
In confronting the climate crisis, what rights should hold precedence?

At the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Doha, Qatar, negotiations around REDD+ broke down primarily as a result of one issue in particular: how to verify the emission reductions achieved by avoiding deforestation through REDD+ projects.

While the countries of the North pushed for verification to be carried out through an external, international process, the countries of the South want to deal with verification domestically, in their own countries. Unless an agreement is reached on this point, it is unlikely that the countries of the North will make financial resources available for REDD+ projects. What can we say about this impasse?

To begin with, we should consider why the verification of carbon emission reductions is being discussed in the first place. Basically, it is because in discussions around REDD, forests are reduced to nothing more than carbon, i.e., the amount of carbon they store and/or release. This is the key point of interest to the countries of the North, as they desperately seek ways to reduce emissions of carbon and other greenhouse gases that lead to climate change, so that they can continue to postpone the drastic changes that are needed in their own models of production and consumption.

If the countries of the North had a broader vision of the importance of conserving forests and fighting deforestation, if they considered all of the essential functions of forests and their importance for the peoples who depend on them, there would be no need to discuss and implement carbon emission verification systems.

In the meantime, these systems are costly and not fully reliable, but they offer a great opportunity for a few big consulting firms or certification companies and other “specialists” to make large sums of money. It has been estimated that expenditure on the monitoring and verification of carbon emission reductions could account for more than half the cost of a REDD+ project. In other words: a huge waste of money, but a fantastic business opportunity.

An external verification system is meant to serve as a guarantee for REDD projects on the “carbon market”, that is, to make it possible for countries and corporations to buy REDD carbon credits and use them to offset their own emissions. Simply put, they would be purchasing the “right” to continue producing carbon emissions. The financial capital market, which is primarily interested in this new market because of its promise of lucrative new speculative activity, needs some form of guarantee, such as the verification of carbon emission reductions. Without such a guarantee, it would be difficult to commodify the so-called “assets”, pieces of paper with a monetary value, that are generated by the “environmental service” of carbon storage.

What is also noteworthy is the exaggerated emphasis that the countries of the North place on the reduction of forest carbon emissions through REDD+ projects. It is currently estimated that deforestation accounts for around 15% of global carbon emissions. Even if this were a reasonable estimate, it is still a small amount compared to the remaining 85% of emissions, for which the

countries of the North are overwhelmingly responsible from a historic perspective. This leads us to ask: If the countries of the South decided at some point to demand external verification of the drastic reductions needed in carbon emissions by countries of the North, would any country in the North actually accept it?

Even less discussed is the fact that, within the market-based REDD+ scheme, the idea of the “right” of countries and large corporations in the North to pollute is inherent. However, this is a “right” that is not established in any international agreement or declaration. It is something that has been imposed historically, since the colonial era, and facilitated by the current power wielded by the most industrialized countries of the North and their transnationals, as well as the rapidly rising power of other countries that apply the same logic.

In this issue of the WRM bulletin we want to talk about other rights, namely human rights. These rights are in fact enshrined in various international declarations and conventions, such as the right to a healthy environment, which includes the right to a balanced climate that allows communities to guarantee their livelihoods, well-being and way of life. Nnimmo Bassey, in his article on oil and human rights, warns that unless 80% of known fossil fuel reserves are left underground, the world will experience extreme global warming that would have catastrophic effects.

While the “right” to pollute of a small minority of the world’s population, headed up by multinational corporations, holds precedence, these corporations – as this edition demonstrates – constantly violate the human rights of the communities affected by their projects. They continue to destroy more and more tropical forests. But this was not discussed in Doha.

The human rights of all cannot be subordinated to the “right” to pollute of a small few as a means of ensuring profits for multinationals. It is unacceptable for this logic to be allowed to threaten the survival of humankind and the planet, particularly in the countries of the South. It is vital for the large majority of the world’s population to mobilize and organize, to an ever greater degree, in order to exercise, to an ever greater degree, their legitimate power, the power of the people.