Navigating climate change mitigation and sustainable development in the tropics

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Whatever the final outcome of the Paris climate conference may be, it is clear that forests and land-use need to be part of the transition to a low-emission future.

Deforestation and land-use change in the tropics are among the most significant global drivers of climate change. At the same time, conversion of native vegetation to pasture and cropland is a way for millions of people to secure and improve their livelihoods, across the tropics.

In a vicious cycle, deforestation and land use changes lead to degradation of ecosystem services that communities depend on, such as water, fish, game and soil resources, ultimately undermining human wellbeing.

As studies show, tropical forests are crucial in tackling climate change. Achieving a low-emission future predicates changing the development patterns that drive climate change and forest destruction in a way that also meets rural development needs. It is challenging, but the Sustainable Tropics Alliance is showing how it can be done.

The Alliance is a strategic partnership of independent, non-governmental organisations that draw on research, multi-stakeholder engagement, and local knowledge to develop new approaches to low-emission rural development (LED-R) in tropical regions. A transformational framework for large-scale, bottom-up solutions

Low-emission rural development (LED-R) is one form of low-emission development, with the added “R” denoting that its emphasis is rural. LED-R can be described as sustainable development focused on land-related activities, with an emphasis on climate mitigation and adaptation. Hallmarks of LED-R include:

- **Bottom-up**: top-down strategies for slowing deforestation and reducing emissions are failing to penetrate regional development strategies and improve human wellbeing.

- **Regional**: based on sub-national jurisdictions, embedding climate goals in regional development strategies.

- **Politically viable, empowering marginalised actors**: achieving LED-R requires genuine participation of diverse stakeholders; securing rights to resources and increasing governance capacity of local institutions.

- **Compatibility with existing frameworks**, including REDD+, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and major private sector initiatives. LED-R harnesses climate mitigation and adaptation strategies to work in concert with development policies and alternative livelihood strategies.
The approach is tailored to local contexts: current development paradigms are products of specific histories, and interacting cultural, political, economic and biophysical processes. The Sustainable Tropics Alliance has identified five elements for defining progress towards low-emission rural development: sustainable economic development, healthy ecosystems, manageable climate, equitable social systems, and human wellbeing.

Helping to implement international commitments

Countries are expected to implement increasingly complicated international commitments related to climate change and sustainable development. These include the SDGs and also sub-national commitments, for example, in relation to benefit sharing with forest-dependent communities, smallholders and indigenous peoples, as in the Rio Branco Declaration.

LED-R approaches can help countries – through both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders – to respond in an integrated way to international expectations related to climate change mitigation, social equity and sustainable development, including sustainable sourcing of commodities.

REDD+ is one of the tools for achieving LED-R, but it should not be treated in isolation. REDD+ needs to be part of a transition to low-emission rural development, which works for rural people and takes account of local development needs, agricultural practices, cultural and political circumstances and global economic drivers such a commodity prices.

Not easy, but the Sustainable Tropics Alliance is identifying steps towards success

The role of tropical forests in climate stability is clear, and the past decade has brought about important advances through corporate and government commitments to reduce deforestation, as well as a degree of political will and institutional architecture for climate finance and benefit-sharing. However, many of these commitments are extremely difficult to implement on the ground, and few rural communities are receiving benefits.

Tropical regions face an increasingly complex and increasingly urgent challenge: how can they advance rural development in a way that improves local and regional wellbeing, while also fulfilling an expanding global role in terms of climate change and food security?

There are no ‘silver bullets’ – but empowering local stakeholders is crucial. Governments, businesses, farmers, communities and civil society must all be at the table to drive the transition to low-emission rural development.

The Sustainable Tropics Alliance is helping to identify potential solutions to these complex challenges, finding synergies between climate mitigation, sustainable economic growth and human wellbeing.

MORE INFO

The supporting research and evidence are downloadable at earthinnovation.org and sustainabletropics.org.

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