

Protecting Tropical Forests - More than a side event in the run up to Copenhagen

<http://www.social-europe.eu/2009/11/protecting-tropical-forests-%e2%80%93-more-than-a-side-event-in-the-run-up-to-copenhagen/>

January 27, 2011



Deforestation and its impacts as a topic of international climate negotiations have been underestimated for too long. While the Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC calculates that deforestation accounts for around 20 percent of global greenhouse gases, recent scientific findings emphasise that this figure might be much higher. Therefore, deforestation comes after energy supply and industrial processes as the third largest single cause of global warming and accounts for more emissions than, for instance, the transport sector.

Concentrating the negotiations simply on energy and industry related questions might lead to a historic shortcoming in a new global climate treaty in Copenhagen.

Despite its crucial importance, solving the problem of land use change and deforestation is even more complicated than most other topics in international climate policies. The reasons are manifold:

First, the overwhelming majority of deforestation occurs in developing and least developed countries and is therefore out of reach of our regulatory authority. Taking deforestation as a single source of emissions, Brazil and Indonesia – rather than the United States and China – are on top of the climate sinner score board. Developing countries perceive the use of their natural resources as their fundamental right for development and object external interference. Although some countries have realised that a stop of the dramatic looting of tropical forests might also bring net benefits, the regulatory capacities in most of these countries are just too weak in order to stop companies and farmers from illegal cutting and burning of forest areas.

Second, there is no effective forest protection regime in place that could reward the stop of deforestation as a climate policy instrument, similar to the deployment of renewable energies or the greening of an industrial branch. The Kyoto Protocol introduced only very few instruments in order to guarantee the preservation of forests as a climate change measure. Therefore, so far less than 0.1% of all international emission reductions have been directed to deforestation as a source of global warming.

So, what has to be done in Copenhagen? First of all, public awareness has to be raised in order to make clear that deforestation is not an issue at the far end of the negotiations, but right at its centre. In a second step, new protection instruments and funding mechanisms have to be developed by all parties to a future agreement. At present, debates focus on a new system of so called “REDD+” certificates, rewarding states for the preservation of their natural habitat. Attaching a price to not using tropical forests will be of utmost importance to a new climate regime. Relying on the natural good will of people will not solve the problem, as the past record has shown.

Furthermore, this new system has to be supported by financial action from developed countries. Creating an international forest fund will be necessary in order to compensate for the potential losses by preserving valuable forest areas. Slowly, this funding could be supported by a global carbon market, in which these forest mechanisms would be included.

The protection of tropical rain forests is more than just a mitigation instrument in a new international climate regime. It combines many different positive effects: On the one hand, the protection of forests is already active adaptation policy. Soil erosion, floods, and major impacts of tropical storms show that a changing landscape is less resilient against the effects of global warming than a natural and stable ecosystem. On the other hand, securing the home of indigenous people and protecting biodiversity should be a moral responsibility to all of us. Both aspects show that stopping deforestation is in a similar way a social duty as it is an environmental obligation.

No related posts.