



**Gatekeeper**



# Making REDD+ work for communities and forests: three shared lessons for project designers

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Steve Ball and Jasper Makala



*Mpingo  
Conservation &  
Development  
Initiative*

This is number 155 in the long-standing *Gatekeeper* series. It marks a relaunch of the publication, not only in terms of design but also in content and style. *Gatekeeper* will now include case studies from across IIED's research: natural resource management, sustainable markets, climate change and human settlements.

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# In this issue of Gatekeeper...

Read how the Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI) in southeastern Tanzania successfully involved communities in participatory forest management, Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) certification and REDD+.

Steve Ball and Jasper Makala offer their experience and share three lessons: why you should start with quick and dirty calculations on what drives deforestation; why you need to design 'backwards' from REDD+ market requirements; and how you can deal with some of the challenges of introducing to communities the commercial element (carbon contracts) necessary for REDD+.

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# Summary

Around the world NGOs and communities are exploring how REDD+ might help them conserve forests and support local livelihoods. Developing good projects is a complex task, and lessons gathered from experience should ease the process.

## The business of REDD+

REDD+ stands for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and is a global initiative that uses money from public sources, carbon market finance and the private sector to offer developing countries financial incentives to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon pathways to sustainable development, so reducing the world's overall greenhouse gas emissions. If REDD+ succeeds, it could help protect the world's forests as 'carbon reservoirs' to slow down and mitigate climate change impacts.

But REDD+ is far more complex than just forest conservation with automatic payments for storing carbon bolted on. It brings a business-like focus to forest conservation.

This issue of *Gatekeeper* shares our practical experience of how the Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI) has confronted the challenges of designing a REDD+ project in southeastern Tanzania.

We started with a successful community forestry project focused on sustainable timber extraction, certified by the Forest Stewardship Council and we initially looked to REDD+ to help fund its expansion. But the approach we eventually found, based on improved fire management, was far from that originally envisaged.

We've learnt how REDD+ project developers need to identify which specific cause or causes, collectively known as 'drivers' of deforestation, they are tackling and explicitly quantify how much carbon emissions will be abated after allowing for 'leakage' (when activities that damage the forest are simply displaced elsewhere with no overall reduction in greenhouse gas emissions).

Project developers must also understand market needs, as encapsulated in the various carbon offset validation schemes.

Here, we share our experience of the setbacks and potential pitfalls that can arise if projects are not designed 'from the ground up' to both tackle the most appropriate driver(s) of deforestation, and then to satisfy the chosen validation scheme's demands.

Working with communities — as many REDD+ projects will — introduces further complications; project designers must balance carefully the need for openness and clarity against the dangers of being too specific when in fact project details, such as the value of carbon credits, are uncertain.

In particular we recommend a longer and more detailed design phase than is usual in forest conservation projects, even if stakeholder pressure favours early project activities 'on the ground'. Use this design phase to fix key criteria and assess the overall project feasibility, before starting to implement your project.

Some trial and error is inevitable in any new project development, especially in a new market like REDD+, but we hope that project developers elsewhere may learn from our experience and use this case study to smooth their own project development process.



Steve Ball and local farmer Kijuwile with a *mpingo* tree at Migeregere. (Credit: Jonas Timothy)

# Some background on REDD+



Members of Likawage Village Natural Resources Committee use beaters to prevent a lit fire from burning backwards towards farms (Credit: Deogratias Ndossi)

## Forests as carbon stores

Forests are vital for people and environments. They lock up carbon, conserve biodiversity, protect watershed services and provide food, fibre, energy, timber and medicine.<sup>1</sup> They are the cultural heritage of millions of people. Yet carbon lost through deforestation and forest degradation could contribute as much as one fifth of humankind's global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>2</sup>

Developed by many initiatives including the UN-REDD programme, and funded through carbon offset schemes, REDD+ scheme aims to offer financial incentives for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (the REDD bit), and for promoting conservation and sustainable forest management that enhances forest carbon stocks (the plus sign). This will only be achieved if REDD+ projects address the underlying causes driving deforestation and are compatible with local peoples' livelihoods. At present, the money for REDD+ comes from international voluntary carbon markets. There is much discussion about an international regulated market, but no agreements have yet been struck.

## Two routes to REDD+

In practice, REDD+ efforts take two main routes. One is through national- or state-level policy changes that reduce incentives or increase deterrents for deforestation and forest degradation. The other is through local REDD+ initiatives that tackle specific local problems, and which can be managed by local governments, charities, or private companies.

The national policy approach has proven difficult so far, as it often threatens well established interests such as farming and charcoal production.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Indonesian government's efforts to halt further forest clearance have been strongly contested.<sup>4</sup>

Local REDD+ projects can either complement national-level efforts (taking a nested approach) or fill gaps where policy changes are not forthcoming.



## Innovation

At a project level, what distinguishes REDD+ from other forest conservation initiatives are twin innovations: **a requirement for a demonstrable overall reduction of greenhouse gas emissions** and **monetisation of that measured reduction**. It is not enough to conserve one patch of forest if loggers move to neighbouring areas. Although under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) rules national policy changes are assessed within countries (ie without considering what deforestation may have been displaced to neighbouring countries), REDD+ projects must individually assess and minimise all 'leakage' — when emissions reductions gained through REDD+ are partly or wholly negated because emissions elsewhere rise as a direct result of REDD+ activities. This is what makes REDD+ projects much harder to implement than more traditional forest conservation projects.

But REDD+ promises to reward success through its **payment based on results** — the change from unsustainable to good practices is to be measured using carbon emissions metrics linked to clear financial rewards.<sup>1</sup>

In a successful project these payments should cover both the costs of establishing REDD+ schemes and their ongoing operations, and accrue profits for the forest owners.



Mwanaiba Mmbega from Kikole village records the details of a plot (Credit: Anne-Marie Gregory)

# Kilwa district and the MCDI

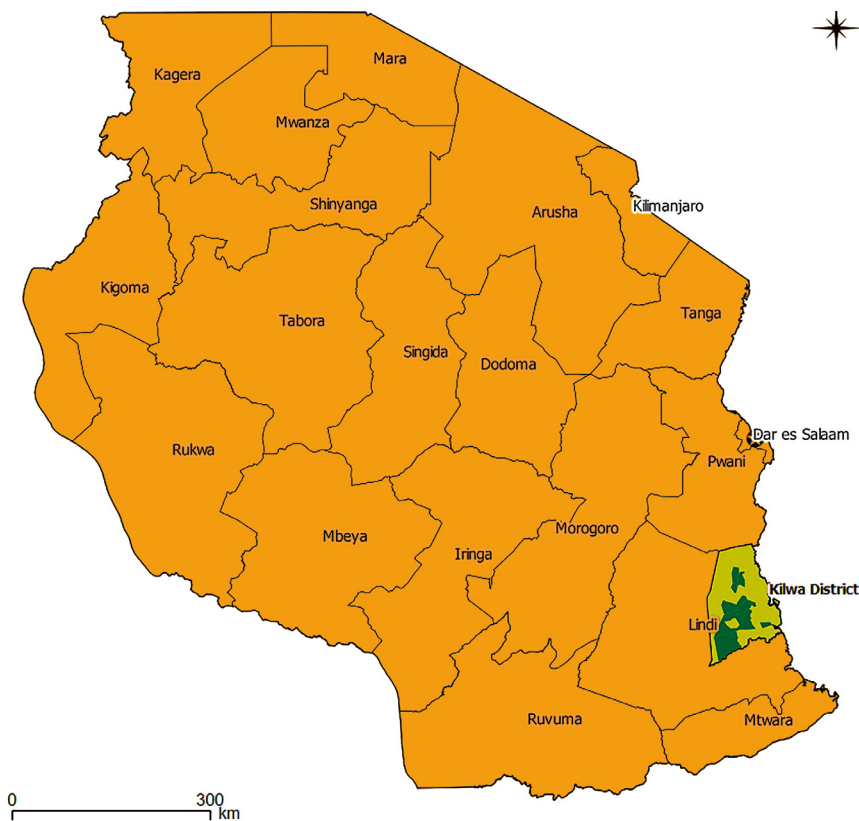


Figure 1. Tanzania's Kilwa district is in pale green, with the areas where MCDI works highlighted in dark green.

## Kilwa district

Kilwa district is in the Lindi region of southeastern Tanzania (see Figure 1). The region is sparsely populated, with abundant forest and timber resources. Most people are very poor. They make a living from subsistence agriculture and depend heavily on the region's forests.

The forests are a mix of East African coastal forests (a biodiversity hotspot) and *miombo* woodlands. *Miombo* is one of the major dry forest-savannah biomes of the world. It covers much of southern Africa and is the single largest vegetation type in East Africa.



## The Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative

The Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI) was founded in 2004. It focuses on sustainable forestry management and compared with other conservation organisations it takes a solution-focused rather than a problem-focused approach.

MCDI's flagship species is the East African Blackwood tree, *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, known locally as *mpingo*, one of the most valuable timbers in the world, which, among other things, is used to make musical instruments such as clarinets, oboes and bagpipes. This tree and other hardwoods in the region are under threat from overexploitation.

### Legal basis

Tanzania has a strong legal framework for participatory forest management, set out in the Forest Act of 2002, which in turn builds on the Land Act and Village Land Act (both of 1999), and the Local Government Act of 1982. These empower villages to manage their own land and to pass local byelaws to regulate activities within their village boundaries. Under the Forest Act, villages that prepare a management plan showing how they will sustainably manage an area of forest on their village land are exempt from government royalties on valuable 'reserved' trees, permitting them to retain such revenue for themselves. Areas covered by such plans, which must be approved by the district forest officer, are known as Village Land Forest Reserves (VLFRs).

There are over 400 VLFRs across Tanzania,<sup>5</sup> but management effectiveness varies widely and revenue generation has proven difficult.



Jasper Makala and Kikole villagers by the Village Land Forest Reserve sign (Credit: Paul Harrison)

We believe that farmers will conserve East Africa's valuable forests if, and only if, they receive significant benefits from those forests. MCDI's original aim was forest conservation through sustainable and socially equitable harvesting of *mpingo* and other valuable timber, leveraging its high value for the benefit of local people. But timber production is only one valuable service provided by forests, and so we are broadening our vision to include other sources of revenue from sustainable forest management, in particular carbon offset sales from REDD+ activities.

### FSC-certified timber

In 2009, MCDI facilitated the first ever commercial timber harvest from a community forest in Tanzania. A crucial development that supported this was focusing a forest resources assessment specifically on the resources (timber) which most interested MCDI and the rural communities. This tight focus ensured we had enough data to compute robust harvesting quotas. That sounds straightforward, but at the time it involved much trial and error to get the method right. And as you will read, a similar process was necessary later on to develop a workable REDD+ scheme.



MCDI works in an area of Tanzania where widespread illegal logging accounts for up to 96 per cent of timber extracted.<sup>6</sup> So to improve sales (and prices) we organised the first Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certificate scheme for community-managed forests in the whole of Africa. FSC-certified products are verified from the forest of origin through the supply chain, reassuring the final consumers (musicians in the case of blackwood) that the products they are buying come from responsibly harvested sources.

The forests are managed by rural communities (members of the group scheme) while MCDI is the certificate manager that handles technical issues with the certificate issuer, FSC.<sup>7</sup> The group certificate design is efficient, as the costs of certification can be spread between all member villages and new group members can easily be added.

Our sustainable timber and group FSC schemes have been successful, generating over US\$100,000 of sales and still growing rapidly. But despite these successes, the scheme is not yet financially self-sufficient, with donors paying the certification costs. So MCDI is moving towards charging communities a share of their revenue to cover management costs, aiming to make the whole initiative financially self-sufficient.

We also want to broaden the scheme to bring benefits to more people and get the economies of scale that could enable full cost recovery, (in other words allow the scheme to run along business lines), while still generating substantial profits for communities.

## An initial plan: to fund FSC expansion through REDD+

In 2009 we heard that the Norwegian government wanted to support pilot REDD+ projects in Tanzania. We were intrigued, but thought our work would be ineligible because REDD+ requires 'additionality': only emission savings that would not have otherwise happened qualify for financial incentives, and the communities we worked with were already involved in participatory forest management and making money from selling sustainably felled timber, so they already had an incentive to conserve the forest.

But in a 'light bulb' moment we realised that we could combine (FSC-certified) timber sales and REDD+ as long as the two were clearly contributing in different ways.

The key was our need to expand. Forests not yet inside our FSC certificate scheme were vulnerable. Bringing them into the group certificate would protect them and prevent future carbon emissions. So the initial plan was that the REDD+ project would finance the costs of expanding the FSC certificate (at least US\$20,000 per village).

# Our first lesson: assess what is driving deforestation



Forest clearance near Ruhatwe village, Kilwa district (Credit: Steve Ball)

Many forests in southern Tanzania are degraded or heavily degraded<sup>8</sup> and in recent years, uncontrolled logging and timber trade has surged in Kilwa, in part due to improved transport links with the capital Dar es Salaam.<sup>6</sup> Charcoal is widely used in Tanzania, particularly in urban areas, and demand from Dar es Salaam is growing.

We felt there was a clear, long-term conservation argument for showing that local communities can make money from forests in other ways. So we wrote a REDD+ project proposal based on the assumption that the biggest local driver of deforestation would be charcoal production. Our plan was to develop some kind of sustainable charcoal initiative subsidised by carbon offset sales derived from REDD+ approaches.

Source	Minimum	Best guess	Maximum
Fire	0	74,000	450,000
Agriculture	20,000	44,000	93,000
Timber	12,000	28,000	64,000
Charcoal	2,000	4,000	9,000
Total	34,000	150,000	616,000

Table 1: Estimated carbon losses in Kilwa per driver of deforestation (tonnes per year).

### Current, not future savings

However, the carbon offset markets do not reward you for preventing future potential deforestation — they buy offsets based only upon what emissions you prevent each year. So, having landed the grant from the Norwegian government, we swiftly realised that if we wanted REDD+ to work, we would have to demonstrate real carbon savings **now**.

The fundamental strategic questions were:

- What are the major forest carbon losses in Kilwa district?
- Which of these can we realistically address now?

Initially we talked to lots of stakeholders whose activities led to deforestation and forest degradation.<sup>8</sup> Focus groups included farmers, livestock keepers, timber traders and makers, charcoal makers and traders, petty traders, and village leaders. The groups represented a wide cross-section of residents, including men and women, young people and elders, and other relevant social groupings. This qualitative

study showed that the four main causes of deforestation in Kilwa were **agriculture, charcoal production, timber harvesting and fire**.

But the most important analysis came later, and led to a significant project redesign in 2012. We did a rough calculation of likely carbon losses from each of the four deforestation drivers. We had some data, but not on all of the variables we needed to know, so we used expert estimates. This introduced a major element of uncertainty, so we added minimum and maximum likely extremes to provide a range around the best estimate on each variable.

Rough though they were, these calculations gave us an order of magnitude estimate for each driver of deforestation. But they also highlighted just how little we actually knew. In fact, charcoal production almost certainly has a negligible impact (at present — we expect it to climb sharply in coming years) compared with fire, which we estimated to be the leading driver of forest carbon loss, accounting for about 60 per cent more than the next highest driver, agriculture (see Table 1).

This was our first practical lesson in designing a REDD+ programme. We realised that we were focusing on the wrong driver: charcoal was not the answer — fire management was, even though fire is the least well-understood of the four drivers, with by far the widest range between minimum and maximum estimates.

Some people questioned why we used ‘guesswork’ rather than ‘proper science’ for such an analysis. But quantifying the main drivers of deforestation, however roughly, was crucial and led to a significant project redesign. The results showed us where we needed to start — and it gave us the confidence to begin the REDD+ process, even knowing how little we knew.

### Who lights forest fires?

Most forest fires are started deliberately. In our initial qualitative survey all focus groups said they used fire in the forest in their daily activities.

- Farmers use fire to clear trees or prepare land for cultivation.
- Loggers use fire to clear logging sites and improve access.
- Livestock keepers use fire to remove old grasses and encourage new growth for their cattle.
- Hunters use fire to chase animals and improve visibility and mobility.
- Charcoal makers use fire for their kilns.

## Managing fires

Using fire in basic daily activities is not the problem, but managing it is. Without adequate precautions, a fire will quickly become uncontrollable. Year after year fires frequently get out of hand. Excessive fires affect the forests in two ways: they prevent regeneration (by killing nearly all seedlings and saplings below a certain size), and increase the mortality rate of large trees (in the short term one additional large tree death instantly removes a significant amount of carbon).

Fires do more damage the later they start in the dry season: the drier the forest the hotter it burns. Many fires are lit in the mid to late dry season, and these are the ones doing the most damage. Based on experience elsewhere in southern Africa, our partners from the University of Edinburgh in the UK believed the forests in Kilwa were likely losing 0.5–1 tonne of carbon per hectare per year from trees killed by frequent late season bush fires.

Fire plays a crucial role dry forest ecosystems and total fire suppression is a bad strategy that can lead to catastrophic fires when one finally does catch alight. Instead, destructive late season fires can be abated through ‘early burning’ as soon after the end of the rains as possible. The timing is determined by how quickly the grass dries out, and in southeastern Tanzania is about 4–6 weeks after the last major rains of the season. Early burning over large areas of forest requires fires to be lit in a semi-controlled fashion, so the end of the early burning season comes when fires lit during the day do not burn themselves out automatically overnight (as the temperature drops and dew forms). Typically there is a four week window during which early burning can be safely conducted.





## A new proposal

The forests we prefer to work with in Kilwa are typically large tracts that have not been intensively logged in the recent past. Such forests tend to be relatively inaccessible for fuel or timber extraction and usually unsuitable for agriculture (and where farming is possible, tackling the deforestation from agriculture also involves significant opportunity costs for local farmers). The only real uses for these large remote tracts are some logging and hunting.

We proposed to communities that they should pick an area of forest they do not currently use and we would help them make money from it. In most REDD+ projects you are unlikely to succeed with this approach. After all, REDD+ is about reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation **now** and not at some point in the future (for example, when accessibility has improved enough to make charcoal production and other activities economically profitable).

In unused forests the threat of deforestation is low and the amount of deforestation that you can prevent is negligible. But wild bush fires are the exception. They can easily spread across wide areas, and may be started in remote areas too, often to increase visibility and lessen risks for local people walking through the forest. MCDI data suggests most parts of the forest are burned at least every other year, mostly during the latter part of the dry season. Therefore fire management seemed to be the one area where we could make substantial carbon savings. But these savings still need quantifying, so we are developing a new carbon accounting method for dryland forests affected by frequent late season wild fires.

## Check your assumptions or face changing your plans

We imagine many people who are experts in local natural resource management might be similarly tempted not to do any real background work on drivers of deforestation before starting a REDD+ project. We assumed we were experts and thought that charcoal production was the biggest current threat to our local forests. But if we had done some analysis of drivers first we would have realised earlier that we were wrong. Instead we had to revise our REDD+ project design around paying communities for fire management through 'early burning'.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a lever to expand our FSC certificate, it became simply another string to our bow; another revenue stream available to rural communities engaging in sustainable forest management (and may support expansion, but only in the same manner as any other business revenue might).

Thus, our advice to other REDD+ project developers is to determine your ultimate project design by analysing deforestation drivers from the outset. Until you understand these, everything else is moot.

# Our second lesson: work ‘backwards’ from carbon market requirements

## Carbon markets

A lot of attention on REDD+ has focused on an anticipated international regulated market (accessible only to national governments) under a successor to the Kyoto protocol: essentially opening up the Clean Development Mechanism to include REDD+. However, international negotiations have largely stalled despite some progress on REDD+ at UNFCCC COP19 in Warsaw (November 2013). As yet there is no regulated market for carbon payments — only voluntary markets.

International voluntary carbon markets aim to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions as cheaply as possible, subject to various policy constraints. For example a European power plant may find it cheaper to offset its emissions by paying someone to prevent emissions elsewhere, perhaps by conserving threatened forests in Africa, than to clean up the plant in Europe. Doing this requires accurate measurements of greenhouse gas emissions generated and avoided so that activities that emissions reductions can be appropriately rewarded.

Voluntary carbon markets require you to demonstrate a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions as defined by a trusted third party body such as Verified Carbon Standard, Plan Vivo or the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standards (see overleaf).



Evaluating harvestable *mpingo* (Credit: Anne-Marie Gregory)

Offsets are sold in units of tonnes of carbon dioxide or equivalent ( $\text{tCO}_2\text{e}$ ); in 2012 the average price of carbon on voluntary markets was US\$5.9/ $\text{tCO}_2\text{e}$ , while forestry offsets (including REDD+ projects) fetched on average US\$7.8/ $\text{tCO}_2\text{e}$ .<sup>10</sup> Yet these prices are well down on the US\$20–30 per tonne prices that people expect in an international regulated market.



Kisangi Village Natural Resources Committee measure tree girth during a participatory timber inventory. (Credit: Lodrick Mika)

## Setting standards

The Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) is the gold standard in voluntary markets for measuring carbon savings and sequestration, developed by an international voluntary organisation. Projects and activities accepted into the VCS are rewarded with verified carbon units (VCUs). A VCU represents the equivalent of one metric tonne of carbon dioxide emissions avoided or removed from the atmosphere. These VCUs can be sold on the open market.

Alternatives to VCS include Plan Vivo and the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standards (CCB Standards). Plan Vivo is simpler than VCS, and is a framework for supporting rural smallholders and communities to manage their natural resources more sustainably, with a view to generating climate, livelihood and ecosystem benefits. Participants are paid for ecosystem services such as afforestation and agroforestry, forest conservation, restoration and avoided deforestation. Similarly, the CCB Standards evaluate land-based carbon mitigation projects that address climate change, support local communities and conserve biodiversity. CCB is often applied on top of VCS due to its higher social and environmental standards, which complement the rigorously assessed carbon savings under VCS.

## Missteps from under-planning

In MCDI we opted to target combined VCS-CCB validation. We chose VCS-CCB over the simpler challenge of Plan Vivo as VCS appeared to us to be more scalable, have better long-term prospects as markets grew, and fitted better with the likely shape of any future regulated market. But although we discussed including VCS validation in our project design from the start, we did not plan for VCS in detail until much later on. This led to a couple of missteps: prematurely attempting to set up contractual relationships with communities (discussed in Lesson 3 overleaf), and inappropriate landscape analysis.

The landscape analysis was prompted by an opportunity to share costs with another pilot REDD+ project being developed in a neighbouring district. Most REDD+ project methodologies that aim to quantify carbon savings from avoided deforestation are grounded in a wider landscape analysis, and we thought we could reduce costs by sharing in such an analysis, as well as ensure a consistent view between our two projects that would ease the project validation process by VCS.

But this was before we had completed our analysis of what was driving forest carbon losses, and before we had considered exactly what data requirements we would need for VCS-CCB. Measuring carbon gains obtained by better fire management requires a very different approach. Hence we never actually used the analysis of satellite images over the past ten years that we had obtained.

This experience is something we have noticed in our own project partnerships and in other REDD+ pilot projects. There is a difference between theoretically interesting questions that could be asked around the management of carbon stocks in forests, such as the landscape analysis we did, and what is actually needed to support a project's claims of carbon savings. As with the issue over deforestation drivers, we succumbed to the temptation to work from accumulated experience while simultaneously exploring the new REDD+ framework into which we were trying to fit. But it led to wasted efforts due to the very specific requirements that the carbon markets and associated validation schemes impose on projects.

At the time of writing, MCDI and its partners have just submitted a brand new methodology to the VCS approval process. It sets out in detail how to quantify carbon losses from late season fires using a model called GapFire, developed by the University of Edinburgh, UK.

The model takes as its key inputs two sets of parameters: the first set relates to the current state of the forest (statistical distribution of biomass and grass fuel loads), while the second describes how frequent different strength fires are in the landscape. The first set of parameters is fixed for the project and was determined through arduous and detailed forest surveys. For the second set of parameters we have two scenarios: the baseline ('without project') scenario, and the 'with-project' scenario. We have defined the baseline scenario (sometimes known as the 'business as usual' scenario) using historical fire records, obtained by scanning satellite imagery for visible burn scars. The project scenario will be determined each year by monitoring the direct impacts of early burning efforts on both early and late season fire frequencies.

The difference in biomass between the GapFire model runs for the two scenarios is easily converted into a figure for carbon emissions averted, and will provide the basis for calculating saleable carbon offsets according to VCS rules, which require the computation to be explicitly conservative. All of this is set out in the draft VCS method just submitted.

VCS's process for approving new methods has much improved in the last couple of years, and, if successful, we expect ours to become available for general use sometime in 2014. Communities supported by MCDI should start selling VCUs shortly thereafter.

Thus, our advice is to design the detail of a REDD+ project by carefully working 'backwards' from your chosen verification scheme's requirements, rather than trying to work forwards from a general understanding of first principles.



# Our third lesson: carbon contracts and communities

For the project to go ahead, we needed to obtain the communities' free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). We saw the importance of an FPIC process, so one of our earliest activities was awareness raising about REDD+ and payments for carbon offsets.

This seemed a sensible way to start engaging with local communities, because our initial understanding was that once the communities committed to protecting the forests, we could start claiming carbon offsets. To demonstrate this commitment, we developed a contract with the communities outlining what project activities they would do.

This turned out to be a really difficult challenge that we approached the wrong way.

We began designing our initial flawed project design (based on mitigating charcoal production) in 2010. As an NGO, our goal was not to maximise profits. So we drafted contracts that put all the risk and upfront investment on MCDI, and stated that communities could leave with only 90 days' notice.

The contracts made it clear that:

- The land and forests still belonged to the communities
- We would sell carbon offsets on their behalf and pass the profits back to communities
- We would assist them to manage their forests and to become FSC-certified.

We started trying to sign the contracts with the communities in late 2010. However, we did not know how much revenue could be gained from carbon offset sales, so the benefits were unclear. In addition, the communities had significant concerns. Recently large land deals in the area with a biofuel company had not worked in the communities' favour, and although our contracts explicitly confirmed that communities retained land ownership, they contained maps and therefore looked like a land deal. The 30-year time frame, which is the standard way to meet the permanence requirement in REDD+, was also problematic for many communities, representing a higher level of commitment than the minimum five-year period of FSC group certificate membership.



*Acacia nigrescens* timber cut for building poles  
(Credit: Anne-Marie Gregory)



Others planning a community forestry project around REDD+ may face similar difficulties. REDD+ is a hard and complex concept to grasp, especially for communities who struggle to even understand the basic concepts of carbon release and storage. In addition, future financial returns are uncertain. You can approach communities and explain how they can make money from selling sustainably logged timber, because they know timber has value. But trying to explain what carbon dioxide is or how they can make money by **not** doing something (ie not cutting down the forest) is much harder. Such uncertainties and complexities create confusion and misunderstanding, and local politicians can seize on this in a bid to promote themselves.

In addition, our approach attracted significant opposition from some government leaders. We believe that tropical forest conservation needs to move on from a simplistic aid dependency relationship, to a more equal partnership based on trade, so we believe that asking communities to sign contracts with us is a sensible approach. However, government officials were uncomfortable. Instead of simply helping communities (NGOs give, communities receive), they wanted to know why we were designing contracts to make money out of their forests. With the benefits as yet unquantified, we found our contracts stirring up significant opposition, and we soon dropped them in favour of basic agreements of project cooperation.

Our advice is **not** to have these discussions at the beginning. There is a lot to be said for taking a slower approach. Once we had our new project design focusing on fire management rather than charcoal production, it was relatively easy to go back to the communities and say, "What do you think about fire management as a project? Is it feasible? What recommendations for activities would you have?". It was much easier to have a useful, meaningful discussion with communities on how to implement such a project. Our project joining forms do not entitle us to sell carbon offsets on the communities' behalf, and some kind of formal contract will still be required when we start such sales. By that time, we should know exactly what benefits there will be to communities in terms of likely revenue, and the first sales should follow swiftly after, helping to build community confidence in REDD+ and its ability to generate revenues from the forests.

Exactly what then happens to the money earned by communities is another matter. Questions of good village leadership and equitable benefit sharing are critical, and we have already worked on these with communities receiving money from timber sales. For instance, under our prompting, the frequency of Village General Assemblies (meetings of all voting age adults in the village who wish to attend) has increased from under two to between three and four per year in villages we support. (By law, villages are supposed to hold one such assembly meeting per quarter.) As ever, our ability to effect change depends on us having a strong trust relationship with the communities we are supporting, which is in turn extremely vulnerable to perceptions of unfairness, thus emphasising the importance of getting these contracts right.

# Summing up

Our motivation for producing this issue of *Gatekeeper* is to share our experience with a wider audience. Our main lesson is that the peculiar demands of REDD+ call for an extended project design phase. Even if stakeholder pressure favours early project activities ‘on the ground’ it is important to check out the fundamentals and assess project feasibility as rigorously as possible before starting on other activities.

At the beginning of this design phase, project implementers need to have the confidence to make ‘back of an envelope’ estimates of key variables to get a clear picture of what is actually driving deforestation. Accurate and precise information giving high levels of statistical confidence is unlikely to be available in many potential REDD+ project sites (global measures of deforestation are often not accurate at local scales). Even so, rough quantitative estimates are valuable — a purely qualitative understanding will not get you very far. These ‘rough and ready’ initial estimates will let you narrow down your focus without spending a lot of time on detailed studies only to find out that their numbers simply do not support your project.

This quantitative line of attack fits with the business-like approach that is ideally needed for effective REDD+ project design and implementation. Whether in a formal market setting or a quasi-market (as has been proposed for the international regulated system), any REDD+ project must succeed as a business proposition. In simple terms, its ultimate success will depend on being able to generate and sell carbon credits that are worth more than the cost of establishing and then implementing the project. A good business also knows that it must understand the market in which it is operating and its potential customers.

For REDD+ that means you need to make an early choice of which validation schemes to pursue (though you can always keep others as a plan B in case your first choice turns out to be unfeasible),

and then design the rest of the project around the needs of that scheme. Obviously such design decisions should not ignore other constraints — such as are often involved when working with communities — but the project must also fit properly with the market requirements if it is to ever sell any carbon offsets.

An extended design phase may pose some additional challenges if you are developing a REDD+ project in a new area where your organisation has not worked previously. Clearly you will need to explain to communities what REDD+ is in order to obtain their initial buy-in and agreement to cooperate, but there is no need to rush in with a contract too early.

Earning and maintaining the trust of rural communities is an absolutely crucial task of any community-based conservation project. Often it is better to proceed at a pace that best suits the communities than that which fits your own (understandable) desire to impress donors with progress. Some project implementers are now deciding not to propose the specifics of REDD+ projects to communities because there are so many unknowns, such as prices of carbon offsets.<sup>11</sup> Our experience supports that: we advise taking a more cautious approach. Begin by talking in terms of what the community knows and understands, and only later explain REDD+, how much money can be made and how these critically important issues can be managed.



Logging crew carrying logs from the felling point (Credit: Jasper Makala)

When tackling all the various elements that go into a successful REDD+ project, it can be too easy to lose sight of what is at the heart of REDD+. You will almost certainly be distracted by talk of voluntary versus regulated markets, fund versus transaction-based payments, benefit sharing safeguards, co-benefits and other issues peculiar to REDD+. These are all important, but such issues can obscure the key challenge of REDD+, which is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from forest destruction. That requires you to keep always in mind the central focus: drivers of deforestation. Until and unless you can properly address at least one such driver, your REDD+ project will never succeed.

The good news is that we believe our fire management approach to REDD+ should not only succeed here in southern Tanzania, bringing a much needed additional revenue stream to rural communities, but that it also has huge applicability to dryland forests elsewhere in the world, and especially in the *miombo* biome that covers much of southern Africa.

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*Mpingo tree (Credit: Steve Ball)*



Read how the Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI) in southeastern Tanzania successfully involved communities in participatory forest management and REDD+.

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