REDD Alert! How REDD+ projects undermine peasant farming and real solutions to climate change

Agriculture is increasingly being discussed at high level forums on climate change that promote different programmes which they claim will help farmers to adapt to climate change and reduce agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions. These initiatives are heavily influenced by corporations and governments that want to protect industrial agriculture and corporate food systems from real solutions to climate change that would provide peasants with more lands and support agro-ecological farming for local markets. As a result, small scale peasant agriculture is being targeted by a number of aggressively promoted false solutions to climate change while industrial and corporate-driven agriculture mostly continues with business as usual. One such programme is called REDD+.

A recent publication from GRAIN and the WRM explains some of the patterns that make **R**educing **E**missions from **D**eforestation and Forest **D**egradation (REDD) a danger for peasant farming. The publication explains how REDD+ reinforces the corporate food system that is largely responsible for climate change, has robbed many communities and forest peoples of their territories and undermines the food and agricultural systems of peasants and indigenous peoples that can cool the planet.

In most cases, the information peasant communities receive about REDD+ projects is biased or incomplete. Many promises of benefits and employment are made by project proponents if the community agrees to the proposed REDD+ activity. But the majority of REDD+ activities limit the use of the forest for shifting cultivation, gathering and other subsistence use. Hunting, fishing, grazing or cutting some trees for construction of housing or canoes are also often restricted and the restrictions are enforced by REDD+ project owners, often with the support of armed guards. Furthermore, most communities are not informed that these projects generate carbon credits, or that the buyers of these credits are some of the largest corporations worldwide, whose businesses are built on fossil fuel extraction and the destruction of territories of traditional communities. Peasant farming is thus singled out as the cause of deforestation while the major drivers of deforestation are ignored. At the same time, large-scale drivers of deforestation like industrial logging, expansion of oil palm, soya or tree plantations, infrastructure mega-projects, mining, large hydro-dams – and above all, industrial agriculture expanding into the forest – continue without restriction (See "REDD: a Gallery of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies").

Some patterns that make REDD+ a danger to peasant farming

REDD+ blames peasant farming practices for deforestation and emissions

Peasants around the world are being squeezed onto less land while still managing to produce most of the world's food, without nearly the amount of GHG emissions produced by large-scale industrial farms. The overwhelming majority of REDD+ projects, however, seek to reduce GHG emissions by further reducing the lands that peasant farmers and indigenous communities have access to or by changing how the land is used by peasant farmers.

REDD+ proponents have the erroneous assumption that shifting cultivation in particular, a practice commonly used by forest peoples around the world, is a major cause of deforestation. This is simply not true. What is usually lumped together under the term "slash-and-burn" in reality are hundreds of different land use practises, adapted to the local circumstances. Far from causing large-scale forest loss, these practises have allowed forest-dependent communities to maintain the forests they depend on. Where shifting cultivation is leading to forest degradation, rotation cycles are usually shortened because less land is available for shifting cultivators. This is almost always a result of expanding industrial plantations or mega-infrastructure projects or industrial logging, which grab land peasant communities rely on for food production.

Another argument used by REDD+ proponents is that the "opportunity cost" is lower than it is with restricting the expansion of plantations and industrial farms. The “opportunity cost” is a measure of the economic value that would have been generated, by companies or peasants, if deforestation activities were allowed to continue. The consultants can see the money that plantations generate for companies; but they do not see the whole value that forest areas represent for peasant communities in terms of local food production, housing, medicines, biodiversity, culture, etc. For REDD+ proponents, therefore, it is more "cost" effective to stop peasants from using forest lands than it is to stop plantation companies and corporate farmers.

REDD+: Good business for carbon companies, international conservation NGOs, consultants and industrialized countries

One of the big promises of REDD+ is that forest-dependent communities and peasant farmers will get paid for protecting the forest. To entice governments and communities of the South, REDD+ proponents routinely make exaggerated claims about the size of the global trade in carbon credits – or the expected size of a future forest carbon market.

The reality is that the price for carbon permits has been in free fall since 2008. And while carbon permits might swing back to the expected price, the experiences of existing REDD+ projects that sell carbon credits show how most of the supposed profits that are in theory going to communities will be captured by others.

Before a REDD+ project can sell carbon credits, a lot of technical documents have to be written, certified and verified by different auditing firms. All of these preparations cost money. And they are not cheap. They add up to what is called the 'overhead costs' or 'transaction costs' of REDD+ projects.

For international conservation groups like The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and WWF by contrast, REDD+ is good business because they are able to capture a large portion of the international aid and climate funding available for REDD+. They are involved in many REDD+ projects and initiatives and act as advisors on national REDD+ plans. None of these groups have revealed the size of their REDD+ budgets, or how much of their funding comes from the climate finance that industrialised countries account as REDD+ payments to the global South.

Industrialised countries also stand to gain even more from REDD+ if the new UN climate treaty currently being negotiated provides them with the possibility to take the credit for tropical countries reducing deforestation. One of the proposals on the table is that the countries providing financial support for REDD+ count REDD+ reductions towards their own emission targets – a very convenient option for governments in industrialized countries seeking ways to avoid deep emissions cuts at home.

REDD+ undermines food sovereignty

There are different ways that REDD+ projects commonly undermine local food production and create food insecurity among local communities. In some cases, families participating directly in the offset project must reduce their production of food crops in order to plant trees for the project. In other cases, the REDD+ project prevents the communities from accessing forested areas that they rely on for hunting and gathering, for shifting cultivation or for grazing.

The regular failure of REDD+ initiatives to 'establish alternatives to slash-and-burn' or 'modernise' peasant agriculture through proposals developed by far-away project owners or conservation NGOs points to another tension inherent in REDD+: these projects are concerned first and foremost with maximizing carbon storage in the area that will deliver carbon credits. Initiatives to involve peasant communities and forest peoples are an afterthought, a requirement from donors or to show supposedly participatory project implementation.

REDD+ undermines community control over territories

Tradable REDD+ credits are a form of property title. Those who purchase the credits do not need to own the land nor the trees that are “storing” the carbon, but ***they do own the right to decide how that land will be used***. They also usually have contractual rights to monitor what is happening on the land and request access to the land at any time they choose for as long as they own the carbon credit.

Communities often are not informed about how the contract they sign for REDD+ projects might undermine their control over their territories. Often, obligations that communities or families enter into are not clearly explained or they are described in ambiguous terms that can easily be misinterpreted. Seeking legal advice on such complex and ambiguous technical documents is made difficult because almost all REDD+ contracts contain strict confidentiality clauses.

Another important way that REDD+ projects affect community control over territories is by creating divisions within communities. While many promises of employment through REDD+ projects remain unfulfilled, REDD+ projects generally do hire people from within the community to work as forest rangers or guards whose role it is to report on compliance with REDD+ project rules within the community. In other words, they are expected to keep an eye on other members of the community. Their role is to report to the project owners if community members cut down trees, hunt, fish, grow food crops in the forest or use the forests as they have always done but which is forbidden under the REDD+ project rules. This form of 'employment' creates divisions within the community that will negatively affect the ability of communities to organize and work together to defend their territories.

> How changes in the law inspired by carbon markets are threatening agrarian reform
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> Forest Code in Brazil is an example for how legal changes informed by REDD+ and similar offset trading initiatives pose a risk to agrarian reform and peasant rights to land. The 2012 revision of the Forest Code extends the use of tradable forest restoration credits. These are credits that a landowner can sell if s/he has cleared less forest than allowed under the Forest Code. Farmers who have in the past cleared more forest than the law allowed and are obliged under the 2012 Forest Code to restore the area cleared in excess of the legal limit – or risk losing access to agricultural credit lines – can buy these forest restoration credits instead of restoring the forest on their own land.

These tradable forest restoration credits put a key instrument for Agrarian Reform in Brazil at great risk. The historical instrument of Agrarian Reform has been the expropriation of *latifúndios* that could be shown to be unproductive and thus not fulfilling the constitutionally required "social function" of the land. The introduction of tradable forest restoration credits created an instrument that could shield owners of *latifúndios* from expropriation for social purposes because these credits would transform unproductive estates into carbon factories and repositories of environmental reserves. This in turn would allow land owners to claim that the land is fulfilling the constitutionally required "social function".

REDD+ facilitates the expansion of corporate agriculture

The deforestation caused by the agriculture sector over the past few decades is almost entirely due to the expansion of commodity crops for export and for animal feed, with the vast majority of this expanded production on large-scale industrial farms and plantations. Deforestation is then directly linked to international commodity supply chains that are controlled by a small number of transnational food corporations. These include commodity traders and producers like Cargill, Louis Dreyfus Group, Bunge, Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), JBS or Wilmar International, food companies like Nestlé, Danone, or Unilever, and supermarkets and fast food chains like McDonald's, Walmart or Carrefour.

To shield themselves from bad publicity and to protect their supply channels, corporations have established voluntary certification schemes and commodity roundtables with the participation of a few large international NGOs (see separate article in this bulletin).

Conclusions

The problems are clear, the solutions exist …and they are very different from the REDD+ concept.

REDD+ helps to conceal the fact that while agriculture is a major contributor to climate change, not everybody growing crops shares the same responsibility for the emissions. It is the industrial food system – with its heavy use of chemical inputs, its erosion of soils, its deforestation and its emphasis on production for export markets – which is the main source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet, REDD+ falsely blames shifting cultivation and peasant farming for deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions. In reality, peasants are already proving that it is possible to ‘feed the world’ while producing far fewer emissions than the export-led, industrial model of agricultural production. Giving lands back to small farmers and indigenous communities is the most effective way to deal with the challenges of feeding a growing global population in an era of unpredictable climate change. REDD+ is a dangerous distraction from urgent action in this direction.

Access the publication here:
https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/how-redd-projects-undermine-peasant-farming-and-real-solutions-to-climate-change