
Can CDM money be acceptable for forest conservation?

Deforestation contributes to climate change through the release of carbon in the forest biomass. Forest conservation and rehabilitation activities thus need to be promoted both to conserve carbon --in the case of primary forests-- and to absorb it --in the case of secondary forests allowed to regrow.

But should forests be included in the Clean Development Mechanism or not? It's a difficult question for NGOs, IPOs and forest communities, but one that will need to be answered at the upcoming negotiations at the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Climate Change. Our aim here is not to give a clearcut yes or no answer, but to share our viewpoints on the matter.

For a forest community or an environmental organization working to protect a specific forest, the inclusion of forests in the CDM could mean receiving very much needed funding to ensure forest conservation, as well as political and legal support from the local and/or national government. The forest would be conserved and the local community would at the same time be able to improve its standard of living. This could be portrayed as a "win-win" situation.

There are however some problems resulting from the global character of the carbon trade. Anyone willing to pay for a "carbon forest" service will be continuing carbon dioxide emissions elsewhere. They will also be supporting the extraction of fossil fuels elsewhere. In both cases there will be affected communities. Among them might be a community in another country living near the polluting industry buying the carbon credits from the forest community. Or there might be an indigenous community --in a third country-- affected by oil extraction in its territory. For these two communities affected at "long distance" by the carbon project, carbon forestry projects could well be a "lose-lose" proposition.

If we accept that any carbon-forest deal should be approved only with the consent of all affected local people, this example suggests that before making a decision, the local community involved in the carbon project would need to identify and consult all the other affected communities. Depending on their response, it could accept or reject the carbon deal.

It follows that CDM-related forest conservation would be an extremely complicated operation, since there would be very few "simple" situations such as the one described in the above example. Countless communities would need to be identified and consulted in most potential projects. Additionally, what would happen if one affected community opposed a project while the other communities involved approved it? Wouldn't this generate problems and divisions among affected peoples?

At the same time, it needs to be stressed that although "carbon money" may be perceived as a possible solution to save specific forest areas, it is clearly not the solution to the much broader issue of deforestation and forest degradation occurring throughout the South. Such problem cannot be only seen as a "climate" issue, but as also affecting soils, water, flora, wildlife and local peoples' livelihoods. Negotiators at the Convention on Climate Change need to be reminded about the commitments their governments have already made, particularly within the framework of the

Convention on Biological Diversity and the Proposals for Action of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests. If implemented, these commitments would ensure not only money transfers from the North, but more importantly, the establishment of adequate frameworks --at both the national and international levels-- to address the direct and underlying causes of deforestation.

NGO and IPO participants at the upcoming Conference of the Parties confront the task of ensuring that the Clean Development Mechanism will serve to promote socially equitable and environmentally sustainable development and that the climate debate is linked to the rest of the social and environmental commitments already agreed upon by governments.