Principles for land-use in the Paris climate agreement

Land use has a crucial role to play both in our attempts to tackle climate change, and ensure food security. These two concerns should underpin our strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to their consequences.

A sustainable approach to land use provides the basis for ensuring food security in the face of a warming world, while competition for land can lead to forest loss, which is a significant contributor to climate change.

For this reason, halting deforestation and forest degradation is vital if we want to limit the rise in global temperatures; at the same time, protecting and restoring forests and other natural ecosystems can draw carbon from the atmosphere, as well as protecting ecosystems and biological diversity.

However, an over-reliance on land for mitigation could lead to conflicts over its use, which would almost certainly have an impact on food security, biodiversity and human rights, particularly the land and tenure rights of indigenous people and local communities. Land-based mitigation must also not delay urgently needed action to phase out fossil fuel emissions, by allowing offsetting instead of action to reduce industrial emissions.

The Paris agreement needs to recognise the importance of the land sector, and start a process to develop clear and transparent principles, which ensure that any action taken on climate change happens in accordance with social and ecological considerations. These principles should address the following:

1. Land is crucial for food security

Food security and poverty eradication are priorities for developing countries. Currently, 795 million people are suffering from hunger. The fifth IPCC report stresses that beyond its impacts on the level of food production (availability), climate change will impact all the pillars of food security (access, utilization, and temporality), impacting how people access and use food.
According to the UNDP, an additional 600 million people could be at risk of hunger by 2080 as a result of climate change. For this reason, to avoid competition, it is essential that no land that is currently used for food should be converted to non-food purposes in the name of climate mitigation. The right to food and food security must be prioritised.¹

Language such as “net-zero”, “climate neutral” or “carbon neutral” - which promote an over-reliance on land-based mitigation by opening the door to increased competition geo-engineering technologies such as BECCS² - should have no place in the new climate agreement.

In the agricultural sector, we must distinguish between agricultural models and prioritise tackling activities with the highest emissions, such as fertiliser use and production, and methane, particularly in ‘high-emitting’ countries.

2. Land is fundamental to rights and livelihoods
Any mitigation and adaptation actions involving land must uphold international obligations to protect human rights, including the rights of indigenous people and local communities to secure tenure of land, territories and resources. Indigenous people, forest-dependent communities and small farmers are often marginalised, and so improving their security of land tenure and engaging them fully in decision-making about the land and natural resources they are dependent on is essential for effective and long-lasting land-based mitigation. Experience from tropical forests tells us that effective forest protection happens when forest peoples’ rights are formally recognised.

3. Land and forests must not offset ongoing use of fossil fuel emissions
Mitigation action in the land sector cannot replace ambitions to phase out fossil fuel emissions. Meeting the goal of limiting temperature rise to below 1.5C will require reducing global carbon emissions from energy, industry and forests to zero by 2050, as well as restoring carbon in natural ecosystems. Reducing carbon emissions to zero means the end of fossil fuel use. Mitigation in the land sector must not be used as an offset, as carbon sequestered in land can easily be reversed back into atmospheric CO2, and so cannot compensate for continued fossil fuel emissions.

4. Forests and ecosystems are important for mitigation and biodiversity
Priority actions for the land sector include halting deforestation and the degradation of natural forests by 2020. We must also protect other carbon-rich ecosystems such as peatland and wetlands, and restore and regenerate degraded ecosystems. Even activities not directly related to emission reductions, such as securing tenure rights for indigenous people and local communities, are also important as they have been shown to be the best way of keeping forests standing.

Mitigation measures related to land must not threaten important environmental objectives, such as protecting biological diversity and natural ecosystems. Many of these measures, such as protecting old-growth forests and peatland, benefit both the climate and biodiversity, and so should be prioritized. In general, measures related to land use should be designed in a way that incentivises broader environmental benefits – such as enhanced biodiversity, water quality, habitat for wild fauna and flora and soil fertility.

The Paris outcome should highlight the importance of protecting forests and other natural ecosystems, including pre-2020 action in this sector, such as reference to the SDG target to halt deforestation and forest degradation by 2020. Clear, unambiguous principles for integrated, sustainable land management that address all of these concerns must form the basis for all climate mitigation actions in the land sector.

¹ Hilal Elver, United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Report A/70/287, August 2015.
² BECCS refers to Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage.