

The Hollow Consensus on the Amazon

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BRASILIA – The Amazon rainforest will survive only if the will to preserve it is stronger than the desire to burn it down. And current signs are not positive. Clouds of rhetoric, controversy, and punditry, thicker than the smoke from forest fires, threaten to distract attention from the purposeful action required to protect the world's largest tropical forest. Meanwhile, its destruction continues unabated.

The apparent unanimity on the need to prevent the Amazon's annihilation is nothing more than a hollow consensus. Brazil's current political leaders talk of defending the rainforest, but do nothing to change the predatory development model that is destroying it. Most policymakers have little interest in combining growth and prosperity with social inclusiveness, the protection of forests, and the preservation of indigenous cultures. Instead of learning about the genuinely sustainable development already underway in the Amazon, they oppose every attempt to alter the perverse economic logic of exploitation.

There are already several initiatives to promote sustainable development in the region. They include the 2008 Sustainable Amazon Plan – with inputs from scientists, politicians, and civic leaders – and the more recent [Amazônia 4.0](#), designed by a team of scientists led by the Brazilian climatologist Carlos Nobre.

Although awareness about the Amazon and its potential has advanced considerably, the smartest ideas have yet to be put into practice. And many of those who try to defend the forests are killed – including activists Chico Mendes, Dorothy Stang, José Cláudio, and Maria do Espírito Santo, and, [in July this year](#), indigenous chief Emyra Wajãpi.

Following the most recent [global outcry](#) this summer against the fires in the Amazon, the hollow consensus has returned – this time as a dangerous masquerade. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has done little to hide his disdain for the environment and its defenders, both during the 2018 presidential election campaign and since taking office at the start of this year. He vowed on prime-time television to defend “our Amazon” and fight environmental crime, but his deeds fall well short of his words.

Today, Bolsonaro's government is busily dismantling hard-won environmental protections, preventing law-enforcement agencies from enforcing regulations, honoring environmental criminals as “hard-working people,” attacking indigenous peoples, rebuking renowned scientists, and [criticizing donors](#) such as Norway and Germany that have supported the country's broadly successful Amazon Fund.

Here, Bolsonaro has the backing of Brazil's powerful rural lobby, which controls the Ministry of the Environment and whose representatives make up almost 40% of Congress. These rural interests are actively contributing to the hollow consensus by publicly claiming to support protection of the Amazon while encouraging deforestation.

Even some of the more progressive representatives of the agribusiness sector are participants in the charade. They join with environmentalists in declaring their support for the Amazon, but avoid lobbying their congressional representatives to adopt more enlightened approaches. As a result, many of these lawmakers are effectively siding with the government, the rural lobby, and many in the agribusiness sector who want to weaken environmental oversight, end protection of endangered species and regions, weaken environmental licensing rules, and roll back indigenous rights.

The only way to stop the destruction of the Amazon is through a determined fight against land grabbing, illegal logging and mining, and predatory cattle ranching. These practices are mutually reinforcing and financed by criminal networks, and they threaten to turn the vast rainforest into a degraded, unproductive pastureland.

Brazil's cattle industry is at the heart of the problem. Between 1975 and 2017, the country's herds [increased by almost 70%](#), with much of the growth occurring in the Amazon. For every ten hectares of forest that are cut down, [six are turned over to pasture](#).

Government and business need to take additional steps to disrupt environmental crime. For starters, the government must rapidly secure indigenous rights and provide these citizens with essential public services. And it must end widespread impunity for criminals, which acts as a powerful disincentive to respect the law, and stymies innovation and the adoption of more sustainable practices. The government also must modernize the country's agribusiness sector, which stands to gain from better stewardship of the Amazon – and must itself offer tangible solutions.

The hollow consensus is not restricted to Brazil: at the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York this week, some world leaders' speeches about the environment offered make-believe remedies and false promises. Meanwhile, in the Amazon, indigenous peoples, riverside communities, smallholder farmers, environmentalists, and civil servants are being threatened and attacked by criminals and neglected by the state.

All of this makes me incredibly sad. I joined the fight to protect the Amazon when I was 18, and I walked alongside Chico Mendes to put an end to relentless deforestation. Our "weapons" were our own bodies. I continued the battle as a senator and then (from 2003 to 2008) as Brazil's environment minister. While in government, I helped to create and implement a national plan to prevent and control deforestation in the Amazon. This initiative helped to [reduce deforestation by 83% between 2004 and 2012](#), prevented the release of four billion tons of carbon dioxide, and created more than 24 million hectares of protected natural areas.

We achieved this by crafting a real consensus based on hard science and solid partnerships. We promoted serious debate across society and tackled the structural causes of deforestation. And we worked together with every stakeholder that was prepared to help solve the Amazon's many social challenges instead of just talking about them.

With the rainforest under increasing threat, now is not the time to step back and take comfort in false promises. More than ever, Brazilian society needs to find its voice, and every sector must assume its responsibilities. By forging a genuine consensus to defend the Amazon, Brazil can once again serve as a role model for the world.