

Turning political pledges into action on climate change

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The UN's efforts to combat climate change by protecting tropical forest has received substantial support from Norway. The programme is called REDD+, which stands for “reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries.” Credit: JK Røttereng

In a previous life, Jo-Kristian Røttereng walked the rainforests of the

Congo Basin, as a part of the Norwegian government's NOK 3 billion effort to curb tropical deforestation. He's seen the towering trees, heard the grunting of gorillas from deep in the jungle, watched brightly coloured birds flit through sunlight filtered through the thick forest canopy.

But his two years working for the Ministry of Climate and Environment on Norway's Congo Basin project made him wonder: What it will take for countries of the world to come to an agreement to control global warming?

Why is Norway, so very far from the tropical forests it is helping to safeguard, such an active player in rainforest protection, for example?

And is there something we can learn from the political and social debate that shaped Norway's climate programmes that could help turn international political pledges into real actions to control climate change?

"Even though we have technical solutions, and economists can tell us what is optimal in terms of financing, what we need are climate solutions that are politically feasible at the national level," says Røttereng, a PhD candidate at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology's (NTNU) Department of Sociology and Political Science. "In the end, someone must make the decision to launch climate initiatives – and in most political systems, that decision making requires support from the key players. What climate solutions are more likely to rally the necessary support and why?"

Think of Røttereng as the Sherlock Holmes of climate action. He's trying to find clues to how countries can create successful national climate programmes by studying Norway's two big flagship efforts: the country's NOK 3 billion tropical forest protection programme, and its national and international efforts to promote carbon capture and storage (CCS).

An oil nation's climate obligations

With just 5 million people, Norway seems an unlikely player on the world climate policy stage. But oil and gas on the Norwegian continental shelf have made Norway rich.

At the same time, the Norwegian government and its people are strongly committed to meeting the country's international climate obligations.

The 190 countries that will come to Paris at the end of November will determine the fate of the planet's future climate.

But how do you reconcile an economy made wealthy on oil with the need to cut harmful [carbon dioxide emissions](#) – which come from burning fossil fuels like oil?

Røttereng is studying why Norway's answer in part has been to support approaches that keep the carbon dioxide that comes from burning fossil fuels out of the atmosphere in the most cost-effective way possible.



Protecting tropical forests is an important tool in battling climate change, but it also helps protect species, like this gorilla in the Congo Basin. Credit: JK Røttereng

The first way is to store carbon dioxide in trees, by protecting tropical forests. The second is to promote the national and international development of carbon capture and storage, which captures [carbon dioxide](#) from [fossil fuel emissions](#) and stores it away from the atmosphere.

Exactly how and why these two programmes have stayed at the centre of Norway's climate policy lies at the core of Røttereng's research. He's a political detective piecing together all of the factors that helped turn technical solutions into political realities.

He's interviewed previous and current policymakers, ministers and members of parliament, bureaucrats, industry leaders, environmentalists and scientists who were involved in the series of decisions that have created the political situation in Norway today.

"I'm interested in how these (programmes) keep being policy, over the years, and over different governments," he said. "This is not just a single decision of what (we will do); how the programmes are actually implemented requires many decisions at many different levels."

Everybody wins

Røttereng isn't done with his PhD research, but one key factor has come clear in his work. It's that Norway's two major investments in curbing greenhouse gases have remained active, internationally oriented policies for nearly a decade because of their potential to be good for the planet, and good for Norwegian society.

The UN's initiative to protect tropical forests is called REDD +, which stands for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries." Photo: Private

"It's a way of doing large scale climate actions without stepping on anyone's toes," he said. "Everybody wins."

Take tropical forest protection, which falls under a United Nations initiative called REDD+, which stands for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries."

When Norway pledged its NOK 3 billion of support to keep tropical forests from being logged, for example, politicians realized they could pay for the programme out of already agreed-to growth in development assistance funds. That meant Norway could achieve two goals – help

developing countries with aid as well as protect [tropical forests](#) – with the same funding mechanism.

"You put a significant amount of money on the table and it makes Norway important in [climate](#) negotiations," Røttereng said. "It's a big winner as long as there are no problems with scandals, and our own cost is spending some development assistance money that was already set aside anyway."

A cost-effective approach

An additional benefit of supporting REDD+ is that it is potentially one of the most cost-effective ways to store carbon. This fact was highlighted by the UK's 2006 Stern Review, which was released just as the Norwegian government was considering funding tropical forest protection. One of Røttereng's major findings is that it has been much harder to implement than anticipated, however.

Norway's [greenhouse gas emissions](#) come mainly from heavy industry and the oil and gas sector, and as a political consequence, are very difficult to cut. Nor is it easy to cut emissions from the country's electricity generation, because most of Norway's electricity comes from hydropower that releases essentially no greenhouse gas emissions.

Røttereng said that the difficulties of cutting greenhouse gas emissions at home have led Norway to support alternative approaches to cutting emissions – like tropical forest protection abroad and global initiatives to advance storing carbon in geological formations.

A determined optimist

Røttereng isn't sure that the 190 countries headed to Paris later this year

will be able to come up with an agreement that will achieve the emissions reductions the world needs.

"From an analytical perspective, and from my outsider perspective, it is hard to see that countries right now will show up at the negotiating table with a mandate to achieve the emissions reductions we need," he said.

But as one of the first generations that will see an ice-free arctic in the summer, and that ultimately must find both the technical and political solutions to keep the planet from irreversible warning, does he think the world can save itself?

"I have no choice but to be an optimist," he said. "Everyone wants to avoid global collapse. People come up with good solutions all the time, but this problem goes to the core of how we organize our societies. It requires inventive decision making that pushes and seduces the key actors in each country to become part of the solution."

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

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