

Bolsonaro at the Climate Summit: fake news in the post-truth world?

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY OBSERVATORY ON CLIMATE CHANGE (OIMC)
AT THE RIO DE JANEIRO STATE UNIVERSITY (UERJ)

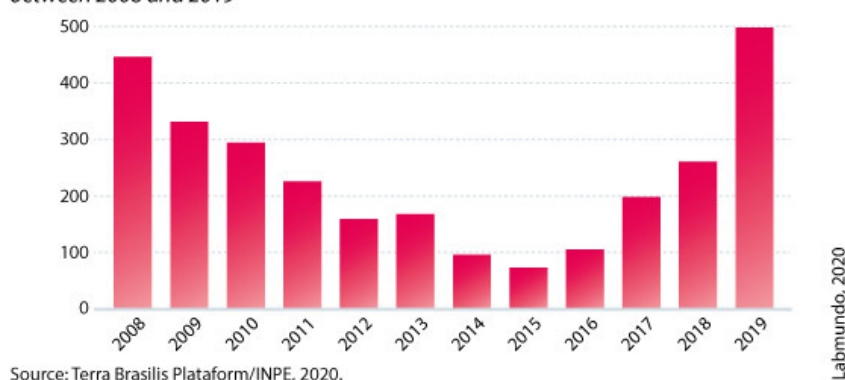
One year after the infamous April 2020 ministerial meeting, in which the Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, defended the tactic of “doing all of it in two shakes (of a lamb’s tail) in matters of environmental policy, Bolsonaro’s speech at the Leaders Summit on Climate, convened by the Biden-Harris administration, took by surprise not only the Brazilian society, but also large segments of the international community. Bolsonaro’s speech referred to achievements and commitments of the Brazilian government that were totally disconnected from the reality of decisions and policies implemented by his administration since he took office in January 2019.

Having fallen into disrepute, Bolsonaro came to the summit after a series of criticisms from Brazilian and international civil society organizations regarding the increase in deforestation rates and the intensification of illegal practices in the Amazon. In addition, successive controversies over several of Salles’ statements, especially on the conditioning of the current 40% reduction in deforestation rates to the Brazilian government’s access to US\$ 1 billion fresh funds, also reinforced the difficulty that Bolsonaro faces in recovering Brazil’s diplomatic credibility in multilateral climate negotiations. According to Imazon, in 2020, the Amazon lost the largest area of green forest over the last ten years: 8,058 square km. This figure represents a 30% increase in deforestation, when compared to 2019. The most recent deforestation rates, which cover Salles’ years as minister, have repeatedly broken deforestation records since 2008. US Democrat Senators have condemned this Brazilian proposal pegged to financing conditions, and in a letter to Biden suggested that that any transfer of funds to Brazil should be conditional on actual and material reduction in Amazon deforestation rates.

Boasting Brazil as an unchallenged environmental leader, the president stressed that the country is rich in biodiversity and that it is an “agro-environmental” power (and also that it has carried out a “green” revolution in the field thanks to “sustainable” agriculture), in addition to having a very climate-friendly energy matrix, which drives an innovative economy in terms of clean energy sources and other technologies, such as hydrogen and biofuels. In other words, Bolsonaro emphasized aspects that he considered positive in the country’s energy, environmental and climate profile, which are largely the result of efforts made by previous presidents and not of policies implemented under his own administration. In fact, many of the issues that are defended by Bolsonaro, such as the development of the Amazon based on agrobusiness, are riddled by criticism, but these crucial issues were obviously not included in the Brazilian official statement.

DEFORESTATION IN INDIGENOUS LANDS

Deforested area in indigenous lands within the Legal Amazon, in km², between 2008 and 2019



If, on the one hand, it is true that nature has been very generous with Brazil, Bolsonaro’s speech at the Leaders Summit on Climate sounds like a fanciful tale according to which the power project that has driven his political decisions would aim to preserve the country’s ecological and biodiversity abundance, as well as its populations, in particular indigenous peoples, the quilombolas and diverse traditional communities. Still, along the same lines as this “green business card”, which, although partly real, is mostly imaginary and fallacious, Bolsonaro drew attention to the need for dialogue with civil society, communities and indigenous peoples – which surprised the Brazilian society, since his administration has adopted the exact opposite direction in the discourse and actions of the federal government.

The inconsistencies between the president's bold proposals and the actual facts were stark: (i) he proposes to double the investment in deforestation inspection, when the current budget is the lowest in the last 21 years and when the structures and practices of detection and inspection of deforestation, including institutions such as IBAMA, the Federal Police, INPE, among others, built over the last few decades, have been facing an astonishing dismantling; (ii) he states that the country accounts for less than 3% of global emissions, when, in fact, it accounts for 4 to 5% of global emissions, according to data from the IPCC ("International Panel on Climate Change"); (iii) he emphasizes the preservation of the Amazon rainforest, stating that the country maintains 84% of this biome preserved, when, in fact, there is an estimate that 20% of the forest has been fully deforested, with an addition 10% to 20% of the areas facing different degrees of degradation.

It is interesting to note that Bolsonaro's more subdued tone on April 22, 2021 contrasts not only with the policies and practices of his own administration, but also with the standing adopted at the United Nations General Assembly in 2019. In his first speech at the UN, Bolsonaro spoke of confronting multilateralism and accused other governments, which he considered a threat to an international order ideally guided by liberal values and solidarity among Christians. His pronouncement on foreign policy, two years ago, aimed to please his local supporters. In 2020, a few days after replacing his Minister of Foreign Affairs, a "softer" – but less real – side of Bolsonaro seems to have been forced to abandon his faithful domestic negationist followers, in order to respond to external pressures in favor of a pro-climate collective action. What was discussed between Brasilia and Washington during closed-door meetings in recent weeks will never be known, but external pressure seems to have had an effect, at least as far as this pronouncement is concerned.

As for international negotiations and goals, Bolsonaro drew attention to the issue that, according to him, would be the real cause of the current climate problem: emissions from industrialized countries. In this sense, he again appealed to the well-known principle of common – but historically differentiated – responsibilities between developed and developing countries. Such a position was also defended by Chinese President Xi Jinping in his speech.

China and Brazil are strong supporters of this principle and, alongside countries like India and South Africa, negotiated in favor of its inclusion in the 1992 Framework Convention and in the 2015 Paris Agreement. This appeal served to contextualize Bolsonaro's announcement of reduction in Brazilian emission targets by up to 40% in 2030, in light of the recent (and no longer ambitious) Brazilian NDC (Nationally Determined Contributions), submitted by the federal government in late 2020. This announcement is critical for the Brazilian climate community, as it signals, once again, that the government has no interest in fulfilling commitments, not even those announced by the administration itself. It also represents a less ambitious goal when compared to the previous one, which suggests an unjustified constraint before the leaders gathered at the Summit.

Bolsonaro announced 2050 as the year when Brazil will reach neutrality, advancing the previously stipulated deadline by ten years. In the December 2020 NDC, the neutrality deadline had been the year 2060. The Brazilian NDC's goal was similar to that of other developing countries, like China, which maintained its official proposal at the Climate Summit to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. The advancement announced by Bolsonaro actually reflects a response to Biden's request to have the country commit to neutrality by 2050, a goal that the US government has been advocating since the beginning of the new administration.

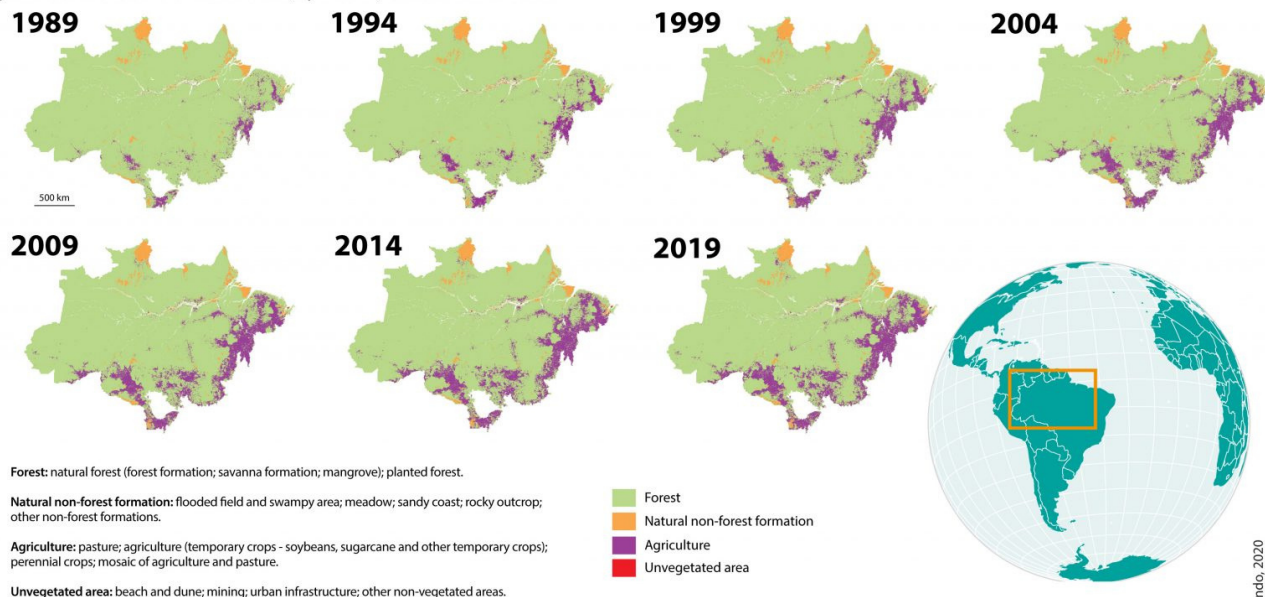
In view of this announcement, there is a void of information for the Brazilian climate community, as a review of the current NDC is now necessary. Once again, Brazilian activists, researchers and NGOs are witnessing a mismatch between what is announced and what actually happens, due to a lack of planning, in addition to the irresponsible manipulation of data and uncertainties. As for neutrality, however positive the announcement may be, there is skepticism that Bolsonaro will actually present guidelines on how or with which tools he plans to achieve such an ambitious goal.

Before COP 26, Bolsonaro stated that the key Brazilian negotiations would deal with articles 5 and 6 of the Paris Agreement, and that the country will undertake to fully adopt the mechanisms provided for in both articles. Regarding article 6, Bolsonaro pointed to carbon markets as a crucial means to raise resources and investments to boost climate action. Besides, in relation to article 5, he mentioned the need for fair remuneration for environmental services, as a way of recognizing the economic nature of conservation activities implemented by the country. This position does not correspond to the government's discourse when bargaining with Washington, according to the proposals presented by Salles in the days leading up to the Summit

Another promise made by Bolsonaro was the elimination of all illegal deforestation by 2030, through “command” and “control”, with the reinforcement of national environmental organizations. The alleged strengthening of environmental agencies to justify the use of force is another key issue. That is because, on the one hand, it is known that Brazilian monitoring and control institutions have been dismantled and, on the other, such strengthening validates an uncoordinated plan that can set a precedent for even more serious security issues in the Amazon, such as increased violence and the growth of militias in the region. In fact, when dealing with the Amazon, Bolsonaro’s project seems to seek the end of illegal deforestation through its legalization. It is worth mentioning that an illegal deforestation target was included in the former Brazilian NDC and that it was revised by the administration in late 2020. Furthermore, the president failed to specify what he meant by “zero illegal deforestation” in the Amazon region.

COMPOSITION OF THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON BIOME

Dynamics of land use in the Amazon biome, by function, between 1989 and 2019

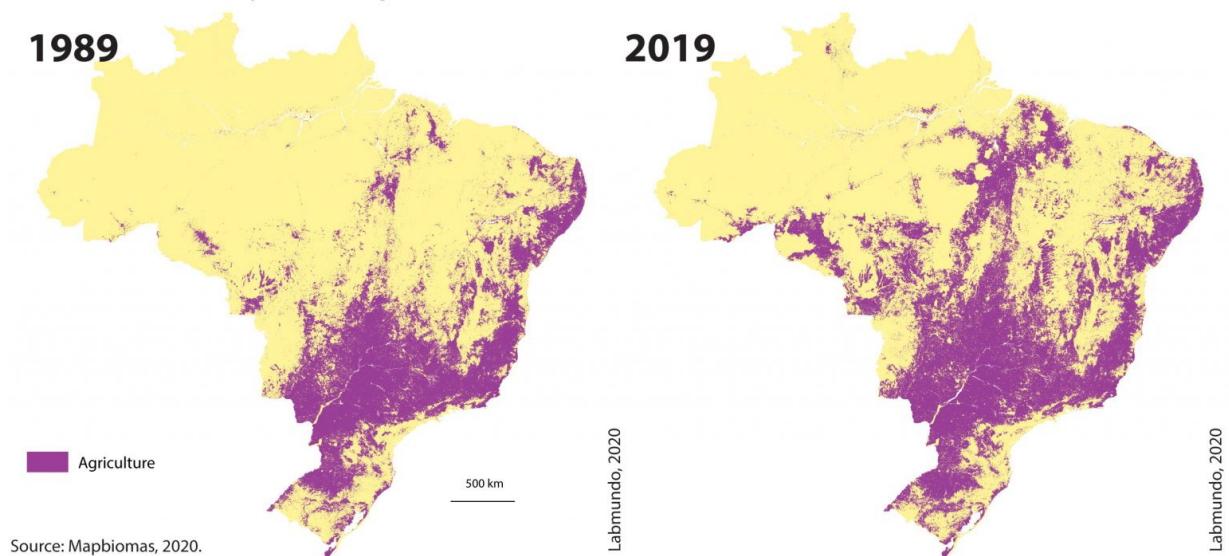


Source: Mapbiomas, 2020.

Thus, Bolsonaro is now cornered internationally and faces internal pressure due to the fast-approaching 2022 presidential elections. With his popularity declining and former president Lula's return to the political scene, Bolsonaro cannot avoid contradictions in his pronouncement. The government is unable to present plans even when it comes to the resources that it seeks to access through successive attempts to obtain international cooperation. At a press conference held after Bolsonaro's pronouncement, Salles went as far as to say that the resources deposited by Norway in the Amazon Fund could be reactivated after the new update on deforestation rates that should occur at the beginning of the second semester. Taken together, all actions of the Bolsonaro administration point to an (intentional) misunderstanding of reality.

AGRICULTURE EXPANSION IN BRAZILIAN TERRITORY

Area of the Brazilian territory destined to agriculture, in 1989 and in 2019



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by Ana C. Maranhão Godoy)