



Global Cooperation in Amazonia: Matters of Fact and Matters of Concern

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The Amazon is on fire. When the news came out, it seemed almost like an accident, a fortuitous calamity of unknown origin, much like the fire that set the Parisian cathedral of Notre-Dame aflame. And yet, the recurring forest fires in the Amazon were going on for a while, and early warnings had been already given by the scientific community. In July, Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) warned about an alarming rise in deforestation, pointing out an increase of 88 percent in June compared to the year before. These numbers, however, were dismissed by the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, who called the data 'lies' and denounced these as an irresponsible attempt to damage the image of the country. But the spike of deforestation would be dramatically confirmed less than a month later, when INPE issued new data about an alarming rise in forest fires in the Amazon. When the smoke-filled skies of Sao Paulo turned black in the middle of a Monday afternoon, the media and the international community woke up to the fact that the Amazon rainforest was burning.

The 'internationalization' of the Amazon

The current situation of the Amazon rainforest is to a great extent the result of a systematic dismantling of environmental and climate policies that had proved to be effective in the past. Between 2005 and 2015, the Brazilian government made major advances in combatting deforestation through the Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon. Under this scheme deforestation was brought to a historical low in 2014, when it registered a 70 percent decline (Nepstad et al., 2014). This success was the result of a set of policies in which global cooperation was central. The Amazon Fund was created as a REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) mechanism to raise international funds to contribute to the efforts of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. By far, the largest contributor to the fund was Norway, with US\$ 1.3 billion, followed by Germany, with US\$68 million. These funds were being periodically disbursed as deforestation declined. However, following the recent upsurge in deforestation, Germany and Norway decided to suspend their contributions. Not long after this, the crisis of international cooperation was further deepened when Brazil's president went on to reject G7 aid to tackle the forest fires.

To justify his position, Bolsonaro has resorted to populist rhetoric, in a well-known trope of Brazilian nationalism, denouncing the 'internationalization' of the Amazon as a form of neocolonialism. The rejection of internationalism, paradoxically, refers exclusively to intergovernmental and transnational governance schemes that would allow global cooperation. This rhetoric intentionally ignores the fact that the Amazon – Brazilian and beyond – has been historically inserted in global markets: since the rubber boom of the late nineteenth century up until the commodities boom of the 2000s. This feeds into a growth model that relies on the expansion of the extractive frontier: agroindustry, oil extraction and mining, along with the infrastructure that is needed to access and commercialize these commodities.

This dependence on free trade and global markets reveals 'common but differentiated responsibilities'



towards the Amazon – to draw on a basic principle of climate change governance. The European Union is using this interdependence as leverage to pressure the Brazilian government to change its approach to the Amazon. France and Ireland have already threatened not to ratify the free trade agreement that was recently signed with Mercosur, a South American regional trade bloc, unless Brazil addresses the current crisis in the Amazon. For their part, seven states from the Amazon basin, including Brazil, have signed the ‘Leticia Pact’ as a pledge to save the Amazon. However, it is not yet clear how this pact will translate into concrete policies or if it will foster a more assertive regional approach. This is something that is clearly lacking in the existing regional organization of Amazonian states, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization.

Beyond ‘speaking truth to power’

The way in which Brazil’s president belies facts thwarts democratic governance and global cooperation. When satellite data from a recognized scientific institution is dismissed or climate change is denied, ‘speaking truth to power’ seems to become a futile task. In a less blatant but equally pernicious way, extractive industries and states mobilize serviceable experts to continue plundering natural resources. All this to the detriment of local populations and, in particular, indigenous peoples whose traditional territories play a crucial role in conserving the Amazon. In this context, to mobilize for science is to mobilize for human rights – and indigenous rights. It is not merely ‘speaking truth to power’, but it is first and foremost a call for justice. This is how scientific facts link to the environmental justice movement, bringing a gleam of hope to a bleak picture.

It is precisely this connection between scientific facts and environmental justice that is being put forward by transnational alliances among scientists, activists, and indigenous peoples from the Amazon. An illustrative example of this is the collective work of the umbrella organization uniting indigenous peoples from the Amazon basin (COICA) together with a network of scientists who map indigenous territories and protected areas, with the purpose of quantifying their

contribution to adapting to and mitigating climate change. The scientific data shows that indigenous territories and protected areas store over 50 percent of above-ground carbon in the Amazon region (Walker et al., 2014). This means that the recognition and delimitation of indigenous territories is a policy that fosters both the livelihoods of indigenous peoples, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. This is the sort of alternative governance that requires more support from global cooperation.

References

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Further reading

- López Rivera, A. & Mauelshagen, F. (forthcoming). Climate Change Governance. In A. Tittor et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to Political Economy and Governance in the Americas*. Routledge.

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