ND-GAIN
Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative

Colombia // Latin America

Visión Amazonia Early Movers Programme (REM): Bespoke Agreements with Farmer Associations for Agro-Environmental Activities

Country Information

Population

51.8 Million
(World Bank, 2022)

UNFCCC National Adaptation Plan

Yes, 2018

GINI
(Scale of 0–100)

0 ▼ 100

(World Bank, 2021)

Intervention Information

$87 Million (USD)
Cost

2016-2021
Timeline

ND-GAIN Vulnerability Score
(Scale of 0-1)

0 ▼ 1

(ND-GAIN, 2023)

✔ Rationale for Selection

Cases were selected for review based on general screening criteria, including timeframe of intervention, location of implementation, and evidence-based outcomes, as available. This effort was highlighted for its multi-objective approach, with a focus on sustainable livelihoods and local engagement as part of the intervention.

Outcome Area(s)

Land Management/Conservation: Improving Forest Governance and Reducing Deforestation, Improvement of Livelihoods through Agro-Environmental Activities, and Food Security

Funding Partner(s)

Governments of Colombia, KfW Development Bank (Germany), Norway and the United Kingdom, and the Global Environment Fund

Implementation Partner(s)

Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Natural Heritage Fund (Fondo Patrimonio Natural), Colombian Government Amazonian Scientific Research Institute (SINCHI), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)

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Context of Intervention

The Colombian Amazon region comprises 48 million hectares which represent 6.4% of the total Amazon biome and 41.8% of Colombia's national territory.[1] As the world's largest rainforest, the Amazon is home of a significant biodiversity that includes a quarter of the world's terrestrial animal species and tree cover of paramount importance for its oxygen and carbon stock. The Colombian Amazon's natural richness is also interwoven with its cultural diversity, as 17% of the 1.2 million people living in the region are indigenous peoples. The region is home to over 70 indigenous ethnic groups. In fact, more than half of the Colombian Amazon has collective landtitles that belong to 178 indigenous reserves covering 25 million hectares.[2]

Unfortunately, the Amazon region continues to have the fastest rate of deforestation in the world. Between 1984-2019, more than 3 million hectares of the Colombian Amazon were deforested for illicit activities.[3] Deforestation is the main threat to biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Colombian Amazon basin; it is driven by land grabbing for cattle pasture, colonization and population displacement, illicit crops, and illegal gold mining.[4] These issues are exacerbated by the poverty of the region – nearly half of the households in the region (~46%) are unable to meet basic needs, which is significantly higher than the national average (~28%).[1] In this context, agroforestry and silvo-pastoral conservation programs, particularly those that integrate indigenous ecosystem knowledge, are notably relevant for simultaneously addressing the need for sustainable livelihoods while protecting and regenerating forest cover.

Description of Intervention

The Visión Amazonía Programme is an initiative to support the Colombian government's National Development Plan goals of reducing deforestation, meeting restoration targets, and ending natural forest loss by 2030. To achieve this aim, the initiative brought together successful interventions in the region to support low deforestation development. One of the first was the Visión Amazonía Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) for Early Movers Programme (REM). As a program that combines carbon finance from the KfW Development Bank with operational support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Early Movers Programme supported countries taking relevant actions to protect forests by providing payments conditional upon verified emission reductions from deforestation. The specific purpose of the Visión Amazonía REM (VA REM) project was to reduce deforestation and poverty through the promotion of sustainable, productive practices that contribute to improving the quality of life of local populations while conserving Amazonian biodiversity and achieving net zero deforestation. The implementation of the VA REM Program was based on five pillars: 1) improving forest governance; 2) strengthening sector planning and development for sustainability; 3) agro-environmental development; 4) environmental self-governance on indigenous territories, and 5) enabling activities.[5] Engagement of the indigenous communities to shape priorities was critical and facilitated through close cooperation with the indigenous organization OPIAC (Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonia Colombiana). Through this, communities identified the critical focus areas: territorial integrity, strengthening self-governance, and improving local livelihoods.[2]

The agro-environmental development pillar aimed to reduce deforestation and poverty through the implementation of incentive structures for the sustainable production of key commodities, such as coffee, beef, dairy, cocoa, and rubber. This was accomplished through voluntary net zero deforestation agreements with low-income, smallholder farmer (peasant) associations and individual producers. Commitments have focused on deforestation reduction, low-carbon rural development, and preventing the expansion of the agricultural frontier by working with these peasant associations in the regions of influence.

The incentive structures supporting sustainable production and livelihoods were both financial and technical, such as new lines of associative credit (e.g., cooperatives) for projects, alliances for market access, and facilitation of sustainable agricultural practices. Examples of technical assistance to facilitate sustainable production included improving crop yields over time (thus, income) through land management practices such as soil conservation with crop rotation and cover crops as well as developing composting practices. The success of the VA REM agro-environmental pillar relied largely on these agreements, while simultaneously benefitting from robust community support. Farmer members elected the boards of directors of these peasant associations' with whom the agreements were negotiated and therefore held legitimacy with the local farmers. In addition, because they are part of the community, they know the reality of the Amazon region and have greater ability and presence to navigate sensitive security conditions with regard to conflict or illicit crops.

Intervention Funding

The VA REM project was funded by the Governments of Germany, Norway, and the UK. Based on verified emission reductions as a result of reduced gross deforestation in the Amazon Biome, the three donor countries provided approximately $87 million USD to support the project. This intervention was implemented by the Colombian government through the Colombian National REDD+ Strategy to control deforestation in the Amazon. At least 60% of the total VA REM funds were designated for local actors, primarily to benefit smallholder farmers, forest-dependent communities, and indigenous communities.[5]

Outcomes from the Intervention and Dissemination

The multi-objective, integrated approach of the Visión Amazonía REM is essential for collaboration in a vast region where monitoring and implementation require strong local cooperation. The focus on agro-environmental development outcomes related to better engagement, planning, and local governance are relevant to the readiness process with the expectation of contributing to emission reductions as well as sustainable livelihoods.[6]

Agro-Environmental Livelihoods
Enabling sustainable livelihoods is critical to shifting deforestation trends. By 2019, two years before the completion of the program, at least 2,744 farming families had benefited from the VA REM agro-environmental activities. Moreover, beef and dairy reconversion projects and agroforestry systems for cocoa, rubber, and non-timber forest products, among other activities, engaged nearly 1,500 families.[4]

Deforestation and Land Protection
As the core reason for international investment, land protection and setting up the mechanisms for land protection was critical. Nearly 100,000 hectares were protected with non-deforestation agreements with farmers at a high level of compliance.[4] Britain's National Institute of Economic and Social Research studied the effects of Vision Amazonia's agreements with farmer associations on deforestation outcomes at the farm level. Results indicated that agroforestry programs can delay deforestation and even promote permanent forest cover. For significant environmental returns, however, this requires rapid expansion and scaling of the program.[8]

Local Capacity
Technical and implementation capacity issues are common in rural areas. Significant efforts requiring new or more developed partnerships can sometimes catalyze capacity building and better systems for coordination. This process facilitated greater community, peasant, and indigenous organizational power and coordination, as well as improved coordination of regional and local institutions. Strong institutional coordination can be considered a 'readiness' condition toward sustainable land use under their jurisdiction.[4]

Considerations

Indigenous Engagement
While some reviews indicated a positive shift in local power and coordination, some critiques include concern that the pillar approach relegated the indigenous peoples' interests to one pillar (Pillar 4), even though their interests extending across all five.[9] Regardless of the sufficiency of indigenous engagement, this underscores the importance of multi-objective approaches being well integrated. This applies not only to vertical or horizontal integration of governance and stakeholder activities, but the interrelated aspects of the objectives. Despite this critique, the external evaluation underscores the importance of this effort in raising national, departmental, and municipal government awareness regarding the role of indigenous groups in the sustainability of the Amazon region and the need to strengthen environmental governance in indigenous territories.[4]

Strengthen Local Institutional Capacity
The initial objectives and targets proposed in the design phase of VA REM for the number of families benefited and number of hectares protected were much higher than the actual achievements by the end of the project. A variety of factors impacted the outcome numbers, including insufficient local institutional capacity to identify projects and establish agreements.[4] Further, land registration capabilities in Colombia serves as a barrier; Colombia needs to improve institutional verification and monitoring systems to prevent 'greenwashing.' This ensures that government can track lands currently deforested to create baselines.[10] Long-term, local organizations and institutions need to have the capacity to support sustainable, profitable income-generating activities beyond the formal non-deforestation agreements or the results will be short-lived.

Conflict

Armed conflict creates an extremely difficult implementation context. The Colombia VA occurred under frequently challenging conditions, which can confound and complicate the ability to assess the intervention or identify root causes of deforestation.[6] Nonetheless, one of the key drivers is land grabs by large estate owners.[3][11] While one program is insufficient to address the structural causes of deforestation, the aftermath of armed conflict can provide a policy and implementation window for sustainable development.[11] Systemic approaches that combine improved regulations, incentives, and management may begin to address underlying causes. This brief highlighted one such program, as direct agreements with farmer associations puts stakeholders at the center of the design and implementation of agro-environmental activities that seek to achieve both sustainable production and livelihoods.

Embedding Conservation Education, Management, and Planning

The current model of economic development in the Amazon has been centered on extraction and agrarian colonization; this approach has not brought prosperity to the local population nor has it protected the forest.[10] The non-deforestation agreements are an important step, but to ensure sustainability of conservation practices beyond these agreements, it is necessary to work toward shifts that support a different model. The VA REM project included investments in territorial management and planning processes and environmental education. These efforts supported building a social pact across the region to prevent deforestation, forest degradation, and loss of biodiversity and economically vital ecosystem services. Developing environmental literacy while building local and regional development planning processes capacity enhances the sustainability of new land management practices.

Citations

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