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Title: Becoming Fundable? Converting Climate Justice Claims into Climate Finance in Mesoamerica’s Forests

While some express ongoing concerns that Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) could be development-as-usual or a form of land-grabbing, others argue that this idea presents an opportunity. The Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB) suggests that REDD+ has opened a window for advancing its member groups’ claims to territory and resource rights. Indigenous and local communities in AMPB maintain that they are the true ‘guardians of the forest’ – not deforestation threats or mere ‘beneficiaries’ for government and international programming. These ten groups hold legal rights to 60 percent of Mesoamerica’s forests and invoke environmental justice discourses to make claims on their governments and in the international arena. Specifically, AMPB claims that climate finance for forests should go directly to forest-dependent communities, and not national governments and or environmental NGOs that have conventionally promoted REDD+.

AMPB is proposing a Mesoamerican Territorial Fund (FTM) to directly capture climate finance, arguing that addressing the legacies of historic marginalization and ongoing criminalization will also lead to the best forest outcomes. However, to attract the attention of any entity that could capitalize the FTM, AMPB and its members must prove that they can conform to donor requirements and expectations, even though the mechanism is meant to be designed around them and their territories. Becoming fundable puts strains on the existing relationships between territorial leaders and their constituencies – and potentially between communities and their forests.

Given these tensions, this paper draws on fourteen months of collaborative fieldwork since 2015, including interviews, participant observation, social media analysis, and document review, to ask: what are the possibilities and limitations for these groups of engaging in climate finance, given concerns over historic injustices and current threats to their rights and lands? Can constructing the FTM provide a viable and just model of REDD+ for forested lands under community control? This project specifically engages with questions of environmental ethics, equity, and justice in the context of climate change, examining one case of the creative agency of historically marginalized groups to insert their rights claims into the increasingly multi-scalar world of forest governance.