# Destructive companies “creating more biodiversity”?

As we have already argued in previous bulletins, it is absurd to accept the idea that companies can freely destroy an area—for example to conduct mining activities—as long as they “offset” these activities. The World Bank, large corporations, conservationist NGOs and, increasingly, national governments argue that it is acceptable to “offset” the biodiversity destroyed by mining, as long as an “equivalent” area is protected or re-created elsewhere. The absurdity of this idea does not stop here. The World Bank, through its private sector arm—the IFC—claims that this kind of “offset” project should ideally result in “more biodiversity” (1): in technical terms this idea is called “net positive impact,” even when it involves the destruction of thousands of hectares of forest, and with it the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities.

The “biodiversity offsets” proposal is based, in the first place, on accepting mining and other destructive activities as inevitable. These activities must go on, as if they were the only way towards a “better future” or “progress”—which are some of the promises made to people when another major development project is announced. Continued destruction is so essential to the concept of “biodiversity offsets,” that this proposal would not be viable or even exist if there were no destruction. It is a perverse logic, since anyone with a bit of common sense would seek first to avoid destruction, rather than facilitate its continuance. But in the current capitalist economic system, destruction makes sense; from the perspective of those who continue to destroy with impunity in order to create new opportunities to profit.

In the perverse logic of “offsets,” its proponents seek an area “equivalent” to that which will be destroyed, and in the case of “biodiversity offsets,” in the same region or country. Then they invent a story – very much like what happens with REDD+ projects – in which they claim that the area runs the risk of being destroyed or deforested in the future, not by the company, but by the population using the forest. The mining company appears, generally with the support of large conservationist NGOs, proposing conservation as a way to “save” the area from “destruction;” which involves restricting local communities’ access to the forest and their traditional activities, such as agriculture. A report soon to be released describes what this means for the people living in an “offset” area (2). It focuses on one of the most internationally known “biodiversity offset” projects, developed by mining company Rio Tinto in Madagascar. While local peoples are blamed for total destruction of the “offset” area, and have their rights to use the forest restricted, Rio Tinto QMM is allowed to freely deforest 1,500 hectares to install a mine and extract the mineral ilmenite.

But the perversity of such projects goes even further. In some cases companies claim they even “create” “more biodiversity,” for example, when—in addition to protecting the “offset” area—they carry out complementary activities such as tree-planting to “enhance” the region’s biodiversity. The project is thus even more perverse, since they present mining—which is extremely destructive—as an activity that contributes positively to the environment. It is also perverse because they usually promote reforestation activities as social projects, when, in practice, participating community members—and it's never all of them—are paid very little. Meanwhile, communities are restricted in their

livelihood activities, a situation which jeopardizes their food sovereignty. Worse yet is when reforestation involves monoculture plantations of fast-growing species that require a lot of water and chemicals, a frequent scenario.

In order for this “offset” logic to thrive, it is necessary to have laws and regulations protecting companies so that they can destroy legally, as long as they carry out “offset” activities. The World Bank, for example, encourages this. The first article of this bulletin addresses those dangerous changes in laws and regulations, offering a glimpse into the growth of this phenomenon in the global South. Another article reflects on how the green economy logic, which tries to reduce “biodiversity” and “nature” to a mere group of species and “ecosystem services,” increases the impunity of companies that destroy them. Another article describes how this logic has played out in Colombia, in the context of peace negotiations to end the armed conflict in the country. One article offers a critical reflection on local community “consultations,” which also abide by the logic that a destructive project is inevitable, and wherein decisions are usually taken long before the community knows about the project. This bulletin also includes an article on how REDD is failing to protect forests: After the Nigerian government implemented REDD projects restricting communities’ traditional use of forests, it proposed the construction of a mega-highway that not only will destroy forests and communal territories, but also cut through three REDD project areas. The final article, from India, shows how extractive industry’s corporate interests run roughshod over communities’ collective rights, even when these rights have been legally recognized.

False promises tied to proven destructive activities—both in terms of “offsets” and claims to create “more biodiversity,”—are not just restricted to “biodiversity offset” schemes. In the last Paris climate conference, different versions of the idea to “Capture and Store Carbon,” combined with activities like tree-planting, suggest it would be possible to develop projects that result in “negative emissions.” Corporate interests primarily spread these ideas. This means, for example, that oil companies could continue to burn this product, to “capture” the carbon emitted and to “store” it somewhere through a given technology, often uncertain. And, if a project like that is linked to another one that involves large monoculture tree plantations that “store” carbon from the atmosphere in a country in the global South, the company claims it has not only “offset” its emissions, but also helped solve the climate crisis, since it created a situation of “negative emissions.” Indeed, at the Paris Conference we saw ambitious plans to “reforest” Africa, and in this bulletin we have included an article about a conference that took place this month in Ghana, which seeks to promote this idea even more.

One positive aspect of these plans is that, in their absurdity, they make more evident how unviable the current destructive model of production and consumption is. We see this daily in the ever more serious environmental destruction and its impacts. We must therefore continue exposing and denouncing the increasingly absurd and irrational ways that such group of destructive businesses explore to preserve their interests.

*1 -* http://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/bff0a28049a790d6b835faa8c6a8312a/PS6_English_2012.pdf?MOD=AJPERES

*2 - The report on the Rio Tinto project in Madagascar and the impacts of the company's “biodiversity offset” project, production of Re:Common and WRM, will be published shortly.*