
[What's hiding behind the letters R – E – D - D?](#)

This article is part of the publication [15 Years of REDD:](#)

[A Mechanism Rotten at the Core](#)

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What do the letters REDD stand for?

It's an abbreviation in English for 'reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation'.

Why are forests discussed at UN climate meetings?

The fact that carbon is found in coal, petroleum and gas as well as in trees is often used to argue that reducing deforestation is important to prevent climate chaos (see [Is all Carbon the Same? Fossil Carbon, Violence and Power](#)). The panel of scientists advising the UN on climate issues has sanctioned this questionable argument by claiming that to avoid climate breakdown what matters is how much of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide is piling up in the atmosphere, not where this carbon dioxide comes from. (8) Fossil fuel companies and industrialized country governments are using this argument to distract from the urgent need to protect the ancient underground carbon stores from which most of the carbon in greenhouse gases originates. This means ending the extraction of coal, petroleum and gas. REDD helps delay this unavoidable decision by pretending that protecting forests (or planting millions of trees) can undo the damage caused by continued fossil carbon burning. It is therefore a dangerous distraction.

Why are there so many different names for REDD and what's the difference between them?

The explanation of how REDD was to help end deforestation has changed several times since REDD was introduced in 2005. These changes in part reflect the influence of different interest groups on the design of REDD. Initially, REDD was to bring about a reduction in emissions from deforestation by offering money to companies that destroy forests. With each subsequent change, more activities became eligible for what at the time was believed to be a door-opener to large volumes of international funding. Tree planting, logging, forest conservation and intensification of traditional agriculture practises such as [shifting cultivation](#) were eventually declared activities eligible for REDD funding. There are at least five different variations of REDD, each with its own name.

- It started in 2005 with **RED**, where the focus was on D=deforestation. The assumption was that RED payments would make forests worth more standing than cut down. RED money would convince companies planning to destroy forests to stop cutting down the trees.
- A second D=degradation, was added in 2007: **REDD** enabled payments also to those who

damage a forest but where some trees are kept standing so that what remains is still called a forest in international statistics.

In both RED and REDD, payments were promised if whoever planned to destroy or degrade a forest was willing to discard these plans. This was a very perverse incentive because it was inviting blackmail: if you don't pay me, I will destroy the forest.

- Shortly after, a +/plus was added: **REDD+** enabled payments to logging and plantation companies as well as to the conservation industry. Specifically, the "+" adds 'enhancement of carbon stocks' (plantations), 'sustainable forest management' (industrial logging) and conservation (protected areas) as activities for which REDD payments can be requested.

The arguments for these additions vary. Among the most common justifications are that trees soak up carbon as they grow, so planting many trees should be good for the climate (9) and that logging companies need extra money so they can afford to log more carefully and practise '[selective logging](#)' with special care for the climate.

The argument for adding conservation to the list is even more problematic. For those who already protect forests to qualify for REDD funding, they need to agree to one of the following stories: (1) some of their activities ([shifting cultivation](#), typically) is harming the forest and they will need to stop or change these activities in exchange for REDD money. Or, (2) their forest is threatened by intruders encroaching on their territory. This intrusion and the deforestation resulting from it can only be addressed because of the REDD money; without REDD, those who were protecting the forest would not have enough funding to stop the deforestation.

These stories either reinforce the false perception that forest-dependant populations are driving deforestation or that they absolve the state of its obligation to prevent intrusion and destruction of forests in Indigenous Peoples' territories. The second story line ignores that in many countries, protecting indigenous territories against intrusion is a legal obligation of state authorities. REDD puts that responsibility onto forest-dependent peoples whose forests are being invaded.

- The next change produced the names **landscape REDD+** and **jurisdictional REDD+**. The argument for this was that REDD+ needed to cover larger areas beyond just individual projects. REDD programmes covering whole regions, provinces or entire nation states were now said to be needed to reduce deforestation. Otherwise, the destruction might just move outside the REDD project borders. The 2016 UN's Paris Agreement on climate change refers to this version of REDD. Because it involves many different areas of forest under different tenure and ownership regimes, governments assume the responsibility to account for changes in the volume of carbon stored in the forests under jurisdictional REDD+. The carbon accounts of individual REDD+ projects have to somehow be integrated into the government's national or province-wide forest carbon balance sheet. The World Bank's BioCarbon Fund initiated such initiatives. In the so-called voluntary carbon market, individual REDD projects continue to dominate, even though these projects are expected to somehow be integrated into jurisdictional REDD+ plans. How and when this will happen, and what it will mean for individual REDD projects, remains unclear.
- REDD was never a name that worked well for the PR departments; the term was too long, too technical, too hard to explain, too cumbersome to translate into other languages. With opposition to REDD rising and the flaws in the REDD design becoming ever more apparent, large conservation NGOs began to promote REDD under yet another name: **Nature-Based Solutions (NbS)** or **Nature Climate Solutions**. (10)

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- **Indigenous REDD** was a concession to pressure from Indigenous Peoples reminding those who had promoted REDD that it was Indigenous Peoples' resistance to forest destruction and the demarcation of indigenous territories that was keeping forests standing in many places. This proposal emerged after conservation was made an eligible activity under REDD. The demarcation and legal recognition of indigenous territories has been a core demand from Indigenous Peoples to engage in Indigenous REDD. In most cases, this promise has yet to be fulfilled. (11)

Who came up with the idea and who promotes REDD?

Discussions go back to the beginning of the UN climate talks. Projects that claim to reduce emissions through avoiding deforestation (palm oil or soy companies not clearing forests to expand their plantations, for example) were excluded from carbon trading under the UN's Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Climate negotiators gave four main reasons for this decision: (1) these projects would generate so many carbon credits that they would 'flood the market' and drive down the price of carbon credits; (2) forests can burn down, and when they do, the compensation of the fossil carbon emissions is lost (storage of carbon in forests lacked the permanence necessary to allow for compensation of fossil carbon releases was the language used in the debate at the time); (3) slowing deforestation in the limited area of a forest carbon offset project does not stop forest destroyers from simply continuing their destruction elsewhere; and (4) there is no direct way to measure how much carbon is stored in a forest, therefore the figures are very unreliable and the calculations revealed large variations and inaccuracies.

International conservation NGOs like Environmental Defense and the Nature Conservancy and think tanks like the World Resources Institute (WRI) had campaigned hard to see forest offset projects included into the Kyoto Protocol's carbon trading mechanism. They continued their campaigns and in 2005, the "Coalition for Rainforest Nations", through representatives for the governments of Papua New Guinea and Costa Rica re-introduced the idea to the UN climate negotiations as RED (reducing emissions from deforestation, see above). This coalition is often wrongly described as a coalition of rainforest nations while its correct name "Coalition for Rainforest Nations" reveals its true nature as an NGO. It was created by two Columbia Business School graduates from the US and Italy, one of whom grew up in Papua New Guinea and has regularly been on the country's delegation at UN climate conferences.

Supported by industrialized country governments such as Norway, Germany and UK, this "Coalition for Rainforest Nations" played a key role in seeing REDD firmly rooted in the UN climate negotiations in Bali, Indonesia, in 2007. The same year, the World Bank, launched the **Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)**, with the intention to "jump-start a forest carbon market". (12) It later also launched the **BioCarbon Fund** and the **Forest Investment Program (FIP)**. Together with initiatives such as the German government's **REDD Early Movers (REM)** programme and the Norwegian government's **Norway International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI)**, these programmes have spear-headed REDD+ in many countries in the global South.

Even though the arguments for not including forest carbon in the Kyoto Protocol's offset mechanisms remained unchanged, REDD was established as an international forest policy tool. Supported by a wide range of government and philanthropic funding programmes, a whole new industry appeared. It included consultancies, REDD project companies like Wildlife Works Carbon, certification standards like the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standards (CCBS) and specialised sales agents for REDD projects. With jobs and careers now tied to REDD, the question of effectiveness and whether the idea is really fit for purpose are unlikely to be at the top of the list for this group of REDD

proponents.

What about the money promised by REDD?

Funding for REDD has mainly come from four sources. Most funds have come from governments, directly and through entities like the World Bank and the Green Climate Fund. (13) Philanthropies and companies interested in buying carbon credits have funded individual REDD projects and organisations promoting REDD.

The World Bank and other bilateral REDD initiatives used their 'technical assistance' to oversee the preparation of 'baselines' of emissions from deforestation and carbon stored in trees and the setting up of systems to measure, report and verify (MRV) movements of forest carbon. They also readied sectors for inclusion in [carbon accounting](#) and carbon trading schemes and set in motion the necessary legal changes to enable Southern countries' participation in carbon markets under the UN's Paris Agreement or other international carbon trading schemes such as the aviation industry's CORSIA. (14)

The World Bank in particular has also used REDD initiatives like the **Forest Investment Programme (FIP)**, the **Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)** (15) or the BioCarbon Fund **Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes** (ISFL) to further open up Southern economies to carbon and agriculture commodities markets. For example, the ISFL involves activities in five countries (Ethiopia, Zambia, Indonesia, Colombia and Mexico). Its impact on national policies that affect peasant farming may be long-lasting and prepare the ground for pushing peasant farming deeper into industrial agriculture. The BioCarbon Fund makes no secret of the initiative's goal: to pioneer programmes that enable countries and the private sector "to adopt changes in the way farmers work on the ground." (16) Even if these programmes sell few carbon credits in the end, they will still push peasant farming deeper into agro-industrial production and undermine traditional cultivation practices such as [shifting cultivation](#) and the use of controlled fires for soil preparation.

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