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The politics and performativity of REDD+ reference levels: examining the Guyana-Norway agreement and its implications for ‘offsetting’ towards ‘net zero’

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Abstract

This article examines the political and performative function of the deforestation ‘reference level’ within Guyana’s Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) agreement with Norway. It argues that the establishment of, and continual negotiations around, the reference level rate illustrate how the Guyana-Norway REDD+ agreement was always more about ensuring the programme’s ‘success’ than materially reducing deforestation in Guyana. By setting the ‘reference level’ at 0.275% per year in 2010, far above Guyana’s historical rate of 0.02%, Guyana’s successful performance in terms of ‘avoiding deforestation’ against this inflated level was all but guaranteed – even as ‘business as usual’ forest use continued on the ground. The fact that the reference level was high moreover allowed Norway to claim that it had ‘contributed’ (through its REDD+ payments) to higher ‘avoided emissions’, even though there was never a clear relationship between its payments and Guyana’s deforestation rate throughout the programme. The ‘performative’ nature of the programme was meanwhile confirmed in 2019, when Norway disbursed the entire remaining balance from the US$250 million originally pledged to Guyana, despite the fact that Guyana had infringed the adjusted reference level ‘floor’ of 0.056% in several years of the programme. The article concludes that if meaningful solutions for ‘avoiding deforestation’ are to be developed, especially in the context of a new centrality for offsetting within the global ‘net zero’ agenda, ‘success’ must mean more than achieving results on paper and resources must be committed that are commensurate with the scale of the stated policy challenge.

Keywords: REDD+; reference levels; deforestation; politics; performativity; Guyana; Norway
1. Introduction

By the end of 2019, Guyana had received\(^1\) all of the 1.5 billion Norwegian Krone (NOK)\(^2\) originally committed to it by Norway in 2009 for ‘avoiding deforestation’ as part of the two countries’ bilateral Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) agreement (Stabroek News 2019a). However, despite some evidence for areas of programme success\(^3\), it is still unclear whether REDD+ has achieved anything substantive in terms of assisting Guyana to address the structural drivers of deforestation – the putative aim of the REDD+ concept. Indeed, Guyana’s official annual deforestation rate has more than tripled since the start of its arrangement with Norway, rising from 0.02% in 2010 to 0.07% in 2019 (Guyana Forestry Commission 2020), and there has been little to no progress in changing existing patterns of land use through policy interventions (REDD-Monitor 2013a; Development Today 2019). Crucial to understanding the apparent contradiction between claims of programme success and minimal real change on the ground is comprehending the critical function of the deforestation ‘reference level’ within Guyana’s REDD+ agreement with Norway.

\(^1\) Strictly, Guyana does not ‘receive’ these payments directly; rather, performance-related deforestation payments are first transferred by Norway into a World Bank-managed account based in Washington termed the ‘Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund’ (GRIF). Funds are only released to Guyana from this GRIF account once Guyana has developed appropriate projects to spend the funds on. Even then, the Guyana Treasury does not receive this money directly; rather, the money is managed and spent on behalf of Guyana by a ‘project partner’, such as the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) or United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Currently, around US$60 million of unspent REDD+ money remains in the GRIF; another account at the IDB holds a separate US$80 million of the Norway money that is intended as equity for the currently-stalled Amaila Falls hydropower project (Development Today 2021).

\(^2\) This was equivalent to US$250 million at the time of the original pledge in 2009. By the time Guyana had actually received the total pledged, it had declined to approximately US$225 million due to exchange rate fluctuations between the NOK and the US dollar over the course of the programme.

\(^3\) For example, see Birdsall et al. (2014) and Roopsind et al. (2019). The former highlights some valid aspects of success, such as the delivery of funding for REDD+ projects and the strengthening of forest monitoring capacity, whilst the latter highlights the potential for reductions in tree cover loss compared to counterfactuals using data from similar countries, but given the paucity of suitable data the authors highlight that the probability that these reductions could have occurred by chance are as high as 60%. Laing (2015a) also finds some evidence for an impact of the introduction of REDD+ on the willingness among gold miners to hold onto gold mining claims (in anticipation of potential future reductions in mining land), but again the lack of data limits the findings.
Establishing a reference level of deforestation is a central part of the REDD+ process (Angelsen et al. 2012). Typically represented as a percentage figure, it is used as a benchmark to assess the performance of a community or region in ‘avoiding’ deforestation (Chagas et al. 2013). By comparing the actual annual rate of deforestation against the reference level, auditors are able to calculate how much the community or region should be rewarded for having ‘prevented’ deforestation and therefore reduced emissions of carbon dioxide. The idea is that the reference level should be set at a level close to an estimate of deforestation in a ‘business as usual’ forest use scenario. Thus, if the community or region is able to implement policies (e.g., alternative livelihood or conservation programmes) that lead to a lower actual level of deforestation relative to the reference level, it can receive financial rewards based on the agreed carbon price offered by the purchaser. An ‘optimum’ reference level will then be one that is low enough to stimulate the recipient community or region to enact policies or programmes that ensure that forests are managed in a more sustainable way than would have occurred under ‘business as usual’ conditions (Vatn & Angelsen 2009). By allowing for this quantification of ‘performance’ in terms of forest management, the reference level therefore enables buyers of carbon credits (whether states, companies, or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)) to receive clarification of the degree to which their ‘purchase’ is directly connected to a measurable level of ‘avoided deforestation’ (Streck 2012).

The process of establishing and using the reference level has however been the subject of considerable academic and policy debate on REDD+. For example, some have drawn attention to the justice dimensions of setting the reference level too low as it could end up limiting legitimate resource use by countries or communities (Sheng & Qiu 2018; Collins 2019; Jodoin

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4 In the case of Guyana’s ‘national’ REDD+ modality, the assessment is for the majority of the country (Angelsen 2017). Although deemed a ‘national’ level REDD+ programme in fact the agreement only covered the state-owned forested areas, comprising the State Forest Estate and State Lands. Privately held forested areas, including indigenous-owned areas were not included in the agreement, although the latter were planned to be included on an ‘opt-in’ basis that has never fully materialised.
2019). This claim connects to classic debates in political ecology that frame REDD+ as a tool of global forest ‘governmentality’ that subjects forested states and peoples to new forms of technocratic and undemocratic control (McGregor et al. 2015; Sanders et al. 2017). Conversely, others have argued that setting the reference level too high can end up effectively rewarding countries for ‘avoided emissions’ that would have occurred even in the absence of the REDD+ payments – so-called ‘additionality’ (Caplow et al. 2011; Chiroleu-Assouline et al. 2018). At worst, a high level could lead to a state being rewarded even though it is essentially doing nothing to address deforestation; that is, it could still be rewarded even though its deforestation rate is rising rapidly, as long as it remains below the official REDD+ ‘reference level’ (Karsenty & Ongolo 2012; Seyller et al. 2016). Both accusations have been variously made of Guyana’s REDD+ programme with Norway, whose reference level was constantly re-adjusted throughout the programme – from an initial level of 0.45%, to an adjusted level of 0.275%, and then down to an ‘agreed maximum level of deforestation’ of 0.1% (that incorporated a ‘floor’ level of 0.056%).

This article examines the inside story of the Norway-Guyana REDD+ policy process, and argues that the ongoing negotiations around the reference level throughout the course of the programme illustrate the overriding political nature of a programme that, above all else, had to be seen to ‘succeed’ on paper, even if this success meant nothing on the ground. These political objectives related to domestic political aims in Norway and Guyana, as well as to a broader need to validate the REDD+ model within global climate discourse and practice (Hermansen & Kasa 2014; Svarstad & Benjaminsen 2017; Røttereng 2018a). In order to investigate this, the article will explore in detail how Guyana’s reference level was established, how and why

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5 This parallels the debate regarding ‘hot air’ that (deliberately or otherwise) emerged from the targets of Russia and Ukraine under the Kyoto Protocol (Paltsev 2000).
it fluctuated throughout the course of the programme, and how these adjustments affected the way the programme was perceived and reported.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 introduces the critical literature on the politics of policy design. It uses the concept of ‘performativity’ to discuss how project baselines and monitoring processes can be manipulated to create the ‘impression’ of policy success in terms of internal project targets, even as minimal – or even, no – material changes are evident on the ground. Sections 3, 4, and 5 then examine the three key numerical reference level figures in Guyana’s REDD+ experience that have defined both claims of policy success and failure. Section 6 discusses the implications of the Guyana-Norway REDD+ experience for broader debates about forest conservation in the context of the supposedly central role of ‘offsetting’ in the emerging global ‘net zero’ agenda. Section 7 concludes.

2. The politics and performativity of global development policy

2.1 REDD+ as a contested global policy ‘success story’

REDD+ is a global forest conservation scheme according to which forested countries are to be paid in return for their results in re-orienting their land and resource use in ways that ‘avoid’ contributing further to deforestation – following the wider conceptual Payment for Environmental Services (PES) framework (Angelsen 2012). REDD+ has exhibited more staying power than other climate mechanisms, such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), and appears to be central to ongoing global climate efforts (Lovera-Bilderbeek 2019). It was, after all, privileged with inclusion in the Paris climate agreement within a standalone article (Mongabay 2015). And in the context of the focus on ‘offsetting’ within the global ‘net zero’ climate agenda, policy frameworks that facilitate the purchasing of carbon credits by polluting companies still appear highly relevant (Carbon Brief 2021). In short, REDD+
continues to be promoted as a ‘success story’ by a range of observers, such as donors, environmental NGOs, and civil society groups (Lund et al. 2017).

REDD+ has however been the target of considerable criticism since its emergence on the policy scene at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) summit in Bali in 2007 (Angelsen, 2013). Much of this criticism targets the evidence base that REDD+ is indeed contributing positively to avoided deforestation. In this regard, Norway’s REDD+ activities implemented through its Norway International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) have already been under the microscope (Brown 2018; Røttereng 2018a). Norway has claimed to be contributing to millions of tons of ‘avoided’ carbon emissions through its REDD+ programmes; and yet, critics – including Norway’s own Office of the Auditor General – have cast doubt over the putative causality between Norwegian funds and changes in deforestation in recipient countries (Angelsen et al. 2018; van der Hoff et al. 2018). In the case of Brazil, for example, it has been pointed out that falls in deforestation took place before Norwegian money even arrived and were rather connected to Brazilian state policies (Correa et al. 2019; WRM 2019).

2.2 The politics and performativity of policy ‘success’

In trying to reconcile celebrations of policy success with apparently minimal (or even negative) impacts on the ground, it is useful to consider both the performative and the political dimensions of policy design and implementation, especially of PES policy schemes such as REDD+. When applied to a policy context, the concept of ‘performativity’ refers to the ways in which scientific ideas about the social and ecological world end up shaping the way that policy actors conceptualize and attempt to manage policy problems (Blok 2011; Scott 2015).

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6 For example, it claims that NICFI has “supported Brazil in reducing deforestation in the Amazon by 70 per cent”. Available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/climate-and-environment/climate/climate-and-forest-initiative/kos-innsikt/hvorfor-norsk-regnskogsatsing/id2076569/ [Accessed November 6, 2019]
In discussing REDD+ in terms of the ‘performativity’ concept, authors have examined, for example, how economistic conceptualizations about the role of markets, incentives related to natural resource use, and ecological models about carbon and forests, have all informed the shaping of REDD+’s particular programme design (Gupta et al. 2012; Yocum 2016). Others have analysed how REDD+’s standardized toolkit of consultations, measurements, and verifications gets ‘performed’ in a routinized way by policy actors and programme participants, often to the detriment of more sincere and context-specific engagements with ‘place’ (Skutsch & Turnhout 2018; Arts et al. 2019).

Most relevant for our discussion here though is the way in which policy ‘success’ within a programme such as REDD+ becomes wholly dependent not on its impact in reality, but in terms of its ability to satisfy (or ‘perform’) internal programme goals. Or, as Spicer et al. (2009, p.541) argue, "[p]erformative knowledge is legitimate not because it is true, but because it has a technical value associated with producing results." In the case of REDD+, this “performative knowledge” is primarily the data on ‘avoided emissions’, whose value is calculated relative to the project’s reference level, which in turn determines the degree to which the programme is judged a ‘success’ or not – even if this ‘success’ has no material basis in reality.

But how and why do forms of virtual policy ‘success’ – whose impacts are so far removed from meaningful, actual impacts – get constructed in the first place? Performativity research highlights the role of individual human judgement in the establishment and design of project baselines and monitoring systems. It shows how the supposedly the authoritative knowledge that enables projects to appear “scientific” (Yocum 2016, p. 677) is often constructed in a highly arbitrary way: as a result, project monitoring may not necessarily produce meaningful indicators of substantive change. In the case of environmental policy interventions, this may be because the often-crude quantitative estimates that serve as benchmarks against which success is judged are invariably at odds with the complexity and dynamism of socio-ecological
phenomena (Scoones 1999). Alternatively, it may simply be because the data that would ideally be used to generate a project baseline is simple absent – a common problem for REDD+ programmes in data-scarce countries such as Guyana7 – and so guesswork is relied upon instead (Laing 2014). Carver (2018) provides an excellent example of these processes in her study on the construction of a biodiversity offsetting project in the UK. She shows how the economic ‘value’ of pieces of land according to their level of biodiversity could be dramatically altered by project actors simply making minute, arbitrary adjustments to where they placed the ‘boundaries’ between different scales (i.e., ‘high’, ‘medium’, ‘low’, etc.) of species frequency.

But while ‘performativity’ research tends to emphasize the way in which limited real-world policy impact can be driven by a mix of crudely translated ‘science’ and an impersonal bureaucratization of the policy process (Scott 2015; Yocum 2016; Carver 2018), other scholarship examines the more explicit role of political interests in shaping ‘scientific’ rationality itself. With respect to REDD+, several authors have examined how policy actors have attempted to manipulate project baselines – as well as ongoing monitoring processes – in order to create the ‘impression’ of success, even while little is being achieved on the ground (Gupta et al. 2012; Saito-Jensen & Pasgaard 2014; Pasgaard 2015). In such instances, the manipulation of project baselines may guarantee project ‘success’ on paper (i.e., in term of recording high ‘avoided emissions’), even as the material reality of deforestation or degradation may be worsening in reality.

7 The challenge here is to conduct a suitable impact evaluation, based on a control scenario that allows for separation of policy from the myriad of other factors that impact deforestation. This challenge has been increasingly recognised in the literature (Borner et al, 2020) and the challenge is not limited to REDD+ schemes (Robalino et al, 2021). The critical issue is that in many cases suitable controls are simply not available and alternatives need to be sought to conduct evaluations of success (as recognised by Roopsind et al, 2019 in their evaluation of Guyana’s REDD+ scheme). As we will see, this issue of the ‘reference level’ becomes central to the representations of success in Guyana’s own REDD+ programme.
Karsenty and Ongolo’s (2012) work in particular has been valuable in drawing attention to the incentives forested states have to campaign for high deforestation reference levels in order to ensure access to higher ‘avoided deforestation’ payments. As they write: “the most rational attitude for a government with little concern for collective interest is, first, to negotiate the worst possible scenario in deforestation terms for setting the best possible reference (that is to say, which allows a high rate of deforestation) and, once this goal has been achieved… to do nothing… [it] may believe it will still be credited at the end of the engagement period with the favourable baseline scenario it negotiated” (Karenty & Ongolo 2012, p. 42). In a similar vein, Seyllar et al. (2016, p.231) found that two certified REDD+ projects, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Madagascar, essentially “resemble 'virtual emission reduction machines’ designed to inflate the production of carbon credits and that they do not structurally change the local economy characteristics which drive deforestation”.

2.3 Virtual policy?

How, then, can we think about policies which are – either by poor design or deliberate intent – not aimed at changing the world; and which may achieve results on paper while having no discernible impact on material reality? For Mosse (2003, p. 45), where a policy programme’s material impact diverges dramatically from claims about its success, it risks being reduced to “an elaborate media event”, or as a kind of “Baudrillardian simulacra, free-floating in its own hyper-reality”. Although Mosse (2003, p. 45-47) does recognize that there could be a range of reasons for this manipulation beyond simple economically or politically-motivated ‘deception’ – such as to “validate higher policy goals” or “justify the allocation of resources” – he argues that it is nonetheless problematic when the prime concern is retaining the impression of a “direct causal linkage” between project actions and project outcomes rather than working to actually achieve that causal linkage.
Such insights have also been applied to analyses of REDD+ actors’ efforts to claim ‘success’ even where minimal – or non-existent – actual changes are evident on the ground (Arts & Babili 2012; Duchelle et al. 2018; Massarella et al. 2018). Norway has been the target of some of this analysis, with Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2017) arguing that a range of actors involved in NICFI projects globally have attempted to portray activities as ‘successful’ in order to either justify and defend their original decisions, access further project funds, or validate REDD+’s broader goals. In some ways, this is understandable, as donors will always try to represent positively policy achievements and shield policies from negative publicity (Weaver 2010). This is particularly true in the development aid world where considerable time, resources, and political capital are often expended in developing and rolling out risky schemes across multiple countries (Yanguas 2018).

For Farrington et al. (2005), though, just because actions are not achieving what is being stated as the overall goal, it doesn’t mean they are meaningless; they could still be achieving something of value. So, while monitoring deforestation to ‘calculate’ avoided emissions that policy actors know are not really being avoided may seem senseless, it may serve broader purposes outside the project’s narrow goals. It could, for example, be providing valuable technical skills and experience to those involved, in terms of acquiring knowledge about Geographic Information Systems (GIS) or acquiring practical experience of engaging with donors and policy makers (Larrazábal et al. 2012; Bellfield et al. 2015; Pham et al. 2016). Thus, as Farrington et al. (2005) stress, the main impacts of policies or development programmes may be the ‘unintended outcomes’ that lie outside the parameters of narrow project goals and targets.

2.4. Methods
To investigate the political and performative dimensions of the reference level within the Guyana-Norway REDD+ agreement, the authors employed an ‘extended case method’, as elaborated by Peck and Theodore (2012). This involved a “judicious combination of observations, documentary analysis, and depth interviews, as a means of probing, interrogating, and triangulating issues” (ibid. p. 24). Accordingly, the authors engaged in a thorough review of the literature – both academic and policy – on the Guyana-Norway agreement, between 2007 (when the programme was first proposed in Guyana) and 2021. They complemented this analysis with the conducting of a total of 75 interviews with actors involved and implicated in the REDD+ process in Guyana and beyond between 2011 and 2019 across several phases of fieldwork.

Interviewing followed a ‘snowball’ sampling approach, whereby an initial list of key persons was generated based on the authors’ existing knowledge of the Guyanese context, with subsequent relevant persons identified by both asking for recommendations from the interviewees or by discovering new interviewees through other channels (Tansey 2009). Interviews were mainly organized in-country via email, telephone, or in person, with a few taking place over Skype, where the relevant persons were not in-country. Overall, the sampling strategy generated a broad and diverse sample of participants that reflected a wide range of sectors and concerns was generated. Interviewees included key government and former government officials, government agencies (such as the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC), Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)), donors (such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)), Norwegian officials (within NICFI), local chapters of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) (such as Conservation International), and local Amerindian and mining groups.

The quantitative and documentary data sources offered a detailed overview of the REDD+ timeline in relation to: the adjustments in the reference level; the official justifications for these
adjustments; and some critical commentary on the policy process, especially via local media. Conducting interviews meanwhile enabled the authors to fill in gaps in the story, especially by gathering and triangulating first-hand accounts of actors who were central to the REDD+ process (Tansey 2009). These data were synthesized in order to build a nuanced picture of the negotiations over, and implications of, the reference level throughout the Guyana-Norway REDD+ process. The decision was then taken to organize the material in terms of the three key time periods that relate to the three main reference levels that were adopted over the course of programme, between 2009 and 2019. The following three sections will now analyse the politics and performativity of the negotiations over the reference level within the three time periods.

3. Laying a marker: the ‘interim’ 0.45% reference level

As has been widely observed, Norway was an early mover on REDD+ and its NICFI remains the largest single contributor to REDD+ schemes globally (Correa et al. 2019). Although the NICFI emerged in 2007 as a clear response to climate-related activism both in Norway and beyond (especially around forests in fora such as the UNFCCC, Norway also had a clear political motivation to support programmes such as REDD+ (Hermansen 2015). Indeed, due to its role as a large-scale fossil fuel producer, Norway had a strong vested interest in finding ways to both offset its own carbon emissions generated through fossil fuel production while also producing positive PR for Norway itself as a climate champion (Anker 2018; Røttereng 2018a, 2018b).

Having made the commitment to REDD+, Norway had to rapidly identify pilot countries to support in time for the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in 2009 (Egede-Nissen 2014). This led to the rushed selection of Guyana, which was considered strange at the time
given the lack of prior relations between the two countries (Bade 2012). The lack of prior knowledge was however arguably crucial in defining the early designs of the REDD+ programme, as some have argued that Norway may have been naïve in assuming that achieving results would be easy (Bade 2012; Bulkan 2016). On the Guyana side, Hook (2019a) has examined in detail how Guyana had been preparing its own strategies for accessing global climate funds for several years, driven by domestic fiscal difficulties and partisan political objectives. Thus, when the Norwegian money became available, Guyana was prepared with its own ideas about what it wanted out of the REDD+ agreement. The basis of its initial demands was informed by the now-notorious McKinsey and Co. study that was widely dismissed at the time as an “ecological form of blackmail” (Karsenty & Ongolo 2012, p. 5). The McKinsey and Co. study suggested that Guyana should be paid US$580 million per year (by someone) in order to be sufficiently compensated for avoiding deforestation (see Figure 1).

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8 The partnership has been since explained as connected closely to the personal relationship between the respective leaders of the two countries, President Jagdeo and Prime Minister Solheim (Bade 2012; Egede-Nissen 2014; Hermansen and Kasa 2014).
Although Norway ignored the proposed annual figure of US$580 million (instead offering a much lower amount of US$250 million over five years), it accepted Guyana’s proposed reference level for the REDD+ agreement of 0.45% (Government of Guyana 2009). This interim reference level was based on the ‘combined reference level’ approach – proposed to help solve the issues of High Forest Low Deforestation rate countries (HFLD) by combining deforestation rates in the country itself with global levels – allowing these countries to increase deforestation (up to a limit) and still be rewarded (Strassburg et al. 2009). Given the paucity of data on Guyana’s historic deforestation, an annual rate of 0.3% was used as a proxy for Guyana’s national rate, which was combined with a global level of 0.6%, to produce an average of 0.45% (Laing, 2014). As this was below the global annual deforestation rate (which at the time was at 0.5%)9, Guyana assumed that this level would be accepted. And they were initially right: the 0.45% reference level was adopted in 2009 as the programme’s interim reference level that would be used to calculate payments to Guyana for avoid deforestation pending more comprehensive analysis of Guyana’s historical deforestation rate.

As well as agreeing to the 0.45% reference level, Norway also acquiesced to Guyana’s demands to spend its REDD+ payments not on activities that would directly influence deforestation, but on projects that were aimed at building what Guyana was terming a ‘Low Carbon’ Economy (Government of Guyana 2010). These projects were conceived as a ‘win-win’ solution that would both save forests while also assisting Guyana in its decarbonization of electricity (Laing 2014). As a member of the Multi-Stakeholder Steering Committee (MSSC) – the key policy forum overseeing the Guyana-Norway agreement – stated: “The President had his pet projects, which is Amerindian votes, Amaila Hydro. Nothing wrong with it, some of those are good things”10.

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9 According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations’ (FAO) 2005 Forestry Assessment.
10 Interview with anonymous member of the MSSC, 2012.
Norway maintained significant indirect control over Guyana’s receipt of its performance-related REDD+ payments, however, with the payments first being transferred to a World Bank-managed account based in Washington termed the ‘Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund’ (GRIF). Funds would only be released to Guyana from this account once Guyana had developed appropriate projects to spend the funds on. This process caused considerable consternation, especially in Guyana, given the fraught political events of the time, with an interviewee in 2011 reflecting on President Jagdeo’s public statements on the delays: “imagine the President going internationally and cussing up the World Bank and everybody else, because you want the money to come before elections, it was a play for elections, get the money before elections”.11

4. A compromise: The adjusted 0.275% reference level

Norway’s relatively lenient approach to Guyana’s reference level was abandoned in 2010 following the delivery of the first annual forest monitoring report from Pöyry, a New Zealand-based consultancy company, which revealed that the historical rate of annual deforestation in Guyana was only 0.02% (Bulkan 2016). This report had a dramatic effect on external perceptions of the Guyana-Norway agreement. Indeed, as Global Witness (2011) dramatically stated at the time, “With the way the agreement was then structured, deforestation in Guyana could increase by twenty-fold and still remain within the agreed limits.” As a result of Pöyry’s report, a new negotiation began to establish a new reference level that would protect Norway from accusations that it was paying Guyana to increase deforestation (The Ecologist 2011). The interim 0.45% figure was thereby abandoned and never actually used to calculate payments or appraise Guyana’s performance.

Following the release of Pöyry’s report, Norway was forced to respond, and, after negotiations and following the combined reference level approach, a compromise was reached, which led

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11 Interview with anonymous member of civil society, 2012.
to the lowering of the reference level to 0.275%. This new level was arrived at by combining the revised historic figure for Guyana’s deforestation (of 0.02%) with a reduced global average of 0.52% (Government of Guyana 2013). Although also criticized by observers who maintained that such a level still effectively ‘encouraged’ Guyana to increase its deforestation rate ten-fold (REDD-Monitor 2011b), the level was justified by the fact that it was below the global average rate and would give Guyana the space to develop its policies while allowing it to continue exploiting its resources sustainably (Angelsen 2017).

At the same time as the reference level was adjusted, Norway also introduced additional clauses into agreement as further political risk insurance. The insertion of these clauses was animated by the belated delivery of a ‘risk assessment’ report for Guyana by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) in 2010 (Bade 2012). This report indicated that Guyana’s political situation would potentially make it a riskier choice as a REDD+ partner than Norway had previously assumed (REDD-Monitor 2013a). A range of institutional and governance measures that became known as ‘enabling conditions’ were therefore appended to the original 2009 agreement (Laing 2014). These measures – which included an obligation for Guyana to outline a plan for Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) implementation, accede to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), secure indigenous village titles, and integrate land use planning (Laing 2014) – effectively meant that satisfying the targets on deforestation alone would not lead to the release of funds: Guyana would also have to jump through additional bureaucratic hoops.

Collectively, the creeping number of conditions on the receipt of the payment for avoided deforestation led some to observe that the programme had turned into more of a results-based aid programme than a scheme based purely on the provision of an (ecosystem) service – the original expectation (Angelsen 2017). This suspicion was effectively confirmed by the fact that REDD+ financing had been classified by Norway as ‘Overseas Development Aid’, in lieu of
an official new category for classifying ‘carbon finance’ (ibid.). Indeed, the original 2010 administrative agreement even stated that the US$250 million amount was a ‘grant’ from Norway, to be paid in full over the course of the agreement – in spite of the language of ‘performance’ being misleadingly used throughout the programme. Guyana’s politicians became increasingly vocal, from 2010 onwards, about the growing number of obstacles they faced in accessing what they saw as funds they had already earned for keeping deforestation below their reference level of 0.275% (Bade 2012). President Jagdeo in 2011 commented: ‘They (the World Bank and the IDB) want to treat it as though it is their money; this is our money’ (Kaieteur News, 2011). Despite these problems, Guyana did nonetheless receive its first payment in October 2010, totalling US$30 million, with this money being deposited into the GRIF, as per Norway’s rules (World Bank 2010). This particular payment was however not strictly for ‘avoided deforestation’ performance but was rather to cover Guyana’s ‘Administrative Costs’ of establishing the institutional architecture that would oversee the REDD+ scheme (Government of Norway 2010).

5. More stringent standards: 0.1%, the ‘agreed maximum level of deforestation’

While the 0.275% rate continued to be used as the ‘reference level’ for calculating Guyana’s avoided level of deforestation within the Guyana-Norway REDD+ agreement, events in 2011 led to further significant changes to the terms of the agreement. Following the delivery of the second monitoring report on Guyana’s deforestation rate for 2010, it was found that the rate had more than doubled in during the first year of the programme, rising from 0.02% to 0.056% (Stabroek News 2011a). This was primarily due to unanticipated increases in gold mining activity following an increase in the world gold price (Hook 2019b).

Faced with the prospect of being seen to be funding a doubling of the deforestation rate through its climate funds, Norway again acted swiftly, this time re-structuring the payment mechanism
by inserting an ‘agreed maximum level of deforestation’ clause into the agreement (Laing 2014). This ‘agreed maximum level of deforestation’ was set at 0.1% and meant that Guyana would begin to lose payments if its deforestation rate increased at a higher rate than the Year 1 rate of 0.056%; once the annual rate reached 0.1%, Guyana would receive none of its payments for that year from Norway (Gutman & Aguilar-Amuchastegui 2012). As Figure 2 shows, Guyana would lose funds by a factor of between 1.5 and 3 for every 0.015% that the deforestation rate increased above 0.056%. This new arrangement was unique in the architecture of REDD+ projects and had not previously been proposed in the literature. The somewhat bizarre implication of this new arrangement was that the 0.275% figure continued to be used to calculate the level of avoided deforestation, even though the effective cut-off rate above which Guyana would receive nothing was now 0.1%. The 0.275% figure then effectively became an arbitrary figure used throughout the scheme to calculate how annual avoided deforestation payments would be arrived at.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) To add to the complications, Norway agreed to pay for only 80 per cent of Guyana’s avoided emissions (Development Today 2019).
Despite the small degree of breathing space that the 0.1% level offered Guyana, the new discounting system and the new method of measuring degradation did nevertheless have an immediate effect, as spikes in the deforestation rate in 2011 and 2012 caused by increases in gold mining-driven deforestation caused Guyana to reportedly lose money from its first performance-related payments proper (Lowe 2014). In 2011, the deforestation rate increased to 0.079%, leading to losses of around US$20 million, meaning that Guyana was reportedly paid US$45 million in 2011 (Stabroek News 2011b). Though in 2012 the rate fell to 0.068% this was nevertheless still above the 0.056% ‘floor’ level, therefore leading to a similar loss (Stabroek News 2014). Guyana subsequently ‘earned’ a further US$35 million in 2012\(^\text{13}\), US$40 million in 2013\(^\text{14}\), and US$45 million in 2014, though none of these payments were actually transferred to the GRIF until 2015 (Development Today 2017). In each case, the direct relationship between the avoided deforestation being paid for by Norway was difficult to

\[\text{Annual Payment} = 100 \times \text{Annual Deforestation Rate} \times (1 - 0.056\% \times \text{Discount Factor})\]

\(^{13}\) As reported in Guyana Chronicle (2012) but not disbursed into GRIF until 2015, thus leading to exchange rate losses (Development Today 2017).

\(^{14}\) Kaieteur News (2014) but not disbursed into GRIF until 2015, thus leading to exchange rate losses (Development Today 2017).
ascertain as the method of calculation was not made public. These payments were considerably lower than they would have been had the simple monetary value of ‘avoided emissions’ (illustrated in the eighth column in Table 1) was being used, suggesting that Guyana’s infringements of the 0.056% threshold were leading it to incur losses. These losses didn’t however appear to animate any serious reform efforts in Guyana, with critic Janette Bulkan observing in 2013 that Guyana had still “made no changes to policy, strategy, laws, regulations or procedures concerning forestry or mining” since commencing its REDD+ programme (REDD-Monitor, 2013b).

**A final absurd twist**

Despite supposedly ‘losing’ millions of dollars in ‘performance’ payments for transgressing the 0.056% deforestation ‘floor’ in several years of the programme (e.g., 2011, 2012, and 2013, as displayed in Table 1), in 2019, in a final twist, Norway announced that it would be disbursing into the GRIF the full remaining balance it owed on the NOK 1.5 billion ‘grant’ originally committed, amounting to around US$45m (Stabroek News 2019). How this amount was calculated is unclear, with Norway simply stating that this was the amount it had “offered to pay” for the years 2013-2016\(^{15}\) (Development Today 2019). As it had already reportedly paid for performance in 2013 and 2014, it was moreover unclear if this final payment corresponded with Guyana’s ‘avoided deforestation’ performance in any specific year. A more serious question is that: if Guyana went over the 0.056% threshold level in several years of the programme, why did it did not ultimately lose any money from the NOK 1.5 billion that Norway had committed, as per the ‘performance-related’ principle? Indeed, the transfer of this final balance suggests that, in practical terms, receiving the NOK 1.5 billion was ultimately

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\(^{15}\) Although Norway recognized that Guyana had effectively ‘avoided’ 43,141,961 tons of carbon emissions between 2013-2016, Norway stated that it was only willing to pay for 9,600,000 tons, which when converted to ‘avoided emissions’ and multiplied by the carbon price, miraculously equalled the remaining balance Norway owed Guyana on the NOK 1.5 billion it originally pledged in 2009! (Development Today 2019).
independent of Guyana’s performance in individual years – and that the annual ritual of deforestation measurement was mere ‘performance’.

A Development Today (2019) article compared Guyana’s resource- and time-intensive ‘performance’ of calculating the annual deforestation rate over multiple years – only for Norway to hand over the full amount originally promised regardless – to a ‘Rube Goldberg’-type formula: one that “uses an excessively complex and impractical method to reach a simple, predetermined answer”. This seems an apt comparison. Indeed, the only money that Guyana did indeed ‘lose’ over the programme period was around US$25 million, and this was due not to poor deforestation ‘performance’, but to exchange rate fluctuations: Norway originally committed in 2009 to giving NOK 1.5 billion to Guyana, which was to be paid into Guyana’s Washington-based GRIF account at the World Bank in US dollars. Due to a weakening NOK vis-à-vis the US dollar over the ten years of the programme, Guyana’s US$250 million was therefore gradually eroded to around US$225 million by the time it received payments into the GRIF (Development Today 2019; World Bank Group 2020).
The politics and performativity of REDD+ reference levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total forest area (ha)</th>
<th>Annualized rate of forest loss (ha)</th>
<th>Deforestation rate (%)</th>
<th>Forest loss at reference level of 0.275% (ha)</th>
<th>‘Avoided deforestation’ rate16 (%)</th>
<th>Avoided deforestation area17 (ha)</th>
<th>Avoided tons of emissions from avoided deforestation18 (CO₂)</th>
<th>Simple monetary value of ‘avoided emissions’ from deforestation19 (US$)</th>
<th>Avoided emissions that Norway has explicitly agreed to pay for20 (tons)</th>
<th>Actual REDD+ payment from Norway to Guyana (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990-2000</td>
<td>18,473,390</td>
<td>2,127</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2009</td>
<td>18,473,390</td>
<td>6,850</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>18,388,190</td>
<td>10,287</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>50,567</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>40,270</td>
<td>14,779,090</td>
<td>73,895,450</td>
<td>N/A (admin costs)</td>
<td>30,000,00021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>18,378,300</td>
<td>7,912</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>50,540</td>
<td>0.221</td>
<td>40,616</td>
<td>14,906,072</td>
<td>74,530,360</td>
<td>Not publicly stated</td>
<td>45,000,00022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>18,487,880</td>
<td>14,655</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>50,841</td>
<td>0.196</td>
<td>36,236</td>
<td>13,298,612</td>
<td>66,493,060</td>
<td>Not publicly stated</td>
<td>40,000,00023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>18,475,140</td>
<td>12,733</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>50,806</td>
<td>0.207</td>
<td>32,270</td>
<td>11,843,090</td>
<td>59,215,450</td>
<td>9,323,596</td>
<td>35,000,00024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>18,470,570</td>
<td>11,975</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>50,794</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>38,788</td>
<td>14,235,196</td>
<td>71,175,980</td>
<td>2,090,903</td>
<td>30,000,00025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>18,452,160</td>
<td>9,200</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>50,743</td>
<td>0.225</td>
<td>41,517</td>
<td>15,236,739</td>
<td>76,183,695</td>
<td>2,205,128</td>
<td>45,000,00026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-15</td>
<td>18,452,160</td>
<td>9,200</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>50,743</td>
<td>0.225</td>
<td>41,517</td>
<td>15,236,739</td>
<td>76,183,695</td>
<td>2,655,741</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-17</td>
<td>18,442,960</td>
<td>8,850</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>50,718</td>
<td>0.227</td>
<td>41,865</td>
<td>15,364,455</td>
<td>76,822,275</td>
<td>2,655,741</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (2009-2017)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>84,812</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>405,755</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>313,079</td>
<td>114,899,993</td>
<td>574,499,965</td>
<td>Not publicly stated</td>
<td>225,000,00027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Breakdown of deforestation rates, avoided emissions, and financial payments relevant to Guyana-Norway agreement. Source: Compiled by authors from various Guyana Forestry Commission reports and from authors’ own calculations. Light green rows represent original five-year agreement period; dark green rows represent no-cost extension period.

16 Difference between actual deforestation rate and the 0.275% reference level: these figures represent ‘avoided deforestation’ according to the Guyana-Norway agreement.
17 Difference between the actual deforestation area and the reference level area loss based on a deforestation level of 0.275%.
18 Calculated by multiplying the ‘avoided’ area of deforestation based on the 0.275% reference level by the ‘interim carbon figure’ of 367 Tons CO₂/ha.
19 Calculated by multiplying the avoided deforestation area by US$5 (fixed price per ton of CO₂).
20 These figures were quoted in Development Today (2019) but it is unclear how they were arrived at by Norway. They are thought however to include various discounts related to losses Guyana incurred when its deforestation rate went above 0.056%.
21 Transferred to GRIF in October 2010 to cover administrative costs for establishing REDD+ institutional architecture in Guyana, as reported in World Bank (2010).
22 Transferred to GRIF in April 2011, for ‘performance’ in 2010/2011, as reported in Stabroek News (2011a).
23 For ‘performance’ in 2011/2012, as reported in Guyana Chronicle (2012). Only transferred to the GRIF in 2015, thus leading to exchange rate losses.
24 For ‘performance’ in 2012/2013, as reported in Kaieteur News (2014). Only transferred to the GRIF in 2015, thus leading to exchange rate losses.
25 For ‘performance’ in 2013/2014, as reported by PR Newswire (2015). Only transferred to the GRIF in 2015, thus leading to exchange rate losses.
26 Transferred to GRIF in September 2019, covering years 2013-2016, as reported in Development Today (2019).
27 Total payments received by Guyana equalled around US$225 million and not the US$250 million originally pledged due to exchange rate losses of around US$25 million incurred by Guyana while the NOK (the currency Norway delivered its payments in) depreciated against the US dollar (the currency Guyana received the funds in).
6. The policy implications of the Guyana-Norway REDD+ agreement

6.1 REDD+ within the offsetting and ‘net zero’ agenda

Although Guyana received payments for ‘avoiding’ hundreds of thousands of hectares of deforestation within the terms of its agreement with Norway, the simple fact is that deforestation increased by a factor of three in Guyana over the course of the programme (Guyana Forestry Commission 2018). While Roopsind et al. (2019) argue that deforestation rates in Guyana were 35% lower than they would have been in the absence of REDD+, the causality is unclear (as they concede) and it is difficult to see how Norway’s money could have contributed directly to this. Indeed, there were no significant policy changes to the mining or forestry regulations over the programme period and few jobs created in non-mining sectors (Hilson & Laing 2017). Moreover, as of 2021, only US$80 million of the original pledge from Norway has actually been received by Guyana for it to spend on ‘low carbon’ projects; the remaining balance rests in the World Bank-managed GRIF account in Washington pending the successful approval of suitable projects, and with the IDB, who hold funds intended as equity for the Amaila Falls Hydropower project (Development Today 2021). And although deforestation did fall after 2014, this is thought by many to be more a consequence of a reduction in road building by loggers that previously facilitated opportunistic mining than any direct consequence of the REDD+ programme or its associated projects (which are all in various states of incompleteness) (Mongabay 2018). Indeed, as Figure 3 shows, as soon as the world gold price rose again in 2017, deforestation once again rose accordingly. This lack of apparent link between Norway’s funds and deforestation in Guyana therefore makes it difficult to argue that the Guyana-Norway programme has achieved its main aim, which was to develop

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28 The actual amount of avoided emissions Norway has rewarded Guyana for has never been officially declared, but a simple calculation based on the NOK 1.5 billion (US$250 million) amount at US$5 per ton of carbon would represent avoided emissions of around 50 million tons of CO₂.
a provable mechanism that could be replicated globally to reduce carbon emissions generated by deforestation through a payment mechanism (Government of Guyana 2010).

This lack of overall learning should concern those who see REDD+ as a ‘fix’ for offsetting emissions globally. Indeed, NICFI’s moves to partner with the aviation industry rest on the assumption that ‘carbon credits’ bought by industry actors will offset carbon emissions through avoided deforestation (REDD-Monitor 2016). Moreover, during COP26, it became evident that offsetting is envisaged as having a major future part to play in the global ‘net zero’ agenda, with ‘business as usual’ resource extraction (especially in the fossil fuel sector) needing to be ‘offset’ by a significant expansion in the carbon credit market if ‘net’ emissions targets are to be reached (Carbon Brief 2021). However, if the funds from ‘carbon credit’ purchases that countries such as Guyana are receiving are not actually being spent on effective measures for influencing deforestation, there is the possibility that REDD+ will lead to minimal reductions in carbon emissions through avoided deforestation while ‘business as usual’ continues in the aviation industry (Fern 2017; Lovera-Bilderbeek 2019). Needless to say, if ‘virtual reality’ – rather than genuine – emissions reductions in forested countries via manipulated reference
levels are combined with ‘business as usual’ activity within incumbent energy regimes, this represents a concerning state of affairs for the overall emissions reductions picture (Schwartzman et al. 2021). One important consolation of the experience may however be the significant capacity-building in the area of its Monitoring Reporting & Verification System (MRVS) within Guyana that could potentially support future streams of funding based on monitoring forest cover and degradation (Bellfield et al. 2015; Laing 2015b).

6.2 Reference levels and effective compensation

In terms of learning about the effectiveness of reference levels within REDD+ programmes, the fact that Guyana did lose money during 2011, 2012, and 2013 of the agreement suggests that a reference level of 0.056% (the ‘floor’ level introduced in 2010) would have potentially represented an appropriate deterrent for Guyana against increasing deforestation. However, there are two main reasons why a 0.056% reference level would not have suited the Guyana-Norway agreement. For one, it is likely that Norway would not have wanted to be seen to be imposing limits on Guyana’s economic and resource sovereignty; thus, a reference level of 0.056% would have opened Norway to the criticism that it was restricting Guyana’s own development in ‘neo-colonial’ ways (Collins 2019). Two, it would have prevented Norway from being able to disburse any money in several years of the programme, thus stymying its ‘progress’ – and potentially being inconsistent with the very nature of the finance.

In terms of learning about the level of payment (either to individuals or nationally) that would be required to offset or even reduce such profitable (but ecologically destructive) activities such as gold mining, the Guyana-Norway experiment has similarly not generated many useful lessons. While Overman et al. (2019) found that the figure of US$5 per ton of carbon dioxide (tCO₂) that Norway was offering Guyana could be sufficient for influencing land use nationally in Guyana, the problem with the Norway agreement was – for them – that the payments went
to the state and NGOs rather than directly to miners; and so, the lever of influence over land use was weak and indirect. Overman et al.’s (2019) conclusions about the viability of the US$5 carbon price are however contested, with others arguing that the amount being offered in exchange for avoided emissions does need to be higher where gold mining predominates due to its higher relative profitability per square hectare compared with activities such as farming (Dezécache et al. 2018). Dezécache et al. (2018) suggest for example that a carbon price of up to US$30 tCO2 and carbon credits equivalent to as much as 50% of Gross Domestic Product could be needed to adequately compensate countries for avoiding deforestation where natural resource rents, particularly from mining, are high.

In this regard, it is instructive to revisit the figure of US$580 million per year proposed by Guyana in 2009 as the necessary level of compensation in order to assist Guyana in re-orienting its land use. This figure was dismissed as outlandish at the time (Karsenty & Ongolo 2012), as it was based on the assumption that it would be ‘rational’ for Guyana to increase its deforestation rate to 4% per year – something that Guyana’s low population, lack of interior infrastructure, and soil ecology made practically impossible (Greenpeace, 2011). However, in hindsight, this proposed level of compensation appears more reasonable as an estimate. Indeed, from 2011 onwards, Guyana’s gold exports went up to around US$1 billion per year (Hook 2019a), and it would have taken an annual payment in the hundreds of millions of US dollars to begin to substantially influence existing land use patterns. As revenues from gold rose over the course of the REDD+ programme, the US$50 million – per year – offered by Norway became relatively less significant as a compensatory revenue source, which was compounded by the extreme delays in disbursement.

7. Concluding remarks
This article has examined the negotiations around the establishment of, and adjustments to, Guyana’s REDD+ reference level over the period of the Guyana-Norway agreement, between 2009 and 2019. It has argued that, at all stages, rather than being a figure animated by the desire to influence the biophysical, material reality of deforestation in Guyana by deterring forest-destroying activities, the reference level appeared to serve primarily a political and performative function within the internal logic of the Guyana-Norway agreement (e.g., Karsenty & Ongolo 2012; Seyller et al. 2016). The broader agreement meanwhile appeared more about validating REDD+ as a concept while serving domestic political ends for Norway than it was about effectuating any meaningful change on the ground in Guyana (e.g., Svarstad & Benjaminsen 2017). The payments Guyana ‘earned’ appeared only loosely related to actual deforestation performance in any given year, and the little money that Guyana has to date received cannot be said to have contributed directly to any change in deforestation (Development Today 2019; Hook 2019a).

Throughout this process, the level of the reference level was central to ensuring that these political objectives could be secured, with the 0.275% level, for example, allowing the programme to achieve ‘success’ by ensuring that Guyana could satisfy project goals without deviating at all from ‘business as usual’ land use. Likewise, the high reference level enabled Norway to claim that it was contributing to higher ‘avoided emissions’, despite the suspicion by many that the ‘avoided deforestation’ being ‘paid for’ would never have occurred anyway due to Guyana’s lack of ability to exploit its own natural resources at a faster rate than it was already doing. As the reference level was lowered and various conditions and waivers variously became inserted into the agreement over the programme period, it became difficult to escape the conclusion that the overriding aim became more about ensuring that the full amount of the NOK 1.5 billion ‘grant’ would be ultimately disbursed at a minimum of reputational damage for Norway – rather than to match payments to performance and be willing to withhold funds.
if performance standards were not met (Angelsen 2017; Hook 2019a). Overall, then, we could say that REDD+ in Guyana was successful within the terms of its own internal rationalities, targets, and measures of performance, while, in actual experience – and in terms of the wider context – achieving little. The experience underlines the risks of prioritizing what Spicer et al. (2009, p.541) term "[p]erformative knowledge" over actual, observable reality.

While Norway may end up receiving plaudits for contributing to fighting climate change through funding avoided deforestation, it is therefore important for observers to cut through the rhetoric in order to actually establish what happened, in material terms, and how it was justified; in short: what is the gap between rhetoric and reality? This is not merely an academic exercise focused on dismantling the language games of policy elites (e.g., Mosse 2003; Svarstad & Benjaminsen 2017); it is one animated ultimately by the desire to find more effective and equitable approaches for both conserving ecosystems and funding development (Dezécache et al. 2017, 2018; Hund et al. 2017; Overman et al. 2019). Indeed, if meaningful solutions for re-orienting supposedly unsustainable patterns of land use in the Global South are to be developed, ‘success’ must mean more than merely achieving results on paper and resources must be committed that are commensurate with the scale of the stated policy challenges.

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