



The role of forests in the international negotiation process of UNFCCC

Forests are crucial for climate change. The deforestation process is one of the main greenhouse gases emission sources in developing countries and it is also greatly important at the global level. New mechanisms to fight this process are under development and implementation at the national and international level. At the same time, the UNFCCC negotiation process seems to go through one of the main crises ever seen before. The real risk is that the Kyoto Protocol and maybe the entire UNFCCC process may collapse. In this context, forests may find a new role to move from one of the main causes of climate change to one of the most important potential solutions. In the view of the Rainforest Coalition, REDD+ could be the right key for this change

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Introduction

The forest sector is one of the main causes of climate change and also one of the main driving forces towards the solution path.

Through photosynthesis the flora removes the carbon present in the atmosphere as CO₂ and fixes it as organic carbon in its vegetal tissues. With crops this process takes a year cycle, consequently carbon may still be available as CO₂ for the next cycle, after biomass is burned or used as energy in biological systems. A tree lives for several years and this implies that the atmospheric CO₂ is fixed for a longer period, introducing the important aspect of carbon storage in the forest biomass.

The quantity of stored carbon is very important in the carbon cycle's dynamics. The European forests are *per se* able to remove around 870 million t of CO₂ an-

nually, a quantity approximately correspondent to 10% of the GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions in 2008[6].

With deforestation this capacity is lost and the result is an indirect increase of CO₂ in the atmosphere: for this reason deforestation could be formally considered as a source of CO₂.

Forest in the unfcc negotiation process

Not only may the forest cause a reduction in the net capacity to fix CO₂, but also the whole change in land use (i.e., from forest to graze or from graze to agriculture) These situations are considered as LULUCF (Land Use and Land Use Change and Forestation) in the UNFCCC context, the United Nations negotiation process on climate change. At the global level the emission generated by LULUCF is almost 20%[1] of the global GHG emissions.

Therefore, it should not surprise to know that LULUCF played and is still playing a key role for an interna-

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tional climate treaty, but probably it is not as much known that it was very important for the first Kyoto Protocol process too.

The opposition of the USA to the Kyoto Protocol started before the negative vote of the Senate that blocked the ratification of the document. During the process of development of the Protocol, the USA negotiators clearly demonstrated their disagreement about the way it was decided to account the biomass carbon stock in developed countries, the so called Activity Based approach. The USA preferred the Land Based approach, asking all developed countries to consider their entire national area, in order to have a reliable description of the reality.

The Activity Based approach allows developed countries to decide which area to initially take into consideration during the definition of the baseline for LULUCF. The area under activities shall be monitored during the years in order to track any increase or decrease in stored amount of CO₂. On the one side, this approach could be helpful in a first phase of implementation due to the lack of data that can make hard a complete account of all emissions and removals from the whole territory of the country.

On the other side, the risk is that each country applies a sort of selection on the areas where they may obtain benefits. As a consequence, when a country accounts areas where the forest has grown but it doesn't consider where the situation has worsen it will describe a better situation than it actually is. The creation of a benefit in the total GHG amount of a country that does not correspond to the real situation is called "hot air". The decision to apply the Land Based or the Activity Based approach was very crucial during the development of the Kyoto Protocol but Kevin Conrad, the chief negotiator for the Papua New Guinea delegation in UNFCCC, believes this problem is not yet solved in the actual critical phase of the negotiation for the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. In an interview of June 2010 he declares: "LULUCF is the biggest escape clause in the entire UNFCCC. It is a very serious issue. You can call it fraud or you can call

it whatever you want, but the fact is that the rich countries are allowed to pick the area of forest they want to account and ignore the area of the forest where they are cutting trees. This has such significant impacts that Russia has said: "If you make me honest on the forest we have to cut our target from 30% reduction to 15%", so they have to make a 50% change. We say they are cheating in the forest area. We, as developing countries, have to pledge to be far more honest than the rich countries. We agreed already on the international accounting, whereas the rich countries have not"[16].

Mechanisms to fight deforestation in developing countries

In developing countries the context is different because in their case the risk is not to hide the real situation in order to have a benefit in the reduction target as it is for developed countries. Here the problem is normally the high deforestation rate and the need to establish an economic tool able to stop or reverse the deforestation process. The financial support from developed countries is fundamental because it is not enough to spread out the idea that forests have an international value for climate change if this idea is not economically supported in order to help populations living in those areas in view of poverty eradication.

It is important to introduce a new and more effective system to financially support developing countries to preserve their forest.

In the past, often the financial support was directed to reforest areas previously interested by deforestation activities. As usual, working on the outcomes of a problem is not so effective as acting on its cause and this approach was not really able to reduce the international deforestation dynamics.

Therefore, a new approach was suggested in Bali during COP 13, the annual Conference of Parties in the UNFCCC. During this meeting, in 2007, it was decided to reduce the deforestation activities through a proactive approach. The basic idea is that forests have a worldwide value and that developed countries shall

help developing countries to avoid any deforestation activity that may reduce the capacity of our “planet’s lungs”.

This mechanism is called REDD+ (Reduction Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation)[5] and will be applied in developing countries. In Bali COP 13, Norway was very active and gave a big contribution to mould the REDD. In order to better show their intention and push the international context towards the creation of REDD+, the Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg launched the NICFI, Norway’s International Climate and Forest Initiative[8], during the UNFCCC Conference. Through this initiative, Norway offered 500 million dollars per year in bilateral agreements with some developing countries which have a very important coverage of forests like Mexico, Brazil, Guyana, Tanzania and Indonesia, through a multilateral cooperation with the UN-REDD Programme, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Congo Basin Forest Fund (CBFF), Forest Investment Programme (FIP), Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), as well as with scientific institutions and NGOs, such as ITTO REDDES and the Civil Society Support Fund[9].

This project turns out to be crucial in order to actively fight deforestation activities in developing countries and move the international negotiation context, although it doesn’t seem to be so effective at the moment.

This is also the thought of Carlos Ritti, Responsible for WWF Brazil of the Climate Change and Energy Programme: “Until now the international cooperation is still moving slowly because the system is still very bureaucratic and the Brazilian banks lost time to give their approval to the projects”[18].

Strong difficulties for the unfccc

In June 2011, Norway hosted two important meetings in Oslo that confirmed the strong commitment of the Scandinavian country on the forest sector[17]. The first meeting was the European Ministerial Conference on

Forests that achieved a very important result. In fact, during this meeting it was agreed to launch a negotiation process for the creation of a legally binding accord level and to adopt European target for 2020 in this sector[5]. The second one was an international meeting to update on the REDD+[10] progress.

Nevertheless, all these initiatives lose an important part of their effectiveness if they are not part of a larger international agreement and the only potential context for them at the moment is the UNFCCC. But times are not so healthy for the Convention and in the last few years it seems to have been rather a sick patient on the deathbed. In this situation the forest may play a very interesting role to assure a future to the Kyoto Protocol (KP)[7]. To better describe this potentiality it is, therefore, necessary to draw an overview of the negotiation process during the last five years.

The definition of the new reduction targets for developed countries in the second commitment period of the KP is a crucial item and it has been planned to start in 2006[11]. But during the COP 12 in Nairobi it was not possible to start any discussion on this matter, because positions of the parties were too distant. The only significant decision during COP 12 was to put the oxygen mask to the sick patient, postponing any decision on the KP at the next COP. In 2007, at the Conference in Bali, the situation started in the same way than in Nairobi, but at the end a decision arrived: to create a two-year period of specific negotiation, the Bali Road map. The two-year track should permit the definition of new reduction targets for developed countries, creating, at the same time, a new context, called LCA, where to define commitments also for developed countries that didn’t ratify the KP (USA) and some adequate actions for the main developing countries. Another positive output was, indeed, launching the idea of financing the fight against deforestation through the REDD and the NICFI of Norway.

In Autumn 2008 G.W. Bush, probably the main opponent to a new legally binding agreement, lost the elections, but the new President Barack Obama was not yet in charge in December during the COP14. The USA

went to Poznan with a delegation that followed the old USA Presidency's instructions and the real consequence was that a progress was not possible and another year was lost.

Later on, in 2009, the COP 15 took place in Copenhagen with very high expectations, if considering that it was the conclusion of the Bali Road Map[12]. The entire world was waiting for a new international agreement but the Conference was able to produce only an enormous failure[13]. The only positive thing was the attention that all the media and citizens paid to climate change and the attendance at the COP of almost the totality of Prime Ministers and Chiefs of State of the world. At same time, this was part of the reason why the Conference failed. In fact, all expectations were addressed to the actions of Prime Ministers but some of them started a parallel negotiation process and discussed the solution in very small groups, without taking into consideration all the work done in the past by the official delegations.

At the end, the mountain roared and brought forth a mouse in the Copenhagen Accord[14], somehow more an obstacle rather than an improvement for the negotiation work in the following years.

During 2010 not only the KP, but the entire process of UNFCCC could have, in some way, collapsed because it seemed unable to produce any effective results[15]. Probably this situation helped reach a partial agreement[2] in Cancun, during the COP 16, where a positive output arrived for technology transfer and financing, with some progress for the REDD+ too, but still nothing for the future of the KP.

The next step is the COP 17 in Durban from 28 November to 9 December 2011, and it should be the final stop for the KP. The first commitment period expires in 2012 and if a decision for the second commitment period for the KP doesn't come, our patient will not survive. The actual perspective seems not to be so positive for the strong opposition of Canada, Russia and Japan. What seems possible is that some Parties, probably the EU and maybe Australia, can offer some extra

time to the KP. A new oxygen mask of two or three years to our patient, expecting some more positive changes in the USA, where now the Senate doesn't show any intention to come to any kind of legally binding agreement, or the result of the V IPCC Assessment Report, where it is highly probable to find a strongest message of urgency.

A solution may come from the forest

The "extra time" option is not so attractive for developing countries interested in having a full agreement for the second commitment period of the KP, the only internationally legally binding document on climate change, and they are trying to find some other solutions to revitalize the KP.

In such context, space was given to the proposal of the Coalition for Rainforest Nations[3], a worldwide group of countries inside the UNFCCC particularly interested in forests.

Federica Bietta, Deputy Director of the Coalition, thinks that their proposal may be the bridge between who is in and who is out of the KP. "In Mexico started Phase 1 of countries' preparation for REDD+, now we are in the implementation phase, but it is with Phase 3 of full application that forest may play a strategic role for the future of KP. It is now important to move forward to the idea to have formal commitments only from developed countries, but there is no doubt that developing countries should be helped with financial support. Our idea is to introduce in the second period of KP the commitment to fight deforestation adopted at national level. In this way it is possible to obtain the double result to have more transparency in the developing countries commitment and more ambitious emission targets from the rich countries.

Actually we have several positive feedbacks and we are looking with optimism to the next COP in South Africa"[19].

Ms. Bietta does not meet the requests of the most problematic countries in the direction of this proposal,

but it is possible to imagine that the emerging economies, as China, could in some way be worried that a big flow of money may move from the existing projects like CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) to the forest sector.

But deforestation is still on the daily agenda

Whilst negotiations on this issue is frenetic and may open a new door for a successful future to the KP, some troubles are involving other emerging economies, like Brazil.

A new proposal of law, the Forest Code, has passed by the Low Chamber and it is now stopped before being voted by the Senate. A big movement of associations, including the 10 previous Environmental Ministers, is fighting in order to obtain the withdrawal or a strong modification of the law, because otherwise there is the serious risk that deforestation, after the minimum level achieved in 2010[4], starts growing again.

And what is on the table is something really critical to the planet. "The destruction of the Amazon forest could cause a strong consequence for the fight on climate change", says Carlos Ritti, "with the risk to nullify the strongest commitment of developed countries"[18].

The option for President Dilma Roussef to use the veto power for this law is supported from 79% of the Brazilians, but everyone hopes that in the end she won't have to use it, the law having been changed in advance.

At the end of 2011, it seems that forests are playing a crucial role in tackling climate change as they have never done before. The last months of the Internation-

al Year of Forests will show if this will happen in a positive way, giving forests the role they deserve.

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