

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+¹ (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 could 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 in exchange. 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, rather than projected, emissions. In Cancún in 2010, 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 in Cancún or Durban, 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 project-based approach to REDD+

Historic proponents of project-based forestry offsets have sought to reconcile their interests with recent conflicting UN decisions by promoting the “nested approach”. In the UNFCCC, the nested approach has been pushed to allow undefined “sub-national” projects to gain credit under national monitoring efforts, while in California it is being pushed to allow CDM-like (Clean Development Mechanism) “projects” to gain credit under provincial-level monitoring efforts.

Proponents of nested approaches argue that projects and their reference levels could nest under an overarching reference level, but are rarely explicit 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 do not fall by a pre-determined amount), but under most proposals the projects would continue to receive credits regardless (thereby increasing, rather than reducing, global emissions).

The aggregation of projects that have failed individually to deliver real climate benefits does not make 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 transparent and equitable benefit sharing mechanisms.

¹ Given the drastic need for global emission reductions, Greenpeace believes that REDD+ financing should currently be directed to halting industrial-scale deforestation and degradation where it occurs, and preventing it from occurring in forests at high risk (rather than to certain “+” activities such as afforestation).

Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV)

Effective MRV systems and national monitoring of deforestation rates are 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 require national-level remote sensing (e.g. 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. Most importantly, 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.

Unfortunately, the text that came out of the UNFCCC SBSTA in Bonn does not include the much needed non-carbon benefits but rather promotes a view that reduces complex forest ecosystems to the carbon stored within them. Falling short of reaching a final decision on MRV in Durban, SBSTA is expected to submit the final draft decision to COP18 at Doha. Only a decision that goes beyond just measuring carbon will provide real and meaningful protection for the forests, its people and biodiversity.

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 and indigenous peoples responsible for protecting the forests. While any REDD+ mechanism will have to deal with 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 which primarily focus on the interests of carbon traders and middlemen rather than on actually reducing emissions, protecting biodiversity, and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities.

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 explored, 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 on the ground responsible for protecting the forests.

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