

reflections

by Achim Steiner,
UN Under-Secretary-General and
Executive Director, UNEP

How might the world deal with the multiple challenges of poverty, biodiversity loss, land degradation, conservation of water supplies and climate change? Part of the solution may lie in building new financial arrangements — or perhaps even carbon market mechanisms — that address deforestation and the degradation of forest ecosystems.

The idea is not new. It was proposed and then abandoned, amidst fiercely differing opinions, when the Kyoto Protocol was agreed over a decade ago. But it has gained a head of steam since 2005 when countries and non-governmental organizations meeting in Montreal put aside their differences to give it a fair hearing. It could now become a central plank of a new, and more inclusive, climate deal when nations meet for crucial negotiations in Copenhagen in late 2009.

This change of heart is partly a measure of the magnitude of the challenge now facing the world: felling forests may cause around a fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions. It also reflects a sense that the science and the mechanisms needed to make improved forest financing or forest carbon markets work are within our grasp. And former sceptics have now recognized the many benefits that may arise.

There is now an urgent need to demonstrate in practical terms — via pilot projects on the ground — that a workable, international regime on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) can rapidly be brought forward. This must have safeguards covering such aspects as managing payments to developing countries, insurance for REDD projects that prove less than optimal, and the interests of indigenous peoples and local communities who must benefit from the wider ecosystem services that forests generate.

UNEP, in collaboration with the UN Development Programme and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, has joined forces to quick-start such pilot projects with funding from governments such as Norway, as well as partner philanthropic organisations. The partnership — in support of the UN climate change convention and the current negotiations under the Bali Road Map en route to Copenhagen — is also working closely with the World Bank (especially the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility); the Global Environment Facility and donor governments, such as Australia and the UK. With just 14 months to the Copenhagen meeting, it is vital that these projects and plans both dovetail and play to their various strengths and areas of expertise.

The UNEP/UNDP/FAO collaborative programme on REDD is focussing on two main streams: working with a handful of pilot developing countries



to build the capacity and ability to develop and implement national REDD programmes, including payments systems; and international convening and support of REDD initiatives to promote coordination and coherence on key technical and operational REDD issues, such as monitoring and verification. The collaborative programme will also be working to feed successful experiences into the climate discussions with the UNFCCC Secretariat in time for a post-2012 climate deal.

There are big potential benefits in raising much-needed revenues for developing countries, by making conserving and managing tropical forests worth far more than felling them. Indonesia, for example, is estimated to be able earn \$1 billion annually — at a carbon price of just \$10 a tonne — if it cuts its deforestation to one million hectares a year.

Several outstanding issues remain, not least ensuring that all countries benefit that have the potential to do so. Nations such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) need assistance in strengthening basic environmental laws so they can participate in potential REDD projects and manage the environmental impact of the big investments flowing into harvesting nature-based assets. Within the broader REDD programme launched in DRC and the Congo Basin, UNEP has launched a project to support the DRC's efforts to put in place environmental legislation, and similar initiatives may be needed in other countries.

This is a defining moment for the international community, including the United Nations. We have the chance to bring intelligent market-based and other financing mechanisms to bear on some of the most pressing and intractable issues of our generation. If we can help to deliver a workable and practical framework for REDD we may achieve more in eradicating poverty, conserving biodiversity and advancing the wider sustainability agenda than we have managed with traditional approaches in the past. It would also build confidence towards reaching an agreement in Copenhagen.

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Cover photo © JIM ZUCKERMAN/ Corbis. Forests cover about a third of our planet's land area. They are an essential habitat for some of Earth's richest biodiversity, and absorb massive amounts of carbon dioxide. Yet deforestation is continuing apace, accounting for 20 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. With forests becoming a key area in international negotiations on climate change, this issue looks at the innovative ways we can sustain and develop these ecosystems.