Taking stock of REDD+ in Democratic Republic of Congo
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Forest Reserve near the Village of Masako, Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. CIFOR/Ollivier Girard

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) embraced REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) a decade ago, becoming an early adopter of the initiative in the region. However, the country's rate of emissions from forest loss continues to be among the highest in the Congo Basin due to unsustainable logging, fuelwood collection, agricultural expansion and mining.

REDD+ efforts in DRC were launched to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduce poverty while contributing to the sustainable management of forest resources and the valuation of environmental services. Stakeholders see it as a means of improving forest governance. So, what factors have been influencing the evolution of REDD+ in the past few years, and how can decision makers, practitioners and donors continue advancing the country's environmental and development commitments through this mechanism?

Scientists with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) address this question in a new, second edition of the DRC REDD+ Country Profile. It provides updates on progress between 2013 — when the first edition launched — and 2019, offering an analysis of issues affecting the REDD+ policy environment and outlining key challenges and opportunities for implementation. The publication is part of CIFOR's Global Comparative Study on REDD+ (GCS-REDD+), which examines REDD+ decision-making processes and outcomes in 14 countries to advance the initiative in each context.

"In the past few years, the DRC hosted numerous pilots at the national and subnational level, but information on the outcomes was often scattered," said lead author Félicien Kengoum, a senior researcher at BrightWay Consult. "In contrast to other publications, CIFOR's country profiles provide an overview of REDD+ in the entire DRC, over an extended period of time and through a political economy lens."

REDD+ implementation requires identifying and addressing the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation through inclusive participatory processes, setting reference scenarios to evaluate

progress and fairly compensating all stakeholders. Adequate governance at the national and subnational level is essential to advance each of these targets.

Despite government efforts and international support, the profile concludes that not much progress has been made on REDD+ in DRC over the past six years. Mostly, this is due to an unstable political context, conflicts, weak coordination among REDD+ actors and a lack of financial resources, the profile states.

Researchers also note that enabling conditions such as good governance, transparent data and coherent policies and measures to address forest loss are not yet fully in place. "To date, the effectiveness of REDD+ activities in DRC is unclear due to the absence of rigorous impact assessment," the country profile states.

"However, we believe the situation can improve," said co-author and senior scientist with CIFOR, Denis Sonwa, explaining that the publication breaks down findings and lessons learned to help DRC move toward a full National REDD+ Strategy.

IMPROVING GOVERNANCE

In 2015, DRC, which had 11 provinces at the time, carved out an additional 15 to meet rules established by the 2006 constitution. "There is a risk these new, cashed-strapped provinces turn to the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources since the financial results of REDD+ shall be realized in the longer term," Kengoum said. Under-resourced REDD+ institutions are also struggling to become fully operative.

Another challenge is the clash between sectoral policies impacting forests. "Weak coordination across sectors and ministries has persisted since 2013," according to the study. "This prevents any drivers of deforestation and degradation that stem from sectors outside of forestry from being addressed."

For example, there have been different positions on the possibility of opening Virunga National Park to oil drilling that could threaten the integrity of this UNESCO World Heritage site. Virunga is home to one third of the world's wild mountain gorillas and is considered the continent's most biodiverse protected area.

The profile also notes that civil society organizations, Indigenous groups and local communities are trying to bring important issues to the REDD+ policy debate such as tenure rights and participatory land-use planning, but to date, their involvement has been limited. "People need capacity, knowledge and resources to coordinate amongst themselves and help define policy options for REDD+," said Sonwa, who noted this must be backed by adequate institutional settings and balanced power-relations.

"Despite efforts to establish the coexistence of legal and customary rights over land and resources, state administrators and local leaders still face difficulties in understanding the issues at stake, leading to land-tenure insecurity and conflicts over property," says the profile.

That matters because the distribution of results-based payments from REDD+ initiatives depend on how such property is interpreted. "Indigenous People and local communities can play a significant role in reducing emissions, including through forest conservation and sustainable forest management, and they must be recognized and adequately rewarded for that," Kengoum said.

INFORMING POLICIES

Following the publication of the country profile, researchers will continue working in partnership with national stakeholders to provide tools, information and analysis for policy makers and practitioners working on REDD+ in DRC. Two immediate priorities involve conducting a rigorous impact assessment of REDD+ and supporting Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV) efforts at the provincial level as a basis for future performance-based payments.

Another priority is conducting research on peatlands. "The DRC has one of the largest peatland complexes known in the tropics: a huge carbon sink we need to better understand and manage," Sonwa said.

In parallel, experts will further build the capacity of local journalists and researchers — especially, as part of efforts to consolidate the Yangambi Biosphere Reserve as a hub for the study of climate change and biodiversity in the Congo Basin.

Despite of the dynamics on REDD+ in DRC since 2013, researchers underscore the country's potential. "When REDD came into being, we all thought it would be easier, quicker and cheaper to implement, but falling into pessimism would be a mistake," Kengoum said. "Instead, we must come up with cross-sectoral, transformative solutions to address the drivers of deforestation and degradation for the sake of current and future generations."

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