By Annalisa Savaresi

October 2014: As global carbon dioxide emissions reportedly reached new highs, representatives from hundreds of national and subnational governments, companies, and civil society organizations gathered in New York for the Climate Summit convened by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 23 September 2014. The summit was intended to raise political momentum towards the adoption of a new climate agreement in 2015 and seemingly managed to infuse climate diplomacy with fresh energy.

Several States announced national actions to address climate change, as well as increased contributions to climate finance, most notably China and the European Union. The summit furthermore saw a host of multilateral and multi-stakeholder announcements on actions to address climate change clustered around eight themes: agriculture; cities; energy; financing; forests; industry; resilience; and transportation. For the purposes of BENELEX, the most interesting developments were the adoption of the New York Declaration on Forests and the launch of the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture.

The New York Declaration on Forests

One of the highlights of the Climate Summit was the adoption of the New York Declaration on Forests, whereby a coalition of developed and developing countries (with the significant exception of Brazil), subnational governments, companies, indigenous peoples’ and civil society organizations pledged to halve global loss of
natural forests by 2020 and reduce it to zero by 2030; eliminate deforestation from
the production of agricultural commodities and significantly reduce deforestation
derived from other economic sectors by 2020; and restore 150 million hectares of
degraded landscapes and forestlands by 2020. Although a mere political declaration,
this is the first concrete move towards adopting a multilaterally agreed global target
for climate change mitigation in the forest sector, which may eventually be embedded
in the 2015 agreement.

After almost ten years of negotiations on measures to incentivize the conservation
and enhancement of carbon in forests in developing countries, (commonly referred to
with the acronym REDD+), Parties to the UNFCCC have yet to agree on a global
target to do so. Such a target was perceived as a fundamental prerequisite for
cordinated international action on REDD+ (see Eliasch Review) but only made a
brief appearance in the negotiation text in preparation for Copenhagen Climate
Conference in 2009, never to appear again. The New York Declaration on Forests
therefore represents a first step towards the adoption of such a target, potentially
providing an important piece to complete the REDD+ puzzle (see BENELEX post).

The New York Declaration on Forests is also notable in that it pledges to “support
alternatives to deforestation driven by basic needs (such as subsistence farming and
reliance on fuel wood for energy) in ways that alleviate poverty and promote
sustainable and equitable development.” The Declaration furthermore refers to
“strengthen[ing] forest governance, transparency and the rule of law, while also
empowering communities and recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples,
especially those pertaining to their lands and resources.” These statements re-
emphasise that consideration for social impacts and equity are crucial for climate
change mitigation endeavors in the forest sector.

These considerations have been at the heart of negotiations on REDD+ from the
beginning. The International Panel on Climate Change specifically warned that forest-
based mitigation activities would need to avoid negative impacts associated with
competition between land uses. Moreover, the Eliasch Review unequivocally
asserted that the long-term success of REDD+ would depend upon ensuring that it
beneﬁts “poor people and forest communities.” Parties to the UNFCCC have
attempted to address these concerns by adopting safeguards explicitly requesting
that REDD+ activities avoid causing harm and “enhance other social and
environmental beneﬁts.” The matter is furthermore being addressed in the context of
ongoing negotiations on the so-called non-carbon beneﬁts of REDD+, where speciﬁc
beneﬁt-sharing considerations have emerged (see BENELEX blogpost).

The New York Declaration has reasserted the centrality of intra-State equity
considerations to negotiations on REDD+, arguably going beyond the requirements
already included in extant safeguards, by speciﬁcally making reference to the
empowerment of communities and the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples
to lands and resources (see BENELEX blogpost).
Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture

Another initiative with potentially wide-reaching consequences was the launch of the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture, as a “voluntary, farmer-led, multi-stakeholder” coalition of States, civil society and international and scientific organisations for the incorporation of climate change considerations in food and agriculture systems. Agriculture has long been a contentious matter at climate negotiations, and the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice has only recently agreed to undertake some rather limited scientific and technical work on the issue.

The Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture aims to improve food and nutrition security by helping to adjust agricultural practices, food systems and social policies so as to take into account climate change and efficient use of natural resources. The Alliance’s aspirational outcomes are “sustainable and equitable increases in agricultural productivity and incomes; greater resilience of food systems and farming livelihoods; and reduction and/or removal of greenhouse gas emissions associated with agriculture.” Its programmatic document also states that the Alliance could “create an environment for common outcomes that builds on indigenous knowledge systems, and also bears in mind smallholders and the poorest and most marginalized communities.” The Alliance is furthermore set to encourage efforts that promote “participatory approaches and consultation mechanisms, providing a voice for farmers, including women farmers, and recognizing the crucial role of farmers’ organizations, to yield maximum community – and country – level benefits.”

While the complexities underlying the debate on farmers’ rights (see BENELEX blogpost) are not on the agenda, emphasis on intra-State equity considerations has become increasingly frequent at climate negotiations. Awareness of the perverse outcomes associated with the implementation of some Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects and with the production of biofuels has drawn States’ attention to the need to be particularly vigilant of the social impacts of land-based climate change mitigation activities. The international institutions behind the establishment of the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture have already developed a portfolio of activities and guidance to better integrate climate change mitigation with poverty alleviation and equity concerns.

While it remains to be seen how this new alliance will manage to juggle these ambitious and potentially conflicting objectives, this bottom-up endeavor is yet another manifestation of the fact that, in this like other fields of climate governance, coalitions of willing State and non-State actors are increasingly establishing transnational initiatives, bypassing the stalemate affecting international climate negotiations. Their emancipation from the dire straits of climate negotiations has seemingly rendered these initiatives more willing to engage with the complex interface between climate change mitigation, poverty alleviation and intra-State equity.
Outlook

Time will tell whether the political will expressed at the UN summit will translate into greater momentum at climate negotiations, providing a much needed gear shift toward the adoption of a new climate agreement in 2015. The first reality check will be the next session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) in October 2014, where UNFCCC Parties will gather to discuss the elements of the draft negotiating text of a new climate agreement.

Mitigation from the forest and agriculture sectors is just a sideshow in the grand bargain on a new climate agreement. It is nevertheless a rather sensitive matter, as the mitigation potential in these sectors largely lies in developing countries, where intra-State equity and benefit-sharing concerns are particularly pressing. Parties to the UNFCCC have so far been reluctant to address these delicate matters in a spirit of mutual-supportiveness, drawing inspiration from guidance adopted in the context of other international instruments and processes. The initiatives on agriculture and forests launched at the UN Climate Summit may, however, mark the beginning of a new approach, by giving greater prominence to intra-State equity considerations in forest and land-based climate change mitigation activities.

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