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"Choices have Consequences: REDD+ and Local Democracy in Kenya"

Chomba, Susan

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The extent to which the United Nations Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation programme (REDD+) addresses critical issues of governance is hotly contested. This article focuses on the local institutions chosen as partners by a prominent REDD+ project in Kenya and the implications of this choice for local democracy. The REDD+ project briefly partnered with state-appointed local authorities to represent local interests, bypassing elected ones. Shortly after, the state-appointed authorities were abandoned in favour of "project-created" carbon committees and civil society organisations. The choice to recognise some institutions while excluding others, was justified by the levels of downward accountability and of corruption, and arguments that state-sanctioned institutions were overburdened and inefficient. However, the article contends that this preference for carbon committees and civil society organisations over state-sanctioned institutions, and particularly the aversion to democratically elected ones, was not conducive for long-term strengthening of local democracy. The analysis pinpoints a tension between setting up parallel models of authority that can act as exemplars of democratic practice, while undermining democratically elected institutions that, in Kenya, are struggling to exercise newly devolved powers. Explicit strategies are required to enable learning from parallel governance models and for their migration into mainstream local governance structures, if local democracy is to be strengthened rather than undermined. (Text from author's abstract)

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