

## REDD+ in Mexico: Towards a just and conflict-sensitive approach to reduce land-use emissions

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January 2018

### Introduction

This policy brief synthesizes the policy relevant findings of the international research project “Conflict and Cooperation over REDD+ in Mexico, Nepal and Vietnam”, coordinated by the University of East Anglia and funded by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and the UK’s Department for International Development. It also provides guidance for the implementation of Mexico’s REDD+ strategy (ENAREDD+, 2017), by identifying a set of actions that can maximize the legitimacy and fairness of REDD+ early actions, as well as reduce the likelihood of conflict. The contents of this policy brief draw on the insights of more than 100 interviews carried out throughout the country, including several REDD+ pilots, as well as participant observation in 14 REDD+ preparedness meetings in the states of Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Campeche, Oaxaca, Chihuahua and Mexico City over the period 2014-2016. Our research also benefited from the views of the participants in the workshop “Conflict and Cooperation in Climate Change Policy: A focus on REDD+”, held in Mexico City on 9 November 2016.

### 1. REDD+ preparedness in Mexico

Mexico is one of many countries that has aimed to strengthen forest governance through the adoption of the UNFCCC initiative of *Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation, and the sustainable management of forests and the increase of carbon stocks* (REDD+). REDD+ aims to improve

### Key messages

- REDD+ implementation in Mexico will have to deal with long-standing policy and market-driven drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. Higher levels of government should take on REDD+ principles and increase their efforts to tackle such challenges.
- REDD+ implementation should not be characterized by exclusively technical solutions. Many influential actors often overlook the political and social roots of land-use change.
- Conflict and cooperation in REDD+ can be explained by the contrasting notions of justice held by different actors across scales.
- Understandings of justice in REDD+ governance vary according to each actor’s beliefs, and their expectations and interests regarding forest resources and land-use. Three main injustices came to the fore: socio-economic, symbolic and political.
- REDD+ implementation needs to respect the rights of rural and indigenous communities as established by international law and in so doing understand that REDD+ actions might not be possible or desirable everywhere.
- Rural communities involved in REDD+ early actions should receive meaningful information and be able to discuss the desirability of such actions through the standards and procedures of their own institutions.
- Rural communities have their own capacities, norms and culture, and to respect and strengthen these can guarantee the effectiveness, legitimacy and fairness of REDD+ in the long term.

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forest governance in the global South by aligning such governance to the needs of international climate change mitigation. It aims to incentivize land-use activities and management approaches that avoid land-use change emissions by halting deforestation and degradation processes or by increasing carbon stocks against a historical baseline. Such avoided emissions and increases in carbon stocks can become a commodity subject of trade in international carbon markets, and thus become a way through which implementing countries can recover all or a share of their investments in improved forest and land-use governance. REDD+ in adopting countries involves 3 phases: a preparedness phase to develop the national strategy and other related policy provisions, often accompanied by small-scale pilot activities; an early implementation phase, aimed at the deployment of the national strategy and the roll-out of REDD+ actions at a larger scale; and a third phase which will involve the trade in carbon emission reductions and the upscaling of REDD+ actions at national level.

In Mexico, the readiness period started in 2013 and concluded in 2017 with the publication of the country's REDD+ strategy (ENAREDD+) (Comisión Nacional Forestal, 2017). The National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) acted as a focal point during this period, and it played a key role in involving a large number of organizations in ENAREDD+ design (see e.g. Spiric et al. 2017). These organizations participated in several meetings and through distinct forums for decision-making (Comisión Nacional Forestal 2016a, 2016b), as well as participated in the design of other related provisions, including the Monitoring, Reporting and Verification System, and the foundations of a national REDD+ safeguards system. The principal outcome of such multi-actor, and cross-scale policy discussions was a strategy founded upon the principles of sustainable rural development and integrated landscape management, in which the focus on forest conservation and carbon trading plays a secondary role.

### **2. Conflict and cooperation from an environmental justice approach**

The research informing this policy brief is theoretically grounded on an *environmental justice approach*. Specifically, we mapped and analyzed REDD+ actors in Mexico, which were i) recognized as subjects of policy in the first place, ii) participated meaningfully in the design of the national strategy and pilot projects, and iii) expected to benefit from REDD+ policy decisions and implementation in the future. Their claims regarding these three issues were taken as a reference to illustrate

existing grievances in policy design or potential conflicts in REDD+ implementation. By making explicit any contradictory claims on these three dimensions of environmental justice (i.e. recognition, participation and distribution), social disagreements and disputes can be made explicit and, therefore, the possibilities for transformation arise.

Table 1 below illustrates how distinct sources of conflict in REDD+ relate to environmental justice dimensions. The Table refers to both conflicts that emerged during the preparedness phase and which might persist (or not) in the future, and conflicts that may appear during the implementation of REDD+ early actions. We further distinguish between *internal* sources of conflict, which relate to specific challenges entrenched in REDD+ governance, and *external* sources of conflict, which relate to challenges that concern environmental governance more broadly, such as a lack of policy integration.

#### **Sources of REDD+ conflict (internal)**

- The socio-political causes of deforestation and degradation are overlooked by actors charged with REDD+ implementation, ignoring the most powerful actors involved in unsustainable land-use management.
- Technical implementation guidelines promoted by donors and endorsed by the government result in rules and practices on-the-ground that undermine local communities' willingness and ability to participate in and benefit from REDD+ activities.
- REDD+ policy design and implementation have neither sufficiently nor meaningfully involved community-based organizations.
- Communities in which REDD+ pilot projects have been implemented (and where larger scale REDD+ early actions might also unfold) have at best partial knowledge of what REDD+ means and entails. Their perception that REDD+ is likely to involve large cash hand-outs through PES and other mechanisms has resulted in unfulfilled expectations and it might discourage long-term committed participation.
- The distribution of implementation budgets, i.e. relatively low investments at local level *vis-à-vis* high fees for professional and external consultants, has been uneven and causes resentments across organizations.
- Specifically, the distribution of benefits from REDD+ pilots has been influenced by local tenure regimes, which result in advantages for right-holders at the

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expense of landless people, resulting at times in processes of “elite capture”.

### Sources of REDD+ conflict (external)

- Contradictory rural development policies, coupled with over-regulation in the forestry sector, undermine communities’ interest in engaging in more sustainable land-use practices.
- The economic forces underlying urban, agricultural and livestock-led rural development act as a

significant barrier for effective policy alignment, which would be desirable if Mexico aimed to tackle the principal drivers of greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity loss.

- The lack of political will at high governmental levels to pursue ambitious emission reductions goals in the land-use sector, made evident by the recent public budget cuts for the environmental sector, do not contribute to create favourable conditions for REDD+ implementation.

**Table 1. Sources of REDD+ conflict, future prospects and justice claims**

Sources of REDD+ conflict	Prospects for conflict resolution during REDD+ implementation	Type of justice claim
The socio-political causes of deforestation ignored by some key REDD+ actors	Unlikely; key government actors would have to broaden the analysis of deforestation and tackle the latter’s key drivers.	<i>Distribution</i> of REDD+ costs and benefits
The technocratic nature of REDD+	Evidence of transformation; an overly technical approach to REDD+ design in the early years was counterbalanced during the latest years of the preparedness phase, supported by an unexpected level of participation by civil society organizations.	<i>Participation</i> in policy-making and acknowledgement of multiple perspectives
Low participation by grassroots organizations and community-based actors	Potentially; but only if REDD+ government and civil society actors make substantial investments to address this issue during the implementation phase.	<i>Recognition</i> of diverse subjects of policy implementation and <i>participation</i>
Poor information dissemination to local communities	Potentially; but only if REDD+ government and civil society actors make substantial investments to address this issue during the implementation phase.	More significant and well-informed <i>participation</i> of local actors in REDD+ implementation
Unbalanced funding allocation	Unlikely; unless government actors make committed investment decisions to reduce the share of funds allocated to procedural and technical issues, and to intermediary actors during REDD+ implementation.	More meaningful <i>participation</i> of local actors in REDD+ implementation and better targeted <i>distribution</i> of REDD+ benefits and costs
Uneven benefit sharing	Potentially; despite the exercised pressure by social organizations, no important steps to consider landless peasants were observed during the preparedness phase. The implementation phase, however, may focus on an ‘efforts based’ approach rather than a ‘results-based’ approach, thus possibly incorporating non-rights holders.	<i>Recognition</i> of actors within communities, <i>participation</i> of these ‘new’ actors in implementation and <i>distribution</i> of REDD+ benefits and costs considering them
Contradictory rural development policies and incentives	Unlikely; given the entrenched sectoral approach in Mexico’s public policy and administration and the strong lobby of the urban and agricultural development sectors.	<i>Participation</i> of more actors in REDD+ implementation (beyond the forestry sector) and a more even <i>distribution</i> of REDD+ benefits and costs
Unjustified budget cuts in environmental policies	Potentially; only if the priorities of a new government shift and the share of public investment targeted to the environmental sector increases.	<i>Distribution</i> of government budget

Among the issues highlighted in Table 1, we would like to stress those that, in our view, might continue to spark social conflict during REDD+ implementation. If addressed, we believe that REDD+ implementation will be perceived as more just, and thus it is likely to be less prone to conflict. First, the most important drivers of deforestation in the country remain unaddressed while both the governmental and non-governmental environmental sector has suffered drastic budgetary cuts in recent years (Benet, 2016a, 2016b). Second, the distribution of material resources in REDD+ preparedness has been characterized by a rather top-down allocation of donor funding, mostly to private consultants and civil society organizations with greater capacities, restricting the chances of funding for small organizations and communities. Third, although the development of the ENAREDD+ involved an unprecedented participatory process, opportunities of participation was lower for historically discriminated social groups, such as peasants and indigenous peoples. Fourth, REDD+ early pilots were limited in scope and funding, and communities received little information. Communities' non-right holders, among which there is an important share of women, had few chances to benefit, thus contributing to the reproduction of existing social differentiation at the local level. Furthermore, organized forest communities involved in REDD+ pilots (as well as those which are not) continued to face strong bureaucratic obstacles that put at risk the success of their management efforts (CCMSS, 2016).

### **3. Overview and pathways for transforming conflict in REDD+ implementation**

The conflicts and shortcomings identified in Table 1 above, if carefully addressed, can turn themselves into opportunities for tackling long-standing challenges of environmental and rural development policy. A transformative view aims at understanding the underlying causes of conflict, engaging with the relational dynamics that fuels disputes, while promoting a process of constructive change. We think that future REDD+ early actions will only make a difference if the political economy of land-use in implementing regions is well-understood and the drivers of deforestation addressed. For example, the conflicting agenda of the agricultural and forestry sectors remains an issue to be resolved, although the 2016 signed agreement between the Agricultural and the Environment Ministries to work collaboratively on the design and implementation of REDD+ early actions is an effort worth praising. Re-

directing subsidies away from specific crops that promote deforestation and towards more sustainable forms of land management, such as agroforestry, climate-smart cattle management, soil restoration activities or the consolidation of non-timber forest products, such as ecological beekeeping, could make a significant difference in REDD+ implementation. In addition to these policy re-alignment and public spending changes, conservation NGOs, forestry and agro-forestry civil society organizations should also further support more sustainable development models at local level. REDD+ early actions can be built on the lessons learnt through a long-standing history of numerous initiatives of sustainable community forestry developed by rural and indigenous communities. In some locations and regions, there exist community-based technical and organizational capacities that can facilitate their meaningful participation in REDD+. This opportunity stems from a longstanding collective ethics and customary law, which in many locations have proved effective forms of forest governance.

The presence of strong grassroots organizations in REDD+ preparedness has been limited, but the participation of some forestry organizations has been influential in the shaping of REDD+ in Mexico, using the working groups attached to the National Forest Council (CONAF). However, at subnational level, in the state-level REDD+ Consultative Technical Committees (CTC-REDD+), many sectors and possible stakeholders, particularly the most marginalized, have been absent, along with many forest owners who do not belong to the so-called regional forestry associations. If REDD+ implementation hopes to harness indigenous capacities and knowledges, future efforts should be guided by a sincere respect for their collective rights, according to international indigenous law standards such as ILO 169 agreement. Inviting experts in human rights law and practice during REDD+ implementation, with emphasis in territorial and environmental rights, would fill a visible gap in the REDD+ preparedness process to date, including the discussions around the safeguards systems. Conditions for participation as equals should be guaranteed and indigenous and rural communities' representatives, as well as of women and youth, should have the opportunity to influence early REDD+ actions. In this regard, a necessary condition for full and effective participation is information, as well as a constant and consistent communication with implementing actors to avoid false expectations in implementation contexts. REDD+ should be known for

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what it is and for what it is not. The fulfillment of the principles of transparency and accountability is key for the legitimacy of policy design.

Benefit-sharing will also be a critical pillar of REDD+ implementation. The General Law for the Development of Sustainable Forestry in Mexico guarantees carbon rights to landowners and legitimate landholders (art. 134). The ENAREDD+ establishes that investment in integrated land management plans should make sure that any funded actions are fairly allocated across locally relevant organizations and social groups, and any future carbon payments from realized emission reductions, should be re-invested to further support such plans and upscale REDD+ actions elsewhere.

In conclusion, REDD+ in Mexico has brought a variety of rural actors around a table. They have agreed on the importance of adopting an integral and territorial management approach to effectively address deforestation and forest degradation. REDD+ preparedness has also brought to the fore the importance of aligning policy as a condition for more effective and adaptive responses to the impacts of climate change. These early years of REDD+ have also induced conflicts around issues related to recognition, participation and distribution. Conflicting agendas were openly discussed, and compromises were reached. Historically discriminated actors and social groups, however, have faced constraints to attend relevant REDD+ forums, while their livelihoods continue to be disrupted by state and private sector developmentalism. Being sensitive to these issues and deepening the government's commitment to sustainable rural development can contribute to minimize such conflicts and guarantee a more *just* implementation.

### Acknowledgements

This publication was possible with the financial support from the UK's Department of International Development provided through the Netherlands

Organization for Scientific Research to the CoCooR project - Conflict and Cooperation over REDD+ in Mexico, Nepal and Vietnam (grant no. W 07.68.415). The ideas and opinions presented in this Policy Brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders and our institutions.

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### Published by:

Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Delegación Chihuahua  
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