Guyana is a tropical country on the northeast coast of South America and is part of the Guiana Shield. Forests occupy 75 percent of the total land area of 21.5 million hectares, and Guyana’s forest industry is an important component of the country’s economy.

Guyana is a net sink for carbon: it has a low deforestation rate of 0.1 to 0.3 percent according to the FAO. The country makes a relatively small contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions while absorbing a high level of carbon through the preservation of a large portion of its forests. Guyana thus avoids the emissions associated with development paths chosen by some other formerly forest-rich countries.

In spite of its large extent of forest cover, Guyana is highly vulnerable to climate change, especially since its coast — where approximately 90 percent of the population resides — is significantly below sea level. Guyana is a developing country and its government recognizes the need for economic growth and the utilization of natural resources. Guyana is one of the first forested countries in the developing world to make a serious commitment to a strategy to promote a low carbon development path. Existing international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol provide a source of revenue only to countries that favour projects that replant trees after they have been cut (reforestation) or plant new forests where no forest existed (afforestation). They do not reward countries such as Guyana that have kept their forests standing through effective policies and sustainable forest management practices.

On June 8, 2009, Guyana’s President Bharrat Jagdeo formally launched Guyana’s draft Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS). The strategy has several important components:

- ways in which Guyana can deploy its forests in mitigating climate change while gaining financial and other support for doing so;
- ways in which the country can move into a low carbon development path; and
how the country can be further protected from the effects of climate change (adaptation).

The LCDS aims to enable overall national development in the process.

According to President Jagdeo, “the people of Guyana are willing to act and work with others with a similar vision to break the false debate which suggests that a nation must choose between national development and combating climate change. Instead we should be asking how we can forge prosperous low carbon economies where national development and combating climate change are complementary, not competing, objectives.”

At the launch of the LCDS, the President said that the international community needed to address deforestation within the new climate agreement replacing the Kyoto Protocol: “This will require [first a] proper incorporation of incentives to reduce and avoid deforestation within the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation mechanism, commonly known as REDD. Two, the new climate regime must establish REDD at the scale required – where forestry payments are not only included within the post-Copenhagen agreement, but are also capable of generating the amount of finances needed to out-compete the current international drivers of deforestation. And three, any REDD proposal must attract and sustain the support of the people of rainforest nations, including those who live in and depend on the forests.”

Guyana is trying to use its forests to assist with climate change. Forests are excluded from the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012, but countries like Guyana now argue that forests must be included in the successor agreement to be reached at COP 15 in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Including forests in the Copenhagen agreement will add greater value to them as a resource. A study carried out by the McKinsey Group estimated that the Guyana rainforest could provide revenues to the country of approximately US$ 580 million per year if exploited to its full potential. Guyana is therefore looking at receiving payments to maintain its standing forest, thereby avoiding deforestation, while at the same time providing biodiversity and ecosystem services to the world.

If the international community responds to Guyana’s case for payment for preserving its forests, this money could be used for national development. One way by which Guyana plans to raise awareness in this issue is to present the LCDS at COP 15.

Since the strategy was launched, a large number of activities have been carried out to enable full involvement of the Guyanese people. One of the key elements of this approach is awareness and consultation sessions. The LCDS is presently being widely discussed across the country with key stakeholders and other interest groups to gather their comments and considerations. To support a high-level and effective process, the National Consultation and Awareness Process is being overseen by a Multi-Stakeholder Steering Committee (MSSC), chaired by the President. The MSSC meets weekly and includes representatives from government, youth, women, the private sector, indigenous NGOs, conservation
NGOs, forestry, mining and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) which is providing independent advise to the process.

Since the launch of the strategy, 15 sub-national consultations have been held across the country, attended by 222 communities and 3,285 people (including the launch). An intense awareness and information dissemination campaign was launched at the same time. One element of this campaign was a series of awareness sessions that provided information on the LCDS and an opportunity for further and more specific discussion. Among those participating in the series were the forest producers and miners associations, women, labour, youth and community organizations and NGOs.

The LCDS process has received good reviews by local and international stakeholders. According to the World Bank’s Guyana Country Representative, Mr. Giorgio Valentini, who attended the meeting of the national Toshaos (indigenous leaders) from all Amerindian communities in Guyana: “the process is very well managed, well designed, very open and transparent.” Guyana is leading a group of 37 countries around the world that stand to benefit from the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), a Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) administered by the World Bank. A World Bank mission gave the strategy a “very positive assessment.”

The government plans to continue the process of developing the LCDS and to set the stage for the way forward. The work to date and the leadership shown by Guyana needs support and commitment from the developed world, including the European Union and the United States. Norway has already committed to working with Guyana. Its efforts have to be matched by firm decisions in the Copenhagen agreement that will complement the programs to be instituted by Guyana and other developing forest countries. Guyana is clearly positioned to be a working model. The developed countries need to step up and give support.

Further reading