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'The European Union also shares responsibility'

Deforestation of the Amazon is intensifying. The EU is also responsible for stopping it, say Delara Burkhardt and Nilto Tatto

Read this interview in German.

What is currently happening in the Brazilian part of the Amazon and what does this have to do with Europe?

The Brazilian rainforest is one of the most important tropical forests on earth when it comes to regulating the world's climate and protecting biodiversity. Since Jair Bolsonaro took office as president at the beginning of 2019, deforestation has been advancing at a rapid pace. In 2019, an area of 10,129 square km was deforested, about a third more than in the previous year. According to experts, the area could be even larger this year. By the end of 2020, Amazonia could lose another 12,000 square km of its forest areas – the equivalent of 1,700 football pitches.

Deforestation is largely used to create grazing land for cattle. Bolsonaro's main supporters include the agricultural lobby, which is strongly represented in the Brazilian parliament. It helped Bolsonaro win the elections and he is returning the favour with an agriculture-friendly agenda. The Brazilian rainforest is currently being sold out, both to Brazilian big landowners, who also produce for the European market, and to foreign investors, for example from China.

The land grab is also accompanied by violence. More than half of the reported violence in Brazil last year took place in Amazonia. For example, 27 environmentalists were murdered and 6,000 families displaced.

The European Union also shares responsibility for these developments. Consumer behaviour in the EU contributes at least indirectly to the destruction of the environment and the violation of human rights in the Amazon region. Around one fifth of annual soya

and beef exports from Brazil to the European Union are linked to illegal logging in the Amazon.

Bolsonaro is a staunch climate denier. Critics also accuse him of torpedoing important multilateral agreements. Which agreements are at stake here?

Current environmental policy is clearly in conflict with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris. Specifically in Brazil, for example, the agenda for sustainable development, which it has drawn up with international support. A milestone of this agenda was the adoption of the 'Pilot Programme for the Protection of Brazil's Tropical Forests# in the 1990s. Bolsonaro declared war on environmental authorities, the territorial rights of indigenous peoples and indigenous communities. At the same time; he stopped the most important measures to halt deforestation and introduce a new and sustainable economic model for Amazonia.

Bolsonaro also torpedoed the Amazon Fund. Payments to the fund were made to reduce the rate of deforestation and destructive forest use. Between 2004 and 2017, deforestation in Amazonia fell by 75 per cent under the governments of the Workers' Party (PT). At that time, Brazil received 3 billion Brazilian Real (about €500 million) in grants, mainly from Norway and Germany. When he took office, Bolsonaro dissolved the steering committee of the Amazon Fund, new projects were refused approval and Brazil received no further funding from international donors due to the sharp increase in deforestation rates, slash-and-burn deforestation and the resulting emissions.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the government is submitting bills to parliament that would further encourage deforestation and economic exploitation in Amazonia. These projects would allow mining and large-scale agriculture in indigenous areas. In another initiative, the rules for legalising illegally occupied public land are to be relaxed. The aim is to make it easier for occupiers of land of up to 2,500 ha (about 3,500 football pitches) to acquire ownership. This is not about small farmers who occupied areas of up to 400 hectare. With this change in the law, large landowners will be able to legalise some 15 million hectares – an area about half the size of Italy – retroactively, sometimes with simplified procedures, without having to check on the spot for possible land grabbing and other illegal practices.

How do civil society and political opponents of this agenda react?

The massive deforestation and destruction of Amazonia triggered a wave of protest. Environmentalists, social movements, indigenous peoples, cultural workers, politicians from different parties and the

representatives of the encyclical *Laudato si* of Pope Francis are protesting. Representatives of European and non-European investment funds and companies, as well as coalitions of Brazilian entrepreneurs also denounce the anti-environmental policy of the Bolsonaro government.

What can Europe do to protect the Amazon?

Firstly, the EU needs a supply chain law for forest risk commodities such as meat and soya. Importers would be obliged to ensure that their agricultural products did not come from cleared forest areas or were cultivated, harvested or processed in violation of human rights. Companies wishing to place agricultural products on the European market would then have to check their entire supply chain for sustainability and pay compensation to injured parties.

Secondly, progressive forces on both sides of the Atlantic must work to ensure that the EU-Mercosur trade agreement contributes to sustainable development. According to a study commissioned by the European Commission, the agreement would lead to an increase in meat exports to Europe of 26 to 78 per cent because of higher export quotas and reduced tariffs.

It is therefore important that the sustainability chapter of the trade agreement does not remain a mere declaration of intent by the contracting parties on environmental policy. It must contain binding and implementable environmental standards so that the expansion of agricultural exports does not take place at the expense of nature. In addition, this chapter must protect land rights, especially those of indigenous communities, by enshrining the principle of free, prior and informed consent. This principle is enshrined, inter alia, in Convention No 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries of the ILO (United Nations International Labour Organization).

Brazil signed this agreement in 2002, which of course breaks with current government policy. Germany has not yet signed it, nor has the majority of EU member states. The German Federal Government must finally tackle the ratification sought in the current coalition agreement, as must the majority of the other EU member states, because so far only Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain and Luxembourg have ratified the convention. In short, there can be no trade agreement without binding social and environmental standards.

We also see a need for progressive actors in Brazil and the EU to work together to resume the work of the Amazon Fund, an ambitious objective under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris and the Convention on Biological Diversity,

in the WTO negotiations on trade in environmental products and services and in the implementation of the ILO labour and social standards.

The “my nation first” approach has failed worldwide. Cooperation across borders is the key to protecting global public goods. We may be separated by an Atlantic Ocean. But the struggle for our common planet and for each and every applicable human right unites us democratic and progressive forces in South America and Europe.



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