

Our house is on fire and we are only watching Paris

By Paul Malliet

As the 21st Conference of the Parties, COP21, began last week, all eyes were on Paris in the expectation of an ambitious global agreement that would limit the increase in global average temperature to 2°C and lead countries to begin swiftly to decarbonize their economies. But there is another battle taking place right now that is being ignored, even though it could have catastrophic consequences.

The primary forests and peatlands of Indonesia, located mainly on the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan (and considered one of the Earth's three green lungs), have been ravaged by fire for months as a result of an unexpectedly long dry season, which was in turn fueled by an extremely large-scale El Niño phenomenon[\[1\]](#), but also and above all by the continuation of slash and burn practices, which, though illegal, are intended to deforest the land needed to expand the cultivation of palm oil.

This led to the release of 1.62 gigatons of CO₂ into the atmosphere in the space of a few weeks, tripling Indonesia's annual emissions and pushing the country up from the planet's 6th largest emitter to 4th, behind China, the US and India and ahead of Russia[\[2\]](#). By way of comparison, this represents nearly 5% of global emissions for the year 2015.

Yet the issue of deforestation was central to Indonesia's contribution to the global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for more than 80% of the effort agreed[\[3\]](#) up to now. Moreover, under the UN REDD+ (Reduction Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) mechanism, launched in 2008, Indonesia has benefitted from \$1

billion of international funding since 2011 precisely in order to fight against deforestation and to promote the management of sustainable forests.

However, due to the lack of a rapid and substantial response that would undoubtedly have contained the fires, this effort has literally gone up in smoke in recent months. Three reasons for this can be put forward at this stage. The first concerns the material capacities that Indonesia has for responding to disasters like this. For example, the authorities had only 14 aircraft, and relied mainly on the local population to fight the spread of forest fires by building containment basins. The second element concerns regional geopolitical issues. Indonesia has some diplomatic tension with its neighbors, and the fires raged for a number of weeks before the government agreed to accept international aid. Finally, the existence of a culture of corruption at various levels of government has led to years of deforestation, further weakening the ecosystems facing fire hazards.

Nevertheless, it is utterly clear today that discussion about the ways and means for dealing with climate disasters like this are completely missing from the discussions going on in the COP 21 process. It is more urgent than ever that the international community is capable of providing a framework that includes the capabilities for responding to these types of events, which unfortunately are likely to occur with increasing frequency, with consequences liable to profoundly affect regional relations. Strengthening funding for the fight against deforestation is of course paramount, especially since in this case the cost of avoiding a ton of CO₂ is very low; but it is mainly at the level of practices that substantial progress can still be made, either by introducing greater transparency in fund management or through greater integration of local communities and NGOs in the implementation of new practices.

In his opening speech at COP 21, Francois Hollande declared

that, “what is at stake with this climate conference is peace”. The conditions for peace are indeed likely to depend increasingly on societies’ capacity to adapt to climate risks. The disaster of World War II led the international community to create a body of peacekeepers with a mandate for “the maintenance or restoration of peace and international security”. How many ecological disasters will be required before we see the appearance of green helmets?

[\[1\]](#) According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the 2015-2016 El Niño is listed as one of the three most powerful recorded since data began to be collected in 1950, and the coming decades are likely to see extreme events occur with heightened frequency as a result of climate change.

[\[2\]](#) World Resources Institute, *With Latest Fires Crisis, Indonesia Surpasses Russia as World’s Fourth-Largest Emitter*, 29 October 2015.

[\[3\]](#) In 2009 Indonesia undertook to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 29%, or even 41% (with international aid), compared to a baseline scenario (Source: National Action Plan for Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction (RAN-GRK)).