

# Costa Rica: A Sustainability Success Story or an Incomplete Approach?

**GABRIEL GOMEZ** assesses the Costa Rican approaches to addressing climate change, arguing for indigenous land rights to be taken into account.

As the effects of climate change shift from future threats to present realities, governments, academics, and activists find themselves in deep discussion about the best ways to prevent the irreversible damage our planet faces (“Climate Change” 2022, 20). Finding solutions to the environmental crisis, however, is a challenging task. These policies often have wider economic and social implications that surpass environmental aspects, intersecting green policy with traditional politics.

In the case of Costa Rica, the government has taken wide-reaching steps to reduce carbon emissions by embarking on a decarbonisation plan which aims for zero emissions by 2050 (“National Decarbonization Plan” 2019). The ambition of Costa Rica’s green policies has been reinforced by the country’s adoption of Sustainable Development (SD) as its economic model in the early 1990s (Miranda, Porras, and Moreno 2004). SD aims to meet the needs of all generations—both present and future—balancing economic growth with environmental policy (“World Commission” 1987). The policies have undoubtedly produced positive results, particularly through reforestation efforts. A deeper analysis of the methods used to reach these objectives, however, reveals inherent social inequalities. By approaching this issue through an environmental lens, this article identifies those disadvantaged communities, assessing the extent to which these SD policies have been truly transformative toward Costa Rican society.

## A History of Costa Rica’s Sustainable Development

The beginning of Costa Rica’s legislative emphasis on environmental protection coincided with green movements seen in other countries during the 1970s (Yeo 2020). Early pushes for reform came from environmental activists who argued that human activity had to take natural preservation as its greatest priority (Herrera-Rodríguez 2013). Environmental exploitation through mining and other raw material extraction was already an established practice in Costa Rica; consequently, these activists compromised and adapted, creating national parks. In accounting for both economic development and environmental sustainability, this strategy mirrored tenets of SD a decade before its conception (Dresner 2009).

While environmental protection of national parks promoted ecosystem preservation, disagreements over land agreements between indigenous peoples and environmentalists contributed to social tensions that remain unresolved decades later (Herrera-Rodríguez 2013, 202). For some Costa Rican indigenous communities, the relationship with the land remains a key aspect of their daily lives. For some, its obstruction or disruption amounts to ‘losing a culture and a lifeway...in this way, land rights violations against indigenous peoples are a form of ethnocide’ (Anderson 2015, 10). As this essential aspect of life was taken away from indigenous peoples, the success of SD came at the price of indigenous agency. Furthermore, these

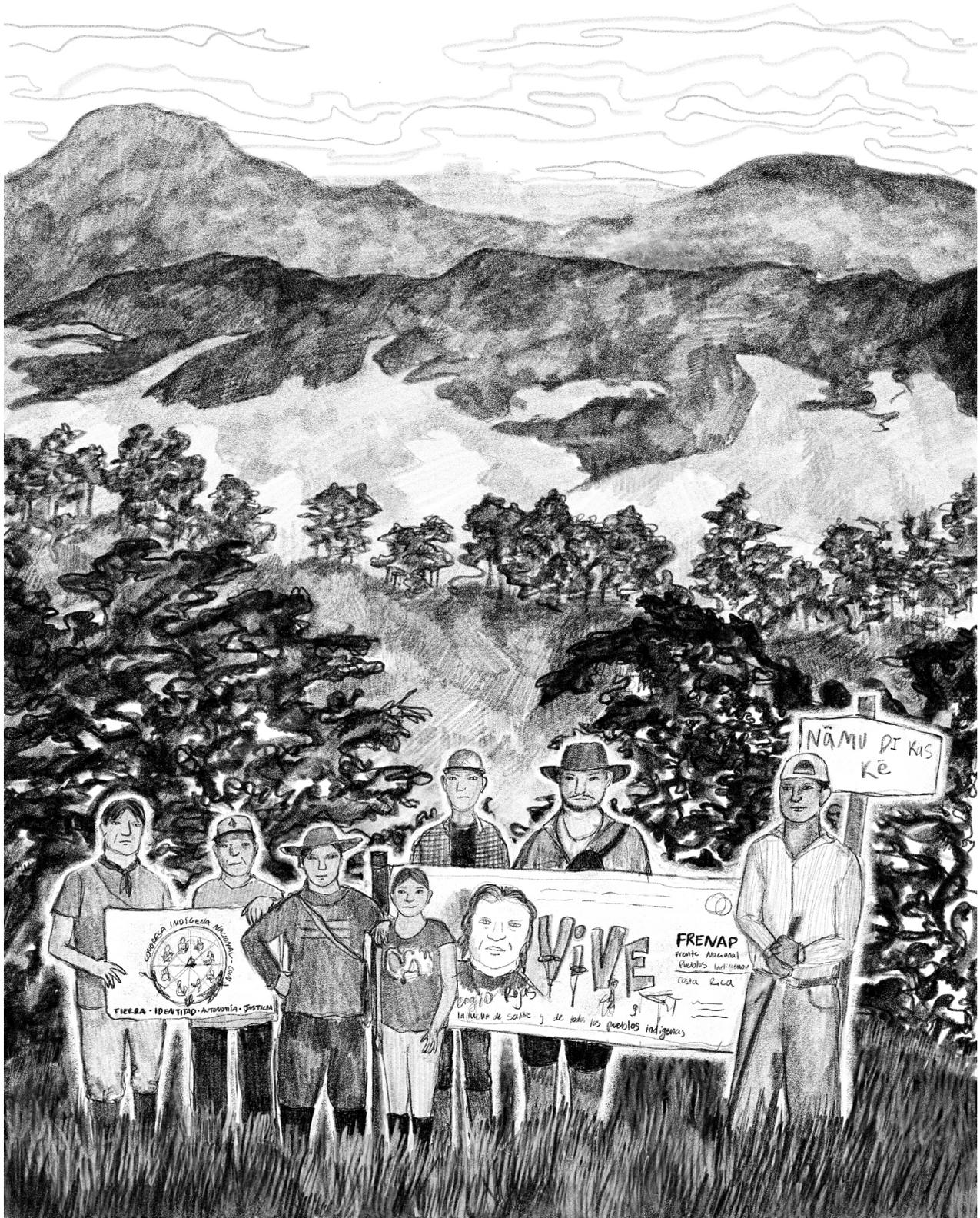


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reforms would lay the foundations for Costa Rica’s ecotourism industry, a major draw for a sector that employs ten percent of the national population (“Cuenta Satélite de Turismo” 2019; 2020). The tradeoff between infringement of indigenous rights and increasing tourism through the creation of national parks was cemented in Costa Rican SD policy.

### Carbon Trading within Carbon Markets: From the International to the Local

The perception of national parks as a sustainable endeavour contrasts with the reality of indigenous people’s decreased agency. Similarly, carbon markets, which have been put forward as another lucrative and transformative approach to tackling

the climate crisis, present issues with laws regarding unequal access to knowledge and outcomes.

Carbon markets take different forms and can be implemented on different scales, but their fundamental principle is allowing entities that emit large amounts of CO<sup>2</sup> to invest in specific, sustainable projects to avoid fines—and conversely allow subjects with few emissions to sell and trade their unused emission allowance to others (Dresner 2009). In this way, assuming that the projects achieve the goals as intended, companies and states can theoretically maintain, if not increase, their individual emissions so long as they invest in carbon markets accordingly. Iterations of these ideas are called Clean Development Mechanisms (CDMs), which allow states to implement an ‘emission-reduction project’ in developing countries to meet their own emission-reduction targets (“Clean Development” 2022).

Costa Rica is a vocal supporter of these projects and encourages states which may be struggling to meet their emissions targets to invest in the country through CDM projects including hydroelectric, wind, and biomass-oriented developments (Pratt, Rivera, and Sancho 2010). The government has also gone further by implementing carbon markets on a local scale through policies such as Payments for Environmental Services (PES). These policies aim to provide ‘financial recognition by the State... to the owners of forests and forest plantations...that directly affect the protection and improvement of the environment’ (“Payment of Environmental Services” 2018). Praised by supporters of a market-based, green-growth approach for incorporating ecosystem services to the market, PES has been credited with supporting Costa Rica’s deforestation trend reversal in conjunction with international carbon markets (Brenes, et al. 2016). Such a dramatic metamorphosis of the natural environment reinforces the capacity of a developed, multi-level market structure to have positive outcomes on the environment and should be praised.

However, major criticism of carbon markets

tends to centre around the question of agency. As with SD in the case of Costa Rica, vulnerable groups are asked to sacrifice agency for the benefit of the privileged. The Costa Rican government has often been at odds with Indigenous communities regarding the impact of environmental policies on land rights (Anderson 2015). Jose Carlos Morales, a Bribri tribe member and former United Nations representative for indigenous communities, believes that ‘overall, Costa Rica is a happy and law-abiding country, but that does not apply to indigenous groups’ (Anderson 2015, 7). Stripping indigenous communities of land rights negatively impacts their economic self-determination and safety; it impedes their ability to live within their communities and practise their traditions without relying on the very institutions that brought about their displacement.

Additionally, when these programmes have tried to integrate indigenous communities into the carbon markets, conflicting ontological understandings of nature create friction in the process (Wallbott and Florian-Rivero 2018, 511). The Bribri tribe, for example, believes that each aspect of the forest (both tangible and intangible) serves a specific purpose that must be addressed without monetary compensation. As such, ‘the PES approach—with the notion of services as a foreign term—has not been easily comprehensible for these respective tribes.’ (Wallbott and Florian-Rivero 2018, 511). This fundamentally different understanding is at odds with indigenous ‘integration’ into the carbon markets (Wallbott and Florian-Rivero 2018, 511). These occasionally opposing views between indigenous groups and government actors compromises the viability and moral validity of adapting a system seemingly opposed to indigenous values, instead of reforming policy with indigenous voices and values at its heart. This deficit in understanding, a pattern also noticed in non-indigenous circles such as farmers reforesting their lands (Miranda, Porras and Moreno 2004, 25), brings into question the true beneficiaries of the carbon market system in Costa Rica and raises concerns about the

continued exploitation of vulnerable and low-income communities under the guise of ‘sustainability.’

Additionally, Costa Rica’s environmental policies, particularly regarding carbon trading and markets, follow a neoliberal trend in the manner in which they affect communities. They reinforce the existing national and international power hierarchy with low-income, indigenous, and rural communities at the bottom. As the power in question comes from the understanding of the carbon market system, access to this knowledge serves to separate the powerful from the non. Moreover, the impact of these disparities goes further than inequality of knowledge, as it also impacts the financial security, land security, and agency of vulnerable communities in a transition promoted globally as a ‘living Eden’ (“Costa Rica: ‘The Living Eden’” 2019).

### **Alternative Values and Priorities: Environmental Justice**

Because SD should be understood as intrinsically tied to neoliberal, profit-driven ideas, alternative views should ideally place emphasis not on economic growth, but instead on natural preservation and justice (Herrera-Rodríguez 2013, 200). While the field of sustainability discourse is rich in diversity and perspective, for the purposes previously outlined, environmental justice (EJ) presents a strategy not only driven by the necessary action needed to meet scientifically set targets, but one that also holds the ethical targets that a globalised society built on exploitation and inequality should strive to mend.

While SD acknowledges this exploitation to an extent, EJ’s focus is on the understanding of environmental impacts as a social problem. This focuses the agenda on social issues often ignored, tolerated, or exacerbated by SD—most notably, injustices against indigenous communities. From the establishment of the National Parks to the planning of hydroelectric projects, indigenous lands have been sacrificed under the guise of a profitable and

convenient transition (Anderson 2015). Unlike SD, EJ recognises the moral and social concerns that must be resolved in order to create a more sustainable future.

While the social failures of SD in Costa Rica raise concerns over idolising the state’s transition, EJ movements have the potential to make environmentally significant changes across the Global South—which has faced a pattern of environmental exploitation and repressed agency (Harris 2013, 314)—while avoiding the profit-driven SD policies that reinforce inequalities. Thus, indigenous communities can adopt EJ in a ‘broad, integrated, and pluralistic discourse of justice’ (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010, 12). In doing so, they can propagate ideas that challenge the status quo through a different moral framework that calls into question the desirability of the system that is promoted by powerful actors. Empowering marginalised communities and promoting agency over profit may be the first step in a new, just way of discussing societal transitions in Costa Rica and abroad.

### **What can we learn?**

Agency and inclusivity are key lenses through which we can determine how Costa Rica must improve its environmental policies. Under the current SD approach, marginalised individuals remain excluded from the system, and its neoliberal foundations continue to be at odds with indigenous communities’ concerns. Thus, further efforts must be made to empower indigenous and other marginalised communities when developing policy to ensure a just transformation not only of the environment and the economy, but also of society. Furthermore, spatial considerations must be better addressed in environmental policies; in particular, the various understandings of the relationship between nature and society must be addressed to challenge the current divisive paradigms. Some efforts, such as ongoing projects aimed at changing

the relationship of the urban and natural spaces at local and community levels, are promising. One initiative in a suburb of San Jose promotes green spaces and encourages residents to grow their own plants while incorporating green ideas into aspects of social life (Comin and Cuvillier 2021; Greenfield 2020). Bringing ideas such as this together could empower indigenous groups and build discussions that incorporate their ideas as an alternative to SD.

Overall, Costa Rica must be understood as a country in transition to a just environmental status quo. While transformative changes to society are being attempted, neoliberal forces should not be underestimated in their drive for profit. Moreover, as stated by Costa Rica's Climate Change Department Head, 'Costa Rica is not meant to be a model for everyone' (Salazar 2014). Nonetheless, it can serve as a lesson for the globe. It is important to learn from the mistakes of the 'green tinted glasses approach,' and actually transform our systems rather than merely the ways that we choose to see them.

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