

REDD+ Challenges and Opportunities

How REDD+ is Shaping Sustainability Pillars

White Paper

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I. REDD+ Overview

REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) is a post-modern approach to conservation, sustainable forest management, and forest carbon stocks enhancement. Under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, the mechanism REDD+ supports allowing developed countries (and companies) pay developing countries to keep their forests standing to sustain carbon sequestration as opposed to clearing them for timber, ranching, growing soy, palm oil, or smallholder agriculture. In its simplified form, REDD+ supports the idea of “*lets pay the south to keep their forests standing so we can continue polluting.*”

REDD+ is hinged on sustainability. When we talk about a sustainability, our main focus is on humanity’s way of living, producing, or operating. Sustainability proposes a way of life that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. At its core, sustainable practices integrate three interdependent pillars (environmental, social, and economic) into a cohesive, long-term approach. Interestingly, blind execution of REDD+ may violate sustainability pillars in multiple ways as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. How REDD+ is Shaping Sustainability Pillars

Sustainability Pillar	Definition / Proposition	How REDD+ Violates the Sustainability Dimension
Environmental Sustainability	Sustainability requires regeneration, low environmental impact, biodiversity protection, reduced pollution, and transition away from high-emission systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Enables the Global North, responsible for most historical emissions, to continue polluting by outsourcing carbon storage to the Global South.Shifts responsibility from Northern emitters to Southern forests and communities, reinforcing power imbalances.Avoids direct emission reductions, delaying genuine decarbonisation.Widespread over-crediting shows many REDD+ offsets deliver little or no climate benefit, undermining environmental integrity.
Social Sustainability	Social sustainability demands equity, human rights, inclusive participation, fair benefit sharing, gender equality, and protection of culture and livelihoods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPIC safeguards are weakly applied, with consultations often late or ineffective.Indigenous and local communities face land-use restrictions, displacement, and livelihood loss.Benefits are captured mainly by national authorities and external actors, with minimal community returns.Women and marginalized groups remain underrepresented, contradicting inclusion principles.
Economic Sustainability	Economic sustainability promotes shared prosperity, resilient local economies, fair value distribution, and long-term cost internalization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">REDD+ funding is centralized, volatile, and frequently diverted by elites.Communities receive limited compensation that fails to replace lost livelihoods.Smallholders face restrictions while Northern corporations offset emissions.Financing falls far below projections, and over-credited offsets generate “phantom” value with little local benefit.

From the general sustainability lens, there is adequate documented evidence on how REDD+'s attempt to turning forests into national assets is occurring at the expense of indigenous communities and unsuspecting payers of the north. This suggests that without addressing the existing gaps like corruption, REDD+ risks entrenching inequities that it seeks to address. In Table 2, I highlight the score on how REDD+'s has scored on relevant SDGs for the global north and south going by the current implementation experiences;

Table 2: The REDD+ SDG Index based on the Current Implementation Findings

SDG the REDD+ aims to support	REDD+ Impact on the global North	REDD+ impact on the Global South
SDG 1: Lifting the bottom up as a prerequisite for shared gains.	Unclear Score No evidence shows that REDD+ is lifting people from the global north from poverty or deteriorating their economic situation	Bad score Evidence shows that REDD+ is perpetuating poverty by cutting people from economically productive activities without compensation
SDG 5: Gender Equality – closing gender gaps in income and assets is a major driver of inclusive growth.	Unclear score No evidence shows how buying carbon credits through REDD+ mechanism reduces income gaps in the global north	Bad score Low gender-inclusivity in REDD+ projects, together with cutting off women from subsistence production worsens the existing gender gaps among the indigenous communities in the global south
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth – particularly Target 8.1 (sustainable, inclusive, per-capita economic growth) and 8.5 (full and productive employment with equal pay).	Unclear score No evidence shows how buying carbon credits promotes sustainable, inclusive, per-capita economic growth, and wage equality in the global north	Bad score REDD+ restriction that are not accompanied by equivalent compensation escalate income gaps, promotes joblessness and undermines economic growth in the global south
SDG 13: Climate Action Official title: “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” Target 13.1 – Strengthen resilience (indirectly requires cutting emissions to limit warming). 13.a – Implement the \$100 billion climate finance commitment (much of which funds emission-reduction projects in developing	Good score Generally, REDD+ honors the proposal to cut emissions, and climate finance commitment to combat climate impacts, supporting global climate planning and integration of climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning	Good score REDD+ has allowed the global south to participate in climate planning and integration of climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning

SDG the REDD+ aims to support	REDD+ Impact on the global North	REDD+ impact on the Global South
<p>countries). 13.b – Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for climate planning (includes national emission inventories and reduction strategies).</p> <p>Target 13.2: “Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning”</p>		
<p>SDG 10 (Target 10.1)-shared prosperity: “By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average</p>	<p>Unclear/Good score</p> <p>On paper, carbon payments under REDD+ mechanism seek to ensure that the indigenous communities in the south grow together with those in the north through shared cash transfers. In reality, no evidence shows that REDD+ is enhancing shared prosperity</p>	<p>Bad score</p> <p>REDD+ is eating into the little economic opportunities of the indigenous communities in the global south by restricting their participation in economic activities without compensation, as the proceeds from REDD+ payments remain among the few elites.</p>
<p>SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy advocates for massive scale-up of renewables and energy efficiency to promote Energy access + clean energy.</p>	<p>Good score</p> <p>Purportedly, REDD+ could incentivize global north companies to invest in lower emission systems to reduce their expenditure on REDD+ carbon credits.</p>	<p>Unclear/bad</p> <p>Restrictions on collecting firewood may shift reliance on cleaner energy</p> <p>Lower income as a result of restricted economic activities could increase poverty among indigenous communities, making local communities gravitate towards cheap, unclean energy</p>
<p>SDG 9 (9.4)-Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure- The SDG calls for low-carbon infrastructure and industrial processes</p>	<p>Good score</p> <p>To cut costs on carbon credits, the global north companies may consider venturing in these infrastructures.</p>	<p>Unclear score</p> <p>No evidence shows that investment in low-carbon infrastructure and industrial processes are taking place because of REDD+ execution</p>

SDG the REDD+ aims to support	REDD+ Impact on the global North	REDD+ impact on the Global South
SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities through low-carbon urban planning transport, buildings for urban sustainability	Good score The global north companies are incentivized to invest in lower emission systems to reduce their expenditure on REDD+ carbon credits.	Unclear score No evidence shows that investment in low-carbon urban planning transport, buildings for urban sustainability in the global south as a result of REDD+
SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production. The SDG proposes waste reduction, and emphasis of sustainable supply chains (12.c – phase out fossil-fuel subsidies) as part of sustainable production	Bad score REDD+ is encouraging the global north to emit carbon, expecting the saved forests in the south to sequester it.	Unclear score No evidence shows that REDD+ is encouraging sustainable supply chains and waste(emission) reduction in the global south
SDG 15 Life on Land. The SDG calls for halting of deforestation (15.2), which avoids ~10–15% of global emissions for effective Forest protection	Good score By participating in REDD+, the global north contributes to deforestation reduction	Good score By participating in REDD+, the global south actively contributes to deforestation reduction

2. Bottom-line

The previous articles have summarized how local and indigenous communities in developing countries experience REDD+ and forest carbon offsets. In its intrinsic form, REDD+ seeks to promote collective responsibility in keeping carbon emissions in check, consistently with the global SDG goals. However, the previous analysis of this subject indicates that, irrespective of the dimension from which we look at it, the world has blindly enactment of REDD+. This has created loopholes for fraud, disenfranchisement, and potential wastage of money by the north on climate projects whose positive outcomes are unclear and heightened suffering of indigenous communities in the south. In particular, REDD+ could perpetuate poverty through restriction of people from engaging in agriculture without compensation, disruption of life through evictions and displacement, and environmental injustice through disproportionate exposure of marginalized, low-income, racial/ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples, to fewer environmental benefits (like access to clean air, water, or green spaces) at the expense of their livelihoods.

3. The Way Forward

A bigger percentage of the diverse REDD+ outcomes arise largely from persistent imbalances in benefit-sharing, driven by centralized governance structures, elevated corruption risks, and inadequate distribution mechanisms issues that persist despite UNFCCC safeguards explicitly advocating for equitable allocation.

More importantly, achieving meaningful emission reductions necessitates holding all stakeholders accountable through a dual approach: substantially curbing emissions at their source while actively promoting carbon sequestration. Despite

ongoing controversies surrounding REDD+, the mechanism merits continued support in the Global South, where it can effectively reduce deforestation rates and safeguard critical non-carbon co-benefits, including biodiversity conservation and the preservation of traditional medicinal resources. Concurrently, the Global North should prioritize the development and rigorous verification of genuine emission-reduction initiatives rather than relying predominantly on offset payments. A balanced strategy that limits emission generation while enhancing sequestration offers the most viable path to stabilizing atmospheric carbon concentrations.

Continued implementation of REDD+ in its current form, however, risks achieving little beyond perpetuating high emissions, undermining international climate objectives, and diverting financial resources from authentic conservation efforts. The proposed approach may inadvertently incentivize inflated baselines by Southern actors, facilitate fraudulent carbon transactions, exacerbate economic challenges in the Global South, and foster violence against vulnerable local communities by powerful national elites engaged in extortionate practices.