



Strategic dissonance: REDD+ implementation narratives and practices in Colombia

Diego Silva Garzón^{a,*}, Laura Gutiérrez-Escobar^b, Nelsa De la Hoz^d,
Nathalia Hernández Vidal^c

^a Hoffmann Centre for Global Sustainability, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Switzerland

^b Instituto de Bioética, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia

^c Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, Eugene, United States

^d Independent Researcher

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

REDD+ implementation
REDD+ narratives
Jurisdictional mitigation projects
Voluntary carbon markets
Climate change

ABSTRACT

This article examines the narrative and material tensions between jurisdictional and private REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) implementers in Colombia, against the backdrop of recent global scandals in carbon markets. It reveals a pattern of *strategic dissonance* between narrative and practice. These actors—from public officials to companies involved in generating carbon credits—publicly attribute governance failures to their public or private counterparts while simultaneously collaborating to maintain the regulatory status-quo. They present their respective initiatives as more financially viable, yet jointly finance climate action to meet mitigation targets. While some promote the integration of jurisdictional and private mitigation efforts, others interpret such efforts as strategies of market consolidation and exclusion. Drawing on over 50 interviews with stakeholders—including government officials, project developers, and environment conservation actors—the article links these forms of dissonance to the strategic mobilization of different environmental governance discourses and to the coexistence of opposing REDD+ political agendas. These findings shed light on the fragmented and politically contingent nature of climate governance in Colombia, and underscore the complex relationship between neoliberal conservation and capitalism.

1. Introduction

Throughout 2023, *The Guardian* published a series of articles revealing serious environmental and social flaws in REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) projects, often funded through carbon markets or results-based payment mechanisms. Based on investigations by Haya et al. (2023) and Dufrasne (2021), these articles showed that many REDD+ initiatives overestimated their mitigation outcomes, failed to demonstrate additional conservation efforts, or lacked mechanisms to guarantee the long-term permanence of results—thereby violating both the Cancun REDD+ Social and Environmental Safeguards and the Colombian National Interpretation of these guidelines.

Some of the projects discussed in *The Guardian* were based in Colombia, where REDD+ initiatives had already drawn national scrutiny over poor social standards. Concerns about respect for the social

safeguards of participation and transparency had emerged as investigative journalism documented cases of corruption, limited community participation, and a lack of effective communication in some REDD+ projects (Bermúdez Liévano, 2022; Bermúdez Liévano, 2023; Rutas del Conflicto et al., 2022). Safeguards related to land and resource rights, as well as equitable benefit-sharing, were also highlighted in reports describing problematic contract terms extending up to one hundred years, unfair benefit-sharing arrangements, and restrictions on local resource use to meet mitigation targets (Díaz and Ruiz, 2023; GAIA, 2023; GFI et al., 2024; del Pueblo, 2024; UK Embassy et al., 2024). Similarly, violations of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) standards were noted by Aguilar-Støen (2015,2017) who documented instances where contracts between project developers and Indigenous communities were signed under questionable conditions, including language barriers and reports of alcohol involvement.

While REDD+ scandals have been well documented globally

* Corresponding author at: Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2, Geneva, Switzerland.

E-mail addresses: diego.silva@graduateinstitute.ch (D. Silva Garzón), imgutierrez@javeriana.edu.co (L. Gutiérrez-Escobar), nelsadelahoz@gmail.com (N. De la Hoz), nher@uoregon.edu (N. Hernández Vidal).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2026.104581>

Received 30 April 2025; Received in revised form 7 February 2026; Accepted 10 February 2026

Available online 5 March 2026

0016-7185/© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

(Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2014; Rotz 2014; de Jong et al., 2014; Chomba et al., 2016; Schmid 2023), this article examines how such controversies have generated narrative tensions between public and private REDD+ implementers in Colombia. These include public officials—particularly from the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development—and private entrepreneurial actors involved in the voluntary carbon market (VCM). The latter comprise project developers, validation and verification bodies, certifying companies, and credit buyers (polluting companies) who design and implement jurisdictional programs or private projects (see Annex 1 for a visual representation of this network of actors). These actors deploy competing narratives to defend their respective approaches and shift blame for failures, giving rise to what Hajer (1995, 56) calls *storylines*: narrative simplifications that actors construct to cope with uncertainty, imperfect information, and limited knowledge. In this case, storylines serve as vehicles through which REDD+ implementers argue over the strengths and limitations of jurisdictional versus private initiatives, as their actions come under increasing public scrutiny.

This article contributes to the literature on REDD+ by analyzing the narrative struggles between jurisdictional and private implementers in a national context where both frameworks coexist. It also builds on research on REDD+ policy discourses by examining how the storylines of REDD+ implementers resonate with dominant REDD+ policy discourses. As Hajer (1995) argues, storylines draw on existing discourses to enable communication and coalition-building, but they can also be strategically mobilized to promote particular policy agendas, reinforcing existing discursive frameworks. Hajer (2005, 300) defines discourses as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.”

Based on Hajer’s (1995) argumentative discourse analysis, Bäckstrand and Lövbrand (2006) identify three dominant discourses of global environmental governance that are central in REDD+: ecological modernization, which promotes techno-managerial solutions and market-based incentives for the protection of the environment; green governmentality, which produces new knowledge about the environment and expands biopolitical dispositives for its monitoring and conservation; and civic environmentalism, which emphasizes the importance of environmental justice, equity, and the participation of marginalized populations. REDD+ implementers in Colombia strategically navigate these discursive frameworks in their practice and storylines, adapting to shifting policy orientations across successive government administrations.

Some scholars have analyzed the influence of storylines and environmental governance discourses on REDD+ definitions (Nielsen, 2014) or national REDD+ practices (Ramcilovic-Suominen and Iben Nathan, 2020). However, few have focused on their divergent mobilization by public and private REDD+ implementers. This gap may reflect the limited number of countries where both approaches coexist, as well as the broader neglect of REDD+ experts in academic research. As Kono and Upton (2024) observe, scholarship has paid little attention to the positionalities and politics of REDD+ experts within national processes.

A notable exception is Van Der Hoff et al. (2015), who explore the discursive tensions between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers in Brazil. They challenge the notion that discursive convergence is necessary for the successful implementation of REDD+ (Hiraldo and Tanner 2011). Instead, they argue that implementers mobilize different discourses of “sustainable development” and “carbon commodification,” giving rise to distinct REDD+ networks that at times compete or collaborate in practice. However, Van Der Hoff et al. (2015) do not examine how these dynamics coexist and unfold in practice.

This article addresses that gap by analyzing the narrative tension between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers in Colombia and their interplay with environmental governance discourses and practices of REDD+ implementation. This analysis sheds light on three forms of strategic dissonance—that is, instances where narratives and

material practice do not align, but instead reflect selective appropriations shaped by changing political and institutional contexts—at the regulatory, financial and infrastructural level: (1) implementers attribute blame for REDD+ regulatory failures to their counterparts while collaborating to maintain the regulatory status quo; (2) they compete to position their networks as the most financially sustainable, while cooperating in financing mitigation efforts; and (3) they express intentions to articulate jurisdictional and private initiatives nationally while some of them fear that such efforts conceal a strategy of market competition.

These dynamics reveal two agendas – one of convergence and collaboration between public and private REDD+ implementers, and another of competition and market control. We show that the coexistence of these agendas reflects the overlapping and strategic mobilization of different discourses of environmental governance promoted by successive Colombian administrations, resulting in layered and fragmented REDD+ frameworks.

A methodological note is warranted before we continue with this analysis. Although REDD+ controversies have profoundly affected forest-based Indigenous and black communities, this article does not offer a systematic analysis of their perspectives. Our focus is deliberately on public and private implementers—those who design, certify, regulate, and commercialize REDD+ initiatives. This angle allows us to trace narrative tensions within the institutional architecture of REDD+ itself, but it leaves out the equally important views of those most directly affected. We address this limitation in separate work, including analyses of Indigenous experiences with specific REDD+ programs (Gutiérrez Escobar et al., 2025), public discourses about Indigenous peoples in REDD+ debates (Hernández Vidal et al., 2025), and an ongoing study on safeguards.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide a short history of REDD+ development in Colombia. We then map the narrative tensions between jurisdictional and private implementers, analyzing three key areas of competition, collaboration, and coexistence. The last section of the article discusses the underlying REDD+ discourses and mitigation agendas that could be behind these types of dissonance and what they could mean for the future of REDD+ in Colombia.

The article is informed by 50+ interviews and informal conversations with program/project owners and developers, certifying companies, validating and verifying bodies (VVBs), regulators from jurisdictional and private initiatives, Conservationist NGOs, officials from the Ministries of Environment and Sustainable development (MADS) and Agriculture and Rural Development. It is also informed by public fora to which we have attended, such as the 2023 *Cumbre del Clima* organized by the Colombian association for the actors of the carbon market (Asocarbono). We use pseudonyms to protect interviewees’ identity and all translations are ours.

2. REDD+ in Colombia

Colombia’s REDD+ initiatives have reflected varying degrees of ecological modernization, green governmentality, and civic environmentalism across three administrations: the liberal government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), the right-wing administration of Iván Duque (2018–2022), and the current left-wing government of Gustavo Petro (2022–present).

Santos’ REDD+ approach was closely tied to the peace process with the FARC guerrilla, which culminated in the 2016 Peace Agreement. The Agreement promoted a vision of peacebuilding grounded in sustainable development, aiming to align socio-economic recovery with environmental protection. Within this framework, the administration adopted a green growth strategy intended to generate alternative economic opportunities in post-conflict regions dominated by illicit economies, while curbing environmental degradation. For several experts involved in designing the national REDD+ strategy, this agenda positioned REDD+ as inseparable from the broader peacebuilding project: deforestation

and armed conflict, they argued, stemmed from the same structural drivers of rural marginalization and territorial inequality.¹

In this context, REDD+ was framed as a mechanism capable of simultaneously supporting rural livelihoods and advancing forest conservation. The Santos government thus promoted both jurisdictional and private REDD+ initiatives and introduced a carbon tax and a non-causation mechanism that became central funding sources for Colombia's voluntary carbon market (VCM). Overall, the Santos' administration was clearly influenced by the ecological modernization discourse, promoting the monetization of carbon sinks and the use of financial incentives to encourage pro-environmental behavior.

A significant shift occurred with the arrival of Iván Duque in 2018, whose administration reoriented environmental governance away from Santos' developmentalist peacebuilding framework. Duque was elected on the promise of not implementing the Peace Agreement, after Santos lost the referendum that sought popular approval for it. Duque's obstruction of the Agreement's implementation and his reliance on a militarized strategy to control deforestation—rather than a sustainable development approach—had serious consequences. During his term, over 700,000 ha were deforested (Yunis Mebarak and Pablo Correa, 2023, 118), a 5% increase compared to Santos's second term (Tarazona, 2022), as shown in Image 1.

Duque's flagship anti-deforestation policy, *Operation Artemisa*, deployed command-and-control tactics against illegal loggers and miners in national parks and natural reserves. With at least 21 military operations, this approach exemplifies a disciplinary form of green governmentality, centralizing environmental stewardship and operationalizing it through state security forces. This type of approach has been often criticized as insufficient to tackle tropical deforestation (Da Conceição et al., 2018) and in the case of Colombia, it increased the level of violence in the Amazon region, weakening the security of local populations. According to Global Witness, assassinations of socio-environmental leaders rose sharply—from 24 in 2018 to 67 in 2022 (Open Democracy, 2022). Duque further weakened the environmental sector by cutting the Ministry of Environment's budget by 94% compared to Santos's final year.

The election of Gustavo Petro in 2022 marked another major inflection point, this time away from Duque's militarized model and toward community-centered approaches. Petro's administration, the first left-wing government in Colombia's history, adopted an ambitious environmental agenda, declaring its aim to make Colombia a “global power of life.” This slogan reflected a commitment to biodiversity protection and climate action. According to Yunis Mebarak and Pablo Correa (2023, 246), Petro's strategy emphasized collaboration with local communities rather than top-down enforcement, reflecting a strong resonance with the civic environmentalism discourse. Results have been mixed. While the government claimed to reduce deforestation in 2022 and 2023, rates surged again in 2024. This increase has been linked to the re-emergence of FARC dissidents and new criminal groups asserting territorial control and using deforestation as an economic and strategic tool, amidst challenging peace negotiations with the current administration (Krause, 2020; Revelo-Rebolledo, 2019; García et al., 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Although Petro's government has expressed support for climate action, it has distanced itself from the VCM. REDD+ scandals have been used by government officials to criticize market-based mechanisms and

reaffirm state-led jurisdictional REDD+ programs. Consequently, while civic environmentalism shapes Petro's rhetoric and certain practices, elements of ecological modernization and green governmentality remain embedded in his conservation agenda.

The remainder of this section outlines the main characteristics of the jurisdictional and private REDD+ networks promoted—albeit to varying degrees—under these three administrations. This context is essential for understanding the REDD+ implementer narratives analyzed later and that represent the core of our study.

2.1. Jurisdictional REDD+: the *visión amazonía* program

Colombia embarked on preparations for the implementation of REDD projects in 2008, receiving support from international organizations and cooperation funds (Gobierno de Colombia, 2018, 19). In this year, the Colombian Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology, and Environmental Studies (IDEAM) initiated efforts to enhance its technical capabilities for monitoring forest coverage and quantifying the nation's deforestation rates (Gobierno de Colombia, 2018, 78). This initiative eventually led to the establishment of a national forest inventory and the development of a comprehensive national forest and carbon monitoring system by 2012. Consequently, IDEAM was able to successfully formulate the country's first national forest reference emission levels (FREL), serving as a critical measure for evaluating the impact of mitigation projects in reducing the country's deforestation rates (see Annex 2 for a visual representation of the institutional developments leading to the creation of *Visión Amazonía*).

The preliminary groundwork undertaken by Colombian state institutions for REDD+ played a pivotal role in shaping the first jurisdictional REDD program in Colombia, known as *Visión Amazonía*. Created in 2013 under the first Santos' administration with the help of German initiative 'REDD Early Movers' (REM), this program works with local communities in the Amazon to protect the forest in areas with high levels of deforestation. The establishment of the country's FREL paved the way for REM participants to establish a methodology for quantifying the carbon emission reductions that would ensue from the program, and match them with 'result-based' payments from REM funders: Norway, United Kingdom and Germany. In essence, the program tracks changes in forest coverage within its areas of operation and estimates the associated carbon emissions reductions in tons of CO₂ equivalent. REM funders committed to remunerating USD 5 for each ton of CO₂e that the program prevented from being emitted, while REM developers pledged to prevent an additional ton of CO₂e emission for every ton financed by the funders. The emission reductions resulting from the REM program are calculated according to a methodology commonly agreed by program participants, the program mitigation initiatives are registered in a national platform, and results are verified by an independent auditor.

REM *Visión Amazonía* can be understood as an expression of green governmentality, grounded in the state's use of remote sensing technologies and statistical tools to monitor forests. These techniques enable the quantification of mitigation outcomes in carbon units and support the creation of financial incentives to curb deforestation—an approach that is also aligned with ecological modernization discourse. However, it is essential to note that REM was not designed to operate within any carbon trading system. Its results cannot be used to offset emissions from REM donor countries, nor can they be traded on carbon markets (Yunis Mebarak and Pablo Correa, 2023, 94). Rather, REM functions more like a development initiative funded through international cooperation, with disbursements contingent on the verification of emission reductions. Under this framework, *Visión Amazonía* received performance-based payments for the 2013–2016 period for approximately USD 87.3 millions (Yunis Mebarak and Pablo Correa, 2023, 44), but no payments were issued after 2017 due to the failure to meet expected mitigation

¹ For example, Esperanza, a staff member from a multilateral organization, explained to us in an interview in March 2022: “The national REDD strategy assumes this cross-sectoral approach with rural development as a fundamental framework, but above all, an interdependence with the implementation of the Peace Accords. This is so because the causes of deforestation are the same as the causes of violence in Colombia. And if there is no comprehensive implementation of the Accords, deforestation will never be stopped because the underlying causes will never be addressed”

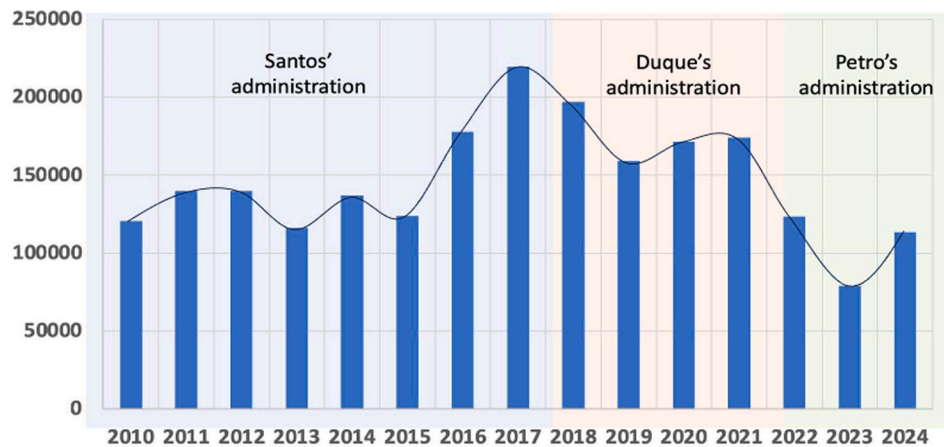


Image 1. Annual deforestation (hectares) in Colombia 2010–2024..

Source: Our own based on Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales - Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible [Ideam - MADS] (2025, 8)

outcomes.² A second phase of *Visión Amazonía* started in 2023 and is expected to last until 2027.

According to the program's benefit-distribution model, about 75% of payments were invested in the so-called Arc of Deforestation, located in the departments of Guaviare, Caquetá, and Meta—areas at the center of armed conflict and extractivist pressures in the Colombian Amazon (see [Image 2](#)). Investments followed two main strategies. The first focused on the direct control of deforestation, including actions targeting illegal armed groups that drive forest loss. The second supported producers, particularly settlers, in adopting production systems that reduce deforestation, such as silvopastoral and agroforestry practices. Additionally, following principles of equality and solidarity, 20% of payments were allocated to Indigenous communities in the Amazon through a grant system, regardless of their direct involvement in deforestation-reduction activities.

2.2. Private REDD+: Colombia's voluntary carbon market

Voluntary carbon market (VCM) initiatives are private mitigation projects, including REDD+, designed to help private actors to voluntarily compensate for, or offset, their carbon emissions. In this market, companies interested in improving their carbon footprint can do so by acquiring certified emission reductions, known as carbon credits.

In Colombia, the market for this type of credit has been significantly boosted by state intervention. Colombia established a carbon tax in 2016 (Law 1819 of 2016) over the consumption of fossil fuels and incentivized emissions reduction across various sectors. However, the country also established a mechanism of no-causation of such tax ([Decree 926 of 2017](#)), which allows companies liable to the tax to offset their carbon emissions through the purchase of certified carbon credits from the domestic VCM.

Broadly speaking, projects from the VCM work in the following way. A private company, known as the project developer, chooses a particular

² To be sure, *Visión Amazonía's* goal to curb deforestation in the Colombian Amazon is an extraordinarily difficult goal for any single program to achieve, given the region's complex socio-political and ecological dynamics. Its effectiveness ultimately depends on broader forces, including the shifting dynamics of the armed conflict, the uneven implementation of the Peace Accords, and recurring cycles of legal and illegal extractivism. Thus, although the program has contributed to reducing deforestation, it cannot resolve the problem on its own because it relies on a short-term technocratic approach that leaves deeper structural drivers intact—for example, the expansion of agribusiness and extensive cattle ranching enabled by powerful political-economic alliances, and the persistence of militarized strategies that have intensified conflict in post-accord territories ([Krause, 2020](#); [Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al., 2021](#)).

standard and methodology to design and implement mitigation activities. These standards and methodologies are produced by private companies, known as certifiers, that are recognized by the national accreditation authority (ONAC) and that have the authority to certify the emission reductions of mitigation initiatives. They provide the minimum guidelines that a project needs to follow in order to prove a positive contribution to climate mitigation (e.g. additionality), and to manage risks related to negative socio environmental effects (e.g. carbon leakage or reversal). They also provide the methodologies for the design and implementation of projects through different types of activities (such as reduction of deforestation, improve forest management, afforestation and reforestation, among others) and precise guidelines for the quantification and monitoring of carbon emission reductions and removals.

In order to avoid conflicts of interests, where certifying companies certify the mitigation results of project developers that do not appropriately follow their guidelines, a third party known as the validating and verifying body (VVBs) is introduced as an independent mediator between the two actors. VVBs check that developers are appropriately following the guidelines established by the standard at different stages of the project cycle, suggest improvements to developers and write reports communicating their findings to certifying companies.

Following the guidelines of a particular standard, project developers evaluate the technical, social and economic viability of implementing a mitigation project in a particular locality of the country. Once the viability of the project has been established, they reach a private agreement with local communities, or other land holders living in the project area, in order to implement the project. They seek the validation of the VVB in order to register their project in their Standard of choice and commence the project. As a mitigation project advances and produces results that are verified by VVBs, certifying companies will proceed to certify those results by creating a certificate of emission reductions (carbon credit) per each ton of carbon that was mitigated. Carbon credits are stored in a digital registry from where they can be traded. (See Annex 1 for a visual explanation of the Colombian Voluntary Carbon Market based on [Silva \(in press\)](#)).

Like jurisdictional REDD+ programs, private projects within the Voluntary Carbon Market (VCM) also draw on elements of green governmentality and ecological modernization discourses. These initiatives depend on the production of new forms of environmental knowledge and techniques for monitoring carbon emissions. Unlike jurisdictional REDD+, however, this knowledge is not centralized by the state or tied to command-and-control mechanisms. Instead, it is codified in private standards and operationalized through a network of independent auditing bodies. Furthermore, within the VCM, carbon units function as tradable commodities purchased to fulfill specific objectives—typically

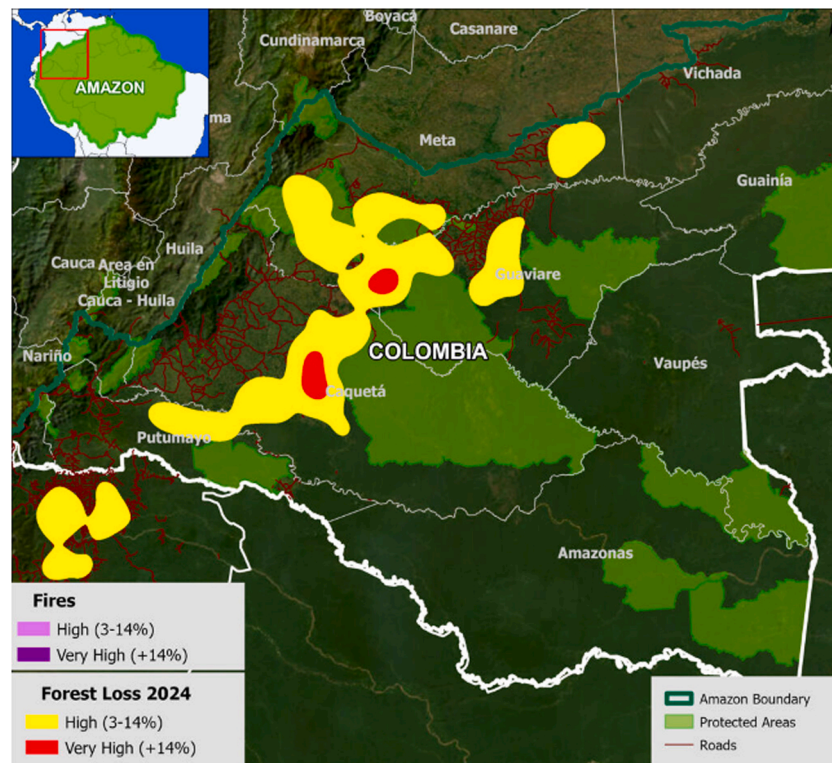


Image 2. The Colombian Arc of Deforestation in 2024. Source: Amazon Conservation, 2024.

corporate offsetting goals—whereas in jurisdictional programs, carbon metrics primarily serve to quantify environmental outcomes. Additionally, companies operating in the VCM, unlike Visión Amazonía, have concentrated their REDD+ projects in Indigenous territories in the departments of Vaupés, Amazonas, and Guainía, which lie outside the Arc of Deforestation. Implementing projects in exceptionally well-preserved areas of the Colombian Amazon has raised concerns about whether these initiatives genuinely meet the principle of additionality, as well as the potential adverse impacts they may have on Indigenous ways of life and worldviews—communities that have safeguarded the Amazon rainforest for centuries (Gutiérrez-Escobar, Hernández Vidal & De la Hoz 2025).

3. Narrative tensions and strategic dissonance in Colombia's REDD+

The coexistence of jurisdictional and private REDD+ networks in Colombia has generated ongoing tensions among REDD+ implementers, which have become increasingly visible in recent years, particularly in the context of REDD+ scandals. In addition to news articles, academic publications, and podcasts covering these controversies at the national level, numerous events are organized monthly by conservationist NGOs, international cooperation agencies, state institutions, and VCM actors. Together, these forums have created a dynamic public arena in which the present and future of Colombia's climate mitigation initiatives are debated, with particular attention to the regulation, financing, and distribution of benefits associated with REDD+.

Based on our research, we identify six core areas of narrative tension between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers in Colombia (see Table 1). These tensions give place to different *storylines* (Hajer 1995: 56) that are often confrontational, as actors emphasize the distinct advantages of the carbon mitigation network they support and frequently shift blame for REDD+ scandals to their counterparts. For example, implementers claim that their respective REDD+ initiatives are more effectively regulated and financed. They also argue that their networks have better mechanisms of benefit distribution or that they are

more compliant with mandatory socio-environmental safeguards. Some of these storylines resonate with those that have been identified by Nielsen (2014) as central in REDD+ discourse, such as defending the market mechanism as the most efficient way of promoting environmental conservation or the portrayal of public-private conservation partnerships as win-win solutions.

Clearly, this binary classification does not reflect the complexity of the positions mobilized by our research participants. Many expressed hybrid views, combining elements of both perspectives or occupying more ambivalent or critical stances. Nevertheless, narrative tension between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers remains a key feature of the REDD+ in Colombia.

This tension is compounded by a notable dissonance between narratives and practice. While REDD+ implementers are engaged in a narrative dispute, they often collaborate in practice and promote pragmatic co-existence. As Van Der Hoff et al. (2015) argue, this is not inherently contradictory. REDD+ networks can coexist and even cooperate despite divergent discourses, while confrontational narratives may serve to defend the status quo or push for change in specific directions.

To better explore the complexities of the narrative tensions presented above, and their dissonance with material practices, we turn to the analysis of three key areas from Table 1 in greater depth: a. the way in which REDD+ projects and programs are regulated by public and private norms; b. the capacity of jurisdictional and private REDD+ initiatives to remain financially sustainable over time; and c. the functioning of the infrastructures that have been designed to mediate the co-existence of jurisdictional and private REDD+ initiatives. We focus on these three areas because they exemplify the paradoxical relationship between narrative competition and material collaboration in Colombia's REDD+ landscape.

Key to understanding the dissonance between narratives and practices in the Colombian case is the recognition that the state is not a unified actor; rather, it comprises overlapping generations of personnel, policies, and regulatory instruments that do not always align. REDD+ implementers have been involved in different administrations that

Table 1
Narrative tensions between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers in Colombia.

Areas of Debate	Jurisdictional narratives	Private narratives
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdictional programs are better regulated than private initiatives because they are directly monitored by the State. • The VCM is the domain of private law and the State cannot intervene. Even if it could, the State does not have the institutional capacity to do so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private initiatives are well regulated through private audit networks. The market quickly expels actors that behave poorly. • REDD+ scandals are exceptional cases where a lax regulatory framework meets greedy actors. Private initiatives have had flaws in the past but they are improving.
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdictional programs have the capacity to attract more climate funds than private initiatives because they have a larger mitigation impact and because international donors trust States more than private actors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private initiatives have more financial potential and are more financially sustainable than jurisdictional ones because they do not depend on the political will of donors.
Benefit Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdictional programs fairly distribute benefits to local communities through grant programs and following the principle of solidarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VCM recognizes participating communities as equal business partners and establishes bilateral agreements with them where the distribution of benefits is agreed by both parties.
Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a solid national interpretation of the Cancun safeguards. • The state is working on operationalizing this interpretation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no clear guidelines for the implementation of safeguards. • The safeguards of private standards are more robust than national guidelines.
Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Visión Amazonía</i> did not implement FPIC during its first phase, because the national REDD+ plan was the result of a process of consultation with indigenous organizations. • After a legal case raised by some indigenous organizations, the government agreed to carry out FPIC for the second phase of the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private projects should not require FPIC. Communities that have freely chosen to carry out a REDD+ project in their territories, do not need to consult themselves in order to participate in private projects of the VCM.
Infrastructures of coexistence (RENARE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The national registry of emission reductions (RENARE) is a tool of articulation between jurisdictional and private mitigation initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The national registry of greenhouse gas emission reductions (RENARE) has been dysfunctional and this dysfunctionality can be mobilized to exclude private actors from project areas.

strategically mobilize diverging discourses of environmental governance (ecological modernization, green governmentality, civic environmentalism) in support of different REDD+ agendas.

3.1. Competition or complicity? Regulating REDD+ initiatives in Colombia

One of the most contentious issues in the debate between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers in Colombia concerns how these initiatives are regulated. State and voluntary carbon market (VCM) actors diverge sharply in their perceptions of the adequacy, strength, and legitimacy of both public and private regulatory

frameworks. This section compares the storylines mobilized by these actors regarding the regulation of REDD+, drawing on our interviews and analysis.

3.1.1. Market-driven REDD+ regulations

VCM actors acknowledge that some private REDD+ project developers in the Colombian Amazon have engaged in unethical practices in pursuit of profit. However, they characterize these actors as a few “rotten apples” in an otherwise well-regulated market. As noted earlier, private project developers are required to follow the methodologies and safeguards set out by recognized carbon standards (or certification bodies). These standards—though variable—generally require adherence to national laws and basic principles such as environmental integrity, additionality, permanence, and social safeguards.

Some VCM actors even argue that private REDD+ projects are more stringently regulated than their jurisdictional counterparts. Daniela, the director of a certification body, told us that private developers are under growing pressure to align with international expectations and guidelines, including CORSIA, ICROA, and VCMI. By contrast, jurisdictional programs such as *Visión Amazonía* are not held to the same market-facing standards because they do not issue tradable credits. Instead, their emission reductions serve to demonstrate program effectiveness to donors and funders. For example, during its first phase, *Visión Amazonía* was not validated against any international certification body but was simply required to meet national policy goals and apply a carbon accounting methodology agreed upon by its funders ([Gobierno de Colombia, 2018](#)).³

VCM actors offer various explanations for the inability of private regulation to prevent unethical conduct. Many describe the early years of Colombia’s carbon market as a steep learning curve. Esteban, an expert from a certification body, noted that early definitions of key principles—particularly additionality—were overly lax. He pointed specifically to [Resolution 1447 of 2018](#), which governs the monitoring, reporting, and verification of mitigation initiatives. According to Esteban, this resolution adopted a “soft” definition of additionality by accepting any activity that could reduce emissions as additional, even if these activities could have occurred in the absence of the project due to existing legal commitments or financial resources.

In the early years of the Colombian VCM, REDD+ projects in Colombia were certified under international standards with stricter criteria, influenced by the legacy of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). But the introduction of a national certification body permitted certification under Colombia’s more flexible rules. This shift had two major effects: it encouraged the development of a national carbon market dominated by local actors, and it set a low bar for project approval, thereby attracting developers more motivated by quick profits than by climate mitigation or conservation.

Still, Esteban maintains that the quality of Colombian REDD+ projects is improving as national standards become harmonized with international ones. In a competitive market, he argues, only the most robust projects will survive. As he put it:

“I would say that the best regulation that can exist is the market’s acceptance of credits. If the credits are sold, it means that the market is perceiving those credits as solid credits. If they manage to survive the press scandals and they manage to continue selling credits, it is a good sign. And if the State were to regulate us, perhaps it would not find anything else to contribute.”

3.1.2. The public regulation of REDD+

Most state officials we interviewed agreed that the absence of clear

³ However, in 2021 the program requested certification from the ART TREES standard as it seeks to start a second stage of operations where the production of carbon credits is contemplated ([ART TREES 2021](#)).

regulations in the early stages of REDD+ allowed for the emergence of opportunistic and predatory behavior by private developers. Oscar, an official from *Visión Amazonía*, told us that the state initially provided no oversight, leading to the proliferation of profit-driven projects that generated “a lot of tension in the region, many challenges [for local communities], and a lack of clarity in terms of information.” For Oscar, the situation is “very disorganized and needs to be regulated—even if it is a voluntary market.”

This sentiment was echoed by others in the conservation and international development sectors. Amalia, from a UN agency, recalled that during the design of Colombia’s National REDD+ Strategy—*Bosques: Territorios de Vida*—her team recommended the creation of a comprehensive regulatory framework for private REDD+ projects. But officials from the Ministry of Environment declined, claiming that because these projects are based on private contracts among market actors (e.g., communities, developers, certifiers, and verifiers), they fall outside the state’s jurisdiction. As she explained:

“The answer we got from the Ministry of Environment was that this was an issue of private actors and that the state could not get involved.”

Fernando, from the state agency IDEAM, was more direct:

“If one day my office wants to regulate the carbon market, the next day I will find a *tutela* on my desk.”⁴

Other officials suggested that even if the state were to assert greater regulatory authority, it lacks the capacity to enforce it. Antonio, a Ministry of Environment official, pointed to the fragmentation and chronic underfunding of the country’s environmental governance institutions. REDD+, the national carbon tax, and broader climate mitigation efforts are divided across various agencies, each with distinct mandates and leadership.⁵ “Each body has its own objectives and reports to different bosses,” Antonio said, making coordination nearly impossible. In his view, proper REDD+ governance would require “a total restructuring” of the *Sistema Nacional Ambiental* (SINA), which includes the state institutions working on environmental issues.

This regulatory vacuum is compounded by legal ambiguity over carbon ownership. A draft resolution issued in August 2024 by the Ministry of Environment claimed that carbon is a natural resource owned by the state. Under this interpretation, individuals and communities could only usufruct from it through state authorization (*Minambiente*, 2024a). VCM actors rejected this position, arguing that carbon is an environmental asset freely exploitable by landowners (*Asocarbono*, 2024). Indigenous communities are expected to resist the ruling, citing constitutional rights to territorial autonomy and self-management of natural resources.

Further complicating matters is the failure of Colombia’s financial regulators to determine whether carbon credits constitute commodities or financial assets. Carbon credits do not fit neatly into any existing legal category: they are not securities (they don’t handle deposits), not savings instruments (they don’t promise returns), and not shares (they don’t pay dividends). As a result, regulators have hesitated to classify them, leaving them in a legal grey zone that hinders state oversight and enforcement.

This institutional ambiguity was particularly evident during a public

⁴ A *tutela* is a legal action that seeks to protect the constitutional rights of individuals or vulnerable groups, such as indigenous peoples.

⁵ Some of these include: the *Dirección de Cambio Climático y Gestión de Riesgo*, which belongs to the *Viceministerio de Ordenamiento*; the agency in charge of forests of the *Dirección de Bosques, Biodiversidad y Servicios Ecosistémicos*, which depends on the *Viceministerio de Normalización de Políticas*; various agencies attached to the Ministry of Environment, such as the *Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales* (IDEAM), and the *Instituto de Investigaciones Biológicas Alexander Von Humboldt*; among others.

event held in Bogotá, where we asked representatives from various state agencies about their role in regulating the carbon market. Staff from the Financial Superintendency of Colombia explained that their office could only intervene if carbon credits were formally defined as financial assets—a classification that remains unresolved. Officials from the Industry and Tourism Superintendency, which is responsible for consumer protection, remarked that REDD+ contracts often lack a clearly defined consumer, complicating any attempt at regulatory oversight. Representatives from the National Tax and Customs Directorate (DIAN) acknowledged that their limited expertise in environmental policy and climate finance hampers their ability to manage the fiscal dimensions of the carbon market. In practice, this leaves the Ministry of Environment as the sole public institution with any formal responsibility over REDD+ and the VCM—despite lacking the financial capacity, personnel, and legal tools required to govern them effectively.

3.1.3. Competition or complicity? strategic dissonance in REDD+ regulation

What do these narrative strategies around regulation accomplish in practice? First, both jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers claim that their respective systems are adequately regulated. Private actors stress their reliance on a self-regulating ecosystem of standards and third-party verifiers, while state officials assert that jurisdictional programs are subject to national oversight. Second, each side deflects blame for ethical violations. VCM proponents attribute failures to a formative learning curve; state actors disclaim responsibility by pointing to the privatized nature of the market and their limited enforcement capacity. These rhetorical maneuvers ultimately serve to resist meaningful reform. VCM actors frame private regulation as a dynamic process of continual improvement. Jurisdictional actors vacillate between asserting and denying state authority—an ambivalence that recalls *Randeria’s* (2003) notion of “the cunning state,” which simultaneously claims the power to act and the inability to do so. In short, while jurisdictional and private implementers publicly compete over who regulates better, their mutual failure to ensure robust oversight reveals a deeper material complicity. The narrative competition obscures the shared interest in preserving a loosely regulated environment that enables both sides to operate with minimal accountability.

3.2. Competition or collaboration? Financing climate action in Colombia

Beyond regulatory challenges, the issue of financial sustainability also emerged as a central concern in our interviews. Stakeholders frequently invoked the ability to attract and manage funding as an argument in favor of either jurisdictional or private mitigation initiatives. Here, actors in the voluntary carbon market (VCM) have been particularly assertive, arguing that private REDD+ projects are financially viable because they are sustained by market-based mechanisms—unlike public programs, which they claim are constrained by political volatility. Proponents of jurisdictional REDD+, by contrast, emphasize that even private market actors depend on state policy and international cooperation. Seeking to reconcile these competing storylines, the association of VCM stakeholders, *Asocarbono*, advocates for a hybrid model that combines both public and private efforts to more effectively meet Colombia’s climate mitigation goals.

3.2.1. The public/private financial dichotomy

During 2013–2017, *Visión Amazonía* reported payments and funding for emission reductions totaling USD 87.3 million. This was based on an agreed price of USD 5 per ton of CO₂ equivalent. In 2019 the donor countries pledged a supplementary amount of USD 366 million to fund additional mitigation efforts aimed at reducing deforestation by 21% by 2022 and by 50% by 2025 (*Andoke et al.*, 2023, 337). With these funds, *Visión Amazonía* had financed indigenous projects by December 2021 totaling USD 15.3 million (*Minambiente* 2021).

Despite the scale of these financial flows, many VCM actors question

their long-term reliability. Daniela, the director of a leading carbon certification standard, noted that jurisdictional programs depend heavily on donor funding, which is shaped by shifting political agendas and external priorities. In contrast, she argued, private REDD+ initiatives generate their own financing through the issuance and sale of carbon credits in domestic and international markets—making them more self-sufficient and adaptable.

An analysis carried out by the NGO *Ecoversa* (2023) seems to support this perspective. The report claims that, between 2013 and 2021, private REDD+ initiatives in Colombia outperformed *Visión Amazonía* both in terms of financial leverage and mitigation results.⁶ While *Visión Amazonía* raised USD 87 million over this period, it failed to secure any additional payments between 2017 and 2021 due to unmet targets. In contrast, private projects raised USD 187 million and reportedly delivered more than double the emissions reductions (see *Table 2*). These findings reinforce a narrative common among market proponents: that scalable, impactful climate finance requires the efficiency and responsiveness of market mechanisms (Pedroni et al., 2009).

3.2.2. A publicly held private market

Despite the appearance of a clear public/private divide, some actors argue that the VCM in Colombia cannot be fully understood outside the context of state intervention. Carlos, a representative of the United Kingdom embassy in Colombia, emphasized that the VCM owes its existence to public regulation—particularly the introduction of the *non-causation* mechanism of the country’s carbon tax. This mechanism allows companies to fulfill their tax obligations by purchasing certified carbon credits, thereby anchoring private credit demand to public fiscal policy. From this angle, Colombia’s carbon market is not truly “voluntary,” but rather a hybrid system shaped by state-led financial incentives.

Although consistent with the narratives that support private REDD+ initiatives as a way of escalating climate finance, the *Ecoversa* study presented above also supports Carlo’s perspective. Not only does it assume that most of the demand for private REDD+ carbon credits is motivated by the non-causation mechanism, the study seems to have been written in support of this mechanism. The study was commissioned

Table 2
Financial Leverage of *Visión Amazonía* & Private REDD initiatives (2013–2021) in USD.

Item	Jurisdictional Program (<i>Visión Amazonía</i>)	Private REDD+ projects	Ratio of financial leverage
Payment for Results Financing	\$87.330.321	\$187.493.578	1:2,14
Direct investment in communities or project areas (% of total resources)	77%	72%	
Tons of carbon emission reductions	41.690.435	89.068.881	1:2,13
Avoided deforestation in ha (estimate)	73.645	195.332	1,2:65

Source: Análisis sobre el apalancamiento de recursos público-privados para el combate a la deforestación en Colombia (*Ecoversa* 2023, 32).

⁶ The income of private REDD+ projects was calculated in the study using data from 37 projects that were already producing carbon credits in the country. The study assumed that the value of their transactions was equivalent to 75% of the, otherwise, expected carbon tax revenue. This assumption is based on the idea that companies that are liable to the carbon tax will have incentives to buy carbon offsets only if their value is significantly lower than the cost of paying the tax per ton of carbon.

by *Asocarbono* in the midst of modifications to the mechanism as part of the 2022 national tax reform. Law 2722 of 2022, which legislates this reform, limited to 50% the share of taxable carbon emissions that liable companies could offset through the purchase of national carbon credits. Thus, through the *Ecoversa* study, *Asocarbono* hoped to show that the public/private collaboration through the *dupla* ‘public carbon tax/private carbon offsets,’ was effective, and that further steps towards weakening this strategy were not justified by the VCM mitigation results. The study includes various future scenarios showing how future mitigation trajectories would be affected by further changes in the non-causation mechanism and argues that national mitigation goals will be achieved quicker if the VCM continues to be supported by state intervention (*Ecoversa* 2023, 39–40).

Proponents of the reform, however, argue that limiting offsetting obligations forces industries to implement structural emissions reductions within their operations rather than relying solely on credits. They also contend that reducing domestic offsetting could incentivize local certification bodies to meet international standards—enabling Colombian projects to access less limited carbon markets abroad.

3.2.3. Narrative competition, material collaboration: strategic dissonance in REDD+ financing

What emerges from these competing narratives is a dissonance between discourse and practice. Both jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers take a similar stance with regards to financial sustainability, arguing that their own networks of mitigation are best positioned to attract financial capital and scale up climate action. From the perspective of the current administration, this narrative tension serves to support recent regulatory changes that reduce the public support of the VCM, such as the reduction by half in the amount of emissions that industries liable to the carbon tax can compensate through the purchasing of carbon credits.

Yet in practice, many third-party observers from international cooperation agencies point to significant material interdependence between public and private initiatives. They note that the VCM depends on public regulation to create demand, while jurisdictional programs rely on mitigation outcomes of private projects to meet national targets. While some VCM actors continue to promote a market-driven vision aimed at international expansion, *Asocarbono* adopts a more conciliatory stance—mobilizing a narrative of collaboration that echoes the REDD+ agenda of previous Colombian administrations.

3.3. Articulation or exclusion? The co-existence of jurisdictional and private mitigation initiatives

Another central issue raised by our interlocutors concerns the dysfunctional governance infrastructures that were supposed to regulate the coexistence of jurisdictional and private REDD+ initiatives in Colombia. The main tool that was developed for this purpose is the National Registry of GHG Emission Reductions (RENARE), managed by IDEAM. While some actors view RENARE as a vital platform to articulate jurisdictional and private mitigation initiatives, others see it as a potential tool for exclusion. Because only projects listed in RENARE are recognized by the state, periods when the platform was offline raised serious concerns and speculations among VCM actors who were unable to register their projects. This section examines these tensions, which we later connect to the shifting agendas of different government administrations.

3.3.1. Articulation

RENARE was created to centralize emissions data from all mitigation initiatives—jurisdictional and private—in Colombia. The platform was envisioned as a tool for transparency, public accountability, and oversight of national mitigation efforts. The RENARE was also supposed to prevent double counting of emission results. It also aimed to prevent double counting of emissions reductions by identifying overlaps

between private VCM projects and jurisdictional programs. According to [Resolution 1447 of 2018](#), in such cases, private projects must “nest” within the broader jurisdictional program—either by having their accounting “grandfathered” and becoming executing partners, or by formally requesting exclusion from the jurisdictional program ([ART TREES, 2021](#), 23). To achieve these objectives, [Resolution 1447](#) obliged all jurisdictional and private mitigation initiatives to register their intended activities and areas of intervention in this platform.

This governance architecture led some VCM actors to view RENARE as a promising instrument for articulating different levels of mitigation. For example, Esteban, from a certification body, described RENARE as “a very good opportunity to articulate the two levels of private activities and these jurisdictional activities... make good nesting... [and] to start implementing article 6 [of the Paris Agreement].” However, he lamented that this opportunity had been largely squandered due to frequent platform failures. Although RENARE was launched in 2019, it was suspended in September 2022 after a legal challenge to [Resolution 1447](#) was brought before Colombia’s Council of State ([SINCHI, 2023](#), 23). Until its reactivation in June 2024 ([Minambiente, 2024b](#)), no new mitigation projects could be registered.

This hiatus created a regulatory grey zone in which new projects were technically in violation of a legal requirement they had no way of fulfilling. Consequently, criticism emerged against VCM projects developed both before and during the suspension period, particularly over concerns of poor nesting or potential double counting. The RENARE’s success (or lack thereof) as an instrument of articulation between jurisdictional and private mitigation initiatives has led to speculation by actors of the VCM about the ‘real’ role of the platform.

3.3.2. Exclusion

Nearly all the VCM actors we interviewed expressed concern over the RENARE’s two-year suspension. Many feared that project areas they had not been able to register would not be officially recognized when the platform resumed operations. Although some of these fears were alleviated once RENARE was reactivated in June 2024, they nonetheless reflect deeper mistrust toward state institutions and a broader anxiety that national digital infrastructures could be weaponized to marginalize private actors.

The core of the problem lies in the fact that, during the hiatus, unregistered projects were effectively invisible to the state. Moreover, in cases where jurisdictional programs such as *Visión Amazonía* overlap with private projects, only those private projects that are already registered and operational in RENARE can formally request exemption from nesting. The system’s dysfunction, therefore, denied private developers the opportunity to make such requests, effectively giving public institutions the option to nest these areas within jurisdictional programs to avoid double counting.

Felix, a technical officer from a company developing projects in Casanare, told us in 2024: “When the RENARE comes back online, all the areas [with unregistered projects] could appear as reserved for jurisdictional programs,” creating the false impression that no new projects had been developed in those areas. Martin, from another project development firm, was more explicit in his suspicions. Speaking about the World Bank-funded *Biocarbono* program,⁷ he speculated: “Their [the state’s] plan is to give all the areas to jurisdictional programs... because the World Bank is interested in mediating the trade of sovereign credits abroad.... It’s a business.”

For project developers like Felix and Martin, this was not just a

technical issue but a struggle over territorial control. Referring to the *Biocarbono* program, which aims at establishing mitigation projects in the Colombian Orinoquía, Felix said: “I don’t know where they [Biocarbono] are going to implement their program. There’s a lot of land in the Orinoquía, but most of the land that’s eligible for mitigation projects is already controlled by private developers.” His view suggested that *Biocarbono* could only advance by entering territories already occupied by private initiatives. In this context, RENARE’s suspension was interpreted not as an accident, but as a strategic move to undermine private claims and expand jurisdictional reach.

Fueled by this type of rumors, the issue became politically sensitive in the country. While REDD+ implementers tended to reassure VCM actors, the state authorities in charge of designing the mitigation agenda avoided the issue, sometimes refusing to be interviewed on the topic. For example, an organizer of a panel on mitigation that was part of the “*Cumbre Internacional de Sostenibilidad e Innovación Ambiental*” held in Bogota in 2023, told us that a high directive of IDEAM accepted to participate in the panel if no questions were asked about RENARE.

3.3.3. Articulation or exclusion? Strategic dissonance in REDD+ infrastructures

The silence of state authorities helped to sustain a latent power dynamic—defined by two dissonant futures. One envisions RENARE as an instrument of coordination and transparency, where existing private initiatives are validated, and jurisdictional and private efforts are effectively nested and governed. The other sees RENARE as a mechanism of exclusion, a public tool to constrain private action and expand jurisdictional programs under state or multilateral control.

Although RENARE has now been restored and the feared wave of exclusions has not yet materialized, the narrative tension between jurisdictional and private implementers has already had material effects. Fearing the delegitimization of their work, private developers responded in multiple ways: they filed legal complaints (*tutelas*), sent letters to IDEAM, and found alternative channels to report project activities. As we explore in the next section, these actions—and the anxieties that fueled them—signal a deeper condition of uncertainty rooted in the overlapping yet dissonant architectures of Colombia’s REDD+ governance.

4. Two contrasting REDD+ agendas

The three forms of dissonance discussed in the previous section—regulatory, financial, and institutional—point to the simultaneous circulation and material entanglement of two divergent REDD+ agendas in Colombia: (1) an agenda of articulation and collaboration between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers, and (2) an agenda of competition and control over the carbon market.

The first agenda is accompanied by narratives and material practices that promote the coexistence of jurisdictional and private REDD+. In this agenda REDD+ implementers voice formal and informal rules of interaction between the two REDD+ networks. This is visible, for example, when public functionaries argue that state actors cannot intervene in the private market and that clear procedures exist to nest private REDD+ initiatives within jurisdictional programs when project areas overlap. In addition, we also find material frameworks set in place for collaboration between the two networks, such as the public mechanism of non-causation that allows companies that are liable to the carbon tax to offset their emissions through the purchase of carbon credits from the VCM.

The second agenda is accompanied by narratives and material practices that reduce the space for collaboration or that threaten to do so in the future. Here REDD+ implementers blame each other for the regulatory gaps that have permitted the emergence of REDD+ scandals, they compete to position their respective mitigation networks as the most competent and ethical, and spread rumors that create uncertainty about the future. At the material level these voices are accompanied by

⁷ While *Visión Amazonía* is the only REDD+ jurisdictional program that is being implemented in the country, the *Biocarbono* program will concentrate on agrarian and agricultural mitigation practices. Financed by the World Bank, the first phase of this program included prospecting and carbon accounting analysis of rice, cacao, and cashew production, as well as cattle ranching. If approved, its second phase will advance with implementation of mitigation activities.

the dysfunctionality of the national registry RENARE, the current government's decision to reduce the amount of carbon emissions that companies liable to the carbon tax can offset through the VCM, as well as recent decisions about who owns carbon in Colombia, which give ample rights to the state.

These contrasting agendas are not only expressed in technical or bureaucratic decisions—they are also embedded in broader political imaginaries and environmental governance discourses. Several research participants associated the first agenda of collaboration with the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos, which actively promoted the creation of the VCM alongside jurisdictional REDD+ programs, in line with the ecological modernization discourse. Private REDD+ implementers who defend market initiatives while mobilizing narratives of collaboration with jurisdictional programs defend this approach, arguing that the private market can learn from previous mistakes. This narrative resonates with what [Bäckstrand and Lövbrand \(2006\)](#) have called the 'strong' (or reflexive) ecological modernization approach.

In contrast, some private REDD+ implementers believe that President Gustavo Petro's administration has acted to curtail the role of private initiatives in favor of jurisdictional programs. Mariana, who works for a verification and validation body (VVB), remarked: "The people in the private market are afraid that Petro wants to nationalize the carbon market." Jurisdictional implementers, however, tend to interpret this shift not as an attempt to nationalize mitigation efforts, but as a corrective measure aimed at strengthening regulatory oversight. From their perspective, these interventions would align with a civic environmentalism discourse, focused on clarifying and enforcing social and environmental safeguards.

Despite this, other implementers believe that the current administration's attempt to reassert control over forest and agrarian territories suitable for mitigation is not simply driven by social concerns but part of a broader strategy to position Colombia in emerging international carbon markets. The prospective creation of an international market for ITMOs (Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes) under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement may be incentivizing the current government administration to prioritize nationally controlled carbon credits over private initiatives. From this line of interpretation Petro's administration and current jurisdictional REDD+ implementers strategically mobilize the civic environmentalism discourse while embracing ecological modernization in practice.

These perceived agendas and the accompanying mobilization of environmental governance discourses reflect the shifting and often overlapping priorities of the Colombian state, as successive governments seek to impose their policy preferences while contending with legacies inherited from prior administrations. What emerges is a heterogeneous and contested policy landscape in which jurisdictional and private REDD+ actors selectively mobilize different narratives to advance their own political and economic interests. Confrontational storylines are mobilized by jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers as tools to protect or modify particular policies, as well as financial and regulatory privileges. For example, private actors of the VCM position themselves ambiguously in these political arena, supporting aspects of previous political agendas favorable to the private market (such as the support of the VCM to the non-causation mechanism), while attempting to negotiate their coexisting with jurisdictional programs supported by state.

5. Conclusion: strategic dissonance in Colombia's REDD+

In this article, we examine the narrative tensions between jurisdictional and private REDD+ implementers in Colombia, particularly in light of recent carbon controversies. Our analysis focuses on three discursive arenas discussed in public fora and private interviews: the regulation of REDD+ in Colombia, the financial architectures supporting mitigation initiatives, and the governance mechanisms aimed at articulating jurisdictional and private efforts. Across these arenas, we

identify a range of confrontational storylines employed by different actors to explain the emergence of carbon scandals and to legitimize their preferred REDD+ networks.

Despite their discursive disputes, REDD+ implementers often collaborate in practice and promote pragmatic coexistence. As [Van Der Hoff et al. \(2015\)](#) argue, this is not necessarily a contradiction. Discursive convergence is not required for cooperation, and confrontational narratives are often strategically deployed. In a shifting policy landscape, such storylines serve to protect or challenge financial and regulatory privileges, as well as policy agendas inherited from previous administrations. We identified three forms of strategic dissonance between narrative and practice:

First, regarding regulation, both jurisdictional and private REDD+ actors acknowledge weaknesses in the voluntary carbon market (VCM). Yet, while private actors often depict scandals as isolated incidents that can be corrected through market evolution, jurisdictional actors attribute the problems to the state's limited regulatory reach over private initiatives. Ultimately, the competition over which mitigation network appears better regulated is accompanied by a tacit complicity to leave the VCM largely unregulated. The VCM continues to function independently, while the state focuses on jurisdictional programs and intensifies its critique of private initiatives.

Second, concerning financing, jurisdictional and private implementers each claim that their respective networks are more financially robust. However, the material reality reveals deep interdependence: the VCM heavily relies on state-created incentives, such as the carbon tax and the mechanism of non-causation, which enable private actors to capture a share of public rents. Here, narrative competition over financial robustness masks a material entanglement rooted in policy decisions from previous administrations that continue to structure the sector today, often irrespective of current jurisdictional preferences. As the current administration signals a change of direction in growing support for jurisdictional programs, VCM actors increasingly adopt more conciliatory narratives.

Third, in terms of REDD+ infrastructures, implementers mobilize both narratives of articulation and exclusion. On one hand, the national registry (RENARE) is portrayed as a key instrument to harmonize jurisdictional and private initiatives, especially to avoid double counting. On the other hand, the registry also grants the state latent power to exclude VCM projects from official recognition—a power rendered visible during periods of institutional dysfunction. In response, VCM actors have taken preventive measures to protect their project areas, revealing a dissonance between public narratives of coordination and ground-level practices shaped by mistrust and competition.

Taken together, the patterns of strategic dissonance point to the coexistence of two perceived REDD+ agendas in Colombia: one that seeks articulation and collaboration between jurisdictional and private implementers, and another oriented toward competition and market control. These agendas are informed by different discourses of environmental governance, strategically deployed by different generations of public officials and sectoral actors, and animated by ongoing disputes over different issues: the property of carbon, the delineation of project areas, the regulation of the carbon tax mechanism, the enforcement of social and environmental safeguards, and the protection of indigenous constitutional rights.

An important implication of these dynamics is that disputes over REDD+ in Colombia remain largely confined to a centralized and institutional arena. The narrative struggles analyzed in this article primarily unfold among state agencies, private developers, certifiers, and market intermediaries, while Indigenous peoples, local communities, and citizens appear mostly as objects of regulation, protection, or risk—rather than as political interlocutors shaping REDD+ futures. This is not incidental. REDD+ governance is deeply technical, relying on complex accounting methodologies, legal instruments, and financial infrastructures that tend to depoliticize debate and limit meaningful participation beyond expert and institutional circles. Strategic

dissonance thus operates not only as a tension between narratives and practices, but also as a mechanism that reproduces exclusion by displacing social and territorial conflicts into technocratic disputes over regulation, finance, and infrastructure.

Rather than viewing these agendas as the outcome of coherent, top-down political strategies, our findings suggest that they emerge from the layered, and at times contradictory, discourses and actions of successive administrations and sectoral actors. As Colombia navigates the complex interplay between national priorities and global carbon markets, understanding these layered agendas and the way they become expressed in dissonant narratives and practices becomes critical for assessing the future of REDD+ in the country—and, more broadly, for evaluating the ideas and discourses that compete to guide the political economy of climate mitigation in the country.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Diego Silva Garzon: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Laura Gutierrez Escobar:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nelsa de la Hoz:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Nathalia Hernandez-Vidal:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.

Funding

This research was conducted with the financial support of the Consolidation Grant of the Leading House for the Latin America Region for the project “Counting carbon: the shaping of low carbon landscapes,” and with the help of the Swiss National Science Foundation grant 10001A_197546/1 for the project “Accounting for Nature: Agriculture and Mitigation in the Era of Global Climate Change”.

Acknowledgments

We thank all the interviewees for their time and willingness to participate in this study. We are also grateful to Shaila Seshia Galvin and John Paulraj for providing comments to oral presentations of this article in workshops held in Bogotá, Colombia in June 2024 and Geneva, Switzerland in December 2024.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2026.104581>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

References

- Aguilar-Støen, M., 2015. Global forest conservation initiatives as spaces for participation in Colombia and Costa Rica. *Geoforum* 61 (May), 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.02.012>.
- Aguilar-Støen, M., 2017. Better safe than sorry? Indigenous peoples, carbon cowboys and the governance of REDD in the Amazon. *Forum Dev. Stud.* 44 (1), 91–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2016.1276098>.
- Amazon Conservation (2024). MAAP #229: Amazon Deforestation & Fire Hotspots 2024. <https://www.maaaprogram.org/special-analysis/deforestation-hotspots/>.
- Andoke, L., Arazi, E., Suárez, H.C., Griffiths, T.F., Sánchez, E.G., 2023. Amazonian visions of Visión Amazonía: indigenous peoples' perspectives on a forest conservation and climate programme in the Colombian Amazon. *Oryx* 57 (3), 335–349. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605322001636>.
- ART TREES, 2021. TREES Concept Note Colombia. Architecture for REDD+ transactions (ART). <https://art.apx.com/mymodule/reg/TabDocuments.asp?r=111&ad=Prpt&act=update&type=PRO&aProj=pub&tablename=doc&id1=108>.

- Asocarbo, 2024. Análisis Jurídico Sobre Los Derechos de Carbono En Colombia. Asociación Colombiana de Actores del Mercado de Carbono.
- Bäckstrand, K., Lövbrand, E., 2006. Planting trees to mitigate climate change: contested discourses of ecological modernization, green governmentality and civic environmentalism. *Glob. Environ. Polit.* 6 (1), 50–75. <https://doi.org/10.1162/glep.2006.6.1.50>.
- Bermúdez Liévano, Andrés, 2022. The Yuruparí Jaguars' territory divided by a carbon credit project. *La Silla Vacía*, October 26, 2022. <http://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/the-yurupari-jaguars-territory-divided-by-a-carbon-credit-project/>.
- Bermúdez Liévano, Andrés, 2023. A reservation sold carbon credits and its inhabitants didn't know. *La Silla Vacía*, June 3, 2023. <http://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/a-reservation-sold-carbon-credits-and-its-inhabitant-didnt-know/>.
- Cavanagh, C., Benjaminsen, T.A., 2014. Virtual nature, violent accumulation: the 'spectacular failure' of carbon offsetting at a Ugandan National Park. *Geoforum* 56 (September), 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.06.013>.
- Chomba, S., Kariuki, J., Lund, J.F., Sinclair, F., 2016. Roots of Inequity: how the Implementation of REDD+ Reinforces Past Injustices. *Land Use Policy* 50 (January), 202–213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2015.09.021>.
- Da Conceição, R., Hugo, J.B., Wunder, S., 2018. REDD+ as a public policy dilemma: understanding conflict and cooperation in the design of conservation incentives. *Forests* 9 (11), 725. <https://doi.org/10.3390/f9110725>.
- Decree 926 of 2017. Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, Government of Colombia. *Minambiente*. 2017. June 1 2017. URL: https://www.minambiente.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Decreto_926_de_2017_Actualizacion.pdf.
- de Jong, W., del Castillo Torres, D., Ángel Salazar, 2014. Carbon cowboys in Peru and the prospects of local Redd governance. *Portes, Rev. Mex. Estudios Sobre La Cuenca Del Pacífico* 3 (8), 61–83.
- Defensoría del Pueblo. 2024. Informe Temático Sobre Derechos Étnicoterritoriales, Derechos Ambientales y Bonos de Carbono En Territorios Colectivos Étnicos. Retos y Desafíos. <https://repositorio.defensoria.gov.co/items/4b02a052-787d-44cd-b7ef-cf0f0e17e039>.
- Díaz, J.M., Ruiz-Nieto, O., 2023. Diagnóstico de Proyectos REDD+ En La Amazonia Colombiana. Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Científicas SINCHI, Bogotá <https://www.sinchi.org.co/files/PUBLICACIONES%20DIGITALES/redd%20en%20la%20amazonia/Diagnostico%20de%20proyectos%20REDD+%20AC%202023.pdf>.
- Dufresne, Gilles. 2021. Two Shades of Green: How Hot Air Forest Credits Are Being Used to Avoid Carbon Taxes Colombia. Carbon Markets Watch.
- Ecoversa, 2023. Análisis Sobre El Apalancamiento de Recursos Público-Privados Para El Combate a La Deforestación En Colombia. Asocarbo and Conservación Internacional. <https://fedemaderas.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Estudio-deforestacionCI-ASOCARBONO-ECOVERSA.pdf>.
- GAIÁ. 2023. Problemas y Oportunidades de REDD+. Una Mirada Desde Los Territorios Indígenas de La Amazonía. 5. Documentos de Investigación y Política. https://gaiaamazonas.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/REDD_policy_paper_VF_web.pdf.
- García, S., Andrea, P., Wong, G.Y., 2024. The political economy of deforestation in the Colombian Amazon. *J. polit. Ecol.* 31 (1). <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5230>.
- GFI, CTC, and CEALDES, 2024. Mercado Voluntario de Carbono En Colombia: Un Análisis a Luz de La Transparencia e Integridad. Una Aproximación Hacia Los Proyectos REDD+. Global Financial Integrity, Corporación Transparencia por Colombia, Centro de Alternativas al Desarrollo. <https://gfintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Informe-Completo-Mercado-Voluntario-de-Carbono-en-Colombia-V2.pdf>.
- Gobierno de Colombia. 2018. Bosques Territorios de Vida: Estrategia Integral de Control a La Deforestación y Gestión de Los Bosques. <https://visionamazonia.minambiente.gov.co/content/uploads/2021/06/RIS-III.pdf>.
- Gutiérrez-Escobar, L., Hernández Vidal, N., De la Hoz, N., 2025. From house of spirits to carbon sink: ontological conflicts around REDD+ in the Colombian Amazon. *Human Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786251332581>.
- Hajer, M.A., 1995. *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Clarendon, Oxford.
- Hajer, M.A.M.A., 2005. Coalitions, practices and meaning in environmental politics: from acid rain to BSE. In: Howarth, D., Torfing, J. (Eds.), *Discourse Theory in European Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 297–315.
- Haya, Barbara, Kelsey Alford-Jones, William Anderegg, Betsy Beymer-Farris, Libby Blanchard, Barbara Bomfim, Dylan Chin, et al., 2023. Quality Assessment of REDD+ Carbon Credit Projects. Berkeley Carbon Trading Project. Berkeley Carbon Trading Project. Goldman School of Public Policy. University of Berkeley. <https://gspp.berkeley.edu/research-and-impact/centers/cepp/projects/berkeley-carbontrading-project/REDD+>.
- Hernández Vidal, N., Silva Garzón, D.E., Gutiérrez Escobar, L., de la Hoz, N., 2025. Making Indigeneity without Indigenous Peoples through REDD+ initiatives. *Latin Am. Carib. Ethnic Stud.* 20 (4), 446–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2025.2489200>.
- Hiraldo, R., Tanner, T., 2011. Forest voices: competing narratives over REDD+. *IDS Bull.* 42 (3), 42–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00221.x>.
- Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales - Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible [Ideam - MADS]. (2025). Actualización de cifras de monitoreo de la superficie de bosque - Año 2024.
- International Crisis Group. 2024. “Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon.” Briefing 52. Crisis Group Latin America.
- Kono, A., Upton, C., 2024. Performative politics of REDD+ experts: siloed discourses and a missed opportunity. *Environ. Sci. Policy* 156 (June), 103741. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2024.103741>.

- Krause, T., 2020. Reducing deforestation in Colombia while building peace and pursuing business as usual extractivism? *J. Polit. Ecol.* 27 (1). <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23186>.
- Minambiente, 2021. *Visión Amazonía Trabaja de La Mano Con Los Pueblos Indígenas de La Amazonía*. Bogotá, Colombia.: Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, Government of Colombia. [visionamazonia.minambiente.gov.co/news/vision-amazonia-trabaja-de-la-mano-con-los-pueblos-indigenas-de-la-amazonia/](http://visionamazonia-trabaja-de-la-mano-con-los-pueblos-indigenas-de-la-amazonia/).
- Minambiente. "Draft Resolution "Por Medio de La Cual Se Definen Las Reglas Para El Uso y Usufructo Del Carbono En Bosques y Demás Ecosistemas Estratégicos Del Territorio Nacional, Se Modifica La Resolución 1447 de 2018 y Se Establecen Otras Disposiciones.".
- Minambiente, 2024b. Se reactiva plataforma para registro nacional de reducción de emisiones y remoción de GEI - RENARE - . June 1, 2024. <https://www.minambiente.gov.co/se-reactiva-la-plataforma-para-el-registro-nacional-de-reduccion-de-las-emisiones-y-remocion-de-gases-de-efecto-invernadero-renare/>.
- Nielsen, T.D., 2014. The role of discourses in governing forests to combat climate change. *Int. Environ. Agreem.: Polit. Law Econ.* 14 (3), 265–280.
- Open Democracy. 2022. El Arresto de Iván Duque y El Legado Ambiental de Su Gobierno. *Open Democracy: Free Thinking for the World*, 2022.
- Pedroni, L., Dutschke, M., Streck, C., Porrúa, M.E., 2009. Creating incentives for avoiding further deforestation: the nested approach. *Clim. Policy* 9 (2), 207–220. <https://doi.org/10.3763/cpol.2008.0522>.
- Ramcilovic-Suominen and Iben Nathan, 2020. REDD+ Policy translation and Storylines in Laos. *J. Polit. Ecol.* 27 (1), 436–455. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23188>.
- Randeria, S., 2003. Cunning states and unaccountable international institutions: legal plurality, social movements and rights of local communities to common property resources. *Euro. J. Sociol.* 44 (1), 27–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975603001188>.
- Resolution 1447. Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, Government of Colombia. August 1 2018. URL: <https://www.minambiente.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/15.-Resolucion-1447-de-2018.pdf>.
- Revelo-Rebolledo, J., 2019. *The Political Economy of Amazon deforestation: Subnational Development and the Uneven Reach of the Colombian State*. Political Science, University of Pennsylvania. PhD Dissertation in.
- Rodríguez-de-Francisco, J.C., Del Cairo, C., Ortiz-Gallego, D., Velez-Triana, J.S., Vergara-Gutiérrez, T., Hein, J. 2021. Post-conflict transition and REDD+ in Colombia: Challenges to reducing deforestation in the Amazon. *Forest Policy and Economics* 127 (June), 102450. doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102450.
- Rotz, S., 2014. REDD'ing forest conservation: the philippine predicament. *Capital. Nat. Socialism* 25 (2), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2013.862837>.
- Rutas del conflicto, Mongabay, and Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística, 2022. "Indígenas Negocian Bonos de Carbono En Desventaja y Sin Respaldo Estatal." 2022. https://rutasdelconflicto.com/especiales/carbono_opaco/index3.html.
- Rutas del conflicto, Mongabay, and Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística. 2022. "Una Empresa Divide a Los Indígenas y Compromete Parte de La Amazonía Por Cien Años." 2022. https://rutasdelconflicto.com/especiales/carbono_opaco/index2.html.
- Schmid, D.V., 2023. Are forest carbon projects in Africa Green but mean?: a mixed-method analysis. *Clim. Dev.* 15 (1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2022.2054400>.
- Silva, D., in press. Symbols of climate action: audit labor and the production of carbon credits. *Econom. Anthropol.*
- SINCHI. 2023. "REDD+ En La Amazonía Colombiana." Instituto Amazonico de Investigaciones científicas - SINCHI.
- Tarazona, David. 2022. Colombia: Las Deudas de Duque y Los Retos de Petro En Materia Ambiental. *Mongabay*, August 25, 2022, sec. America Latina. <https://es.mongabay.com/2022/08/deudas-de-duque-y-retos-de-petro-en-materia-ambiental-en-colombia/>.
- UK embassy in Colombia, WWF, and CCAF. 2024. "Acuerdos REDD+ Justos y Equitativos. Una Guía Para La Amazonía y El Pacífico." UK Embassy in Colombia, World Wild Fund for Nature, Center for Clean Air Policy.
- Der Hoff, V., Richard, R.R., Leroy, P., Boezeman, D., 2015. The parallel materialization of REDD+ implementation discourses in Brazil. *Forest Policy Econ.* 55 (June), 37–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2015.03.005>.
- Yunis Mebarak, José, Pablo Correa Torres. 2023. *Vision Amazonía - Programa REM*. Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development.