

IN FOCUS

Respecting Rights in Climate Change Mitigation: The debate about REDD

Contributed by Peter Kostishack, Director of Programs, Global Greengrants Fund

Climate change raises many human rights concerns as poor people around the world are the most vulnerable to its impacts and least culpable for the causes. While world leaders and scientists work to find solutions to this global crisis, some of the solutions themselves are raising questions from indigenous peoples and human rights advocates.

One such solution being discussed for inclusion in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is the mechanism of Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, or REDD. REDD aims to provide financial incentives to curb deforestation, which is responsible for roughly 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Under REDD, carbon emitters could offset their emissions by paying for the protection of forests that would otherwise be cut down or degraded. Many tropical countries with carbon-rich forests, as well as conservationists, are eager for this source of financing, however communities that live in and depend on those forests, many of them indigenous, are wondering how their rights to lands, resources and knowledge will fare when exposed to the international carbon markets.

A major concern is that REDD agreements will ultimately increase government and private sector control over forests and threaten local land tenure. If a government can receive offset funding from an oil company or a multi-lateral carbon fund to protect forests, it may be less likely to grant land title to those forests' indigenous inhabitants. Without legal title, local communities are unlikely to see financial benefits from the carbon transaction. They may be pressured to change their traditional activities such as swidden agriculture, or they could be resettled or evicted from their lands entirely. Already, in Indonesia, con-artists, posing as carbon brokers, are promising lucrative REDD projects to local communities and governments in exchange for signing over their forest rights. In the Congo Basin, where the land rights of 150,000 indigenous forest dwellers are not recognized and government corruption is rampant, communities are unlikely to be consulted or receive benefit from REDD. Unless stronger rights protections are incorporated, REDD could lead to increased land grabs, corruption, and conflict.

Such protections include recognition of indigenous peoples' legal customary rights to their territories and natural resources; respect for communities' right to free, prior, and informed consent with respect to REDD agreements; mechanisms that ensure fair benefits for the people who live in and protect the forests; and establishment of independent and transparent mechanisms for resolving conflicts and monitoring REDD projects.

Donors can help ensure that indigenous and other forest peoples' voices are heard at international negotiations such as the upcoming Conference of Parties in Copenhagen. Furthermore, they can assist communities and their advocates prepare for the fast-approaching carbon markets by funding mapping and land titling, training on rights, awareness-building about climate change and international agreements, strengthening local institutions for decision making and monitoring, and access to legal assistance to resolve conflicts and negotiate fair benefits.

Resources for funders:

1. Consultative Group on Biodiversity Funders Group on Climate and Energy:
stage.cgbd.org/visitors/aboutcgbd/workinggroups/climateandenergyfunders/
2. Samdhana Institute: www.samdhana.org (Funding REDD preparedness in Indonesia)
3. Seeing 'REDD'? Forests, climate change mitigation and the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities (Forest Peoples Programme)
http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/ifi_igo/seeing_redd_update_may09_eng.pdf
4. Guide on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples (Tebtebba)
www.tebtebba.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=468&Itemid=27
5. Indigenous Environment Network: www.ienearth.org
6. Third World Network: www.twinside.org.sg