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Title: The community approach to REDD+: is this a (partial) mistake?

Official texts of the UNFCCC initiative Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) evidence a strong community focus. The central role of communities is enshrined also in support programmes such as those of the UN-REDD+ and the World Bank’s FCPF. What started as a desire to safeguard communities from harm under REDD+ seems to have morphed into a frame in which communities are portrayed as having both the capacity and the responsibility to protect forests, and they are now widely seen as REDD+’s chief implementers.

We suggest that the logic here may have gone somewhat astray, since it is well documented in scientific literature that most deforestation in the tropics is connected to expansion of commercial agriculture and large scale ranching, which is not typical of community livelihoods. We analyzed texts of national documents on REDD+ from a range of developing countries using the software programme Atlas-Ti to determine how much of their REDD+ effort and funds were being directed towards communities. We found that despite the fact that in most cases commercial agriculture was identified as the main driver of deforestation, communities were indeed getting the lion’s share of the funds. The point is not that communities are irrelevant and should not be in REDD+ at all, but it is clear that they will not be able to combat the deforestation that is caused by commercial agriculture in these countries.

We suggest that the community lobby, which includes not only groups representative of Indigenous People but also major development NGOs and international research institutes, fought during the international REDD+ negotiations for a more community-based focus for social reasons and may have inadvertently played into the hands of global capital. As a result, the REDD+ instrument may have lost an opportunity to deal effectively with emissions from deforestation. We provide three different possible explanations of this policy anomaly through the lenses of political ecology, behavioral economics and policy practice.