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CoP26 report card: Forests need implementation, not declarations alone

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The fund pledged way below what is needed to achieve goals, 10 times being pumped into companies driving deforestation

In the "first" major outcome of the Conference of Parties (CoP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Glasgow, 105 countries accounting for 85 per cent of the planet's forests signed the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use. The Declaration commits the countries to "halt and reverse deforestation and land degradation by 2030".

It is a deal to be cherished for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as well as to sustain forest-based survival of communities, which comprise nearly 25 per cent of the world's population.

Forests absorb around a third of the global carbon dioxide released from burning fossil fuels every year. But we are also losing this voracious carbon sink at the rate of an area equivalent to the size of 27 football pitches every minute.

Currently, 23 per cent of global emissions come from land use activities such as logging, deforestation and farming. Article 5 of the Paris Agreement signed in 2015 mandates parties to "reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation" by taking up forest conservation and protection. The new deal can be argued as an extension of this mandate.

Signatories to the declaration include countries that are responsible for deforestation as well as consumers of commodities that lead to forest clearance like Brazil, China, EU, Russia and the United States. The United Kingdom and many countries in the European Union, for instance, are the biggest consumers of woody biomass for energy generation, a significant portion of this coming from local forests.

Similarly, signatory countries like the US, Canada and Russia are the world's leading producers of wood pellets for export, to be burnt as a coal substitute.

In another development, 28 countries that represent 75 per cent of global trade in key commodities responsible for causing deforestation signed a new Forests, Agriculture and Commodity Trade (FACT) Statement. The FACT statement sets common actions "to deliver sustainable trade and reduce pressure on forests, including support for smallholder farmers and improving the transparency of supply chains".

This involves reducing deforestation in the global supply chain of the produce. As a follow up, 30 financial institutions that have an asset worth more than $8.7 trillion also agreed to "eliminate" investment in commodity-driven deforestation.

Along with it came the commitment of $19 billion of public and private funds during 2021-2025 to make it possible. Of this, $12 billion will be public finance from 12 countries and the rest from 30 financial institutions. This committed fund is for taking up supportive activities in developing countries.

But before the euphoria over the deal sunk in, António Guterres, secretary-general of the UN, flagged an immediate caution card: Signing the declaration is the easy part. It's essential that it's implemented now, for people and the planet.

His cautionary reaction resurrects a dead trail of similar pledges made in the past to save global forest resources and the people depend on them.

In 2014, over 200 national, private and civil service supporters who agreed to reduce deforestation by 50 per cent by 2020 and end it by 2030 signed the New York Declaration for Forests. This voluntary political declaration was inked in the UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit in New York.

Brazil, Russia and China didn't sign this one but have agreed to the Glasgow Declaration. We have more such promises to remember: The UN Forum on Forests in 2005 committed to "reverse the loss of forest cover worldwide" by 2015; in 2008, 67 countries agreed to reach zero net deforestation by 2020.

Earlier, banks also signed in the voluntary Soft Commodities Compact that committed them to reduce financing deforesting sectors like palm oil, timber products and soy to achieve zero net deforestation by 2020.

Keeping the2014 promises — restoration of 150 million hectares of degraded landscapes and forestlands by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030 — would have mitigated over 7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent per year by 2030. Instead, going by a five-year assessment of this pledge, the global rate of gross tree cover loss increased by 43 per cent in 2019.

This has resulted in "on average, annual tropical tree cover loss between 2014 and 2018 emitted 4.7 gigatons of carbon dioxide per year — more than all of EU's 2017 greenhouse gases emissions, according to the assessment. "Nearly half of these emissions occurred within humid tropical primary forests."

Global Forest Watch reported that the world lost roughly 25.9 million hectares (nearly 100,000 square miles) of tree cover (an area roughly the size of Colorado) to deforestation in 2020 — much of it in the tropics.

Jo Blackman, head of Forests Policy and Advocacy at Global Witness, said:

Countries must back up their pledge with a commitment to bring in strong and binding national legislation that makes it illegal for companies and financial institutions to fuel deforestation, Blackman suggested.

The committed fund for the pledge, both private and public as well as from the financial institutions independently, is well below what is required to ensure the declaration achieves its objective effectively. Instead, more and more funds continue to be pumped into organisations that cause deforestation.

Its latest assessment found that over 10 times that amount is being poured into companies driving deforestation. Banks and investors in the UK, EU, US and China ploughed $157 billion since the Paris Climate Agreement into agribusiness firms linked to tropical deforestation and associated human rights abuses, netting an estimated $1.74 billion in income along the way, according to the assessment. "Many of these banks have no-deforestation policies, have committed to align with the Paris goals or are signatories of the Soft Commodities Compact."

Countries also raised concerns over the new pledge, particularly those who are being accused of encouraging deforestation for development. Joko Widodo, the president of Indonesia, said at CoP26:

Millions of Indonesians depend [for] their livelihood on the forestry sector. Any new pledge must be accompanied by market incentives and not unilaterally imposed by rich countries.

Forcing Indonesia to commit to zero deforestation by 2030 was clearly inappropriate and unfair, Siti Nurbaya Bakar, Indonesia's environment minister, told the British Broadcasting Corporation.

"If we want our forests to survive they must be valuable. The developed world has plundered our forests. We plan to save the forest by exporting it sustainably," said Ali Bongo, the president of Gabon, a signatory country that is in news for its recent push to harvest forests for timber export.

India stayed away from this declaration. It apparently took the step as it was not happy with the effort to link infrastructure development and related activities with the conservation of forests in the prepared text, according to an Indian representative who spoke to Down To Earth with on condition of anonymity.

The text of the final declaration linked transformative action in the related areas of sustainable production and consumption, infrastructure development, trade as well as finance and investment. "The linkage proposed between trade, climate change and forest issues were unacceptable to India as it fell under the World Trade Organization," he said.

India is also mulling changes to the existing Forest Conservation Act, 1980 to allow more windows of deforestation for accommodating key projects. It is an effort that might be pushed back if India signed this declaration.

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