[REDD+ in the Paris Agreement secures funding for conservation industry while large-scale deforestation advances unhindered]

The "conservation industry" – groups such as The Nature Conservancy, WWF, Conservation International, consultants and auditors of REDD+ projects – and funders like the World Bank celebrated the formal recognition of REDD+ in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in December 2015. They have been lobbying for an inclusion of REDD+ into global carbon markets established by the UN's Kyoto Protocol for nearly a decade. For communities affected by REDD+ projects and programmes, however, the news will have been no reason to celebrate. Faced with harassment, tenure insecurity and restrictions on their traditional forest use, forest peoples and traditional forest users have been on the sharp edge of the REDD+ experiment that has seen the conservation industry pocket hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars, Norwegian kronor and euros for the unfulfilled promise to turn REDD+ into a successful forest conservation tool that will halt deforestation.

In reality, REDD+ is not designed to protect forests or reduce deforestation but to enable corporations and industrialized countries to continue burning fossil carbon even longer. Instead, REDD+ falsely singles out small-scale farming and shifting cultivation as the main cause for the destruction of tropical forests. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that the result of 10 years of conservation industry experimenting with REDD+ is an increase in forest loss in several areas where REDD+ projects have been implemented - REDD-Early Movers programme in Acre, Brazil and the Mai N'dombe REDD+ project in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to name just a few (1). Worse than that, REDD+ implementation on the ground has resulted in severe restrictions on forest peoples' traditional land use while large-scale cattle ranching, mining, hydro-dam and infrastructure developments continue unabated, destroying large swaths of tropical forests. Thus, REDD+ has shown to be the wrong tool for tackling the drivers of large-scale destruction. (2)

Yet, despite the dismal track-record of REDD+ over the past 10 years, corporate and institutional investors and their partners from the conservation industry keep announcing new REDD+ initiatives. The European Investment Bank, Conservation International and an investment fund called 'Althelia Climate Fund', for example, received a total of US$53.5 million (US$ 35 million investment and US$ 18.5 million as grant) from the UN Climate Convention's Green Climate Fund (3) for a REDD+ programme in Madagascar. Norway, corporations from the global food industry (responsible for deforestation and substantial greenhouse gas emissions) and the World Bank's Global Environmental Facility (GEF) announced a new "tropical forest and agriculture focused fund" at the World Economic Forum 2017 in the Swiss luxury ski resort Davos. The new fund is said to use a 'jurisdictional approach', (see below), and mentions Brazil and Indonesia as initial countries where projects are to take place. Global food companies that are said to be interested in supporting the fund include Carrefour, Mars, Nestlé, and Unilever – the latter having announced an investment of US$25 million over a five year period into the fund.

But do these global food corporations really want us make believe they care about forests and forest peoples' rights? The motive of protecting market shares – and therefore, profit margins - in industrialized countries and urban centers where consumers increasingly demand 'deforestation-free' products seems more plausible. It would also explain why these corporations are not presenting initiatives to reduce corporate control of the international food system and a strengthening of the less carbon-intensive peasant farming models. Expecting such measures from global food corporations would be like expecting that fossil fuel corporations lobby the UN to adopt a strong climate agreement that clearly spells out an end to fossil carbon burning in the near future. Why do governments such as Norway and Germany, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and corporations such as Unilever keep pouring new money into REDD+ despite the initiative having "fallen far short of what was hoped"? (4) A recent academic article provides some explanation. 'Promising Change, Delivering Continuity: REDD+ as Conservation Fad' explains that for the conservation and development industry, REDD+ serves to help them ensure "to generate value and appropriate ?nancial resources." (5) A fad is a "form of collective behavior that develops within a culture, a generation or social group and which impulse is followed enthusiastically by a group of people for a finite period of time". And usually, effectiveness or suitability of the fad to the solving of the actual problem matters little.

The article notes that a recent study of "23 of the 300 sub-national initiatives showed that only 4 had managed to actually sell carbon credits and found that funding is a key challenge to sustain the initiatives." The article also mentions technical "challenges", and explains that "marketing of carbon credits under the voluntary carbon standard systems involves complex technical procedures and requirements."

The authors explain that while the language and arguments change when the conservation industry comes up with a new proposal to save forests - that "REDD+ implies change at the discursive level." One such recent change in the REDD+ discussion is the term 'jurisdictional REDD+'. It means that governments and development banks are moving away from funding individual REDD+ projects and instead aim to put REDD+ activities in place at the level of a whole province, state and ultimately, an entire country. The German government's REDD Early Movers programme is an example of a 'jurisdictional' REDD+ programme where the German government pays the government of the Brazilian state of Acre if Acre can provide evidence that deforestation in the state has not exceeded an agreed maximum of forest loss. The new tropical forest fund mentioned above that was announced by Norway and others in Davos, also announced it would focus on 'jurisdictional' projects.

Despite such changes in terminology, the authors of 'Promising Change, Delivering Continuity' say that in practical terms, REDD+ - like previous 'conservation fads' - above all stands for "continuity and repetitiveness in terms of the initial promises and expectations leading to substantial donor ?nancing, pilot project activities, and policy development and implementation processes." The authors also say that REDD+ promises and expectations "have achieved little in terms of changing actual forest management and use on the ground outside selected pilot project sites, but have sustained the livelihoods of actors within the development and conservation industry, including academics.

It is unfortunate that those responsible at the European Investment Bank, the Green Climate Fund or in the governments of Norway and Germany keep ignoring the growing evidence showing that if the goals are reducing forest loss and tackling the root causes of climate change, continued funding for REDD+ is counterproductive. That evidence will not change just because the conservation lobby has succeeded in having REDD+ mentioned in the UN's Paris Agreement, or banks and governments keep pouring more money into new regional, 'jurisdictional' REDD+ initiatives.

The 'Promising change' article concludes that REDD+ above all is "a discursive commodity that is carefully promoted in particular ways that allow actors within the development and conservation industry access to ?nancial resources." Because there are still many who look to REDD+ in the hope of addressing global climate change and protecting forests and forest peoples' rights, the authors urge a questioning of the uses of funding allocated to REDD+. Add to that the severe restrictions, criminalization and tenure insecurity for forest peoples and traditional forest users affected where REDD+ projects are implemented (2), it is time to replace the failed REDD+ experiment with support for the struggles and initiatives of forest peoples and traditional forest users who have protected forests for generations. Several studies have shown that where indigenous peoples' territories are recognized and demarcated and where the rights of traditional forest communities are respected, deforestation rates are lower than in surrounding areas not under control of indigenous peoples or traditional forest communities. (6)

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(1) See among others, 'Deforestation is increasing in the Mai N'dombe REDD project area. And the project still sells carbon credits' at: http://www.redd-monitor.org/2016/02/18/deforestation-is-increasing-in-the-mai-ndombe -redd-project-area-and-the-project-still-sells-carbon-credits/ ; The virtual economy of REDD: Conflicts of interest, hot air, and dodgy baselines at: http://www.redd-monitor.org/2016/06/02/the-virtual-economy-of-redd-conflicts-of -interest-hot-air-and-dodgy-baselines/
(2) For examples, see REDD Collection of Conflicts and reports on the website www.redd-monitor.org
(3) See the Green Climate Fund information about the approval of the funds here: http://www.greenclimate.fund/-/sustainable-landscapes -in-eastern-madagascar
(4) See also the extensive CIFOR study 'REDD+ on the ground: A case book of subnational initiatives across the globe.' Published in 2014.
(5) Promising Change, Delivering Continuity: REDD+ as Conservation Fad. Article by Jens Friis Lund et al. Published in the journal World Development (2016).
(6) See graph 'Indigenous groups are good forest stewards', pg. 17 in the Fern et al. report 'Going Negative'. http://www.fern.org/sites/fern.org/files/Going%20negative%20version%202.pdf