



# The Carbon Neutrality Challenge

by Roberto Dobles

## The National Climate Change Strategy

In the face of the potentially devastating social, economic and environmental consequences of climate change, the world is taking only minute and isolated actions, ignoring the fact that any effective response must be collective and simultaneous. While the causes of climate change are country-specific, the effects are global and cumulative. Policy change is required at both the national and international levels. Time is running out. We cannot afford further delay.

Developed nations and the large developing countries have an important responsibility in addressing climate change, and they should act as soon as possible. However, this does not mean that smaller countries should sit on the sidelines. In Costa Rica, we have unilaterally declared it our goal to become climate neutral by the year 2021, the bicentennial of our independence.

Our first step was to put climate change at the top of the government agenda. The current administration has integrated the National Climate Change Strategy (NCCS) into its National Development Plan. Designed after careful analysis of the complex interactions of economic, social and environmental factors, the NCCS outlines two complementary and equally important agendas: the National Agenda and the International Agenda. The National Agenda has been defined around six strategic axes: mitigation; adaptation; metrics; capacity building and technology transfer; education, culture and public awareness; and financing. The International Agenda is also structured around six strategic components: exerting international influence; attracting foreign capital; leadership; legitimacy; presence in multilateral and binational forums; and international capacity building.

## The National Agenda

According to several studies, Costa Rica is located in one of the regions most threatened by climate change. Thus, the country is strongly motivated to do what it can to reduce its vulnerability. The National Agenda stresses two main action areas: mitigation and adaptation. The goal of mitigation is to reduce total carbon emissions, while the adaptation component is intended to protect economic

growth, social development and ecosystems from the dangers of climate change.

To mitigate carbon emissions, Costa Rica plans to reduce emissions by source; enhance its carbon sinks through reforestation, natural forest regeneration and avoided deforestation; and develop carbon markets and the C-Neutral brand.

Tropical forests are one of the most precious ecosystems on the planet, home to diverse species and a wealth of genetic resources. Forests provide crucial environmental services, from soil and watershed conservation to protection against floods, landslides and other natural disasters. They also draw tourists, an important source of income for Costa Rica. Furthermore, forests play a crucial international role in maintaining the climate balance as “carbon sinks” or reservoirs of greenhouse gases. Standing forests are the most important terrestrial reservoir of carbon dioxide. To enhance this function, Costa Rica is implementing a new tree planting campaign linked to Wangari Maathai’s United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) campaign to plant one billion trees worldwide. In 2007, our country planted more than 5 million trees. For 2008, the target is 7 million trees, which translates into approximately 1.5 trees per capita.

The Costa Rican government is also actively promoting the “C-Neutral” or carbon-neutral brand as a way to reduce emissions while at the same time differentiating the country and its products in the global marketplace. We envision a future when goods ranging from hotel rooms to coffee beans to Intel processors manufactured in Costa Rica carry a C-neutral label assuring consumers that the good or service was created in a carbon-neutral process. Companies wishing to earn the label would need to reduce their emissions and purchase carbon offsets to make up for carbon emitted in the production process. The administration is betting that the makers of C-Neutral products will become stakeholders in the campaign for carbon neutrality with strong incentives to push for continued “green” innovation.

One of the priorities of the adaptation component of the National Agenda is to identify the economic, social and environmental risks of climate change by geographic zone and sector (energy, transportation, etc.). Based on this



Photo courtesy of IISD/Earth Negotiators Bulletin.

Minister Dobles and General Secretary Beverly Miller at the February 2008 meeting of the UNEP Governing Council.

information, adaptation measures can be prioritized and an action plan developed to reduce the effects of climate change. Management of water resources, health, agriculture and livestock, infrastructure, coastal areas, fishing, land and marine biodiversity and ecosystems will be key components of the adaptation strategy, as well as disaster preparedness and risk management.

Mitigation and adaptation alone will not be enough, however. All programs implemented must be measurable, reportable and verifiable in accordance with international methodologies. After all, what cannot be measured cannot be managed. Proper financing mechanisms and adequate technology are also required. Last but not least, no strategy can ever be well implemented without proper education and public awareness efforts. It is the people, after all, who will determine the outcome and success of this strategy.

### The International Agenda

Climate change knows no borders. Just as it is true that greenhouse gases generated within our territory will have a negative impact not only within our borders but on the

rest of the world as well, it is also true that global actions (or inactions) directly impact Costa Rica. It is therefore time to recognize that the current social, economic and environmental situation demands that we transcend the limitations of the traditional nation-state and accept the common responsibilities we share. For our part, we in Costa Rica are committed to contributing to the dialogues and negotiations that will eventually lead to a new international climate regime when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. We will reach out to allies abroad and serve as a replicable model for other nations with similar circumstances.

Our country has historically dedicated considerable effort towards the protection and conservation of our natural resources. We continued to build on that tradition at the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the UNEP Governing Council / Global Ministerial Environment Forum, which took place in Monaco in February 2008. At that meeting, Costa Rica successfully launched the Climate Neutral Network (CN Net, [www.climateneutral.unep.org](http://www.climateneutral.unep.org)). The network's aim is to create a truly global information exchange open to all sectors of society. Three pioneering countries have joined

Costa Rica in this network so far: Iceland, Norway and New Zealand. Four cities — Arendal, Norway; Rizhao, China; Vancouver, Canada; and Växjö, Sweden — have also joined the CN Net. Additionally, over 30 companies and organizations have agreed to participate in the initiative, clear proof of Costa Rica's role as an international climate change leader.

Achieving our goal of carbon neutrality requires access to financial resources. Costa Rica supports international efforts to develop appropriate financial instruments and carbon markets that provide effective incentives for developing countries. We visualize a more flexible future climate regime, oriented toward streamlining the various financial mechanisms and carbon markets, in order to guarantee greater cost efficiency.

We are currently organizing a series of workshops on carbon neutrality in order to introduce our Climate Change Strategy to the international audience. This effort begins a process by which we hope to gain access to adequate financial, technological and human resources and forge an international network of allies willing to act against climate change. We began this dialogue in May with a series of workshops hosted by the Natural Resources Defense Council and held at the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard University. UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies has been a crucial supporter of Costa Rica's initiative, allowing us access to invaluable academic and technological resources and inviting us to take part in the "Alternative Energy and the Americas" workshop held jointly with Ovshinsky Innovation, LLC, on September 29 of this year.

We plan to maintain the momentum of this initiative by

putting together another cycle of similar workshops. The goal is to enable a mutually beneficial dialogue between our country and universities, NGOs, think tanks, government entities, businesses and financial institutions, in order to lay out a road map for the decarbonization of our country while, at the same time, building an international network of allies against climate change.

## Further Reflections

The target of carbon neutrality will not be reached without a combination of national efforts and international support. The Bali agreement recognizes the need for this combination by stipulating that developing countries should undertake "nationally appropriate mitigation actions in the context of sustainable development, supported and enabled by technology, financing and capacity-building, in a measurable, reportable and verifiable manner."

In a collaborative effort among the respective Ministries, Costa Rica will launch policies and measures

that provide incentives for reducing emissions in a variety of sectors. These national policies are necessary but not sufficient to achieve the intended emission reductions. After an arduous process of awareness raising and broad consultation, both public and private sectors have come onboard and are willing to invest. However, it is clear that the total cost cannot be covered domestically. Access to international funds will be critical to cover the difference between national investment and the total cost of going carbon neutral.

In this context, Costa Rica notes with concern that international resources are being earmarked for mitigation efforts in the high-emitting emergent countries where the volume of potential reductions is high. However, it is entirely possible that, with the proper international financial support, smaller countries may be able to achieve reductions more quickly than large countries, and would therefore be able to harness the benefits associated with early reductions. Furthermore,

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Minister Dobles helps with a tree planting.



Photo courtesy of Fonaffio/Sylvia Guardia.

leaving small and medium-size economies out of the global transformation toward low-carbon development condemns these countries to the continued use of soon-to-be obsolete technologies, perpetuating already unacceptable poverty levels.

Costa Rica calls for international funds to be awarded to developing nations based on each country's merits, privileging those that have launched and implemented climate-friendly regulatory frameworks. Disbursement of these resources cannot be based on the mere existence of "green" policies but rather should be made once the reductions in green house gas emissions have been nationally measured and reported and internationally verified.

It is in this manner that Costa Rica interprets the Bali agreement and declares itself ready to accept its common, but differentiated, responsibility. It is time to diverge from business as usual and refrain from picking only the low-hanging fruit when it comes to taking serious action against climate change. Tackling a problem as complex

as global warming, while simultaneously protecting the social and economic pillars of development, requires a major paradigm shift.

Almost 200 years ago, we pledged to become an independent nation, where all our citizens could be free men and women living in peace, and we succeeded. Costa Rica now pledges to become free from climate change by declaring peace with nature and striving to reverse global warming and its deadly consequences. We have begun the journey from words and theories to concrete actions; the time to act is now. Will you join us?

Dr. Roberto Dobles is the Costa Rican Minister of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications. He gave a presentation at the CLAS-sponsored conference "Alternative Energy and the Americas" held in Detroit, Michigan, on September 29, 2008.

Protestors hold balloons representing the carbon footprints of the countries represented at the 2008 G8 summit in Japan.



Photo from Associated Press.