

How to get REDD right – Navigating the winding road towards sustainability

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Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) could play a key role in climate change mitigation in the coming years. Enthusiasm for this concept is largely substantiated by its expected positive contributions to biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. REDD does indeed offer tremendous opportunities for promoting sustainable development in many tropical countries. However, it is by no means a 'given' that REDD will deliver all the benefits envisaged. The recently held 'Biodiversity Conservation and Poverty Reduction Workshop'¹ discussed major hurdles and opportunities for REDD to simultaneously address climate change, biodiversity loss and poverty. Participants identified three major 'roadblocks' that need to be overcome for REDD to adequately address its wider environmental and development focus.

REDD Roadblock #1 - Small local stakeholders could be excluded from a benefit-sharing mechanism: The financial benefits from REDD could potentially be withheld from those who have the greatest stake in maintaining forest resources: rural and forest communities. If carbon finance is channeled through inefficient and non-transparent administrative hierarchies, resources might 'dry up' before reaching local or regional levels. Such inequitable outcomes are particularly likely to materialize in situations of poor governance. This is a worrying fact, considering that precisely those countries with the highest REDD income potential score poorly on most governance indicators (Ebeling and Yasue, 2008). Further, in situations of insecure land tenure or unclear use and access rights, governments and other powerful stakeholders could abuse their position to exclude smallholders and local land stewards from REDD benefits. In this respect, poorly designed REDD could undermine land tenure security in many rural areas – especially for indigenous peoples and other forest dependent communities.

REDD Roadblock #2 - REDD-induced changes in land use trends could increase poverty and food scarcity: Global demand for agricultural commodities and forest products has been identified as one of the main drivers of tropical deforestation (Geist and Lambin, 2002). A future REDD mechanism could block large forest areas for agricultural production and thus shift demand for land to other areas. Changes in consumption patterns, together with population growth will increase demand for timber, cattle and energy crops in the future, putting further pressure on scarce land resources. The combination of land scarcity and demand pressure could contribute to price increases for land, wood and food products. Given the current prosperity growth patterns, the demand pressure will unlikely be fully buffered by price increases or intensification measures. In the timber sector, this pressure could result in increased deforestation in developing countries not yet part of the REDD regime ('international leakage') or in temperate and boreal forests. In the agricultural sector, demand pressure could lead to prioritization of available areas for more lucrative cash and energy crops (Benhin, 2006), unless this is countered by national food-security policies. This would leave subsistence-based agriculture marginalized and potentially increase land-tenure inequalities. As a result, local livelihoods relying on staple food and firewood may be put at risk, exacerbating existing poverty patterns.

¹ Organized by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation; see also: http://www.bfn.de/0610_vortraege.html

REDD Roadblock #3 - A “carbon-only” focus could compromise the quality of ecosystem management: If a REDD mechanism only aims at maximizing carbon emission reductions, this might jeopardize the more comprehensive and sustainable management of ecosystems within a given country. Outside the prioritized REDD areas, land use pressure from agriculture and forestry could shift to low-carbon ecosystems. Non-forest habitats such as savannas, grasslands and wetlands could become particularly vulnerable to such shifts in land-use trends (Miles and Kapos, 2008). However, they can be of crucial value for supporting local livelihoods, conserving biological diversity and sustaining other ecosystem services. Even in REDD project areas the sole focus on carbon might not correspond to management requirements for other forest ecosystem services, such as species conservation or watershed regulation.

Policy implications

At the international level, the challenges of REDD-induced land-use pressure could be reduced by shifting demand for imports with high negative impacts on climate and biodiversity to products from sustainable forest management and agriculture (including agroforestry). Agricultural import policies, notably the target quota for biofuels in the EU and the US, need to be reconsidered in this respect. Importing countries can furthermore strengthen consumer choices through clear and meaningful product labeling. Effective legislation to ban illegal timber imports would provide incentives to improve forestry governance in exporting countries and thus also strengthen their capacity to implement REDD. Readiness efforts in developing countries should, besides technological issues, focus on supporting participatory programs to build capacity and improve land tenure security, including customary and indigenous land rights. Granting land tenure security to forest communities has proven to be one of the cheapest and most effective ways of lowering deforestation rates and would therefore need to be an integral component of any sustainable REDD strategy. Fundamentally, good governance will be a key ingredient and pre-condition for successfully implementing REDD. To prevent the marginalization of biodiversity-rich forest and non-forest areas under a REDD regime, the valuation of other ecosystem services needs to be promoted in the long-term. In the meantime, voluntary, market- or fund-based certification standards for biodiversity protection and poverty reduction should be explored – using performance-based incentives. Complementary to regulatory safeguards in a REDD regime, these incentives could assist in achieving sustainable REDD measures on the ground. To ensure food security, developing countries should harmonize their REDD strategies with national land-use planning and agricultural policies, in order to use scarce fertile land as efficiently as possible. In this respect, REDD measures should be linked effectively to the `National Adaptation Program of Action` (NAPA), the `National Poverty Reduction Strategy` (PRSP) and the `National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan` (NBSAP). Further support is urgently needed to explore the interlinkages between REDD, deforestation drivers and food supply changes.

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