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### A Fresh Look at REDD

by

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#### Abstract

*The belief that societies that conserve their forests are themselves the beneficiaries of their efforts is very deep rooted across the developed world. In support India is often cited as a country that achieved near zero deforestation in 1980s even when at the bottom of the countries on the development path. But perhaps India has paid a price for this fast track conservation like none else. For the past decade and more India is struggling with a mammoth wave of disaffection among its poorest in its forested underbelly right in its middle. India's house of agony is a land that holds forests of enormous ecological and economic value, has mineral resources which rival the richest in the world and it has a population density which is low by India's standards. And yet it is the poorest part of the country. If one superimposes the poverty of the people on the forest map of India one would be tempted to define poor as inhabiting the space where conservation has preceded development. If REDD has to succeed it must bring significant changes in the lives of the people where it expects to reduce emission. Development must walk in step with conservation. The emphasis on low cost has to change. REDD is important not because of low cost. REDD is important because it offers huge climate mitigation opportunities through a mechanism that holds the promise of making life of the poorest a bit more livable.*

**Key words:** REDD, Forest Conservation, Development, Poverty

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Oslo, enchantingly beautiful at this time of the year, would see action on REDD Plus again after a relatively quiet period since Copenhagen last December. REDD entered the climate scene rather late in the dying months of 2005 and then picked up speed fast so that by the time of Bali in 2008 it appeared as if REDD was the only hope for keeping temperatures from rising beyond 2 degree Celsius. In the two years between Bali and Copenhagen more carbon was emitted by those attending REDD conferences around the world than all the rest of the global issues combined. The massive letdown at Copenhagen lowered the fever a bit and now it is possible to take a more dispassionate view of the REDD hope and hype. And this is what Norway, the patron saint of REDD, is planning to do at the Oslo REDD meet on May 27 through the establishment of a global REDD Plus voluntary partnership even as the UNFCCC negotiations struggle to provide a mandatory legal basis to it. In a way it is recognition of the fact that the issue is too complicated and the expectations too widely different between the developed and the developing world. The former expects too much at too little price and the latter is at once enticed and repelled by the offer that have been dangled before them.

Let us look at what REDD Plus means today after all these debates of the past five years. Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) became REDD Plus after conservation, sustainable management and enhancement of carbon stocks were added to the original concept at Bali. The basic idea owes its birth to the fact that deforestation is the cause of as much as one fifth of the total greenhouse gas emission in the world, larger than the entire emissions from the transport sector across the world. The comparison with the transport sector is meaningful because in the public mind the car is the villain. So, the logic goes, if we can reduce emissions from deforestation to lower levels the pressure on the other sector would ease. Nicolas Stern of the Stern Review was one of the first to bell the REDD cat raising the hopes of the developed world that so much could be achieved with so little. His estimate for the initial emission reductions was as low as \$5 for one ton of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. This cost would, of course, go up as initial low cost REDD options are exhausted. The marginal cost of reducing emission by 1 ton in the richest countries, in contrast, exceeds \$100. In the popular discourse in the West there is a near unanimous agreement, an unwavering faith even, on the immeasurable value of forests and the need for all societies, poor or rich, to preserve their forests forever. The intrinsic value of this belief can hardly be argued with. Because forests are in fact valuable to all for the very wide range of goods and services they offer to those living within, nearby and far away. It does not need a certificate from an ecologist, it is a value known to all. But if its enormous value is indeed known to everybody then why poorer countries still manage to lose their forests? It can only be because these societies or, atleast, individuals in these societies find economic rationale in clearing forests rather than retaining them. Even when possessed with all the knowledge regarding the value of the forests.

Over the past five decades, the FAO and the World Bank have tried valiantly to stop deforestation around the developing world. The World Bank alone invested \$ 5 billion in the two decades preceding 1990s, a large part of which was in South and South East Asia. But at the end

of it there was little to show for the efforts. In fact deforestation even accelerated in some of the countries which were the recipients of these investments. A world bank review of the forestry sector lending came to the conclusion that the failures occurred on account of the inability of forestry projects to address the governance issues. This led to the World Bank insisting on improvement of forestry governance as a condition for structural adjustment loans in the forestry sector.

But forestry governance is not the same thing as the overall governance because forestry governance implies only improvement in the forestry administration and management and the forest-people interface processes. Important as they are, they do not even begin to address the governance issues that degrade the lives of the poorest in large swathes of the developing world.

These issues are not access to fire wood or medicinal plants or small timber for agricultural implements. This much the poor are able to manage on their own even under most trying circumstances. The real issues are hunger, unemployment and health and what the future holds for their children.

Nobody wants to look at these because it requires big money. Stern's \$5 for a ton does not look at the need of the people who have to bear the consequences of REDD. This is an offer to the rich that they can get what they want cheap. The scale of investment required has to be such that it upgrades the lives of people in these countries from extreme poverty to a level comfortably above the poverty line and this has to be achieved in a relatively short period. This would require not only large, quick and focused investments but also need creation of a just international economic environment with economic equity as its focus not only among the countries but also among the people within countries.

The belief that societies that conserve their forests are themselves the beneficiaries of their conserved forests is very deep rooted across the developed world. This implies that countries that conserve their forests do so for their own good. India is often cited as a country that achieved near zero deforestation in 1980s even when at the bottom of the countries on the development path. But perhaps India has paid a price for this fast track conservation like none else. For the past decade and more India is struggling with a mammoth wave of disaffection among the poorest of its poor in its forested underbelly right in its middle. Led by the self-described Maoists this is causing pain where it hurts the most. India's house of agony is a land that holds forests of enormous ecological and economic value and has mineral resources which rival the richest in the world. It supports a population density which is low by India's standards. And yet it is the poorest part of the country. If one superimposes poverty on the forest map of India it would be clear that the largest number of poor inhabit regions where conservation has preceded development locking the land and its resources out of the developing economy. People of the region have wealth around them and beneath them but it contributes little to their wellbeing. To the affected people forests do not symbolize beauty and their aesthetic value to stray visitors offers no reason to celebrate. If forests have value it must enter the economic life now and in

measures that would make substantial difference to them. And not merely a few fruits and raisins with twigs and bark thrown in. Bare survival is what these forests can sometimes offer but it hardly satisfies the seeker.

Conditions across the world among the poor and the deprived are not much different. If REDD has to succeed it must bring significant changes in the lives of the people where it expects to reduce emission. Development must walk in step with conservation or otherwise the failed philosophies of yesterday would engulf us once again and people living in misery would cause distress to the rest and not only by emitting more CO<sub>2</sub>.

The voluntary nature of REDD Plus Global Partnership at Oslo provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at the whole issue. The emphasis on low cost has to change. REDD is important not because of low cost. REDD is important because it offers huge climate mitigation opportunities through a mechanism that holds the promise of making life of the poorest a bit more livable. In this, both the quantum and the routing of REDD funds is crucial. Three aspects are of paramount importance. First the amount of money made available must be adequate and timely, second it must reach the people who are expected to make sacrifices for preventing deforestation and third it must be spent on activities that ensure, indirectly and directly, the conservation and enhancement of carbon stocks. While markets undoubtedly ensure efficient distribution of limited resources, in most parts of the world, where REDD investments are needed, conditions are not yet right for the market mechanism as it would not ensure appropriate distribution.

Giving money to the country governments does not ensure it either because then there is no way of ensuring that the right shares reach the right communities. And even if it does reach the communities it has to be ensured that the money is spent in right kind of activities.

There are no easy one-size-fits-all solutions to these problems. But as long as the right questions are asked – is the money adequate, how would it reach the targeted community, for what activities should they use it and how to undertake monitoring effectively – localized solutions using local institutions would be found. Part of the objective should be to strengthen these very institutions because governance is not just promises and resolve at the top. It needs a very large number of institutions crisscrossing each other that not only deliver in their functional areas but also support each other while also keeping watch over possible wrongdoings. REDD Plus Partnership must identify these institutions and put fresh breathe in them. With resources and values.

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