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ARE ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOODS PROJECTS EFFECTIVE AT DELIVERING CONSERVATION RESULTS?

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Alternative livelihood projects are used by a variety of organisations as a tool for achieving conservation results. These interventions can vary a great deal and there is no single accepted definition of what constitutes an alternative livelihood project. Added to this, we know very little about what impacts, if any, alternative livelihoods projects have had on forestry conservation, as well as what determines the success or failure of these interventions. Reflecting this concern, a resolution was passed at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2012 calling for a critical review of the benefits to biodiversity of alternative livelihood projects. Here, we report on a systematic map and review undertaken as a response to this resolution, and as part of the Centre for International Forestry Research's Evidence Based Forestry Platform. We define alternative livelihoods projects as interventions that seek to alleviate a human threat to biodiversity through providing, or encouraging the use of an alternative resource; an alternative occupation; or an alternative method (lower impact) of exploitation. We identify 69 studies of alternative livelihood interventions of which 21 include detailed assessments of their effectiveness. Our systematic map details the characteristics of these alternative livelihood projects, and the systematic review finds that the available evidence does not allow for any clear determination of why alternative livelihood projects usually don't work, or why they occasionally do. The evidence base that we have assembled provides an excellent starting point for further research work including interviews with project implementers to fill in the evidence gaps we have identified. The field of conservation requires a set of best practice guidelines for the evaluation of alternative livelihoods and this study, given it has identified many of the shortfalls in design, methodology and evaluation, could elucidate the first stage of that process. There continues to be a wide and deep investment in alternative livelihood projects, and together funders, practitioners and researchers must pay more attention to project design, monitoring and sharing of lessons (both positive and negative experiences).