



Salvadoran Research Program  
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## Getting ready for REDD+ in Mesoamerica: Trends and critical issues for forest communities

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The initial stages of REDD+ readiness in Mesoamerica demonstrate clear weaknesses and a series of limitations which could be highly detrimental to the forest communities and indigenous peoples that live in and/or control many of the areas under consideration for REDD+ initiatives. Although Mesoamerica may indeed offer 'favorable conditions' for REDD+ measures, an effective REDD+ mechanism will require more meaningful efforts to address inherently complex and contentious issues —such as the drivers of deforestation and degradation— at the heart of many of the forest governance challenges in the region. It is also clear that in order to address core issues such as equity and social justice, more serious efforts must be leveraged to address the implications of REDD+ on the rights of indigenous and campesino (peasant) forest communities over forests, including their rights of use, access, management and exclusion. Indeed, these rights are crucial for ensuring that REDD+ contributes to improving territorial governance and management.

Despite these challenges, as well as a complex landscape marked by uncertainty around a new climate change regime, the low expectations of the upcoming 16th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-16) in Cancun, and the failure of climate legislation in the United States Senate (all of which influence carbon markets and funds), Mesoamerica still offers a valuable and strategic opportunity to redefine REDD+ from the perspectives of indigenous and campesino forest communities. The following provides a brief discussion of principal trends and critical issues arising out of the REDD+ readiness processes in Mesoamerica, as well as fundamental concerns regarding the development of strategies and the implementation of actions that seek to benefit forest communities and indigenous peoples.

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As the role of forests in climate change has become increasingly prominent in international policy discussions, a diverse set of actors have emerged in Mesoamerica with a clear interest in proposals for the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+), including governments, aid agencies, and research, conservation, and community organizations.

This interest is no coincidence, as REDD+ could strengthen the technical and institutional capacities of governments, while for forest communities and indigenous peoples, it could enhance livelihoods and build new institutional arrangements that could broaden approaches to forest governance and sustainability in the region's territories.

Although REDD+ readiness has only begun recently in Mesoamerica – it is evolving rapidly – increasing the urgent need for resolute commitments towards a more meaningful inclusion of key actors, whose participation is essential for a legitimate process. The manner in which the region is institutionalizing REDD+ has the risk of being highly detrimental to forest communities and indigenous peoples, not only because of the lack of attention to ensuring genuine processes of consultation and participation, but also due to the absence of meaningful dialogues over fundamental concerns over the distribution of benefits and rights.

Despite these challenges, Mesoamerica still has the opportunity to demonstrate innovative leadership at an international level in the design and implementation of an inclusive REDD+ mechanism, which not only addresses the underlying causes of deforestation and degradation, but also strategically and meaningfully incorporates indigenous peoples and forest communities into the readiness process from its inception. Moreover, because Mesoamerica faces the pressing need to foster stronger linkages between adaptation and mitigation, processes such as REDD+ must be developed on the foundation of agreements among a broad base of actors.



## Getting ready for REDD+: Governments and technical agencies first

Perhaps one of the most striking elements of the current REDD+ strategies is the degree to which they have been developed in the central environmental and forestry offices of each country, producing plans that place a strong emphasis on state institutional capacity building and technical studies, while avoiding some of the more complex issues such as forest governance and the drivers of deforestation. This technical emphasis reflects the dove-tailing of interests between the market —promoted through initiatives such as REDD+— on the one hand, and the governments of the region, on the other. For its part, the market requires technical studies to establish baselines, identify territories with greatest reduction potential, and determine the legal foundations to guarantee the sale of certified emissions reductions. At the same time, many of these studies and efforts are useful for governments, regardless of whether they ultimately lead to a functioning REDD+ regime, as they provide an important opportunity to strengthen the capacity of governmental programs and initiatives.

While this convergence of interests is important, it must also be understood within the broader context of interests and conditions that have influenced the readiness process and its products. Perhaps the most salient of these is the prevailing uncertainty regarding the resources linked to REDD+, and the conditions under which they will be made available. This uncertainty has led to a generally cautious approach by governments, which are understandably hesitant to enter into politically costly negotiations with the various national sectors linked to

deforestation until greater clarity is achieved. In addition, the emphasis on technical aspects can be understood as one of the elements of least resistance and controversy in the REDD+ process: the environmental and forestry agencies most involved with the technical components of REDD+ are able to advance in their preparation relatively unfettered as they are less subject to political dynamics —and to a lesser degree— to criticism and conflicts.

The predominant interest of the regional readiness programs is to move the processes forward as quickly as possible, though this is somewhat tempered by countervailing pressure within the agencies to ensure the development of coherent strategies and to protect themselves from criticism from civil society, indigenous peoples and forest communities. For example, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility has clearly been aware of the weaknesses in the different Readiness Preparation Proposals (R-PP), yet the efforts to rectify these shortcomings have been limited, due in part to the need to achieve readiness quickly. The donors have therefore generally accepted the REDD+ strategies despite their weaknesses, as they do not want the process to stagnate. Throughout this process, international conservation organizations have been actively involved in a variety of readiness activities and have positioned themselves as advisors to governments, and in some cases to national and local NGOs.

## Getting ready for REDD+, but avoiding or postponing confronting deforestation and degradation

Although deforestation and degradation rates continue in Mesoamerica, forests are

disappearing less quickly than in previous decades, reflecting a forest transition in the region, where economic growth, migration to urban centers and off-farm employment opportunities lead to decreasing pressure over forest resources and lower rates of deforestation and degradation. Although there is a general understanding of the factors explaining these lower rates, as well as factors for the persistence and intensification in other areas, there is also a notable lack of systematic efforts that analyze the underlying causes of these processes and their inter-relation with broader dynamics, including public policy frameworks, and new national, regional and transnational private investment flows.

Even Mexico has struggled with this challenge, despite developing one of the most advanced REDD+ strategies in the region. While the country's R-PP received a relatively positive assessment from the Technical Advisory Panel (TAP), this evaluation team also highlighted the proposal's inadequate analysis of deforestation and degradation, due to the lack of differentiation between regions and causes of deforestation; the failure to sufficiently examine linkages to public policy; and insufficient attention to market forces and the role of migration. This challenge is shared throughout the region, even for countries with greater capacity for data collection and analysis – such as Mexico and Costa Rica – and clearly poses an even greater obstacle for those countries that lack systematic or updated information. Meaningfully addressing deforestation and degradation will require not only robust analysis of its causes but also a better understanding of territorially specific dynamics in the region, and the disparate contexts, actors and factors that drive them.

These efforts should inform the design stages of REDD+. Unfortunately, the trend has been just the opposite, as program design phases are well underway without strong analyses of the underlying causes of deforestation and degradation.

### Getting ready for REDD+ or for the '+' in REDD? The implications for adaptation

The increasing interest in the "+" in REDD has important implications for REDD+ in Mesoamerica, not only for its rising profile in REDD+ discussions in the region, but because it also explains the role of different actors in eventual "+" actions, under its components of conservation, sustainable forest management and enhancement of carbon stocks. Though each country employs a different approach, the "+" is critical for every national REDD strategy in Mesoamerica. In Mexico's strategy, community forestry is assigned a prominent role for its contributions towards sustainable forest management, and the government has even showed interest in the second "+" (REDD++), to reduce emissions in agriculture. Costa Rica has showed interest in forest conservation due to the weight of its National System of Conservation Areas, while El Salvador sees an opportunity to increase carbon stocks for its National Program for Ecosystem Restoration, part of a larger effort of climate change adaptation in the country. Guatemala and Nicaragua also envision the potential of REDD+ mechanisms as closely linked to the reduction of vulnerability and adaptation to climate change. In practically all of





Mesoamerica, the areas with greatest forest cover coincide with territories under the control of indigenous peoples or are inhabited by forest communities, *ejidatarios*<sup>1</sup> or campesinos.

Although these official positions are intended to link REDD+ with larger strategies, the readiness programs to date have not clearly incorporated this series of interests, linkages and positions. Yet the growing interest in the “+” in REDD presents an interesting and authentic window of political opportunity for the region, especially considering the need for a more strategic articulation between mitigation and adaptation to address the unavoidable conditions of high vulnerability already impacting the region. Bold and innovative efforts in this area could foster more relevant, visionary and inclusive REDD+ mechanisms in Mesoamerica, which could also enjoy broader political support than what currently seems to be the case.

### The institutional challenge for REDD+: Beyond state institutionalality

Addressing the underlying causes of deforestation poses a series of institutional challenges; unfortunately, progress has been lacking in this area as institutional linkages have been weak. There is a broad consensus among environmental and conservation sectors that more inter-sectoral coordination will be necessary to design a coherent REDD+ strategy. In Guatemala, the different ministries and sectors have been convened by the Inter-Institutional Commission on Climate Change. Yet an example of the deeply entrenched and opposing sectoral interests emerged just after the first meetings of this group: the extension of an oil concession in the Maya Biosphere Reserve was signed by the Ministry of Energy and Mines, opposed by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, and ultimately approved by the government. Other

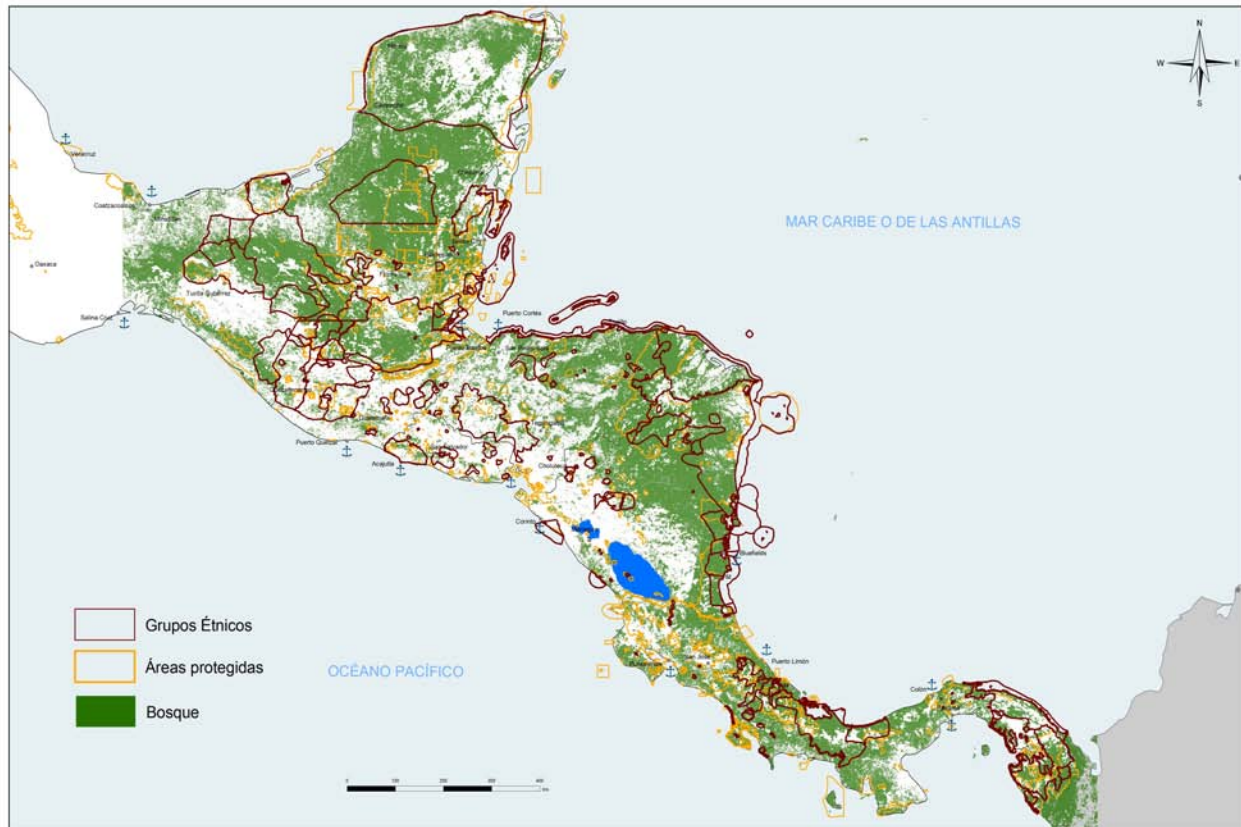
countries have formed similar entities, such as the Inter-Secretarial Commission of Climate Change in Mexico, which integrates various key Ministries in the country, though it does not include the Commission for Indigenous Development (CDI). Another example is the recently formed National REDD+ Working Group in Honduras, which in addition to governmental entities, includes representatives of the private sector, civil society and academia. In Costa Rica, several key sectors are not directly linked to the REDD strategy. Despite their weaknesses, these actions are more advanced than in the other Mesoamerican countries, casting doubt on the political will in the region to launch serious efforts to reduce deforestation and degradation.

Equally important is the challenge of incorporating different spheres of governance, not only horizontally between sectors and different actors, but also vertically to incorporate formal and informal territorial and local governance bodies. Consultation with, and direct participation of, all of these governance levels will be extremely important for effective coordination, particularly territorial and municipal authorities, which are notably absent from the initial readiness processes.

The strategic role of indigenous peoples and forest communities must also be emphasized for the sustainable management and the conservation of forests of the region. Unfortunately, their inclusion in the REDD+ processes to date has been severely insufficient. The lack of incorporation of the CDI in the Inter-sectoral Commission of Climate Change in Mexico is just one example of a larger pattern of inadequate representation and

<sup>1</sup> Farmers of an ejido, formally municipal or state land.

## Map Central America: Indigenous territories and forests



consultation with indigenous peoples and forest communities. Although each country has begun processes or plans of consultation and participation, they have done so while simultaneously developing national strategies, excluding these communities from the initial steps of the REDD+ process. It is of the utmost importance that the participation of indigenous peoples and forest communities be formalized and institutionalized as one of the first steps in the preparation of REDD+, instead of being addressed as one more element in a list of components or requirements that include consultation workshops in the readiness process. The reasons for this are not only ethical, but also strategic and political, given that significant areas of forests in Mesoamerica are under their control. Indeed, the most stable forests that also contain

the highest levels of carbon in the region are in indigenous territories, which also overlap with protected areas. Moreover, these areas also face significant threats and impacts from the different dynamics of deforestation and degradation.

Finally, the region's REDD+ strategies have focused almost exclusively on the national legal frameworks and the state norms and rules that influence forest management. The growing interest in this approach could be setting a dangerous trend towards strengthening the systems of protected areas, national parks, management plans and regulations based on conservation objectives. This runs the risk of profoundly affecting local livelihoods, especially considering that in

Mesoamerica the discussions of rights related to REDD+ are limited almost exclusively to carbon and forest property. This could easily lead to a reinforcement of previous attempts to reorganize the management of forests according to simplified state approaches to tenure that do not take into consideration the complex local systems of use and management practiced by communities. The recognition of these systems not only avoids negative impacts, but also presents an important opportunity to strengthen territorial and forest governance through a combination of both formal and informal governance mechanisms. In the context of weak formal institutions, the governments of the region seem to be ignoring their best allies for ensuring effective governance, an essential requirement for implementing RED, REDD or REDD+ actions.

### Concerns for equity and social justice in REDD+ readiness

Equity and social justice in REDD+ hinge on the rights of indigenous peoples and communities that live in and/or depend upon forests. Unfortunately, a large part of the debate regarding these issues seem to be limited to concerns over the distribution of benefits resulting from the eventual financial flows made available in the implementation phase of REDD+ (post 2012). There are varying positions with regard to REDD+: those who reject REDD+ asserting that it is a real threat and will be used to restrict the rights of communities, to their land, resources and territories, all of which are constitutive

elements of their livelihoods and cosmovisions. Those who are more receptive to REDD+ recognize that it poses real threats, but also consider that the initiative is an unprecedented opportunity that could expand and strengthen rights, livelihoods—and in some cases— even the conditions of forest and territorial governance.

In this context, it is clear that the protection of the rights of communities is of critical importance, and the expansion of these rights could —and must— be a core element in enhancing the opportunities offered by a REDD+ mechanism; especially given the importance of rights in promoting larger objectives of equity and social justice. For this reason, it is not only discouraging, but also worrisome that the readiness actions to date have not placed a greater emphasis on rights. This, however, does not mean that they have been completely absent. For example, Mexico's plan has included community forestry as an important component in its national strategy, and Honduras has also mentioned community forestry in its designs. Nevertheless, with the exception of Mexico, community forestry has been consigned an extremely low profile in the national strategies of the region. In countries such as Panama, conflicts over territory and tenure, both in and outside the indigenous comarcas, are not mentioned in the FCPF proposals. In Mexico, tenure conflicts are mentioned, but the proposal does not include plans to resolve them. As is well known, with the possible exception of Costa Rica, there are a number territorial conflicts and complex tenure disputes across the region, which will require decisive and sustained efforts for resolution. Yet these challenges have been largely ignored in the discussions of REDD+ strategies.



## Rights: a strategic emphasis for REDD+ readiness

A further concern with the REDD+ strategies is the tendency to discuss tenure only in the sense of formalizing individual property relations, which on the one hand could lead to the strengthening and expansion of protected areas; and on the other hand, could easily reinforce the restriction of community and indigenous rights. Of all of the REDD+ strategies in the region, there are virtually no plans to strengthen the rights of communities or indigenous peoples in the access, use, extraction and management of resources. The discussion regarding the ownership of carbon has even threatened these rights, as has occurred in Guatemala. Even though the construction of a carbon credit or certificate of emissions reductions may seem innocuous, it has enormous potential to influence how, for whom, and for what the forest is used. In other words, carbon rights are fundamentally linked to the bundle of rights over forests, and are therefore part and parcel of – inter alia – the livelihoods, productive practices, and culture of the communities. In the Petén, varying interpretations over the rights to carbon have complicated and virtually precluded the community concessionaires' access to international carbon markets. The community concessionaires have asserted the right to share ownership with the state,

but the issue remains unresolved. This example illustrates the importance of carbon rights, and their potential to roll back the advances in rights achieved over previous decades. It is critical that indigenous peoples and forest communities recognize this threat.

At the same time, the rights over carbon, depending on how they are institutionalized, can also be a strategic opportunity for strengthening, asserting and expanding community rights, as a key and indivisible element that forms part of a larger basket of rights of forest communities and indigenous peoples. These are issues that require support, exchanges, various levels of platforms and *s y s t e m a t i c a c c o m p a n i m e n t* (acompanamiento) for communities, networks and organizations, including indigenous as well as community forestry organizations. These types of activities are crucial for ensuring that discussions of equity and social justice are not limited to solely conventional concerns over financial mechanisms for payments for environmental and/or ecosystem services, as has been the trend to date. These conventional issues must be addressed, however, they are clearly insufficient to address the complex concerns and core issues under dispute – both in REDD+ and in other territorial dynamics – from the perspectives of forest communities and indigenous peoples.





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