
Offsets in the forests

A logic that violates indigenous and traditional peoples' rights while facilitating further deforestation. A compilation of articles from the World Rainforest Movement Bulletin (WRM). October 2019.

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Acre is a relatively small state in the western Brazilian Amazon, on the border with Peru and Bolivia. The state is well-known as the place where Chico Mendes lived. Mendes was murdered in 1988 for his struggle for the rights of rubber tappers. He became a symbol in Brazil and the world for his struggle for social justice in the forest.

Acre has also become famous worldwide in a very different way: as a state cited as model for a so-called Green Economy in tropical forest areas. This model is built on putting a price on nature and claiming that forests in one place can be destroyed without overall damage to nature as long as they are 'recreated' elsewhere. Or that companies can continue to pollute and burn fossil fuels like petroleum and coal and yet claim to not cause climate change - as long as they pay for example, the state of Acre, for the promise to keep forests in Acre standing as a carbon store. With such a payment for what is called the "ecosystem service of carbon storage", the polluting company can claim to have compensated the climate damage caused by burning petroleum or coal. This idea is called carbon offsetting.

Buying carbon credits, or carbon offsets as they are sometimes also called, is perhaps good for the company PR but it is bad for the climate, for forests and for communities for whom the forest is home. Bad for the climate and forests, because the destruction caused by drilling and burning petroleum and coal will continue. Bad for communities for whom the forest is home because, as the articles in this compilation demonstrate, carbon offsetting brings conflict, dispossession and outside control over community forests.

The Encyclical Letter *Laudato Sí* of 2015 warns about the consequences of falling for this illusion that the climate damage from continued burning of fossil fuels can be compensated:

"171. The strategy of buying and selling 'carbon credits' can lead to a new form of speculation which would not help reduce the emission of polluting gases worldwide. This system seems to provide a quick and easy solution under the guise of a certain commitment to the environment, but in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require. Rather, it may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors."

Acre has become an international model pioneering precisely this trade in carbon credits linked to a mechanism originally called REDD. REDD stands for Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). What may sound good at first sight has shown to be a very damaging idea, for the climate (because it does not help reduce emissions), for the forest (because it does not help reduce deforestation, as the many recent fires in the Amazon have shown) and for communities for

whom the forest is home (because it blames peasant farmers and indigenous peoples for deforestation, restricts their use of the forest, causes many conflicts and allows owners of REDD projects to monitor and control the use of their territory). This reality of REDD is far from the promise of benefits forest-dependent communities that can be found in the colourful PR material on REDD, distributed widely by the government of Acre and their partners like the World Bank and big conservation NGOs.

Today, this REDD idea of saving forests by selling carbon credits to polluting companies or countries who prefer not to reduce their own carbon emissions has taken on a variety of names such as 'natural climate solutions' (when we all know that the only solution to avoiding a climate crisis is to keep petroleum and coal in the ground), 'landscape restoration' or 'bio-based economy'. The names may be changing but the consequences for Amazon communities will remain the same because these remain false solutions pushed from the outside upon forest-dependent communities in the Amazon.

In the past years, communities, activists and local organizations supporting community struggles for social justice have been building – in the spirit of Chico Mendes - an alliance against the “green economy” and its compensation logic. They have documented the manifold negative impacts of this false assumption that carbon emissions from burning fossil carbon contained in petroleum, coal or gas can be compensated by paying for carbon storage in the forest in Acre.

The articles and declarations of this compilation were originally published in the bulletin and website of the World Rainforest Movement. They tell the story of how REDD is a threat for forest-dependent communities in the Amazon and has failed to help prevent deforestation. Several articles address specific struggles of communities in Acre to defend their forests and territories from destruction and from REDD.

Say no to the false solution of carbon offsetting and REDD!

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