

Collaborative action for a 'forest positive' future

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Biodiversity matters: A forest ranger observes a population of orangutans on May 7, 2017 in the Leuser Ecosystem, located in the provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra. (AFP/-)

Undoubtedly, 2020 was meant to be a “super year” for nature; but a recent United Nations report has found that the world failed to meet any of the 20 biodiversity targets established a decade ago in Aichi, Japan, to slow the destruction of forests and other life-supporting ecosystems.

As a result, forest loss has continued at an alarming rate, with approximately 10 million hectares lost each year between 2015 and 2020, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). Agricultural expansion continues to be the greatest driver of deforestation, and has accelerated forest biodiversity loss.

The UN has warned that failure to act could undermine the Paris agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, beyond the climate crisis, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is also a stark reminder of humanity’s dysfunctional relationship with nature.

It is no coincidence that deforestation has coincided with the quadrupling of new infectious diseases over the last 60 years, according to UNICEF. The invasion of natural habitats cause species to live in closer proximity to one another and to humans, hence increasing the risk that animal viruses will find new hosts – in us.

Just as carbon is not the primary cause of climate change, it is not nature but humans and our activities that are the critical driver of pandemics. Fortunately, the current crisis has also demonstrated the potential of collective human will and action, as well as how quickly nature can heal when it is finally allowed to.

The turn of the century thus marks a critical crossroads in humanity's journey towards achieving a forest positive future. Governments and companies both have the opportunity to better align their economic models with planetary boundaries and successfully deliver on their "no deforestation" commitments. But to do this, greater collaborative action must complement individual action going forward to end deforestation and protect biodiversity globally.

Increasing investor and consumer pressure, coupled with the risks of supply chain disruption amid the COVID-19 pandemic, have accelerated positive changes in corporate behavior. Nonetheless, the inherent complexity of supply chains remains a common challenge cited by companies seeking to eliminate deforestation from their individual value chains.

Jurisdictional approaches are a promising tool in addressing this challenge. This participatory and collaborative process unites producers, traders, processors and markets across commodity supply chains to identify common goals, and empowers all supply chain stakeholders to work together across subnational jurisdictions.

This process enables companies to better monitor and identify the root causes of deforestation in their supply chains. Synergetic approaches also allow for greater awareness among subnational governments of other social and environmental issues within their jurisdictions.

Since these initiatives involve diverse sets of stakeholders, including smallholders, companies can benefit from increased levels of assurance across a larger landscape to minimize the risk of sourcing from irresponsible producers. The participation of jurisdictional governments also reduces regulatory risk for companies, as they are more likely to be aligned with upcoming regulatory requirements.

While jurisdictional initiatives are still in their nascent stages, early signs are encouraging that companies are deploying these initiatives as a viable tool in addressing sourcing and sustainability challenges within their commodity supply chains.

One notable example is the Siak Pelalawan Landscape Program (SPLP) in Riau, which is a coalition of eight companies – Cargill, Danone, Golden Agri-Resources, Musim Mas, Nestle, PepsiCo, Unilever and L'Oréal – working together to support the transition to sustainable palm oil production in the Siak and Pelalawan regencies. Such collaborations hold great promise in uniting cross-sector efforts to tackle deforestation and scale sustainable practices.

However, lack of consistent, reliable information for companies about these approaches and potential outcomes hampers their appetite for involvement. At the same time, lack of capacity at the subnational level to develop, implement and report on these interventions impedes the scaling of jurisdictional approaches.

At present, buy-ins from companies and subnational governments are insufficient to fully reap the rewards of jurisdictional approaches. Improved impact reporting over time will

hopefully provide a clear business case to gain buy-ins and crucially, scale up these collaborative processes.

In recognition of their potential and to mobilize their uptake, the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) launched the Enabling Jurisdictional Approaches to Halt Deforestation project to create a standardized and consistent framework for stakeholders to report on the quality of jurisdictional initiatives.

The project introduces new metrics for the quality of jurisdictional interventions, company training and engagement sessions, as well as policy briefings about the business case for developing jurisdictional initiatives using data that states and regions report to CDP.

With consistent and reliable information, companies and subnational governments will have greater incentive to engage in jurisdictional interventions. Further, the process of responding to this new assessment will support subnational governments in understanding what information the market needs and will build their capacity and ability to provide that information.

Ultimately, by creating the data and insights needed, CDP hopes to form a positive feedback loop between market actors, producers and subnational governments, accelerating collaborative action to secure a zero-deforestation, sustainable economy for the future.

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