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# What role should governments play in regulating land use?

Inter-American Dialogue's Latin American Energy Advisor

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*Q and A: What Role Should Governments Play in Regulating Land Use?*

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Roughly half of the deforestation that was avoided in Brazil's Amazon region from 2005-2009 was the result of governmental policies, according to a report released March 21 by the Climate Policy Initiative. Meanwhile, "billions" of investment dollars are on hold as Brazil considers a proposal governing land purchases, nearly two years after the country banned foreign investors from buying large tracts of land, the Financial Times reported. Meanwhile, the alarming rate of loss of Paraguay's Chaco Forest has also recently made headlines. What role should the state play in regulating land usage? How can Latin American governments balance preservation of unique environmental systems with economic growth?

**A: James N. Levitt, fellow in the Department of Planning and Urban Form at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in Cambridge, Mass.:**

"For most of the past decade, Latin American economic growth has maintained a healthy pace. Foreign direct investment from nations such as China that are seeking reliable supplies of minerals and other natural resources has been particularly strong. And growing populations in the region continue to strive for improved incomes and living conditions. All of this economic activity is putting severe and sustained pressure on Latin America's unique land base. Most professionals working in the field of land conservation are all too familiar with the urgent reports of the disappearance of and ongoing threats to landscapes along Chile's Valdivian Coast, in the Brazilian Amazon, in the Chaco region of Paraguay, and in uplands of Belize, to name just a few. In recent years, government regulation has played a highly significant role in checking the loss of forest cover in Latin America. For example, Chile's regulations restricting the cutting of native forestlands and the use of non-native plantation species have transformed the behavior of that nation's large and prosperous forest products sector. Yet the pressures, and the worries over the survival of some of earth's most unique natural assets, continue. Beyond regulation, there is a set of complementary conservation practices that are increasingly familiar and useful to Latin American land conservationists. These techniques call for collaboration of landowners across the public, private, NGO and academic sectors to achieve measurable and lasting 'landscape-scale' conservation outcomes. They include: the use of conservation easements granted by private landowners to governments and land trusts; the leveraging of mitigation markets to rectify the loss of ecosystem function resulting from such activities as mining and road construction, as well as commercial and residential development; and incentives for targeted, sustainable economic activity, enhancing the prospects, for example, for local eco-tourism and value-added forest

products manufacturing businesses. The question really, then, is not whether regulation should play a role in the protection of Latin America's green infrastructure, but rather how new private-sector friendly conservation techniques can complement such regulations while helping to sustain Latin America's economic progress."

**A: Sebastián Acha, member of Paraguay's Chamber of Deputies:**

"The land clearance rate of the Chaco is faster than ever. There is no consensus between producers and the government in order to protect and sustainably develop this fragile ecosystem, which is susceptible to desertification. The role of the state is key. There is a need for clear policies related to sustainable development, and there is an urgent need for policies that use Paraguay's natural capital for the socio-economic development of the country, based on the protection of biodiversity. At the present, there is a gap in national regulations that protect the Chaco eco-region, and there are two marked positions. On one side, there are the producers that need to develop the land by clearance for timber harvesting and cattle ranching, and on the other side are organizations and people concerned about the protection of the Chaco. The role of the government in this situation is vital to balance these two positions for the protection and sustainable development of the Chaco, the country and perhaps the region. A good example of this is the payment for ecosystem services that promote conservation through economic incentives. The role in governments in achieving 'sustainable development' by developing green economic policies and clear national regulations is key, but is only the first step. Harmful human behavior needs to be changed, starting with a solid environmental education about the vital role of biodiversity in human wellbeing."

**A: Fabio Rubio Scarano, senior vice president in the Americas division of Conservation International:**

"The state should play a major role both in terms of regulating land usage as well as in creating and enforcing good environmental legislation. For example, Brazil has good environmental laws, but they have always been poorly enforced. Land use policy is still a problem. For instance, Brazil has some 60 million hectares of unproductive land on fertile soils currently occupied by cattle-raising with an average of one cow per hectare or less. Curiously, this is almost the same amount of land dedicated to highly productive and modern agribusiness (nearly 67 million hectares). In other words, with adequate land reform to make cattle-raising more intensive in smaller areas and allow expansion of agriculture to currently unproductive areas, Brazil could arguably double its food, fiber, fuel and commodity production without cutting down a single tree. This depends on adequate land use policy. In the case of the Amazon, there has been much reduction in deforestation in Brazil, but it is increasing at fast rates in countries such as Bolivia and Peru. Road infrastructure and energy are two of the main drivers, and Brazilian investment is also related to that. So, in the case of the Amazon, we should think of transnational policies to avoid simply transferring the deforestation problem across borders. Finally, there are already several examples across the region, at the local scale, where conservation-based development has been increasing the life standards of local people. The working hypothesis of Conservation International is that there is a direct causal relationship between maintenance of natural capital

and human well-being. In partnership with local governments and local societies, we are beginning to build field demonstrations that confirm this hypothesis."

*The Energy Advisor welcomes reactions to the Q&A above. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org) with comments.*