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The devastation of the Amazon predates Bolsonaro

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The recent fires that devastated the Amazon, [burning](#) over 20,000 hectares of forest, caused global outrage. Many were quick to blame Brazil's president, [Jair Bolsonaro](#), who since taking office has made it clear that protecting the [environment](#) is not really a priority of his government.

Indeed, his policies and anti-preservation speech have played a major role. Earlier this year, the government [cut](#) the budget of various agencies responsible for fire prevention, including the environmental inspection agency IBAMA, the fire prevention system PrevFogo, and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio), which inevitably affected the country's ability to cope with the fires.

In addition, Bolsonaro has taken measures that encourage deforestation and promote agribusiness and [mining](#), at the expense of the rights of indigenous people and sustainability. His fiery rhetoric also incited farmers to [start](#) fires to show their support for the president in the face of international criticism.

While Bolsonaro's anti-environment policies should be condemned and countered, he is by far not the main factor behind the devastation of the Amazon.

At this point, it is important to separate facts from fiction. After news spread of the forest fires, social media was flooded with images and videos - most of them not of this year's fires - feeding into a wave of disinformation among both supporters and critics of Bolsonaro. Many celebrities

and officials used these fake images to spread the word of the disaster.

While their concern is indeed welcome, as are pledges of funding - albeit rather modest - it is important to understand that these fires are an annual occurrence and this year's blaze was not necessarily that much worse than previous years.

According to Brazilian journalist Pedro Burgos, the Real-Time Deforestation Detection System (DETER), which was quoted to have [showed](#) an 82 percent increase in forest fires in June, is contested by experts, who [warned](#) that the method used is not the best for measuring deforestation.

[Global warming](#) is part of the problem; it is exacerbating droughts during the dry season which enables fires to spread faster and undermines efforts to put them out. But the real culprit is human action on the ground. Mining, infrastructure projects, agriculture and animal husbandry have been the main drivers of deforestation, which creates clearings and reduces the humidity of the forests, directly contributing to the spread of fires.

While under the first eight months of Bolsonaro's presidency, damaging activities have undoubtedly increased, the truth is, the devastation of the Amazon has been going on for decades under successive Brazilian governments, whether right-wing or left-wing.

They have sought to push the frontier of the Amazon further in, encouraging settlement under the excuse of securing borders, opening roads like the [Trans-Amazon](#) highway, constructing dams, and constantly cutting funds for its preservation.

President Dilma Rousseff's approach to the Amazon, for example, differed from Bolsonaro's more in terms of rhetoric than practice. When it came to the environment, Bolsonaro never denied his intentions of exploiting the forests; Rousseff, however, put on a front as though she cared.

Yet, it was during her term, that tens of thousands of indigenous people were forcibly [removed](#) from their native land in the Amazon to clear the way for the construction of hydroelectric [plants](#), like Belo Monte, Jirau and Teles Pires, which apart from the devastating impact on local communities involved considerable deforestation.

Rousseff was so committed to unsustainable industrial development that she even flouted a [decision](#) by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights asking for the suspension of the Belo Monte works and ignored Brazilian legislation that [obliged](#) the government to consult the affected populations before starting any construction.

During her first term, Rousseff cut 72 percent of the budget for the prevention of deforestation in the Amazon. In 2016, during her second term, deforestation [spiked](#), marking a 75-percent increase from its historical low in 2012. In 2017, Michel Temer [reduced](#) the budget of the Ministry of Environment by 51 percent.

Bolsonaro has not only pushed forward with the anti-environment policies of his predecessors but also stopped paying any lip service to environmental concerns. His rhetoric has emboldened farmers, illegal miners and loggers who feel they can go about destroying forests with impunity and increased violence against indigenous people.

The international community is right to be outraged and to seek action against his government.

Germany and Norway [withdrew](#) from the Amazon Fund, Finland [urged](#) the European Union to consider imposing sanctions on imports of Brazilian meat, and France threatened to kill the trade deal with South American Mercosur bloc. There have also been [calls](#) for divestment from business sectors that violate environmental codes, penalties for companies that employ "dirty supply chains", product boycotts, etc.

The political consequences for [Brazil](#) can be serious.

Boycotts and sanctions should always be the last resort, as they have devastating effects on the populations they are imposed on. But in some cases, such as the case of Brazil, they may be the only way to prevent a global catastrophe.

Sanctions can indeed force Bolsonaro's hand to take immediate action and take the ongoing fires under control. This, however, would only be a palliative measure.

Brazil is essentially an agricultural export economy. This is the main reason behind the rapid and large-scale conversion of the Amazon rainforest into agricultural land. Moreover, Brazil is following a development model that is destructive for the environment.

The Brazilian state is still [investing](#) in fossil fuels, demonstrating that it is unable to understand the importance of switching to environmentally sustainable energy sources and green technologies in the 21st century. It has also invested heavily in biofuels of plant origin, which experts warn could [increase](#) deforestation. Construction of hydroelectric plants in the Amazon, which also contributes to deforestation, is still ongoing.

Sanctions on their own would not be able to change any of this. To protect the Amazon in the long term, Brazil urgently needs to rethink its development model and find ways to grow and prosper without destroying the lungs of the planet.

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