

Brazilian civil society united by the Amazon

Paulo Hartung
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The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of transformations that were underway in our societies, while generating, in its wake, renewed energy towards the march for a new green revolution. The new green revolution entails a race against climate change. It stands for the future of our planet and the well-being of all generations; reasons that encourage us in this noble effort, that bring us together with forward-looking purpose in the pursuit of a better, more sustainable world.

In the post-COVID-19 world, the environment has become an imperative for any public policy that views a sustainable recovery. This imperative is driving the development of new business models and becoming a permanent feature of public discussion, with growing environmental awareness, especially among young people.

Considering Brazil in this context, it is safe to say that few countries in the world enjoy such a natural vocation to have an effective voice in the environmental debate, helping find ways to preserve nature while generating value for society and the world at large. The challenge we have before us is to transform this natural potential into energy for change.

Unfortunately, as recently seen in the world's largest tropical rainforest, home to the richest biodiversity on the planet, the truth is we have been wasting precious time and assets. We have strayed from our path, while illegal activities in the Amazon fester, with deforestations, fires, land fraud, illegal mining and other such crimes.

This criminal activity harms us in so many ways, but deals a major blow to Brazil's reputation, one that has been built with painstaking effort since the launch of the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit back in 1992. For the past decades, we have been on the right path, strengthening capacities, improving environmental protection – playing one of the leading roles in the creation of a multilateral effort to combat climate change and preserve biodiversity.

The situation we are now in requires collective maturity to face up to past mistakes and work together to fix them. Brazil has a unique opportunity: it is in our hands to sow the seeds for a different future. One based on sustainability, value-generation and intelligent stewardship of the resources bestowed on its land. Societies around the world are increasingly engaged, informed, mobilized to combat the illegal environmental devastation. Devastation that, as we know, causes irreversible damage to the majority of people, while rewarding predatory minorities.

Eager to contribute to a solution, business leaders are coming together in unprecedented ways, providing a show of positive activism that is also in line with the majority of how Brazilians feel about the issue. Led by the Council on Sustainable Business Development, 40 CEOs of major Brazilian and multinational companies co-signed a letter addressed to the Brazilian vice-president and president of the Amazon Council, Hamilton Mourão, as well as to other key authorities in Brazil. This was the spark of what has since become a growing movement.

Today, well over 80 Brazilian business leaders have joined in this common cause. The strategy is not confrontation, but a belief in dialogue and persuasion, planning and commitment geared toward developing a long-view, sustainable policy initiative. It is clearly a subject that transcends any single political term or partisan interest, and should be viewed as a policy of the Brazilian state and of our people. We must implement structural policies to make real change, not topical or reactive measures that have no lasting effect.

To that end, this movement has held several meetings with top officials of the Brazilian government, in the executive, legislative and judicial branches, and with the attorney general's office, as well as with state governors from the Amazon region.

The movement is led by companies from diverse sectors of the economy, national and multinational corporations, which have embraced the cause of sustainability and want to be part of the solution. Together, their focus is to push for effective measures against criminal deforestation in the Amazon and to support projects that advance the bioeconomy and with transparency, helping to ensure a more stable climate for potential investors and businesses in these challenging times. Initiatives such as increasing traceability, for example, are essential to the modern customer. As a popular saying goes, we must separate the wheat from the chaff. That is, we must reward those who are doing what is right and bring to justice those who dare violate the law.

In meetings with government officials, this action plan includes proposals such as: more integration between the federal, state and municipal governments; the due application of the Brazilian forestry code, perhaps one of the most advanced and stringent in the world; and a fair landholding regularization that does not reward land fraud, but instead certifies rightful ownership and lawful use. This will help identify and prosecute criminal deforestation, while preserving the environment and also indigenous lands. If all the instruments already at our disposal are used to focus our actions towards effective monitoring, the Amazon rainforest will soon be perceived again as the natural treasure that it is, and no longer the epicenter of environmental tragedy of planetary scope.

Driving toward the greater good is what motivates this group in uniting private and public determination to devise viable alternatives for the Amazon and for Brazil's other diverse biomes; one that preserves our natural treasures, that help keep our forests standing tall, while at the same time properly enabling people's livelihoods.

This initiative, in fact, has become stronger in recent days, with the action of the Brazilian Coalition on Climate, Forests and Agriculture, which brings together 230 entities, including NGOs, academia and private companies. The Coalition issued a document with six proposals to curb deforestation in the Amazon: intensified enforcement, command and control in the region; immediate suspension of the registration of the rural environmental registry (CAR) on public lands; selection of 10mn hectares for protection and sustainable use; adoption of strict criteria for granting rural loans and funding; transparency in vegetation suppression data; and suspension of regularization of land ownership of properties with deforestation carried out after July 2008, as defined by the forestry code.

As stated, the role of civil society has been invigorated at this time, with multiple and complex challenges coming to the fore. In Brazil there is a growing notion that we must get back on track in preserving the Amazon rainforest as the valuable asset that it is for present and future generations. As we know, the Amazon's environmental importance transcends its geography, affecting a series of other variables. A

conserved rainforest is essential to stable rainfall regimes within Brazil itself, as well as other parts of the continent; it protects the soil, in addition to removing and storing CO₂. In fact, it is the reason why Brazil has such potential to become a leader in the CO₂ market.

We know it is within our reach to conserve our natural wonders, while generating social value keeping our forest standing. There are plenty of examples from the Amazon itself that show us the way, such as the sustainable commercialization of the açai berry, which already represents a market of over US\$1bn annually. Another positive example of sustainable production is found in the cocoa and Brazil nut markets; in the natural rubber and palm oil industries; all activities which are helping keep the forest afoot, while securing the livelihood of more than 25mn Brazilians who live in the Amazonian region. For too long the Amazon has been caught in a cycle of destruction and poverty. A sad paradox for its inhabitants, most still living in poverty amid the richness of the land they occupy: the treasures of living, breathing forest that never ceases to marvel the world and bequeath us all with priceless natural and environmental goods.

There is no viable alternative to a green future. If we insist on the wrong path, what hope is there for the future we envisaged? A future that secures investments in education and infrastructure; investments that create good paying jobs, that fights inequality and poverty. That will help Brazil rise to its potential. This is why the Brazilian private sector is taking a stance, together with other committed and vibrant civil society groups, showing that it is not only possible, but in our best interests, to keep providing sustainable products and services to the world.

It cannot be said that any society is doing well if the planet is doing badly. In the midst of the tragedies, and also because of them, we have witnessed that Brazil once again has become the focus of world concern because of our current environmental policies. The creation of the Amazon Council under the leadership of the vice president of the republic has given a signal in the right direction and generated goodwill. However, it is no secret that the image we project abroad will change only after Brazil shows that our actions are producing concrete results, with transparency and adequate metrics.

Therefore, we must all join efforts to build a forward-looking, sustainable alternative for the Amazon and for nature conservancy in general, one that brings people together in the struggle to preserve life. From here in Brazil, you can be sure, civil society is united and committed to building a greener future, one in which our country takes up the leading role which befits its true vocation: to become a major agro-environmental power for the good of the world, a key player in the coming low-carbon bioeconomy.

By Paulo Hartung

Executive president of Brazilian planted tree production association Iba and former governor of Espírito Santo state

Economist, executive president of [Iba](#), the Brazilian association responsible for institutionally representing the planted tree production chain, board member of the Education for All program, and former governor of Espírito Santo state (2003-2010 and 2015-2018).

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