Ecosystems Climate Alliance
Side Event
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Introduction

Global Witness was formed approximately 18 years ago. Our first campaign was the result of an investigation into the support the Khmer Rouge was giving to logging operations in the tropical forests of Cambodia.

Forests are one of Cambodia's most valuable and easily exploitable natural resources. Global Witness's investigations revealed how this timber was being exported through Thailand to more lucrative markets in Asia, Europe, and the US, and was effectively funding the Khmer Rouge's military campaigns and ultimately keeping this genocidal regime in power.

We also helped to cut off funds from the illegal timber industry in Liberia that Charles Taylor was using to pay for his war in Liberia. Later investigations led to the closure of the China-Burma border to timber traffic in 2006.

Our investigations have seen up close how illegal logging and the international trade in illegal timber funds armed-conflict, whether it is government officials, the army or criminal gangs with machine guns, it is always the forests and the local people who suffer.

Illegal logging costs billions of dollars in lost revenue, and promotes corruption and organized crime. Of course it also prevents sustainable development for the almost 1 billion people who live in or around forests and depend upon it for their food, medicine, fuel and daily needs.

So how will REDD work in this setting? Billions of dollars are expected to flow into forest rich countries, many of which suffer from weak governance and systemic corruption, especially in their forest sector. Simply pumping money into that situation is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

We have seen the harm that poor governance in the forest sector causes, so one of our focuses here at the climate change negotiations has been to lobby governments to find ways to address and improve forest governance

So how does a country improve governance?

Firstly, and perhaps most important, governments need to become more transparent in how they make decisions and implement them.

In many potential REDD+ countries, decisions over how their forests are managed and sustained are often made behind closed doors, by an elite minority who have vested interests which seldom benefit the vast majority of local, and often very poor, citizens.

Many southern NGOs and Indigenous Peoples groups have refused to engage in the international negotiations on REDD. On the ground, we have also seen many forest-dependent communities suspicious of their governments and the timber industry generally.

This distrust is the result of:

- In many cases there are disputes over ownership of the land.
- Many indigenous peoples are not recognized as citizens of their own country (effectively denying them access to many of the legal rights that comes with citizenship).
- And of course, they have experiences of armed conflict, illegal logging, and encroachment on their traditional lands without their consent or even prior consultation.

So how do we build trust between governments and those that they govern? Here's what the Cancun Agreement calls for:

- Transparent and effective national forest governance structures
- Full and effective participation of local communities and indigenous peoples
- Respecting the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples

These are not just words on paper. They are key safeguards in the Cancun Agreement – and without doing these things, REDD will simply not work.

REDD+ needs the support of the local communities and indigenous peoples who are the custodians of much of the world's forests. But their support has to be earned. It requires governments to involve local people in the decision making processes, and those people must be confident they will earn a share of the revenue and that the safeguards will be properly implemented.

Opening up access to information

Key to this, is access to information – how transparent and accountable is the government? Without access to information, forest governance cannot be improved, local people cannot participate in any meaningful way, and their rights cannot be assured.

But of course opening up government is not easy. There needs to be trust on both sides. Government staff need to feel confident that being more open and transparent is in their interests too.

Experience shows us that as governments become more transparent and accountable, this not only increases civil society participation and engagement but ultimately leads to improvements in relations between government and the governed.

Of course decision-making is a bit slower, as opportunity needs to be given for local people to make submissions or provide input. Appeals and complaint mechanisms also need to be available. But ultimately the final decision has greater legitimacy, and in the end implementation of that decision is quicker, smoother and much easier. It also leads to better outcomes because the decision is informed by a broader spectrum of interests.

Global Witness's Forest Transparency programme

Global Witness manages a programme funded through the UK government, to support local environmental and human rights campaigners in forest-rich countries in Africa and Latin America. We support those organisations to engage with their governments, and advocate on issues important to their local communities.

Further, and importantly for the REDD process, those organizations monitor transparency by assessing how well their governments produce and disseminate up-to-date information relevant to the conservation and management of their forests.

When looking into transparency in the forest sector, it is important to use both a top-down and bottom-up approach. Looking top-down, the focus is on the legal obligations each State has to enhance transparency and participation in decision making: This includes looking at

the rights established under the country's Constitution, and other relevant laws, such as any Freedom of Information legislation.

Working bottom-up is also important because there are many examples where the laws might be in place but they are poorly implemented, or bureaucracy and red-tape make it almost impossible to take advantage of those laws. This effectively prevents local communities from asserting their rights or holding their governments and other relevant entities to account.

Civil society groups in country work with forest-dependent communities on the ground to help them identify what information they need and how accessible that information is. With support from Global Witness, these results are published in a national report – available at: http://www.foresttransparency.info/

These reports promote national and international efforts to:

(i) Improve transparency in the management of forests;

(ii) Improve policies and practices of the forest public administration; and

(iii) Improve citizen engagement and awareness of forest-related issues.

The report provides information across areas critical to forest use and forest management:

- Freedom of information laws
- Forest policy and laws
- Forest and land tenure
- Permit allocation process
- Logging operations
- Oil / mining permits and information
- Taxes, revenues, and redistribution

Civil Society

The Cancun Agreement also requires that governments develop national monitoring systems and systems to provide information on how the safeguards are being addressed and respected.

Involving civil society in this monitoring system is necessary – not to replace the role of the government but to supplement and complement it.

Civil society monitoring

(i) Ensures the information collected is credible and useful in the context of the particular REDD+ country;

(ii) It is cost effective;

(iii) It helps build confidence and trust between governments and civil society; and

(iv) It empowers local people, and gives them a sense of ownership of locally based REDD projects.

Ground truthing

An effective monitoring system also requires information be collected on the ground. Identifying deforestation may be relatively easy with satellite data, although there are some difficulties with its accuracy for cloud covered tropical rain forests. However, forest degradation, illegal logging and changing patterns of cultivation are much more difficult to observe without ground-truthing.

An important component of the greenhouse gas emissions from forests also comes from disturbances to the biomass and organic matter in the soil. Particularly peat-forests where carbon emissions from biomass and soil organic matter are potentially huge. Data on soil carbon cannot be seen from a satellite, and data must be collected on the ground.

Civil society input is also necessary when it comes to collecting information on how the safeguards are being addressed and respected. This information should include not only what policies are in place but how they are being implemented on the ground. Field-based data collection is an important tool to test whether practice on the ground is consistent with policy as written down on paper.

Ground-truthing is not necessarily costly if local people are involved. For example, employing local communities in the field with basic training and use of low-cost technology such as (solar powered re-chargeable) GPS devices, cameras and mobile phones, can provide substantial amounts of information on biodiversity, forest management, illegal logging and other activities taking place in the forest. That information can be collected when local people are going about their daily routine – for example, as they enter the forest to collect honey or fire wood.

There is concern that Governments may not always be able to monitor all aspects of their own performance in promoting and supporting the safeguards with sufficient objectivity. Local people are less likely to be influenced by vested interests. They are also directly impacted by REDD, and have an interest in ensuring accurate data is collected on REDD's social and environmental impacts.

Local communities and indigenous peoples also stand to be one of the main beneficiaries of REDD, and are therefore motivated to ensure transparency in the financial flows right down to local level. This means local people will often be willing and enthusiastic monitors, which should be taken utilised to ensure the information collected on the ground is accurate and comprehensive. And of course, local communities have local specialised knowledge and a trained eye to quickly recognise changes in the landscape.

Relying only upon government officials can means visits to sections of the forest may occur every 6 months or even less often. Even when there are reports of particular incidents it may take weeks for an official from the Forestry department to get on-site. Local people can provide information daily or weekly. They live in the area and are always there.

Conclusion

So as a final remark, it is local people who are uniquely qualified to provide information about what is happening on the ground, creating an additional layer of transparency around the impacts of REDD+.

Involving civil society, particularly indigenous peoples and local communities, in the collection of data is essential for building credibility and quality of the information, and ultimately for building legitimacy in the process in the eyes of those on the ground, as well as international donors and investors.