



Indigenous Peoples in the Solomon Islands in the forests they protect. Credit: Rob Maccoll for AusAID.

WHO REALLY BENEFITS?

How REDD+ Fails Forests and Those Who Protect Them

*Developed by the
Forests & Climate Change Campaign
of the
Global Forest Coalition*



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Forests are far more than carbon sinks; they support all life on Earth through intricate interconnections. Despite being vital to all life, deforestation persists because its structural causes are not addressed including in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that has reduced forests to carbon sinks.

The UNFCCC's history is marked by 'developed' countries' unfulfilled commitments and efforts to avoid their responsibilities by, among others, abuse of the "carbon sink" function of forests to evade actual mitigation obligations by paying minimal amounts to the Global South. After an extremely complex negotiation process, the scheme now known as REDD+ was adopted. On the surface, it is presented as a global program to financially incentivise and compensate countries for their efforts to conserve forests. Officially adopted in the Warsaw Framework at the Conference of the Parties (COP 19) in 2013, REDD stands for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries," and was later amended to REDD+ to also include compensation for the conservation and sustainable management of forests, and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

REDD+ was pushed by the Global North rather than originating from Indigenous Peoples, custodians and protectors of forests, or Global South countries. If you look at deforestation through the misleading, commodifying lens of REDD+, global forest loss causes an estimated US\$ 2 trillion to US\$4.5 trillion in lost biodiversity annually. But, of course, you cannot put a monetary value on life; on a more human level, this devastates well over 1.6 billion people directly, especially Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent communities. Deforestation disrupts vital lifeways, particularly impacting women and disrupting cultural practices, which ultimately affects future generations.

From its inception, REDD+ was designed to offer payments to countries and projects reducing CO2 emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. The underlying idea was to attach market value to ecosystem services, offering developed countries a way out of their obligations by paying developing countries economic incentives to reduce forest-related emissions, and hence 'offsetting' their own rising emissions. This approach, rooted in neo-liberal capitalism, commodifies forests and 'carbon', disregarding centuries of conservation practices by forest communities; Indigenous Peoples, women in all their diversities, and local communities, for whom forests are integral to their ways of living, culture, spirituality, and livelihood.

The economic valuation of forests and financial incentives have overshadowed actual outcomes—reducing deforestation and emissions—while neglecting the rights, governance, and sovereignty over the natural resources, land and territories of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Numerous case studies indicate REDD+ projects have caused displacement and land grabs, reducing communities to mere passive beneficiaries rather than active agents with inherent rights and decision-making power. Critical analyses have also pointed out how the commodification of carbon may increase social conflicts, and render everything other than the carbon content of the forests worthless, thus ignoring and obscuring other forest functions. The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) study, Transforming REDD+, Lessons and New Directions (2018), concluded that it has been difficult to document and prove that actual reduction in forest loss has taken place and that greenhouse emissions (GHG) have been reduced, which we also aim to address.

The tracking of REDD+ financing is notoriously difficult. According to Climate Funds Update (2023), since 2008, US\$ 5.6 billion has been pledged to multilateral climate funds that support REDD+. Cumulatively, US\$ 3 billion has been approved for REDD+ over that same period. However, the exact figure is hard to find, with Andoh, J et al (2022) arguing that between 2009 and 2014, as much as US\$ 6 billion was disbursed to thirteen tropical developing countries. Yet, despite this huge finance flow, global deforestation rates and biodiversity loss have remained largely unmitigated. This briefer concurs that it is difficult to establish a correlation between the quantum of REDD+ finance flow and the reduction in deforestation and carbon emissions, as research from Brazil and Indonesia indicate, for example. The biggest fundamental flaw is that REDD+ ignores the historical and ecological roles that Indigenous Peoples, women in all their diversities, and local communities play in the conservation, protection, and governance of forests.



Piles of logged trees in a forest. Credit: Jonas Nilsson Lee.

DEFORESTATION



According to the World Resources Institute, the total tropical primary forest loss in 2023 amounted to 3.7 million hectares, resulting in 2.4 gigatonnes (Gt) of carbon dioxide emissions. Despite this being a 9% reduction from 2022, the rate in 2023 was nearly the same as in 2019 and 2021. Other sources say tropical deforestation contributes about 20% of annual global GHG emissions. Further, in 2022, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a US Government agency, reported that carbon dioxide emissions continued to increase, and they are still increasing to this day. Despite the implementation of REDD+, UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates point out that global deforestation still accounts for about 11% of CO2 emissions, a figure that has remained unchanged over the past decade.

The numbers above vary and are sometimes contradictory because it is very difficult to get an informed assessment of REDD+ and the program's impact on deforestation rates due to varying monitoring methods and definitions of forests. For example, Global Forest Watch highlights that differing definitions of forests can include monoculture plantations or land designated for forest use without trees, skewing data on actual deforestation. Some count net forest loss, and often include restoration of forest cover through monoculture tree plantations, which should not be compensated against deforestation of primary resources, as primary forests are extremely valuable in and of themselves. This discrepancy can entrench a false and misleading public perception in favor of reduction in deforestation. To address this, we attempt to focus on figures highlighting actual deforestation rather than forest cover loss as much as possible.

Drivers of deforestation are also vital to consider when accounting for deforestation. Around a quarter of global carbon emissions come from agriculture, forestry, and other land use (AFOLU), with agricultural expansion the primary driver of global deforestation, responsible for about 90% of cases, according to the FAO. This data contrasts with previous underestimations of the impact of agriculture on GHG emissions, highlighting the impact of agriculture on deforestation and overall GHG emissions.

Looking at deforestation figures in Brazil and Indonesia can help evaluate REDD+, as much of REDD+ finance has been directed to these two countries. Of the USD 6.5 billion committed by donor countries for REDD+ projects globally between 2010 and 2019, Brazil received USD 1.3 billion – the largest share received by a country, according to CIFOR-ICRAF's research team. According to a 2022 report on REDD+ National Strategy by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Government of Indonesia, since 2007, Indonesia has received more than US\$ 232 million with further commitments of US\$ 180 million. As deforestation rates in both countries have historically been a major issue, looking at how things have changed since the inception of REDD+ can give us some insights into whether it is working or not.



In 2010, Brazil had 492 million hectares of natural forest, covering 59% of its land area. By 2023, it lost 2.73 million hectares of natural forest, resulting in 1.80 gigatonnes of CO2 emissions. In 2022, Brazil accounted for 43% of global tropical deforestation. Before REDD+, and prior to 2010, Brazil saw a decline in deforestation due to effective policies and enforcement from 2004 to 2009. However, there is little evidence that REDD+ significantly curbed primary deforestation afterwards. The reductions observed can largely be attributed to pre-existing national policies rather than REDD+ initiatives, as well as different analyses that may rely on net forest cover analyses rather than focusing on primary forest deforestation.

Despite significant funding from multilateral sources like The Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), the Forest Investment Partnership (FIP), and the UN-REDD Programme, REDD+ initiatives have seen limited success. The Amazon Fund received the most financing at US\$ 705 million, but considering the high deforestation rates in Brazil since REDD+ implementation, this indicates a significant disparity between financial investments and their effectiveness in curbing deforestation. In the Brazilian Amazon, REDD+ projects also overestimated reduced GHG emissions and deforestation due to poorly set baselines amongst other issues. Some of these projects promoted monoculture plantations and undermined Indigenous livelihoods, which particularly affects women who rely on forests for food and resources. The funds have not seemingly translated into meaningful decreases in deforestation rates, but have certainly contributed to human rights abuses.

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Returning to the drivers of deforestation, Brazil remains one of the largest meat exporters globally, and REDD+ hasn't notably curbed the expansion of livestock farming. An investigation by the BBC and Global Witness reports that while deforestation in the Amazon dropped by half over the past year, it increased by 43% in the Cerrado, another large and biodiverse ecoregion in Brazil. This demonstrates a problem inherent in REDD+: leakage, where deforestation simply moves from a REDD+ project area to a different non-REDD+ area. Large meat producers including JBS, Minerva, and Marfrig have also since been linked to illegal deforestation, leading to a massive increase in deforestation. While parts of the Amazon were 'protected' through certain REDD+ initiatives, deforestation in other vulnerable areas increased. This demonstrates how simply creating more REDD+ projects would not solve this, as illegal deforestation continues both in the protected and non-protected areas. Deforestation in this case is driven by powerful agriculture interests.

Cattle ranching and unsustainable agriculture account for at least 24% of deforestation and GHG emissions globally. COP28 encouraged initiatives to monitor deforestation, yet large banks continue to be linked to supplying funds to illegal deforestation activities through agriculture in Brazil. Focusing and funding alternatives to unsustainable livestock and agricultural production is a better bet than a non-specific, voluntary framework like REDD+, with its poor track record of deforestation reduction, as well as the underlying problems that persist (see more on permanence, leakage, baselines and additionality in GFCs 2020 report, 15 Years of REDD+: Has it been worth the money?).



Farms and pastureland carve into tropical forestland in the Western Brazilian State of Rondônia. The state is one of the Amazon's most deforested regions. Photo taken on 18 July, 2016. Credit: Author Planet Labs, Inc.

INDONESIA



Deforestation in Indonesia before REDD+ was a major problem, driven by factors such as agricultural expansion, logging, and palm oil production, leading to significant loss of tropical rainforest. While REDD+ initiatives were introduced to address deforestation, their effectiveness has been mixed, showing limited success. In 2022, for example, Indonesia still lost 230,000 hectares of primary forest. Similar to Brazil, Indonesia continues to grapple with persistent forest loss and has also experienced leakage. Mongabay also reports that deforestation through the pulp and paper industry has increased fivefold between 2017 and 2022 – in other words, deforestation is on the rise in Indonesia, despite REDD+ efforts.

Indonesia also has conflicting interpretations of what “zero deforestation by 2030” means, and monoculture tree plantations like eucalyptus and trees used for pulp production, which are some of the major causes of primary forest loss in Indonesia, are counted as forests. As discussed earlier, this is not unique to Indonesia but rather is a fundamental flaw in the REDD+ framework itself, where governments decide what counts as a forest. A GFC report from 2009 showed how many REDD+ projects include monoculture tree plantations in their definition of what constitutes a forest, despite real forests storing 40% more carbon than these monoculture tree plantations. Consequently, funds directed toward forest conservation can ironically cause deforestation by replacing natural forests with large plantations like eucalyptus and palm. This inclusion of monoculture plantations as forests inherently skews data on forest cover loss, further undermining efforts to find verifiable assessments of the impacts of REDD+ projects.

Figures from 2018 show Norway, one of the biggest funders of REDD+, pledged US\$1 billion to Indonesia to reduce deforestation. This amount is tiny compared to the revenues generated by industries like pulp and palm oil, with Indonesia being the largest global producer of palm oil. Conversely, Norway profits immensely from oil exploration within its borders and continues to expand exploration and production even further, increasing its GHG emissions annually. Under REDD+, it seems that the Global North can continue to outsource the responsibility of reducing emissions to the Global South through REDD+, while continuing to pollute and drive global carbon dioxide emissions.

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RESPECTING RIGHTS



Indigenous Peoples globally are ensuring a future for all of us, but, REDD+ is failing to benefit these communities adequately. Carbon credit schemes associated with REDD+ have led to documented cases of land dispossession and other human rights violations in countries including Peru, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Tanzania, Cambodia, Indonesia, Colombia, and Brazil. Promises of prosperity often result in top-down interventions that disrupt Indigenous ways of life and exclude Indigenous Peoples from decision-making regarding their territories. The failure to recognize and respect the land rights of Indigenous Peoples, women and local communities means that forests are further at risk, though it is well known that deforestation rates are up to 50% lower in Indigenous territories than elsewhere.

Non-implementation of tenure and governance rights for local communities, Indigenous Peoples, and others with traditional rights of access to forests hinders their ability to protect these vital ecosystems. Many REDD+ projects lack additionality, focusing on areas not at high risk of deforestation, thus failing to provide new benefits. Moreover, these projects often fail to properly implement land and governance rights of Indigenous Peoples and forest-based communities, preventing communities from fully managing and benefiting from their lands and being subjected to increasing conflict, despite their proven effectiveness in forest conservation. The lack of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) exacerbates these issues, perpetuating colonial legacies of dispossession.

Furthermore, studies show that when REDD+ projects are approved, finance does not reach Indigenous and forest-dependent communities effectively. Between 2008 and 2023, approximately 87% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for REDD+ activities came from Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. Despite significant funding, the benefits reaching Indigenous communities remain minimal. For instance, out of the US\$ 1 billion pledged by Norway, only a fraction has been allocated directly to Indigenous-led projects. Another study by the Rights and Resources Initiative found that Indigenous communities have received little direct financial support from REDD+ programs, partly because they are diverted through government agencies or NGOs.

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Almost one-quarter of all land area is occupied by Indigenous Peoples, who steward one-fifth of primary tropical forests and protect the majority of global biodiversity. Unfortunately, as one study notes, the majority of conservation cases do not treat Indigenous Peoples as important actors. Any successful conservation efforts must involve Indigenous participation, which is proven to actually protect forests: When Indigenous tenurial and collective rights are respected, deforestation rates tend to decrease.

The Cancun decisions of COP16 promoted safeguards for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, but these are non-binding so states can claim to respect Indigenous knowledge and the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities without genuine action, or simply ignore Indigenous communities altogether. The push to privatize nature and prioritize economic interests over human and more-than-human rights underscores the need for alternative approaches that genuinely involve and benefit those who are already protecting our remaining forests.



Women harvesting rattan from the forests near Henda village, Palangkaraya, Indonesia.
Photo taken on 9 October, 2012. Credit: Achmad Ibrahim/CIFOR

CONCLUSION



Available figures so far point out that around US\$ 6 billion has already gone into REDD+ schemes, and there are estimates saying approximately US\$ 15 billion per year would be needed for REDD+ projects. Comparatively, the global spending on war, one of the biggest polluting factors globally, was over US\$ 2,443 billion in 2023 and is increasing each year. In 2023, global fossil fuel subsidies also increased to US\$ 7 trillion. Climate finance of any sort pales in comparison and is diverted through ineffective frameworks, while large polluting entities continue to grow their profits and destruction. Reforming a system that does not benefit those who are already protecting forests and fails to demonstrate positive impacts on deforestation reduction just doesn't make sense. More funding won't advance REDD+ policies to a point where they do good: the lack of correlation between REDD+ and reducing deforestation, and the proven cases of harm to forest communities demand alternative, real, community-based solutions that prioritize rights, biodiversity, and real forests over profit-driven false solutions.

As we revisit GFC's briefing from 2020, it is unfortunately clear that not much has changed over the past four years. REDD+ continues to reduce complex forest ecosystems to 'carbon', commodifying life that we all depend on. Rights and tenure of Indigenous Peoples, women and local communities are still not being recognized in practice, FPIC is largely absent, and the past limited concern for gender issues still seems to be the case. Further misinterpretation of REDD+ concepts, such as focusing on monoculture reforestation over real forests, and ignoring drivers of deforestation, still turns complex forest ecosystems into carbon sinks.

GFC supports rights-based solutions over false solutions. As Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network says: REDD+ is "a false solution that entrenches and magnifies social inequalities in many ways. It is a violation of the sacred, plain and simple." CLARA's analysis in "Towards Real Zero: Missing Pathways – Rights Based Solutions" helps to emphasize the needs of people and the planet, such as committing to respecting the land rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, ending deforestation rather than focusing on net outcomes, working towards true restoration, natural regeneration, reforestation, and improved forest management, prioritizing biodiversity and rights, and restructuring our damaging and unsustainable food systems altogether.

Going forward, and as GFC continues to highlight in our campaigns, the imperative of ending the financing of false solutions to climate change is becoming increasingly urgent. Climate finance must support real solutions that emphasize the importance of community-driven conservation, with an emphasis on Indigenous traditional knowledge and community stewardship, and of the deep knowledge and impact of women in all of their diversities, rather than investing in solutions that prioritize profit and economic "growth" over life itself.