

REVIEWING REDD+ AND THE VGGTs AS TROPICAL POSTCOLONIAL FOREST GOVERNANCE POLICIES OF THE FAO

The world's forest cover is declining, with the most critical deforestation occurring in tropical forests (Fischer et al. 2021, 1-2). Consequently, tropical forest governance has attracted numerous actors on the international stage, among which the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is one of the oldest and most influential to date (Pernet and Forclaz, 2019). Adopting a postcolonial theoretical approach, this literature review will examine scholarly debates on two of the FAO's tropical forest governance policies: *Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, plus the sustainable management of forests, and the conservation and enhancement of carbon stocks* (REDD+), and the *Voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries, and forests* (VGGTs).

The first section will introduce the FAO, REDD+ and the VGGTs, in the historical context of the FAO's often overlooked colonial roots. Then, the second section will explore literature on REDD+, with a focus on its Westernised technocratic monitoring standards and its neoliberal financial regime, to highlight the adverse impacts which REDD+ has on small-scale stakeholders in former colonies. Finally, the third section will critically review VGGT scholarship, to discuss the potential of the guidelines' human rights approach to equal stakeholder engagement in policy negotiations and implementations. The concluding remarks will argue that global postcolonial tropical forest governance remains dominated by centralised Western actors and their interests, and that critical gaps in REDD+ and VGGT literature must be addressed to improve the agency and influence of small-scale and non-western stakeholders engaged in forest management across the world.

Introducing FAO and Its Policies

When analysing contemporary forest governance policies of the FAO from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, several scholarly accounts highlight the significance of the organisation's historical roots in colonial forest management. Founded in the United States in 1945, the FAO's multilateral efforts towards improved forestry and agriculture emerged out of a Eurocentric post-war focus on global modernisation and economic growth (Wright, 1964). Consequently, fostering an international regime of forestry expertise, centred around promoting Western technologies as means of forest governance, became, and still remains, a core task of the FAO (Forclaz, 2019). However, this international knowledge regime was largely informed by colonial administrative perspectives (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2020), which attracts critical attention to the widespread influence that the FAO continues to possess (Köhl et al., 2015). Yet, there is an evident gap in the literature on the understanding of the FAO's current practices in relation to the organisation's colonial past (Pernet and Forclaz 2019, 245). This critically limits academic understandings of historically embedded inequalities and adverse impacts of the FAO's widespread postcolonial forest governance policies today.

The most prominent policy spearheaded by the FAO on the international stage is REDD+ (Thompson et al., 2011). Promoted globally by the UNREDD programme, of which the FAO is a founding member (UNREDD, 2024), REDD+ is a neoliberal market-based policy aiming to create financial incentives for forest conservation. It does so by delivering compensation payments to actors who commit to reduced deforestation (Köhl et al., 2020). Payments are distributed as post-success rewards, determined by the amount of carbon stocks saved in

conserved forests (Well and Carrapatoso, 2016). REDD+'s quantitative results-based payment structure relies on standardised global technoscientific measurement, reporting, and verification functions (MRVs), which the FAO oversees the development of (FAO, 2024). However, by pursuing such a standardised 'scientific truth' to international conservation, the FAO and REDD+ are critiqued for overlooking issues of contextual social inequalities (Manda and Mukanda, 2023), which prompts reflections on the role of REDD+ in sustaining a western technocratic hegemony in global forest governance.

To compensate for the social limitations of REDD+, FAO developed the VGGTs as a complementary policy that aims to strengthen community engagement in forest governance through improved land tenure rights (Skulska et al., 2019). The guidelines focus on facilitating states' compliance to international human rights law (FAO, 2022), reflecting the substantial postcolonial debates on human rights concerns in tropical forest governance (Jansen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the VGGTs' democratic potential materialise within a postcolonial approach, as they prioritise the just representation of marginalised groups in global forest governance (Seufert, 2013; Brent, 2018). However, as the VGGTs gain political legitimacy, concerns arise of the guidelines becoming yet another 'paper policy' (Irland, 2008), which would ultimately favour the interest of central government actors within the international neoliberal conservation regime.

REDD+: MRVs and Neoliberal Finances

In the context of the FAO, REDD+ scholarship largely focuses on the implications of advocating a one-size-fits-all 'scientific truth' to forest governance through standardised global MRVs. Tewari (2016, 24-25) argues for the MRVs' potential to provide unprecedented reliability and

detail in long-term monitoring of forest change in developing countries, with improved conditions for South-South cooperative forest governance as a result. However, most postcolonial research presents critical limitations to the MRVs, often problematising the FAO's inconsistent scientific definitions of 'forest' which inform the monitoring processes and result-based payments of REDD+ (Gillerot et al., 2021; Olander et al., 2008). Pro-REDD+ literature generally disregards this fundamental flaw in the 'standardised' MRVs, giving rise to questions about the accuracy and transparency within REDD+ monitoring. This observation is supported by literature that suggest the MRVs to have generated a flexible 'scientific truth' in tropical forest governance, which only holds *the appearance* of being scientifically neutral, as it can easily be altered and exploited through truth governmentality to benefit centralised Western actors (Köhl et al., 2015; Gillerot et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2023). Lovell (2015, 1376) strengthens this argument by accentuating the political tensions around breaches of sovereignty from foreign knowledge claims that have surfaced in developing countries because of REDD+ MRVs. Equally, Thompson et al. (2011) stress the ways in which western-developed scientific MRVs continue to structurally overlook, and devalue, indigenous knowledge that is based on cultural and social practices which cannot be measured by quantitative remote sensing tools. To better explore such inbuilt inequalities of MRVs as potential remainders of colonial pasts, the critical underrepresentation of qualitative and non-western research in REDD+ debates must be addressed.

Studying the inadequacies of MRVs lead scholars onto the topic of REDD+'s neoliberal financial structure, which is argued to, further, exacerbate Western centralisation of tropical forest governance (Delacote et al., 2022; Ramcilovik-Suominen, 2019). The MRVs themselves are frequently criticised for their high upfront costs (Lovell, 2015; Köhl et al., 2020), which suggests

a financial barrier to the sovereign agency of low-income countries required to perform REDD+ monitoring. As costly standardised MRVs delegitimize more affordable and decentralised local monitoring processes as part of REDD+ (Lovell 2015, 1376), the MRVs reinforce the need for wealthier actors in the Global North to manage the economic flows of REDD+ across the world (Pham et al., 2021). Furthermore, due to the abovementioned market-based commodification of carbon stocks within REDD+, the number of neoliberal actors from the Global North involved in funding conservation projects in the Global South is rapidly growing. Consequently, debates on institutional fragmentation, and the subsequent decline in financial accountability and transparency, are common within REDD+ literature (Well and Carrapatoso, 2016). Critical literature highlights the challenges related to obtaining information about the basis of REDD+ financing and, more importantly, to whom the funds go (Manda and Mukanda, 2023). A postcolonial analysis, then, portrays how such a non-transparent western-dominated REDD+ financial regime sustains conditions that allow for continued extractivist practices in former colonies by centralised actors in the Global North (Thompson, 2011).

The centralised Eurocentrism embedded within the MRVs 'scientific truth' as well as the REDD+ extractivist financial regime causes postcolonial debates to turn their attention to injustices and inequalities in REDD+ stakeholder engagement. Literature particularly focusses on the unequal terms on which small-scale local stakeholders in former colonies engage in REDD+ in comparison to market-driven centralised governments or large-scale multinational actors (Alemagi et al., 2014; Svarstad and Benjaminse, 2017; Pham et al., 2021). Whilst UNREDD may promote community participation, there is no policy guidance on how this engagement should take place in practice (Skutsch and Turnhout 2018, 638). Thus, few barriers seemingly exist to financial incentives remaining the primary focus of large-scale stakeholders in

REDD+. Consequently, the privatisation of forest conservation is increasing, which Manda and Mukanda (2023, 10) argue drives land grabs in tropical forests that are not only ineffective in terms of conservation, but also undermine the livelihoods of local communities and indigenous people. Ramcilovik-Suominen (2019, 263) explores such REDD+ land grabs through the prism of state territorialisation, arguing that alternative financial and environmental motives of REDD+ ‘greenwash’ the political benefits of centralised control over the practices of remote forest communities. She is further corroborated by Thompson et al. (2011, 106), who argue that REDD+’s activities are characterised by insufficient communication with affected indigenous people, which further marginalises already vulnerable groups within global forest governance. It is in these discussions that literature on inadequate tenure rights within REDD+ programmes become prominent, where several postcolonial scholars note the social exclusion and displacement of indigenous people that the financially driven REDD+ regime is accelerating (Giurca and Befort, 2023; Castañeda et al., 2023).

VGGTs: Stakeholder Agency in Negotiations and Implementation

In response to the increasing concerns surrounding just tenure rights within forest governance, the FAO produced the VGGTs (Masiero et al., 2015). With a postcolonial approach, the VGGTs’ potential as a complimentary policy to REDD+ can be commended, as they serve to ensure improved tenure rights for local communities impacted by forest conservation initiatives. Scholars commonly argue how better tenure agreements have the potential to facilitate just, equal, and durable stakeholder inclusion in both negotiation and implementation stages of forest governance, which reduces deforestation and social exclusion as a result (Fischer et al., 2021;

Jansen et al., 2021). In such discussions, the VGGTs' unique human rights approach to forest governance is positively acknowledged. Applying human rights as a policy framework for improved tenure rights on forest land can reduce violent conflict and human suffering in relation to conservation land grabs (Skulska et al., 2019); and decentralise multilateral initiatives such as REDD+ to increase stakeholder accountability within the international forestry regime (Jansen et al., 2021). Gutiérrez-Zamora (2021), further, introduces the potential of the VGGTs' human rights focus to improve gender equality in forest governance, by recognising the often-overlooked reality that women's livelihoods are disproportionately impacted by reduced access to forest resources in conservation zones. Consequently, the vast majority of pro-VGGT literature focuses on the guidelines' potential of strengthening the agency of diverse small-scale stakeholders. However, with postcolonial theory, scholar Zoe Brent (2018) also introduces the strengthened national sovereignty that the VGGTs could grant former colonies, as the guidelines' attention to land rights provides an instrument with which the expansion of the neo-imperialistic Western capitalist conservation regime could be challenged.

However, incentivized by the flow of Western carbon offset capital into tropical conservation projects, many centralised governments in former colonies are hesitant to let the VGGTs disrupt the neoliberal governmentality of the global forestry regime (Pham et al., 2021). This forms the core of the critical postcolonial approach to the VGGTs. Despite the VGGTs widely promoted potential of local stakeholder engagement within negotiation processes, research demonstrates how centralised actors and interests remained the dominant forces in developing the guidelines (Masiero et al., 2015; Seufert, 2013). Masiero (2015) calls attention to how, in contrast to the FAO's public narratives, indigenous perspectives were structurally underrepresented and devalued in the development of the VGGTs. This critique is contextualised by recognitions of the

FAO's centralised Eurocentric understanding of indigenous small-scale cultivation as a significant driver of deforestation (Shapiro et al., 2023), which undermines the legitimacy of indigenous actors in VGGT negotiations. As a result, the policy framework for the VGGTs critically do not recognise ancestral lands as eligible for tenure rights (Seufert 2013, 185), nor do they provide proper policy guidance on fair benefit-sharing with indigenous communities whose residential land is sold for conservation purposes (Pham et al., 2021). Thus, whilst recognising their conceptual potential, postcolonial literature challenges the inadequate centralised perspective and normative nature of the current VGGTs. The VGGTs' purpose is to guide practical implementation of better tenure agreements in specific local contexts (Skulska et al. 2019), and a normative centralised framework undercuts that aim. Noting, then, how the VGGTs, regardless of their evident flaws, are gaining political legitimacy on the international forestry stage, Brent (2018, 1372-1379) questions whether the guidelines have become another example of 'paper politics'; i.e. policies which serve to increase the international legitimacy of the central governments that adopt them, but without improving conditions for the adversely affected small-scale stakeholders on the ground.

Brent's argument resonates with a larger body of literature, that builds off the recognised flaws within VGGT negotiations to explore the limitations posed to their effective and just implementation. Seufert (2013) produces oft-cited arguments about the inherent limitations of the VGGTs implementation and performance due to their voluntary nature. He focuses specifically on the lack of implementation accountability that follows from the FAO's scarce monitoring requirements for states that have voluntarily committed to the guidelines (Seufert 2013, 184). As the VGGTs are not intended for certification, but rather as guidance in efforts towards existing international law, they are not binding and progress reports are, therefore, not

required (Masiero et al., 2015). Brent's (2018) case study of Guatemala demonstrates this in practice, where inadequate consideration of local stakeholders' interest and practices in the local implementation of the VGGTs went practically unnoticed amongst international actors, who only oversaw the government's initial adoption of the guidelines. The problematic gap between adoption and implementation in the context of the VGGTs is, thus, a focal point of postcolonial literature. However, further research is needed to establish holistic guidance on how to strengthen the implementations of the VGGTs. Particularly, more qualitative, interdisciplinary, and non-western research that breaks from the mainstream institutional perspective on FAO's policies needs to be conducted (Pernet and Forclaz 2019; Pernet, 2019). This will increase the scholarly understanding of how the VGGTs impact livelihoods and land rights of local stakeholders in practice and provide resources for improved local stakeholder awareness surrounding just implementation practices of the VGGTs (Jansen et al. 2021).

To conclude, reviewing the literature on REDD+ and the VGGTs using a postcolonial theoretical approach has shown a persisting centralised Western dominance in the FAO's tropical forest governance policies. REDD+ scholarship challenges how the standardised MRVs globally impose Eurocentric technocratic forestry practices, which define successful conservation in terms of quantifiable carbon stocks. The neoliberal financial carbon regime that governs REDD+ as a result is critically argued to mask ongoing extractivist and neo-imperial practices by centralised actors in the Global North, and to adversely impact indigenous stakeholders in conservation zones. In response to the shortcomings of REDD+, the FAO developed the VGGTs, which postcolonial literature analyses with a greater balance between conceptual benefits and practical limitations. Taking a human rights approach to improved tenure agreements in forest governance, the potential of the VGGTs to reduce violent conflict over land and increase

small-scale stakeholder agency is widely praised. However, this potential currently remains largely theoretical as a range of practical limitations to the VGGTs negotiation and implementation processes prevail. Centralised interests continue to dominate the VGGT framework, and there are substantial concerns that the lack of implementation monitoring is causing the guidelines to become ‘paper policies’, favouring centralised state actors without benefiting or engaging local stakeholders on the ground. A postcolonial theoretical analysis of literature on FAO policies, therefore, consistently returns to a call for further research, to resolve the evident underrepresentation of qualitative, interdisciplinary, and non-western knowledge in the context of REDD+ and the VGGTs. Especially as analyses of the FAO’s organisational history uncovers a stark colonial past, academia must better its understanding of how this may impact and undermine just forest governance through REDD+ and the VGGTs today.

References

- Alemagi, Dieudonne., Minang, Peter A., Feudjio, Mireille., Duguma, Lalisa. 2014. “REDD+ readiness process in Cameroon: an analysis of multi-stakeholder perspectives”. *Climate Policy* 14:6, pp. 709-733
- Brent, Zoe W., Alonso-Fradejas, Alberto., Colque, Gonzala., Sauer, Sergio. 2018. “The ‘tenure guidelines’ as a tool for democratising land and resource control in Latin America”. *Third World Quarterly* 39:7, pp. 1367-1385
- Castañeda, Rodrigo., Cerón, Carlos A., De los Ríos-Carmenado, Ignacio., Domínguez, Larissa., Gomez, Sergio. 2023. “Implementing the voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests from the working with people model: lessons from Colombia and Guatemala”. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50:5, pp. 1820-1851

Delacote, Philippe., Le Velly, Gwenolé., Simonet, Gabriela. 2022. "Revisiting the location bias and additionality of REDD+ projects: the role of project proponents status and certification". *Resource and Energy Economics* 67:1, pp. 1-17

FAO. 2024. "REDD+ Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation". Accessed on 27 February 2024. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/redd/en/>

FAO. 2022. "Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security". First revision. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/i2801e>

Fischer, Richard., Cordero, Fabian T., Luna, Tatiana O., Velasco, Rubén F., DeDecker, Maria., Torres, Bolier., Giessen, Lukas., Günter, Sven. 2021. "Interplay of governance elements and their effects on deforestation in tropical landscapes: Quantitative insights from Ecuador". *World Development* 148:1, pp. 1-13

Forclaz, Amalia R. 2019. "From Reconstruction to Development: The Early Years of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Conceptualization of Rural Welfare, 1945–1955". *The International History Review* 41:2, pp. 351-371

Gillerot, Loïc., Grussu, Giorgio., Condor-Golec, Rocio., Tavani, Rebecca., Dargush, Paul., Attorre, Fabio. 2021. "Progress on incorporating biodiversity monitoring in REDD+ through national forest inventories". *Global Ecology and Conservation* 32:1, pp. 1-12

Giurca, Alexandru., Befort, Nicolas. 2023. "Deconstructing substitution narratives: The case of bioeconomy innovations from the forest-based sector". *Ecological Economics* 207:1, pp. 1-10

Gutiérrez-Zamora, Violeta. 2021. "The coloniality of neoliberal biopolitics: Mainstreaming gender in community forestry in Oaxaca, Mexico". *Geoforum* 126:1, pp. 139-149

Irland, Loyd C. 2008. "State Failure, Corruption, and Warfare: Challenges for Forest Policy". *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 27:3, pp. 189-223

Jansen, Louisa J.M., Kalas, Patrick, P., Bicchieri, Marianna. 2021. "Improving governance of tenure in policy and practice: The case of Myanmar". *Land Use Policy* 100:1, pp. 1-12

Johnson, Brain A., Umemiya, Chisa., Magcale-Macandog, Damasa B., Estoque, Ronald C., Hayashi, Masato., Tadono, Takeo. 2023. "Better monitoring of forests according to FAO's definitions through map integration: Significance and limitations in the context of global environmental goals". *International Journal of Applied Earth Observation and Geoinformation* 122:1, pp. 1-12

Köhl, Michael., Neupane, Raj P., Mundhenk, Philip. 2020. "REDD+ measurement, reporting and verification – A cost trap? Implications for financing REDD+MRV costs by result-based payments". *Ecological Economics* 168:1, pp. 1-13

Köhl, Michael., Lasco, Rodel., Cifuentes, Miguel., Jonsson, Örjan., Korhonen, Kari T., Mundhenk, Philip., Navar, Jose J., Stinson, Graham. 2015. "Changes in forest production,

biomass and carbon: Results from the 2015 UN FAO Global Forest Resource Assessment”. *Forest Ecology and Management* 352:1, pp. 21-34

Lovell, Heather. 2015. “The multiple communities of low-carbon transition: an assessment of communities involved in forest carbon measurement”. *Local Environment* 20:11, pp. 1363-1382

Manda, Simon., Mukanda, Nyambe. 2023. “Can REDD+ projects deliver livelihood benefits in private tenure arrangements? Experiences from rural Zambia”. *Forest Policy and Economics* 150:1, pp. 1-12

Masiero, Maura., Secco, Laura., Pettenella, Davide., Brotto, Lucio. 2015. “Standards and guidelines for forest plantation management: A global comparative study”. *Forest Policy and Economics* 53:1, pp. 29-44

Olander, Lydia P., Gibbs, Holly K., Steiniger, Marc., Swenson, Jennifer J., Murray, Brian C. 2008. “Reference scenarios for deforestation and forest degradation in support of REDD: a review of data and methods”. *Environmental Research Letters* 3:2, pp. 1-11

Peluso, Nancy L., Vandergeest, Peter. 2020. “Writing Political Forest”. *Antipode* 52:4, pp. 1083-1103

Pernet, Corinne A., Forclaz, Amalia R. 2019. “Revisiting the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): International Histories of Agriculture, Nutrition, and Development”. *The International History Review* 41:2, pp. 345-350

Pernet, Corinne A. 2019. “FAO from the Field and from Below: Emma Reh and the Challenges of Doing Nutrition Work in Central America”. *The International History Review* 41:2, pp. 391-406

Pham, Thu T., Moeliono, Moira., Yuwono, Jennie., Dwisatrio, Bimo., Gallo, Patrícia. 2021. “REDD+ finance in Brazil, Indonesia and Vietnam: Stakeholder perspectives between 2009-2019”. *Global Environmental Change* 70:1, pp. 1-13

Ramcilovik-Suominen, Sabaheta. 2019. “REDD+ as a tool for state territorialization: managing forests and people in Laos”. *Journal of Political Ecology* 26:1, pp. 263-281

Seufert, Philip. 2013. “The FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests”. *Globalizations* 10:1, pp. 181-186

Shapiro, Aurélie., d’Annunzio, Rémi., Desclée, Baudouin., Jungers, Quentin., Kondjo, Héritier K., Iyanga, Josefina M., Gangyo, Francis I., Nana, Tatiana., Obame, Conan V., Milandou, C., Rambaud, Pierrick., Sonwa, Denis J., Mertens, Benoît., Tchana, Elisée., Khasa, Damase., Bourgoïn, Clément., Ouissika, Chérubins B., Kipute, Daddy D. 2023. “Small scale agriculture continues to drive deforestation and degradation in fragmented forests in the Congo Basin (2015–2020)”. *Land Use Policy* 134:1, pp. 1-17

Skulska, Iryna., Colaço, Maria C., Aggarwal, Safia., Didier, Habimana., Monteiro, Maria L., Rego, Francisco C. 2019. “Assessment of Portuguese Community Forestry using the Voluntary

Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure and FAO Community-Based Forestry Framework”. *Society & Natural Resources* 33:1, pp. 101-121

Skutsch, Margaret., Turnhout, Esther. 2018. “How REDD+ Is Performing Communities”. *Forests* 9:10, pp. 1-16

Svarstad, Hanne., Benjaminsen, Tor A. 2017. “Nothing succeeds like success narratives: a case of conservation and development in the time of REDD”. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11:3, pp. 482–505

Tewari, V.P (2016) “Forest inventory, assessment, and monitoring, and long-term forest observational studies, with special reference to India”. *Forest Science and Technology* 12:1, pp. 24-32

Thompson, Mary C., Baruah, Manali., Carr, Edward R. 2011. “Seeing REDD+ as a project of environmental governance”. *Environmental Science & Policy* 14:2, pp. 100-110

UNREDD. 2024. “The Programme”. Accessed on 27 February 2024. Available at: <https://www.un-redd.org/about/programme>

Well, Mareike., Carrapatoso, Astrid. 2017. “REDD+ finance: policy making in the context of fragmented institutions”. *Climate Policy* 17:6, pp. 687-707

Wright, Norman. 1964. “War on Hunger - The Work of the Food and Agriculture Organization”. *Journal of Royal Society of Arts* 112:5099, pp. 810-825