

A conversation with Cool Earth, May 16, 2018

Participants

- Hannah Peck, PhD – Deputy Director, Cool Earth
- Leo Hyde – GIS Data Scientist, Cool Earth
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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Cool Earth.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Ms. Peck and Mr. Hyde of Cool Earth as part of its investigation into reducing deforestation. Conversation topics included an overview of Cool Earth, the evidence base for its program, its monitoring activities, and its room for more funding.

Overview of Cool Earth

Cool Earth works with local communities that have requested support to establish agreements that protect local forests from deforestation. It provides support in the form of funding and training, enabling communities to generate revenue and avoid selling forests to loggers.

Cool Earth has been operating for ten years and is currently active in Peru, Papua New Guinea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and, as of 2018, in Cameroon and Mozambique, where it is working with small local charities to implement the community partnership. It employs 20 staff at its headquarters in the United Kingdom and approximately 30 field staff (about two thirds Cool Earth staff and one third regular consultants) mainly based in Peru.

Program model

Cool Earth provides communities with funding in exchange for a commitment to not sell local forests. At present, it makes agreements specifically with community associations, which are composed of representatives elected annually by local residents. Community associations make final decisions on how funding is spent and can decide to withdraw from agreements with Cool Earth at any time.

The funding that Cool Earth provides to communities is typically spent on income-generating activities. For example, communities in Peru tend to spend funding from Cool Earth on farming cacao and fish, which are consumed locally and sold to neighboring communities. In addition to providing funding, Cool Earth has also offered communities technical support on sustainable farming practices, training on finance and accounting, supplies to facilitate emergency health evacuations, and scholarships for local students.

Challenges

One concern with Cool Earth's program model is that communities will begin selling forests after funding ceases. It mitigates this risk by informing communities that its funding is finite and by providing technical support on finance and agricultural practices, which it hopes will enable communities to generate and maintain the income necessary for self-sustainability.

Completed projects

Although it does not consider these projects truly completed, Cool Earth, for political reasons, did exit from its first community partnership in Brazil within a few years of establishing an agreement, and a partnership in Ecuador that it had supported alongside Flora and Fauna International, where after initial funding, a local charity was able to take over the project, training community members as rangers.

A forest analysis of the Brazilian community Democracia, located on the northern bank of the Rio Madeira, where Cool Earth had invested in Brazil nut production and a primary school, found that the forest had grown since Cool Earth's departure. However, forest growth cannot necessarily be attributed to Cool Earth's work because the Democracia community could have received support from other sources or been impacted by other factors.

Aside from its premature exit in Brazil, Cool Earth has not yet completed projects with any of the communities it has supported. It has begun implementing an exit strategy using a new theory of change time plan of a further six years for a community in Peru that it has been supporting for eight years (its oldest agreement) and has designed its newer partnerships in Papua New Guinea to run for five to seven years.

Evidence base for Cool Earth's program

Cool Earth's main evidence base for the success of its program is satellite analysis demonstrating that forests are still standing. It is also developing methods for evaluating its social impact.

Potential to conduct a randomized controlled trial (RCT)

Cool Earth hopes to eventually conduct RCTs that more clearly attribute its program to reductions in deforestation.

It notes that the approach of an RCT, published in 2017, testing the impact of a Ugandan program that directly paid households for not cutting down forest trees is not precisely the same as Cool Earth's work. Cool Earth's program model is to disburse funding through community associations. While it has provided small amounts of funding directly to households in the past and recorded information on how households spent this money, this method of support was taking place alongside parallel livelihood and general community support activities so it was not possible to decipher how direct household payments specifically impacted the health of local forests.

Challenges

Cool Earth believes that one challenge in conducting an RCT of its program would be to ensure that control groups, which would not receive funding, were treated fairly and ethically.

Monitoring activities

Cool Earth conducts ongoing monitoring of its impact on forests, communities, and biodiversity.

Forest analysis

Cool Earth's core monitoring activity is using satellite data to analyze its impact on forests, although it is still in the process of refining its model. One challenge in particular is determining what rates of deforestation would be without Cool Earth's presence, which involves selecting robust control groups to compare to the sites where Cool Earth works.

Household surveys

When entering a new area, Cool Earth administers baseline surveys to each household in the community. Due to language barriers, surveys are often administered by a community member, with the help of Cool Earth staff. Surveys are composed of approximately 50 questions and ask for information such as ages of family members, number of children in the household, annual income, sources of income, distance to water, and general needs. Household surveys are time-intensive, requiring approximately 50 minutes per family, and are conducted every two to three years, allowing enough time to pick up appreciable differences.

Recently, Cool Earth has incorporated assessments of community needs and priorities into household surveys through basic necessity surveys and re-designed the survey to simplify it and get more accurate data against key performance indicators. It is also in the process of developing systems to reduce surveys' risk of bias. Cool Earth has found that survey administrators, when asking questions, often provide examples that may induce particular responses.

Findings

Household surveys have been useful for determining a community's baseline trends, such as high rates of malnutrition and anemia or lack of access to water, which Cool Earth is then better able to address through its programming. These surveys also enable identification of non-timber forest products enabling Cool Earth to help communities look into market potential.

Biodiversity monitoring

Cool Earth currently monitors its impact on biodiversity by using camera traps managed by community members that capture the location and variety of species in forests. Cool Earth's remote sensing team is also working on integrating recent

advances in satellite technology that remotely measure carbon density of trees and plant diversity.

Extensive evaluations of our past activities

Over the past twelve months, Cool Earth has been carrying out a detailed evaluation of its Peru partnerships from 2015-2017, which is now being analyzed, with final results due in January 2019. This has enabled the team to create a simpler and more effective theory of change focusing more on the organization's strengths and removing activities that are less likely to contribute to its long-term aim of forest protection. The more streamlined approach focuses on three pillars: community independence, agricultural productivity, and forest health.

Room for more funding

Budget and costs

Cool Earth's annual budget is approximately £2.2 million. It estimates that the funding it provides directly to communities amounts to 50% of its budget or approximately £100,000 per year for a population of 3,500 people and a forest size of 30,000 acres. Additional costs include staff, technical support, and overhead.

Plans to increase budget

Cool Earth's plans for expansion involve establishing partnerships with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that offer on-the-ground expertise. As it expands into new areas over the next few years, Cool Earth plans to increase its budget accordingly.

Cool Earth recently established partnerships with local NGOs in Mozambique and Cameroon.

Future plans

Cool Earth would use additional funding to:

- **Continue current projects** – Over the next few years, Cool Earth plans to spend a total of approximately £600,000 on its two projects in Peru and its three projects in Papua New Guinea. These long-term community partnerships where Cool Earth has its own staff working alongside community members are Cool Earth's means of gaining in-depth knowledge of community support for forest protection. These partnerships are expected to provide the deepest level of monitoring data across a suite of measures, and continue to be a key source of insight and impact.
- **Facilitate expansion through a rainforest network** – Cool Earth will be seeking additional funding to expand to new areas through partnerships with local NGOs and community conservation groups. This expansion, creating a "rainforest network," uses a lighter-touch approach of having less Cool Earth staff on the ground and instead utilizing local knowledge to provide shorter-term projects to empower communities to protect their forests. This will also enable

Cool Earth to test methods of community support for forest protection under a variety of scenarios including forest threats, cultures, and political systems, to build a global dataset that incorporates results from all of its projects. It plans to use this to continue improving its program model. Cool Earth has recently signed forest agreements with two of these new rainforest network projects (Cameroon and Mozambique). It has five more in the pipeline and 25 that still require feasibility studies. These require further resources and funding to implement.

- **Build its monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) team** – Alongside expansion of its rainforest network and continuing its current longer-term partnerships, Cool Earth is building its MEL team and methods to ensure its monitoring is lightweight, proportionate, and, above all, consistent across all of its partnerships. Cool Earth believes monitoring and evaluation should be as useful for and be of equal ownership to the rainforest communities as it is for Cool Earth and its many funders.

Using these three focus areas of 1) current in-depth community programs, 2) a rainforest network of local NGO projects, and 3) a consistent MEL strategy, Cool Earth is committed to leaving room open to innovation and opportunity. Its plan is to maintain space and funding for experimentation and risk and develop tools for reducing the distance between conservation funding and community conservation.

*All GiveWell conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/research/conversations>*