Greening REDD+

Challenges and opportunities for forest biodiversity conservation

Workshop summary

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Introduction

From April 14-16, 2010, the international expert workshop *"Greening REDD+: Challenges and opportunities for forest biodiversity conservation"* took place at the University of Freiburg in Germany. It was facilitated by the research project *"The protection of forests under global biodiversity and climate policy"* conducted jointly by the Institute of Forest and Environmental Policy and the Institute for Landscape Management[1]. The project analyzes potential synergies for the conservation of forest biodiversity in developing countries between the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) with a major focus on the currently evolving mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD+). While a considerable number of REDD+ pilot projects are being implemented in different developing countries and national REDD+ strategies have been developed, the actual design of the mechanism at the international level is yet to be agreed upon in the upcoming UNFCCC negotiations.

The workshop brought together 37 international experts (11 countries) from science, policy and practical work in order to discuss central issues related to the synergies between climate and biodiversity objectives facilitated through REDD+. Besides keynote speeches and plenum sessions, there was room for in-depth discussions during working groups that concentrated on further specification of REDD+ safeguards and co-benefits, sustainable management of forests and forest related definitions, the monitoring of forest biodiversity and the role of REDD+ for protected areas. The results of the working groups are summarized below.

Definition and further specification of REDD+ safeguards and co-benefits

Participants discussed on the interpretation of the terms "safeguards" (i.e. avoiding negative impacts) and "co-benefits" (i.e. creating positive impacts). They emphasized the need to distinguish between safeguards as the term used in the negotiations at the international level whereas co-benefits are more appropriate in the context of national policies and strategies.

As examples for safeguards, the participants named the avoidance of conversion of natural forests, e.g., by using gross deforestation rates as a basis for reference (emission) levels and by developing clear definitions for forest, sustainable management and afforestation / reforestation. Avoidance of "biodiversity leakage", which means the displacement of unsustainable land-use activities to areas with less carbon but high biodiversity, as well as the prioritization of high biodiversity forests, have also been mentioned several times as a safeguard. Additionally, the suggestion has been to give emphasis to the "two Ds" (Deforestation and Degradation) compared to activities aiming at "enhancement of carbon stocks" (the +).

In order to make the discussion on safeguards and co-benefits more operational, it was proposed to develop guidelines as a joint effort by UNFCCC and CBD. However, concern

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was raised regarding difficulties in communication that would probably slow down a joint process. Furthermore, it was claimed that there is no mandate under the UNFCCC to discuss issues related to biodiversity. Accordingly, it should be left up to the CBD to assess the potential effects of REDD+ on biodiversity and to develop guidelines for avoiding negative impacts. Still, participants identified acceptance and support by UNFCCC of the CBD efforts to provide guidance to be a helpful starting point for making progress on the environmental integrity of the mechanism and its implementation. Relating to the development of REDD+ guidelines by the CBD, some participants proposed to focus on the national rather than on the international level, with CBD national focal points serving as "consultants" during the development of national REDD+ strategies. In general, participants agreed on the need for coordinating existing efforts and institutions.

Sustainable forest management (SFM) / sustainable management of forests (SMF) under REDD+

Participants initially discussed the differences between SFM and SMF. There was a broad consensus that the reason for using SMF in the Bali language of UNFCCC is of political nature and that the terms both have the same meaning, respectively refer to similar objectives. Some participants pointed out that on the international level the term SMF has a rather political character, whereas on lower levels with a focus on implementation the technical dimension prevails. In this context, it was stated that SFM / SMF could serve as a safeguard if properly designed, e.g., if conservation of primary forests would be part of such a concept or if it promotes a focus on forest restoration / forest rehabilitation. This, however, requires clear definitions and a common language of the different international policy processes within UNFCCC, CBD and United Nations Forest Forum (UNFF) – not only regarding the definition of forest(s), but also of the terms "sustainable" and "management".

It has also been argued that UNFCCC has no mandate to define and operationalize these terms; instead, general guidance and/or specification would be an issue subject to national sovereignty and circumstances. This view was supported by several contributions stating that SFM / SMF needs to be linked to land use planning and to clear tenure rights, including prior and informed consent of affected people. Regarding the technical side, a need for well elaborated criteria and indicators and capacity building has been identified as these tools are necessary preconditions for a sound monitoring, reporting and verification of co-benefits for biodiversity and other ecosystem services.

Participants also emphasized that there are already several elaborated concepts useful for the implementation of SFM / SMF, e.g. those developed in the different regional processes. These concepts would need to be adapted to REDD+, and the focus should be on their implementation instead of duplicating work. The ecosystem approach of the CBD could function as an umbrella for differentiated SFM / SMF concepts. Standards like the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Climate, Community, Biodiversity Standard (CCBS) were thought to help ensure safeguards for biodiversity and promote co-benefits.

Criteria and methods for the monitoring of forest biodiversity in REDD+ pilot projects

Participants identified a set of general characteristics for criteria and methods, and addressed the need to recognize the wide range of aspects inherent to biodiversity, such as structural, compositional and functional components like genetics, species, habitats or ecosystems. Whichever method or criteria used, a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, that should also be comprehensible for non-ecologists, appears to be a prerequisite for effective monitoring. There was consensus that an international REDD+ framework would be desirable that considers biodiversity aspects and provides main principles for monitoring, while allowing flexibility in the use of criteria for assessing and monitoring of biodiversity on the implementation level.

In order to monitor impacts of REDD+ pilot projects on biodiversity, participants discussed the possibility of establishing pre-project biodiversity baselines on which subsequent monitoring can be based on. Specific criteria and methods for biodiversity monitoring under REDD+ can be derived from the considerable pool of existing experience on methods and criteria. Useful concepts at the international level include the High Conservation Values (FSC), the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the Living Planet Index (WWF), Important Bird Areas (Birdlife International), Wilderness Areas (Conservation International), etc. Other data on (sub-)national level include forest inventories, area of forest cover, land use data or agricultural censuses. It was suggested that, integrated in geographical information systems and maps, such information might become useful in the identification of priority areas for REDD+ activities and the establishment of biodiversity baselines.

REDD+ activities need to establish monitoring infrastructures due to the need for Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV) of carbon dynamics. Such monitoring schemes potentially facilitate biodiversity monitoring under REDD+. Participants pointed out that this includes remote sensing systems, which are especially useful for describing forest structure, presence of different forest ecosystems, and changes in area of primary forest. It was also stated that the monitoring of biodiversity is not possible without involvement of local communities, and that local knowledge on biodiversity should be used whenever appropriate. Participatory methods were generally considered to be cost efficient and may also offer the opportunity to include monitoring of socioeconomic trends.

The Role of REDD+ for protected areas

Participants agreed that REDD+ funding can be used for different kinds of land management activities, with protected areas (PAs) being one tool to achieve REDD+ objectives. While there were some concerns that PAs do not meet the “additionality” criterion because they are already protected per definition, it was emphasized that it is worthwhile to invest now in PAs in order to guarantee their effectiveness in the future. This holds true for PAs that are currently severely underfunded as well as for all other PAs since there usually is a need for improving PA management, especially in terms of participation and alternative livelihood options.

The discussions also highlighted that the issues of “additionality” and “leakage” constitute problems during the implementation phase of pilot projects, but they will be less prominent once REDD+ strategies are implemented at the country level. Some further arguments for channelling REDD+ funds into PAs were that fund administration is facilitated by existing PA agencies and administrative units, PAs have already proven to be effective in reducing deforestation, and that PAs are an ideal tool for combining achievement of carbon and biodiversity objectives.

At the same time participants pledged for caution because PAs consist of zones with different forest management objectives and not all sites were selected because of their high value for biodiversity. It was also discussed that additional funding cannot always solve the underlying problems of so-called paper parks. This means that the suitability of PAs for REDD+ support needs to be evaluated by individual monitoring of forest cover, biodiversity and management objectives. Further issues were raised concerning the uncertainties related to the detection and monitoring of forest degradation in and outside PAs, and the potential negative impacts on local and indigenous communities. Participants agreed that they should be eligible for REDD+ funds since they are one important instrument for reaching REDD+ objectives and ensuring co-benefits for biodiversity.

Summary of working group results

During the workshop it became apparent that there is a need for country-specific solutions. The national level is of primary importance because national strategies and policies provide guidance for REDD+ pilot projects, their implementation and governance, and function as an interface between the international REDD+ framework and implementation on the ground.

The development of guidelines by the CBD that are aimed at national stakeholders seem useful for ensuring the consideration of biodiversity issues, e.g. further defining the concepts of safeguards and co-benefits for biodiversity. National and regional concepts of SFM / SMF can also act as important safeguards – provided they target biodiversity, e.g., by including the conservation of primary forests into the concept. The ecosystem approach of the CBD functions as an umbrella and guidance necessary to develop concepts that are flexible enough to take into account national and regional circumstances.

Regarding monitoring of biodiversity, the workshop underlined that background information and data (in different quality and resolution) already exist on both the national and the international level. These can be used to derive feasible indicators for biodiversity monitoring and can also be applied for the identification of priority areas for REDD+ projects on the ground. There was consensus that it is preferable to start immediately with using existing approaches and data in order to integrate biodiversity monitoring into REDD+ projects, instead of waiting for the unlikely “entering” of biodiversity in the UNFCCC negotiations on REDD+. Regarding PAs, there was consensus that existing and new PAs are important tools for implementing REDD+ at the national level but they need to be combined with other tools such as sustainable landscape management outside PAs and the creation of forested corridors.