15 years of REDD+

Has it been worth the money?

15 years ago, a proposal to financially-compensate governments and other actors for their efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation was formally launched at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The scheme aimed to reduce deforestation and forest degradation by half, and was estimated to require up to €24 billion in climate finance to achieve this[1]. Fast forward 15 years, and over 350 projects are underway in at least 53 countries, covering an area the size of Morocco[2], and so far costing at least €20 billion in public finance[3].

The initial idea behind *"reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation"* (REDD, and the + stands for *"forest conservation and enhancing forest carbon stocks"*, which includes reforestation, afforestation and forest restoration) was to reward forest conservation in developing countries by creating a financial value for the carbon stored in forests. It was argued that a financial incentive in the form of a results-based payment (RBP) was needed to encourage countries, especially those with high deforestation rates, to scale up forest conservation measures given that deforestation is far more profitable to them than forest protection.

While this sounds like a straightforward proposal, REDD+ has been one of the most controversial environmental policies that has ever existed. It has divided governments, civil society and Indigenous Peoples' organizations, and proved to be highly controversial within the United Nations itself. Some big conservation groups continue to believe in the power of the market to mitigate climate change while other civil society actors, particularly human rights groups and Indigenous Peoples' organizations, view and experience this approach as a facilitator of dispossession and resource extraction, and a false solution to the climate crisis. Gustavo Castro of the Chiapas-based NGO Otros Mundos in Mexico explains the latter position on REDD+ succinctly: *"When a natural function like forest respiration becomes a product with a price, it's easy to see who's going to end up with control of the forests"*[4].

Beware of the REDD+ fairy tales!

In 2011 GFC published a series of modern Grimm REDD fairy tales, to assist policy-makers in distinguishing truth from fiction and to challenge the fabricated stories that were being told by REDD+ proponents. They are still very relevant today.

Snow White: REDD+ is a Poisoned Apple
Ananse: REDD's Sticky Web
The Emperor's New Clothes: Why REDD+ won't work
Kaggen: REDD's Tricksters
Rumpelstilzchen: Spinning REDD+ into gold?

[1] FAO, 2017. http://www.fao.org/3/CA0907EN/ca0907en.pdfhttp://www.fao.org/3/CA0907EN/ca0907en.pdf
[2] Angelsen *et al.*, 2018. Transforming REDD+ Lessons and new directions, CIFOR. https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/BAngelsen1801.pdf
[3] Public finance amounts to approximately €19.4 billion to direct and indirect REDD+ activities between 2008 and 2015. Source: European Union, 2018. Study on EU financing of REDD+ related activities, and results-based payments pre and post 2020. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6f8dea1e-b6fe-11e8-99ee-01aa75ed71a1
[4] GJEP *et al.*, 2011. NO-REDD Papers, Volume One, p73. https://globaljusticeecology.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/noreddpapers.pdf

A 2018 Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) review of the first 10 years of REDD+[5] concluded that:

- Meaningful participation of rights-holders in REDD+ projects is often limited, does not respect the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples and pays little attention overall to integrating local needs.
- Most REDD+ strategies are gender-blind and limited concern for gender issues prevails among national organizations working on REDD+ in the global South.
- The nature and level of compensation and the exact beneficiaries of REDD+ still remain unclear.
- Although the issue of land tenure and the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities has been prominent in REDD+ policy-making, not enough has been done to ensure that REDD+ projects function in this regard.
- REDD+ fails to deliver tangible results in terms of improved conservation of biodiversity and other environmental services, or supporting livelihoods and economic development.
- Information and discourses about the drivers of forest change are often purposely hidden or neglected by powerful agents, hindering the transformational changes needed in land-use decision-making.

The shaky foundations that underpin REDD+

1) Valuing carbon over life encourages tree plantations and emissions trading

REDD+ assumes that calculating the contribution of forests to climate change mitigation is simply a matter of counting the carbon that is stored in the trees in the forest—*more carbon in trees means less CO_2 in the atmosphere and thus less global warming*. REDD+ therefore reduces forests to simple carbon sinks, rather than complex ecosystems.

As most Indigenous and forest-dependent peoples recognize, real forests are not just carbon sinks, they also influence water flows, rainfall patterns, local temperatures and even the amount of sunlight that bounces back into space. Moreover, forest carbon is stored in many other plant and animal species and soils, in addition to trees.

However, the simplification of a forest's value to this one measure of carbon makes it easy for governments to ask for an exact amount of financial compensation, and to sell carbon credits through international carbon markets. These carbon markets have been established to allow rich countries, and rich companies and consumers in general, to continue polluting by giving them the option to "offset" their pollution through investing in a REDD+ project.

The forest carbon offset market was originally seen as large source of funding for REDD+, but as most companies and consumers are not obliged to significantly reduce their emissions there has been little interest in buying forest carbon offsets on a large scale. As a consequence, the price per ton of carbon has remained extremely low. This could change now that airline companies have developed a scheme to offset the significant emissions caused by aviation with REDD+ and other projects, although the coronavirus pandemic will delay the impact of this[6].

Another issue is that by only focusing on the carbon stored through tree growth, REDD+ prioritizes fast-growing trees over all other elements of a complex forest ecosystem. In fact, one of the big problems with the scheme is that it uses a definition of forests that includes monoculture tree plantations, where vast areas are covered by a single fast-growing tree species. Although on paper plantations can store carbon relatively rapidly, they

[5] Angelsen *et al.*, 2018. Transforming REDD+ Lessons and new directions, CIFOR. https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/BAngelsen1801.pdf
[6] See for example: Chagas *et al.*, 2019. Should forest carbon credits be included in offsetting schemes such as CORSIA? https://www.climatefocus.com/sites/default/files/Should%20forest%20carbon%20credtis%20be%20included%20in%20CORSIA_0.pdf and https://stay-grounded.org/corsia-baseline-change-aviations-climate-regulation-is-broken-beyond-repair/

provide none of the benefits that real forests provide. They destroy biodiversity and water flows, alter rainfall patterns and they are of no cultural value, with very limited livelihood opportunities for Indigenous Peoples, local communities and women. On top of this, plantations aren't even an effective way of storing carbon: a recent study showed that natural forests are 40 times better at it than plantations[7].

A fast-growing and non-native eucalyptus plantation. **Federica Giunta**

2) Calculating how much carbon is stored through forest conservation is difficult and expensive

For a results-based payment to be awarded, the results must first be clearly and transparently defined. However, attempting to calculate the exact amount of carbon that is stored in a forest is exceptionally difficult, and the suggestion that REDD+ projects can accurately and easily report, verify and monitor forest carbon stocks is simply false. In practice it is also a very expensive process, which means that REDD+ projects cost far more than ordinary forest conservation projects. Most of these extra costs are spent on consultants and expert carbon counters, rather than supporting the Indigenous Peoples, local communities and women who actually conserve forests[8].

In addition, there are three main complications with calculating how much carbon is stored through forest conservation, which have been recognized but never really addressed by REDD+ policy-makers.

a) Permanence: Carbon is always stored in trees temporarily as it is eventually released back into the atmosphere when the tree dies, is cut down or burned in increasingly severe forest fires. This means that REDD+ projects can only deliver temporary results, which is particularly problematic if these temporary results are used to compensate permanent emissions from fossil fuels.

b) Leakage: While deforestation can be avoided in one place, REDD+ projects are not able to mitigate the risk that deforestation will simply move to another region or country. For example, when the demand for commodities such as palm oil and soy remains high, there can be no guarantee that their production won't simply move from a forest protected by a REDD+ project to another area with no such protection.

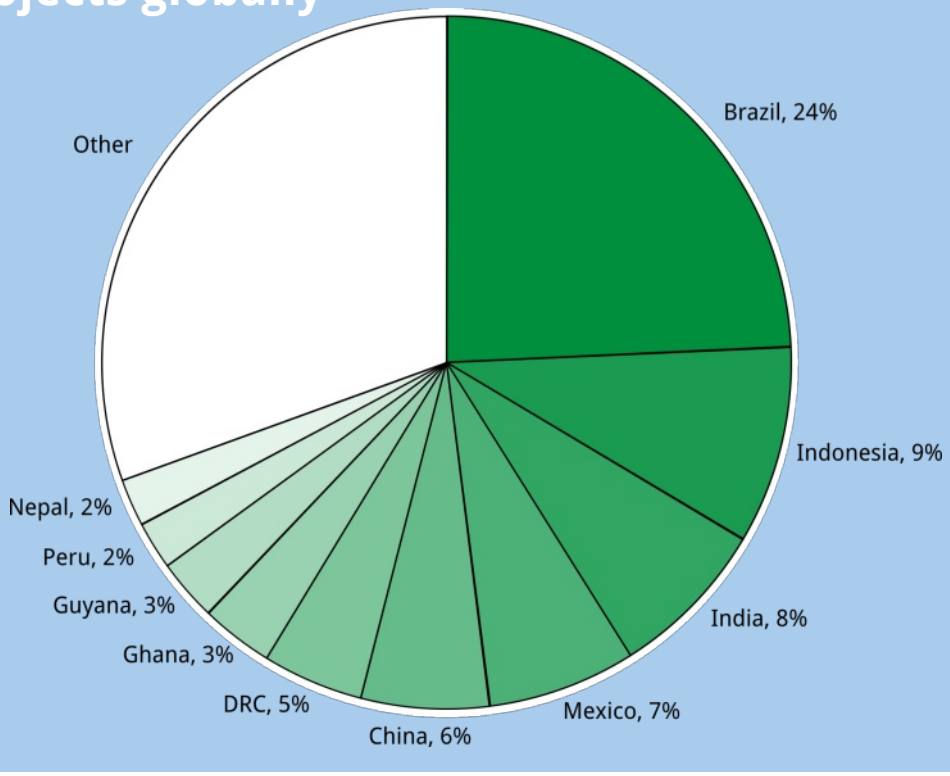
c) Baselines, "reference levels" and additionality: It is impossible to know what might have happened if a REDD+ project had not been initiated. Perhaps the forest would have been destroyed, but it could also have conserved itself without the involvement of REDD+, especially if it is in a remote area or on wet or mountainous land. In order to grow, all a forest needs is land and an absence of companies or other actors that want to destroy it. Therefore, it is impossible to state with certainty that forest conservation was only possible because of REDD+. It is also wrong to assume that a so-called "business as usual" scenario would always imply forest destruction. For millions of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and women, their business as usual has been to live in harmony with forests, rather than destroying them.

[7] Lewis *et al.*, 2019. Restoring natural forests is the best way to remove atmospheric carbon. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01026-8
[8] Lovera-Bilderbeek, 2019. Agents, Assumptions and Motivations behind REDD+: creating an international forest regime. Glos, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing, p280.

An overview of REDD+ projects globally

As of May 2018, around 350 REDD+ projects were underway in 53 countries, covering an estimated area 43 million hectares—nearly the size of Morocco. Ten key countries host most of the REDD+ projects: Brazil (48), Colombia (33), Peru (25), Indonesia (21), Kenya (21), Uganda (18), the Democratic Republic of Congo (17), China (13), India (12) and Mexico (12)[9].

The graph opposite shows the top ten recipient countries for REDD+ finance between 2008-2015, which includes "readiness" programs and conservation projects, but not more recent results-based payments[10].



3) Trees don't grow on money

REDD+ assumes that forests cannot be conserved without money, despite the evidence that some countries and numerous Indigenous Peoples organizations, local communities and women's rights groups with very limited financial resources have successfully conserved their forests for generations[11]. Meanwhile, countries that have received the most forest conservation funding continue to have staggeringly high deforestation rates. Contrary to popular belief, there is no clear relationship between forest finance and forest conservation[12]. The reason for this is that forests do not grow on money, they grow on land. If that land is not needed for other purposes (except the sustainable use of forest resources by local communities), forests can be conserved without any further investment.

For millions of years, forests have been perfectly capable of managing themselves without the help of foresters or conservationists. Even recently, in regions like northeastern United States and Eastern Europe forests have grown back on a large scale where less land has been needed, particularly for industrial agriculture and bioenergy generation, and without much intervention. It might sound obvious, but the over-extraction of wood from forests or clearing them for other land uses tend to be the key causes of forest degradation and deforestation. Therefore, reducing demand for land and wood is the most effective strategy for addressing the drivers of forest loss[13].

Of course, foresters and state forestry agencies support the view that forests need to be managed and paid for, since being paid to manage forests is what they do. Similarly, large conservation organizations also often claim that they need to be paid to conserve forests. The so-called Coalition for Rainforest Nations, the FAO's forestry department and large nature conservation groups have therefore been enthusiastic supporters of REDD+ from the start, as a system that would pay them millions of dollars to not destroy forests.

[9] Angelsen *et al.*, 2018. Transforming REDD+ Lessons and new directions, CIFOR. https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/BAngelsen1801.pdf
[10] Kim *et al.*, 2019. Centralization of the Global REDD+ Financial Network and Implications under the New Climate Regime. Forests, p16.
[11] GJEP *et al.*, 2011. NO-REDD Papers, Volume One, p73. https://globaljusticeecology.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/noreddpapers.pdf
[12] For example, see the Community Conservation Resilience Initiative (CCRI) assessments that were conducted with Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) across 60 sites in 22 countries: https://globalforestcoalition.org/ccri-reports/
[13] Lovera-Bilderbeek, 2019. Agents, Assumptions and Motivations behind REDD+: creating an international forest regime. Glos, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing, p280, and https://globalforestcoalition.org/new-report-redd-does-not-address-underlying-causes-of-forest-loss/

4) No clear benefits for Indigenous Peoples, local communities or women

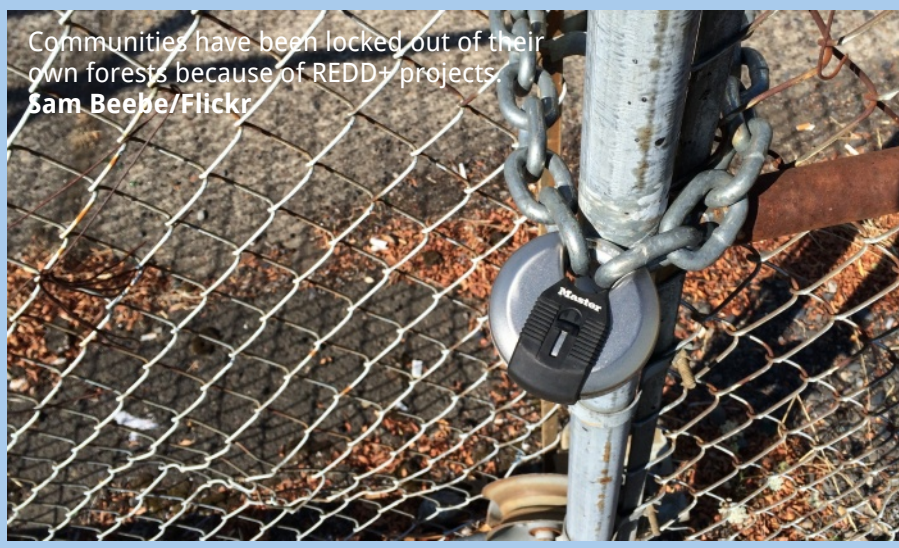
Communities around the world have pointed out that mere forest protection without respecting and protecting the rights of Indigenous and other forest-dependent peoples represents a direct threat to their way of life. REDD+ makes it attractive for outsiders like companies, state agencies or big conservation groups to ignore the customary rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and women over forests, impose strict conservation measures over land they claim to be theirs and subsequently ask for payments for those conservation results. Over the last decade there have been numerous reports that REDD+ projects have resulted in land seizures, murders of environmental defenders, violent evictions and forced displacement, violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights, militarization, loss of livelihoods and biodiversity and the desecration of sacred sites. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)[14], Ghana[15], Brazil[16], Kenya[17], Indonesia[18], Ecuador[19], Vietnam[20], Sierra Leone[21], Tanzania[22], Peru[23], Zambia[24] and Uganda[25] are some of the countries where human rights violations and other significant social problems related to REDD+ projects have been documented.

REDD+ conflicts in Ghana[26]

In Ghana, security arrangements related to REDD+ projects such as fences, guards and anti-poaching patrols have led to the criminalization of the livelihood practices of local communities, creating resentment and conflict. Through making foraging, hunting and grazing illegal, local people who continue such practices for their survival are forced to do so under cover, causing more damage to the forest ecosystems.

A lack of public participation in decision-making has also led to significant interference from powerful political figures. Ghana's forestry sector has been shown to manipulate, put pressure on and interfere in policy-making and implementation in order to accommodate friends and receive commissions. Decisions are not scrutinized, which may lead to the selection of REDD+ projects that have serious negative social and environmental impacts and benefit only a few people.

Another issue identified as a particular cause for concern is uncertainty surrounding land tenure, especially in cocoa-growing areas. This makes projects susceptible to corruption and increases the likelihood that land-use planning will favor more powerful interests and political elites.



Communities have been locked out of their own forests because of REDD+ projects. **Sam Beebe/Flickr**

[14] GJEP *et al.*, 2011. NO-REDD Papers, Volume One. https://globaljusticeecology.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/noreddpapers.pdf
[15] Leach *et al.*, 2015. Carbon Conflicts and Forest Landscapes in Africa. Routledge publishing. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278024256_Carbon_Conflicts_and_Forest_Landscapes_in_Africa
[16] Loft *et al.*, 2015. Taking Stock of Carbon Rights in REDD+ Candidate Countries: Concept Meets Reality https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/articles/ARavikumar1501.pdf
[17] CIFOR, 2017. Rights abuse allegations in the context of REDD+ readiness and implementation. https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/infobrief/6630-infobrief.pdf
[18] CIFOR, 2011. Working paper, Preventing the risk of corruption in REDD+ in Indonesia. https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/WPapers/WP80Dermawan.pdf See also Riggs *et al.*, 2016. Forest tenure and conflict in Indonesia: Contested rights in Rempek Village, Lombok. *Land Use Policy*. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0264837716305403?via%3Dihub
[19] CIFOR, 2017.
[20] Hoang *et al.*, 2018. 'This is my garden': justice claims and struggles over forests in Vietnam's REDD+. *Climate Policy*
[21] Leach *et al.*, 2015.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] CIFOR, 2017.
[24] Transparency International, 2016. REDD+ and corruption risks for Africa's forests. https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2016_REDDCorruptionRisksAfrica_EN.pdf
[25] Leach et al., 2015.
[26] *Ibid.*

Who pays for REDD+?

Big polluters provide much of REDD+'s public finance. **Norad/Flickr**

REDD+ has so far been funded through grants and aid, loans and other financial incentives, and to some degree through selling forest carbon credits on offset markets. Between 2008 and 2015, REDD+ projects received almost €20 billion in direct and indirect public finance. However, REDD+ finance is extremely difficult to track, with low levels of transparency and public disclosure. A recent study found that, in particular for private-sector finance that involves numerous instruments including equity, loans and credit, the number of transactions are almost impossible to count.[27]

Direct REDD+ finance from the private sector is relatively insignificant compared to public finance and is limited to the purchase of REDD+ credits in international carbon markets and green bonds, totaling €162 million between 2008 and 2015. Indirect private finance, on the other hand, is estimated to be much more significant even than public finance, ranging from €22 to 70 billion. This involves numerous (and sometimes untraceable) financial instruments that channel private finance in REDD+ countries into "deforestation free" soft commodity supply chains, which includes livestock and animal feed, wood and crops such as palm oil, coffee and cocoa[28]. This finance indirectly supports REDD+ projects, but given the inherent flaws in certification schemes and the fallacy of "sustainable production" at scale, it is likely that much of this finance is merely another perverse incentive for deforestation.

Until now, the overwhelming majority of REDD+ related projects and policies have been supported through direct grants from donor countries or international organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Most of these grants are primarily used for funding capacity-building programs to get countries "ready" to request results-based payments for REDD+ initiatives. So in most recipient countries deforestation has not actually been reduced yet, they have only been made ready for receiving REDD+ money once they reduce deforestation.

As REDD+ requires huge financial resources in order to function, partly due to the fact that calculating carbon in forests is so expensive, international multilateral funding mechanisms have been an important source of funding. For instance, the UN-REDD program was created in 2008 as a partnership between the FAO, UNDP and the UN Environment Program (UNEP) with the aim of supporting the development of national REDD+ strategies. The Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) is another important multilateral funding mechanism, funded by the World Bank. It became operational in 2008 and basically helps countries to get ready for REDD+. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) also has a specific REDD+ program, and one of the main aims of the World Bank-managed Forest Investment Program (FIP) is to mobilize funds from other sources for REDD+ projects. Approximately 25–33% of direct REDD+ funding is now channeled via multilateral funds managed by the World Bank, the UN-REDD program and GEF.[29]

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is the UNFCCC's formal financial mechanism, with the aim of assisting developing countries in combating and adapting to climate change. In 2017, GCF started a five-year REDD+ results-based payments (RBP) program that will invest $500 million in this next phase of REDD+, and the first RBP project was approved for funding in February 2019 and awarded to Brazil. So far, six RBP projects have been approved in total, five in Latin America (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Paraguay) and one in Indonesia.

[27] https://news.globallandscapesforum.org/31436/struggling-to-follow-the-flow-of-redd-finance/
[28] European Union, 2018. Study on EU financing of REDD+ related activities, and results-based payments pre and post 2020. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6f8dea1e-b6fe-11e8-99ee-01aa75ed71a1
[29] Angelsen *et al.*, 2018. Transforming REDD+ Lessons and new directions, CIFOR. https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/BAngelsen1801.pdf

Green Climate Fund REDD+ projects in Brazil and Paraguay: Perverse incentives for deforestation?

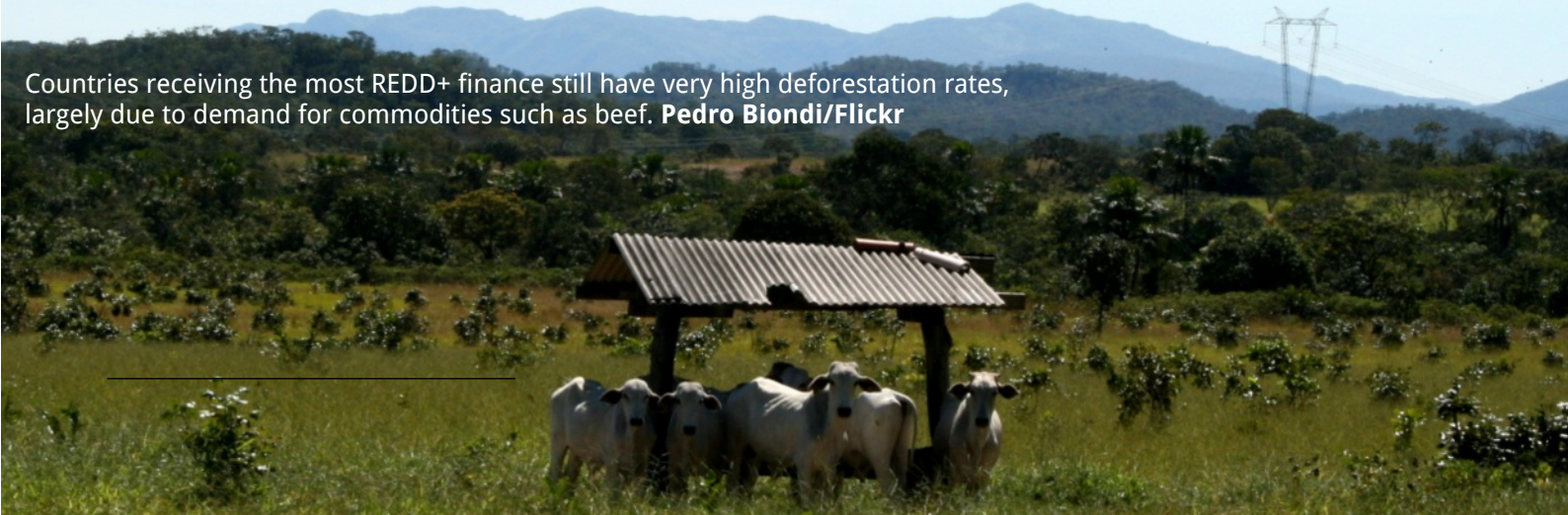
The millions already awarded to Brazil and Paraguay through GCF's REDD+ RBP program are a clear example of how things can easily go wrong[30]. The GCF paid Brazil $96.5 million for its efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation in 2014 and 2015, despite the very inflated forest reference levels that were used to skew the calculations and claim the results. Just a few months later, largely due to government support for the expansion of Brazil's agricultural frontier, massive forest fires in the Amazon ensured that any claimed emissions reductions literally went up in smoke.[31] At the same time, Indigenous, peasant and Afro-descendent communities and human rights defenders have been under constant attack by the Bolsonaro government[32], with women disproportionately impacted by threats to forest communities. These issues are only addressed theoretically by the safeguards and risk management put in place by REDD+ projects, but in practice they cannot be effectively mitigated.

Another recently-approved GCF REDD+ RBP was awarded to Paraguay, which also saw record numbers of fires in 2019. The Paraguayan government has no intention of halting the alarming rates of deforestation currently being experienced in the country, but instead continues to promote forest destruction through its policy support for industrial agriculture. In addition, the RBP funding proposal itself described how there are many flaws in the way the Paraguayan government monitors and calculates the amount of carbon stored in its forests, and the scheme lacked benefit-sharing mechanisms that could have allowed women, Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities to share in the financial reward.

Green Climate Fund REDD+ projects in Indonesia and Colombia: More controversy and civil-society opposition

During GCF's 26th board meeting in August 2020, two more REDD+ RBP funding proposals were approved totaling $132 million. Indonesia claimed emissions reductions during 2014-2016 and asked for $104 million, while Colombia asked for a little over $28 million for the results supposedly achieved in 2015 and 2016. Civil-society groups again expressed serious concerns with the proposals, and an open letter was submitted to the GCF board[33] outlining how the forest reference and baseline levels chosen were inaccurate, and how both countries experienced an increase in deforestation rates after the period that they were claiming reductions for. This increase was especially high for Colombia, showing clear reversals, and in Indonesia, there is clear evidence of leakage, where deforestation has simply moved into secondary forests. Another common problem in both countries is the lack of respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and in particular land ownership rights.

[30] https://globalforestcoalition.org/redd-and-the-green-climate-fund-confirming-the-worst-fears/
[31] https://globalforestcoalition.org/amazon-fires/
[32] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/26/bolsonaro-amazon-tribes-indigenous-brazil-dictatorship
[33] https://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/the-green-climate-fund-gcf-must-say-no-to-more-redd-funding-requests/



Countries receiving the most REDD+ finance still have very high deforestation rates, largely due to demand for commodities such as beef. **Pedro Biondi/Flickr**

The need for alternatives to REDD+

For many communities, particularly Indigenous communities, it is difficult to match their traditional beliefs with a climate mitigation scheme that puts a financial value on the sacredness of the key components of life in a forest ecosystem: air, water, soil and biodiversity, and then reduces them to one simple measure: the carbon contained in trees. This financialization and commodification of life, governed by people in offices and traded on international markets, clearly clashes with the cultural values and traditional wisdom of forest peoples.

Climate finance must be invested in climate change mitigation projects that are effective, efficient and equitable, yet the past 15 years have shown that REDD+ is none of these things. Halting deforestation and forest degradation is an urgent priority, but expensive global conservation schemes and new markets for carbon are not the way to go about achieving it. Instead, the underlying causes of deforestation must be addressed by tackling the real drivers of forest loss head-on. This would require a restructuring of global trade and finance regimes; ending the over-consumption and unsustainable production of commodities such as meat, dairy, wood and palm oil (that between them are responsible for most of the deforestation that takes place); moratoriums on oil extraction and large infrastructure projects in forests; and curbs on forest logging, large-scale bioenergy generation and the replacement of forests by commercial tree plantations.

Alongside this, the global approach to forest conservation must be turned on its head. Instead of top-down, centralized decision-making that disenfranchises rightsholders, a bottom-up, rights-based approach that respects and protects the political power and governance rights of forests communities is required. In particular, the rights, traditional knowledge and practices of Indigenous Peoples should be at the heart of conservation efforts, as well as a recognition of the rights and vital role that women play in forest conservation, and the disproportionate burden of impacts that they shoulder. There must also be more support in policy spaces for the alternative initiatives and traditional forest conservation and restoration practices championed by Indigenous Peoples, peasants, women and other rightsholder groups.

The global North's historical responsibility for climate change cannot simply be paid off by investing in REDD+ projects in the South, especially when powerful actors are running off with the funds and at the same time denying the very people that have conserved forests for generations the right to continue to co-exist with their forests in a sustainable way.

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