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Title: Alternative Livelihoods Projects in forestry conservation – more about sustaining service delivery than sustainable forest management

‘If we had to choose the best way to save our forest, we would choose a return of forest use rights instead of all the alternative livelihood projects provided to us’ Village Headman, Kasempa, Zambia, 2017.

This paper presents the voices and analysis of community members in forest conservation programmes in three countries, The Philippines, Ethiopia and Zambia and demonstrates that rather than incentivising forest maintenance and management or meaningfully helping communities that depend on the forests, Alternative Livelihood Projects (ALPs) seem to be more about perpetuating the pretext for service delivery projects in forest conservation.

Participatory analysis backed with quantitative data on degradation and deforestation shows that forest communities invest in forest maintenance and management through strengthened tenure control and increased user rights and demonstrates no correlation and at times a negative correlation between ALPS and motivation of communities to maintain and manage forest resources. Yet rather than ALPs and the assumptions underpinning them facing increased scrutiny and less support by development projects, the paper provides examples of a huge resurgence and rebranding of ALPs in climate finance funded forest conservation initiatives.

The clear message from the community analysis was that increasing forest value, ‘use it or lose it’ is key to incentivising forest maintenance and management when forest tenure is secure, not tactics designed to distract and delink communities from forest resources through ALPs. It was also clear in some of the sites that climate finance initiatives such as REDD+ that were funding ALPs were undermining rather than enhancing forest value for communities.

The findings beg to question why enthusiasm and funding for ALPs seems to be on the increase in the absence of evidence of efficacy, why are we not acknowledging failure? Respondents, including community reps, government staff and project implementers answered that question by suggesting that ALPs are more about justifying sustainable project funding, rather than a meaningful approach for sustainable forest management.