
FECs	Forest Edge Communities
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GRC	Gola Rainforest Conservation
GRNP	Gola Rainforest National Park
KDLC	Kenema District Local Council
NPAA	National Protection Area Authority
MAF	Ministry of Agricultural and Forestry
REDD+	Reducing Emission from Deforestation and forest Degradation and role of conservation, sustainable management of forest and the enhancement of forest carbon stock in developing countries
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SLENA	Sierra Leone Environment and Nature Association
UNFCC	United Nation Framework Conservation on Climate Change
VCS	Verified Carbon Standards

1.0 Introduction

The initiative, Reducing Emission from Deforestation and forest Degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forest and the enhancement of forest carbon stock in developing countries (REDD+), designed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is regarded as an international policy mechanism to mitigate global climate change (Fletcher et al., 2017; Phelps et al., 2010; UNFCCC, 2010). The main idea of this initiative is of the notion that deforestation and forest degradation contribute significantly to carbon dioxide emission; therefore, conserving tropical forests in developing countries might be an effective way of mitigating atmospheric carbon. Apart from the aim of reducing carbon dioxide emission and improving biodiversity conservation, REDD+ also promotes social objectives, supporting local communities through the provisioning of compensation packages for conserving the forest (Skutsch and Torres, 2015; Springate-Baginski and Wollenberg, 2010).

Subsequently, REDD+ has a significant global impact that is changing how forests are managed around the world, especially in developing countries and where natural resource dependent communities live. According to the UNFCCC Safeguard, 'full and effective participation' of the local people must be encouraged in the design and implementation of REDD+ (Fletcher et al., 2017; Phelps et al., 2010; UNFCCC, 2010). This will serve as an important element for creating REDD+ legitimate policies at the local level (Atela et al., 2015; UNFCCC, 2010). Most REDD+ projects are expected to be participatory, and this builds on existing trends in natural resource management. Environmental scholars have argued that effective local participation can improve sustainable natural resource management, promote equity and justice among local people than bureaucratic led forest management (Rakatama et al., 2018; Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Saraan et al., 2020). Through participation, local interventions are more likely to reflect on the people's needs and aspirations, thus, creating a platform for accountability (Okumu and Muchapondwa, 2020a). It also creates a forum where local voices including the marginalised group in society can be part of the decision-making processes from the formulation to the implementation stage of project interventions (Willis et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2019). Under the right atmosphere, it brings equitable benefits among the local people thereby improving their livelihood opportunities (Nhem and Lee, 2020; Skutsch and Torres, 2015). In addition, many people believe that local people should have a say in the things that affect them, so they will be able to provide effective response management system including the adherence to restrictions within their own context, under the assumption that no one manages such resource better than the local people themselves (Mukisa et al., 2020; Nantongo, 2017).

However, existing research shows that participation in REDD+ is uneven, so are the benefits from projects (Hawthorne et al., 2016; Mukisa et al., 2020; Phelps et al., 2010). For instance, in a study done by Sills et al. (2014) to examine REDD+ project outcomes at different developing countries, out of 300 projects reviewed, only 23 were proved to be successful due to lack or ineffective participation of the local people in the management of the forest resources. Issues like the ineffective implementation of control initiatives, such as the adoption of bylaws to stop exploitative activities (like no hunting, logging, farming and other land

use) in areas that were originally sources of livelihood platforms prior to protection policy establishment, were among their key findings (ibid). In addition, in a pilot REDD+ project in Tanzania, despite the local community members were introduced to maize farming in the alternative livelihood programmes, the project outcome was unsuccessful due to decision taken by the project implementing team that undermined local people's voices (Mustalahti and Rakotonarivo, 2014). Furthermore, this is also visible in a study at the Ongo Community Forest in Mid-Western Uganda on how benefits from REDD+ were unevenly distributed among community members including the vulnerable groups such as women (Namaalwa et al, 2017).

From the cases highlighted, it indicates that most REDD+ projects fail to achieve the goal of inclusive participation that can lead to a positive outcome for conservation and human welfare. It can also be noted that despite aid and national agencies charged with the responsibility of managing natural resources often assume that participation will result to a better environmental outcome, such claims are not often demonstrated (Ribot, 1999; Ribot et al., 2008). This has brought about emerging issues of concern for critical analysis about what effective approach of forest management is required to achieve a better outcome.

Theorists suggest that participation can lead to a better management approach of natural resources through 'greater local voices and control of significant decision-making' (Agrawal and Ribot, 2012). This can be achieved through accountability representation, where certain individuals or institutions may act on behalf of the local people in order to be accountable and respond to local needs. (Ribot 2002, Ece et al, 2017). On the contrary, when there is a disconnection to this, participation is viewed as a different engagement, that may involve an information-sharing approach in community meetings such as consultations or the engagement in activities by the local people to meet the project technical objective, thus, benefiting only a few individuals within the community (Samndong, 2018).

In view of this, many suggestions call for further studies that will examine the social aspects of REDD+ on the ground (Denham, 2017; Gilani et al., 2017), especially from a country's or regions context. Therefore, this thesis seeks to study how local decision-making for forest management happens under REDD+ and the distribution of benefits for REDD+ project at the local community level.

1.1 Study Objective and Research Questions

REDD+ is designed to improve the lives of forest-dependent communities through its benefit-sharing mechanism by providing an alternative source of livelihood while conserving the forest to mitigate climate change (Fletcher et al., 2017; Phelps et al., 2010). It safeguards emphasised the need for full and effective engagement of local people in the planning and implementation processes (Nhem and Lee, 2020; Satyal et al., 2020; UNFCCC, 2010). Therefore, the full and effective participation of local people in decision-making processes and the even distribution of benefits are key components to facilitate the achievement of REDD+ success stories (Devkota and Mustalahti, 2018; Schmitt and Mukungu, 2019).

In the context of forest conservation, the decision-making process is the selection of the course of action from possible alternatives of the participants' views to arrive at a solution that will influence the management of forest resources or project outcome (Khanal et al., 2017). At the community development level, there is a need to engage local people in the decision-making processes in a way that their inputs influence the project outcome (Devkota and Mustalahti, 2018; Larson and Ribot, 2007). However, in many development interventions, implementing bodies present their already-made plans to local communities for dialogue and as such local people's decisions do not influence the project outcome, but serve as a green light to meet project's safeguards and donor approval (Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006). Subsequently, at the community level, certain categories of people are left out from the decision-making processes due to social structure and intervention policies (Samndong, 2018).

Furthermore, scholars have observed that in communities where forest resources are sources of livelihood to local people, there is a need to compensate them for the loss of benefits they might have derived from the forest in order to improve conservation (Matenga et al., 2020; Mukisa et al., 2020). REDD+ affirms this condition and it is set to pay communities for conserving their forests (Samndong 2018). According to Atmedja and Sills (2016), to foster legitimacy in REDD+, a good number of people must benefit from the intervention to lower emission reduction. But if benefits are given only to certain individuals or groups, people may be unfairly treated, thus turning against the whole mechanism to be illegitimate. In light of this, the distribution of benefits in an inequitable manner at the disadvantage of others especially the vulnerable groups in society has been one major challenge in the implementation of REDD+ (Okumu and Muchapondwa, 2020b; Ota et al., 2020). Benefiting sharing can be defined as the distribution of compensation in the form of monetary and non-monetary gains generated from conserving the forest through the implementation of REDD+ (Pasgaard, 2015). According to Skutch et al (2017), monetary benefits given out by REDD+ can be used for personal purposes by the target beneficiaries or collectively put together by the community to embark on community development projects such as the construction of schools, health centres, centres for religious and social purposes or rehabilitation of water wells, road, bridges and so on. Non-monetary benefits, on the other hand, are in the form of alternative livelihood programmes, that engage communities in sustainable agricultural practices and capacity building programmes for the local people in order for them to be self-reliant (ibid). However, a lot of decision-making processes happen at the local level to determine how benefits should be shared.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to understand the decision-making processes and the benefit-sharing mechanism in the implementation of REDD+ at the local community level. This will be done by exploring the following research questions using the Gola REDD+ project in Sierra Leone as a case study.

1. How does decision-making processes within the REDD+ Project happen at the local community level?
2. How are the benefits of REDD+ Project shared among the target population?

1.2 Purpose of the study

By understanding the decision-making processes and benefit-sharing mechanism regarding the compensation packages of REDD+ initiative at the local community level towards natural resource management, the purpose of this study is in two folds: first, it is to generate new knowledge from a country's perspective which will be added to the body of empirical studies about forest reserve management. This will be helpful to policymakers in understanding a better management approach towards attaining sustainable natural resources in developing countries. Second, this study will be beneficial to institutions advocating for the participation of vulnerable groups in development programmes, which is essential for local democracy.

1.3 Focus of the study

The focus of my study is related to my research problem and the purpose of my study, which is used in answering the two (2) research questions I have proposed.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows; Chapter 2 gives the context of the study. It provides information about the historical and present state of the nature reserve in Sierra Leone. It further gives background information about REDD+ and a detailed description of the Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone. In conclusion, the study site is described.

In Chapter 3, an outline of the conceptual framework used in the interpretation of empirical data is provided. I started this chapter by unfolding the concept of participation in a boarder sense to have a clear understanding of the study. I then introduce the concept of political representation and Bourdieu's notion capital, to analyse the data. Chapter 4 which gives a detailed explanation of the methodology used for the research design, methods of data collections and analysis. Lastly, the validity and reliability of the study followed by ethnical consideration sections are described.

In Chapter 5, the empirical findings of the study are presented. I used these findings to answer the two main research questions proposed in this study. Chapter 6 discusses the key findings of the study using the conceptual framework and existing literature. Lastly, chapter 7 gives a conclusion by summarizing the key findings and highlight the contribution of the study to an existing body of knowledge. To conclude, this chapter, I outlined the implication of the policy and practice of the study with its limitation and then suggested further research areas.

2.0 Context

This chapter provides contextual information about the management of nature reserves in Sierra Leone. It gives the historical, as well as the present state of the nature reserve. It further highlights the REDD+ initiative in developing countries and describes the Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone. Finally, it gives an account of the study site.

2.1 Background of the Nature Reserve Management in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone, like other Sub-Saharan Africa countries, faces a lot of challenges in the conservation of its nature reserves. The country was once governed by the British until it gained its independence in 1961. By then, little effort was made to maintain its forest reserves and wildlife conservation, as there was no significant decline in the country's natural resources (Burgess et al., 2015). However, just after gaining independence, the country's nature reserves began to attract exploiters, resulting in extensive hunting of wildlife and the logging of large trees (Larson et al., 2016a). In the bid to stop the rapid exploitation, led to the established of a nature reserve protection division under the forestry department. Later the country's first Wildlife Conservation Act was established in 1972 (Wadsworth and Lebbie, 2019).

Despite this legislative achievement, in 1974 there was no enthusiasm within the then Government for nature conservation (Grainger and Konteh, 2007). There was more interest from the Government in the commercial potential of its nature reserves than its overall protection (Larson et al., 2016a). The country's nature reserves were rampantly mismanaged and led to the export trade of most of its prominent wildlife including Chimpanzee (Jones et al., 2017a). To many citizens, the forest reserve was also viewed as a source for timber production and revenue collection and as such large-scale logging concessions were mostly issued (Burgess et al., 2015).

However, the vast trade in the country's nature reserves and wildlife did not occur without opposition. This led to the establishment of the first civil society on environmental issues in 1976 called the Sierra Leone Environment and Nature Association (SLENA), headed by a Freetown¹ resident, Daphne Tuboku-Metzger (Richards, 1998). This Association succeeded in gaining both local and international recognition and immediately focused on the ban on wildlife exports and the initiation for the setting up of wildlife sanctuaries (ibid). In addition, the arrival of a renowned researcher and environmental conservationist, Dr Geza Teleki on a fact-finding mission when he realised that almost all the chimpanzees used for medical testing in the United States were from only one dealer in a small West African nation of Sierra Leone (Munro, 2015), boosted the country's conservation movement by acting as a central figure to eliminate the export trade on wildlife and later engineered the establishment of the country's first and largest national park, known as Outamba Kilmi National Park (ibid).

According to the Global Forest Assessment country's report of Sierra Leone (2015), the current area of forest reserves in Sierra Leone is assumed to be less

¹ Freetown is the capital city of Sierra Leone.

than 25 per cent. However, it is difficult to record the actual forest area of the country. This is because the country's last national forestry inventory took place in 1975, more than four decades ago (FAO report 2015, Wadworth and Lebbie, 2019). The report estimated forest loss in the country based on records during the last forestry inventory, as 15,000 hectares per year without considering among others, the effect on the country's eleven (11) years civil war and the rapid increase in population from three million to more seven million (Wadworth and Lebbie, 2019).

As at now, the country has four(4) national parks; the Outamba-Kilimi, Gola Rainforest, Loma Mountain and Western Area Peninsula, two(2) game sanctuaries known as Tiwai Island and Tacugama Chimpanzee and a couple of smaller nature reserves wide across the country (National Protected Area Authority of Sierra Leone, 2019). The Forestry Act (1988), is the main statute that governs the forestry sector of Sierra Leone. It focuses on providing guidance that will lead to the management and uses of the forest and thus, recognises two forest types: national and community forests (ibid). The national forests are further divided into commercial and protected forests or areas. All protected areas were governed by the Wildlife Conservation Act (1972), amended in 1990 as the main legislation. The Forestry Act (1988) further makes provision for the establishment of a reforestation fund that can support reforestation, but such fund was never operational (National Protected Area Authority, 2015). Over the past decades, the forestry division of Sierra Leone has been neglected due to lack of funding to provide the technical resources that will enable the effective management of all nature reserves (Munro and Hiemstra-van der Horst, 2011).

To effectively conserve its nature reserves, the National Protection Area and Conservation Trust Fund Act (2012) of Sierra Leone were enacted. This led to the establishment of the National Protected Area Authority (NPAA) and the Conservation Trust Fund (CTF), to promote biodiversity conservation, sales of ecosystem goods and services and research (National Protected Area Authority Act, 2015). This Act empowers the NPAA to exercise firm authority over National Parks and Protected Areas, promotes co-management of resources with local communities and to develop strategies that will provide a sustainable source of funding for protected areas such as the REDD+ projects (ibid).

2.2 The REDD+ Initiative

Reducing Emission from Deforestation and forest Degradation plus promoting conservation, sustainable management of forest and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries (commonly referred to as REDD+), designed by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is regarded as a global policy mechanism that seeks to mitigate climate change, improve biodiversity conservation while at the same time contributes in alleviating poverty in developing countries (Fletcher et al., 2017; Phelps et al., 2010; UNFCCC, 2010). It was during the 11th Conference of the Parties (COP11) to the United Nations Convention on Climate Change in Montreal - 2005, that the introduction of REDD was proposed by the Government of Papua New Guinea on behalf of the Coalition of Rainforest Nations (Pasgaard, 2015; Satyal et al., 2020). As at now, REDD+ occupies the centre of the current climate change agenda. It has been noted that the emission from deforestation and forest

degradation can significantly contribute to atmospheric carbon. Therefore, conserving tropical forest will potentially trap 23 per cent of the global carbon dioxide emission, thus, contributing to mitigate global climate change (Schmitt and Mukungu, 2019).

REDD+ initiative is a concept of payment for ecosystem services, seeking to reward forest community members in developing countries for their efforts in conserving the forest to store significant amount of carbon that will lead to the mitigation of climate change (Bartholdson et al., 2019). According to environmental scholars, REDD+ has greater socio-economic benefits than previous forest conservation initiatives, therefore, more REDD+ interventions are needed to conserve tropical forests in developing countries (Baruah, 2017; Correa et al., 2020; Kowler et al., 2020). Several developing countries have shown greater interest in REDD+ initiative, aiming at selling carbon credits to the developed world, who seems to be the major contributor to global carbon dioxide emission (Samndong and Kjosavik, 2017). However, the transfer of REDD+ funds is based on result-based payment, where developing countries are expected to produce results that are well-defined and agreed upon by the buyers (Aquino and Guay, 2013; Sanders et al., 2020). Many REDD+ projects prove to be unsuccessful when these standards are not met (ibid). Therefore, to achieve a successful REDD+ project outcome, there is a need for 'full and effective participation' of the local people.

2.3 The Gola REDD+ Project

The Gola REDD+ project in Sierra Leone has been in its implementing phase since 2014. It happens to be the first REDD+ project in the country and has a project duration of thirty (30) years (Gola Rainforest, 2019). The project aims at storing carbon, conserving tonnes of carbon dioxide, protecting biodiversity species as well as providing livelihood support to the impoverished Forest Edge Communities (FECs) around the Gola Rainforest National Park²(GRNP)(ibid). The GRNP which covers an area of about 71,000 hectares, is the most important lowland rainforest in Sierra Leone and a key site for the conservation of highly threatened and endemic wildlife species (Larson et al., 2016b).

Until the mid-1990s, the Gola Rainforest was managed by the communities themselves (Crawford et al, 2011). However, such management was not effective and led to the exploitation of the forest resources. Wildlife were rapidly hunted for trade and logging concessions were granted over the said forest (Bulte et al., 2013).

In 2004, a conservation concession was declared by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). Two NGOs, the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), formed an agency called Gola Rainforest Conservation (GRC) through the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, to conserve the Gola Rainforest and compensate the local people for the loss of livelihood opportunities (Larson et al, 2016). Benefits Sharing Agreement with the condition to adhere to strict compliance with the forest management plan was signed between the project implementers and the customary chiefs of the seven chiefdoms within the Gola Rainforest (ibid). The

² GRNP official website: <https://golarainforest.org/>

early conservation work was funded by the Conservation Global Fund and later by both the European Union and The French Global Environment Facility (Munro and Hiemstra-van der Horst, 2011). In 2012, the forest was officially gazetted as a National Park. Due to the limited amount of funding received from its donors to finance the large scale conservation, led to the decision by the partners to develop a REDD+ Project that will generate more income from the sales of carbon credits to sustainably fund the Gola Rainforest management activities over a longer term (Jones et al., 2017b). Initial studies according to the Gola REDD+ project yearly report (2015) shows that the GRNP can generate around 215,000 carbon credits per year for an amount equivalent 1 – 1.4 million USD, depending on the market value of carbon credits. The Gola REDD+ project has been selling credits on the voluntary carbon market validated by the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) and the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA) since its implementation phase in 2014, in order to sustain revenue to improve conservation strategy and enhance the effective management of the protected area (REDD Desk, 2019). Operationally, GRC is an autonomously body that manages GRNP as a REDD+ Project (ibid). It legally sells carbon credits and pays for the management costs of GRNP including compensation to local communities. Since the Gola REDD+ inception, it has annually been able to sell carbon credit. This means ecologically, the project is considered a success based the effective monitoring of the forest by guards.

The National Park is close to about 122 local communities with an approximate population of about 23,500 people within the seven (7) chiefdoms of the three (3) districts in the south-east of Sierra Leone. The larger proportion of the population are women. This is due to the impact of the country's civil war which led to the death of most young men and the greater male migration after the civil war (Bulte et al., 2013).

In a bid to conserve the forest, the project implementing body has been closely working with individuals identified as key stakeholders - customary chiefs (paramount chiefs, village chiefs and village forest committee), landowners and the forest edge communities (Gola Rainforest, 2015). Through series of consultative meetings with these key stakeholders, compensation packages to ensure successful outcomes of the project was agreed. The packages include both monetary and non-monetary gains from the Gola REDD+ Project

If effectively implemented, REDD+ project might fit into the country's broader resource governance and development strategy plans. The poor governance system of natural resources of the country has led to the rapid increase in deforestation. This has posed a significant threat of climate change to the country. Therefore, mitigation initiatives such as REDD+ has the potential to generate emission reductions, sustainably manage forests and further bring benefits to local communities. This will give the government the willingness to give it a full legislative support in order to help solve the many key challenges surrounding the forest governance system of the country.

2.4 The Study sites

Sierra Leone is located on the Atlantic Coast of West Africa and shared boundaries with Guinea and Liberia. It comprises of an extent of the Upper

Guinea Forest biodiversity hotspot that contains many endemic and highly threatened species (van der Horst, 2016). However, it is also one of the most deforested countries in West Africa due to its poor natural resource governance structure. The impact of the country's eleven (11) years civil war also had an effect on the natural resources (Larson et al, 2016). The country's remaining forest reserves which also serve as a source of livelihood to many local people, faced intense pressure from logging, fuelwood and charcoal burning, agricultural purposes among others (Munro and Hiemstra-van der Horst, 2011)

The Gola Rainforest National Park and its Forest Edge Communities are in the south-eastern part of Sierra Leone within three (3) Districts. The protected area extends in seven (7) chiefdoms; Gaura, Tunkia and Nomo Chiefdoms in the Kenema District, Makpele and Barri Chiefdoms in the Pujehun District and Malema Chiefdom in the Kailahun District. At the East part of Gola Rainforest lies the Mano River, which forms a boundary between Sierra Leone and Liberia. Politically, the Gola Rainforest is considered as a 'trans-boundary peace park' between the people of Sierra Leone and Liberia for the establishment of permanent peace in the previously war-affected nations (Garnett and Utas, 2000). Furthermore, Gola rainforest is considered as the largest area of the lowland tropical forest in Sierra Leone and remains to be the key biodiversity hotspot for several endangered and threatened species of both birds and mammals (Crawford et al., 2011). This makes Gola Rainforest not only unique nationally, but of immense importance both regionally and internationally. Hence, the need for a protection status. The forest reserve covers 71,000 hectares and has a boundary demarcated in coordinates with the adjacent FECs (Kerr, 2013). The area experiences two major seasons, the rainy season runs from May to October with heavy rainfall while the dry season is from November to April with sunny days and hot temperature of about 25°C – 30°C (Garriga, 2013).

Like most rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa, the study site is said to be a deprived community and therefore lack socio-economic development. According to the 2015 census report, about 23,500 people are living in the 122 FECs of the GRNP, with a great proportion of women (Jones et al., 2017b). Communities within the Gola Rainforest have important ecological services such as watershed and dams, erosion control and enhanced soil fertility. The local people are primarily subsistence farmers engaged in the cultivation of rice, sweet potato, cassava, palm oil, vegetables, and cocoa as a cash crop. The implementation of the Gola REDD+ project led to restrictions on the use of forest resources that was freely available to the local communities. Prior to REDD+ implementation, non-timber products such as firewood, charcoal, medicinal herbs, fodders, construction materials, wild fruits and animal proteins were obtained by the local people, both men and women for subsistence and a source of income. These restrictions on forest resources have led to local people's livelihood diversification to engage in strategies such as livestock production (chicken and goats), fishing, and petty trading. Other non-farm activities like tailoring, brick making, paid labour on cocoa's plantations and motorbike transportation (commonly referred to as Okada) were also observed to be engaged by the youths. Remittances from relations in urban areas and abroad also play an important role in some households' income.

Furthermore, the study site is said to be in the region where the country's eleven (11) civil war started, and thus, led to the destruction of a lot of community

infrastructures. The local people residing in the study area belong to one of the main local ethnicities in Sierra Leone known as the ‘*the Mendes*’



Figure 1: Map showing the location of the Gola Rainforest National Park.
Source : Laurin et al (2014)

3.0 Conceptual Framework

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework that I have used to understand and analyse how decision-making happens, and the distribution of benefits in the implementation of REDD+ at local community level using the Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone as a case study. In doing so, I unfolded the concept of participation in section (3.1) in a broader sense to have a clear understanding of the study. In Section (3.2), I explored the concept of representation in order to understand who acts as representatives of the local people in the decision-making processes under REDD+ implementation. Lastly, in section (3.3). I used Bourdieu's notion of capital to show how people acquire a status that enables them to either participate or being excluded in natural resource management initiatives.

3.1 'Unpacking' Participation

Despite the growing interest in this phenomenon – participation, it is difficult to find a universally accepted definition (Fung, 2015). This is because the concept of participation is so complex that there are not enough details to know what it entails (Acklin, 2020; Gjessing et al., 2018). Thus, it has variable meanings from contextual viewpoints (López Cerezo and García, 1996). Some have explained participation as an approach centred towards achieving the project technical objective and as such does not permit community members to make significant contributions that will influence the decision-making processes (Samsuri et al., 2020; Sapkota et al., 2020). The local people can only be noticed during information sharing processes such as informed consent and consultation meetings or other engagement organised by the project implementing body (Hagemann et al., 2020; Jumbe and Angelsen, 2007). Arnstein (1969) typology characterised such participation as a degree of 'Tokenism' and is tend to be the form of participation promoted by most development initiatives, where only a few individuals from the target group benefit (Denham, 2017). Others have argued that participation should be centred around inclusiveness, where there is a substantive exchange of views in which the whole citizenry is involved in the decision-making process and other community engagements to meet their needs and aspirations (Ribot, 2002; Agrawal, 2005). In other words, local people should have decision-making power or control over the resources that affect them. According to the FAO (2015), participation is a 'process that influences stakeholders policy formulation, share control over development initiatives and decision-making, and establish ownership over resources among local communities.' In this study, participation refers to the inclusion of local people in the decision-making processes and benefit-sharing mechanism in REDD+ initiative leading to a positive outcome.

Participatory approach came about from the recognition that the failure of top-down state management approach is as a result of decisions made at the state management level that excludes the views of local people including marginalised groups, and thus, leads to the imposition of regulations and policies by the state (Gilani et al., 2017; Persson and Prowse, 2017). Therefore, it is observed that local decision-makers can make better-informed decisions because of their local knowledge about the context and such management does not include high cost (Baruah, 2017; Okumu and Muchapondwa, 2020a). Ribot (2002) argues that participation will increase natural resource management efficiency and promote

equity among local people when effectively implemented. According to environmental scholars, it will promote sustainable practices and reduces the possibility of conflicts at the local level (Ribot, 2002, Agrawal, 2005). This can be achieved by making development plans reflect on the needs of the local people and make them feel connected to the process. In addition, Agrawal (2015) highlighted the assumption that local people can effectively collaborate and gain acceptance to manage and use resources in a sustainable manner if allowed to set their own rules.

However, the questions as to that determine why participation seems unsuccessful in most natural resource management interventions have received attention from development scholars (Denham, 2017; Devkota and Mustalahti, 2018). Natural Resource Management initiatives have different origins and implementation patterns (Gilani et al., 2017). When projects are externally initiated through central government or donor interventions, they are said to impose their actions and policies on local communities (Hawthorne et al., 2016; Matenga et al., 2020). In this regard, the local people will have a very minimal role in the initiation and implementation of such project. Thus, such outcome does not reflect the views of the people, who are the project beneficiaries. Subsequently, when funded by the central government especially in developing countries, the desired aim of the project is not achieved due to the insufficient resources and power given to the assigned local bodies to manage natural resources (Gjessing et al., 2018; Saraan et al., 2020). According to Denham (2017), a classical example of this occurred when massive poaching of endangered wildlife such as elephants and rhinos continued, due to the lack of incentives for their conservation and protection. In addition, scholars have noticed that at most international donor interventions, the conservation objective of the project is prioritised over community development (Ece et al., 2017). As a result, in areas where locally elected institutions operate, project implementing bodies often circumvent these institutions who have the legal right to politically represent the local people and decide to choose and recognise non-elected local actors (Ribot, 2002). Most often, these empowered local actors do not meet the needs and aspirations of the local people and thus, leads to the failure of most projects.

Furthermore, from a broad sense of moral equality, everyone should be treated the same, with fairness and social justice. However, one major concern is the role of inequality among the users of common-pool resources. As observed by scholars, local communities comprise of heterogeneity along caste, class and gender lines (Gilani et al., 2017; Khanal et al., 2017), access to common-pool resources is based on a capital endowment of an individual (Matenga et al., 2020; Sapkota et al., 2020). Some users tend to enjoy better access to common-pool resources because they possess a relatively large amount of capital in the form of economic, social and cultural. For instance, within a local community setting, the elites, which comprises of the village heads and the wealth, may have easier access and benefits opportunities due to their better endowment of capital compared to those with a lower level of capital such as the poor, whose access may violate his survival constraints. Elites may further use their capital to remain in power to gain control and influence the decision-making processes and other community engagements (Mwale, 2019). In addition, Samndong (2018) observed that gender inequality is the most entrenched and persistent challenge to development. Despite the huge number of women in most societies, their participation in most decision-making process and community engagement seems

to be at a low pace due to social structure and intervention policies (Schmitt and Mukungu 2019).

3.2 Concept of Representation

Representation is a remarkable term used in many fields; thus, it has variable definitions. The Oxford English Dictionary defines representation as the 'action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone'. In the field of Environmental Management, representation is a critical feature in community participation. Since it is impossible for the voice of the entire community to be heard during decision-making processes with either the state or project implementing bodies, participation takes place through representation, where certain local actors or institutions, either elected or selected, act on behalf of the entire community (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Ribot (2002) argues that representation should be a means by which state services or implementing bodies respond to the needs and aspirations of the local people as well as be accountable to them. It will translate citizens' interests into tangible outcomes thereby improving natural resource management efficiency and promote equity among the local people (ibid).

However, whoever stands to represent local people matters. This is because the transfer of power to representatives can either promote or undermine the efficient and equitable processes. When discretionary powers are transferred to elected local actors or institutions, they can be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the local community (Ribot 2003). This can be achieved through the enabling of positive and negative sanctions such as electoral processes, court hearing, audit, monitoring, fines, free press, public reporting, social movements and so on, for them to be accountable to their citizens (Ribot, 1999; Fischer, 2016). Accountability provides the creditability of the process of management of the natural resource by securing local people's rights and inputs, reduces corruption and paves the path for equitable and sustainable use of natural resources (Jackson, 2020). Theorists believe that accountable representative authorities with discretionary powers can lead to local efficiency, equity, and development, which is essential for local democracy (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). On the contrary, when implementing bodies choose to work with non-elected local bodies such as customary authorities, project committee, NGOs, there are often no mechanisms of public accountability to ensure that planning responds to local needs (Ece et al, 2017). Where people feel that they are unable to make decisions, it discourages local participation and allows non-elected actors to be in control of resources (elite control) and take ownership over public resources (elite capture), thus, accumulating more capital without no form of responsiveness and accountability to the local people.

By using the concept representation, I investigate who the intervening agent choose to work with and how this affects the participation of local people in Gola rainforest management under REDD+ implementation.

3.3 Concept of Capital

I used Bourdieu's notion of capital to show how people acquire a status that enables them either to participate or being excluded in natural resource management. I did this with the notion of finding out why certain individuals or groups occupy higher positions to gain influence in decision-making while others continue to lack influence in decision-making processes and face inequity benefit sharing of natural resources within a given field. In this case, the local community level in REDD+ implementation projects. According to Bourdieu, there are three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural (Inglis and Thorpe, 2018).

Economic capital is the level of monetary resources an individual or group possesses (Inglis and Thorpe, 2018). Individuals can acquire such capital through legal or corrupt means to get to positions where they can be selected or elected,

thus, influencing decisions and control resource in their favour. It can also be used by an individual to execute power. At the local community level, village elites such as the customary chiefs, the wealth may possess such capital in order to be recognised and be given further leadership positions to become more powerful in the community.

Social capital is the social network an individual has with people which gives him an edge over others in a given situation (Inglis and Thorpe, 2018). However, social capital does not depend upon the number of networks one possesses but upon the class of individuals, one has. For instance, networking with few highly placed individuals in society will give you more connections than when with many low-class people (Ojha, 2008). This social tie helps an individual to get more opportunities than others can hardly get in society. For instance, customary chiefs and project committee members with such capital at the local level, are recognised as representatives of the local people by intervening agencies in a community. As a result, they are first to benefits from projects or get information about project activities from the project implementing team than other local members. In addition, networking with follow chiefs in other villages can give one access to information about decision outcomes from other sources, which can be used to gain high bargaining power during decision-making process with the project implementing team or the local people.

Cultural capital is identified in three states, namely embodied, objectified and institutionalised. The embodied state comprises of the knowledge an individual acquired consciously or passively inherited that is socially recognised; objectified state comprises the properties an individual possessed that is of economic value, and the institutionalised state is the academic credential or professional qualification an individual or group possessed (Inglis, 2018).

The analytical advantage of drawing from this framework is of the emphasis that these three forms of capital can be easily converted into one another and take the form of symbolic capital. This can be expressed into power relations. Society can recognise and place an individual in a position of power, as shown in the case of the project implementing bodies recognising customary chiefs as representatives of the entire community (Ojha, 2008). It gives an understanding that individuals within a society can acquire these forms of capital through various means to get into positions of power and keep enjoying the privileges in accessing and controlling of public resources. However, the lack of these forms of capital by an individual, places him at the bottom of the ladder where his inputs cannot influence the decision-making processes and thus continue to suffer inequality benefit-sharing from public quotas. Focusing on these aspects will help grasps the central idea behind the participation of the local people in natural resource management interventions such as REDD+. By linking both concepts together, representation and capital, gives a foundation to understand why entrenched power relations influence the ability of local people to meaningfully participate in natural resource management initiatives.

4.0 Methodology

This chapter discusses the research approach for the study and explains the data collection process. It includes the sample size of the research, how respondents were selected, the choice of research methods and procedure used to collect the empirical data and as well as how the collected data was analysed.

4.1 Research Design

This study is based on the constructivist worldview, seeking to understand local participation in natural resource management initiatives especially in developing countries (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The overall objective of this study is to have a clear understanding of the decision-making processes and the benefit-sharing of mechanism in the implementation phase of the REDD+ initiative at the local community level. My thought about conducting this research was subjected to the view that local people, the primary users of the local natural resources have a way of understanding their contributions towards natural resource management. As suggested by Khan(2008), there is a need to go beneath every day's life and bring forth the reality that lies underneath. Local people make sense of the world that is social constructed (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). I wanted to explore how local people story their lives. According to Inglis and Thorpe (2019), people's stories and experiences make meaning, and this is useful to society. What the local people know is very much important for interpretation in this study rather than facts (Silverman, 2015). Framing this research described local people's insights to what is considered normal in exercising their consciousness about natural resource management interventions and rural life. I decided to use constructivist philosophical stance to unfold the complexity of this socially interactive phenomenon that is based on the shared experiences of individuals because this same approach has been used in other research to assess this kind of data.

Based on the nature of the study and the research questions it strives to answer, I used qualitative methods to collect empirical data related to life experiences of the actors involved and to further understand how they frame their lifeworld(ibid). In addition, I used a case study approach as suggested by Yin (2012) to investigate and have detailed information about this phenomenon within a real-life context. This allowed me to use different sources of evidence to collect thick description and narrative-styled content from a social science perspective towards participatory natural resource management initiative (Bryman, 2016).

4.2 Selection of sampling respondents and studied sites

The studied population considered for this research were those directly involved in the conservation of the Gola Rainforest National Park(GRNP), i.e. the forest edge communities, project implementing body(GRC) as well as the local government council that is legally representing these communities. Out of this, using a purposive sampling strategy, the small sample size was selected to

produce in-depth data about the views and experiences of the participants. Based on the guidance from GRC, I identified two (2) villages as my study sites. My selection was based on communities where Gola REDD+ Project activities were currently implemented to have a first-hand information, as well as their accessibility, due to the deplorable road conditions within the studied sites. The resources and time available for this study were also taken into consideration. Motorbikes commonly referred to as ‘Okadas’, the only means of public transportation within these communities were expensive and challenging to navigate within the communities.

My first contact in these communities were the village heads, referred to as customary chiefs, who later handed me over to the village youth leaders, that were willing and ready to discuss general issues about the subject. These youth leaders became my key informants and made it easier for me to recruit participants. Within each of the two (2) villages, seven (7) respondents making a total of Fourteen (14) local people relevant to the study were recruited to participate in the individual semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two(2) representatives from the project implementing agency and one(1) from the local government council. A focus group discussion of approximately 10 - 20 individuals of both men and women was also held in each of the villages.



Figure 2: Showing means of transportation (Okada) to the studied sites(Photo: Alhaji Kallon)

4.3 Data Collection Methods and Procedure

I conducted a six-week data collection exercise within the period from 8th February 2020 to 25th March 2020 with the above-mentioned participants. Based on my research questions, I decided to do a case study of the Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone to have a ‘real-world’ and in-depth understanding of the research problem (Yin 2012). To have grips on this study, I started by reviewing relevant reports of the Gola REDD+ Project in order to access data that would not have been possibly captured by the primary data collection methods, as well as to have

a comparison of what is on paper and that on ground. In addition, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and personal observations were held to collect empirical data for this study. The use of these multiple methods or triangulation was to go beyond acquiring the knowledge made possible by one approach, thus, contributing to promote quality research (Bryman, 2016). The interviews and focus group discussions were centred around the role of the key stakeholders and the ordinary local people in the implementation of Gola REDD+ project including decision-making processes from informed consent sessions to strategies and rules, benefit sharing and local people's perceptions towards these processes. Other issues include the relationship between the various set of actors, i.e., the project implementers, their chosen stakeholders and the local people, as well as the participation of the various classes of people including women, youth and other marginalised groups.

During personal interviews, I used the standard interview protocol or question guide that I initially framed in order not to lose sight of the central research questions. The questions were formulated in a manner that will create room for participants to share in-depth information about the subject and probe further to get more detailed answers (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This aided to cover all the relevant topics that were important for the study and allowed ample time to have discussions with participants on topics that seemed interesting and insightful (Flick, 2018). Interviews with all village respondents were directly done in '*Mende*', the local language spoken by all in the studied site. This eased communication; by putting the respondents in a relaxed mood as they were able to respond comfortably to questions in their dialect. As a result of this, I had an in-depth understanding of the relevant topics. Interviews with representatives of the Gola Rainforest Conservation (GRC) and Kenema District Local Council (KDLC) were done in English. I used a different question guide because I wanted to record only their organisations' views. In addition to personal interviews, I had Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in each of the two (2) villages to engage participants in live discussions. This brought out issues relevant to the study that would not have been possibly discussed during the individual interviews.

I further complement these methods of data collection with direct field observations within the studied area including transact walk to ongoing and completed Gola REDD Project activities initiated in these communities to get first-hand information. This captured the behaviour and activities of participants in their local settings. I further ensured that my thoughts through observations, demographic information about individuals, places and dates and other key information were recorded in my fieldwork notebook within 24 hours duration when my memory was still strong to get a full picture of events (Flick, 2018). The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, translated (where applicable) and then transcribed.

Furthermore, I was fortunate to attend a general community meeting organised by the project implementing team. Since I have attended similar meetings while working for my previous local organisation in Sierra Leone and understand the tradition of the local people in this studied site, gave me a prior experience in my capacity as a researcher.

The next sections describe in detail how the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted, data analysis method, reliability and validity of the study and ethical considerations.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

I decided to interview two (2) representatives (both men) from the GRC, the implementing body of the Gola REDD+ Project. One was done before going to the communities and the other after collecting data from the community respondents. This is because I wanted to have the organisation's view about the subject under study first and later make a follow-up of controversial data collected from the community respondents. During the first interview session with the GRC staff, I created room for the participant to share in-depth information about the subject, by probing further to get more details answers (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Based on the interview guide I had prepared; I conducted this interview in an informal atmosphere to ensure that there is a free flow of communication with this expert. This helped me to have a better understanding of the situation on the ground and led to my selection of villages within the project site for fieldwork. I was able to reformulate some of my interview guide questions for the local respondents at the village levels. For this study, I decided to keep respondents and villages anonymous. The following couple of weeks, I went to VIG1 and VIG2 to conduct fieldwork in the same manner.

In VIG1, I interviewed seven (7) respondents comprising of four (4) women and three (3) men. In VIG2, I also had (7) interviews comprising of three (3) women and four (4) men. These respondents include leaders and ordinary local members in the community that might have benefited or not from the Gola REDD+ Project initiative. I ended these individual sessions, by interviewing a representative(man) from the Kenema District Local Council (KDLC) - the legal representative body for these local communities. These individual interview sessions were platforms where respondents answered sensitive questions that may not have answered in the presence of others. Interviews within the local community respondents lasted for about 90 to 120 minutes, while that with GRC and KDLC representatives lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes. The total number of individual interviews was seventeen (17).

Table 1: Details of interviewed respondents

Identity in text	Sex	Represented body	Interviewed Date
P1	M	GRC	2020/02/08
P2	M	VIG 1	2020/02/10
P3	M	VIG 1	2020/02/13
P4	M	VIG 1	2020/02/15
P5	F	VIG 1	2020/02/18
P6	F	VIG 1	2020/02/21
P7	M	VIG 1	2020/02/25

P8	F	VIG 1	2020/02/28
P9	F	VIG 2	2020/03/03
P10	M	VIG 2	2020/03/07
P11	F	VIG 2	2020/03/10
P12	M	VIG 2	2020/03/13
P13	M	VIG 2	2020/03/15
P14	F	VIG 2	2020/03/17
P15	F	VIG 2	2020/03/20
P16	M	GRC	2020/03/23
P17	M	KLGC	2020/03/25

4.3.2 Focus Group Discussions

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions were held. It is an exercise where respondents participate in live discussions among themselves than just the researcher (Silverman, 2015). Bryman(2016) observed that if power is relinquished to participants by the moderator during a discussion, the participants will introduce new ideas that may not have been mentioned by the moderator. Regarding this, I conducted a focus group discussion including both men and women in each of the two (2) villages. Their inclusion was deliberate because of the limited time available. The local people by then were busy clearing the land for the next planting season of their crops. However, because of the conducive atmosphere and the similar stories shared about happenings in these villages, bought confidence to everyone to participate. During the FGD in VIG1, there was strong disagreement about an issue that went debatable. From this, I concluded with a more concrete account about the credibility of what people say under normal discussion when they are not influenced (Flick, 2018). In VIG2, I observed the issue of dominance by two individuals in the group. I encouraged the few reticent members to participate. This was also a platform where I identified members that I had personal conversations with to gain more in-depth knowledge about the subject or find out reasons for not participating as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

I facilitated the sessions with a guide to keep the participants focus, and not to deviate from the main subject of discussion. I asked Alhaji, who works at one of the local organisations in that community to take keynotes during the process. I audio recorded the entire discussions to keep track of everything. The focus

group discussions took about 90 to 120 minutes. In VIG1, I had 13 men and 5 women while in VIG2 were 11 men and 8 women.



Figure 3: Conducting FGD IN VIG1 (Photo: Alhaji Kallon)



Figure 4: Conducting FGD in VIG 2 (Photo: Alhaji Kallon)

4.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Reducing a huge amount of data from different data sources to obtain answers to the research questions has been a major challenge for many researchers (Yin 2012). Flick (2018) observed that in order to make sense of the data, a convenient approach must be taken by the researcher to manage a large volume of data without losing the context. Regarding this, I started my data analysis immediately during my data collection exercise in the field as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Silverman(2015). In order to get insightful interpretation of the data, I carried out thematic analysis approach – an analytic approach that involves identifying themes or patterns in a textual data and then interpret the result in a thematic structure by commonalties(Bryman, 2016). Yin(2012) further describes it as ‘a sense-making approach that finds relationship and quantifies qualitative data’. In carrying out this process, data collected from a wide range of different sources including individual interviews, focus group discussions and personal field observation notes were transcribed into an ‘Evernote’ software application to ensure I have a backup online and a Microsoft Word copy. I used a computer-assisted data analysis software Atlas. ti version 8 to code and identify emerging patterns or themes related to my research questions. Thereafter, these major themes were further narrated in a constructivist approach manner in relation to the conceptual framework to produce the major stories told in this research using strong pieces of evidence such as direct quotes from the respondents.

4.5 Validity and Reliability of the Study

Anney(2014) emphasised that data collected and analysed should accurately and credibly represent the researcher’s interpretation and result. Maxwell(2008) further explain the importance for qualitative researchers to emulate scientific methods and strive for trustworthiness and minimalization of bias in a research project. Therefore, to increase the degree of validity and reliability of the study, I adopted different scientific methods as advised by Flick (2018). I used data triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources. I realised that the data from these sources are convergent and support each other. This further helped me to get the complete picture of the reality on the ground. I recorded all possible data collected from fieldwork including verbatim account, direct observation and reflective experiences, later transcribed and used in my analysis (Yin 2012).

In addition, I used a computer-assisted software Atlas. ti version 8, an excellent tool for analysis to limit any form of data manipulation. I tried as best as possible to stay close to the empirical data by providing the verbatim accounts of the respondents as well as my reflections during fieldwork (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, I used thick descriptions throughout the write-up to bring out the views of participants with direct quotes where necessary to provide a rich and contextual explanation of the study as suggested by Silverman(2015).

4.6 Ethical Consideration

Research ethics is an important aspect of a study and involves the moral standard of practice that a researcher should take to ensure the security and safety of participants (Halse and Honey, 2005). Flick (2018) further emphasises the essence of such practice, as it stands to uphold the human dignity of participants within the studied area to ensure that their physical, mental and cultural well-being is taken into consideration.

In this study, I started by making contacts through emails while in Sweden to GRC, Gola REDD+ Project implementing agency in Sierra Leone about my proposed research in order to be granted permission for fieldwork in their project site. On arrival in Sierra Leone, I further presented a letter of authorisation from my university to the implementing agency which led to my request approval. At each of the villages, my first contact was the village head. I presented a letter of authorisation from the project implementing agency requesting permission to conduct fieldwork in their locality. At the start of every individual interview and focus group discussion, I informed participants about the essence of the study and further reiterated that their participation in such research is voluntarily and therefore they have the right to participate or withdraw at any time of the process (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Throughout the study, I kept the participants and villages anonymous and used codes when discussing them. According to Yin (2012), disguising participant's identity while collecting, analysing and reporting data will protect the privacy of secrets shared. This often favours vulnerable groups in society that are unable to protect themselves, especially in developing countries.

In addition, I presented my data and report without bias to ensure that the research is of good quality. In order to get people informed, the final report of this research will be shared with the participating community and institutions engaged in natural resource management and local democracy.

5.0 Empirical Findings

In this chapter, insights about how decision-making happens, and the distribution of benefits at REDD+ initiative using Gola REDD+ Project in Sierra Leone as a case study is explored. They extend from the views and perceptions of the participants as well as the analysis of the various data collected during fieldwork. I focus on answering the first research questions on how the decision-making processes within the Gola REDD+ Project happen at the local community level. In doing so, I first identified those that are representing the local people in the decision-making processes to evaluate local people's participation. Furthermore, I outlined the actions of those considered as decision-makers of the Gola REDD+ project. In answering the second questions, how are benefits from REDD+ Project shared among the target population? I did this, outlining findings under the two main benefit types achieved in the REDD+ implementation process, i.e., monetary gains and alternative livelihood programmes.

5.1 Representatives in the Gola REDD+ Decision-Making Process

Looking at the concept of representation as explained in section (3.2), since it is difficult to include the entire community in the decision-making processes, certain individuals may act on behalf of the local people. Actors involved in the decision-making processes are key in producing the outcome of a project. This is because there is a need to negotiate the implementing decisions of the project that can be broadly undertaken. Despite REDD+ social safeguard calls for full and effective participation of all relevant stakeholders, the selection of the local representatives for decision-making at the Gola REDD+ project and the extent of their actions in the implementation of REDD+ project and activities, are determined by GRC, the project implementing agency. In order to have an in-depth understanding of which institutions or individuals GRC identified as representatives of the local people, a staff from GRC, the project implementing body highlighted,

” As an organisation, we worked under the REDD+ social safeguards. We are, therefore, mandated to actively involve community members in the management process of this project [.....]. However, REDD+ project funding is tied towards producing results. Having this in mind, at the pilot phase of these projects, a top management meeting was held where we identified the key stakeholders within the communities that we would like to work with as partners. After a series of suggestions among the experts, we concluded in identifying certain individuals who we thought can help achieve the project objective. Gola Rainforest lies within seven chiefdoms, the customary heads of these chiefdoms referred to as paramount chiefs are among our key stakeholders. We believe that the customary chiefs can help encourage or force their people to protect the reserve forest in order to meet the project outcome. In addition, at the village level or forest edge communities, we work directly with the village heads and village forest

committees. Most often we engage these individuals (paramount chiefs, villages heads and village committees) in decision-making processes since they are recognised by their people to represent them. The outcome of our discussion is then conveyed to the different communities by their representatives. However, occasionally, we do hold generally community meetings with the entire community to update them about the project development'' (P2: 2020/02/10, GRC)

Additionally, in a focus group discussion at VIG1, everyone agreed to the response highlighted by one of the women about their knowledge of REDD+ project and the village chief as their representative.

''We got to know about REDD+ project during a meeting called by the village chief, where the project team informed us about the REDD+ objectives, activities and its potential benefits. The meeting lasted for about 3 to 4 hours and at the end of the meeting, members were free to express their views concerning the project. However, before the general community meeting, we were informed that the project team had previously held meetings with all the heads of the surrounding villages about their consents of implementing REDD+ project and it was unanimously agreed by them. We were later informed as a community about the outcome of those meetings by our customary chief. The general community meeting held was in line with what the village head had already informed us. He should represent us in such gathering and give us information about the outcome''(FGD1, VIG1, 2020/03/01)

Both villages reported that they were consulted before the implementation of REDD+ activities. These consultative meetings were organised to explain the project, its importance to communities and the potential benefits the communities stand to gain. However, the consent to join REDD+ was already approved by the customary chiefs in their initial meetings with GRC without the inputs of the general local body. Therefore, meetings like this, was a mere information sharing and not to get the people's inputs.

Furthermore, I tried to figure out why GRC chooses to work with non-elected actors, despite the presence of KDLC, the legally elected body representing the people. In a focus group discussion in both VIG1 and VIG2, participants expressed their views that the selection of customary chiefs by the implementing agency, shows a clear understanding that they are more concern about achieving the technical objective of the project. Some of the reasons stated by them were customary chiefs are easier targets of manipulation by GRC to gain control and implement the project to meet their desired objective. Many believed that customary authorities pay more attention to resource control, as a result, the local people adhere to their authority more than the legally elected authorities that are based in the district headquarters town. Others pointed out that the lack of trust from the elected-bodies due to previous corruption cases such as misappropriation of public funds and lack of bureaucracies might be the reason for the implementing body's decision.

From the perspective of the KDLC, the legal representative of the communities on why they are not involved in the management process of Gola REDD+ process, the council representative responded.

‘The local government is responsible for running all local communities’ affairs from different sectors. However, in the case of the Gola REDD+ project, since it is internationally funded, the donor and implementing body decide who to partner with. Nevertheless, we can intervene in the process when called upon by the communities to seek their interest’ (P17: 2020/03/25, KDLC).

These pieces of evidence show that the project implementing body(GRC) focus is on achieving the conservation aspect of the project, therefore, their choice of local partner is based on those that can quickly help meet the technical objective of the project without meeting bureaucratic principles. The selection of the customary chiefs gives GRC full control decision-making processes, as it does not allow the representatives to make significant decisions, such as how the project should be implemented. However, it elevates their positions in the local communities through the decision-making and control of resources thereby increasing their various forms of capital. As a result, customary chiefs may not only have possession of the resources but will be able to use them at their advantage. It is like empowering them the more without no form of accountability to the local people. One of the interviewees stated

‘The village chiefs are more concern about how the community can adhere to the bylaws of conserving the forest. So that they can keep enjoying the benefits derived from the project since they are not accountable to the local people. No one questions their actions because the positions and power they control is for life’(P7: 2020/02/25, VIG1).

According to the political structure of Sierra Leone at the local level (chiefdoms and villages), customary chiefs usually men, are the local rulers responsible for running the affairs of their communities. A chiefdom which comprises of several villages is headed by a paramount chief, and each of the villages averaging about 100 to 300 people has a subordinate chief called the village head. The role of customary chiefs had existed long before the arrival of the British to colonialize Sierra Leone. They gain their positions through inheritance from their family lineages, and as such, they remain in such position of power and keep accumulating the various forms of capital for life unless otherwise. For instance, during the implementation phase of the Gola REDD+ project, the selection process of the village committee was assigned to village chiefs. The committee of twenty (20) members together with the chiefs represent the local people during project meetings and other engagement organised by the project implementing team. Being a member of this committee goes with a lot of opportunities. They are the first to enjoy benefits derived from the project including a monthly meeting allowance. In the focus group discussions in VIG2, participants complained about how the village head uses his power to choose his close relations and friends as members of the committee. One of the men explained

“Most of us were displeased about how the selection process of village committee was done. We thought it should have been done democratically, but to our surprise, only those close to the chief were selected. We think this is unfair to us as a community. We all have the right to be part of happenings in the community irrespective of our connection to those in higher positions of authority” (FGD2, VIG2, 2020/03/21).

As highlighted from the concept of representation in the conceptual framework, when power is transfer to non-elected authorities, they may act on behalf of the public sometimes, but often they work to secure their own interests. This is because the people do not get to select or elect who their representatives are based on who are they trust and think would act on their behalf; nor are there clear mechanisms that enable citizens to influence decisions and hold these actors to accounts for their actions. Furthermore, finding shows that the chiefs and members of the village committee gain economic capital through the allowances from the monthly Gola REDD+ village representatives’ meetings. The capital received can be further converted into social capital to increase their networking spaces and to symbolic capital by gaining popularity within the community.

5.2 Decision-making in the Gola REDD+ Project

5.2.1 The Implementing Body makes the Decisions

As previously mentioned, REDD+ safeguard calls for full and effective participation of the local people, which entails that representatives or the local people must be actively involved in decision-making processes and receive equity benefits. However, drawing from the concept of representation, implementing bodies choose to work with non-elected local authorities that can be easily manipulated through corrupt practices such as bribery in order to achieve their desired technical objective of the project. As organisers of the project with the expert knowledge, they are tasked to meet the demand of the donors to keep the result-based payment on-going. Finding reveals that GRC used their technical expertise to bring to the decision-making table their already-made plans of how the project activities should be implemented. In other words, they decide on the kind of project activities that should be implemented and in what way the local people can be involved. In an interview with one of the village heads, he refers to the project implementing agency as the head of the Gola REDD+ project and therefore, he takes direct instructions from them. He explained,

“When it comes to the implementing of Gola REDD+ project, the project implementing team decides how things should be done. This is because they implement the project according to their stated policy. As a result, the top-down approach might be the only mechanism in implementing this process. Most often, when called upon during meetings organised by them. They set out the agenda of what should be discussed. For instance, in our initial meeting as representatives from all the target communities, the project implementing team informed us about the project objective, its activities and the potential benefits to the communities.

They also outlined the need for protecting the forest, the danger of climate change to communities, the need for alternative livelihood programmes and community development. Our main reason for accepting to join REDD+ was because we were told by the organisers that the management of the forest resource will entail our inputs in decision-making processes and thus receive benefits. Their proposed plans were accepted by us because of what the community will stand to gain. However, I think certain information like the yearly amount of money as compensation was not mentioned during the meeting. This would have made us reject the Gola REDD+ implementation or call further for negotiation. I think during such meetings, our inputs as representatives did not influence the decisions due to their set plans. However, within the project field, we are like soldiers on the ground to impose restrictions of illegal activities caused by our people in the protected area and to seek the interest of our people''.(P3: 2020/02/13, VIG1).

From the chief's narrative, it is evident that GRC oversees the decision-making processes, he confirmed that they understood the project based on the information provided by the organisers. They were quite sure that the project would provide them with the substantial alternative livelihood opportunities, so they can avoid the use of forest resources. However, their understanding of REDD+ reveals that the kind of information disseminated, motivated the customary authorities to accept the project. In other words, since the project implementing body was the main source of information about the project, they have absolute control over the information dissemination and only provide information that will shape the representatives' perception of accepting the project. These meetings did not create space for the customary chiefs to influence the implementation process of the project. However, it was a platform for the customary authorities to accept the views of the project implementing team.

In the focus group discussion in VIG2, participants also considered the project organiser (GRC) as the key actor in the REDD+ decision-making processes. Their importance is associated to their contributions in providing monetary gains as incentives for conserving the forest and as well as the initiation of alternative livelihood programmes in the form of agricultural capacity training programmes, rehabilitation of local people's cocoa plantations and the introduction of financial management scheme among others in these deprived communities, thereby improving the livelihood opportunities of the people. One of the beneficiaries commended GRC.

“GRC has a set goal, in achieving it, they have been instrumental in providing different livelihood programmes at the local level. I think, their intervention has provided livelihood opportunities for the people, thereby keeping some of the local people busy to stop engaging in illegal activities in the forest''(FGD2, VIG2, 2020/03/21)

In this regard, the possession of economic capital by the project implementing team makes them to be recognised by the local people as key decision-makers. It is also noticed that the actions of the GRC in decision-making processes did not respond to the needs of the people. This is because the GRC is only accountable to the donors and not to the people. For instance, GRC does not report financial matters to the local people especially on how much is being realised from the

sales of carbon credits, neither does the team discuss budgetary allocation of project activities to be implemented. One of the village heads complained.

“As a community, we have a major role to play in the conservation of Gola Rainforest by ensuring all the restricted rules are adhered to as stated by the GRC. However, when it comes to the area of accountability, GRC has never informed us about the amount of money generated from the sales of carbon credits that we have been compelled to store. The allocation of funding to the various programme activities is done independently without consultation with the people. In other words, they decide ‘who get what’ and the number of people each project activity stand to benefit”(P10: 2020/03/07, VIG2).

Furthermore, in an interview with one of the women, she expressed concern about the difficulty of being included in the alternative livelihood programmes. This is because, in each of the project activities, the project team decides the number of people that should be involved in participation. She explained.

“Most of the programme activities have a limited number of people that can join. In one of the capacity building training programmes organised for women farmers, I have wanted to participate in the training session so that I can be knowledgeable about modern farming practices. However, I was excluded to be part of the session because there was no available space as I was informed by the organising team”(P5:2020/02/18, VIG 1).

In both interviews, it can be noted that the project organisers use their power in making most of the decisions. As a result, their contributions in the implementation of the Gola REDD+ project has a significant role to play in achieving a positive outcome.

5.2.2 The Customary Chiefs make the Decisions

As highlighted from the concept of Representation, certain individuals act on behalf of the people, since it is difficult for the entire community to participate in decision-making processes with the implementing bodies. Regarding this, customary chiefs are chosen as local partners to work with GRC in the implementation of Gola REDD+ project activities. At the community level, the transfer of power to customary chiefs, allows them to make most of the decisions. Respondents at the individual interview sessions said the chiefs are the ones with the final sayings regarding Gola REDD+ implementation. The project implementing body makes suggestions to the customary chief on what needs to be done and then the chief decides or recommends. They highlighted it with different cases.

“At the start of Gola REDD+ project implementation phase, the selection process of village committee members was assigned to the chief, with the view of choosing people that will be committed to meeting the project objective without bias. However, we realised that most of the people in this committee are relations and friends of the chief. There are people in this committee that do not merit it

because it was biasedly done due to their connection with those in higher authority’’ (P8: 2020/02/28, VIG1).

‘‘With regards to compensation packages, Gola REDD+ project adopted an annual scholarship scheme for the community school-going children. However, only two (2) scholarship positions are entitled to each community. The chief decides which households should be the recipients of the yearly scholarship in a community like this, with a lot of school children whose parents cannot afford school charges. Most often children chosen are relations to the chief’’ (P10: 2020/03/07, VIG2).

‘‘An annual amount of money is given to target communities by the implementers as compensation for conserving the forest. It is supposed to be shared among household members as we were previously informed. However, when such amount was received by the chief on behalf of the community, he was not accountable to the people on how much money was received and he did not ask the consent of members on how much money should be shared. Most often he uses the said amount to engage in community development project such as road and bridge constructions rather than sharing the amount of money to members of the community’’ (P14: 2020/03/17, VIG2).

However, from the narratives, it is noted that the customary chiefs did not respond to the needs of the people. With regards to the chief’s decision of how monetary benefits were used, he said the decision of using the money in community project was made in agreement with his sub-chiefs. They came to such a conclusion because the money allocated for distribution among community members was very limited compared to the number of households. He further stated that the amount received from the implementing team was equivalent to USD 400 and to be shared among 80 households, which may be equivalent to USD 5 each. As a result, they decided to invest in a community development project, so it can be enjoyed by all, which he thinks it an effective way of changing their natural resource use behaviour.

Furthermore, in the Focus group discussion in VIG2, participants complained that the Gola REDD+ project monthly general meetings were held at the customary chief’s compound. Being the private place of the chief make it uncomfortable for people to express themselves. Some members also expressed ill-feelings that the chief often asks non-invited people away when certain project meetings are held. Many participants noted that the chief had a very strong influence over the project as he controls all the information that reaches the village from the project implementing team. He is always in contact with the project team, they visit him more often to gather report. It is, therefore, evident that the friendly relation with the implementing team, the selection of the meeting venue and choice of who to invite to meetings, shows that the village head has full control of the process regarding Gola REDD+ implementation at the village level. The power exhibited by the chief shows that it is difficult for local people to hold non-elected officials accountable and as such the customary chiefs do not always represent the people.

In addition, data gathered during interviews, reveals that the access to and use of the forest is determined by the chiefs. In cases where fines are been levied on lawbreakers when caught by the forest guards for engaging in illegal activities at

the forest, the chief decides how much should be paid by the individual depending upon the gravity of the case. One of the interviewees highlighted.

‘We are not pleased about the new rules that are in place to access the forest. The forest has been our source of firewood for the past decades but since the Gola REDD+ intervention. We have been asked to stop the collection of firewood in the forest in order not to threaten the endangered species. To adhere to this, fines are levied by the chief on individuals who violate the bylaws, which I think it unfair on us as owners of the forest’ (P4: 2020/02/15, VIG 1).

It is clearly seen here that the lack of complete devolution of discretionary power, make the chief to over-use his power. Because there is no form of sanction that holds him accountable. Customary chiefs can further use such power at their advantage to benefit themselves or their close relatives and friends. In an interview with one of the respondents, a lady, aged 53, narrated how the chief used to receive bribes from the village committee members to remain in their positions. She further stated that the chief used to collect gifts such as goats or chickens from individuals that may want to be part of the project livelihood programmes.

‘The chief is not working on our behalf because he is using corrupt means to put people in the project activities. People must give him gifts such as goats, chicken or gallons of palm oil to be considered eligible to participate in some project activities. Some time ago, I approached the chief that I wanted to be part of the agricultural project. He told me that I should bring him 5 gallons of palm oil in order to participate, according to him, many people were waiting in the queue to be included in that programme. I was not included in the programme because I unable to afford such gifts’ (P15:2020/03/20, VIG 2)

From this narrative, it can be noted that the position of the customary chief gave him the opportunity to use resources at his own advantage. Being in such position of authority enables him to manipulate people to give him gifts or exclude others from benefiting that cannot afford such gifts. By doing this, he accumulates more economic capital to himself due to his corrupt practices which can be converted to other forms of capital, making him more powerful in society. Similarly, one of the women complained that she did not participate in the agricultural capacity training programme because her name was later removed from the list to be replaced by the friend of the chief. This shows that social network or capital plays an important role within social structures and that the kind of people you network with matters. It is, therefore, noted that those that network with individuals that are highly placed in society, may tend to gain certain opportunities that are not merit based.

During the Focus group discussion in VIG1, finding reveals that a general community meeting organised by the project organiser in agreement with the chief is held once in every month at the chief’s compound. However, there have been a drastic drop in attendance when compared with when the project implementation started. The reason why people do not attend has variable responses. Some pointed that the project did not meet their expectation. Therefore, attending meetings like this was a waste of time, so they prefer to use

such time in something more meaningful. Others explained that during such meetings, the project organisers and the chief contributions are mostly taken into consideration. They observed that their views have never influenced the project outcome. Another reason why local people do not attend such meetings is that there is no incentive attached for participating. However, if someone misses such meetings 3 times without a justifiable reason, a fine is often levied by the chief. One of the men highlighted.

‘‘There is no need of attending such meetings. Our views are not heard. The customary chief together with project team makes the decisions. I only attend after every two months because I do not want to pay fines’’ (FGD1, VIG1, 2020/03/01).

From this narrative, it is observed that customary chiefs use their power to subject people to obey their rules. Ideally, the local community recognised and obey customary chiefs’ rules more than the project implementing body or elected local authorities. It is based on this, that the implementing body might have preferred choosing customary chiefs as a representative over elected local body that has the legal right to represent the people.

5.3 The Gola REDD+ benefit-sharing mechanism

How REDD+ funding reaches the local people at the community level depends upon the benefit-sharing mechanism designed by the project implementer in consultation with the representatives of the local people. Therefore, from the concept of representation highlighted in the conceptual framework, the choice of representatives will lead to the benefit-sharing approach applied within the project. The Gola REDD+ is directly channelled to local projects based on the market-model, where developed countries pay local people in developing countries compensation for their abstinence from converting the forests into other land uses. In this regard, the Gola REDD+ implementation presents new risks in the community such as the loss of access to land, elite control and loss of livelihood opportunities that greatly affect poor households, women and other marginalised groups. This section analyses the benefits community households have gained from the Gola REDD+ project, which can be categorised into; (A) Monetary benefits for the loss of livelihood opportunities (B) Alternative livelihoods programme.

5.3.1 Monetary Benefits for the Loss of Livelihood Opportunities

During the interview sessions, only individuals such as landowners and customary authorities had a clear understanding of how the monetary benefit mechanism works. The other villagers’ knowledge on this seems acute. This is because not all of the Gola REDD+ benefits involve the participation of the entire community. The packages in a monetary form which include surface rents for landowners, community compensation, and educational scholarships are annually given to communities within the seven chiefdoms in which GRNP lies.

The surface rents were given only to households identified as landowners of GRNP. According to one of the beneficiaries of this entitlement, an amount equivalent to USD 15 each is annually shared among households that are considered as landowners. However, in a focus group discussion in VIG1, participants especially the landless but forest-dependent members expressed concerns of being excluded from the process. One of the men highlighted.

‘‘This is unfair. We stand to gain nothing when it comes to monetary compensation just because we are landless community members. However, we also have a role to play in conserving the forest. Despite being landless, we have been using the forest as a source of alternative livelihood. Therefore, we must also be compensated for the loss of our livelihood opportunities. We have suggested to the project implementing team to engage us in the monitoring and assessment activities so that we can be paid for our labour. But nothing has been done about it’’(FGD2, VIG2,2020/03/21)

Another concern raised by landless respondents during the interview sessions was that the opportunity of participating in the livelihoods programme was more given to landowners compared to the landless. This means the landowners will benefit more from the economies of scale of production, thereby increase their economic capital that will eventually be converted to other forms of capital, while the landless which depend even more on the forest resources because they do not land for agricultural cultivation, are systematically disadvantaged and excluded from the benefits.

Monetary gains are also given to communities as rewards for conserving the forest. According to the GRC staff, such reward is necessary to induce people from engaging in more disruptive resource-use practices, thereby providing alternative income sources to help improve their standards of living. However, during individual interview sessions, many respondents expressed dissatisfaction about the expected money. Based on previously held meetings with the project team, they were expecting that a substantial amount of money will be received to be shared among households. One of the interviewees stated.

‘‘At the start of the project implementation, we were told that huge amount of money will be given to every household as compensation for the loss of livelihood. Most of us have already had plans of investing the money in petty trading. We were later surprised to be informed by our customary authorities that such money will be used in executing community development project rather than sharing among households’’ (P12: VIG2, 2020/03/13)

In addition, respondents that were not from the community leadership strata were unaware about how much money was given out to the community. In response, the customary chief highlighted that the amount of money received, according to the project implementer’ explanation, depends upon the amount of sequestered carbon produced that was bought by the buyers. He did not share such an amount because every household would have only received a couple of dollar equivalent. Therefore, in agreement with his sub-chiefs, they decided to use the money in rehabilitating community bridges that can equally benefit every community member. However, the use of such incentives may not be effective, as it is not expected that everyone can benefit equally. It also creates room for elite control,

where only the chiefs might decide how to use such fund and the decision taken always favour them. Therefore, for the good of all, the decision to share benefit either at the household level or engage in community infrastructures should be done through community consultation, where there be a possibility of accessing the preferences of all community participants rather than just the customary chiefs. This will develop a positive attitude and ownership among local people.

Furthermore, it is noted that the amount of monetary benefits did not fully compensate households for the benefits they should have realised converting the forest to other resource uses. Before the implementation of Gola REDD+ project, the local people regarded the forest as a source for bushmeat, firewood, charcoal production, building materials, herbal medicines and bee farming to increase their livelihood income. After Gola REDD+ project was implemented, all these activities were banned. Forest guards were deployed within the forest for people to obey compliance and fines were levied on lawbreakers by the customary authorities. Based on the number of households, if community compensation were to be shared among households, then each household was expected to receive about USD 5. This show that such payment of ecosystem services does not have a fix payment plan. Therefore, finding further reveals that the amount given as community compensation to the number of local people is key in deciding whether benefits are to be shared among households or collectively use to invest in community infrastructures. If there are too many participants, benefit shared among individuals might be of no significance to the people and thus, it will undermine the effectiveness of the project. As a result, investing in community infrastructure might be the best alternative to be enjoyed by all and might be less vulnerable to elite capture.

With regards to the educational scholarship, data reveals that scholarship opportunities in the form of a yearly payment of school fees and other charges for school-going children within each of the local communities were agreed. In communities where the illiteracy rate is at an increase, such programme aims to improve the level of education at these communities by ensuring that a greater number of children had access to high school education. However, in the focus group discussion in VIG2, concerns were raised by participants about the number of scholarship spaces available per year. One of the men highlighted.

‘‘We were all pleased about the scholarship package for our children to pursue schooling. Most of the villagers especially widows and single mothers cannot afford to send their children to schools because of school charges. However, the number of scholarship spaces available per village is only two (2) in proportion to about 80 school-going kids. How can only two (2) scholarship spaces be shared among the total number of school kids in this community? It will be fine, if the project team can increase the scholarship quota to at least ten (10)’’ (FGD2, VIG2, 2020/03/21)

Subsequently, some interviewees expressed concerns that their households have never benefited from such scholarship scheme, as most of the children that receive such opportunity are somehow related to the chief. He decides who gets the scholarship. In an interview, a staff of the implementing team responded that the number of allocations of the scholarship is based on the funding available for that specific programme and the number of communities targeted. As a result, two (2) scholarship spaces were given to each of the 122 communities within

Gola REDD+ project site. This shows that implementing body decision on the number of people to benefit in a specific project activity is related to the amount of funding available to execute such a project.

5.3.2 Alternative livelihoods programme

One way of ensuring that a good number of individuals benefit from the compensation package of REDD+ project is to design a programme that favours the marginalised group in society such as the landless, women and the pro-poor. With regards to this, GRC, the implementing body of Gola REDD+ project in agreement with the representatives designed alternative livelihoods programme that include agricultural capacity training, rehabilitation of degraded cocoa plantation and saving and leading group.

Since agriculture is the main livelihood of the target communities, a special capacity training programme was designed to improve the farmers' traditional practice of farming into modern ones, to increase the productivity of their farms thereby improving food security and the income level of the community members. All the participants I interviewed are engaged in some sorts of farming. The main crops grown in this area were rice, cassava, sweet potato, groundnut and pepper. Respondents estimated their yearly income from a common household ranging from USD 600 to USD 2000. These incomes are generated from the sales of both their main crops and the cash crops, which is cocoa. However, during the focus group discussion in VIG 1, it was revealed that only two (2) groups of 30 individuals each making a total of 60 were formed to be participants of the training programme. According to a staff member of GRC, the project did not get everyone on board to participate due to lack of funding. This means a good number of people were left out from participating in this alternative livelihood programme. More men were included compared to women. This is because the men were the first to receive information about the group formation based on the household division of labour at that specific period. At the arrival of the project team, most men were in the village because it was the period just after the end of the season of clearing farmlands for cultivation. Women by then were mainly engaged in planting crops or doing domestic chores at home. One of the women interviewees highlighted.

'Most of us (women) were not included in the groups for the capacity training programmes. We wanted to participate in order to be knowledgeable about modern methods of farming. However, the formation of groups was done in our absence. The chiefs should have informed us about the programme since he is the first to get information from the implementing team. We were hoping that more groups would have been added, but nothing has been done about it. We felt left out in a programme that would have contributed immensely to increase our income level'' (FGD1, VIG1, 2020/03/01)

From this narrative, noted that most of the women were excluded because they were busy doing something else. Therefore, the formation of such groups would have been done when all community members were well informed and present in the village. The lack of access to this information by the women shows that the customary chief uses his power to decide who can participate in such a programme.

Cocoa, which is a cash crop, is grown and owned by about 80 per cent of the local people living in the studied site. However, because of the lack of resources

to engage in effective maintenance of these plantations, led to the rapid reduction in the productivity of these crops. As a result, most farmers cannot realise the estimated income from their plantations. It was on this ground, that the Gola REDD+ project in consultation with the customary chiefs designed a programme where farmers can be given a specific amount of money to rehabilitate their cocoa plantations. In addition, GRC provided special training on cocoa production, post-harvest processing and farm management. This was aimed to increase the productivity of crops, thereby diversifying the local people's sources of income to improve their standards of living. However, about two-thirds of the interviews conducted raised concerns about this project activity. One of them, a woman, aged 50. She is a widow with five (5) children. Her household has five (5) hectares of cocoa plantation but she has not been realising much money from the sales of her cash crops due to poor maintenance of the farm since the death of her husband. Unfortunately, she did not benefit from the cocoa project because her name was not included on the list of beneficiaries. She narrated her story.

'We were told in a community meeting by the project team that all cocoa plantation owners will benefit from the project. Our names were taken as potential beneficiaries. However, during the distribution of money for the rehabilitation of cocoa farms, headed by the chief. Some of us (women) were not included. There was no reason mentioned for removing our names from the list. We were hoping that the chief should have investigated the matter from the implementing team since he is our representative, but nothing of such was done. Maybe the chief might have removed our names from the list. This is unfair to us. Is it because I am a widow?'' (P11: VIG2, 2020/03/10).

From this narrative, it is evident that within a social structure, certain groups especially women may tend to be marginalised because of the lack of various forms of capital. The exclusion of the woman from participating shows that customary chiefs most often do not seek the interest of the local people they claim to represent, they use their positions to exclude others from participating. Other interviewees especially the landless and youth raised similar concerns, blaming the organising team and representatives for designing a programme that excludes them for participating. The landless were hoping that the project implementing team can also engage them in the monitoring and assessment activities of the project so that they can be paid for their labour, while the youth wanted to be employed as forest guards by the implementing team rather than hiring outsiders from the urban areas.

Furthermore, due to the lack of financial institutions in the studied area, local people find it difficult to manage their finances. This has resulted in a high rate of poverty in these communities. To mitigate this, the implementing team designed a programme to conduct special training on financial management and further provided loan kits for community members. Participation was voluntary, members were tasked to deposit a specific amount of money in a wooden box headed by a trained committee. Later, participants can loan money from the saved account when they are in dying need without interest or the total amount contributed can be shared after a specific period. GRC monitored the process and provide support when needed. This has enabled members to achieve financial independence by establishing a secure means of saving money and procure small loans that can be used for petty trading or invest in agricultural activities. During the focus group discussion in VIG2, participants were delighted about such

initiative, as it can help generate alternative income for them. However, the only concern raised was that the scheme did not make provision for everyone to participate. Just like the other implemented alternative livelihood programmes, the participation of people in this scheme was also limited. Only two groups of 25 members each were formed, thus, leaving a huge number of people out of the programme. Finding reveals that the implementing body has full control of the project and therefore, decides the number of people that should participate. Most often, the lack of funding by the project team limits people from participating. Therefore, a mechanism must be adopted where a good number of the target population can be included in the project activities.

6.0 Discussion

This chapter gives the interpretation of the key findings of the study. It links the findings to the conceptual framework I presented in Chapter 3 on Representation and Capital. References are made on existing literature on participatory natural resource management, local democracy and REDD+ decision making and benefit-sharing mechanism. I concluded this section by giving a summary of the discussion to answer the research questions.

6.1 How Decision-making processes within the Gola REDD+ project happen

The study found that customary authorities were chosen by GRC to represent local people in decision-making processes over KDLC, the elected local body that has the legal mandate to represent the local people in that jurisdiction. According to Ribot et al (2006), it is the intervening agent that decides which institution should be empowered. In doing so, some are recognised to have authority, while others are not. A possible explanation for this might be since REDD+ payment is based on result achieved, the choice of actors by the GRC depends upon those that can help achieve the project objective within a specific period without much protocols in order to keep it go-going. GRC believes that the customary chiefs can be easily manipulated to have full control and efficiently implement the project activities in their favour. Regarding this, customary chiefs' views during decision-making processes with the GRC did not influence the decision-making processes but seen as a green light to meet the REDD+ safeguards as observed by Agrawal and Chhatre(2006). According to Ece et al (2017), the processes set up by intervening agencies to engage local communities, do not allow the local people to have full control over the intervention. Rather, they are enactments of their participation requirements to facilitate project approval by the donors. Data also revealed that because of the previously held corruption cases such as bribery and embezzlement of public funds and the slow pace in bureaucratic principles by the elected local institution, led to the implementing body's decision of working with the most 'easy to work with' available institution. It was confirmed that GRC has full control over the REDD+ implementation at the local level. Furthermore, the customary chiefs also made significant decisions in the implementation of Gola REDD+ project activities. GRC decides how the project should be implemented and who stands to benefits. They do not inform the people either on how much money was realised from the sales of carbon credits or the budgetary allocation for project activities. This is because GRC is only accountable to the donors and not to the local people. Most often, the project team 'stage-manages' activities in order to meet the technical objective of the project. It can therefore be noted that the implementing body's decision of choosing customary chiefs over KDLC is based on promoting the quick attainment of project technical objective.

Furthermore, the finding of this study shows that within the local communities, the transfer of power to customary authorities by GRC did not reflect on the needs and aspirations of the local people. Result revealed that the chiefs made most of the decision at the local level. This is because GRC assigned

most of the community engagements to the chiefs, such as the selection of village community members and those that should be included in the alternative livelihood programmes. This transfer of power allows the chiefs to continue accessing resources to secure more capital. According to the concept of representation drawn from the Ribot (2002, 2004), when power is transfer to the non-elected body such as customary authorities, they do not respond to the needs and aspirations of the local people. This is because no form of sanction is levied on them that can make them accountable. This was also noted in VIG2 when the customary chief was engaged in corrupt practices of receiving bribes, but it was difficult for him to be sanctioned because of his influence and capital he possessed. One of the issues that emerged from this finding is that customary chiefs will keep accumulating the various forms of capital in order to gain control over public resources. In addition, it is noted that participation in community engagement at the local level is evaluated based on the degree in which representatives respond to the needs of the local people and be accountable to them (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Therefore, decision-makers should be empowered to respond to the needs of the people as well as being sanctioned so that they can be accountable. By so doing, the views of the entire citizenry can be included in decision-making processes. According to Ece et al (2017), in cases where implementing agency chooses non-elected local body to represent local people over the elected local body as in the case of this study, it undermines local democracy by disempowering those assigned the legal right to represent the local people, thereby diminishing their role in local decision-making. As a result, the outcome of such a process is always not sustainable as it encloses the public domain (Ribot, 2002, 2004).

Furthermore, access to information is seen as the main factor for facilitating the participation of local people in development interventions. However, this did not seem to be the case in the Gola REDD+ project implementation phase. The source of information for local people was either through the GRC or the customary chiefs. According to the finding, it is noted that since the implementing body was responsible for information dissemination during the consultation meetings with the local representatives. Only information that led to the acceptance of the project were shared. This again shows that the project implementing agency had full control over the process and therefore, chooses representatives that can be easily manipulated to achieve their project objective. It is also noted that at the community level, the customary chiefs were the first to receive information on behalf of the community. They used their positions of power to decide who to share such information with, that will participate in the project activities. This demonstrates that when power is transfer to non-elected local authorities by the implementing body, there is always control of resources as stated by Agrawal and Ribot (2012). Members cannot hold their leaders accountable because no form of sanction is levied on them as observed by Fischer (2016). This finding helps to understand that the kind of information revealed to participants would shape their perceptions to a particular objective.

The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that women participation in decision-making and other engagements at the Gola REDD+ project implementation was low when compared to men. A possible explanation for this finding maybe because of the dominant position occupied by men within this local community. Women are those with a lower form of economic, social and cultural capital (Inglis and Thorpe, 2018). Men are the heads of their

households, as a result, they are in the best position to gain the various forms of capital in order to be considered for public positions. For instance, according to the finding revealed, women are placed at a lower hierarchy within the social structure. In both villages, only two women per village were part of the village forest committee of ten (10) participants. This shows that the committees were male-dominated, and as such women felt inferior within these groups. One major reason for this is because of the gender roles that stipulate women from sharing their views where men are present. They prefer reserving their opinions during decision-making processes. Furthermore, women cannot be appointed as customary chiefs within these communities because of the culture and tradition of the local people. They faced all sort of marginalisation within the local community. For instance, during the personal interviews held, most women shared reasons that deter their participation in the Gola REDD+ project; they were either denied access to information about project activities or their names were deliberately removed from the list of participants by their men counterparts. Nevertheless, as revealed out by respondents, there has been instances within the community where women have been gaining better bargaining power than the men during decision-making at the household level. Therefore, in order to promote women's participation in decision-making at the community level, they should be empowered to gain more economic, social and cultural capital which will enable them to participate in such interventions.

To answer the question of how decision-making processes within REDD+ Project happen at the local community level. From the analysis of this study, it is observed that the choice of representatives by the implementing agency, either by non-elected or democratic means plays a central role in decision-making processes. When non-elected authorities are preferred, implementing body gain control over decision-making processes and implement the process in their favour. Subsequently, the transfer of power to non-elected institutions allows them to gain control over public resources and keep accumulating more forms of capital. This is because no form of sanction is levied on them that will make them accountable. By democratic means, decisions taken by elected local representatives reflect the local people's views. As a result, it will be difficult for elected institutions to gain control and capture the resources, because there is a tendency for representatives to be positively or negatively sanctioned in order to be accountable.

6.2 How the Gola REDD+ Benefits are shared

The main idea of the Gola REDD+ project was that by providing compensation packages in the form of monetary and non-monetary gains will help increase the livelihood opportunities for the local people, thus improving the conservation objective of the project. However, this did not seem to be the case because of the benefit-sharing mechanism employed. The choice of non-elected authorities by the implementing body as representatives did not permit customary chiefs to make significant decisions on how benefits should be shared. Finding in this study revealed that monetary benefits shared at community level did not fully compensate the local people for the loss of their livelihood opportunities. This finding leads to similar results obtained in other studies by Samndong(2019) and Denham(2017). A possible explanation to this was that before the restriction on forest use, households derived resources from the forests that led to the increase of their livelihood incomes. However, after Gola REDD+ implementation, the

amount received by households did not measure to what was originally gained from the forest resources. For instances, In VIG2, if the amount given as community compensation was to be shared, then each household would have received approximately 5 USD, which is an insignificant amount for a household in relation to the direct income realised from the forest. This led to the adaptation of a coping mechanism of investing in community infrastructure to be enjoyed by all. However, such a decision should not only be taken by the community authorities as in the case of this study but through community consultation, where there be a possibility of accessing the preferences of all community participants. This finding has an important implication for developing measures in deciding when community compensation should be shared among household or collectively use for community development infrastructural projects.

Furthermore, the finding of this study shows that a special compensation package was designed for the landowners of the GRNP. An amount equivalent to USD 15 per household was annually shared among those considered as landowners. Also, landowners were given more opportunities to participate in the alternative livelihood programmes when compared to the landless. They were also considered as beneficiaries of the cocoa rehabilitation programmes as most of them possessed either one or more plots of cocoa plantation. A possible explanation to this according to project implementing is that landowners are considered as those with the legal rights over the forest. However, in most of the interviews conducted, concerns were raised by other community forest users especially the landless and youths. They were left out from the project design as no special package engulfs their cases. These group of people were negatively affected by the restrictions imposed by the REDD+ Project on the access to the forest for cultivation, hunting, firewood collection among others. Under the REDD+ Project implementation, they were considered as the poorest. Prior to the project, the landowners were not using the land intensively. Instead, they were leasing it to the landless at minimal returns. As a result, the landowners do not incur no major impact from the restrictions of the REDD+ Project imposed. However, the project tends to favour the landowners and exclude majority of the poor households such as landless who bears the greatest cost due to restrictions on the forest use. By analysing this project through the distribution of benefits, clearly shows that no equity concerns were considered while designing this project. Without benefiting from REDD+ compensations, poor households might not support the project. As a result, they will undermine the restrictions and engage in the cutting down of trees for charcoal production and firewood. This will compromise the project's ability to attain its technical objective. The landless were hoping that the project implementing team can also engage them in the monitoring and assessment activities of the project so that they can be paid for their labour, while the youth wanted to be employed as forest guards by the implementing team rather than hiring outsiders from the urban areas. One of the issues that emerge from this finding is that natural resource management initiatives should be designed in a way that all components or groups within the community do not left out.

Another unanticipated finding was that, in all the alternative livelihood programmes designed by the Gola REDD+ Project, such as agricultural capacity training, cocoa plantation rehabilitation and the saving and loan scheme, as well as the educational scholarship, did not fully incorporate the local people to participate. For instance, according to the community head in VIG2, out of the

250 people that were eligible and willing to participate in the agricultural capacity training programmes, the project only catered for 50 people, leaving out huge number unattended. According to GRC, they claimed that the project does not have enough funding to get everyone on board to participate. Therefore, only a few individuals were selected based on the customary chiefs' recommendations. From this finding, it is clear that out of USD 1 to 1.5 million received from the annual sales of carbon credits for Gola REDD+ implementation according to the project report(2018), only smaller percentage was allocated to the local people as compensation while the rest for GRC, the implementing agency operational cost. A similar finding was revealed by Bartholdson et al(2019) which led to their conclusion that REDD+ is more of an institutional affair than a market process. This finding may help us understand that the implementing body's decision of choosing non-elected institutions as representatives is a strategy of manipulating the system and runs it in a way that favours them.

To answer the question of how REDD+ benefits are shared among the target population. According to findings revealed, when REDD+ benefits are shared under a mechanism where the implementing agency or donor decides to choose and empower non-elected officials over elected institutions, the project may not fully compensate the local people for the loss of their livelihoods. This is because non-elected authorities can be easily manipulated by the project organisers in order to implement the project in their favour, thus, meeting the technical objective of the project (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). This will lead to a situation where most of the target population will be left out of the process from participating. As a result, certain individuals within the social structure such as women, landless, youth and other marginalised groups continue to suffer inequitable benefit-sharing due to the lack or insufficient possession of the various forms of capital(Ojha, 2008).

7.0 Conclusions

This chapter gives a summary of the key findings of the study based on the research questions explored to show the new knowledge contributed to existing literature. Furthermore, I give an account of the potential implications of the study and outline the limitations of the study. Finally, I give some suggestions for further studies.

7.1 Summary to key findings

By analysing the decision-making processes and benefit-sharing mechanism at the community level in the Gola REDD+ project implementation phase, this thesis has shown that the choice of empowering non-elected institutions in natural resource management initiatives cannot influence local people's voices in decision-making processes and therefore, will lead to an inequitable distribution of benefits among the target population.

The GRC team had absolute control in the decision-making processes of the Gola REDD+ project. They choose to work with customary chiefs that are the easier target of manipulation during decision-making processes, in order to meet the technical objective of the project and keep it on-going. It is also revealed that GRC is only accountable to the donors and not to the local people. This is because there is no discretionary power transferred to non-elected institutions by the local people that can hold GRC accountable. As a result, GRC decides how the Gola REDD+ project should be implemented and who stand to benefits.

Furthermore, the study revealed that the transfer of power to customary authorities by the GRC within the local communities, made the customary chiefs to have the final say in the decision-making processes. Most often, GRC, the implementing body suggests to the customary chief on what needs to be done and then the chief decides or recommends. As a result, customary chiefs used their positions of power to accumulate different forms of capital for themselves through various means in order to build reputation to remain in such position. Most often, they do not meet the needs and aspiration of the local people because no form of sanction is levied on them to make them accountable. It also was revealed that social interaction with those in higher authority pays few individuals within such communities. Friends and relations of the customary chiefs benefitted more from Gola REDD+ project activities because of their existing social network or ties.

This study found that generally, the lack of access to information by the local people about the Gola REDD+ implementation deters people's participation in decision-making processes at the Gola REDD+ project. The main source of information about Gola REDD+ project was through GRC or the customary chiefs. However, data showed that during consultation meetings with local representatives, only information that led to the project acceptance was revealed by GRC. Also, at the village level, the customary chiefs were the first to receive information about Gola REDD+ project activities from the GRC. Community meetings regarding Gola REDD+ project were held at the chiefs' compounds. As a result, the customary chiefs decide who to share such information with or who

to be invited to such meetings to engage in the participation of Gola REDD+ project activities. This evidence shows that GRC and Customary chiefs used their power to control the entire process of the Gola REDD+ implementation.

The study has also shown that women's participation in decision-making process seems to be at low pace when compared to their men counterpart. The culture and tradition of the local people in this local community brought about differences in gender roles. Women do not have enough economic, social and cultural capital that can place them in decision-making positions. It was also revealed that certain positions of power like customary chief can only be occupied by men because of social norms. Most of the women's names were deliberately removed from the list of participants of the alternative livelihoods programme to be replaced by those close to the village leadership strata. This is because many of the men believed that Gola REDD+ project activities are masculine and therefore, should be undertaken by men.

Furthermore, with regards to the benefits received from Gola REDD+ project, the finding of this study indicates that the project did not fully compensate the local people for the loss of their livelihood opportunities. This was demonstrated in relation to their present income level. Before Gola REDD+ implementation, the local people engaged in activities in the forest that provided more income that improved the household's standards of living. However, after Gola REDD+ implementation, the amount received for household's compensation was insignificant compared to what was originally gained from the forest resources. To utilise the said amount wisely, a coping mechanism was adopted to invest in community infrastructural project that will be enjoyed by all.

One of the issues that emerged from this study was that the landowners benefited more from the Gola REDD+ project implementation when compared to other forest users. Special compensation packages in a form of monetary gains were annual given to all those considered as landowners. They were given more opportunities to participate in project activities and also identified as direct beneficiaries of the cocoa rehabilitation programmes. This is because, according to local participants, landowners were considered as legitimate owners of the forests. This raised concern from other forest users especially the landless and youths who felt left out from the project activities, as no special compensation package was designed in favour of them. The landless and youth were hoping that the project would have engaged them in other activities, so that they can equally benefit. By so doing, this will make the project legitimate and sustainable.

Finally, the study has shown that the project activities designed by the Gola REDD+ project such as the agricultural capacity training, cocoa plantation rehabilitation, the saving and loan scheme as well as the educational scholarship did not fully make provision for larger proportion of the target population to participate. The finding showed that in communities where the Gola REDD+ project was implemented, more local people were left out from the programme activities compared to those the project catered for. This is because, according to the GRC, the project did not have enough funding to get everyone on board. As a result, only a few individuals were selected. However, according to Gola REDD+ project report, findings revealed that greater portion of amount received from the sales of carbon credit was spent on GRC's administrative and operational costs than the compensation cost to local people.

7.2 Potential Implications of the Study

Despite customary chiefs are justified on the grounds to represent the local people. The fact that are not accountable and elected, make them private institutions that can create room for elite control and capture (Ribot, 2013). Therefore, for local voices to make significant decisions in natural resource management initiatives that will lead to equitable distribution of benefits among local people, there should be a review of the policies to ensure that intervening agents work directly with elected local institutions instead of non-elected local authorities. This will empower elected institutions to engage intervening agencies to follow all bureaucratic principles and make them accountable to the local people (Ribot,2002). In addition, the representatives (elected local institutions) will be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people, because sanctions that can either reward or punish will be applied to make them accountable (Fischer, 2016).

It is evident that REDD+ has the potential of promoting carbon sequestration while advancing local livelihood. However, the benefits from REDD+ have not adequately matched the local people expectation. According to project staff, this is because of the low and varied prices for carbon credits paid by buyers at international carbon markets. There should be a review of the prices of carbon credits, so that communities can realised more from the loss of their livelihood sources in order to fully engage in REDD+ alternative livelihood programmes thereby improving local people's standard of living.

In relation to a global REDD+ debate, this study support the views of other scholars who emphasise that REDD+ benefits distribution should be not be based on land ownership, but rather on those that bears the greatest cost for the restriction of forest use(Allo and Loureiro, 2018; Chomba et al, 2016). If is not addressed, it will not result to equitable distribution of REDD+ benefits, but rather a much-reinforced form of inequality.

Furthermore, it is also revealed that GRC circumvents KDLC and choose to work with customary chiefs on the basis that they are incapable or corrupt, without allowing them to prove otherwise. I, therefore, argue that it is not acceptable to circumvent elected local institution just because they are engaged in corrupt practices. Rather, intervening agencies should be able to build structures that will make elected local institutions accountable and more effective. This can be done by imposing checks and balances, audits, public meetings and other forms of accountable mechanisms. In other words, despite there are many obstacles to support elected local institutions. If relevant structures are put in place, working with elected local institutions will lead to a positive outcome than that of non-elected authorities. This is because local elected institutions play a key role in anticipating needs, formulating responses as well as negotiating bureaucratic procedures(Fischer, 2016). Therefore, choose local democracy.

7.3 Limitations of the study

Answers to the research questions are based on the empirical data collected. However, there may be some potential limitations of this study. There is a

possibility of sample and selection biases of respondents. In order to gain approval to conduct fieldwork, the project team was my first point of contact of accessing the communities. As a result of this, there might be a tendency of referring me only to communities they have already established good relationships with. In addition, the chiefs were also my first contacts. They may tend to recruit participants that are related to them. Having this in mind as a researcher, I later decided to interrogate participants before conducting interviews in order to minimise bias.

Furthermore, due to the deplorable road condition in the studied area, there was limited access to data. I was only able to collect data from few communities using a commercial motorbike. It can also be noted that this research was time constrained due to the limited time allocated for the completion of my thesis. As a result, data collection and processing were done within the shortest possible time frame to meet the thesis deadline for submission. Finally, because of my cultural background was related to the study site, there was a possibility of reporting my cultural biased views. However, I made sure to not tie myself to the study but to honestly report the empirical findings of the study.

7.4 Suggestion for further studies

In this study, the findings revealed were based on answering the research questions related to the research problem. I, therefore, suggest few topics that will be relevant for further research.

- A similar study from a different region or country's context needs to be explored about REDD+ decision-making processes and benefit-sharing mechanism at the local level.
- Further studies on how the lack of capital contribute to the exclusion of certain groups from benefits derived from natural resource management initiatives.

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