
CDM: Clean Development Mechanism or Carbon Dealers' Market?

In 1997, the negotiators of the Kyoto Protocol came up with an ingeniously-named project: the "Clean Development Mechanism." For the lay person, the message was that the governments of the world had finally agreed to create a mechanism that would allow development atmospherically non-polluting. But what this wording hides is anything but clean.

This mechanism is in fact a licence to pollute. In Kyoto, industrialized countries committed themselves to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but they simultaneously invented a way out of those same commitments. The mechanism is simple: instead of cutting emissions at source, they would "compensate for" emissions by implementing projects in other countries. Some of the possible projects involve forests, tree plantations and soils that would allegedly act as "carbon sinks". A U.S. senior official candidly told Reuters: "If you remove a ton of carbon from the atmosphere through carbon sinks then that is the same as avoiding a ton of emissions through fossil fuels" and added that "by counting how much carbon is absorbed through forests and farmland, the pressure would be greatly reduced on U.S. companies to cut emissions and other gases." And that's the objective of the CDM: to reduce pressures to cut emissions, particularly in the North.

However, what the earth needs is precisely the opposite. The transfer of carbon from fossil fuels to the atmosphere cannot go on indefinitely. Some 4,000 billion tonnes of carbon in fossil fuels are still under the earth's surface, which is more than ten times the amount of carbon stored in forests. Adding as little as few hundred billion tons of this to the air would likely result in a climatic disaster. What's thus needed first and foremost is to prevent the extraction and use of those fossil fuels by replacing them with clean, renewable and low impact energy sources and energy efficiency measures. Such would be the meaning --at least from a climate perspective-- of a Clean Development Mechanism.

Climate negotiators have perverted the meaning of those words to create a CDM which is in fact only a Carbon Dealers' Market, through which some will economically benefit at the expense of the world's climate. Still, some government delegates --particularly from countries more likely to be gravely affected by climate change-- are trying to bring some reason to the debate. Mr. Espen Ronneberg, of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, in July 27, 1998, presented a position paper of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) on the Clean Development Mechanism. In his presentation, he said: "It is not in our interest to create new loopholes for certain industrialized countries to export out their domestic obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. ...The unscrupulous industrialized countries who are seeking to promote such projects need to be reminded of their obligations under the Convention itself as well as under the Kyoto Protocol --to reduce their own emissions of greenhouse gases-- the primary focus of which should be domestic action."

It is important to highlight that the CDM has not yet been approved and two battles need to be fought to prevent sinks from being included in it: the September meeting of the Convention's Subsidiary Bodies and the November meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The "unscrupulous industrialized countries" must not be allowed to negotiate the world's atmosphere with equally unscrupulous Southern governments willing to sell it for a handful of dollars.

