

REDD: 'National' versus 'sub-national' approaches

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This briefing seeks to explain several main issues surrounding national and sub-national approaches to REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation). There has been much confusion over 'national' versus 'sub-national' approaches, and it is important to understand the different applications of these terms in order to assess their anticipated environmental and social impacts.

REDD has gained momentum in the international climate change negotiations in large part due to broad country support for national-level reductions in deforestation emissions. It is important to remember that sub-national 'avoided deforestation' projects were previously rejected by UNFCCC parties because of the inherent problems of such approaches, including leakage (where drivers of deforestation merely shift from one part of the country to another), non-additionality (where finance is provided to protect an area of rainforest that would have been protected anyway) and impermanence (areas being subsequently destroyed due to fires, infestations and even climate-related impacts). At a minimum this would mean there would be no benefit to the climate from REDD. Furthermore, if sub-national REDD were to be included as an offset in the carbon markets, it could even make the climate crisis worse by allowing industries to continue to pollute while not providing real emission reductions.

The national/sub-national issue can be broken into several component parts: Reference Levels; Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV); and Implementation.

Reference Levels

Perhaps the most critical decision for REDD in terms of its ability to deliver real emission reductions is the decision to establish a credible national reference level based on historic emissions. In Cancun, Parties decided that REDD must be based upon national reference levels, but that sub-national reference levels could be used 'as an interim measure'. While neither 'sub-national' nor 'interim' have been formally defined by the UNFCCC, most parties have stated that national reference levels are necessary for results-based actions. This understanding is consistent with the requirement for national monitoring systems for results-based actions.

Nested approach: Constructive ambiguity clouds this CDM approach to REDD

The historic proponents of including avoided deforestation projects in the CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) have sought to reconcile their interests with the recent UNFCCC decisions on REDD by promoting concepts that sound good on the surface, but ultimately lack substance (and merit). The 'nested approach' is one such example. In the UNFCCC, the 'nested approach' has been pushed in an effort to allow undefined 'sub-national' projects gain credit under national monitoring efforts, while in California it has been pushed to allow CDM-like 'projects' to gain credit under provincial-level monitoring efforts. Proponents of 'nested approaches' are never quite clear on what happens to sub-national offset projects in relation to national level emissions. Under some proposals, sub-national projects might not receive credits if national emissions rise (or don't fall by a pre-determined amount), but under most the projects would continue to receive credits regardless (thereby increasing, rather than reducing, global emissions). Regrettably, despite its lack of integrity some stakeholders have promoted this 'constructive ambiguity'. Greenpeace does not believe that the aggregation of projects that have failed individually to deliver real climate benefits makes for sound public policy. Rather, the need to reconcile sub-national implementation with national-level reductions will only succeed through programmes that clarify and respect land tenure rights, enable the full and effective participation of civil society in national plans and strategies, and provide for the transparent and equitable benefit sharing mechanisms.

Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV)

The UNFCCC SBSTA is currently charged with providing guidance to developing countries on establishing 'national forest monitoring systems and, if appropriate, sub-national systems as part of national monitoring systems'. In Cancun, parties decided that readiness activities can utilise sub-national monitoring systems 'as an interim measure' while 'robust and transparent' national monitoring systems are being developed. Results-based actions, however, require 'national monitoring systems'.

National monitoring of deforestation rates is necessary to ensure that REDD is not merely shifting deforestation and forest degradation from one part of the country to another (leakage). At a minimum, this would appear to require national-level remote sensing (eg satellite imagery) of deforestation rates and associated forest emissions, supplemented by comprehensive ground-based monitoring and in-depth understanding of the local dynamics of the drivers of deforestation/degradation. National monitoring could be supplemented by more detailed sub-national monitoring efforts, particularly in areas at higher risk of degradation.

Non-carbon benefits such as biodiversity and the rights and livelihoods of local communities and indigenous peoples must also be part of any MRV system for REDD. MRV Systems that focus solely on carbon could hide perverse outcomes, such as the loss of biodiversity and the violation of basic human rights under international agreements. In Cancun, parties agreed to recognise the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, as well as the need for their full and effective engagement with monitoring and reporting efforts. Similarly, the agreement required that REDD actions be 'consistent with the conservation of natural forests and biological diversity' to avoid potentially perverse incentives to turn natural forests into plantations. Countries are currently discussing how these MRV systems can best be developed to achieve these objectives. Independent international verification systems will be needed to validate the results of any chosen approach.

Implementation

While the history of failed sub-national avoided deforestation projects demands that results largely be incentivised through the achievement of national-level reductions in deforestation and forest degradation, the implementation of REDD programmes is largely expected to occur at the regional and local levels. Innovative financial transfer mechanisms are therefore needed to ensure that the financial and other benefits provided by REDD flow to the local communities responsible for protecting the forests.

While any REDD mechanism will have to deal with the many issues associated with implementation, the overall architecture of the mechanism could affect the way implementation takes place. A mechanism designed to provide offset credits for compliance purposes could lead to policies and actions very different to those promoted by a mechanism whose goals are to reduce emissions, protect biodiversity, and respect the rights of local and indigenous peoples.

Approaches are therefore needed that provide incentives for national-level reductions in emissions in a manner that protects biodiversity and fully respects the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. This can best be achieved by ensuring that national plans are developed in a fully transparent and participatory manner, with special attention paid to multi-stakeholder processes. Furthermore, REDD should focus on stopping the large industrial drivers of deforestation who are responsible for the vast majority of emissions, rather than small-scale forest uses that may have cultural or historic significance to certain communities. Innovative financial transfer mechanisms should be refined and implemented to ensure that financing and other benefits are allocated in a fully transparent manner to those responsible for protecting the forests.

Conclusion

Greenpeace believes the key to REDD success is to provide incentives that will reduce deforestation and degradation at the national level in a manner that protects biological diversity and fully respects the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. REDD must deliver real environmental results while benefitting the peoples and communities responsible for protecting the forest on the ground.

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