
New crossroads, same actors: The green economy of the powerful, voices of resistance of women

Business as usual dressed up in green

Humanity is moving along old paths in new clothes. The current civilization model, which is portrayed as hegemonic but actually corresponds to a small minority of the planet, is dragging it towards its limits, exposing it to multiple crises.

At the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, the governments of the world recognized that the planet was facing a severe environmental crisis. The famous Bruntland Report gave rise to the concept of “sustainable development”, a type of development through which it would be possible to maintain and increase growth without placing future generations at risk. From this point on a series of United Nations conventions were adopted on biodiversity, desertification and climate change, supposedly aimed at stemming the environmental crisis.

It seemed like the future of the planet had a real chance. However, none of these purported solutions addressed the root of the problem: the capitalist system and its logic of limitless growth. Vested interests won out, and instead of the change needed, the response was to eagerly embrace and promote neoliberal strategies that have led to the commodification of nature.

Now, 20 years later, as we head for another Rio summit, the environmental crisis is even more acute, and “sustainable development” now bears the label of the “green economy”. Incorporated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2008, the “green economy” advocates switching to renewable fuel but maintaining the same systems of production, trade, finance and consumption.

Without a doubt, this proposal benefits the large capitalist economies, which currently find themselves mired in a severe financial-economic crisis. The “green economy” offers an opportunity for their corporations to resume the accumulation of capital and reap greater profits through both productive and speculative activities. It is a matter of redirecting investment towards nature – transformed into “natural capital” – as well as investing in new, supposedly clean technologies such as those that use biomass and in the “carbon emissions market”.

Within this framework, the concept of payments for environmental services is at the eye of the storm. “The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity” (TEEB), another UNEP initiative, has been instrumental in assigning an economic value to biodiversity – thus overcoming a major obstacle for the promoters of the commercialization of nature.

From this perspective, “environmental services” and “trade in environmental services” play a key role in the “green economy”. According to Silvia Ribeiro of the ETC Group, which is monitoring and researching this process, the result will be “greater commodification and privatization of nature and ecosystems, through the integration of their functions (defined as ‘services’) into financial markets” (see WRM Bulletin 175).

Carbon markets also have a part in this perverse logic. While their origin dates back before the current promotion of the concept of the “green economy”, they are an example of the efforts to commodify and therefore privatize the air, water, forests and biodiversity.

Trade in illusions

The Kyoto Protocol accepted regulated carbon markets in the framework of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This means that companies that reduce emissions can sell them, converted into bonds, to other companies who find it more advantageous to use these pieces of paper as a licence to continue polluting.

Carbon markets form part of the so-called “financialization” of nature, in which financial speculation has come to predominate over production, spurred by increasing financial market deregulation, while capital markets – through the issuing of stocks and bonds – have become the main sources of investment.

Carbon market transactions now total more than USD 100 billion annually, with many investment funds and other major financial players now investing in the carbon credits market including Deutsche Bank, Morgan Stanley, Barclays Capital, Rabobank, BNP Paribas Fortis, Sumitomo, Kommunalkredit, Cantor Fitzgerald.(1)

By 2010, much of the growth in the volume of trade in carbon happened in the secondary carbon derivatives market, in other words, where negotiations take place between financial operators. What started out in the primary market as a project that would supposedly reduce emissions in a country in the South – with those emission reductions sold in the form of certificates to a buyer in the North – ends up as a purely financial activity, with no additional benefit for the climate and for the communities that depend on forests, and which purportedly – according to the propaganda – would benefit from the money they would receive for not using their forests.

A complex financial system has been created, based on the fallacy of establishing a direct equivalence between the fossil released from the subsoil where it was permanently stored for millions of years, and the carbon in the biosphere temporarily stored in plants. Once fossil carbon is released, extracted and burned, it cannot be safely stored again underground, because biological and geological systems do not have the necessary capacity.

In fact, the only solution is to leave the bulk of the coal, oil and gas reserves that have still not been exploited underground. But there are many powerful interests who are opposed to this, and so creative efforts are channelled towards inventing new ways of conducting business with nature and avoiding the changes genuinely needed.

The market, which is expanding into unimaginable areas – such as, in this case, pollution – cannot solve the problem of climate change. On the contrary, it exacerbates it, because it distracts attention from the need to undertake structural change towards a system that is not dependent on the consumption of fossil fuels. It also exacerbates inequality, and allows the countries who owe their growth not only to the exploitation of other peoples but also to their contamination of the atmosphere to elude their historical responsibility.

Forests on the stock exchange

Forests are currently a hot topic, but unfortunately, not due to genuine concern for their preservation,

but rather for their use as the basis for convoluted business dealings.

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) is a mechanism introduced into the Kyoto Protocol in 2010 through negotiations at the Cancun Climate Change Conference. By placing a monetary value on the carbon stored in trees, based on the argument that this will serve as an incentive for forest preservation in countries of the South, since it will be more profitable to keep trees standing than to clear them, REDD proposes that the emissions supposedly “reduced” by preventing deforestation be traded on the carbon markets.

Aside from the fact that REDD projects entail costly and not very reliable systems for monitoring carbon flow, they have led to a situation where the voracious search for biomass and carbon credits has set its sights on forest peoples, who are taken in or coerced into complying.

An article published by the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI) news agency in its magazine *América Latina en Movimiento* reports that “indigenous peoples or communities, usually small in size, with little or no experience in dealing with the Western modern world, often with tenuous or no legal ownership of their lands and territories, will face increasing pressure to negotiate their rights over their territories or resources, directly or indirectly, with powerful international actors. (...) Obviously these communities will be in even less of a position to negotiate with adequate knowledge of the complexity of the international process and to unravel its implications. There are not a few cases of communities that have been taken in by seductive promises – true or false – without measuring the consequences for their livelihoods; or of leaders who have given in to the temptation of rapid access to resources, sometimes through the use of bribery. There are also communities with little negotiating power who have been pushed off of their lands, or have accepted derisory conditions. The terms of negotiation are therefore extremely unequal, and when communities resist, their members often face the risk of being evicted, fenced in, or even physically eliminated. The history of the Conquest is thus repeating itself through new forms.”(2)

In Indonesia, while oil and mining concessions continue to expand, and oil palm plantations now cover 11 million hectares and seem destined to keep growing, there are more than 40 REDD projects and grandiose government discourse on the importance of “saving the forests”. The non-governmental organization WALHI/Friends of the Earth Indonesia has categorically stated its opposition to carbon markets and REDD. In an interview with REDD-Monitor, WALHI campaigns director Teguh Surya commented, “ If you want to save your lungs you should stop smoking. The government says that we will save Kalimantan's forests as the ‘lungs of the world’. [But only 45%](#). They will exploit the remaining 55%. You cannot save your lungs if you are still addicted to cigarettes. It's impossible .”(3)

In the meantime, REDD credits have still not been accepted by the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS), which currently accounts for 97% of the existing carbon market. This means they must be traded on the voluntary carbon market, which is not regulated – up until now it has mainly served to “greenwash” the image of corporations – and is much smaller than the official Kyoto market, which is still in the REDD preparation stage.

Nevertheless, the actors who have a strong interest in the implementation of REDD continue to carry out a wide range of efforts and to commit copious resources to projects whose execution remains uncertain, given past experience of broken promises, the conditions attached to financing, and the current financial crisis, as highlighted in a recent report by a number of civil society organizations.(4)

Bringing visibility to the gender dimension

Forests are also much more than mere receptacles of carbon. Above all, they provide livelihoods, sustenance and income to more than 1.6 billion people around the world, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It is peasant farmers and indigenous peoples who depend most on the forests, and among them, it is primarily women whose survival depends on the supplies they find in the forests.

Of particular relevance here are the socially constructed roles, rights and responsibilities that are assigned to men and women and the relation between the two sexes, giving rise to gender roles. In the division of roles, women have been assigned the task of caring for the home and responsibility for the health and education of their families. For centuries, rural women have been responsible for domestic chores; caring for and feeding their families; and tending the family's crops, including the exchange of seeds and selling the produce grown. But in general, they occupy a socially invisible place.

According to data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), cited in an article by Esther Vivas, a member of the Centre for Studies on Social Movements (CEMS) at Universitat Pompeu Fabra,(5) in many African countries women represent 70% of the field labour, are responsible for supplying 90% of the domestic water supply, and are responsible for between 60 and 80% of the production of food consumed and sold by the family. They account for 100% of the processing of foods, 80% of the activities of food storage and transportation, and 90% of the labour involved in preparing the earth before planting.

Meanwhile, a report from the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency, cited in an article by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID),(6) reveals: "Women gather firewood from forests and fetch water from rivers and lakes for household use. They sustain their families and communities with the products of the land. Yet in most African countries, women's legal property ownership rights are not secure. Only 1% of women in Tanzania have legal land titles. In Zimbabwe, up to 20% of women have land titles, but despite this relatively higher number, 'women rarely profit' from their land."

The AWID article explains how the expansion of monoculture plantations for agrofuel production, one of the driving forces behind land grabbing, has led to a situation in Ghana where "the traditional livelihoods of many women who depended on their cultivation of cocoa and oil palms are being eroded as a result of land grabs. Ethiopian widows who are already dispossessed of their land ownership rights, and have to farm on 'marginal lands' are further dispossessed by land grabs as these 'marginal' lands are being grabbed to grow biofuels."

In many cases of changes in land use – which has involved the destruction of forests and other ecosystems to make way for monoculture plantations – the incorporation of women into the paid workforce has saddled them with a double burden. They continue caring for their families while also working outside the home to earn an income, often in precarious employment, earning far lower salaries than men for the same work, which sometimes leads them to work longer hours to increase their income.

In terms of the use of forests, local communities' knowledge of trees and non-timber forest products is complex and rooted in tradition, but in addition, both this knowledge and the use of forests is often gendered, resulting in asymmetrical distribution of and access to power between men and women, as recognized by the UN-REDD Programme in a recent report.(7) It is worth highlighting the report's reflection that the use of the term "community" as homogeneous, static, harmonious and "un-gendered" units within which people share common interests and needs conceals power relations

and masks biases in interests and needs based on, for example, age, class, caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. The report also stresses the need to question gender differences, in other words, what it means to be a man or a woman in a given context. It refers to statistics on agriculture and forestry which reveal that women work longer hours than men, frequently in activities related to subsistence and family care. This translates into less time to attend and participate in other activities that could contribute to greater involvement and access to information

Moreover, there are also gender differences in rights and access to land, based on customary practices and legal constructs. This inequality is crucial given that land is a vital resource for food production.

Despite their key role in subsistence, women can be more seriously impacted in times of food crises. FAO points to evidence that in 2008, when food prices rose sharply, in some countries female-headed households were more vulnerable than those headed by males, because they spend a larger proportion of household income on food and because they were less able to respond by increasing food production.(8)

According to research by Arabella Fraser, cited by Esther Vivas in the abovementioned article, access to land is not a guaranteed right for many women. In numerous Southern countries laws forbid this right, and in those countries where legal access exists there are often traditions and practices that prevent women from property ownership, which means they also have no control over the sale of land or how it is transmitted to children. In the same article, a member of the Karnataka State Farmers Association of India, which forms part of the La Via Campesina network, explains that peasant women in India have almost no rights and are considered an “addition” to males. “Rural women are the most untouchable of the untouchables within the social caste system,” she maintained.

The same situation with regard to access to land exists in much of Africa, where women do not have inheritance rights, which means that if they are widowed, they end up losing their land and other assets. However, African women are fighting back and organizing to confront the recent upsurge in land grabs and to demand the right to ownership and control of land and natural resources. Kenya recently adopted a national land policy that cements women's land ownership rights and Tanzania has a law that requires women's participation in local land administration bodies. Meanwhile, in 2009, the African Union adopted the Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa, which calls on states to ensure equitable access to land and recognizes the role of colonization in cementing patriarchy in land ownership laws by “conferring title and inheritance rights on male family members” and permitting discrimination against women on matters of personal law (marriage and inheritance), as reported in the above mentioned AWID article.

Agribusiness, which has found new routes for expansion in the context of the green economy, has entailed the dismantling of family economies, local markets and sustainable land use. Large-scale mechanized production on monoculture plantations and the loss of forests has led to the loss of sovereignty for many local communities. Women's ties to the forest, their role as providers and their importance within the community have all been violently altered, not as the outcome of a sought-after and conscious process of change, but rather as the result of an abrupt externally caused rupture. The market “solutions” of the appropriation of the land, water and air doubly affect women due to their lack of rights and greater vulnerability.

Women, subjugated but not silent

Among the “environmental services” formats ready to be sold on the carbon market, REDD and REDD+ have emerged with particular force. In order to put their best foot forward, the promoters of these mechanisms propose addressing the situation of women through gender mainstreaming in project formulation, as advocated in the abovementioned UN-REDD Programme report. REDD is therefore presented as a *fait accompli*, in which it is necessary to participate in order to make it better. And gender representation will earn it even greater backing...

The privatization of what were once common goods shared by communities – land, water, forests – frequently leads to an intensification of migration, which hits women particularly hard given their historical responsibility as family caregivers. Migration characterized as a process of “urbanization disconnected from industrialization” (see the article by Esther Vivas) pushes ex-peasant women to the cities, which then feeds them back to the marginalized periphery where they live off the informal economy. Women are an essential component of these national and international migratory flows, which result in the dismantling and abandonment of families, land, processes of production and ways of life.

The uncertain and undoubtedly meagre payment for the “environmental service” provided by forests is a perverse incentive in the case of communities that are already hemmed in by the destruction caused by the advance of agribusiness. Surreptitiously, this form of commercialization of life threatens the sacred bond that has ancestrally tied indigenous peoples, above all, to nature, through a cosmology that has historically converted them into guardians of the forests. Behind REDD lies the loss of access to forests and their use by communities and indigenous peoples. And given the roles and functions of rural and indigenous women, this will especially impact on them, as described earlier.

This is why other voices are rising up, demanding the right to say no to REDD! It was precisely during the 16th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 16), which incorporated the REDD mechanism, that women and organizations from around the world joined together to reaffirm the importance of safeguarding the rights of women and to state their opposition to REDD initiatives. The arguments put forward in the statement they issued, which we contributed to disseminating at the time (http://wrm.org.uy/subjects/women/Position_on_Women_and_REDD.html), remain as relevant today as ever.

For their part, on International Women's Day this year, the World March of Women denounced “the new round of looting and appropriation of natural resources” and stated their rejection of “the consumer culture that impoverishes communities, creating dependency and exterminating local production.” They stressed, “We continue on the march, to resist, and to construct a world for us, for others, for our peoples, for all living things and the environment. These actions continue to confront the onslaught of the lethal capitalist paradigm with its false solutions to the crises and its fundamentalist, conservative ideology.” And finally, their declaration concluded, “we demonstrate our resistance and our self-defence through our bodies and our territories. We strengthen our struggle for structural changes in our lives and we will continue on the march until we are all free! We call for the networking between our movements and the strengthening of alliances with other movements, for it is in this way that we will construct a free world.”(9)

In Brazil, on March 1, 1,150 women from the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) occupied a eucalyptus plantation owned by Suzano Papel Celulose (10) in the extreme south of the state of Bahia. The occupation formed part of a series of actions organized by La Via Campesina Brazil to mark the international day of women's struggle. Its aim was to denounce the unemployment, poverty,

social inequality and expulsion of the rural population caused by monoculture eucalyptus plantations, which have taken over lands that were once forests. Another 2,000 women marched through the streets of the city of Curitiba (11) protesting against agribusiness, the violence of capitalism and patriarchy, the approval of the new Forest Code (which paves the way for the further advance of agribusiness – see WRM Bulletin 166) and the green economy promoted by big capital.

In their opposition to the advance of agribusiness, women are raising the banner of food sovereignty.

The monopoly held by a group of transnationals with the support of governments and international institutions (the World Bank, IMF, etc.) that promote policies that benefit them (privatization, forced opening to the global economy, free trade agreements) has taken control of the production of food and turned it into just another business.

As the organization GRAIN points out, the problem is not a lack of food, but rather a lack of access to it. In 2008, worldwide grain production had tripled since the 1960's, while the global population had only doubled. It is the prevailing production, trade and pricing policies that condemn people to hunger in the midst of abundance.

In the face of this situation, food sovereignty has become a process of popular resistance whose conceptualization makes it possible to bring social movements together around commonly agreed goals and actions. Food sovereignty prioritizes local autonomy, local markets and community action, and incorporates elements like agrarian reform, territorial control, biodiversity, cooperation and health. It seeks to regain the right to decide what, how and where to produce what we eat. And as Vivas aptly notes, there is an inherent feminist perspective incorporated in food sovereignty.

Power will continue to seek formulas and opportunities to perpetuate itself, but resistance will continue to find voices, and among them, those of an ever growing number of women.

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2- “Pueblos selváticos en la encrucijada”, Sally Burch, América Latina en Movimiento, El cuento de la economía verde, <http://alainet.org/publica/alai468-9.pdf>

3- Interview with Teguh Surya, WALHI: “We are against REDD. We are against carbon trading,” Chris Lang, March 9, 2012, <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2012/03/09/interview-with-teguh-surya-walhi-we-are-against-redd-we-are-against-carbon-trading/>

4- “O mercado de carbono não é a solução que promete ser para governos, florestas e populações do hemisfério sul”, published in February 2012 by various civil society organizations, http://www.fern.org/sites/fern.org/files/carbonleaflet_25nov.pdf

5- “Without women there is no food sovereignty”, Esther Vivas, 2012, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2473>

6- “Africa's Latest Land Rush: The Effect of Land Grabs on Women's Rights”, AWID, February 10, 2012, <http://awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/Africa-s-Latest-Land-Rush-The-Effect-of-Land-Grabs-on-Women-s-Rights>

7- “The Business Case for Mainstreaming Gender in REDD+”, December 2011, UN-REDD Programme

8- “The State of Food and Agriculture - 2010-2011”, Women in Agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development; Women's work, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e02.pdf>

9- World March of Women Declaration - International Women's Day 2012,

http://www.marchemonddiale.org/news/mmfnnewsitem.2012-03-05.8809414578/en?set_language=en&cl=en

10- “Mulheres do MST ocupam fazenda da empresa Suzano, no município de Alcobaça-Bahia”, MST, <http://www.mst.org.br/Mulheres-camponesas-ocupam-fazenda-da-Suzano-Papel-e-Celulose-no-sul-da-Bahia>

11- “Marcha reúne 2 mil mulheres do campo e cidade em Curitiba por Código Florestal”, Camilla Pinheiro and Pedro Carrano, <http://www.mst.org.br/node/13026>