
REDD and the Indigenous Peoples of Costa Rica

Costa Rica is currently known throughout the world for its efforts in forest conservation. This “success” is mainly attributable to its Payment for Environmental Services (or PSA for its initials in Spanish), a forerunner to the REDD program in Costa Rica.

PSA is a system of financial incentives provided by the National Fund for Forest Financing (FONAFIFO), a department of the Ministry of Environment and Energy. The program pays landowners and holders of forests and tree plantations for the so-called “environmental services” their forests or plantations provide, including: mitigation of green house gas emissions; water protection for urban, rural and hydroelectric use; protection of biodiversity for purposes of conservation and sustainable, scientific and pharmaceutical use in research and genetic improvement; protection of ecosystems, life forms and natural scenic beauty for science and tourism purposes.

This system, however, has serious weaknesses in that it focuses solely on the supposed environmental services, while ignoring the cultural, spiritual and social values of the forest and its biodiversity and the respective impacts of these omissions on local communities and indigenous groups. Nor does it question the causes of environmental degradation or predatory consumerism. And since it offers just one payment for a set time period, it does not provide a solution to issues such as reducing poverty.

Moreover, this method has not kept the forests from the threat of activities like large-scale tourism or monoculture pineapple and African palm plantations. What it has done is provide favorable conditions for big corporations to produce lumber as a business concept by concentrating incentives – like the PSA – for monoculture plantations, thus paving the way for the exploitation of forest lumber and other ecosystems according to strict profit and market criteria.

In the specific case of indigenous territories, the PSA negotiates contracts with the Comprehensive Development Associations (ADIs in Spanish) attached to the National Indigenous Council (Conai), an official agency in charge of managing both indigenous issues as well as their relations with public institutions. The government deems the distribution of somewhat more than nine million dollars among all the indigenous territories in the country to be a PSA achievement. Although there have been successful cases where use of resources has been well-planned and/or evenly distributed, in many territories these funds have created tension because some groups have appropriated and managed them very subjectively, showing favor to families closest to them. In territories belonging to the Ngöbe ethnic group, for example, several million PSA funds have been distributed over the past five years. However, there is not a single known case in which these funds have gone towards consolidating their territories, given that a vast quantity of land is still in the hands of non-indigenous people. This point is of vital importance since there are Ngöbe territories where more than sixty percent of the land is held by non-indigenous farmers who cause deforestation.

As mentioned before, the PSA is a forerunner to REDD in Costa Rica, and according to the strategy being implemented by the Costa Rican government published at the end of 2010, some of the key

factors in this process are the indigenous territories, mainly because those areas are home to a significant part of the country's forests. With the implementation of REDD, the government plans to consolidate at least 600 thousand hectares currently under the PSA system and add another 750 thousand hectares, in addition to recovering forest cover on 12% of national territory that is currently being used for something other than forestry. It also intends to maintain the National System of Protected Areas.

Any policy or mechanism related to indigenous groups in Costa Rica must first go through a consultation process aimed at preserving their autonomy. This is why FONAFIFO has contacted indigenous groups from different territories for them to participate in the official process. One of these groups is the Bribri Indigenous Network and Cabecar (or RIBCA, for its initials in Spanish), composed of representatives from 8 indigenous territories from the Costa Rican Atlantic coast. This group has participated in drafting a national consulting plan for REDD+ among indigenous peoples, with financial support from GIZ (German Cooperation Agency). According to RIBCA, the Consulting Plan was drafted with representatives from the four regional blocks where the 24 indigenous territories of Costa Rica are located. The proposal was presented at a meeting last January with indigenous representatives, who approved the general framework for the plan. It establishes, among other things, the REDD+ organizational structure and dialogue system with indigenous groups; while FONAFIFO and GIZ are familiar with this system, the indigenous groups are not.

For this reason, last September representatives from the Indigenous Development Associations (ADIs) and national, regional and community indigenous organizations went to the FONAFIFO coordinator, as well as World Bank officials in charge of the matter, with a series of irregularities and potential biases that the REDD+ initiative would mean for indigenous groups.

According to the National Indigenous Board of Costa Rica Bulletin, the ADI representatives proposed that, before implementing a REDD strategy, certain issues must be overcome first: 1) Approval of Law 14.352 on the Autonomous Development of Indigenous Peoples; 2) Territorial security: recovery of land, territory, natural resources and biodiversity; 3) Reach a consensus on a national development plan for Indigenous Peoples; and 4) Reach a consensus on public policies and programs specifically regarding Indigenous Peoples. They highlighted, furthermore, that the government has already acknowledged, accepted and applied mechanisms for REDD+ consulting in the draft version of the Autonomous Development of Indigenous Peoples Law. Moreover, they stressed that a decision on an initiative like REDD+ cannot be left to just one ADI group.

They likewise assert that the government is trying to impose its political agenda in spite of the indigenous peoples' own agenda, and that the Costa Rican government has never been concerned with recovering indigenous lands even though the Indigenous Law has existed since 1977. According to Pablo Nájera, an indigenous representative from Terraba, "REDD+ simply tries to take advantage of indigenous people to justify the process. The indigenous people in these communities know nothing about REDD+. How much of an indigenous role was there in defining the strategy? Which processes should be initiated and why now? Will REDD+ be part of indigenous policy? Who will be the buyers? Who finances? Why?"

Antonio Nájera, from the same territory, also reports that his family has been running a farm devoted to educational purposes and scientific research for 30 years, but has never received any support from FONAFIFO. He says that fact that he is just now learning about what they plan to do with REDD+ indicates that communities have not been given the slightest bit of information previously.

Although it is true that there is still no agreement on REDD in Costa Rica, the Bribri people – located

on the south Atlantic coast – have already suffered its impact.

Members of the Alto Durigna community within the Bribri territory have denounced the implementation of REDD on its territories. This indigenous community is alarmed by FONAFIFO's intentions to apply REDD on some 1000 hectares of forest within its territory, where two sites considered sacred in the Bribri culture are located. Filidencio Cubillo, a Bribri, asserts "the forests in this area are not merely forests, they are sacred sites for our people. One of them, the Surayo, is the origin of creation, of the seed. They were designated by Sibú to give life to his seed. It is the same case for Namasol hill. This is why the outside world does not understand our way of seeing, feeling and expressing our spirituality. The outside world only sees in terms of money; everything is merchandise to them. We therefore reject this project that purports to "conserve" part of these forests. They say that it's a thousand hectares, but we don't know how much it will be. We defend these forests. It is our own community who are protesting and not people who have come from outside to get us riled up."

If the interests of local communities and indigenous groups are truly at the heart of this, the solution should be to advocate comprehensive public policies that promote community control over their territory and Nature's assets. This should be done by reinforcing initiatives already in place, such as community governance of the forest and its biodiversity, thus safeguarding the conditions for them to truly exercise their historic and collective rights of autonomy and control over their lands and territory according to their worldview.

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