

BOLIVIA: in view of the deforestation alert, a new national and global pact on climate justice and sustainable forest management is urgently needed.

Introduction

In 2012, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Forests and Fisheries (VGGT) were adopted. Ten years later, tenure systems are under increasing stress. The availability of land, fisheries and forest resources is reduced by human-induced environmental degradation and climate change. This is an obstacle to the goal of securing the right to food for a growing world population. In particular, the continuation of land and natural resource grabbing leading to alarming degrees of concentration of land and natural resources in the hands of a powerful few.

The Bolivian case shows that the expansion of the agricultural frontier for agribusiness development comes at a high environmental and social cost. The levels of deforestation are moving the country away from its goals for the Paris Agreement (COP21, 2015), and indigenous communities and territories are being dispossessed of their lands, affecting the fulfilment of their right to food. At the same time, and despite the country taking innovative positions in international fora, the country's track record of implementing its climate commitments is poor. The results achieved in terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, agriculture, and sustainable water management are far from the defined targets. New initiatives and commitments are needed to address the situation in the Bolivian Amazon and Chiquitanía, two key regions in the fight against the global climate crisis.

10 years of the Voluntary Guidelines on Land Governance (VGGT)

The VGGTs are a series of recommendations adapted by the FAO Food Security Council to (i) improve the protection of land tenure rights, with emphasis on women, indigenous peoples and vulnerable populations, (ii) promote genuine participation and the right to free, prior and informed consent, (iii) promote equitable sharing of benefits from state-owned land, fisheries and forests, and (iv) ensure that investment policies do not run counter to sustainable development. These guidelines are an important step in enshrining human rights as a cornerstone of natural resource governance and have contributed to the international recognition of land rights. However, at the global level, much remains to be done to make the Guidelines (which are not binding) a reality both in letter and spirit. Indeed, many of the implementation programmes have focused on technical measures, without addressing the structural causes of land concentration and ecosystem destruction, and little has been done to apply the overriding principle of prioritizing vulnerable groups.

1. An agribusiness model with multiple environmental and social impacts

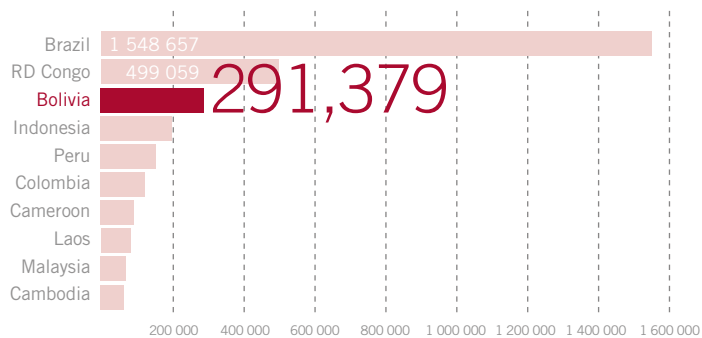
In the case of Bolivia, the agribusiness sector - in particular in soya and livestock - is expanding in the department of Santa Cruz, contributing to the increase in deforestation with high social and environmental costs.

a. Deforestation and other environmental impacts

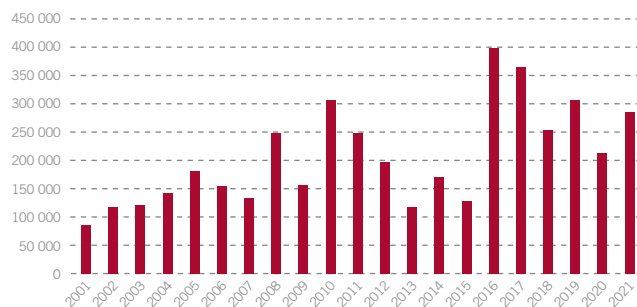
According to Global Forest Watch, Bolivia is among the ten countries in the world with the highest forest cover. In 2021 it was the third country with the highest loss of tropical primary forest, only after Brazil and Congo (countries that both have larger areas than Bolivia).

In 2016 there was a sharp increase in the national deforestation index, following a series of state measures aimed at easing the requirements for clearing and entitlement of farmland. Since then, the annual deforestation has remained at an average of 300,000 Ha, much higher than prior to 2016. 86 % of the deforestation is concentrated in the eastern department of Santa Cruz. The rest is found mainly between the departments of Beni, the tropical region of Cochabamba and the north of La Paz (the Bolivian Amazon). This high level of deforestation, together with the increase in bushfires of recent years, is now the main cause of greenhouse gas emissions in the country.

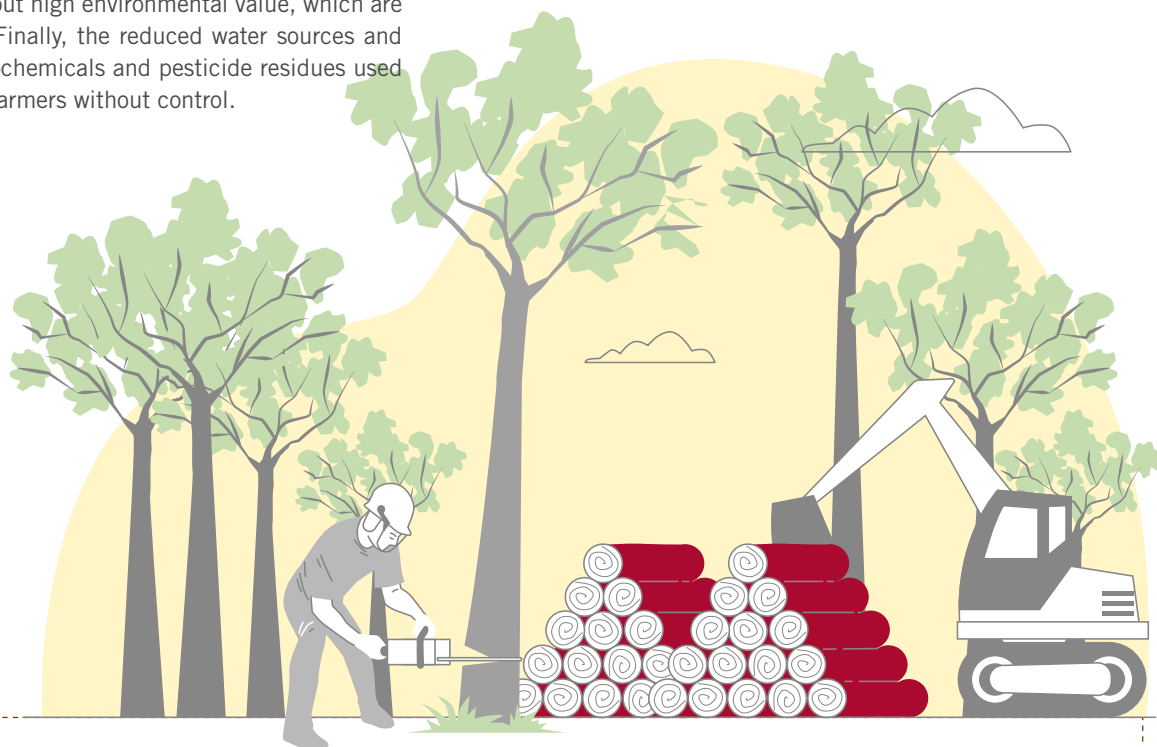
This deforestation generates other **environmental impacts**, such as the loss of biodiversity and changes in the water cycle. It also causes strong wind currents that pollute the air with dust and degrade the nutritional value of soils. The relaxation of agri-environmental standards is leading to short-term overexploitation of soils with little agricultural potential, but high environmental value, which are then converted to pasture. Finally, the reduced water sources and streams are polluted by agrochemicals and pesticide residues used and disposed of by the soy farmers without control.



Graph 1: Countries with the highest levels of deforestation. Pérdida de bosques en Ha Global Forest Watch. World Resources Institute



Fuente: G. Colque, Deforestación 2016-2021, el pragmatismo irresponsable de la Agenda Patriótica, Fundación Tierra, La Paz, 2022.



Box 2 Main drivers of deforestation in Bolivia

Source: F. Tierra "Deforestation 2016-2021"

- The expansion of the soybean model
- To replace degraded or depleted soils that are being converted into cattle grazing fields
- The deregulated creation of new Mennonite colonies
- A mechanism to justify the control of land without entitlements and in conflict.
- The expectations generated by state projects in biodiesel and meat export.

¹The Mennonite communities are Protestant societies with around 57,000 people organized in 52 colonies in Bolivia. On their relationship with agrarian issues in the country, see Fundación Tierra, "Las colonias menonitas en Bolivia", Dec. 2015.

The objective of the Patriotic Agenda 2025 to turn agriculture, especially for export, into one of the pillars of the Bolivian economy has not been accompanied by the adoption of environmental measures, indicators and responsibilities. This leads to the shaping of an agricultural model that is far from resilient.

Source: Fund. Tierra "Deforestation 2016-2021"

b. Affecting indigenous and peasant communities and their right to food

Indigenous communities are directly affected by the dispossession of their lands due to large-scale soybean cultivation, ceding their territorial domains in exchange for rent or payments. The modalities of distribution of these payments are a factor of social inequality and conflict between families, overlooking the communal organization and egalitarian rules established by the agrarian reform. There is also conflict between indigenous communities and migrant peasants from traditional agro-industrial areas and, to a lesser extent, from other parts of the country, with settlement permits or claims to communal or neighbouring lands. The lack of consultation by the National Agrarian Reform Institute when issuing titles exacerbates this situation.

On the other hand, the commodification of community land has led to the weakening and in some cases the collapse of traditional agricultural systems, affecting the communities' **right to food**:

- The agribusiness leads to indigenous people being dispossessed from the best land.
- Indigenous people stop practicing their traditional forms of diversified production.

- Indigenous people are unable to allocate income to agribusiness production systems because they have no control over seeds, water, fertilizers, financial capital and markets.
- There is no enabling environment in Bolivia for indigenous peoples' own food production or economic income.
- Environmental impacts increase the violation of the communities' right to food.



The Poza Verde community, an example of the limits of the existing model of relations between the company and the communities

Ayoreo people, department of Santa Cruz

In this Ayoreo community, indigenous representatives of the community negotiated land use rights with soy, corn and sunflower producers. Despite the income received from renting the land, the community remains in a situation of poverty, which shows the limits of this model to respond to the needs and rights of the communities. 60% of the territory is cleared and planted with soya. In total, deforestation in the last seven years has reached 80% of the land. The traditional activities of using and exploiting forest resources or hunting and fishing have disappeared in a very short time. This situation caused the migration of the adult population, mainly men, while women and children stayed in the community. Inequalities are growing among the Ayoreo themselves. Affected in their collective rights and customs, today this community is in a process of disintegration.

Women, the most affected

The situations generated by the agribusiness have a greater impact on women, in community contexts marked by unequal gender relations. Within families, the dispossession of land and the loss of subsistence farming activities alters women's possibilities to control productive activities and income. In several communities, men migrate to the city in search of non-agricultural work, while women are left in charge of the children. This situation increases their workload and can be an additional factor in the disintegration of families, with potential effects of increased tension and even domestic violence.

2. Towards Common Strategies for the Right to Food and the Climate Agenda

a. Innovative international approaches but little progress in implementation

Since the 2010s and in the Paris Agreement negotiations (COP21, 2015), Bolivia presented an alternative vision to the dominant positions, insisting on the concept of climate justice, rejecting market-based compensation mechanisms such as REDD and REDD+, and proposing an alternative approach based on community-centred sustainable forest management.

In March 2022, the Bolivian government delivered **a new version of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**, which presents more ambitious commitments, as well as a more transparent public policy framework and monitoring mechanisms. The new target for 2030 is to reduce deforestation by 80% compared to the 2020 level (262,178 ha), 32% with own efforts and the rest with international cooperation aid.

In order to increase national contributions, Bolivia considers that international cooperation is required, in particular through Climate Ambition Partnerships (bilateral or multilateral), within the framework of non-market based approaches (art. 6. 8 PA) that contemplate: i) provision of financial resources for the fulfilment of the targets; ii) provision of technologies and means of implementation; iii) and access to markets for Bolivian product portfolio derived from the sustainable and resilient management to the climate crisis resulting from the foreseen targets.

Bolivia NDC 2021-2030

b. Inspiring experiences

Despite little progress, there is a growing number of innovative experiences of productive initiatives based on the sustainable use of the forest. However, for greater environmental and social impact, the implementation and scaling up of these proposals needs to be accelerated.

- [Non-Carbon Benefits \(NCBs\), an alternative approach still underdeveloped](#)

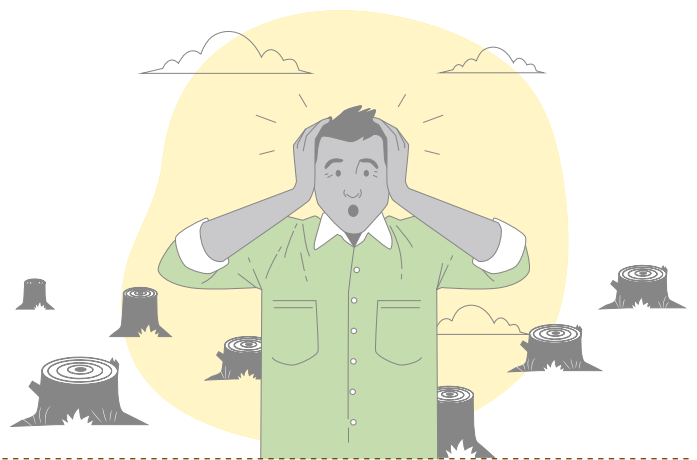
In a context where carbon market-based forest management programmes have been challenged by indigenous peoples, civil society organizations and some governments, NCBs (non-carbon benefits) are presented as an alternative that can be appropriated by, and strengthen, indigenous peoples' organizational structures. This mechanism, based on a sustainable and participatory forest management approach, has great potential to be developed in Bolivia, contributing to both climate and sustainable development goals. This was demonstrated by the EU-funded "Non-Carbon Benefits" project in Panama and Bolivia (Chiquitanía) (2017-2021).

- [Sustainable use of the forest: the case of Amazonian fruits](#)

Various initiatives around the collection and commercialization of the Brazil nuts in the Bolivian Amazon have shown the potential of sustainable models for the use of forest resource. For example, the project "Management of non-timber resources in the Amazon Forest: a strategy for adaptation and mitigation of climate change from the Bolivian and Peruvian experience", im-

Seven years after the COP21, the balance of the implementation of Bolivia's climate commitments is poor.

What has been achieved in terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, sustainable agriculture and sustainable management of water and other natural resources is far from the defined targets. This balance is explained by the adoption of contradictory policies expanding the agricultural frontier for agribusiness as well as the lack of a national budget, specific policies to implement an ambitious climate change mitigation and adaptation strategy and low levels of international cooperation for the NDCs.



plemented by the Bolivian Association for Research and Conservation of Andean Ecosystems in the border area of the Madre de Dios basin (Pando) and financed by the EUROCLIMA+ programme. Among others, an Observatory of Amazonian Fruits and Climate Change was established, which generates quantitative data on the production and commercialization of 4 Amazonian fruits (Brazil nut, açai, cocoa and copocazú). This initiative increases the adaptive capacities of communities and places access to timely information as a central strategy for greater producer ownership of value chain gains.

- [The potential of the Integrated Livestock Forest Model](#)

As an alternative to the extensive cattle ranching model for both domestic consumption and export that has had great social and environmental impacts in Bolivia, the model of Forest Management with Integrated Cattle Ranching (MBGI) has yielded encouraging results in the Bolivian, Paraguayan and Argentinean Chaco. The model includes the delimitation of reserve areas and biological corridors (no less than 10% of the land), agro-ecological rehabilitation areas for intensive fodder production and self-consumption crops (up to 10%) as well as areas of sustainable forest management through low-impact practices in the rest of the area. With technical and financial support, the model could be adjusted and replicated in the dry forest regions of the Bolivian Chaco and Chiquitanía.

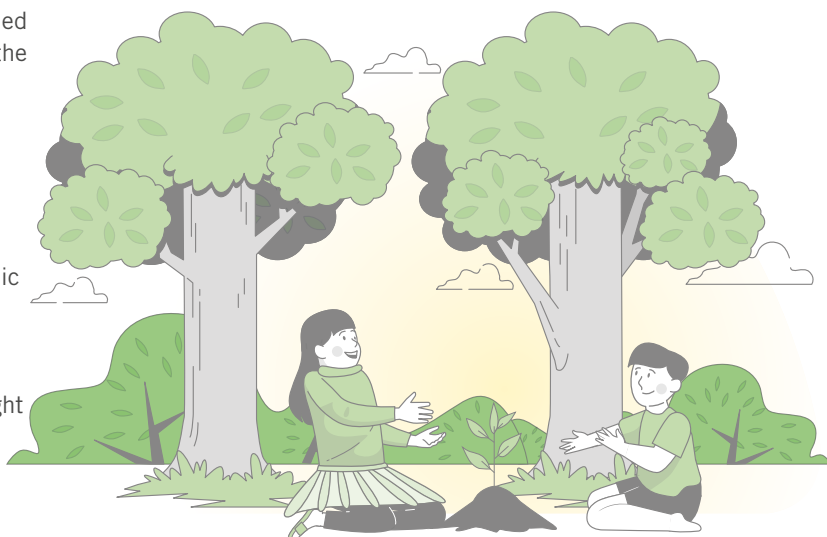
Recommendations

To the Bolivian government, in order to realize the rights enshrined in the constitution and the vision of climate justice set out at the international level, to:

- Adopt measures to protect indigenous communities in areas of agricultural frontier expansion. This includes exercises in prior consultation with the highest standards established in international law, setting annual targets for reducing deforestation, stopping land trafficking and disputes over public lands, and supporting agreed programmes for sustainable development and crop diversification.
- To adopt an ambitious public policy to promote and support agroforestry systems, as proposals for food security and the right to food for communities and the preservation of forests and ecosystems.
- Seek agreements between Amazon basin countries that harmonize land tenure policies and economic investments, to protect local communities and exercise greater control over illegal actors.
- The government must show transparency of investment projects and, in accordance with the VGGTs, guarantee the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of local communities and their right to determine the process and use of their land at any point in the process. This also includes information and studies on environmental risks and impacts.
- Establish and implement frameworks and mechanisms to protect human rights defenders working in defense of land and nature. In particular to implement the Escazú Agreement on Access to Information, Public participation and Justice in Environmental Matter.

To the EU and its member states:

- In the run-up to COP27, make a stronger commitment to climate finance mechanisms and more ambitious instruments of cooperation to ensure that countries that suffer the most from climate impacts, such as Bolivia, can implement the necessary adaptation measures. This in particular considering the needs of the most affected indigenous and peasant communities.
- Support a new funding target that includes funds for damages



and losses in the most vulnerable countries and considers the needs of affected communities.

- Advocate for the EU to come forward with an updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) that is compatible with the 1.5 C limit and that leads to significantly higher emission reductions than previously envisaged by 2030.
- In line with the VGGTs, implement and monitor compliance with the European Commission's regulation on deforestation-free products³, which aims to ban certain commodities and derived products that generate deforestation from entering the European Union (EU) market. Support traceability systems to ensure that the regulation applies throughout the supply chain.
- In compliance with the VGGTs, show example and leadership in addressing a more holistic and systemic approach to climate policy, showing the interrelationships between biodiversity protection, climate and food security. This requires a review of the EU's trade and cooperation policies towards Latin America, to ensure coherence between agricultural, food, environmental and climate policies. It also requires new commitments to promote and support more sustainable and resilient agricultural practices and forest management.

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Lima, 2022-11-07

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³Timber, coffee, cocoa, palm, soy, cattle.