

GEF Small Grants Programme

Community-based REDD+: Empowering Indigenous Communities through Participatory Carbon Accounting

Grantee: Organización de Unidad y Desarrollo de la Comunidad de Ipetí-Emberá (OUDCIE)

Location: Ipetí Emberá, Panama

SGP Contribution: US\$ 30,000

Cash Co-Financing: US\$ 30,400

In-Kind Co-Financing: US\$ 45,000

Project Duration: Dec 2008 – Dec 2011

Number of people served: 550 members

Focal area: Climate Change

Background

The Ipetí community was established in the mid-1970's after the Emberá people were relocated after the construction of a hydroelectric dam on Lake Bayano. Currently, the community is composed of 550 people living on 3,195 hectares (ha) of collectively owned land. The community mainly relies on subsistence agriculture, rearing of cattle and traditional crafts. As a result of unsustainable agricultural practices such as the establishment of pastures and timber harvesting in addition to land invasion, the indigenous community was facing deforestation and a rapid decline of their natural carbon stocks by more than 50% by 2024 according to the participatory study conducted in partnership with McGill University. The study demonstrated that there was considerable potential in the Ipetí-Emberá land for a carbon sequestration project to stabilize carbon stocks while also providing livelihood and biodiversity

benefits, hence demonstrating all prerequisites for the implementation of a REDD+ carbon initiative. The project was spearheaded by the community-based organization "Organización de Unidad y Desarrollo de la Comunidad de Ipetí-Emberá" (OUDCIE) representing all community members, and implemented with technical and financial support by the GEF Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP), implemented by UNDP, with technical support from McGill University. In order to reverse deforestation and protect carbon stocks on indigenous lands, the project aimed to empower the community to participate in the voluntary carbon market by involving community members directly in participatory monitoring and completing a carbon offset contract with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), which was looking to become carbon-neutral. Given the innovative potential of the initiative, the GEF Small Grants Programme supported the project in 2008.

Project Objectives and Key Activities

The main goal of the project was to build the capacity of the community for participation in carbon market mechanisms, as OUDCIE was striving to create incentives to preserve the community forests and counteract economic pressures. In order to achieve these objectives, participating families were trained in forest preservation, sustainable forest management, agro-forestry and reforestation with native species. The first step was the completion of a forest carbon inventory of the average above and below-ground carbon stocks, for which the community members were trained as carbon experts. With the support of McGill University scientists, the community went on to negotiate



a contract with STRI for establishing 10 ha of native timber species, thereby enhancing carbon stocks by 4,400 tCO₂e. The participants employed reforestation with native species and agro-forestry, given that the contract also included a component to avoid deforestation on 8 ha per year, which aimed at avoiding 3300 tCO₂e annually.

Environmental Impact

In addition to the direct environmental benefits of off-setting 4,400 tCO₂e of carbon emissions through reforestation and avoiding additional 3300tCO₂e by preserving the existing forest, the project produced biodiversity benefits by preserving native timber and fruit trees, including high cultural value and endemic species that have almost been lost in the community's collective lands. In addition to these direct impacts, the importance of the project as an innovative partnership ensuring full community participation should not be underestimated, since without community buy-in REDD+ interventions would not be sustainable.

Socio-Economic Impact

The project provided benefits to the 550 members of the community. Part of the funds earned in this carbon off-set project will go to the community fund to improve education and basic infrastructure, including cultural and tourism development. Twenty-two of the 71 community households directly participating in the project, received additional income as payment for establishing and maintaining the reforestation initiative as well as from agro-forestry, given that fruit and timber were chosen because of their high market value. Additionally, the fruits have been used for household consumption, improving food security in the community. Furthermore, the community organization benefited from capacity building and 30 members were trained in forestry and carbon accounting.



Policy Impact, Replication and Scaling up

This pilot initiative will likely have a significant policy impact. In addition to achieving social and environmental benefits, the project supported the development and demonstration of a participatory carbon accounting methodology that ensures full involvement of an indigenous community. The methodology incorporates both rigorous scientific input of McGill University academics as well as the community-focused approach of the GEF SGP. The project focus is consistent with the national environmental strategy of Panama as well as GEF SGP's commitment to develop and test innovative participatory methodologies empowering communities for participation in carbon trade regimens, which are currently missing. The methodology and approach piloted in this project can be scaled up and further tested in Panama as well as other countries of the region, potentially resulting in the development of a new carbon accounting methodology, which can be used in other REDD+ initiatives.

"We are not selling a tree, we are not selling the land, we are selling carbon, an ecosystem service"
Ultiminio Cabrera, OUDCIE

Lessons learned

As with many other GEF SGP initiatives, it was demonstrated that community leadership, communication, and coordination capacities are crucial for project success, sustainability and successful implementation. Given the long-term nature of reforestation and carbon storage activities, capacity building in management and leadership should be an on-going process, allowing new generations to take over project management through time. Sustainable REDD+ interventions cannot succeed without non-carbon benefits. Reforestation with native timber not only has great potential for enhancing carbon stocks, but also brings additional biodiversity benefits. Agroforestry has a positive environmental impact while addressing livelihoods and food security. Community REDD+ initiatives are vulnerable to external land-use pressures, including land tenure and land-use conflicts, which may need to be addressed to ensure sustainability.