

The case for REDD+

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REDD+ projects worldwide have found that they reduce deforestation while improving the lives of forest dwellers, writes **Oliver Griffith**.



There's little debate anymore that the pace of deforestation is not sustainable. Deforestation and forest degradation are the second leading causes of global warming, responsible for about 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The recent COP26 recognised this with a pledge to stop deforestation by 2030; but how will we get there?

Can we in the North tell developing countries not to cut down their forests because we need them as carbon sinks to slow down climate change? Not without some form of compensation.

They're desperate for economic growth and have a right to use their resources.

European countries cut down their trees centuries ago for the same reasons, and the US now emits over 15 metric tonnes of CO₂ per capita, almost eight times as much as in the average sub-Saharan country.

And the same people who lecture developing countries are the ones who drive SUVs and consume the soy-fed beef and palm oil that contribute to deforestation. We need a reality check.

Why not just buy all those rainforests and turn them into national parks to preserve them as the world's lungs? Not a bad idea, and it's worked in some places, but what if there are people living in the forests and contributing to their demise?

Population pressure, subsistence farming, and fuel wood and charcoal making account for about half of tropical forest loss, while commercial agriculture, logging, and more recently climate disasters, account for the rest. So, the obvious solution is to lessen these activities.

Since at least half of deforestation is linked to rich world consumption patterns, an important step is to change these. There are encouraging signs, but the growing middle classes in developing countries want to live well too. And how can we tell a family just escaping poverty that they shouldn't have modern conveniences or eat beef?

Changing habits and the economic models that sustain them won't be easy.

Tackling deforestation on the ground is an indispensable adjunct. It should involve giving indigenous inhabitants title to the lands they have sustainably used for centuries, creating family planning programmes to ease demographic pressure, and finding sustainable livelihoods for forest dwellers. And governments must cut subsidies for unsustainable forest activities and improve environmental laws and forest management.

Since the primary drivers of deforestation are economic, we must find economic solutions, making the trees more valuable standing than cut down.

Among the most effective and far reaching is the United Nations' REDD+ programme. It Reduces Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation by selling carbon credits based on verified emission reductions in forests.

The proceeds are used to help the forest communities find more sustainable livelihoods and improve their standard of living. By harnessing market-based economic mechanisms for an economic problem, it may have the greatest chance of success among the many initiatives with the same goals.

A crucial component is gaining influence in the decision-making process for land use, which is challenging in the countries where most tropical forests are located. It requires international encouragement, such as through COP26, and local policy reforms.

At the same time, we need quick action on the ground where deforestation is happening.

The results so far are encouraging. Studies of REDD+ projects worldwide have found that they reduce deforestation while improving the lives of forest dwellers.

Moreover, REDD+ has increased the awareness and commitment of governments and the private sector on the importance of forest preservation, pinpointed commercial agriculture as a driver of deforestation, and provided a platform to secure land rights.

It's not a magic bullet and must be combined with activism against polluting companies in the global North, but it's a good start.

I recently visited two REDD+ projects run by Wildlife Works, a private conservation company – the Kasigau Corridor Project in Kenya, which was the first REDD+ project to be verified by the two main REDD+ standards (VCS, CCBA) in 2011, and the ERA-Congo Project in Mai Ndombe province in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

What impressed me was not just the slowing down of deforestation, but the positive socio-economic effects of the substantial funds flowing into these poor regions from the sale of carbon credits.

In the Kasigau Corridor area, wherever you turn there are community projects, from schools and clinics to handicrafts cooperatives, water tanks, pumps, and farming cooperatives.

In fact, Wildlife Works facilities are far more visible than those of the local or national governments.

In Mai Ndombe the impact is even more dramatic. The 180,000 residents in the isolated forest communities in the 300,000-hectare project area lack healthcare, education, electricity, running water, and adequate nutrition. Once again, the community-based Wildlife Works projects are popping up everywhere, and are already reaching over 50,000 people, taking the place of underfunded state services.

That this is happening in the DRC, and with relatively efficient support from the government, is even more remarkable.

Time will tell if such projects are sustainable in the long term. It would be better if developing governments took on these tasks themselves, and rich countries finally fulfilled their promises to drastically cut emissions. However, this is wishful thinking. So, given the urgency of deforestation, we need viable alternatives such as REDD+.

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