

# PUT FOREST PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF THE UNFCCC POLICY

**Sustainable forestry management must be a focus of the UNFCCC agenda and of any climate change agreement resulting from Copenhagen. The people who live in and depend on these forests must be at the heart of any solutions proposed.**

Sustainable management of forest for the sake of our planet and for forest peoples must be a central part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agenda to halt climate change, but it must not be a substitute for urgent action to reduce emissions from fossil fuels.

False economic arguments must not be allowed to impose top-down solutions to climate change that ignore the local conditions in forests and the needs of the people who live there and depend on them. The active participation of these people is paramount in the proposed projects and solutions to deforestation.

Such participation is not likely to happen unless all proposed measures for forest conservation are couched within a wider framework that recognises the rights of all groups living in the forest to:

- prior consultation
- preservation of their traditional ways of using forests
- being kept informed of all decisions involving the use of forest resources, as well as their ability to contribute to public policy on climate change mitigation.

But historically these groups have been – and continue to be – ignored and disempowered by wider society. Unless the UNFCCC agenda explicitly pays attention to this power imbalance, their critical role in forest conservation and sustainable management could be ignored.

## The peoples of the Amazon

The World Bank estimates that more than 1.6 billion people, of whom more than 60 million are indigenous, rely to varying

degrees on forests for their livelihood.<sup>1</sup> More than 70 per cent of the world's plant and animal species come from these forests.<sup>2</sup> The Amazon is home to millions of these animals and people, including many indigenous groups and afro-descendants who have lived there for hundreds of years. They have a close relationship with and dependence on the resources and ecosystems in the forest.

For centuries, the Amazon forests have been maintained in an ecologically sustainable manner that has preserved traditional lifestyles and biodiversity, successfully combining conservation of global forestry resources with more commercial enterprises.

In Brazil, indigenous groups and descendants of runaway black slaves – called quilombola communities – use forest resources for food, to build houses, to make tools and medicines, and to produce and sell Brazil nuts.

In Bolivia, chestnut, rubber, bushmeat and wood are extracted both for local consumption and domestic trading.

But the role of indigenous and black groups in preserving this valuable ecological resource has never had much recognition or state support. The vast majority live in poverty and endure discrimination and/or formal exclusion from social and economic institutions, which makes them very vulnerable.

In both Bolivia and Brazil, numerous obstacles exist to their legal ownership of land despite constitutional provisions to safeguard their rights. Groups are not consulted or invited to participate in policy-making, while both state and private-sector

# POVERTY

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CPI (pro- Indian commission of Sao Paulo, Brazil) and CIPCA (centre for research and training of peasant farmers in Bolivia), with input from Christian Aid staff

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groups increasingly question their right to be involved in projects that determine the future of the forest. Indeed, civil-society organisations that accompany and promote the rights of those living in the Amazon are themselves sometimes the target of threats, thus increasing the obstacles Amazonian groups face when trying to redress the power imbalance that keeps them marginalised.

### **Deforestation in the Amazon**

Other factors now place community groups in the Amazon in deeper jeopardy. The introduction of extractive models of timber production, livestock and agribusiness has led to degradation and deforestation at an alarming scale and rate.

In Brazil, more than of 70,000 sq km of forest were lost between 2002 and 2005 alone. If deforestation continues at its current pace, a significant part of the Amazon will have been converted into savannah within the next 50 to 100 years.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that if this happens the world ecosystem could suffer great changes in flora and fauna, and consequences such as global rainfall, dramatic change in temperature patterns and an increasing numbers of forest fires. This has consequences for global carbon emissions.

In Brazil, deforestation and forest fires account for 75 per cent of the country's total carbon emissions, making it the fourth-largest emitter. At global level, deforestation of tropical forests is the second-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

At a more local level, continued deforestation at this pace could lead to the loss of hundreds of species of plants and animals that are closely linked to the survival strategies of groups living in the forest, and lead to increased migration of groups of so-called environmental refugees in search of better living conditions. This, in turn, could lead to greater economic and environmental impacts.

Climate change is expected to magnify and increase the rate of deforestation in the remaining forests of the world. But Amazonian people are already facing its effects. Amazonian rivers where water levels rise and fall during the rainy and dry seasons are now being altered by climate change.

Since 2005, droughts have alternated with increased and intense rainfall, causing forest fires and floods respectively. The combination of degrading farming practices and climate change in forests could

finish off the last remnants of ecological integrity in the Amazon, and with them the knowledge and culture of millions of forest people.

### **False economic arguments**

The causes of deforestation are complex and as linked to the interests of local companies as they are to global trends and economic stimuli.

Appropriate participatory forest conservation must be undertaken in a manner that allows forest-dwellers to generate sustainable livelihoods. Simply shutting down all economic activity in forests may reduce profits elsewhere and it will also shut down communities' livelihoods.

Taking this complexity into account, it is a matter of some concern that forest conservation is increasingly being presented as the panacea to the environmental crisis of climate change.

In the context of the current discussion, one of the main attractions of the world's forests is the alleged relatively 'low cost' of each ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that could be avoided by slowing down deforestation.

A typical expression of this astonishing view is expressed in the following quote from the *Independent* newspaper: 'In the next 24 hours, deforestation will release as much carbon dioxide as 8 million passengers flying from London to New York. Stopping the loggers is a cheaper and faster solution to stop climate change. Why then do global leaders refuse to see this pathway?... Conservation has been no match for commerce.'<sup>3</sup>

However, this is a false economic argument that ignores the actual causes and the urgency of climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions that originate from the degradation and disappearance of these forests account for less than 20 per cent of global emissions.

This helps to put the problem in its true dimension. In other words, even if we achieved the best-case scenario for well-managed and sustainable use of forests, this would resolve only 20 per cent of the overall problem of greenhouse gas emissions.

The remaining 80 per cent of the problem has its roots in the incessant and inefficient use of fossil fuels, mainly in developed economies. This is where solutions must be found, and the high costs should be taken on board, rather than pushing them on to the shoulders of poor Amazonian communities who have contributed little to the global climate crisis.

Without the certainty of immediate and effective compensation, why would anyone propose to address climate change through a channel that is not only partial at best but which would also involve almost certain damage to the lives and life expectancy of 90 per cent of the 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty?

Why not instead take action on – for example – transport-related measures, the main effect of which would be merely to cause some inconvenience for the wealthiest of the world's population?

This is not to say that we stand against efforts for forest conservation, but simply to demand that any such efforts are carried out with recognition of the underlying power imbalance and, above all, concern for those living in poverty.

Biodiversity conservation, the reduction of carbon reservoirs and the sustainable use of forests are not necessarily contradictory objectives. However, the risk is that the economically attractive natural carbon drainage function of forests will be imposed forcibly over bottom-up community-based solutions.

Because of this, we should question any proposed measures or solutions that give precedence to lowering costs in greenhouse gas emissions over the sustainable use of forest resources by local populations living in the Amazon.

## A people-centred solution to climate change

The conservation, integrated management and environmental protection of the Amazon forests through agro-forestry systems and strategies that offer food security to millions of people, and sustain them and protect their environment, should be valued and promoted among policymakers – at national and international forums – as alternative, ecologically sound and sustainable development models.

Conservation and expansion of the world's natural carbon reservoirs can and should continue to be desirable, but the overriding objective must be the goal of helping people to continue to live in them.

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## Defining the conditions for fair forest carbon conservation

If the UNFCCC, through its mechanisms – including Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD) – is serious about conserving the carbon of the forests, the only way to do this fairly and effectively is to define the conditions and requirements for these projects under local/regional conditions.

This should prioritise:

- delivery of public funding from Annex 1 countries to support forest conservation/sustainable forest management in a manner that benefits local populations
  - adoption of people-focused policies that overcome the power imbalances extant in Bolivia and Brazil, which prevent forest-dwellers from participating fully in public policy about the Amazon
  - prior consultation and negotiation with groups living in forests by both state and private sector
  - the need for a stronger pro-poor focus within the UNFCCC agreement.
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## Endnotes

**1** *Sustaining Forests: A Development Strategy*, The World Bank, 2004, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTFORESTS/Resources/SustainingForests.pdf>

**2** GTZ, *Importancia de los Bosques Tropicales*, [www.gtz.de/en/28176.htm](http://www.gtz.de/en/28176.htm)

**3** Daniel Howden, 'Deforestation: the hidden cause of global warming', the *Independent*, 14 May 2007, [www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/deforestation-the-hidden-cause-of-global-warming-448734.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/deforestation-the-hidden-cause-of-global-warming-448734.html)

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