Environmental Policy is Political: Who holds power in land use decisions?

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Somewhere between 12 and 20% of the carbon emissions that cause climate change come from deforestation in the tropics. The international community has recognized that slowing and stopping tropical deforestation and forest degradation must be a central part of the strategy for mitigating climate change, and the governments of the North and South have advanced many different policy strategies to this end. One of the strategies that has gained the most purchase in international policy circles is known as REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, +Enhancing Forest Carbon Stocks), which at its core involves payments from the global North to the global South to offset the opportunity costs of deforestation. While the idea of REDD+ was appealing to many for its supposed elegance, in practice its implementation has been fraught because of the political complexity of engaging with the diverse actors on the ground who have a stake in land use and deforestation. This talk examines the politics of land use - that is, who makes decisions, how decisions are made, and who ultimately holds power - in order to address where strategies like REDD+ hold promise, and also where they are limited. I present research findings from a nested comparative case study of 55 sites of land use change across 5 countries in the global South (Peru, Indonesia, Tanzania, Vietnam, and Mexico) to shed light on how these policies interact with local politics in practice. I argue that land use decisions are fundamentally political, and strategies that aim to alter the global trajectory of land use change must urgently engage with the real politics of land use, and must not be limited to technical conceptualization in offices of the global North.