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TREES TO THE RESCUE OF CLIMATE AND DEVELOPMENT

EDITORIAL

Globally every year forests 10 times the extent of those in Switzerland are destroyed. At the same time one in four of the world's poor depends directly or indirectly on the forest for his or her livelihood, for firewood, as a source of food and/or for medicinal purposes. Forests are an essential part of the solution to the world's climate problems as well as to world poverty. The relevant SDC global programmes are based on this dual approach, i.e. as a contribution to reducing poverty as well as climate risks. The SDC Global Programme for Climate Change links together development cooperation for the benefit of poor developing countries and climate policy measures that will also benefit the people of Switzerland, in particular our children and future generations.

Forests and their sustainable management, i.e. reconciling protection with rational use, can no longer be considered a purely national issue. Forests are increasingly understood and appreciated as a "public good of global importance". Forests contain the only accessible raw material capable of sustainable production: wood. Forests serve as a pool of biodiversity, water and energy as well as a sink for greenhouse gases. Given this multifunctional nature, forests deserve greater international attention and coordination in the framework of conventions and regulations.

Switzerland, which benefits from many decades of international experience in the promotion of sustainable and climate-friendly management of the forest in the context of development – e.g. in the Himalayas, the Sahel and the Andes -- has much to offer on the subject of forests. Thanks to this recognised expertise the Confederation plays a key role in international forest-related negotiations. Strict enforcement of its federal Forest Law of 1876 helped to establish Switzerland's international reputation as a "progressive" nation in this sphere. For more information on the Confederation's international commitment to protect the world's forests, read on!

Michel Mordasini,
Assistant Director General

Small Farmer in his teak plantation in Togo.

SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT: BALANCING SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS

"It must be clear that including forests at the core of a strategy for a sustainable future is not an option – it is mandatory." The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) expresses alarm in its report entitled "State of the World's Forests 2012". This is not the first time, one might add.

Forests cover about one quarter to one third of the planet's surface. One of their main climate functions is to store carbon. But forest cover is decreasing. In the past twenty years, an area of forest cover about three times the size of Switzerland has disappeared every year, and millions of additional hectares suffer degradation from logging and agriculture. Experts estimate that forest loss accounts for as much as one fifth of the increase in CO_2 in the atmosphere, thus contributing to the greenhouse effect and climate warming.

Forests: a sensitive issue

An increasing number of initiatives emerged in the past few years to protect forests, which are vital to the health of our planet. Why is it, then, that no international treaty on forests has come into being? The matter was raised already twenty years ago at the Earth Summit in Rio, where three other conventions on environmental issues were adopted. "At the time only specialists were aware of climate change: it was not on the political agenda," notes Jürgen Blaser, Forests and Climate Advisor to the SDC's Global Programme Climate Change. "So no one objected to signing a text on climate. Likewise, the fairly general aspects of biological diversity and desertification found few objectors. Forests, however, were a different matter. In some countries, forests cover 80% of the land mass, so much more

Shifting cultivation in a Karen community in Northern Thailand. The forest in the background is a naturally regrown secondary forest after agricultural use.

was at stake from an economic and social point of view. The interest in an international convention was therefore extremely limited." Some countries, including Switzerland, supported the idea, whereas others, among them China, the United States, Brazil and Malaysia, viewed forest policy as a matter of national sovereignty.

The discussions finally resulted in a "Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles" and the creation of an intergovernmental panel charged with launching negotiations. In 2000 the panel was extended into a forum, and in 2007 the forum produced a non-binding agreement on all types of forest.

Forest protection was more solidly anchored in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Forests are only one aspect of the UNFCCC, but they are also addressed in negotiations on other topics. In addition, forest protection benefits from the Global Environment Facility – the principal funding source for the three conventions signed in Rio. The UNFCCC led to the Kyoto process, launched in 1997. Here the link between forests and the climate, mentioned in an FAO document already in 1948, received widespread attention. But in Kyoto the emphasis was mainly on industrialised nations. Only in 2005, at the Montreal Conference, was the issue of tropical forests addressed. It took another two years before an instrument for implementation was agreed upon at the Bali Conference: the mechanism for "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation" (REDD+, see article on page 3).

Human rights

Forests thus store carbon, protect soils, and conserve biodiversity. But they do more than that: according to the World Bank, over 350 million of the world's rural poor depend strongly on forests, and 60 million rely entirely on them for their subsistence. Forests thus play an important role for development. The needs of these people remained largely unacknowledged until the Rio Conference, when their rights and claims began to receive more attention, particularly in the context of industrial forest use. This new awareness became explicit in 2007 when, after 25 years of negotiations, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, recognising in particular their right to their lands, territories and resources. The Declaration clarifies and expands clauses contained in two fundamental international treaties, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights. Both state that "in no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence." Although the rights of indigenous peoples have thus been strengthened since the Rio Conference, much remains to be done when it comes to enforcement, especially in situations where bad governance and corruption are part of everyday life.

Striking a balance between social, economic and environmental requirements

ÉOf course, indigenous peoples are not the only ones who depend on forests for subsistence. Indeed, there is often fierce (and unequal) competition between indigenous forest users, "colonist" peasants who clear the forest for agriculture, and commercial companies engaged in industrial logging. In tropical forests, 70% of the cut timber serves as firewood, while 30% finds industrial uses. Large areas of primary forest are converted into pastureland or plantations for ethanol, palm oil and soya production. Population growth and the global rise in living standards increase the pressure on forests worldwide. Today, half of the world's CO_2 emissions come from emerging and developing countries. The concept of "sustainable forest management", launched at the Rio Conference and developed further since then, strikes a balance between the various interests involved and the measures required to conserve biodiversity and mitigate climate change. The concept takes into account social, economic and environmental aspects and is based on three pillars: protection wherever possible, mitigation of the negative impacts of forest degradation, and adaptation to climate change. Field studies show that local ownership of this management concept is among the most effective instruments.

Switzerland's approach: social forestry

Activities of the SDC's Global Programme Climate Change (GPCC) are based on the social forestry approach. Their goals and scope – poverty alleviation, human security, globalisation that favours development – are in line with the international goals of the UNFCCC as well as the national objectives of the Federal Council's Message on Switzerland's International Cooperation in 2013–2016. Switzerland has gained considerable experience with social forestry and can feed this into international negotiations linked to the UNFCCC and in particular the REDD mechanism. Based on this experience, the SDC's GPCC has initiated a number of regional forest and climate programmes involving marginalised and poor people. In Southeast Asia, Switzerland supports a social forestry network that takes into account food security, poverty alleviation and climate change. An earlier programme in Nepal supported mainly by Switzerland has led to a targeted increase in forest areas, improved forest management, and an increase in poor households' income. Other programmes are up and running in Latin America, as well as in Africa, via the African Forest Forum. The SDC invests about CHF 10 million annually in forestry projects. A similar amount is allocated to REDD+ and tropical forests through the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). These investments aim for long-term impact. Trees in a forest are quickly cut; but it takes 200 to 300 years for a new tree to reach its full size.

THREE QUESTIONS TO...

Stewart Magginis, Head of the IUCN Forest Conservation Programme in Gland (VD).

The negotiations on forest protection are mainly taking place in the framework of the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC). Would it be more efficient to have a Convention dedicated only to forest protection?
Better synergies could be achieved between the forestry elements within various Conventions already in existence. UNFCCC covers forest protection from an emissions perspective by reducing deforestation or improving forest condition from degradation (REDD+). The primary objective is indeed carbon sequestration, however there are clear provisions under the UNFCCC decisions that will safeguard the non-carbon values of forests.

Sustainable Forest Management is now a widely accepted concept. From the IUCN point of view, is it widely (enough) implemented?
The UN Food & Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) 2010 Forest Resource Assessment was the first attempt to assemble globally consistent data on sustainable forest management. Data differences did not allow comparisons between countries or generating regional and global totals.
In terms of tropical forests, the International Tropical Timber Organization's 2011 'Status of Tropical Forest Management', concluded that between 2005 and 2010 the total area of tropical forests under sustainable management increased by 50%. That said, less than 10% of the world's total tropical forests are managed sustainably.

What are the chances that REDD+ will succeed, that is will deliver effective results on carbon sequestration?
Ultimately, REDD+ will succeed to the extent that national governments can agree on a comprehensive climate agreement within which REDD+ is a mechanism for reducing forest-related emissions. Whether with an agreement or without, REDD+ will succeed if national governments: i) translate international commitments to national action; ii) can integrate REDD+ into existing legislation and environmental strategies; and iii) include stakeholders in the design of national strategies, allocation of rights and distribution of the financial benefits that will be derived from REDD+.

REDD+: MAKING FOREST PROTECTION PROFITABLE

Intact tropical forests are far more valuable than degraded ones from the point of view of climate protection – not to mention their other important functions. By sequestering CO_2, they make an important contribution to mitigating climate change. But in a world governed by monetary concerns, the dominant logic often focuses on short-term gains. This sparked the idea of compensating developing countries for protecting forests, a "service" by which they simultaneously help to conserve biodiversity, mitigate soil degradation, and regulate the water cycle. Adequate compensation requires, of course, that interests are weighed against each other and that direct benefits for local populations – in particular indigenous peoples – are ensured. This is the basic principle underlying the REDD+ mechanism for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation. In a nutshell: unused forest must also generate profit – in the form of payments for the CO_2 that it stocks.

REDD was launched in 2007 at the Bali climate conference. The initiative was complemented by the World Bank's "Forest Investment Programme" and "Forest Carbon Partnership Facility" (FCPF), which support individual countries in developing a REDD+ strategy. The UN has launched the UN-REDD programme, administrated by three UN organisations: the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Meanwhile, the scope of REDD activities has broadened, as reflected in the new name "REDD+".

Paying for carbon storage

The REDD+ mechanism consists of three stages. First, the applicant country has to assess the status of all its forests, define national goals (forest area to be conserved, land planning, etc.), and develop strategies for implementing these goals. This stage requires a strong involvement of the partners concerned: the government, local authorities, civil society, the population depending on forest resources and in particular the private sector. At present, about 30 countries are preparing a strategy within the framework of the FCPF. At the second stage, strategies and action plans are implemented; if necessary, this includes institutional reforms and changes in property rights. Finally, at the third stage, an internationally acknowledged assessment determines how much CO_2 has been saved and how much it is worth. Local conditions are essential in determining this value. Compensation can come in the form of investments, project funds and sale of CO_2 emission allowances on the carbon market, with an important role played by the private sector. Until now, Costa Rica is the only country that has reached the third stage of the process.

No blueprint

Since REDD+ was launched in 2007, it has met with intense criticism. The consideration of the rights of indigenous peoples (conservation of their resources, preservation of their life style, participation in REDD+ benefits) has been a matter of particular debate. Moreover, criticism is aimed against the fact that the private sector is called upon in an area that is so significant for the common good. Even market studies such as the one produced by the consulting firm Munden Project consider the process as risky and not very attractive or even potentially counterproductive. By contrast, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) considers REDD+ as a useful instrument – though not a blueprint – that needs to be complemented by more broadly defined national-level strategies. Switzerland supports REDD+ with an annual contribution of CHF 8 million paid through the SECO. From the Swiss point of view, the mechanism addresses all values that forests have for society.

PARTICULARLY WORTH NOTING

1
Forest conservation is mandatory for combating climate change. Trees store large amounts of carbon and their growth depends on carbon. At the same time, they protect soils from erosion and regulate the water cycle.

2
Deforestation and the degradation of primary forests causes about one fifth of global CO_2 emissions – more than the transport sector worldwide. These emissions partly result from combustion processes (70% of timber from tropical forests is used as fuelwood); more importantly, however, they are owed to the fact that forests no longer store carbon once they have been cut.

3
At the 1992 Rio conference, the international community was unable to agree on a forest convention. The use of forests has very concrete implications; hence a number of countries consider forest use to be a matter of national sovereignty. Since Rio, the concept of sustainable forest management has gained significance. It aims at a long-term balance between social, economic and environmental interests. Today negotiations concerning forest conservation are mainly conducted within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

4
The Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanism was launched at the climate conference in Bali in 2007. The aim of this mechanism is to compensate countries that conserve their forest in the long term instead of exploiting them. About 40 countries are preparing a national strategy for implementing REDD+.

5
The SDC has included forest conservation in its Global Programme Climate Change (GPCC), which subscribes to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Switzerland supports community forestry programmes in which participation of the local population is ensured. Local forest users have gained visibility and more rights since the 1992 Rio conference.

Market for charcoal in the highlands of Madagascar.

INNOVATIVE PROJECTS

(under www.deza.admin.ch, Projects/All projects)

ASEAN Social Forestry Network (ASFN)
Collaboration with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) for promoting policies of decentralized forests management in ASEAN member states. The emphasis is on local initiatives based on climate-friendly approaches and sustainable forest management that addresses livelihood improvement and poverty alleviation.

AFRICAN FOREST FORUM (AFF)
Supports the largest South-South knowledge exchange network in forestry on the African continent. AFF provides a platform and creates an enabling environment for independent and objective analysis, advocacy and advice on all relevant policy and technical issues pertaining to achieving sustainable management, use and conservation of Africa's forest and tree resources as part of efforts to reduce poverty, protect the climate and the environment and promote economic and social development.

INDIGENAS REDD+
A contribution to the umbrella organisation (COICA) of the indigenous peoples' associations in the greater Amazon Basin for the development of an own indigenous peoples' strategy for REDD+. Jointly with other partners, GPCC supports the implementation of the "Free, Prior and Informed Consent" concept.

RIGHTS AND RESOURCES INITIATIVE (RRI)
At the global and regional levels; RRI promotes the rights of local populations dependent on forests, their legal access to the forest and its resources, and their access to markets for products and services derived from their forests.

IMPRINT

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