# Seeing the forest, missing the field: Forests and agriculture in global climate change policy

Cinthia Soto Golcher[a],[*], Bas Arts[a], Ingrid Visseren-Hamakers[b]

[a] Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University and Research, P.O. box 47, 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands
[b] Department of Environmental Science & Policy, George Mason University, David King Hall, Room 3019, 4400 University Drive, MSN 5F2, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States

ABSTRACT

As the climate change problem becomes more eminent, there is more pressure to increase efforts in all sectors and countries. The land-use sector is seen as an option to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and key in achieving a balance in GHG emissions and removals by sinks by 2050, as envisioned in the Paris Agreement. This article presents two comparative case studies within the climate change arena and aims to understand how and why: 1) tropical deforestation and forest degradation have secured a prominent place on the international climate change agenda, while 2) agriculture has not secured a prominent place. We use the agenda-setting multi-stream approach (MSA), while adding a framing layer. Based on primary data (including an international workshop with forest and agriculture experts, interviews, and participation in key international meetings), and secondary data, this article concludes that REDD + is an example of how a condition was framed as a problem, a viable proposal was developed, and political will and receptivity was shown, all of which placed REDD + high on the agenda, and generated its legal and methodological framework over the course of ten years. In these efforts, the role of policy entrepreneurs was key. Agriculture, on the other hand, is a more complex sector with multiple interests and millions of stakeholders. The consideration of agriculture, in particular its mitigation component, is therefore a highly contentious issue. The fear of new binding commitments and the potential threat to food security and production, and the lack of a convincing proposal that addresses the multiple values of agriculture has impeded substantive progress. Also, the absence of a committed policy entrepreneur limits the place of agriculture in the climate change agenda under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

## 1. Introduction

Within global environmental governance, the consideration of the conservation and sustainable use of forests has proven to be a difficult and contentious task. Deforestation continues to be a challenge in many countries. The inclusion of tropical deforestation as part of the climate agenda was neglected for several years until 2005, when it became an agenda item under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to be further considered as part of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) programme of work: "Reducing emissions from deforestation in developing countries: approaches to stimulate action" (UNFCCC, 2005). Ten years later, forest was the only sector explicitly mentioned in the Paris Agreement through its specific attention to REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation in developing countries). By being in the UNFCCC decision agenda, REDD + started as a

mitigation mechanism that evolved throughout the years into something more complex and encompassing (for instance, to include safeguards). REDD + has triggered a number of actions, initiatives and funds at the national and international levels. The inclusion of REDD + in policies, plans and programmes has happened relatively fast (Den Besten et al., 2014).

Several researchers have indicated that REDD + success is highly dependent on how actors manage to address the main drivers of deforestation and forest degradation and work together with other sectors influencing land-use decisions, including agriculture (Corbera et al., 2010; Kissinger, 2013; Salvini et al., 2014). Despite the strong linkages between forests and agriculture, including the fact that agriculture is one of the main drivers of deforestation (Geist and Lambin, 2002; Hosonuma et al., 2012; Kissinger et al., 2012), the sectors have a history of following separate policy tracks. To add to the complexity, agriculture's emissions are expected to increase significantly over the

coming decades (Climate Focus et al., 2011; Wilkes et al., 2013). Efforts to include agriculture in the climate domain in an integral manner - including both mitigation and adaptation - are more recent than those related to forest. Integration has happened more extensively for adaptation than mitigation (Soto and Visseren-Hamakers, 2018 (in press)). In general, "agriculture has not had a very prominent role in any of the agreements emerging from the climate negotiations. While some progress has been made recently, this has been painfully slow." (Kalfagianni and Duyck, 2015: 2). While the Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs) and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) have opened a window for addressing agricultural mitigation (and/or adaptation), consistency among countries is still lacking. Being part of the decision agenda will allow for a discussion to take place in an structured and potentially action-oriented way, to develop common understandings regarding how to address certain complexities particular to the sector, identify synergies with forest/REDD + , and develop appropriate mechanisms and incentives. As indicated by one of our interviewees: "…when looking at the number of initiatives caused by the REDD + discussions such as UN-REDD, FCPF, FIP, as well as many regional and national initiatives it looks like agriculture is missing this kind of by-product".[1]

This research aims to understand how forests, and in particular tropical deforestation and forest degradation, managed to play an increasingly prominent role on the global climate change agenda, including its consideration in the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 1992: article 5), while agriculture is still lagging behind. The paper also attempts to marry the agenda-setting multiple streams model with framing theory in order to enrich our understanding of agenda setting in international arenas. It addresses the following questions:

1) How and why have tropical deforestation and forest degradation received a prominent place on the international climate change agenda since 2005?
2) How and why has agriculture not received a prominent place on the international climate change agenda?

This article will start by presenting its conceptual framework and methods. This will be followed by an analysis of key dimensions that may be conducive for the consideration of tropical deforestation and agriculture in the international climate change agenda. It wraps up with a discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Agenda setting and framing

"Fundamental to all studies of agenda setting is a focus on the dynamics by which new ideas, new policy proposals and new understandings of problems meet resistance from the prevailing political arrangements but sometimes break through to create dramatic policy changes" (Baumgartner et al., 2006: 959). Over time, various frameworks have emerged to explain such breakthroughs. Explanations have varied from: (1) the urgency of societal problems in need of collective problem solving (Dunn, 2016); to (2) powerful elites that control agenda setting in accordance with their interests (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962); (3) public opinion or mass media that pressure policy makers to act (Downs, 1972); (4) policy entrepreneurs who frame problems and solutions in 'attractive' ways and seek opportunities in politics to 'sell' these to policy makers (Kingdon, 2014); and (5) disruptive periods in which 'external forces', such as disasters or economic crises, force policy makers to change their views and policies (Jones and Baumgarter, 2012). This paper particularly builds upon the fourth framework (Kingdon), because, firstly, it focuses on a *specific* and *single* policy field (climate change), thus excluding more systemic and

structural theories of agenda setting (like the second and the fifth ones). Secondly, it particularly analyses the *internal* dynamics of this policy field, excluding the third and fifth approach, although external factors to agenda-setting will definitely be referred to in our analysis below. Finally, the paper shares with Kingdon (and others) the critical perspective on 'rational choice' approaches in policy analysis, thus excluding the first approach.

Kingdon is the founding father of the so-called 'multiple streams approach' (MSA). It can be viewed as a critical approach towards 'rational policy analysis' (policy cycle framework, stages approach, comprehensive rationality (see Dunn, 2016; Sabatier, 2007). The various stages in a policy process (problem identification, policy design, decision-making, solutions, etc.) do not neatly follow one another; instead, Kingdon considers these as rather autonomous 'streams' of problems (or issues), policies (solutions), and politics (decision-making) that can cause policy change when they meet. For this to happen, windows of opportunity should be opened, for example through elections, referenda or politically relevant events or crises, because political and bureaucratic systems have a 'natural' tendency to resist change. However, the creation of windows of opportunity and the merging of streams do not happen automatically, but should be facilitated by 'policy entrepreneurs' who – for example through targeted issue framing or resource mobilization – bring about policy change. Examples might be high-positioned civil servants, (new) political leaders, lobbyists, charismatic personalities, or Nobel Prize laureates. With this image of the policy process, Kingdon also departs from the possibility to *design* policies rationally. Policymaking is not rational at all; rather, it is ambiguous, selective, biased and imperfect (Cairney and Jones, 2016).

Although MSA and framing theory have a lot in common, including a critical perspective on rational policy analysis and design, Kingdon does not refer to framing theory in his work. Yet some MSA followers do, because framing processes play crucial roles in how problems, policies and politics are defined and coupled (Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, 2015). We too would like to make the framing aspect in MSA more explicit by linking Kingdon to framing theory (Benford and Snow, 2000; Dewulf, 2013; Schön and Rein, 1994). We do so by adding another layer to the MSA framework. While we follow the analytical dimensions per stream, we also explicitly ask ourselves what framing processes have been implied in our case studies to put more emphasis on discursive dynamics and entrepreneurship. Such framing processes are crucial for successful agenda setting, in our view.

As mentioned, the emergence or disappearance of issues on the agenda is, according to Kingdon (2014), the result of three independent streams that interact with one another. The analysis in this article will follow these streams, and whether or not they meet, in the case of tropical deforestation and agriculture, as part of international climate change policy. Based on MSA and framing theory, the following analytical dimensions are used:

1 *Problems stream:* According to Kingdon (2014), indicators, focusing events, and feedback are the means through which policymakers become aware of problems:
- Indicators: can be generated for routine monitoring or special studies. They can assess the magnitude of a situation and recognize if there is a variation in the problem situation.
- Feedback: can come in different forms, for instance established routine evaluations, or programmes' "systematic monitoring" (Kingdon (2014: 101), e.g. performance assessment of a programme, or through more informal means like complaints from the public. In the empirical section ahead, both indicators and feedback will be analysed together, as indicators can be part of feedback.
- Focusing events, such as crises or disasters, are an indication of an existing problem, which might be widespread and not an isolated case.
The role of framing in this stream is key in determining if there is a