



PONDERING THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN REDD+

About 25 percent of developing country forests are managed by communities or individual households. We are looking at more than 250 million hectares of forests. Therefore, the issue of whether community forestry has a role to play in REDD+ is unquestionable. But another question remains; can community forestry be mutually beneficial, for people, forests and the climate?

[Bluffstone and his co-authors](#) have recently pondered this question. They leave no stone unturned and explore an array of opportunities and risks. For example, well-managed community forests can provide important ecosystem services beyond carbon sequestration, some of which are likely to be critical for climate change adaptation. Then there is the concern that, following the steady move in many countries from centralized to devolved forest management, REDD+ may reverse this trend. In fact, we have seen this already to some extent over the last decade. Restrictive legislation and bureaucratic procedures and permit systems have dented the enthusiasm of many local people managing “their” forests. Arbitrary policy changes can have devastating consequences on the livelihoods of especially poor people but, to date, these policy changes cannot be attributed to REDD+.

In Asia, most forests that have been handed over to local people are degraded, which explains why they have been passed on. Restoring them, i.e. enhancing forest carbon stocks, requires quite a bit of labor input, i.e. it is costly. That’s where positive incentives under REDD+ (in cash or kind) could make a substantial contribution. However, distributing incentives remains problematic, in a voluntary REDD+ project, as well as under a national scheme. Transaction costs will go through the roof, if local people get rewarded based on accurately measured performance. Blanket positive incentives will lead to mistrust in the system when communities that have achieved different results, obtain more or less the same rewards. Perhaps, this can all be ironed out.

There is also a completely different issue lurking on the horizon. [Biddulph](#) describes the case of Cambodia’s Oddar Meanchey Province where a REDD+ pilot project supports the sustainable management of community forests (about 15 percent of the provincial forest area). Unfortunately, deforestation and degradation in the remaining 85 percent of the forest area continue unabated. Imagine this situation replicated nationwide; all community forests throughout a country are managed well, yet deforestation continues on a massive scale. The country thus fails to achieve the performance required, against the national Reference Emission Level, in order to qualify for incentives. Under a national scheme, there may not be any rewards for the villagers’ hard work if the government relies entirely on projected REDD+ incentives to compensate them. This could happen in many other countries. Governments would therefore have to consider using alternative forest financing mechanisms to cover the costs of the villagers’ activities, in case REDD+ incentives are not forthcoming.

How would the concerned local people then respond to the question about the role of community forestry in REDD+? In the best-case scenario, they would say “none”. In the worst-case scenario, they would revert to unsustainable forest management, and, from the local to the global, nobody would have gained anything. This is not to say, that the idea of linking community forestry with REDD+ should be abandoned. Rather it means, that focusing on community forests while neglecting key drivers of deforestation and forest degradation may hinder the effectiveness of REDD+ activities. Nobody wants to see that happen.

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