

FORESTS

A DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE



The United Nations General Assembly declared 2011 the International Year of Forests.

The UN wanted to emphasise the importance of extensive forest cover for millions of people around the world.

The goal was to raise the awareness of the general public, international organisations, and local players about the place of forest management in the development dynamics of many southern countries.

2011 has ended. The time has come to take stock.

What is the state of forest conservation?

Is the issue finally being included in development policies?



Credit: The International Institute for Environment and Development

Main threats

At the beginning of the 19th century, tropical forests covered 1.6 billion hectares of the Earth's land mass. Less than half remains today.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, deforestation has been destroying about 6.4 million hectares of forest annually worldwide¹, primarily in tropical regions.

The latest studies using satellite technology show that the rate of destruction of forest cover has significantly increased over the past ten years, particularly in Latin America and Africa.

As Eduardo Rojas-Briales, FAO Assistant Director-General of the Forestry Department, points out, "deforestation deprives millions of people of forest goods and services that are crucial to food security, economic well-being, and the health of the environment."²

That is one facet of the problem. The consequences of deforestation are multidimensional (environmental, economic, social, health-related, etc.) and endanger the overall development of many countries around the world. This is true even though these countries are seeing positive results in other development pillars such as governance, infrastructure, and education.



Tropical forest (Island of Bali, Indonesia) - Credit: Eric Bajart



Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations visiting Indonesia (Central Kalimantan Province) on one of the REDD+ sites - Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten

A real priority

By making 2011 the International Year of Forests, the United Nations General Assembly wanted to highlight the underlying nature of the forest issue, which must be transversally integrated in the development strategies of many countries of the world.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Indonesia, Peru, Vietnam... The galloping deforestation eating away at these countries impacts their resources, threatens their forest communities, and mortgages their development prospects over time.

Deforestation goes beyond these regional impacts and must be dealt with as one of the primary causes of global warming.



Indonesia (Central Kalimantan Province) REDD+ site - Credit: UN Photo

Difficult to implement

This new awareness was the trigger for the launch of several international initiatives during the 2000s.

Coordinated by the UN, the transnational REDD+ programme (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) is the best-known one. Its goal is to limit climate warming via the implementation of sub-programmes to fight against deforestation (in particular through a forest cover monitoring system) and thanks to conservation and biodiversity renewal actions.

Despite some real successes, REDD+ programme implementation faces many obstacles.

Ill-suited financing methods (in the form of carbon credit exchanges), the involvement of corporations, the failure of governments to recognise the land rights of forest communities, the search for hyper-productivity for farm land, inadequate national forest legislation... These are among the cogs of the system that are coming under fire, particularly by environmental NGOs and groups that defend the rights of indigenous peoples.

These problems illustrate the difficulty of reconciling rapid economic development on one hand, and the preservation of forests on the other, particularly in those countries most dependent on an economic model that requires extensive use of natural resources.

Priority to the environment

However, the stakes are high and the efforts undertaken to integrate sustainable forest management in overall development strategies must be continued and improved while taking into account national and local specificities.

The need to take forests into account has become part of the working practices and dynamics of cooperation agencies over the past years.

At **BTC**, the **Belgian development agency**, the experts responsible for providing support to projects implemented in 18 southern partner countries³ confirm this trend.

Claude Croizer, the environmental advisor at BTC, notes the growing significance of forests as a development issue within the scope of Belgian cooperation work (agriculture and rural development, education, health, decentralisation, gender, the environment, etc.). He explains that: "The primary objectives of Belgian Cooperation are the fight against poverty and improvement of people's access to basic services. The fight against deforestation is not an institutional priority like health or education. However, things are changing and many of the programmes we support now include forests."



In order to focus Belgian support, the 18 partner countries (18 beneficiary countries of Belgian development aid) choose the areas on which they want to concentrate from among the Belgian Cooperation's ten strategic work areas.

According to Claude Croizer, over the past few years "partner countries have been increasingly emphasising environmental issues and have moved toward 'environmental' priorities (agriculture and rural development, water, sanitation, the environment and climate)."

Development forests

Among the projects supported by the Belgian development agency, one in particular focuses exclusively on forests.

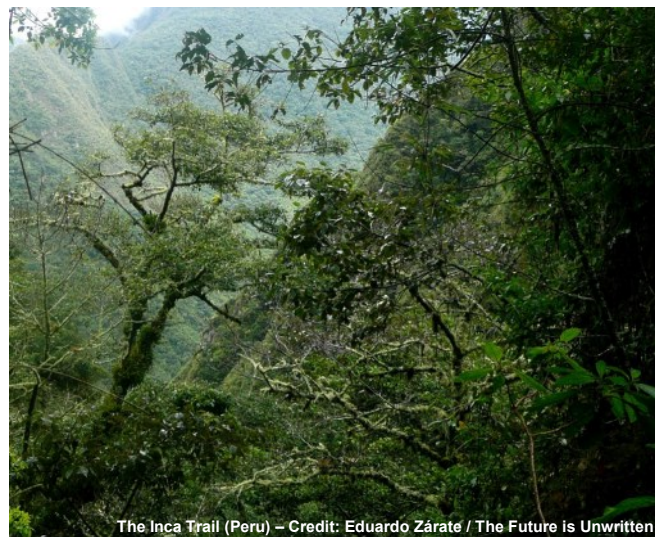
The "Programme d'Appui à la Reforestation au Rwanda" was set up in 2009. Its goals include preparing (or converting) 10,000 hectares of public forest for the production of fuel wood and the quantitative and qualitative management of the country's forest resources.

In order better to meet Rwanda's need for fuel wood, BTC is supporting the strengthening of capacities of competent local authorities, the increase (reforestation) and rationalisation of forest resources, and the improvement of wood energy development techniques (carbonisation processes).

In this project, the issue of forests is included in the country's sustainable management of energy resources.

Other BTC projects include forests, but less exclusively

For example, the Belgian development agency supports the bee-keeping industry in Tanzania, which provides the prospect of employment for thousands of men and women.



Technical training programmes to improve the quality of honey (and, therefore, its sales price) have been implemented as have actions to preserve the underbrush where bees feed.

The preservation of forest resources is also becoming a direct tool in the fight against poverty and a means to ensure better incomes and more sustainable supplies for communities with thousands of people.

The adaptation of resource management systems to climate change is often another concern of developing countries, further justifying the preservation of forests.

In many instances, forest cover protects natural resources from the dangers of global warming that is threatening many countries.

For example, in Vietnam, wooded areas protect coastlines against the rise of salt water that threatens rice paddies and drinking water supplies. Here too, BTC is providing its assistance to local authorities that benefit from additional resources (about €30 million) as part of a sanitation and capacities strengthening programme. This commitment will help local governments meet the challenges created by rapid urbanisation and climate change.

In this case, forest preservation is seen as a way to direct urban development toward more environmentally-friendly and sustainable approaches.



Shipibo Conibo community agroforestry workers (Peru).
Credit: Groenhart

In some regions, forest resources are the foundation on which development projects are built. This is notably the case in the Ucayali region of Peru's Amazon basin where the indigenous Shipibo Conibo people live. Local communities have learned to sustainably manage their resources with the help of a Belgian and a Peruvian NGO, and BTC's Trade for Development Centre.

Obtaining FSC certification should help to enable the sale of wood at the best price as part of sustainable forestry operations.

Trees for growth

For decades, development strategies have focused primarily on economic and social issues. More business means more employment and better living standards.

Today these paradigms are changing and, faced with the erosion of their natural resources and climate change, southern countries and development groups (including BTC) are combining the need for growth and preservation of the environment.

These two components of sustainable development are inseparable and forests are at the heart of this alchemy.

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To find out more:

- *Environment and Development - A View of 30 Development Projects*, a brochure from BTC, the Belgian development agency, published in December 2009 and available at www.btctb.org
- *Groenhart, le bois durable péruvien*, presentation of the project supported by the Trade for Development Centre, available at <http://www.befair.be/fr/projectsheet?page=1>
- *What does the future hold for the forests in the Democratic Republic of Congo?* a BTC publication available at www.btctb.org.

1 Source: FAO, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation

2 Source: ONU / FAO - www.un.org/french/newscentre

3 The 18 BTC partner countries are South Africa, Algeria, Benin, Bolivia, Burundi, Ecuador, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda, Palestine, Peru, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Vietnam.