



## DOES REDD+ DEPEND ON THE CONCEPT OF FOREST CARBON AS PROPERTY?

In the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, a paper by [Sango Mahanty and colleagues](#)<sup>1</sup> revisits the thorny issue of property in the context of forest carbon. Can it ever truly be 'owned'?

The authors identify a series of contentious and legally ambiguous processes that must be negotiated once we assume that forest carbon is a tradable commodity. First, of course, is clarification of tenure, and whether formal property rights or more customary tenure arrangements are suitable. Next is the issue of 'individuation', or the definition of the unit to be traded – the carbon credit. Finally there is the matter of defining the rights associated with ownership of this unit, and to what extent national and international laws, regulations and policies should limit or affect those rights.

While it is possible, though certainly not always easy, to create an environment in which all stakeholders, including forest-dependent people and indigenous people, can negotiate forest and land tenure issues on a relatively equal footing, the same cannot be said of the other stages in defining forest carbon as property. The highly specialist knowledge required for individuation, and the power dynamics in defining the boundaries of rights, mean that social considerations are a highly limiting factor. Different social and institutional contexts around the world will have important and unpredictable impacts on how forest carbon is viewed.

Mahanty and colleagues look at the contrasting situations in Cambodia, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea (PNG) for indications on how these contexts may affect property rights over forest carbon in these countries and elsewhere. The similarities between these three cases are more significant than their differences. Although forest and land tenure contexts are highly varied, ranging from near-total state ownership in Cambodia to near-total community ownership in PNG, property rights in all cases are fluid and subject to continuous renegotiation and reinterpretation. Moreover, this fluidity is inherent in the social structures and livelihood strategies of indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities everywhere. Attempts to pin down long-term property rights over land, let alone over something so abstract as forest carbon, tend to highlight and exacerbate fractures within and between communities, and lead to social exclusion.

The authors conclude that efforts to promote trading in forest carbon will be hampered by the complexity of property rights issues related to this commodity, and by the lack of appreciation of this complexity within REDD+ discourses. However, going back to the top of the page, the starting point for this analysis is the assumption that forest carbon should be viewed as a tradable commodity. In the context of REDD+, this may not necessarily be the case. For example, the authors note that, in Cambodia, local agreements for implementation of REDD+ activities can be made without any explicit connection to forest carbon markets or a specified output of carbon credits, but instead on 'payments in exchange for behavioral change'. In effect – service provision. As forest carbon is not a commodity in such an exchange, do we need to define property rights over it in the first place?

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<sup>1</sup> Please contact Sango Mahanty ([sango.mahanty@anu.edu.au](mailto:sango.mahanty@anu.edu.au)) for the full text "Unraveling property relations around forest carbon".