

Press Release

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More inclusive and coherent global action on deforestation urgently needed to reduce forest loss and climate impacts

Deforestation and forest degradation impact heavily on the climate, biodiversity, economy, and people. While rising global demand for agricultural products is the leading driver of forest loss, there is a lack of effective global governance to address this. After decades of both innovation and failures in forest governance, political and environmental scientists point to solutions for policy makers, industry leaders, knowledge brokers and other stakeholders. And there is a lot to learn from the mistakes and success stories of international forest policy, they say.

Vienna/Brussels, 19 October: Deforestation and forest degradation, mainly due to agricultural expansion, lead to the loss of roughly 9 million hectares of natural forest per year. This has severe social, economic, and environmental consequences, including the dramatic loss of biodiversity, since forests are home to 80% of all terrestrial biodiversity. Also, in the period 2007-2016 some 23% of global carbon dioxide emissions stemmed from deforestation and forest degradation contributing significantly to the pressing climate crisis. Not least, governments, responsible companies and local farmers are losing billions of US Dollars each year due to poor governance of international markets. Scientists say that while there has been a lot of innovative development of public, private and mixed forest policy instruments at regional and local levels, these efforts are thwarted by a highly fragmented, incomplete and ineffective forest policy regime at the global level. With a view to the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference, there is an opportunity for climate policymakers

to capitalize on some of the key lessons learned from mistakes, and success stories, of international forest policy.

Most deforestation takes place in the Global South, and it is driven not only by domestic, but also by international markets and demand for agricultural commodities, bioenergy, and other bioeconomy needs in the Global North. We refer to this as ‘imported deforestation’”, explains Dr. Metodi Sotirov from the University of Freiburg in Germany. “While unsustainable or illegal timber use is still an important driver of deforestation, agricultural expansion for cattle breeding and cultivating soy, palm oil etc. is much bigger. However, international policy and governance are still not addressing the issues at stake: there is still a need for an effective and coordinated global policy response covering all deforestation-related commodities - timber, forest risk agricultural commodities, bioenergy, mining, etc. - and policy, market, societal, ecological challenges that need to be addressed to reduce the further disappearance of the world’s forests.”

In the last three decades, large numbers and varieties of global forest policy initiatives and institutions have evolved; each of them addresses different aspects of forests and their management while there are also overlaps. As a result, global forest governance is greatly fragmented and strongly influenced by certain key policies, such as international climate policies, including the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation REDD+, and global efforts to combat illegally sourced timber trade, including Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade referred to as ‘FLEGT’.

“Many of the international initiatives aiming to stop deforestation such as forest certification and timber legality mechanisms, or REDD+, consider deforestation as a forest sector problem due to forest management and logging. However, the vast majority of deforestation is due to conversion for agriculture, which is largely unaddressed by international forest governance initiatives”, explains Dr. Sarah Lilian Burns, Assistant Professor at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata in Argentina and Group Leader at the Institute of International Forestry and Forest Products of Technical University Dresden, Germany. “Market-based instruments in global forest governance, such as forest certification, including Forest Stewardship Council FSC and the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification PEFC, deforestation-free supply chains, and REDD+, do not resolve the inequality in timber trade between big and small timber producers. On the contrary, they even have the potential of reinforcing such inequalities. This is where the crucial role of states comes in, as governments have a considerable potential to correct ecologically or socially unacceptable market failures.”

What we already know about deforestation and forest governance

Deforestation has many socio-ecological and economic consequences with major long-term impacts, such as the loss of traditional lifestyles, breakdown of social institutions, or encroachment into indigenous communities resulting in violent confrontations. Economically, deforestation not only represents a loss in forest capital (valued at USD 45 billion in 2007), but also loss of potential future revenues and future employment that could be derived from sustainable management for timber and non-timber products. One of the most serious consequences of deforestation is the loss of biodiversity, with an estimated annual extinction of 50,000 species. Deforestation is also an important contributor to global warming with a contribution of about 23% when considering total GHG (CO₂, CH₄, N₂O) emissions; it disrupts weather patterns creating hotter and drier weather, affects water quality and flow, and contributes to soil degradation and desertification.

Dr. Pablo Pacheco, Forests Lead at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) explains: *“Multiple solutions, including public regulations (e.g., bans, moratoria) and market-based mechanisms (e.g., certification, payments for environmental services, traceability) have been tried, as well as ambitious public and private commitments to halt deforestation and improve forest management. But they have achieved only limited success due to a lack of more stringent regulations, financial means, and market incentives to either make deforestation an unattractive land use option or embrace good practices in already converted lands.”*

Scientific research has identified three major challenges and shortcomings in global forest governance: a complexity problem, a regulatory gap, and an implementation gap: the complexity is due to too many public and private regulatory processes across global, transnational and national levels; the “regulatory gap” is due to public and private regulations addressing only a small portion of deforestation drivers such as timber, but not the so-called ‘forest risk’ agricultural commodities; the implementation gap is due to these regulations being neither efficiently implemented nor effectively coordinated.

This bewildering variety of regulatory and market-based instruments creates, rather than mitigates, policy and market trade-offs, conflicts, leakage effects and loopholes. *“These multiple and incoherent approaches hinder the effectiveness of the various forest governance arrangements; the current situation allows land users, firms and countries to forum-shop for the most suitable instrument for their (economic) interests compromising effective anti-deforestation action”*, explains Dr. Sotirov.

Dr. Connie McDermott, Jackson Senior Fellow and Associate Professor Land Use and Environmental Change at the University of Oxford, UK, adds another important aspect: *“We*

are measuring forest change with ever greater accuracy, but are still failing to change it, or assess the human and environmental cost of our efforts so far. Many ‘new’ global governance initiatives borrow heavily on existing strategies that reinforce power inequalities. Rather than transform the status quo, they promise to do more of the same, only faster and harder.”

Science suggests solutions and constructive approaches

“What if we shifted more attention and resources away from global metrics, models and target-setting, to seriously assess how global governance is impacting local people and biodiversity, and to support – or at least not stand in the way of - locally driven efforts to foster change?” Dr. McDermott continues. “Social science can help us here, by studying power dynamics across scales, how governance works in local context, what are the perspectives of local people, and how can we learn from them. We can help ‘scale out’ initiatives by supporting networks and learning between different group efforts, rather than expecting them to ‘scale up’ and become one globally homogenous strategy.”

According to Dr. Sotirov, effective international and EU climate-related action against deforestation and forest degradation will require a combination of supply-side policy measures aimed at producer countries and economic operators (in tropical regions such as Brazil, Central Africa, and Southeast Asia) with demand-side policy measures aimed at countries and companies importing to EU markets (and consuming/trading regions like USA, China, India, Vietnam etc.). Amongst the most important solutions advanced by Dr. Sotirov are the strong need to make international forest-related policy action and cooperation more coherent, and to integrate actions outside the forest sector (e.g., in agriculture, bioenergy, and mining) with those of forest governance, and vice versa; furthermore, underlying trade-offs and synergies between forest-related environmental protection, social equity, and economic development in the quest for global sustainability need to be addressed and managed more explicitly, and honestly.

Connie McDermott provides a critical view on the role of the different stakeholders: *“The international community is not the ‘hero’ that will save the rainforests. We will not save the day by swooping in as experts armed with global statistics to stop bad guys from cutting trees, based on astoundingly little knowledge of either the particular forests we are trying to save or the people we are trying to stop. The day will not be saved by political grandstanding about other countries’ problems, brand-friendly ‘zero deforestation’ commitments, or Big Data. Real and lasting change cannot just be imposed from the outside - it needs to work for people who are directly affected, and who have a long-term knowledge and commitment to particular forests as more than global statistics.”*

Research led by Dr. Pacheco talks about the importance of regulatory alignment. Stronger regulations in consumer countries to avoid imported deforestation are an important complement to building the institutional arrangements and mechanisms in producer countries and producing landscapes to halt deforestation, support improved land use and regenerative agriculture and restore forests landscapes. *“We need to advance jurisdictional approaches including multistakeholder agreements and partnerships in specific landscapes or jurisdictions (e.g., provinces, municipalities) to create synergies between companies (e.g., on traceability, services to suppliers), investors and banks (e.g., screening, risk management), and state agencies (e.g., planning, tenure recognition, extension services) to create positive impacts on nature, and matching those with the needs of local farmers and communities”,* he explains. *“It can be done but the political will to do so needs to be much bigger than in the past. And: there is not a single solution - or “silver bullet” - that will solve the problem of forest governance and deforestation. Solutions need both consuming countries and producing countries, and stronger partnership with stakeholders in the producing landscapes.”*

The four experts have been contributing to the work of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) in various capacities. IUFRO is a world-wide organization devoted to forest research and related sciences. Its members are research institutions, universities, and individual scientists as well as decision-making authorities and other stakeholders with a focus on forests and trees.

REVOLVE is a communication agency fostering cultures of sustainability and has partnered with IUFRO for this media briefing. It publishes a quarterly magazine focusing on the themes of water, nature, energy and mobility, coordinates publications, curates photo exhibitions, organizes forums, and maximizes outreach and impact of EU projects and international campaigns. REVOLVE works with partners to accelerate the energy transformation and the possibility of a cleaner world. REVOLVE is the initiator of the AMWAJ Alliance and a co-founder of Cities4Forests.

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Additional information for editors and contacts for interviews on the next page

For editors

More information including FAQs, facts & figures, photos and infographics are available in English, Spanish and German at

[On imported deforestation | REVOLVE](#)

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