
The 'sins' of the REDD+ approach

The world has been caught in a severe climate crisis as a result of the dramatic increase of anthropogenic (namely, caused by human beings) gases in the atmosphere causing a dangerous rise in the global temperature – what is known as global warming. However, though a global process, it has not been caused so “globally”. Neither all human beings bear the blame for such state of things nor are the ones that historically have contributed most to the problem – industrialized northern countries – taking on their responsibility.

Strong claims – including ours – argue that the ultimate underlying cause of the problem can be traced in the present consumerist system “exported” from northern industrialised countries to the world, where production, commerce and consumption swallow huge quantities of fossil fuels.

The so called international community (organised in the United Nations) has acknowledged the crisis, invested a lot of money in protracted international meetings and proposed a mixture of market-based measures and poor and insufficient reduction commitments to deal with climate change. Failing to deal with the root of the problem, those measures have even allowed polluting countries to evade those reduction commitments. The result is that greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise.

The UN Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has lately focused on deforestation and forest degradation as a source of carbon emission. However, recalling what we had said some time ago, the premise that carbon released through deforestation is the same as carbon produced by burning fossil fuels is a faulty premise, because climate change is not the result of emissions from forests, but rather of the constant increase in the total stock of carbon in the atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels. It is this carbon, which has been stored underground for millions of years as coal, oil and gas, that is the cause of the problem. The resulting carbon emissions – which do not form part of the natural cycle of carbon continuously released and absorbed by plant life – began to accumulate in the atmosphere and gave rise to global warming, which in turn triggered climate change. To claim that carbon emissions from the use of fossil fuels can be “offset” simply by preventing emissions from deforestation is a false, misleading and lethal argument.⁽¹⁾ This is obviously not to dismiss the problem of deforestation, however, it must be stressed that REDD is only addressing one minor source of carbon while it also does not tackle the complex set of direct and especially underlying drivers of deforestation.

In 2005, under the UNFCCC COP 11 the so called REDD (standing for reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) strategies entered the scene. Later on, in 2008, COP 13 added the concepts of “conservation, sustainable management and enhancement of forest carbon stocks”, giving rise to what is known as REDD+. Financial incentives have flooded already to a number of projects allegedly intended to conserve the forests in tropical or subtropical southern countries, for the sake of carbon.

REDD+ programs imply complex strategies of monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) where national governments are being assisted in their preparation by UN organizations – including FAO, UNEP and UNDP under the UN-REDD program – while the World Bank has been leading the

provision of economic incentives through the Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF).

While focusing on deforestation in southern countries reduces pressure on industrialised northern countries to cut their own emissions, the REDD+ governing institutions have been empowered to shape and define, validate or marginalise decisions related to land tenure, benefit sharing and forest management in southern countries. Also, a set of principles and standards will define how to measure carbon stocks –as well as who participates in the process, and to what extent. As highlighted in a report on REDD+ by Thompson, Baruah and Carr (2), such control over participation and validation of certain practices, data, and analysis in addressing climate change affects not only local communities but also the states which are constrained by frameworks that undermine their sovereignty as long as those frameworks define what is to be measured and how.

On the other hand, REDD+ projects tend to reinforce the role of the state including many states that do not duly recognize the land rights of forest and forest related peoples who have been indeed true guardians of the forests. Satellite data used by the Woods Hole Research Center and the Instituto de Pesquisa Ambiental da Amazônia have shown that forest lands where indigenous rights have been recognized stopped clearing in high-deforestation frontier regions in the Amazon. In spite of that, REDD+ gives economic incentives to governments to leave forests untouched, which will imply eviction and marginalization of forest people. Also repression of traditional forest land uses will inevitably impact on livelihoods and thus food security and sovereignty of local communities as well as on their historical structures and ways of living that nurture their identity. Meanwhile, fossil fuel industries, plantation companies, and other industrial deforesters are overlooked.

Indigenous peoples face also the problem of lack of information. Quoting the mentioned report by Thompson et al: "many criticism of REDD+ activities around the world cite insufficient information being provided to indigenous peoples, resulting in the further marginalization of already vulnerable groups".

Claims point not only to lack of information. In January, 2010, a Papuan New Guinea native leader of the Kamula Doso Peoples, Abilie Wape, denounced he was forced at gun point to surrender the carbon rights of his tribe's forest: "They came and got me in the night, police came with a gun. They threatened me. They forced me to get in the vehicle. Then we came in the night to the hotel. They told me: 'You sign. Otherwise, if you don't sign, I'll get a police and lock you up.'"(3)

REDD+ frame may also shape a key issue such as land tenure which is related not only to local communities but also to deforestation. A study by IIED on land tenure in REDD (4) explains that "unclear or insecure tenure may itself promote deforestation. Resource users may have little incentive to protect the resource if they feel they have no stake in it. ... In addition, tenure may influence the distribution of risks, costs and benefits of financial transfers linked to forest conservation. More secure tenure is therefore likely to give local people greater leverage in negotiations with the government and the private sector."

The report, which has identified tenure regimes in seven rainforest countries and some of the challenges they present for REDD, explains that: "As REDD schemes are likely to be regulated by national rather than customary law, a key issue is the extent to which customary tenure systems are recognised and protected under national legislation". And concludes: "It will be hard to determine who should be supported under REDD schemes, e.g. who should get payments, since tenure is unclear on much of the land under threat of deforestation. Experience tells us that, as the value of standing forests or forest land increases, powerful actors tend to capture those values to the detriment of the less powerful forest-dependent poor. If REDD increases value it may also increase

conflicts as claimants stand to gain more by winning control. Critical dangers with tenurial uncertainty include: customary rights being violated in the interests of inward investment; community interests being locked into abusive contracts of a long-term nature; and land speculation by investors at the expense of community interests.”

As Tom Goldtooth, from the Indigenous Environmental Network stated: “The debate must be about property rights; customary land rights and land tenureship; and how this is defined within the discussions of REDD and forested lands. The insertion of strict language that recognizes the rights of Indigenous People is very important here, because it’s not just about full participation. How can you have full participation if you don’t have rights?” (5)

A market-based REDD+ - the most probable outcome of the overall process, even for proposals of fund-based REDD+ - will add power to corporate interests as long as they are more equipped with money and expertise than local communities at the time of presenting projects and complying with complex requirements. Thus, business companies enter the scene becoming stakeholders at the same level as communities that have long protected the forest while using it to meet their needs.

For women the impact of market-based mechanisms is twofold. They generally occupy a marginal position in monetary economies as long as their role as caretakers of the family – in charge of rearing the children, cooking, fetching water, taking care of the old people, and so on – and the forests is economically invisible. Also, they seldom participate in the settlement of transactions. Those in a weaker initial negotiating position are more likely to lose.

While a major sin of REDD+’s approach as an alleged solution to deforestation is that it neglects the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation ultimately putting the blame on forest communities, other major sin is that REDD+ has opened the door to monoculture tree plantations.

The Kyoto Protocol adheres to FAO’s definition of forests that includes any area with a certain quantity of trees. Thus, even alien genetically modified industrial tree plantations are considered a kind of forests – planted forests. REDD+ activities will likely adopt this definition, even more as REDD+’s approach reinforces the reductionist view of forests – now converted into just “carbon stocks”.

We have mentioned some major sins of REDD+ but maybe the worst of all is that it fails to tackle the urgent problem that it is meant to solve: climate change. In times when a concerted action on a large scale in many countries – mainly the ones with more emission levels –is urgently needed, REDD+ becomes a false solution that diverts the attention from the real measure: reduce carbon emissions at source.

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(1) "From climate change to climate disaster: A thin oil line", WRM Bulletin 160

(2) “Seeing REDD+ as a Project of environmental governance”, Mary C. Thompson, Manali Baruah, Edward R. Carr, 2010, pp 100-110, ELSEVIER, www.sciencedirect.com

(3) “Carbon Markets Violate Indigenous Peoples’ Rights and Threaten Cultural Survival”, Press Release, 1/13/10, Indigenous Environmental Network, <http://www.globaljusticeecology.org/pressroom.php?ID=345>

(4) “Tenure in REDD – Start-point or afterthought?” Cotula, L. and Mayers, J. 2009, Natural Resource Issues No. 15, International Institute for Environment and Development, London, UK, <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/13554IIED.pdf>

(5) “The REDD train is going pretty fast and it’s left us at the station”: Interview with Tom B.K. Goldtooth”, by Chris Lang, <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2009/01/14/interview-with-tom-bk-goldtooth/>