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BERLIN—It's been 30 years since the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations launched the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, the first global intergovernmental initiative to halt forest loss. Since then, deforestation has continued unabated, and the latest international effort to stop it—an initiative known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+)—looks no more likely to be effective. Far from protecting the world's forests, the most notable outcome of these two agreements has been, ironically, the production of reams of expensive consultancy reports.

REDD+ was created as part of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the agreement governing its implementation is expected to be finalized during the ongoing UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris. But if world leaders are serious about halting forest loss, they should instead abandon REDD+ and replace it with a mechanism that addresses the underlying drivers of large-scale deforestation.

The flaws in REDD+ are evident in how it approaches the problem it is meant to solve. The vast majority of its projects treat forest peoples and peasant farmers as the main agents of deforestation. REDD project developers seem to be especially fond of projects that focus on restricting traditional farming practices, even as they shy away from efforts to tackle the true causes of deforestation: the expansion of industrial agriculture, massive infrastructure projects, large-scale logging, and out-of-control consumption.

These shortcomings are exemplified in the Socio Bosque Program, a REDD+ initiative in Ecuador, in which efforts to control forest communities and peasant farming overlook the far larger potential damage caused by industrial activity. Under the program, forest-dependent communities sign five-year agreements with the Ministry of Environment, agreeing to restrict forest use in return for small cash payments. At the same time, the program's documentation explicitly nullifies the agreement if the area under its jurisdiction becomes slated for oil exploitation or mining. Today, peasant farmers are being barred from forests as part of the fight against climate change; tomorrow, the same forests could be uprooted in order to allow companies to extract the fossil fuels that are the underlying cause of the problem.

There is a disturbing rationale for this myopic focus on peasants and forest people and for the prominence of this approach on the agendas of international agencies and climate negotiators. REDD+, it turns out, has less to do with stopping forest loss than with allowing industrialized countries to continue to pollute.

The approach underlying the initiative is part of a broader effort to create a market for emission credits, which would allow polluters to continue releasing greenhouse gases if they can produce a certificate attesting that they have contributed toward preventing a similar amount of emissions elsewhere. The forests being protected by REDD+ are important producers of these tradable certificates to pollute, known as carbon credits. And REDD implementation through experimental projects provides advocates of this approach a solid foundation on which to advance their agenda.

For industrialized countries, carbon credits have proved to be an easy way to meet their international commitments under agreements like the Kyoto Protocol. If REDD credits are approved in Paris, countries and companies could pay peasant farmers in Ecuador or elsewhere to protect trees that programs like REDD+ claim they otherwise would have chopped down—thereby avoiding the need to make difficult structural changes to cut emissions at home. Under the rules governing these transactions, the fact that no emissions were actually cut does not matter; what is important is that the tradable permission to pollute has been obtained.

Unfortunately, few of those meeting in Paris have incentives to question this approach. For governments, programs like REDD+ offer an opportunity to avoid politically costly changes. And for international conservation groups like The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Wildlife Conservation Society, the program provides access to international development and philanthropic funding.

The biggest beneficiaries, of course, are the corporations whose hunger for land is driving most of the large-scale deforestation. In addition to allowing them to continue cutting down trees as long as they can produce the necessary carbon credits, REDD+ effectively shifts the blame for forest loss away from their actions and onto communities that have the greatest stake in forests' long-term health.

If the climate negotiators meeting in Paris are truly interested in halting forest loss and bringing climate change under control, they should pull the plug on REDD+ and address the underlying causes of these problems. Rather than attempting to control the lives and actions of forest peoples and peasant farmers, the effort in Paris should focus on ending large-scale deforestation and leaving fossil fuels in the ground. Project Syndicate

Jutta Kill is a researcher and activist who has written extensively about carbon markets and voluntary certification schemes.

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