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Barriers and opportunities for great inclusion of indigenous peoples and traditional communities in Low Emission Rural Development in the Tropics

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Indigenous peoples (IP) and Traditional Communities (TC) are important stewards of forest carbon stocks; they own or have designated use rights to approximately 357 million hectares of forest land in 30 of the world's tropical forest countries, and in Amazonia alone, indigenous territories account for 27.1% of total above ground carbon storage. Despite their key role in climate regulation, IP and TC are frequently marginalized when it comes to discussions, actions and benefits for reducing deforestation. REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation), viewed as a tenable strategy for climate change mitigation, has been increasingly criticized for failing to address key drivers of deforestation and their underlying causes, and for delivering few tangible benefits to traditional forest stewards in terms of improved territorial security, livelihoods, social equity and participation in regional development. We propose an integrated, bottom-up approach, called Low Emission Rural Development (LED-R) that seeks to ensure rights and improve livelihoods for IP, TC and others while mitigating climate change. In this study, we analyze barriers and opportunities for IP and TC in the context of LED-R across twelve tropical forest regions in Latin America and Asia. Methods included policy analyses, semi-structured interviews with indigenous leaders, sub-national government representatives and civil society members, and analysis of deforestation rates within indigenous territories and traditional lands in comparison to the rest of the region. We assess the scope of rights and territorial security, participation of and benefits received by IP and TC with regards to climate change and related processes, and governance conditions that enable or inhibit IP and TC representation and decision-making. Our study highlights that despite historically low deforestation rates and de jure control over forests in many of the study regions, IP and TC face several key challenges. Territorial security is often undermined by insufficient clarity over land tenure, violent conflicts over land and resources, political instability and direct threats from other land uses. Effective participation of IP and TC in regional development and climate change dialogues is often inhibited by conflicting visions of development across sectors and logistical and language barriers. Further, climate finance has yet to reach many jurisdictions, and risks, uncertainties, and in some cases unmet expectations regarding voluntary carbon markets and REDD+ present significant hurdles. At the same time, we argue that new spaces of inclusion of IP and TC, such as the Governor's Climate and Forests Task Force, and the emergence of innovative benefits-sharing opportunities, including concrete examples of REDD+ finance reaching IP and TC in Acre and Rondônia, Brazil have the potential to increase visibility of traditional forest stewards, leverage greater commitments for benefits-sharing, and even catalyze actions to address systemic barriers faced by IP and TC in achieving their aspirations. In order for these opportunities to be capitalized, we conclude with a series of recommendations for broader inclusion of and improved benefits of LED-R for IP and TC.