Reading Seminar 4: Adaptation, mitigation and land tenure in the Brazilian Amazon and other tropical forests, with Maron Greenleaf
Wednesday, May 9, 2018

(1) Greenleaf, M. DRAFT: The Untenured Forest: Land, Labor, and New Environmental Value in the Brazilian Amazon, in review at The Journal of Peasant Studies

A new resource has been created through the management of climate change in the Amazon rainforest: forest carbon. While typically considered a carbon sink, tropical forest deforestation now acts as a net carbon “source” significantly contributing to climate change. Dominant market-based approaches to combating climate change make forest carbon financially valuable, through mechanisms like ‘payment for environmental services’ (PES).

This paper analyzes a program in the Amazonian state of Acre, Brazil called the System of Incentives for Environmental Services (SISA), which enables state redistribution by shifting forest carbon’s value away from land ownership and onto labor. This shift responds to the practical issues surrounding clarifying land rights. In Acre, as in many parts of the Amazon, land ownership is not clear and many poor rural people are unable to obtain formal rights. The program makes forest carbon into public wealth, rather than the private wealth of landowners. The Acreano government can then redistribute the profits to, among others, posseiros (poorer people without formal land rights) based on their labor. In doing this, SISA endows this environmental labor with forest carbon’s value, distributing what can amount to a form of government social welfare provision premised on environmental ends. Rather than paying for people not to deforest or to protect the forest, SISA provides incentives that are meant to encourage certain forms of rural labor. For example, it supports a per kilo subsidy for native rubber production or commercial fish farming on already cleared “degraded” land.

(2) Larson et al., 2013: Land tenure and REDD+: The good, the bad and the ugly, Global Environmental Change

Clear and secure land tenure rights have been identified as one of the key elements for successful conditional payment schemes promoting forest conservation, including strategies for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+). REDD can be defined as a performance-based mechanism, in which funds are used to compensate developing countries for the reduction of forest carbon emissions as compared to a national baseline. The ‘plus’ (+) refers to the inclusion of carbon stock enhancement.

This paper looks to understand under what conditions REDD+ is a threat to local rights, and when does it present an opportunity in regards to reforming land tenure rights. The findings analyzed are drawn from the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) Global Comparative Study (GCS) on REDD+ between 2009 and 2012, in six countries at a national and project level: Brazil, Cameroon, Indonesia, Tanzania, Viet Nam and Peru. While the results are not meant to be representative of all REDD+ sites, they include key countries with an important cross-section of the kinds of projects and tenure procedures being undertaken in many places.

The results show that Brazil is both different and similar to the other countries in key ways. At the national level, Brazil stands out in terms of its national policy framework on tenure and forests. It has implemented substantial tenure reforms, to secure the rights of local landholders, prior to the existence of REDD+. In
spite of these advantages, the project-level data suggests that villages in Brazil have similar problems as the other countries. The other countries share similar and numerous problems for forests and local livelihoods: land conflicts, tenure insecurity, ineffective rule enforcement and the presence of unwanted external forest users. At the project level, many REDD+ proponents in these countries are seeking to secure rights for villagers. Almost all have given serious attention to tenure and sought to address problems to the best of their ability.

However, in most cases efforts are restricted by the lack of addressing tenure at the national policy level. REDD+ has brought serious attention to the issue of local forest tenure rights, including the questioning of current policy and even the rare, bold commitment to a new course of action at the national level, but the extent to which REDD+ might foster opportunities for more fundamental reforms is still an open question. Substantial change appears unlikely in the near future.

Discussion Questions

1. How should we think about the sociopolitical impacts and responsibilities of mitigation and adaptation? Should adaptation and mitigation measures address existing structural or systemic issues?
2. In mitigation and adaptation research and design, how much are ideas/beliefs from developed world contexts imported into developing world contexts, and why might it matter?
3. To what extent should the urgency of climate change adaptation and mitigation supersede other considerations, like land, resource, and other rights?
4. What should count as adequate participation and consent for adaptation and mitigation programs/projects?
5. How should we think about the relationship between adaptation and mitigation? Should mitigation projects also be adaptation projects?

Discussion Notes

REDD+ is included in Paris Agreements, and is now an accepted part of what international mitigation could look like, though still controversial. It is one way that countries can meet NDCs. The “+” refers to environmental and social co-benefits. The controversial part is the question of whether reductions in deforestation can be used as offsets.

SISA is the world’s most respected REDD program. The Acre site is near Peruvian/Bolivian border, it is small, isolated, poor. Mostly non-indigenous, mostly urban. 800,000 people in the state. 86% forested. It was colonized by Brazil in late 1800s. Lots of rubber trees, at a time when demand for rubber was high. In the Amazon, rubber trees are widely dispersed. They tap rubber from living trees, without killing tree in the process. The idea that the living forest can be a source of value makes sense, as there is a cultural history.

The whole state of Acre was made into a REDD program. The state sells carbon credits and distributes money, not based on land rights like a typical program, but instead based on environmental labor. This leads to a kind of redistribution in a place that never had a welfare state.

People don’t have secure land tenure or access to it. REDD might not work as well with secure land tenure (although this is disputable); REDD might exacerbate inequalities. What areas/issues does a place have to address to be REDD ready?
SISA gives incentives that are supposed to nudge them to produce differently, in a low carbon way. For example, the government is building fish ponds for free/very subsidized, as a way to combat deforestation by using already-cleared land more intensively, so more deforestation is not required.

The economic pressure to deforest mainly comes from cattle ranching, though soy and corn are slowly moving in. Most is attributed to large land holders, but there has been an increased enforcement of the forest code that has been pretty effective, so large holder deforestation has actually gone down a lot. One unintended consequence is that small holders are responsible for an increasing percentage of the deforestation, as they have been integrated more into the cattle industry.

This REDD+ program works in Acre because you have a very specific situation where the jurisdictional approach works – democratic rule, environmental elite, etc. This is a state that is oriented in the right direction and wants to redistribute the money in a progressive manner, and the outcome is generally good. This jurisdictional approach starts to raise many core questions. We can learn a lot from this approach. How do you start to apply this to another region or situation?

The issue of consent is important to discuss. Proponents of the program have lauded the extent of the consultation - 15 workshops and 300 comments from stakeholders. Critics of SISA say there hasn’t been adequate consultation. What would adequate consultation actually look like? Does having elected representatives mean there is consent? What is the role of advisory groups? How much communication is needed and what type?

Overall there are many questions about the role of REDD in carbon markets. It assumes pricing some unit of land area is equivalent to some amount of carbon. But it’s not actually putting anything in the ground like carbon sequestration. It’s a vulnerable part of the climate system and brings up questions of permanence and leakage.