

Viewpoint: Key Issues in REDD Baselines and Monitoring

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I would firstly like to thank the conference organisers for inviting me to attend "Rights, Forests and Climate Change." I found the discussion fascinating. As someone who spends his life squinting at satellite pictures to determine what is going on 800km below, the urgency and implications of these discussions on the lives of local people has been for me most pressing.

I want to briefly raise three primary issues that I see developing in REDD discussions in regard to the technical aspects of baseline setting and monitoring, that have either come up in discussions over the last couple of days or have emerged in other discussions taking place under the UNFCCC umbrella.

1) Baseline creation and data management

I think it is important to say at the outset that a significant number, if not the majority, of REDD-Ready countries do not have accurate baselines of their forest cover: where it is, how much is being lost, far less a statistical understanding of the drivers of change. When I say 'accurate' I refer to the need to be able to use such a baseline for the measurement of incremental change.

It is highly unlikely that the capacity building approach of the REDD-Ready initiative will be able to get most countries to the stage where they can prepare their own accurate baselines within many years, certainly not prior to 2012. Nevertheless as they go forward-- and go forward they will-- transparency of data creation and access to these data are vital if the rights of local people are to be respected. If local people are going to be the beneficiaries of REDD projects and enter into them with full understanding of the opportunities and pitfalls, access to what will essentially be a government mapping exercises will be essential.

I think that from the outset it is critical that the UN seek from their partner countries the commitment to the open sharing of forest mapping data, both in its raw imagery, and classification forms. Local people need to be able to access information regarding how their land and resources are being mapped. NGOs and academics need to be able to critically appraise national mapping exercises. Historically forestry departments in many of these countries have a poor record of information disclosure. Resolution of this problem is now all the more important given the implications of REDD projects. Making this happen may require the imposition of donor conditions.

While many of us have attempted or been involved in community-driven mapping exercises, and given thought to the tools applicable to situations where local people are able to map their own forests, I suspect in most places the disconnect between the results of national mapping and monitoring and local people, is simply huge. What is being mapped on the lands of landowners and indigenous people and their ability to understand and interact with this process is vital if this is not to add to disempowerment of who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of such schemes.

On a more technical note, it is vital that countries are required to undertake wall-to-wall assessments of their countries estate. By wall to wall I mean complete coverage, not a sampling strategy, and one that is conducted at a sufficiently fine scale that it is possible to actually 'see' deforestation at the scale at which it is occurring, whether that be a logging road or an small agricultural clearing. As Simon Counsell stated in his presentation at the conference, the

assumptions that go into the design of these sorts of analyses can and do have major effects on the quality of the outcomes.

Furthermore, not having highly detailed highly accurate forest mapping at the start date of national REDD schemes promotes corruption and facilitates abuse of local people's rights. If a participating country is not required to have accurate detailed mapping from which one can detect deforestation and degradation, then it is possible for land clearance to occur but not to be detected. Therefore governments may receive payments for REDD whilst simultaneously allowing logging or other clearances to occur, while local people will have no avenue of appeal because it won't be possible to prove that forest has been cleared due to inaccurate mapping in the first instance. A high degree of accuracy and detail should be a requirement of all countries wishing to participate in REDD.

I have been asked on a number of occasions at this conference about the relevance of the upcoming FAO FRA assessment to these discussions. To clear up any misconceptions, the FAO FRA2010 cannot be used to derive national baselines as it uses a sampling approach. It may give estimates of rates of change in particular sites, but will not allow one to determine where change is actually occurring across a country. Deforestation is often a highly heterogenous process – localised in some places and not in others – making its quantification through sampling error-prone.

2) Degradation:

My second major concern is that the second D, 'Degradation' be maintained within REDD considerations. It must. There is still considerable uncertainty about what will constitute the definition of degradation and certainly how it could/will be measured. This is partly methodological. However it is also made difficult by the retention by the IPCC of the FAO definition of what constitutes forest that allows for forests to be forests with only a 10-30% canopy cover. This definition was apparently conceived from a forestry management perspective. Clearly if one can go from a forest that has 100% canopy cover to one that has only a 10% canopy cover, there are substantial ramifications for carbon emissions. Ecologically a 90% reduction in canopy cover is disastrous, but according to FAO definitions such forest is indistinguishable from intact old-growth forest. If Degradation is not included it could allow forests to be hollowed-out by the logging industry, without it having **any major** impact on national deforestation statistics. I think there is a case for the reconsideration of the definition of what actually constitutes a 'forest' under IPCC guidelines that better reflects the substantial difference in carbon storage between closed tropical rainforest and other forest types.

3) Oversight:

This point could be broadly summarised by the question, "*Whose numbers do you trust?*"

The FAO model of faithfully reporting country statistics is not going to work in the current context. The present default is for the international community to use nationally reported figures. Without external oversight, which in many places may be unwelcome, there is no reason to expect that these figures will be any more accurate than those that have been submitted in the past 20 years through the FAO FRA processes. In many places this experience does not engender confidence.

This is going to be all the more difficult if the in-country Designated National Authority, the DNA, is the same organisation as the one doing the monitoring, and potentially the one managing the financial interface between local people, the project beneficiaries, and the "wall of capital"

descending upon them. For all these reasons self-monitoring is not a good idea. The encouragement of institutional diversity in all aspects of monitoring must be encouraged.

What to suggest in the way of checks and balances is a hard ask. Indeed I suspect that it may be partially driven by the private sector in their involvement with off-set projects – in which uncertainty in carbon estimates in the order of 100's of percent, or in forest areas, would have massive commercial consequences.

Nevertheless, I suspect that some additional construct is needed to provide oversight and verification of the accuracy of national monitoring efforts. The World Bank is considering this in the verification of individual projects, however unless this is extended to the whole forest estate, we may have islands of good data in a sea of uncertainty. Independent verification of the accuracy of forest mapping and the detection of deforestation and degradation increases the transparency of the system, reduces the potential for corruption. Increased transparency and reduced opportunity for corruption results in confidence in the system by investors, donors, governments and local citizens, which assists in making REDD effective. It needs serious thought.

One way that some of these issues could be overcome in the short term is for the creation of national baseline maps to be put out for international tender by the UN or World Bank, obviously according to stringent accuracy and definitional requirements. This is something that can be done, and done within quite a reasonable timeframe. That way, starting out on the REDD journey, countries would have in their possession accurate forest maps, and most importantly, there would be compatibility between the maps of different countries. Yes, there would be 'sovereignty' arguments against this proposition. However it would allow those countries serious about REDD to participate quickly and transparently, while giving the international community confidence in the reality of their investments.

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