

REDD-Plus: An area of potential success in Cancun

An IISD Commentary

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December 2010

Despite predictions of a “lame duck” climate change meeting in Cancun in December 2010, potential areas for success exist. REDD-plus is one such area. A draft decision on REDD-plus is possible and would help to demonstrate that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations are heading in a positive direction. The Executive Director of the UNFCCC Secretariat, Christiana Figueres, remarked that a concrete outcome is needed at the Cancun climate change meetings to prevent the perception of multilateralism as a never-ending road. Forward movement on REDD-plus—a mechanism that has potential to provide substantial benefit to the poor in developing countries—would help to restore trust and belief in the UN negotiating system.

Forests play an important role in the world’s climate system by absorbing and storing carbon. Recent research estimates that carbon loss from deforestation and forest degradation is in the range of 12 to 20 per cent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, forests and other landscapes, including agricultural lands and peatlands, hold significant potential for emission reductions. The majority of deforestation and forest degradation occurs in developing countries, where there are real opportunities to protect forests through a REDD-plus mechanism—the abbreviated name of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in developing countries, including forest conservation, sustainable management of forests and carbon stock enhancement.

Movement on REDD-plus in Cancun, in the form of a draft decision, would provide a framework to guide the various pilot initiatives taking place around the world. Financing is flowing to REDD-plus activities, with at least US\$4 billion of the fast-start financing allocated for REDD-plus activities from 2010 to 2012. Multilateral programs include the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility that includes 37 developing countries and its Forest Investment Program that has identified eight pilot developing countries; the United Nations Collaborative Programme on REDD (UN-REDD) that is working on the ground in twelve pilot countries; and the Global Environment Facility that has over 40 REDD-related projects in developing countries around the world. At least a dozen developed countries have directed bilateral funding to REDD-plus related activities, with Norway being a leader and providing support to Brazil, Tanzania, Guyana, Mozambique and the Congo Basin, in addition to providing funding for the various multilateral initiatives. These important activities build capacity, test and pilot the elements of mechanisms, improve confidence in monitoring and verification, and put in place and test safeguards. An agreement in Cancun will help reinforce these activities, especially in terms of policy support.

REDD-plus is a mechanism to provide financial benefits to help preserve forests and hence reduce emissions. But this funding can do so much more, offering significant co-benefits for developing countries.

The primary benefit is emission reductions by expanding the opportunities for developing countries to contribute to mitigation efforts. Global deforestation was estimated at 13 million hectares per year between 1990 and 2005, resulting in substantial reductions in forest carbon stocks and increases in emissions. Reducing deforestation and forest degradation can have a large and immediate carbon stock impact, and cost-effective actions can be implemented relatively quickly in the forestry sector. The world needs time to make the necessary changes to energy systems and infrastructure because of technology lock-in, meaning REDD-plus has the potential to be a large factor in meeting emission reduction targets in the short and medium term.

The co-benefits of REDD-plus include maintaining ecosystems, enhancing biodiversity, improving livelihoods and enabling adaptation. The World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development reports that 350 million of the world's poorest people, among them 60 million indigenous people, depend almost entirely on forests for their subsistence and survival—while another one billion poor people depend on the forest as an important part of their livelihoods. Tropical forests provide ecosystem services of critical importance for societies, economies and cultures.

REDD-plus also has the potential to include agricultural landscapes, areas that hold significant potential for storing and enhancing land-based carbon while creating economic benefits for farmers. Accounting for the value of trees found on farms would greatly increase the effectiveness of a REDD-plus strategy and help to address a major driver of deforestation, agriculture.

Outstanding issues remain in the REDD-plus negotiations—finance; definition of forests; social and environmental safeguards; geographic scale; and monitoring, reporting and verification—but they are not insurmountable. Negotiators were close to a draft decision in Copenhagen and that text, with a few modifications, provides a strong basis for an agreement in Cancun.

Positive developments on REDD-plus in Cancun, Mexico, in December 2010 will have a constructive impact on the broader negotiations. Movement in the negotiations is needed to restore belief in the UN negotiating process, and REDD-plus is one area ready for action.

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