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Development without deforestation: a new response to global warming

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The magnitude of the global warming crisis is becoming clear worldwide, and practically all nations on Planet Earth are considering how it will affect them and what can be done to combat it. Hybrid vehicles, wind power, improved insulation, solar collectors, congestion pricing to fund mass transit – the list of potential solutions is long and getting longer. Yet one of the most important possibilities – reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (usually abbreviated REDD) – has only recently gotten widespread attention, and even many environmentalists are unaware that about 20% of greenhouse gas emissions actually come from tropical deforestation.

The reason is simple – trees are about half carbon, and when they're cut down or burned up, they release that carbon into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. Thus, countries with high deforestation rates also have high emissions. In fact, although the U.S. and China are in close contention for the dubious distinction of being the world's largest producers of global warming pollution, numbers three and four are actually Indonesia and Brazil. While rich countries' emissions are predominantly from burning fossil fuels, those of Indonesia, Brazil and other tropical countries are almost all from deforestation.

The U.N. climate conference in Bali in December 2007 was a big step forward in dealing with this source of global warming. Over 180 countries agreed that REDD will be one of the major elements of the international treaty on global warming that is to be negotiated and agreed on in Copenhagen in December 2009. While most of the details remain to be worked out, the outlines of the deal are simple: tropical countries would reduce their rates of deforestation, and thus their emissions, while industrial countries would compensate them for the sacrifice of resources – the “opportunity cost” of not using forest land for farming, ranching and timber production – that this reduction in deforestation would require. Effectively, tropical forests would become more valuable when protected, as if they were converted to agriculture. “Development without deforestation” would become a real possibility.

This would not only make a major dent in the problem of global warming, but also be a great contribution to the protection of the world’s biodiversity. Since tropical forests are home to half of the planet’s species of plants and animals, slowing deforestation – even if it’s done in order to keep their carbon locked up in their trees – would also have the important “co-benefit” of preventing the extinction of millions of species. In addition, it would protect the ecosystems that are the homes and sources of livelihood for forest peoples such indigenous groups around the world. And it has the potential to transfer large amounts of money – many times as large as the total of all foreign aid – to poor nations to fund their development.

So, in broad outlines the potential is clear, and would provide benefits for people around the world. But as is always the case, the sticking points in the negotiations are in the details of exactly how to do it. Should reductions in deforestation emissions be paid for by serving as “offsets” to industrial emissions in cap-and-trade carbon markets? Or should a global fund be set up to compensate tropical countries? Or should there be major increases in international lending?

Or all of the above, as in the “basket of approaches” concept proposed by the Coalition for Rain Forest Nations, led by Costa Rica and Papua New Guinea?

Lots of complicated negotiations lie ahead before a new climate treaty, including REDD, can be signed in 2009 and go into force in 2013. But the good news out of Bali was that all the major countries involved – both the tropical ones that would reduce their deforestation, and the temperate ones that would fund it – agree that it is critical to include it in the forthcoming agreement. The twenty-first century can be, for the first time in human history, the epoch of development without deforestation.