GO-REDD+

WHY A PROJECT-BASED APPROACH TO REDD+ IMPLEMENTATION IS INAPPROPRIATE

Climate change is a unique challenge which is truly global in nature. Everywhere on earth is affected by climate change, and a tonne of carbon emitted from land-use change in Fiji has the same impact as a tonne of carbon emitted from a power plant in Finland. Unique challenges require unique solutions, and identifying a solution to something as significant as the impact of GHG emissions from forests requires fundamental changes in thinking and approach. This is what the UNFCCC has been wrestling with over the past seven years. It is easy to feel frustrated with the slow pace of deliberations under the UNFCCC, but it is necessary to bear in mind the magnitude of the challenge being addressed.

It is certainly inappropriate to respond to the apparently slow pace of UNFCCC deliberations by proposing old-fashioned solutions that have been shown to be inadequate. For example, project-based approaches to forest problems have been demonstrated to be ineffective many times over. A decade ago, the GEF concluded that a project-based approach to biodiversity conservation was fundamentally flawed (http://www.thegef.org/gef/sites/thegef.org/files/documents/GEF.A.2.4.English.pdf, pages 32-33). Yet we frequently come across proposals for a project-based approach to REDD+.

Project-based approaches are not only ineffective locally, but they are also unable to address the underlying causes of GHG emissions from forests, which require systemic solutions. Project-based approaches also face serious challenges dealing with leakage (i.e. displacing drivers of deforestation and forest degradation to other locations outside the project site). For full implementation of REDD+, experience from many sources, including the GEF, as mentioned above, indicates that a national approach is the only viable option to deal with underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation and for overcoming problems of leakage. It also allows countries to implement practical measures at scale, through programmatic approaches. This is particularly important in terms of cost effectiveness; the costs of determining independent reference emission levels for each project site and implementing monitoring and MRV activities at the same intensity, would cripple the budgets of most forest administrations even in northern industrialized countries.

These considerations are also reflected in the development of the "Jurisdictional and Nested REDD+" (JNR) approach by the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS). Their web-site notes that "… [REDD+ has] operated on two separate, yet largely mutually exclusive tracks. On the ground, an increasing number of projects are being developed; while at a macro level, governments have been establishing new policies and programs for generating forest carbon benefits across entire states, provinces and countries." The JNR approach acknowledges that jurisdiction-wide accounting and crediting is necessary for scaling up activities so as to reduce emissions at scale over the longer term.

A project-based approach to REDD+ superficially seems attractive – but this is only because it is so familiar. Everyone understands a project-based approach – everyone has been involved in such projects, even if they have had limited success in meeting their objectives, whether those be biodiversity conservation or carbon conservation. The fundamental change in thinking that the national approach for REDD+ requires is a challenge in itself, but is necessary if REDD+ is going to have a significant impact. A national approach will result in priority actions being identified to reduce net emissions, and many of these priority actions will involve activities at specific sites. Such activities could be thought of as discrete "projects", but this must not be confused with a project-based approach and all of its shortcomings.