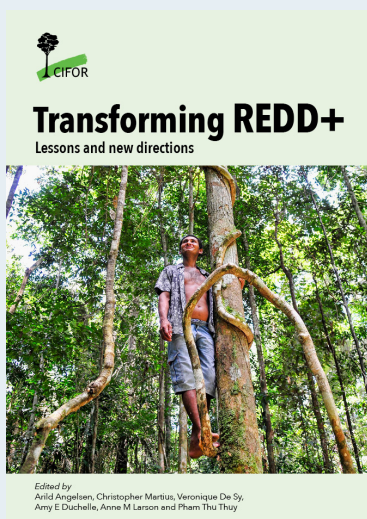


Chapter 2

Pathway to impact

Is REDD+ a viable theory of change?

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Pham Thu Thuy, Denis J Sonwa and Brian Belcher*



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Pathway to impact

Is REDD+ a viable theory of change?

*Christopher Martius, Arild Angelsen, Anne M Larson, Pham Thu Thuy,
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Key messages

- A REDD+ theory of change is expected to outline pathways using conditional incentives to achieve reduced emissions. But as practised, REDD+ has evolved into a diversity of measures, while the core element, conditionality, has rarely been applied.
- Confusion arises when actors fail to distinguish between REDD+ as the *outcome* of reduced emissions and the *framework* to achieve them. Convoluted objectives, unclear donor commitments, and competing ideas about what REDD+ is and should pay for (compensation level, beneficiaries), complicate its implementation.
- The way forward lies in recognising ideological differences for more constructive debates, clarifying technical objectives and embracing pragmatism in implementation.

Looking at REDD+ as a theory of change

A theory of change is a roadmap that outlines how to build a successful transformation



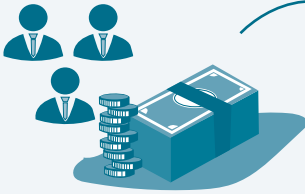
Theory of change approaches are pragmatic tools for transformational change.



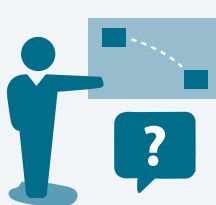
But traditional REDD+ definitions miss or poorly define key components of a functional theory of change.



These include 'power' of incentives, compensation nature and level, who beneficiaries are, and permitted offsetting.



On the ground, REDD+ has evolved to encompass broad, adaptive, non-conditional activities. Clarity on donors' roles, actions and the conditionality of their financial commitments is now needed.



Confusion arises when the objective of reduced emissions and the framework to achieve them aren't clearly defined. The success of REDD+'s broad objectives depends on broad policy reform.



Implementation must be more realistic and pragmatic, based on diagnosis and actioned through evidence-based policy-making.

2.1 Introduction

In 10 years, REDD+ has achieved much along the intended impact pathway. But it has not yet delivered the expected overall impact of reducing GHG emissions. Originally envisioned as a way to efficiently and quickly achieve wide-ranging changes in how tropical forests are managed through a payment for environmental services (PES) approach – with industrialised countries paying forest owners and users in developing countries to reduce emissions and increase removals of GHGs in line with global climate mitigation goals – REDD+ has in reality evolved into a diversity of adaptive, very often non-conditional activities (Sunderlin *et al.* 2015; Duchelle *et al.* 2018a).

Why the disconnect between concept and practice? The continued, sometimes fierce, debate about REDD+ (Fletcher *et al.* 2016, 2017; Angelsen *et al.* 2017) and its failure to provide significant emission reduction results so far (Seymour and Angelsen 2012; Sunderlin *et al.* 2017; Counsell 2018) suggests there are

Box 2.1 What is a theory of change?

A theory of change (ToC) is a model of a change process. It describes and explains how and why a set of activities (such as a project or programme) is expected to contribute to a process of change. A ToC details the main *actors* involved in the process, identifies their *actions* as a sequence of steps or stages in the process, and specifies the *theoretical reasons* for the changes (Coryn *et al.* 2011; Vogel 2012). Many key outcomes in a social change process can be defined as behavioural change; a ToC aims to explain *who* will do *what* differently and *why*? ToCs can be used as a planning tool, as a framework for monitoring and evaluation and, as in this chapter, as an analytical tool (Belcher *et al.* 2017; Belcher 2018).

A ToC recognises that social and ecological systems are complex and that causal processes are often non-linear, with multiple interactions and feedback loops (Douthwaite and Hoffecker 2017). Realistic ToCs include both short- and longer-term outcomes and reflect interactions of individuals, organisations and communities within complex systems.

ToCs are often presented as flow diagrams, with boxes for activities linked by arrows and organised by theme or by sets of actors in *impact pathways*, mapping a route from activities, via outputs, to outcomes and impact. In practice, many ToC modelling efforts end here, with a representation of the main impact pathways. However, a true theory of change also describes the causal assumptions, theoretical explanations and mechanisms by which each step is realised.

A ToC thus provides a useful framework for analysing the causal logic and assumptions in a project or programme. It should provide a plausible explanation as to why the activities should lead to the desired outcomes, and help identify assumptions, enabling factors and stumbling blocks (Harries *et al.* 2014; Maini *et al.* 2018). If there is an explicit ToC, it can be assessed for its completeness and coherence. But without an explicit ToC, it can be useful to trace the implicit ToC by asking the following questions: Who are the key actors? What do they need to do differently for the high-level changes to be realised? How are the interventions of the project expected to contribute to change? Why should each set of actors be expected to change their behaviour?

competing ideas about what REDD+ is, what its goals are, and how to achieve them. This is in part the result of its history, which is rooted in various conservation and development contexts, and a prolonged negotiation process that did not end even when REDD+ was finally formally concluded at the Conference of the Parties in Paris in 2015 (COP21).

In this chapter, we examine whether REDD+ as a concept is properly and sufficiently developed to achieve its proposed goals, by viewing it through a theory of change lens. As a roadmap to successful societal transformation (Weiss 1972, 1997; Box 2.1), a theory of change (ToC) explains how and why an initiative should work (Weiss 1995) and makes explicit the underlying mechanisms and assumptions that allow a proposed activity to achieve its expected outcomes and anticipated impact. In the case of REDD+, reduced deforestation and forest degradation – along with forest conservation, sustainable management of forests and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks – are expected to lead to lower emissions and higher removals (i.e., negative emissions).

Two questions can be asked: First, do REDD+ *projects* and *programmes* have a viable ToC? Second, as an overall *concept*, does REDD+ have a viable ToC? In other words, does REDD+ make realistic and adequate assumptions about how an exchange of (industrialised countries’) money for (developing countries’) emission reductions could work? The first question is discussed in other chapters (4, 7, 9, 12-14); the second is discussed here.

2.2 REDD+ theory of change shows gaps in policy and practice

Although the early phases of REDD+ lacked a true, formal ToC, we can infer one (Figure 2.1) from definitions given at the time. Angelsen *et al.* (2009: xiii) define the key principles of REDD+ in this way:

“A core idea underlying REDD+ is to make performance-based payments, that is, to pay forest owners and users to reduce emissions and increase removals. Such payments for environmental (or ecosystem) services (PES) has its merits: it provides strong incentives directly to forest owners and users to manage forests better and clear less forestland. PES will fully compensate carbon rights holders that find forest conservation more lucrative than the alternatives. They simply sell forest carbon credits and less cattle, coffee, cocoa or charcoal.”

In ToC terminology, REDD+ payments (the activities) from some actors (donors) cause other actors (forest owners and users) to change their behaviour; this results in better forest management and/or less forest clearing, leading to reduced CO₂ emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and/or carbon stock maintenance/enhancement, and eventually to reduced CO₂ emissions from forests (the outcomes); ultimately, mitigating climate change (the impact) (the green boxes in Figure 2.1).

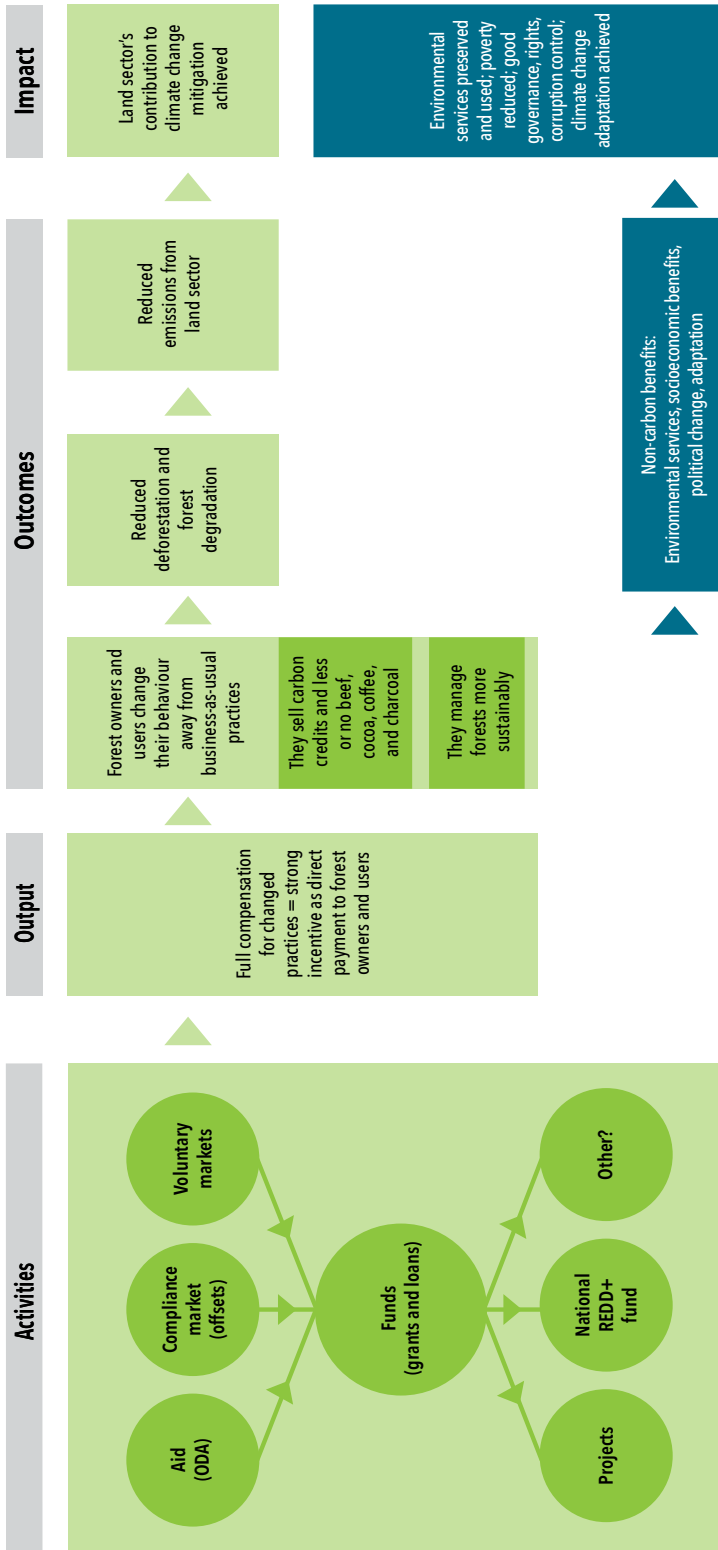


Figure 2.1 A theory of change for the original concept of REDD+

Note: Green and blue boxes represent carbon (green) and non-carbon (blue) benefits. The corresponding ToC steps are shown in grey boxes at the top.

ODA = official development assistance

First, note that the actor group ‘forest owners and users’ is treated as a homogenous group. In practice, there are many different actors, actions and interests subsumed within these processes, with multiple points of weakness and failure in the causal logic. The same is probably true for donors (they are implicit but not actually mentioned in the definition above); their actions, likewise, follow a variety of interests.

Next, observe the emphasis on *strong* incentives, *direct* payments, and *full* compensation in the citation from Angelsen *et al.* (2009). Part of the current debate circles around the incentives that did not come, the question of who should be paid (governments and project proponents also shoulder costs; Luttrell *et al.* 2013), and the expectation of full compensation (what is included in the opportunity costs that need to be compensated?) (Angelsen *et al.* 2017). These expectations for full compensation may have triggered eventual dissatisfaction on some sides, as the official REDD+ provisions (see below) were much more reserved about the point of full compensation of opportunity costs (only citing ‘positive incentives’, see UNFCCC 2011, Add.1; App. 1:26). There is also a group of REDD+ opponents who sharply question the validity of a monetary incentives approach to environmental and development problems (Cabello and Gilbertson 2012; Bayrak and Marafa 2016).

Now, note that the definition does not mention *offsets*. Carbon payments may or may not be based on REDD+ credits that are used as offsets in a compliance carbon market, yet many actors – including some environmental NGOs and academic scholars, and others in the aviation sector and fossil fuel industry – seem to equate REDD+ with offsets (Fiske and Paladino 2017).

Careful readers may have noticed a circularity here: REDD+ as an *action* (or ‘intervention’, the programme of payments and associated rules) leads to REDD+ as an *outcome*. REDD+ can indeed denote two different things, which often confuses the debate: the PES framework just described (action), but also – as implied by its name – the resulting reduced emissions (outcome). Equally within the ‘action’ definition, REDD+ can refer to results-based payment schemes (e.g., PES) only, or more broadly to any actions taken to achieve the outcome.

Finally, the inclusion of the non-carbon (social and environmental) benefits (blue boxes in Figure 2.1) – a part of the rationale that forest management requires working with the people on the ground – has led to complaints that REDD+ has lost its focus. However, including socioeconomic benefits for forest owners and forest-dependent communities would seem the only way to recognise their development aspirations; likewise adding environmental co-benefits is important to avoid having carbon objectives eclipse biodiversity concerns. That said, it is key to recognise that such co-benefits clearly add to the already convoluted outcome expectations, and thus have implications for the ToC.

2.3 UNFCCC decisions form an incomplete theory of change

We can draw a quite different ToC for REDD+ by looking at how it is officially enshrined in the Warsaw Framework, including pertinent UNFCCC decisions (Figure 2.2).

Two of the three REDD+ phases – Phase I on national strategies (readiness) and Phase II on implementation – reflect the fact that substantial international and national policy-making was and is required before results-based money can flow. During the readiness phase, some actors expected broad issues, such as tenure (Chapter 14) to be solved, and policies and laws that conflict with the social and environmental REDD+ goals, or with protection of indigenous and local communities' rights, to be removed (Fiske and Paladino 2017).

The formal components of Figure 2.2 comprise (in green): the four *elements* that are required for a country to join the REDD+ process; the eligible *actions*; the five 'allowable' intermediate *outcomes*, and the financial and other *support* needed from Parties, especially industrialised countries. Phase III (results-based payments) would complete the process, with the eligible actions converted into outcomes, and impact (climate change mitigation) to follow.

This is the UNFCCC setup for REDD+ (UNFCCC 2011, Add.1), but these components hardly describe a fully functional ToC. A major point of weakness is seen in the imbalanced expectations: REDD+ makes clear and strong assumptions about the recipients of funds (i.e., expecting that forest owners and users 'change their behaviour' to reduce emissions) but is less emphatic about donor obligations. While significant donor support has obviously materialised, there are no viable global or national carbon markets, and there is insufficient time and support for readiness (Chapter 4; see also Tiani *et al.* 2015); this indicates insufficient 'behavioural change' in donor countries. This form of REDD+ also adds the Cancún safeguards (blue box), to guarantee environmental and social co-benefits, procedural consistency, and the risks of reversals and emissions displacement ('leakage').

This analysis shows, first, that REDD+ is not very prescriptive about the financing side; while donors hold considerable sway over how the negotiations go, they are not bound by very strong provisions. Failing to describe the role of a major actor group is a weakness in any intervention logic. This is true even if, given lack of donor enthusiasm and the variety of national circumstances in recipient countries, a generic approach was essential to pave the way for a future viable REDD+. Historically, REDD+ brought previous official development assistance efforts for sustainable tropical forest management into the newly emerging global climate change regime (Scherr *et al.* 2004), and thus brought together different communities of practice, which did not easily integrate (Schipper and Pelling 2006).

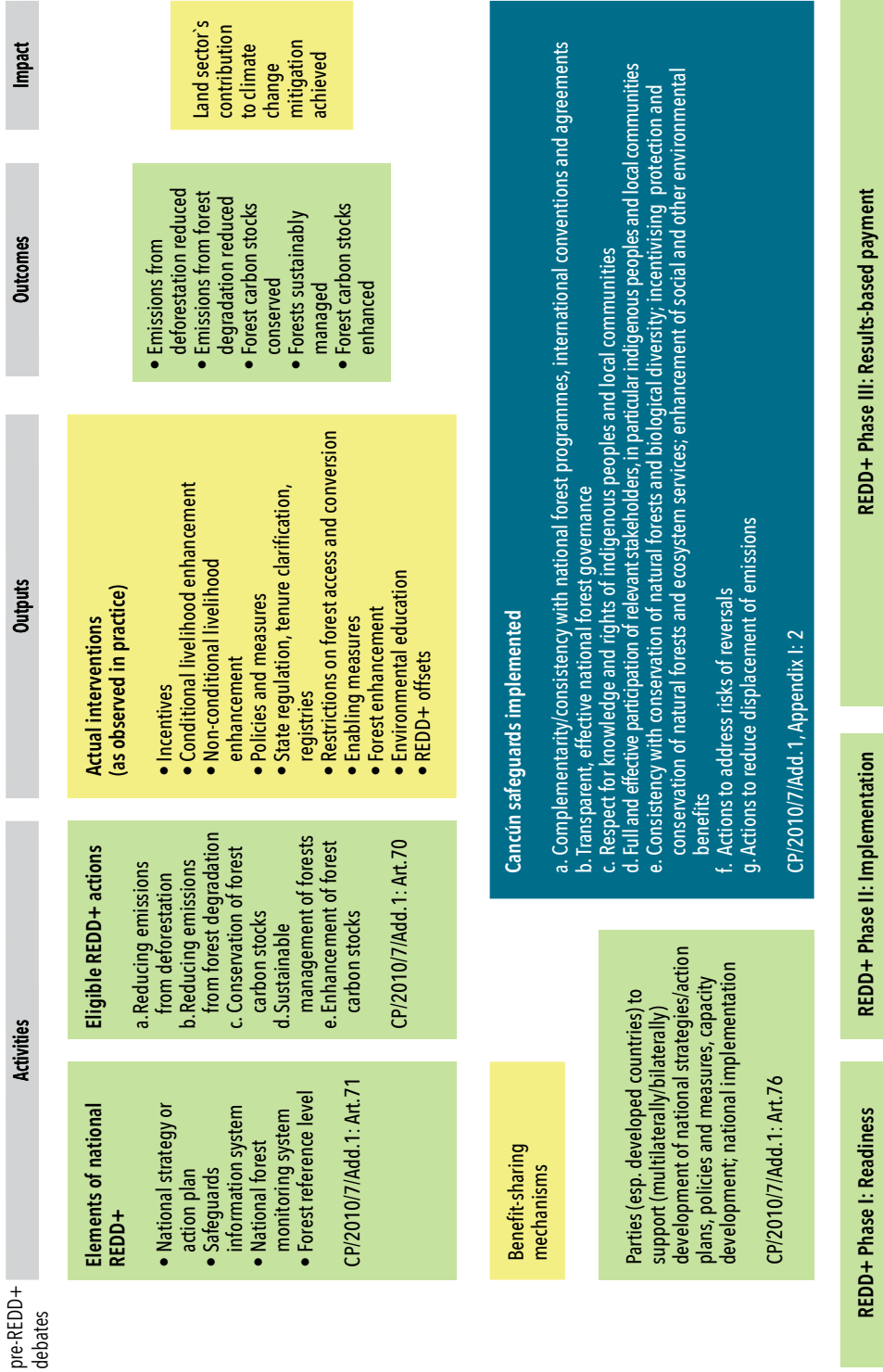


Figure 2.2 The UNFCCC REDD+ decisions in a theory of change (Warsaw Framework)

Note: Green and blue boxes represent formal decisions on carbon (green) and co-benefits (blue). Yellow boxes represent crucial elements in the ToC that are not formally part of the Warsaw Framework. The corresponding ToC steps are shown in grey boxes at the bottom.

Source: UNFCCC 2011

Second, important questions are left to countries and implementers to define, including: (i) benefit-sharing mechanisms (yellow box) that decide on equity, transparency and justice (Loft *et al.* 2017a; Wong *et al.* 2017); (ii) arrangements for financial accountability (Williams and De Koning 2016); (iii) safeguard information systems (Menton *et al.* 2014; Jagger and Rana 2017); (iv) how to effectively address the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation (De Sy *et al.* 2015; Weatherley-Singh and Gupta 2015); and (v) how to organise REDD+ governance across levels and sectors of government (Libert Amico *et al.* 2018). By leaving these decisions for later definition (i.e., to be operationalised under the different national circumstances and reflecting local variability) it was possible to reach international agreement – principles of national sovereignty and implementation neutrality were respected. But this openness creates challenges in practice (e.g., while given broad liberty on how to implement their safeguard information systems, some countries were actually asking for *more* external guidance; Menton *et al.* 2014).

2.4 Current REDD+ debates and practices reveal wide variety of ToCs

Analysis of REDD+ interventions shows that it has changed from a rather rigid instrument into a basket of options (Duchelle *et al.* 2018a), and a diversity of ToCs associated with them. The number of formally eligible actions (Figure 2.2) pales against the many interventions and instruments that actually make up REDD+ in the vast majority of projects (Sunderlin *et al.* 2015). Interestingly, many of them represent non-conditional transfers ('real interventions' in Figure 2.2; see also Duchelle *et al.* 2018a), and the core element of conditionality has barely been tested in policy or practice.

REDD+ theories and debates (Figure 2.2) were important to start the process and inform the readiness and implementation phases, and debate continues to this day. But REDD+ has several seemingly parallel and sometimes incompatible rationales, reflecting different underlying ideologies (Hiraldo and Tanner 2012; Table 2.1). Policies and projects often explicitly avoid politics (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Myers *et al.* 2018). But it is important to recognise the ideology in apparently non-ideological environmental and development debates "precisely because it is unacknowledged or disguised" (Sunderlin 2002, 3).

Hiraldo and Tanner (2012) identified three ideologies affecting REDD+ (Table 2.1): *market liberalism*, which aims to correct a market failure using PES; *institutionalism*, which dwells on the centrality of functional institutions, good governance and the rule of law; and *rights advocacy*, which is focused on the well-being of forest communities, and their fair and equal participation, rights and knowledge.¹ Other

¹ Hiraldo and Tanner (2012) further identified *bio-environmentalism* - attempting to use carbon markets to achieve greater environmental sustainability within the planet's ecological boundaries; as this is basically a market-based approach, we categorised it in the first row in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Main rationales underlying REDD+ theories of change

Rationale	Description	Main policy	Underlying ideology	Key proponents
Economic incentives	Excessive emissions are a market failure, to be corrected through PES	Payments for environmental services (PES/ market approach)	Neoclassical environmental economics (rational choice); 'bio-environmentalists' (Hiraldo and Tanner 2012)	Key donors, World Bank, UN-REDD, Green Climate Fund (GCF), many NGOs
Institutional change and coordination	Good climate policy will be enshrined in laws, regulations and institutions	Institutional reforms; laws and regulations related to climate change	Institutionalism Managerial paradigm (Sunderlin 2002)	UN-REDD Programme
Empower local people, women and marginalised groups	'All you need is rights' to achieve long-lasting impact	Tenure reforms and local rights; gender mainstreaming	Deforestation resulting from unbalanced power, which allows forest exploitation by commercial outsiders	Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), indigenous peoples' organisations, gender organisations, civil society organisations
Information	Equipped with the right and sufficient information, stakeholders can make the right decisions	Public information and transparency; information exchange and coordination among stakeholders	Available information and enlightened public debate producing socially and environmentally optimal outcomes ¹	UN-REDD Academy; academics
Planning	Rational planning by governments at various levels and in its diverse sectors is the key	Planning, and command and control measures	Deforestation is a result of insufficient (landscape) planning and zoning	National administrations; some donors

rationales see *information* exchange or *planning* as key (Sunderlin 2002); but their seemingly technical nature (i.e., promoting ideas such as 'best information' and 'efficient planning') hides that they are also rooted in ideology.

Why do we discuss ideologies? Because an awareness of underlying ideological divergences could help understand debates as well as the motives for resistance to change, paving the way for more informative and constructive dialogue and problem-solving. In the REDD+ debate, it is easy to see how unaccounted-for ideologies underpin different positions, hence leading to different versions of a ToC and a stalling of dialogue (see Chapter 11). Obviously, each of these have valid points, and "models and arguments [are] valid [...] in specific circumstances" (Rodrik 2010, 34).

2.5 The way forward: Transforming REDD+

Interpreting REDD+ as a theory of change has shown us various flaws in the concept. REDD+ has clearly achieved visible advances along the impact pathway (e.g., triggering important international dialogue on deforestation-related emissions and building national capacity (Chapters 5–7). Unfortunately, it has not yet achieved widespread impact – specifically, it has not been as effective and efficient as hoped in reducing emissions, and not as quickly as expected (Chapters 10–12).

But in our opinion, believing that ‘REDD+ is dead’ is premature. While we don’t intend to paint yet another – perhaps the ‘perfect’ – ToC, we think that our analysis, coupled with the experience to date, can help to identify approaches that might avoid some of the more unproductive parts of the debates, and constructively move forward towards REDD+ as an outcome.

Definitions of REDD+. The central confusion between the *framework* to achieve REDD+ and the *outcome* of reduced emissions could be resolved by adopting clearer language. While diversity in the interpretation of REDD+ needs to be embraced, everyone needs to be clearer about which definition they are using during the debates.

Diversity within the REDD+ framework. The framework has seen a diversification of REDD+ activities on the ground into a broad, opportunistic and adaptive basket of options; many of these lack conditional incentives. This puts the implementation reality in stark contrast to the idea of REDD+ as ‘pure’ PES.

Clearer contexts and pathways for REDD+ as a PES mechanism. REDD+ requires both global climate benefits, and local social and environmental benefits, expanding the ‘normal’ PES context of local benefits, thereby adding a layer of complexity. Much more needs to be done to develop the international carbon market, increase public and private funding, and maintain readiness support (see Chapter 3). We believe that recognising the current diversity is more conducive to achieving REDD+ in a real, diverse world of nationally, environmentally and socially varying circumstances than fighting over ideological positions.

Scope of REDD+ as a PES mechanism. Even with the Warsaw Framework in place, there is still a lack of clarity on defining what REDD+, as a PES mechanism, should become (i.e., the ‘strength’ of incentives; the nature and level of compensation; who the beneficiaries should be; and the extent to which offsetting should be permitted). The Warsaw Framework does not have a plan for funding the envisioned REDD+ system. These problems, still much debated, will need resolution soon. Some require action at the national and subnational levels; others need mutually agreeable definitions that please both donors and recipients, negotiable in each individual case.

A skewed view of actors. REDD+ makes clear assumptions about what fund recipients need to do, but provides much less guidance about donor commitments. A functional ToC should encompass all relevant actors, and REDD+ needs to become clearer about the obligations on the donor side of the equation (e.g., to provide sufficient funding, and to set policy frameworks that will enable the emergence of viable carbon markets, to ramp up demand for REDD+).

An acute case of 'objectives overload'. Additional objectives were added when it became clear that REDD+ in its original simplicity was not feasible. Some of these, such as stronger provisions for the participation of indigenous and forest-dependent communities, are essential for the REDD+ ToC to function. Yet they can overcomplicate the picture when responsibility for their resolution lies outside the forestry sector, where REDD+ often resides (e.g., tenure; Chapter 14). While REDD+ cannot succeed without changes in broader development trajectories, rule of law, transparency, etc., it alone cannot solve all these concerns. The current ToC overlooks the fact that REDD+ requires an enabling policy environment. For REDD+ to succeed in the context of the Paris Agreement, decision-making must become more realistic and pragmatic – in both national and local contexts – in deciding what and what not to include.

In this chapter we have tried to take a fresh view of REDD+ by applying a ToC lens. In debates, 'REDD+ veterans' often are able to tell us exactly why a certain provision was or was not included. For example, there are no hard definitions for benefit-sharing mechanisms so as to not violate recipient countries' sovereignty; no hard commitments for the donor community were established, in order to avoid scaring them away; and because views on carbon market finance and offsets diverged too much, they were deliberately left out. There was good, but sometimes only tactical and not strategic, logic behind all the decisions leading up to the Warsaw Framework. Hence the question driving this chapter: is the resulting REDD+ ToC still viable?

REDD+ gives the answer itself. It has achieved much to 'pave the impact pathway', probably because its emerging flexible, multifaceted nature allowed it to fit into the diverse environmental, social and political realities of many tropical forest countries. It also seems to be surrounded by unproductive debate – in part because underlying ideological positions and definitions are not made explicit. It is facing powerful opposition – stemming from vested interests (Chapter 5) and hidden in placeholder debates, e.g., about cooperation (Chapter 11). REDD+ has not achieved the expected outcomes yet, and this is painful given the urgency of the emissions reduction (IPCC 2018). To respond to this urgency in a proactive way, the donor community must embrace the flexibility that allows REDD+ to thrive, step up to build carbon markets, foster market demand and provide the necessary funding. And the world will need to get used to the reality that achieving lasting policy reform takes time.

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