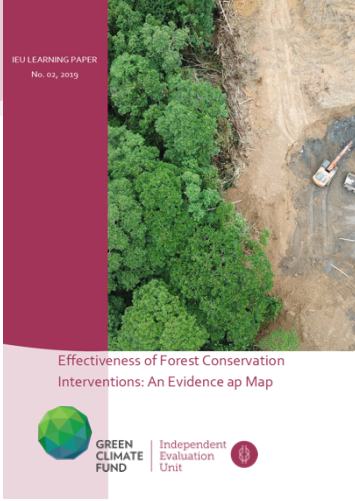
GREEN CLIMATE FUND | Independent Evaluation Unit

TRUSTED EVIDENCE
INFORMED POLICIES
HIGH IMPACT

LEARNING PAPER SUMMARY:

Effectiveness of Forest Conservation Interventions: An Evidence Gap Map



The IEU's Learning Paper Series fosters learning and discussion of climate evaluation, low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways. This 2-page summary provides an overview of the IEU's learning paper on the effectiveness of forest conservation interventions: an evidence gap map.[1]

Background

What is an evidence gap map?

Evidence gap maps (EGMs) are collections of thematic evidence covering a particular topic. They consolidate what we know and don't know about 'what works' in a specific sector. EGMs achieve this by mapping sector related systematic reviews and impact evaluations.

The IEU's forest conservation EGM

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) supports forest and land-use projects that can potentially lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions within the REDD+ framework (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation). The learning paper summarized in this brief assists this aim by mapping the availability of evaluations and analyzing their assessments of the interventions' effectiveness. **Such information is critical to supporting the evidence-based decision-making of the GCF and other organizations** that invest in forest-based climate change.

The learning paper updates a previous EGM of forest conservation interventions prepared by 3ie, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation. It includes peer-reviewed articles collected via the Scopus and Web of Science database and published between 1 January 2016 and August 2018. Specifically, the learning paper's EGM focuses on articles that examine conservation interventions in developing countries.

Method

The EGM divides articles and studies into three tiers. Tier 1 studies used experimental and quasi-experimental methods to understand causal and attributable impact (50 studies). Tier 2 studies used non-experimental methods (28 studies) but had comparators. Tier 3 studies lacked clear comparators or had illogically derived conclusions but provided useful qualitative data for forestry-related interventions (86 studies). The paper also constructed a list of intervention types to reduce any overlap that might result in double or miscounting. See Table 1.

Broad categories of forest conservation interventions
Conditional incentives, such as payments for environmental services
Protected areas
Locally based conservation
Intragovernmental deforestation-curbing regulations and incentives
Product-market-based conservation
Indirect conservation based on improved technologies and/or substitution effects
Indirect conservation based on enabling conditions
Land tenure reforms
Land swaps

Table 1 Intervention categories for forest conservation measures

Key findings

Distribution of interventions

The range of intervention types in the articles examined is highly uneven. Studies of protected areas dominate, followed by locally managed conservation projects and, a distant third, payments for environmental services. Interventions were usually evaluated from the perspective of forest cover, while biodiversity and socioeconomic outcomes were poorly addressed.

[1] The citation for the IEU learning paper discussed in this brief is: Pirard, R., Wunder, S., Duchelle, A.E., Puri, J., Asfaw, S., Bulusu, M., Petit, H., & Vedoveto, M. 2019. Effectiveness of forest conservation interventions: An evidence gap map. IEU Learning Paper 2019. Independent Evaluation Unit. Green Climate Fund. Songdo

Distribution of outcomes

As indicated above, most Tier 1 and 2 studies evaluate forest-cover impacts. Livelihood outcomes are less well covered. Only four studies deal with environmental and social outcomes at the same time. Also worth noting is the relative lack of focus on biodiversity.

Distribution geographically

The IEU EGM covers studies from developing countries. Within these, the studies mostly focus on Latin America and Asia, while Africa is relatively under-represented. See Figure 1.

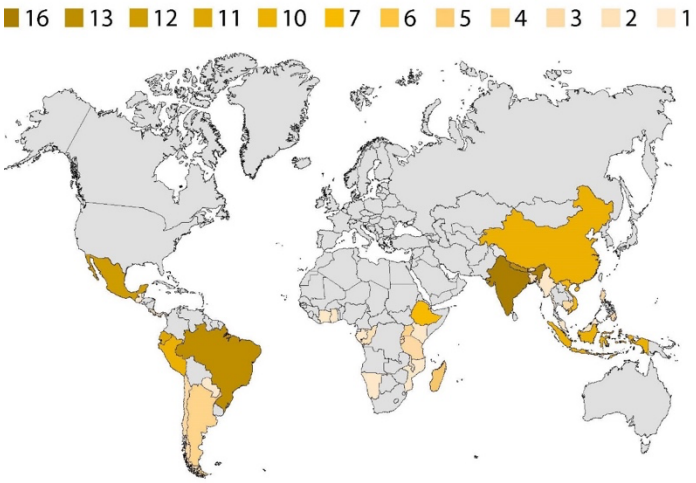


Figure 1 Geographical distribution of studies (all tiers aggregated)

REDD+ interventions

Donors have invested heavily in REDD+, but it is an under-examined intervention. REDD+'s impact on climate change mitigation is relatively unknown. Their focus on well-being may reflect either the high interest in REDD+ social safeguards or the difficulty of linking REDD+ impacts to a single intervention.

Livelihood outcomes

These are unclear and often described as mixed or neutral, which might be a consequence of this intervention being more difficult to assess (three-quarters of Tier 1 cases use remote-sensing data, which does not help).

Leakage

Leakage, or *forest loss* occurring outside the area covered by the intervention, remains understudied. This finding deserves attention, as leakage might prove to be more prevalent if researchers assessed it more frequently.

Other aspects

Notably, among Tier 1 and Tier 2 studies, local community interventions are addressed more frequently than private sector interventions.

GHG emissions appear only once as an outcome variable, ostensibly refuting the view that forests mitigate climate change. However, GHG emissions may also be covered by evaluations that focus on forest cover as a proxy for measuring carbon emissions.

A significant number of interventions are not evaluated or are evaluated only once. They include prominent intervention types such as improving the rule of law and zero-deforestation commitments.

Conclusions

The learning paper echoes the statements made in the preceding 3ie report: the organizations that provide a substantial share of funding for conservation (GEF, GCF, CIF, IUCN, WWF, and others) need access to information in a format that enables evidence to move from the science lab to the world of donors and policy. This is feasible, as many programmes have procedures to collect data of use to evaluators. Better coordination with research institutions is essential to improving the quality of evaluations and reducing biases in intervention selection. This coordination should be the prime responsibility of donors because they decide how funds are allocated and are also among the primary users of evidence.

More can be done to improve research:

- The reasons for these outcomes could be further explained, with more attention on the cause-to-effect relationships, which requires greater utility in studies that deliver comprehensive descriptions of local contexts.
- Impacts need to be considered more systematically in terms of the costs involved, thus requiring more regular cost-effectiveness measurement.
- Clarifying the efficiency of the different subtypes of interventions with plenty of evidence, such as protected areas, may eventually address higher priority knowledge gaps rather than filling in blank spots for seldom-used conservation tools.
- Systematic reviews could look closer at the degrees of impacts to identify interventions with high impact potential. The outcomes of conservation initiatives are usually positive, but some have more impact than others. Understanding why this disparity occurs would be very useful.
- Leakage is another piece of missing information that could be integrated into evaluations more often.