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New Analysis Finds Current Definition of Forests in Climate Agreement Undermines Efforts to Protect Forests and Reduce Emissions

Call for a Focus on Reducing Emissions from All Land Uses

Copenhagen (11 December 2009)--Disagreement over what constitutes a forest could undermine an agreement to protect forests, which is expected to be one of the bright spots at the UN climate change meeting in Copenhagen, according to an analysis by the Alternatives to Slash and Burn (ASB) Partnership for Tropical Forest Margins.

While negotiators are struggling to reach consensus in many areas, there is widespread optimism that the conference will produce a framework for paying developing countries to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation— REDD. Deforestation accounts for up to 12 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions.

But a new analysis from the ASB Partnership—which is part of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) — shows that the Achilles heel of the REDD plan is a porous definition of forest that will not account for large areas of deforested landscapes.

“Countries can clear massive amounts of forest and still claim that deforestation had not occurred,” said Peter A Minang, ASB Global Coordinator, who has extensive experience working with the REDD initiative. For example, replacement of tropical rainforests by oil palm plantations in Southeast Asia would not be considered ‘deforestation’ because the plantations meet the definition of forest. As well, lands that have been clear cut or burned, but which remain under control of forest institutions are still considered forest.

“On the other hand, large wooded areas that are not part of officially designated ‘forests’ as well as huge tracts of peatlands (which account for 3 to 5 percent of global carbon emissions) would fall outside the definition,” said Meine van Noordwijk, Chief Science Advisor for the World Agroforestry Centre and a co-author of the ASB analysis.

ASB analyses in three Indonesian provinces show that some of the approaches proposed for carbon accounting in the proposed REDD plan may only address 20 percent of actual emissions from land use change.

“For people who are not working at the ground level, it may seem easy to say what is and what is not a forest,” says Dennis Garrity, Director General of the World Agroforestry Centre, which coordinates ASB activities. “But there is really no single definition of forests that can apply to the continuum of landscapes with trees. More important will be to capture all the land use practices that are major contributors to global warming or could play a significant role in carbon reduction.”

The REDD plan under negotiation is likely to exclude a considerable amount of land that is rich in trees. Research by the World Agroforestry Centre found that nearly half of the agricultural lands of the world have at least 10 percent tree cover. In Southeast Asia and Central America, 50 percent of agricultural areas have at least 30 percent tree cover. Yet none of these trees—or more to the point, their carbon—would be protected by the REDD plan.

In addition, the researchers point out that in many parts of the world, local communities are resistant to having even areas dense with trees classified as forests because such a distinction can have legal ramifications that can result in their losing control of their lands.

ASB researchers believe the way to resolve the forest definition dilemma is for climate change negotiators to broaden the plan to include any alterations to land cover that release or retain greenhouse gases — whether it is cutting down a virgin forest, cultivating trees on farmlands (agroforestry), or protecting carbon-rich peat from decomposition. This would have the benefit of encouraging the reduction of emissions from a variety of land use practices.

Garrity and others in the ASB Partnership note that REDD discussions have already progressed from focusing only on wholesale deforestation to considering carbon lost when forests are damaged (but still intact) and, more recently, to accounting for carbon gained when forests are added to the landscape. Garrity said the REDD plan is, overall, a welcome development that offers an unprecedented opportunity to address the underlying causes of destructive land use decisions on a global scale. The researchers believe the next logical step is to move beyond the forest to the concept of “reducing emissions from all land uses”. Including all land use, they say, has numerous advantages in tackling some of the thorny issues in REDD negotiations.

It will be more effective, because it considers carbon in all land-uses and could prevent shifting deforestation activities from one area to another. It is efficient, because it focuses on areas with high potential climate impact, not on whether they meet an arbitrary definition of forests; and it is fair, because all developing countries could participate, even those that have low forest cover but possess lands with high carbon storage potential.

And, the methods for measuring these emissions already exist and are used by industrialized countries.

“The prominence of forests in the discussions leading up to Copenhagen has been enormously beneficial, because it has brought a much needed focus to how land use change contributes to climate change,” Garrity said. “The quandary that has emerged from trying to define what constitutes a forest leaves no doubt that negotiators should embrace all land uses as the next step in this highly promising debate. Otherwise, the bright light of Copenhagen will dim considerably.”

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*The **World Agroforestry Centre**, based in Nairobi, Kenya, is the world’s leading research institution on the diverse role trees play in agricultural landscapes and rural livelihoods. As part of its work to bring tree-based solutions to bear on poverty and environmental problems, centre researchers – working in close collaboration with national partners – have developed new technologies, tools and policy recommendations for increased food security and ecosystem health. www.worldagroforestry.org*

*The **Alternatives to Slash and Burn (ASB) Partnership** for Tropical Forest Margins is a global partnership of more than 80 research institutes, focused on finding the right balance between land use, environmental services and benefits to smallholder farmers. The partnership includes non-governmental organizations, universities, community organizations, farmers' groups, and other local, national, and international organizations. Since 1994, ASB has operated as a systemwide programme of the CGIAR and includes 5 CG Centres. www.asb.cgiar.org*