

# DEPARTMENT FOR EVALUATION

Report 2 / 2022

Literature review  
on civil society's roles  
in reducing tropical  
forest loss



**Commissioned by**  
Department for Evaluation

**Carried out by**  
CICERO Center for International Climate Research

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This report is the product of the authors, and responsibility for the accuracy of data included in this report rests with the authors alone. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department for Evaluation

*February 2022*



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## Preface

Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) aims at reducing and reversing loss of tropical forest due to its contribution to a stable climate, protection of biodiversity and achieving sustainable development. Civil society organizations have been considered as important actors in reaching NICFI's overarching goals.

This literature review has compiled the state of knowledge of the role of civil society in reducing and reversing loss of tropical forest. The review has also assessed the rigorousness, quality and robustness of the research findings and provided an overview of knowledge gaps. The purpose of this review is to serve as a basis for upcoming evaluations of the Norwegian engagement.

The literature review was carried out by Cicero on behalf of the Department for Evaluation in Norad.

Oslo, February 2022



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## Acknowledgements

CICERO Center for International Climate Research is an independent institute for interdisciplinary climate research in Oslo. This report was prepared by senior researchers Solveig Aamodt and Erlend A. T. Hermansen at CICERO. We are grateful for this opportunity to gain insights into a broader range of the literature on the role civil society plays in reducing tropical forest loss. In working on this report we received contributions and expert advice from a reference group consisting of Professor Arild Angelsen and PhD fellow Julia del Carmen Naime Sanchez Henkel at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Professor Emeritus Desmond McNeill at the Centre for Development

and the Environment (SUM), University of Oslo, and researcher Bård Lahn at CICERO. Norad and the Ministry of Climate and Environment offered good and valuable comments on the draft report which have been incorporated into this final version. Quality assurance was provided by Department Director Frode Longva at CICERO, and language editing was provided by Brigid McCauley at Lingotext AS. Any errors or shortcomings are our own.



# Executive Summary

The overarching reasons for establishing Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) are that reduced and reversed loss of tropical forest contributes to a stable climate, protects biodiversity and enhances sustainable development. Norad's Department for Evaluation has commissioned CICERO Center for International Climate Research with the task of collating and synthesising the current state of knowledge that can enable us to understand the role civil society plays in reducing tropical forest loss, particularly in Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+).

## METHODOLOGY

The previous literature review in this context is from 2016, and this semi-systematic review therefore concentrates on literature published from 2016 onwards. Systematic searches for relevant literature were made in Web of Science (WoS) and Google Scholar, followed by a qualitative selection from those articles to make sure those most relevant for answering the overarching aim of the review were included. Review

articles and other literature summaries covering a wide area of relevant research were particularly searched for. To ensure inclusion of relevant grey literature, the archives of key non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were searched specifically. In total, the search resulted in around 250 publications, of which 31 studies eventually were found relevant and were assessed more thoroughly. The final sample includes peer-reviewed articles, books, book chapters and grey literature. The assessed publications generally held a high standard, some are even excellent and groundbreaking.

## FINDINGS

The literature on civil society and REDD+ specifically is generally rather limited, but it spans a wide range of focus areas. The publications portray **civil society as playing a multitude of roles in REDD+: campaigning, advocacy, agenda-setting, knowledge production and provision, (process) facilitation, policy design, implementation and evaluation, legitimiser of initiatives, watchdog, commentator and informant. Formal and informal differences in the political**

**systems and political economies of tropical forest countries are important for the roles which different parts of civil society do and can play.** Several studies

emphasise that there is a difference between 1) poor governance and lack of coordination between sectors and levels of governance and 2) conflicting interests. They underline that even if the problems of poor coordination, governance and poor institutional capacity are amended, conflicts of interests still remain and undermine lasting efforts to reduce deforestation.

These findings are particularly relevant to Norad's programme for civil society funding:

- **Participation and inclusion in processes.** Relevant civil society actors, particularly the most marginalised such as indigenous people and other forest dwellers, are often inadequately included in REDD+ decision making and implementation, even when mechanisms to include these actors are formally in place. This





is particularly a challenge in African and Asian countries, where democratic civil society has a shorter history than in Latin American countries.

- **Diversity and conflicting interests among civil society actors.** The studies particularly point to differences between international NGOs (often seeing forests as carbon stock) and local civil society groups (often seeing forests as resources of well-being and livelihoods). Local actors often have higher legitimacy than national/international NGOs, and lasting REDD+ results depend on such legitimacy.
- **Framing of REDD+ as technical/difficult.** The complex and technical language often used in REDD+ policy making favours national experts and government representatives over local people and their organisations.
- **Insufficient and poorly channelled funding.** REDD+ funding is not sufficiently reaching the local actors that actually have to implement changes.

- **Pressure for supply chain initiatives.** Pressure and 'naming and shaming' from civil society actors, in particular international and European NGOs, has been important for companies to adopt zero deforestation pledges, form alliances and develop standards for certifying products.
- **Blind spots in supply chain initiatives.** The limited representation of Global South actors in these initiatives may strengthen unequal power balances and have negative effects on smallholders.
- **Indigenous people's territories** and other areas under the control of local communities/forest dwellers are among the best-performing areas when it comes to reduced deforestation and sustainable development, also contributing to monitoring forests and preventing crime.
- **Civil society as knowledge providers.** Civil society actors have played an important role in tracking the performance of private and public actors, and in providing and systematising deforestation and emissions data, especially where the national

governments have been unwilling or unable to provide such information.

- **Demanders of policy change and agenda-setters.** Civil society actors have been crucial for placing deforestation and forest degradation on the political agenda both in tropical forest countries and in donor countries.
- **Civil society can be important for policy and institutional endurance** in times of political instability or regime change.
- **Political organisation from the ground up is one of the success factors** in lasting initiatives for deforestation control.

#### KNOWLEDGE GAPS

- The **scientific literature on the roles of civil society in REDD+ is limited**, and largely consists of case studies of specific geographical contexts or policy initiatives. Very few large, systematic and comparative studies exist.



- It is **unclear how differences between civil society actors' characteristics, preferences and modes of working influence policy and intervention outcomes**. More research is needed on the diversity of civil society and practices, in particular on the relations between international, national and local civil society actors and between organised civil society groups and the actual interests and livelihoods of indigenous peoples and other forest dwellers.
- An important item in the research agenda is to **understand how international and national initiatives can encompass a broader understanding of tropical forests in a holistic sustainable development perspective**. Comparative research on the specificities and impact of the multiple roles and actions of civil society will be important in this regard.

#### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The reviewed publications advise that REDD+ programming needs to:

- **Address and relate to power relations**. Inclusion of civil society actors in REDD+ is insufficient if the

relative power distribution between different actors is not accounted for.

- **Recognise the key importance of land tenure**, including seeking to **account for systematic discrepancies in land tenure policies and practices** across contexts, policy levels and power differences between different actors in land tenure processes.
- **Recognise the key roles of indigenous peoples as legitimate right holders and providers of solutions**, not REDD+ beneficiaries as such.
- **Ensure real civil society engagement, local participation and representation in all steps of REDD+**: policy making and development, implementation and evaluation.
- **Pay attention and be sensitive to the multiple roles of CSOs**, and **recognise the trade-offs between different roles**.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

- **Funding for civil society engagement needs to**

**be adapted to specific contexts** on account of the context-dependent and multiple roles of CSOs, including the possible trade-offs between these different roles.

- **REDD+ funders should support rigorous impact evaluation studies of both carbon and non-carbon benefits** of REDD+ and of the role of civil society in contributing towards reduced tropical deforestation.
- To improve the knowledge base for further development of NICFI and REDD+, the Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment is advised to **allocate independent research funds** for research on concrete REDD+ interventions, e.g., through impact evaluations.





# Introduction

Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) was established on the basis that reduced and reversed loss of tropical forest contributes to a stable climate, protects biodiversity and enhances sustainable development. Norad's Department for Evaluation has commissioned CICERO Center for International Climate Research with the task of collating and synthesising the current state of knowledge relevant to NICFI's initiatives regarding the role of civil society. The previous literature review in this context is from 2016, and this review will therefore concentrate on literature published from 2016 onwards. The review will compile the current state of knowledge that can enable us to understand the role civil society plays in reducing tropical forest loss. The review will also assess the rigorosity, quality and robustness of research findings and provide an overview of knowledge gaps. The purpose of the review is to identify thematic issues to be addressed and potential methods to be used in new evaluations commissioned by the Department for Evaluation.

According to Norad's guiding principles for civil society support, 'civil society can be defined as an arena where people come together to promote interests and needs on behalf of themselves and others, challenge power-holders, and influence political debates. Civil society includes formally registered organisations, informal grassroots organisations, and social movements.' The guidelines further state: 'the objectives of Norad's support to civil society are democratisation, poverty eradication, human rights and sustainable development. Norad does not support civil society actors that do not further these objectives.' Based on these broad definitions, this literature review will focus on studies of civil society actors that share NICFI's aim of reduced and reversed loss of tropical forest.

It is also clear from the literature review that the term 'civil society' comprises a large and diverse pool of actors with different interests, agendas, roles, practices and understandings of reality. However, the publications reviewed are not necessarily clear on who they define as civil society actors. Some publications use the

concepts non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), forest dwellers, indigenous people, and independent experts, and refer to all of these as civil society actors. In some forest countries the barriers between actor groups are also rather blurred. Some organisations spend much time on political advocacy work but also collect data and publish their own research, while others also organise certain groups of workers and defend their interests. Depending on the profile of the government, civil society actors can also be contracted in as government-paid experts for a specific period. Applying a very strict definition of civil society would probably require detailed knowledge of the people involved in each case. The review does not aim to classify in what way the publications use the concept 'civil society', but when specified in the publications, we write which actors the publications have focused on when relevant for the purpose of this study.



## Methodology

The terms of reference (ToR) call for the literature review to 'systematically map all relevant research/evaluation-based evidence (not only the most well-known).' The methods for strict systematic mapping and review have mainly been developed within fields like medicine, where most of the research follows standard quantitative methods and builds on several previous studies, and where the results are quantitative or can be quantified. Regarding research on reducing tropical deforestation, the literature spans a range of disciplines, quantitative and qualitative methods, research questions and focus areas, and a strict systematic review will not be adequate for a high-quality and holistic understanding of important findings. For the purpose of our review of peer-reviewed literature, we therefore employed a semi-systematic approach<sup>1</sup> where we performed systematic searches for relevant

literature in Web of Science (WoS) and Google Scholar, and made a qualitative selection among those articles to make sure we included those most relevant to answer the overarching aim for the review. We specifically searched for relevant review articles and other literature summaries to cover a wide area of relevant research.

A considerable amount of knowledge on reducing tropical deforestation is provided in non-peer-reviewed publications. Research NGOs, centres, think tanks and other knowledge providers are sometimes involved in peer-reviewed research, but they also publish high-quality reports, studies, policy notes and other grey literature that could be relevant to this literature review. In our Google Scholar searches, however, few directly relevant publications appeared. To ensure a

broad search, we therefore searched specifically in the archives of CIFOR, IPAM, Imazon, WRI and CGD. These searches also resulted in few direct hits dealing specifically with the role of civil society in REDD+<sup>2</sup>, but revealed a few studies that dealt with this issue more generally and which were included in the review (see review matrix for details).

In WoS, searches for the terms 'civil society' and 'deforestation' produced 117 matches. Subsequent searches in Google Scholar for more specific words related to the four categories below, such as 'NGOs', 'local communities' and 'indigenous people' together with 'forest protection', 'supply chains' and 'deforestation' resulted in considerable overlap with the articles already found in the WoS search. The terms 'forest crime' and 'forest monitoring' were exceptions in

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1 For an overview of different review methodologies and their applicability, see Snyder, H. (2019) 'Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines' in *Journal of Business Research* 104, 333-339.

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2 REDD+ can refer to a narrow definition of the mechanism for paying for results (avoided deforestation) but also to a broader definition including other political and economic measures to reduce deforestation. In this report we apply the latter definition, as this is the one used by KOS and Norad.



that very few of these articles overlapped with the ones found in previous searches, few mentioned civil society, and most focused on various forms of legal protection or technical/satellite monitoring. In total, the search found around 250 publications, of which around half had titles clearly indicating a non-relevant study for this review, resulting in an initial sample of peer-reviewed articles in the magnitude of around 120 abstracts. In addition, we read abstracts of articles and studies suggested by the reference group.

The first sample of abstracts and summaries was read and, based on the abstracts (or introductions/summaries where abstracts were missing), around 40 studies were found relevant and were read more thoroughly. These included peer-reviewed articles, books, book chapters and grey literature. Some of them were not included in the matrix because they did not contain findings relevant to the focus of the report. Many studies that did not particularly focus on civil society still had some findings that were relevant to this review. There are particularly many of these 'fringe relevant' studies within category '1. Indigenous peoples, local communities and environmental defenders' (see section 4). This material was rather large, so we had

to select only the most relevant studies. In dialogue with Norad, we made a selection to include those that focused on countries that are NICFI partner countries, while those focusing on other geographical areas were not included. In total, 31 publications were selected for thorough review.

From these publications we developed a literature matrix where we mapped and categorised the studies to identify and assess research questions asked, geographical areas covered, administrative levels analysed (local, regional/jurisdictional, national or international), NICFI categories that were focused on, methods and methodology (including quality), key findings and policy recommendations.

The studies vary considerably in terms of length, scope, focus, methods and specific relevance to NICFI's civil society support. We then assessed rigorousness and quality of findings and recommendations based on overarching common criteria for quality in research. The quality of each publication was therefore assessed based on the principles of the SMART method: **Specific:** Does the study state clear and realistic research question(s)?; **Measurable:** Does the study present a

clear operationalisation of the research question and methods for collecting relevant data?; **Attainable:** Is the method adequate for measuring what the study sets out to investigate? Is it possible to attain reliable data?; **Realistic:** Is the study transparent and accurate in how conclusions were drawn from the collected data and analysis? Are the findings and conclusions valid for answering the research question(s)?; and **Timely:** Are the findings relevant and do they have added value for the knowledge base?

We found that the assessed publications generally held a high standard, some are even excellent and groundbreaking. Each publication was given an overall score. We found only a few studies we assessed to be of poor quality or difficult to assess, and these were not included in the matrix because the validity of the findings was unclear.



## Methods used in the publications

Most studies of civil society are qualitative. The studies typically focus on questions that require in-depth investigation, such as why some actors are involved in policy making and some not, who participates in practice, how civil society organises its activities, and the reason behind civil society demands, or they have an exploratory outset of unwrapping what actually happened and what can be learnt from it. Of the 31 selected publications, 15 used qualitative methods only. Most of the studies used a combination of qualitative sources such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and in-field observation. Such qualitative case studies are resource-intensive, which explains why most of them focus on one country. Only six of the studies have a qualitative comparative design with data collection and comparison across several case countries (Hermansen, 2017; Jodoin, 2017; Luttrell and Fripp, 2015; Milne et al., 2019; Ravikumar, et al., 2018; van Uhm and Grigore, 2021). Satyal (2018) uses a more hybrid method where data is collected using structural

questionnaires to collect data from four countries, and then qualitatively analysing the results.

Eight of the publications are review articles or other literature reviews. These are valuable from a knowledge-base perspective because already published data are selected and systematised, have been scrutinised by peers at least three times (in the original publication, in the review paper and in the review of the review paper), and the publications can cover a wider geographical span and see differences and similarities between case studies. The drawback compared with the case studies is the time lag, since the reviews draw on data already collected and published, and the level of detail, since less detail is offered per study reviewed. In the category of review studies, Milne et al. (2019) make a very solid contribution because their publication is based on their own ethnographic studies in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and these studies are then compared with an extensive literature review of studies with a similar ethnographic design in different countries. Duchelle et al. (2018a) and Simonet et al. (2018) are more

traditional review publications, but they are conducted by some of the leading experts in the field of REDD+ research and bring together and systematise knowledge across methodological approaches in a rigorous manner, making it possible to identify knowledge gaps. We argue that the study by Duchelle et al. (2018a), although not specifically analysing the roles of civil society, is groundbreaking, as it is one of the first rigorous reviews of actual well-being impacts of REDD+ on the ground. As such, we believe that the results in this study are also of particular relevance to Norad and KOS because impact is the ultimate objective of NICFI.

Four of the studies are purely quantitative, and one of them – the study by Walker et al. (2020) – we consider to be groundbreaking. It has long been acknowledged that there is less deforestation in areas controlled by indigenous people and other protected areas, but Walker et al. (2020) have collected data from nine Amazon countries for the years 2003 to 2016, and are able to show the impacts on deforestation and forest degradation and on disturbance in these areas, thus



enabling a cross-country comparison of the importance of these areas for decreasing carbon loss in forests.

Only two studies applied a mixed method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis (Jopke and Schoneveld, 2018; Pham et al., 2018b). Pham et al. (2018b) use a mix of statistics, face-to-face surveys, document analysis and focus groups in their comparative research on who should finance REDD+ and who should benefit from it in Brazil, Indonesia and Vietnam. Jopke and Schoneveld (2018) coded and analysed the zero deforestation commitments of 50 companies and combined them with semi-structured interviews in their assessment of these supply-side initiatives. One publication uses discourse analysis (Brown and MacLellan, 2020), and one publication is largely a presentation of the methods used in the Brazilian System for Estimating Greenhouse Gas Emissions (SEEG) database (Azavedo et al., 2018).



## Findings

Overall, the literature on civil society and REDD+ is rather limited, but it spans a wide variety of focus areas. The publications portray civil society as playing a multitude of roles in REDD+: campaigning, advocacy, agenda-setting, knowledge production and provision, (process) facilitation, policy design, implementation and evaluation, legitimiser of initiatives, watchdog, commentator and informant. However, few of them focus on the *impact* of that involvement, such as the actual impact on the policies adopted (Aamodt, 2018; Hermansen et al., 2017; Hochstetler, 2021; Ravikumar et al., 2018; Seymour and Busch, 2016 are exceptions). We found that many of the studies build on each other, and several publications originate in the extensive and thorough case study work organised and financed by CIFOR. We attribute the relatively small universe of studies on civil society's role in reducing tropical deforestation to the rather limited number of research communities worldwide that focus on these issues.

That said, there are several contributions to the scientific literature that are relevant for programming future evaluations of the NICFI civil society scheme. As outlined in section 3, it should be noted that most of the studies focus on one or a few specific countries. Context is therefore essential. The same policy measure or project design can have very different outcomes and effects depending on national and local conditions. The term 'political settlement' is useful for describing these differences. Khan outlines how 'political settlement is often loosely used to describe the "social order" based on political compromises between powerful groups in society that sets [sic] the context for institutional and other policies' (2010, 4).

Although the studies reviewed did not apply that particular term, it serves well to explain how *formal and informal differences in the political systems and political economies of tropical forest countries are found to be important for the role which different parts of civil society do and can play*. Pham et al. (2021a) call it the 'existing political space for change' (2021a,

87) in which civil society actors can operate. Although many of the countries covered by the studies in this review have challenges related to institutional capacity, corruption, and lack of transparency, they have governance systems that serve to balance political, economic and societal interests. This balance is often also favourable to the drivers of deforestation, and even if the political system does not appear to function in a very sustainable way, it is important to bear in mind that the system is there, has developed, has settled over time, and thus serves its purpose for important actors at different levels. Milne et al. (2019), Pham et al. (2021b) and Ravikumar et al. (2018) all argue that there is a difference between 1) poor governance and lack of coordination between sectors and levels of governance and 2) conflicting interests. All these studies underline that even if the problems of poor coordination, governance and poor institutional capacity are amended, the conflicts of interests still remain and undermine lasting efforts to reduce deforestation.





In the following we will categorise the findings in the publications according to the setup of Norad's civil society scheme, i.e.,: 1) Indigenous peoples, local communities and environmental defenders; 2) Deforestation-free supply chains and financial markets; 3) Reduced forest crime and improved forest monitoring; and 4) Mobilising ambition and support for forest friendly policies. Nevertheless, it should be noted that many studies cover more than one category, and the lines between the categories are sometimes blurred.

## 4.1 Indigenous peoples, local communities and environmental defenders

As was expected, this first category is the one with most relevant literature. Half of the studies reviewed have findings that are relevant to this category. The findings can be divided into four overarching themes:

**Participation/inclusion in processes.** Most of the studies focus on mapping, assessing and explaining the participation of civil society in REDD+ policy making

from a democratic perspective, with the normative outset that those most affected by forest policies should be involved in policy making. Satyal (2018) and Mbeche (2017) find that while indigenous people and local communities often are supposedly included in processes, the actors representing them are not actually selected/elected by those they allegedly represent. Thus, the civil society representatives participating in REDD+ policy making do not necessarily have a mandate from those they supposedly represent (Trench et al., 2017). Pham et al. (2021a) also note the late and mainly 'box-ticking' involvement of civil society organisations in DR Congo's REDD+ policy development.

These studies all focus on African countries, so we cannot generalise the finding to all REDD+ countries. However, in a comparative study of REDD+ implementation in Indonesia, Peru, and Tanzania, Sunderlin et al. (2018) find that although REDD+ policy development at national level has been somewhat successful in the three countries, forest dwellers, in particular indigenous people, are still often excluded from decision making and land use. Milne et al.'s review

of ethnographic REDD+ 'on-the-ground' studies has a global focus and confirms that 'a suite of enrolment issues is present, meaning that those who need to be "on board" for REDD+ to succeed remain only partially engaged, or indeed not targeted at all' (2019, 92). In comparing REDD+ development in Indonesia and Tanzania, Jodoin (2017) finds that the participatory rights of indigenous peoples and local communities have been better secured in the REDD+ processes than their substantive rights (e.g., rights to forests and land tenure).

Milne et al. (2019) establishes that involvement and actual participation of indigenous and local civil society actors are also important for the success of REDD+. In line with this, Larsen et al. (2018) study hybrid REDD+ governance (governance as cooperation between civil society and government actors) in Indonesia and find that local civil society organisations may not have the same level of capacity and knowledge as national or international NGOs, but they have higher legitimacy. They are therefore crucial to involve for the whole process of REDD+ project development and implementation to be legitimate to local actors.



Without such local legitimacy, the hybrid governance of REDD+ with government and civil society actors involved becomes more fragile (Larsen et al., 2018). Satyal (2018) finds that in Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia and the Republic of Congo the FLEGT VPA<sup>3</sup> processes are more inclusive of local civil society actors than the REDD+ processes. Luttrell and Fripp (2015) and Satyal (2018) argue that there is little learning or exchange of knowledge between the FLEGT and REDD+ processes, although there are potentially large synergies and positive learning outcomes.

**Diversity and conflicting interests among civil society actors.** The reviewed literature points out that even if actors agree on the aim of reducing deforestation and forest degradation, there are several diverging interests and differences in problem definition between civil society actors (Larsen et al., 2018; Mbeche, 2017; Satyal, 2018; Seymour and Busch, 2016). The difference in interests between international NGOs and local civil society actors is highlighted by several

scholars. The international NGOs may well have expertise and high capacity that may be necessary and important in many cases of REDD+ project development and implementation, but they tend to have a narrower understanding of problems than do local civil society actors have (Larsen et al., 2018).

International NGOs are more inclined to share the view of donors, having a more instrumental view of forests as carbon stocks (Brown and MacLellan, 2020; Cook et al., 2017). Local civil society actors (including indigenous people) tend to have a more holistic view, where tenure rights, rights to forest use, resources, environmental risks, livelihood and well-being are just as important aims as carbon capture (Duchelle et al., 2018b; Jodoin, 2017; Satyal, 2018). The literature therefore emphasises that in countries and locations where the local civil society is either insufficiently involved in processes or is poorly organised politically, the carbon-focused agenda of international donors and NGOs may override and weaken the more holistic

interests and rights of local livelihoods (Cook et al., 2017; Trench et al., 2017).

Related to this conflict of interests, though still a somewhat different view, is the opposition to the market thinking in REDD+ that is shared by a few civil society actors, some of them international NGOs, some smaller NGOs and some indigenous organisations (Seymour and Busch, 2016). The argument here is that creating a market system will give forests new value in a neoliberal sense, engage governments and private companies, and take the responsibility and ownership away from the ones that have protected the forests until now. In this process the needs and environmental risks of those living in the forests are given secondary importance (Duchelle et al., 2018a; Seymour and Busch, 2016; Simonet et al., 2018). Simonet et al. (2018) argue that livelihood enhancements can help minimise trade-offs between carbon and well-being outcomes, but this issue requires more research. As Duchelle et al. conclude, 'meaningful participation in

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3 FLEGT is the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade regulation, and FLEGT VPA are Voluntary Partnership Agreements on timber trade between the EU and a partner country under this regulation.



the design and rollout of interventions – as a way to achieve more equitable and lasting results – is still a frontier for REDD+' (2018a).

**Framing of REDD+ as technical/difficult.** The participation of forest dwellers, local communities, indigenous peoples and their organisations in REDD+ policy making is hampered by the framing of REDD+ as a technical and/or difficult issue that requires high levels of expertise (Mbeche, 2018; Satyal, 2018). The technical language often used by donors, international NGOs and national government experts alienates the local civil society actors, even if they are formally included in the processes (Brown and MacLellan, 2020; Satyal, 2018). This alienation may have a negative impact on the lasting effect of initiatives, since the possibility of continued progress when international actors leave the area will depend on local ownership and well-established ties between civil society and government (Pham et al., 2021a). The technical language also depoliticises implementation, and thus ignores important aspects (Mbeche, 2018).

**Funding.** The final issue highlighted in the literature on indigenous and local communities is how REDD+

funding is not sufficiently reaching the local actors that actually have to implement changes (Laing, 2018; Milne et al., 2019; Sunderlin et al., 2018). In combination with a technical/instrumental REDD+ understanding, the concentration of funding at governance level is a problem in countries with less solid and established civil societies and advocacy traditions (mainly Asian and African countries), where current REDD+ practices can strengthen the state control of forests at the expense of local needs and traditional practices. In Latin American countries the local and indigenous forest tenure is relatively strong (compared to Asian and African countries), and civil society's capacity to organise politically has been important for channelling funding to those actually changing their practices (Milne et al., 2019).

## 4.2 Deforestation-free supply chains and financial markets

**Pressure for supply chain initiatives.** It is well documented in the literature that pressure from civil society actors, in particular international and European NGOs, has been important for pressuring companies to adopt zero deforestation pledges, form alliances,

and develop standards for certifying products (Jopke and Schoneveld, 2018; Lambin et al., 2018; Seymour and Busch, 2016; Weber and Partzsch, 2018). As highlighted above, the literature again underscores that there are differences between the international NGOs and the interests of local civil society in forest countries. Deforestation-free supply chains are still mainly a Global North-driven phenomenon, and few Global South actors are involved in the policy making (Weber and Partzsch, 2018). Pham et al. (2021b) find that local and national civil society actors want to focus more on the local and national beneficiaries of deforestation, emphasising that it is not mainly transnational actors that gain from deforestation-driving activities.

**Blind spots in supply chain initiatives.** The studies on supply chain initiatives find it problematic that the NGOs involved in such initiatives legitimise the capitalistic system, which focuses on economic growth, free trade, increased consumption and maximising profit, and is in itself one of the key drivers of deforestation (Seymour and Busch, 2016; Weber and Partzsch, 2018). The root causes of deforestation are not addressed by these initiatives, and unless they are followed up



by strong public policies and governance in tropical forest countries, their impact on deforestation may be rather limited due to, for example, leakage or lack of control over what suppliers do when trading with others (Lambin et al., 2018; Weber and Partzsch, 2018).

Deforestation-free supply chain initiatives may also have negative consequences for smallholders because these actors have fewer resources to spend on understanding and adapting to the bureaucratic and technical requirements for joining the initiative and/or having their commodities certified (Jopke and Schoneveld, 2018; Lambin et al., 2018).

### 4.3 Reduced forest crime and improved forest monitoring

Of the four categories of priorities in Norad's civil society scheme for NICFI, the third, on reduced forest crime and improved forest monitoring, is the one that seems least covered by existing studies. The literature on forest crime and forest monitoring is not very large and mainly consists of research on legal structures and strategies, and on monitoring in the sense of satellite images or policing. However, we found a few studies

focusing on civil society in this context, and two main themes are highlighted below.

**Indigenous people's territories.** First, neoclassical economic assumptions predicting that community-based forest management would lead to overexploitation and risk 'tragedy of the commons' situations have been proven wrong. Walker et al. (2020), Duchelle et al. (2018b), and Schleicher et al. (2017) all confirm that indigenous people's territories and other areas under the control of local communities/forest dwellers are among the best-performing areas when it comes to reduced deforestation and sustainable development, and thus contribute to both monitoring forests and preventing crime.

In a comprehensive study of nine Amazon countries, Walker et al. conclude that 'indigenous land tenure and management are key to safeguarding Amazonian forests against increasing demands for the region's land, energy, and mineral resources' (2020, 3022). Schleicher et al. (2017) find that in the Peruvian Amazon indigenous territories and in civil society and private conservation, concessions were generally more effective than state-controlled protected areas,

although all three protection schemes performed considerably better than the unprotected control areas.

Although not a central focus of this review, it should be mentioned that it is well established that forest monitoring and crime prevention can be dangerous, in particular for local and indigenous people.<sup>4</sup> In their on-the-ground study of forest crime, van Uhm and Grigore (2021) focus on indigenous groups in border areas, namely the Panama–Colombia border and the Laos–Myanmar–Thailand border. They find that these groups live under huge pressure from organised criminal groups that need their indigenous knowledge to establish smuggler routes in densely forested border areas. These criminal actors take advantage of indigenous groups' already marginalised position and their lack of legal alternatives, and often force them to cooperate in exchange for safety (van Uhm and Grigore, 2021).

4 See for instance the report by Global Witness on the killings of 227 environmental protectors in 2020 'Last line of defence: The industries causing the climate crisis and attacks against land and environmental defenders'. Available at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/>



Duchelle et al. (2018b) find that in Indonesia, the REDD+ process has been important for mapping and creating indigenous territories, but the lasting result of this progress is too early to assess. Mbzibain and Ongolo (2019) study independent forest monitoring (IFM) in Cameroon and distinguish between mandated (in contract with the government) and non-mandated (without a contract with the government) IFM. They state that in Cameroon non-mandated IFM has emerged because the state-controlled forest management has failed, and through IFMs the country's civil society has played a significant role in improving transparency and holding decision makers to account. Thus, the strongest evidence of civil society's positive contribution to forest monitoring and crime prevention is from South America. While the evidence from Asia and Africa points in the same direction, the number of studies there is more limited. These findings point back to Khan's (2010) definition of political settlements. Many African and Asian countries have rather short histories as independent and democratic states, whereas the Latin American countries, despite brutal dictatorships in recent histories, have much more established traditions in civil society organisation and political contestation.

**Civil society as knowledge providers.** Second, the literature finds that civil society actors in several instances and countries have played an important role in tracking the performance of private and public actors and in providing and systematising deforestation and emissions data, especially in cases where the national governments have been unwilling or unable to provide such information (Azevedo et al., 2018; Jopke and Schoneveld, 2018; Lambin et al., 2018). A prominent example is the civil society-driven System for Estimating Greenhouse Gas Emissions (SEEG) database in Brazil that produces annual estimates of GHG emissions in Brazil that are openly available for all (Azevedo et al., 2018).

#### 4.4 Mobilising ambition and support for forest-friendly policies

**Demanders of policy change and agenda-setters.**

A change in practices, policies and/or incentive structures requires what Underdal (2000) calls a demand for change. Getting back to Khan's (2010) argument on political settlements, the drivers of deforestation are already settled in the current economic and political systems, and studies find that

civil society actors have been crucial for mobilising sufficient demand to place deforestation and forest degradation on the political agenda both in tropical forest countries and in donor countries (Aamodt, 2018; Hermansen et al., 2017; Seymour and Busch, 2016). Without civil society actors, as well as cooperation and knowledge exchange between civil society actors in the Global North and South, REDD+ would probably not have been established so early (Hermansen et al., 2017; Seymour and Busch, 2016).

**Policy and institutional endurance.** From the comparative environmental politics literature, Steinberg (2012) highlights that political stability is a particular challenge in developing countries. Climate policy in general requires long-term planning. However, political instability with high turnover in administrations and sometimes low predictability in both political decisions and implementation poses a major challenge to the effect of climate policies (Steinberg, 2012). In their study of deforestation rates in Brazil, Rodrigues-Filho et al. (2014) confirm these findings and show that deforestation rates increase considerably in periods of regime change when the turnover in local and national administrations is high and deforestation actors can



take advantage of power vacuums. Forest-friendly policies should therefore be regarded as processes where adoption and implementation are equally important and where civil society can play roles at different policy stages. Steinberg (2012) emphasises the role of civil society as a stabiliser and a factor that can enhance the endurance of climate policies when the official political system is unable to do so. In their study of multi-stakeholder forums for addressing land use and land-use change, Barletti et al. (2020) find that if well-functioning, such forums can ensure the endurance of processes across political regime changes.

The literature further highlights that the separation between government and civil society may be rather blurred in tropical forest countries, and that in Brazil environmental activists were actively recruited to work for the government from 2004 onwards, and these civil society actors thus had a direct impact on formulating the climate law adopted in 2010 (Aamodt, 2018; Hochstatler, 2021). In Indonesia, too, civil society actors have been used by the government as experts in REDD+ policy making (Duchelle et al., 2018b). Civil society's ability to be direct or indirect policy makers

depends on its own history and capacity, on the political settlement's traditions in civil society consultations, and on the current government's interest in using those channels if they exist. In both Brazil and Indonesia, civil society's influence on policy development and implementation has decreased significantly following regime changes (Duchelle et al., 2018b; Hochstetler, 2021).

**Political organisation from the ground up.** In their comparative study of Peru, Indonesia and Mexico, Ravikumar et al. (2018) find that an organised civil society is key to successful low-emissions development initiatives. Political organisation from the ground up, and support and cooperation between NGOs at different levels (local, national and international), are particular success factors (Ravikumar et al., 2018).

A final point is that establishing the causal link between civil society activities and actual reduced deforestation or GHG emissions is very difficult, maybe even impossible, yet some researchers have attempted to do so. In a quantitative study of the influence of environmental NGOs on climate performance, Pacheco-Vega and Murdie find that 'environmental NGOs are

associated with lower CO2 emissions, but only in countries where (a) citizens already enjoy political civil liberties or (b) the country is vulnerable to external pressure' (2020, 195). Their findings are most robust in non-OECD countries. However, the methods they use are only valid for establishing a correlation, not a causal relationship, between environmental NGOs and lower CO2 emissions.





## Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Knowledge gaps identified

As mentioned above, the literature portrays civil society as playing a multitude of roles in REDD+: campaigning, advocacy, agenda-setting, knowledge production and provision, (process) facilitation, policy design, implementation and evaluation, legitimiser of initiatives, watchdog, commentator and informant. However, in most studies the specificities of these roles (and their interactions) are poorly defined, measured and evaluated, and generally few specific, systematic and comparative studies of civil society engagement exist. Many studies are thorough in mapping civil society's participation in policy making and other processes, but few make an assessment of the impact of this participation in terms of trying to assess the counterfactual: to what extent did the participation (or non-participation) of civil society influence the final outcome? And what would these policies or processes have looked like with more/less/different participation from civil society actors?

The scientific literature on the roles of civil society in REDD+ is generally limited. The literature that does exist largely consists of case studies focused on specific geographical contexts or policy initiatives. Another reason for the small number of large, systematic and comparative studies is the set-up of most REDD+ initiatives, which lack a clear baseline or credible counterfactual. Very few studies are mixed-method, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Research that can take a more holistic focus, investigating the various drivers and barriers of deforestation-related policies and policy implementation both within and across tropical forest countries and jurisdictions, would greatly advance our understanding of the roles civil society actors at different levels can and do play in advancing NICI's overall agenda. Because REDD+ has now existed for more than a decade, more classical implementation studies that assess intended and unintended consequences compared to policy/programme intentions would also be possible and desirable.

Although civil society actors advocate in favour of reduced deforestation and forest degradation, it is unclear how differences between these actors' preferences and modes of working influence policy and intervention outcomes. More research is needed on the diversity of civil society and practices, in particular on the relations between international, national and local civil society actors and on the relations between organised civil society groups and the actual interests and livelihoods of vulnerable indigenous people and other forest dwellers. To enable sufficient analytical distance and to prevent bias, it is important that these studies are funded as independent research projects.

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are indivisible. Although the REDD+ agenda at the local level in several projects has involved a broader set of concerns, the literature shows that the international REDD+ discourse is still dominated by carbon counting, for instance in ongoing supply chain initiatives. An important research agenda now is therefore to under-



stand how international and national initiatives can encompass a broader understanding of tropical forests from a holistic SDG perspective. Comparative research on the specificities and impacts of the multiple roles and actions of civil society will be important in this regard.

## 5.2 Policy recommendations

The majority (17 out of 31) of the publications contains policy recommendations. However, the generalizability of these recommendations is somewhat limited, as they are often derived from relatively context-dependent material and are not always supported by multiple lines of evidence. Moreover, the specificity and level of detail in the recommendations vary significantly. It is not always clear from the publications who the recommendations are aimed at, but most address those with power to change, i.e., donors (with economic and discursive power) and state actors in forest countries (with political and discursive power). That said, we will in the following try to summarise some key recommendations found in the literature.

REDD+ programming should to a larger degree:

- **Address and relate to power relations.** Inclusion of civil society actors in REDD+ is commonplace and is a necessary step in distributing power in REDD+ interventions, but is insufficient unless the relative power distribution between different actors is accounted for. In REDD+ countries there are often strong political and economic interests that benefit from more or less business as usual; if these actors get a say equal to that of civil society in REDD+ programming, REDD+ is less likely to succeed.
- **Recognise the key importance of land tenure,** including seeking to account for systematic discrepancies in land tenure policies and practices across contexts, policy levels (e.g., national vs local) and power differences between different actors in land tenure processes.
- **Recognise the key roles of indigenous peoples** as legitimate right holders and providers of solutions, not REDD+ beneficiaries as such. It is well documented in the scientific literature that indigenous peoples play crucial roles in keeping rainforests intact; hence their voice and input to policy programming is absolutely crucial for REDD+ to succeed.
- **Ensure meaningful civil society engagement, local participation and representation** in all steps of REDD+: policy making and development, implementation, and evaluation. Meaningful participation is important to ensure that REDD+ interventions are adapted to local contexts and may, if properly designed, simultaneously add legitimacy, credibility and accountability to initiatives.
- **Pay attention to the multiple roles of NGOs and CSOs** and to recognition of the trade-offs between different roles. Civil society undoubtedly plays key roles in REDD+, but some roles may also be conflicting, such as acting as implementers and simultaneously be expected to act as REDD+ watchdogs in the public sphere. REDD+ policy makers should therefore seek a balanced portfolio of projects involving civil society in diverse roles.



### 5.3 Concluding remarks

A key takeaway from the literature assessed in this report is the importance of attention and sensitivity to the multiple roles of civil society and to the synergies and trade-offs between different roles, not least how these differ and compare across contexts. Funding for civil society engagement needs to be adapted to specific contexts (e.g., as regarding the relative degree to which civil liberties and rights are well established).

This literature review has also revealed the lack of rigorous and credible impact studies of REDD+ interventions on the ground. We therefore encourage REDD+ funders and programmers to (to a larger degree) financially support rigorous impact evaluation studies of both carbon and non-carbon benefits of REDD+ and of the roles of civil society in contributing towards different REDD+ programme goals.

Because Norway is a major donor in efforts to reduce tropical deforestation and because the necessity to address SDGs in a holistic manner is increasingly highlighted in Norwegian climate and development politics, more knowledge is required to address these interlinked challenges sustainably. Although project

and programme evaluations can give valuable and important information to donors and other policy actors, independent research is in a freer position to investigate all relevant variables and can to a larger and more systematic degree draw lessons across cases and time. To enable the creation of a much-needed knowledge base, the Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment (MCE) could allocate independent research funds for research on REDD+, including on concrete REDD+ interventions, e.g., through impact evaluations and through specifically addressing the role of civil society. Lessons from such studies can then be fed back to the MCE and other relevant public bodies. Such funding can for instance be channelled through existing programmes in the Research Council of Norway (e.g., NORGLOBAL2 and KLIMAFORSK).



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## Acronyms and abbreviations

CGD – Center for Global Development

CIFOR – Center for International Forestry Research

CSO – civil society organisation

IFM – independent forest monitoring

Imazon – Instituto do Homem e Meio Ambiente da Amazônia

IPAM – Instituto de Pesquisa Ambiental da Amazonia

KOS – Klima- og skoginitiativet

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MCE – Ministry of Climate and Environment

NGO – non-governmental organisation

NICFI – Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative

REDD+ – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation

ToR – terms of reference

WoS – Web of Science

WRI – World Resources Institute



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Cover photo Karine Aigner /Nature Picture Library

ISBN 978-82-8369-093-4

February 2022