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Low-emission development strategies (LEDS)

How can REDD+ contribute?

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Key messages

- At national or subnational levels, low-emission development strategies (LEDS) are a key approach for planning and action towards integration of climate change mitigation and adaptation with development.
- REDD+[1] activities over the past decade have generated much information, institutional learning and on-the-ground experience that can provide valuable lessons for LEDS.
- In this brief, we examine two questions: What can be learned from REDD+ for LEDS? How can REDD+ be part of LEDS?
- REDD+ can be an essential part of LEDS in countries where forest-based carbon emissions are large. It will also be important where forest-based emissions are secondary. If countries chose to follow a socio-economic path based on low-emission development, REDD+ can focus on providing incentives for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, creating motivation for behavior change in forest management, and the incipient REDD+ monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) and safeguard systems can be expanded with relatively low effort beyond the forestry sector.

What are low-emission development strategies (LEDS)?

In the context of green growth initiatives promoted by development organizations, national institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Copenhagen Accord recognized that developing countries seeking to eliminate poverty and achieve sustainable development need to follow LEDS. This was further reflected in the Cancun Accords and in the decisions in Durban (Decisions 1/CP.16 and 2/CP.17). LEDS seek to promote economic development that has a lower impact on the global climate system than traditional development pathways. Many LEDS approaches also integrate the concept of climate resilience. LEDS should "help advance national climate change and development policy in a more coordinated, coherent and strategic manner" (Clapp et al. 2010). If done correctly, LEDS should help countries gain a competitive advantage and position themselves to access markets related to green technologies. Many stakeholders are working to define the specifics of LEDS according to national circumstances and specific local contexts.

What are the challenges faced by LEDS?

Reconciling socioeconomic development with climate change mitigation brings conflicting interests into play. Some business-as-usual interests depend on continued high carbon flows through the economy and can obstruct LEDS activities. Failure to recognize the competing interests of different stakeholders risks paralyzing policy design and implementation.

Integration of policy across governance scales, ministries, departments, commodities and other economic activities is difficult under normal circumstances – and all the more so when balancing development with carbon emission restrictions. Like in REDD+, for LEDS to work, integration is needed in several dimensions: across jurisdictional levels of government, along the value chains in the production of

1 Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+), which also includes activities that enhance the sink strength of existing forests (the "+" refers to this objective)

forest and land-based commodities and other economic activities that produce emissions. LEDS, like REDD+, requires that climate adaptation and mitigation efforts are integrated across economic sectors, horizontally across government ministries, and across the multiple functions of a landscape.

What is REDD+?

REDD+ is an approach to climate change mitigation that involves slowing forest carbon emissions and improving the role of forests in absorbing carbon (afforestation and reforestation, the "+" in REDD+). It was originally conceived as a performance-based system, with payments for measurable (carbon and non-carbon) results. This is achieved by institutionalizing policies and measures at the national and subnational levels that favor conservation or sustainable management of natural forests and restoration of degraded forests. REDD+ is envisioned as an incentive to motivate stakeholders at all levels to maintain and increase forest carbon stocks and to improve forest governance. How well these incentives perform will depend on a multitude of contextual factors, not least the local perceptions of fairness, and the creation of a substantial funding stream. An appropriate tenure foundation must be established to clarify who are the legitimate rights holders to the funding stream and holders of the responsibility to protect forests, and to exclude unauthorized claimants seeking to convert forests.

REDD+ has been widely experimented with over the last 10 years, by about 40 countries and in over 330 REDD+ initiatives globally (CIFOR 2015a). Negotiations over REDD+ were recently concluded by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and while REDD+ has not yet been formally implemented as an international mechanism, it is one of the most advanced policy mechanisms for climate mitigation within the UNFCCC, with final decisions expected from COP 21 in Paris.

An impressive body of knowledge is available about REDD+ concerning policy and practice at the national level, institutional learning at the jurisdictional level, implementation on the ground in REDD+ programs and projects, benefit sharing among stakeholders, and on measurement, reporting and verification (e.g. over 350 scientific papers in CIFOR's Global Comparative Study on REDD+ alone) – a body of knowledge that can provide valuable lessons for progress on LEDS (CIFOR 2015b).

What are the challenges faced by REDD+?

First, deforestation continues to be the primary source of land- based emissions in many high emission countries. Stakeholders with interests favoring conversion of forests to non-forest uses continue to have the upper hand in land-use decisions at the national and subnational levels. Policy, law and regulations are important, but powerful actors find ways to work around them, in part by taking advantage of multilevel relationships. Solutions such as improved coordination, multi-stakeholder processes and land-use planning will be ineffective unless there is fundamental challenge to dominant development models that favor deforestation (Sunderlin et al. 2014).

Second, the large amount of funding intended to serve as the stimulus that launches REDD+ has so far failed to materialize. Public funding was supposed to be used as a temporary catalyst, and has endured in the form of overseas development assistance.

Third, there have been significant challenges in establishing the forest tenure foundation for REDD+, because while many REDD+ initiatives so far have been operating at the subnational level, tenure typically needs policy resolution and political will at the national level (Sills et al. 2014).

Fourth, as in the case of LEDS, operation at the sub-national level can be challenging in having to face down status quo interests that are embedded in the operation of government, and the liability of electoral transitions (Sunderlin et al. 2014).

Fifth, there are significant challenges in operationalizing social and environmental safeguards (Menton et al. 2014).

Sixth, while progress can be observed in a few countries (Romijn et al. 2015), most countries face various challenges in setting up a functioning MRV system due to issues of capacity as well as competition and conflict.

Finally, communities living in forests are not necessarily aware of REDD+ activities or participate in the design and implementation of interventions; inclusive processes for engaging with communities are fundamental for legitimacy and garnering local support (Sunderlin et al. 2014).

How can REDD+ contribute to LEDS?

Reconciling environmental concerns with development must be more than a convenient policy discourse (Babon 2014), for the challenges to both LEDS and REDD+ to be overcome.

In tropical countries, where the main sources of carbon emissions are from forests, integrating REDD+ into LEDS can enhance the effectiveness of the latter. Even though measurable carbon and non-carbon results are not yet available, there is indication that REDD+ has

made considerable headway in laying the groundwork for forest-based climate change mitigation through the establishment of policies and measures, extensive pilot-testing at the local level, and through investing in MRV systems. At least in theory, the conditional payment system in REDD+ will be a powerful incentive for stopping deforestation and degradation by creating a social value and legitimacy for standing forests within the economic auction of landscape decision making. REDD+ can play a key role in broader landscape-level approaches to low emissions rural development when linked to sustainable supply chain initiatives and other domestic policies and finance (Nepstad et al. 2013).

REDD+ can support LEDS for various other reasons. REDD+ was one of the earliest global approaches to climate change mitigation because of the attractive logic that "all we need to do is stop cutting trees". In spite of the challenges experienced by REDD+, this logic still holds up. Given the high urgency of finding global solutions to climate change, REDD+ remains a strong contender for early action. This is reflected in the large number (39) of countries mentioning REDD+ in their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs).

If the expected financing intended for REDD+ materializes, the delivery of rewards can produce rural development on a substantial scale. This can contribute directly to the socioeconomic development goal of LEDS. To the extent that REDD+ fulfills rural development goals, it potentially complements and reinforces similar efforts being conducted through LEDS. Finally, the MRV systems established for REDD+ can be extended beyond forest sector application to the realm of agriculture and other land uses – a significant source of emissions that will be targeted in all LEDS.

Thus, integrating REDD+ with LEDS can be highly synergetic, as both share the same objective: reconciling development with environmental outcomes. Furthermore, LEDS implementation can learn from the many 'childhood diseases' REDD+ was plagued with because it can start building on the higher foundation set by the REDD+ experiences. However, there is a risk that the relatively tangible and measurable REDD+ objectives could be dissolved in the broader LEDS context, at the expense of actual performance.

What conditions favor successful LEDS and REDD+?

At the heart of all efforts to achieve successful climate change mitigation is finding ways of leveraging on science, knowledge and interests tied to climate change mitigation over those interests tied to maintaining high carbon releases. Reaching a strong agreement at COP 21 will assist the process of enabling LEDS and REDD+ by: (1) legitimizing and strengthening governance processes that aim for mitigation and adaptation; (2) providing a stimulus to allocate public funding toward mitigation and adaptation; and (3) stimulating a regulatory environment that invigorates carbon markets of all kinds (including incentives for maintaining forest) and that removes perverse subsidies for carbon-emitting activities.

Regardless of the outcome of COP 21, it will be important for governments to work towards embedding climate change planning in the legislative and judicial fabric of governance structures, making them less vulnerable to electoral transitions.

Green growth ideas, including LEDS, have become dominant in global narratives and have been translated into national discourses to varying degrees, e.g. Vietnam or Indonesia; however, transitions to low-emission economies are far from reality (Jacob et al. 2013; Babon 2014). The first step in spurring action is to change national and regional visions to overcome the dichotomy of business-as-usual approaches and efforts to integrate environmental externalities into economic decision making. In order for both LEDS and REDD+ to meet their objectives, firm commitments from national and sub-national governments and the private sector are needed to make development and emissions reduction goals primary and enduring features of their policies, regulations, norms and institutional culture.

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