
[A Dialogue Reflecting on 15 years of REDD as a Forest Climate Policy](#)

In November 2022, WRM, along with other allies, spoke with several authors from the publication, [“15 Years of REDD: A Mechanism Rotten at the Core”](#). The aim was to reflect on the different layers of harmful impacts that REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) has caused over the last 15 years. We must recall that REDD was introduced in UN climate negotiations as the leading policy on forests. It was also at the UN where the logic of offsets was introduced—that is, the erroneous idea that one person’s contamination in one specific place can be offset in another place by another actor. REDD is based on this logic, which has allowed corporate and state criminals to continue with their business as usual and garner a “green” image.

A lot can be said about REDD’s failures and the impacts it has caused in territories. It is important to emphasize, though, how its proponents have continuously repeated that forest-dependent communities are to blame for deforestation, and that REDD is the salvation to reduce deforestation. This colonialist and racist discourse facilitates the imposition of restrictions and prohibitions on communities and Indigenous Peoples regarding whether they can access and use their forests and lands. Yet REDD does not impose restrictions or prohibitions on the oil industry, logging companies, mining companies, mega-infrastructure projects; nor does it restrict the tree plantation industry, which is in constant expansion.

This article shares a summary of each of the contributions from the discussion. The complete event can be heard here:

WRM with Jutta Kill, member of the WRM International Secretariat:

Why do you claim in your article that REDD has not been a total failure? And why is REDD still discussed in UN negotiations?

Jutta Kill: Reducing deforestation was never the main reason or motivation behind introducing this mechanism. So what are the other motivations behind REDD? Identifying them will help us understand why REDD, and what are now called “Nature-Based Solutions” continue to be a big part of climate discussions—despite consistently high levels of deforestation.

If we only focus on how REDD has failed to reduce deforestation, we can’t see who has benefitted, and in what ways REDD hasn’t been a failure. Indeed, REDD has not been a failure for the oil industry or for other industries responsible for the climate crisis. Mining and oil companies are some of the greatest beneficiaries of this mechanism. For them, REDD has served as a distraction to block discussion—both at the UN and in society in general—on what we should really be talking about: how to keep fossil fuels in the ground. Not paying attention to the carbon trapped under the earth’s

surface makes these companies happy, because it allows them to make billionaire profits from the extraction of oil, gas and coal. REDD's attention is instead placed on the carbon above the earth's surface—that is, in forests and soils. That is a trap.

REDD also didn't let the big conservation industry down. These NGOs have generated huge earnings by carrying out training workshops and introducing methods to measure carbon (with massive margins for error), among other things.

Another way in which REDD has not been a failure is in the huge amount of “carbon-neutral” programs that are available today. REDD has been crucial in making us believe that it is ok to keep buying products and services that in fact worsen the climate crisis.

In conclusion, there are many people generating astronomical profits through the fossil fuel industry, and they use REDD—and now also “Nature-Based Solutions” and the carbon market—to distract us from the need to stop extracting oil, coal and gas from the earth. Meanwhile, REDD has also helped increase land-grabbing and control over Indigenous Peoples' and peasant communities' use of their lands.

WRM with Ivonne Yanez, member of Acción Ecológica in Ecuador and the Oilwatch Network in Latin America:

How can it be that the oil industry—the main driver of the climate crisis—is leading the demand for this so-called “solution” proposed by the UN?

Ivonne Yanez: For almost 60 years, we have known that the emissions from extracting and consuming fossil fuels are the main cause of global warming. And the oil companies were the first to know this. There are videos from 50 years ago of scientists working for oil companies who talk about the problem of global warming. But we also know that capitalism—as we now know it—requires energy from fossil fuels, such as coal, oil and gas. And the very mechanisms we are talking about that use carbon offsets, such as REDD, have been falsely promoted as a solution to climate change—and promoted through the whole institutionality of the United Nations, the international financial system, and others. But in fact, these mechanisms were created precisely to continue the process of extraction and consumption of fossil fuels.

Now, when we talk about the oil industry we should not only be thinking about Shell, Texaco, Chevron or Eni, but also about fossil-fuel capitalism. We should be thinking about industrial agriculture that consumes high amounts of fossil fuels and emits other greenhouse gases; about the military industrial complex that consumes high amounts of fossil fuels; and also about the financial system which, of course, largely depends on the money that this whole military industrial complex (tied to fossil fuels) moves. So capitalists created these offset mechanisms, because they wanted to say “we know what the problem is, but we don't want to solve it.”

Likewise, we should avoid saying, “despite climate change negotiations,” or “despite these mechanisms,” the climate crisis has not been solved. We should always say, “due to this,” “due to these mechanisms,” or “due to the United Nations system and its whole infrastructure,” emissions have not stopped and have continued to increase.

WRM with Tamra Gilbertson, who wrote her doctoral thesis on carbon offsets in Colombia:

What can we learn from the “carbon tax payment mechanism” from Colombia?

Tamra Gilbertson: When people look for supposed “solutions” outside of the carbon market, they almost always argue that we have to establish a carbon tax. But when we take a deep look at carbon taxes and other similar schemes around the world, we find that countries that impose taxes on fossil fuels, emissions or other similar things have not managed to reduce extraction. Taxes do not keep fossil fuels in the ground. So a carbon tax is not going to stop climate change, nor will it keep polluters from polluting. On the other hand, we have seen that companies know perfectly well how to avoid paying taxes, which also affects consumers and workers’ wages.

These taxes, therefore, have not been created to stop capitalist accumulation, but on the contrary, to allow it to continue.

Another point is that these taxes end up being the first step for countries in establishing domestic carbon markets. In the case of Colombia, the tax program has ended up being an inventory of the country’s emissions. And it was created in such a way that only certain kinds of pollution produced within Colombia had to pay a certain percentage of taxes. Let us recall that the largest open-pit coal mines in the Western Hemisphere are in Colombia, which causes tremendous impacts for the Afro-Colombian population and Indigenous Peoples.

When the carbon tax is established, it is not established based on the coal that is actually being extracted—because 98 percent of that coal is exported, mainly to Europe. The tax is based on the emissions generated by the machinery used to extract the coal. And instead of paying that tax, the companies managed to use other mechanisms, including REDD. Large donor agencies, such as USAID and conservation NGOs, sat down at the table to write those laws. And what has happened is the coal industry has still not paid carbon taxes; meanwhile, it is causing a very major impact—including violence—in two places: in the territories of extraction and in the territories used for the alleged offsets.

WRM with Diego Cardona, member of Censat/Friends of the Earth, Colombia:

What are the challenges now that the (leftist) president of Colombia has presented the Green Economy as his political agenda on the environment and climate change?

Diego Cardona: To answer this question I’d like to share a 2019 press release from the environmental authority of the Colombian Amazon, Corpoamazonía, in which it warns Indigenous Peoples and local communities about NGOs, cooperatives or companies that are running carbon-trading or carbon-credit projects in the territories. In other words, REDD-like projects—and we know they’ve changed the name a lot after all the scandals. What the last line of the release states, in summary, is that: “we recommend rural communities avoid giving these organizations documents, money or other requested information...” And several years have gone by since then, and the warning remains the same. Communities are still being fooled.

The number of carbon projects in the country has grown enormously; hundreds of contracts for millions of hectares with projects of this kind are constantly being signed. And the strategies are the same: they co-opt some community leaders—always a man or a few men from the community, never a woman; they sign a contract with that person or people; division is created, and, crucially, deterritorialization. That is, people are forced to leave their territory, they are not allowed to use it, they are not allowed to practice agriculture, they cannot cut down a tree to build a house. In short, they cannot live there.

What are the specific risks in this political moment in the country? Fundamentally, that social movements' agendas and priorities could change. In other words, the government has a lot of social and political endorsement from these movements and from Afro-descendent and Indigenous Peoples and peasants that supported its candidature. But the government's proposal relies heavily on the sale of carbon credits—even more so than with the former government, which we strongly resisted. But it is more problematic now, because it is a seemingly progressive government that is proposing what we have been resisting for decades. This is compounded by the fact that there is little critical analysis, and that large NGOs are presenting this plan as a good thing.

WRM with Tom Goldtooth, director of the Indigenous Environmental Network from North America (IEN):

How does the use of certain language—such as benefits-sharing programs, certification systems, safeguards, etc.—affect the unity of Indigenous Peoples, and how can we strengthen solidarity?

Tom Goldtooth: This is a very important issue, especially because many allies and even conservation NGOs say they are confused. They are confused because when our Indigenous Environmental Network and other networks from the Global South make statements—for example at the UN—we reject carbon markets, geoengineering and other technical “solutions,” as well as climate finance mechanisms.

When they ask us why we are opposed to them, we answer that it is all part of a bogus system. The only strategies discussed in the halls of UN climate negotiations are based on adaptation, mitigation or the funding of false solutions. They have invested a lot in this. For example, we have had to deal with the World Bank, which allocates millions of dollars to intermediary indigenous organizations in the Global South. This has made it very hard for us to inform grassroots forest-based communities, because they have already been convinced that participating in REDD+ (as well as the so-called “Nature-Based Solutions”) will bring them money; they believe it will strengthen their struggles because they are being promised title to their lands.

As a small indigenous organization facing these actors, what is our strategy to warn Indigenous Peoples and local communities about the truth behind these false solutions? We are at the UN in the middle of a big convention center, with many people who have been tasked with training our communities. And so it's a big challenge. The owner of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, created a gigantic fund in the United States and funneled millions of dollars to some of the biggest NGOs that are promoting REDD and “Nature-Based Solutions.” Communities are being pressured to sign 90-year contracts, which they are being told will bring benefits—all with this language of “benefit-sharing.” Meanwhile, we are fighting to tell the counter-narrative.

Those who promote REDD and the carbon market need Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent communities. They are now investing in order to attract people they call “knowledge holders.” These are tactics to co-opt our Indigenous Peoples and communities in order to create division. Some indigenous brothers are being promised thousands of dollars; and the same thing is happening in North America. When they talk about “safeguards,” we must understand that there is no guarantee and no legal consequence if a nation-state violates these safeguards.

And so how can we build solidarity? This is the central point. We have to be very careful with the language we use, because they are using it to create confusion among us. There are people I have known for many years in the struggle for Indigenous Peoples rights, who are the very ones dividing

us. The strategies of the huge conservation NGOs, financial institutions, companies and governments are dividing us. They are not worried about us. The only thing they want is to implement their market schemes. They have even coopted our narrative. They talk about the reconnection of people with nature, of harmony with nature, of ecological and “holistic” development, of “buen vivir.” They are manipulating the language! And our non-indigenous allies are also being divided. We must be very alert. We must develop strategies of solidarity and maintain them.

WRM with Izzudin Prawiranegara, from Agrarian Resources Center in Indonesia:

According to the experience of the community next to the REDD project area in Katingan, Indonesia, how does certification of a REDD project affect communities?

Izzudin Prawiranegara: The REDD project area in Katingan is 300,000 hectares, which includes 20 communities in the central region of Katingan. The project’s main goal is to control people, and even stop people who try to leave the area with forest products. This is evidently a major burden for the population.

Over the last decade in Indonesia, there has been a lot of investment in strengthening law enforcement agencies that are committing so-called environmental crimes—most of which occur in forest people’s territories. Peoples who grew rice, for example, and who for hundreds of years used different plots for their shifting cultivation, can no longer do so. Now if they open up an area for cultivation, they face the threat of a US \$100,000 fine and the possibility of going to jail for 20 years. That is why farmers increasingly depend on agrochemicals, for which they need more money. Consequently, many farmers are forced to leave their lands, and when the land is abandoned, fires appear much more readily. The increased costs of growing rice are forcing people to fish, or to move onto forest lands to try to get something out of them; but they expose themselves to fines.

And so we have seen how capitalists—through the REDD project—are controlling vast swaths of land and creating the conditions that are degrading the land. Now it is harder for people to grow rice in those areas. In other words, the REDD project has increasingly marginalized the people, since they have had to change their traditional ways of cultivation and increasingly use agrochemicals. The people are increasingly being identified as a threat, and even as a commodity.

The project introduced CCB certification, which calculates the aggregate benefits in terms of carbon—based on the REDD Project’s intervention in the livelihoods of the peoples who live in and around the project. That is, it calculates the carbon emissions avoided by changing local practices. According to the project, local people are a threat. It commodifies people by including their livelihoods in its carbon accounting, as part of the requirement to obtain the certification. And once they have the certification, the carbon credits can be sold for a lot more money.

WRM with Ladislas Désiré Ndembet, member of the organization, Muiyissi Environnement, in Gabon:

How are communities impacted by the Grande Mayumba project—a million-hectare protected area that also includes a logging concession?

Ladislas Désiré Ndembet: In Gabon, the Gran Mayumba REDD project does not ever use the word REDD. Its promoters talk about tourism, forest exploitation, agroindustry, and “Nature-Based Solutions,” but the word REDD is never uttered. The Mayumba National Park, which, along with 13

other national parks in Gabon, was created in 1992, occupies 11 percent of the regional territory. Mayumba has 5,000 inhabitants, including Indigenous Peoples from neighboring countries in West Africa who trade in the area.

20 years after the Mayumba maritime park was created, communities are feeling absolutely disillusioned, because they are no longer able to enjoy the wealth of their lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. Peasants and fishermen are suffering from various restrictions, including a prohibition on fishing. This is a real attack on food sovereignty. I am from that community and grew up eating oysters all the time; today this is no longer possible due to the strong conservationist policy.

The land has been handed over to carbon promoters. And the national park, which claimed it would bring people out of underdevelopment through ecotourism, ended up plunging them into total precariousness. In Gabon, the land belongs to the State, and the State is mired in corruption; thus, this mechanism is used to illegally appropriate land, by increasing protected areas. As a result, communities are cordoned off through conservation policies. The government prioritizes public-private partnerships, which end up causing more dispossession for the people.

The Gabonese government vigorously defends these bogus solutions, in an attempt to get more funding for them. It is important to remember that Norway has promised the Gabonese government US \$150 million, and started giving it money since 2021 in the form of carbon credits. It is a very difficult situation. We must denounce these situations and multiple these dialogues. We have to expose these false solutions and make them go away.

WRM with Larry Lohmann, member of the CornerHouse research group in the United Kingdom:

Why do you state in your article that “REDD works better when it is more colonialist,” and how has REDD managed to survive for so many years?

Larry Lohmann: REDD has always been stalked by its own colonialism. I remember when, more than 20 years ago in UN negotiations, an African delegate was outraged at the idea that the land and forests of the Global South would have to absorb the industrialized North’s pollution. Despite the many reforms made to it, REDD will never be able to overcome this colonial stigma. That is because the economic logic of REDD makes it so that doing business as usual is cheaper for large companies than changing anything.

The Global South will never make a lot of money with REDD, because that would go against its own purpose. But the colonialism of REDD goes a lot deeper than the appropriation of lands. Indeed, every time they try to reform REDD, it gets more colonialist. Why? Because to be able to continue burning fossil fuels, those who buy REDD credits have to claim that they are the ones saving forests with their money. They are the ones who should be able to get credit, literally, for creating the distinction between “forests” and “non-forests.” But this means that they must completely ensure that nobody else gets credit for saving that forested area. If the companies that do carbon accounting for REDD projects want to keep their jobs, they need to prove that without REDD projects, nobody else can save the forests—not forest-dependent communities, social movements, local governments or anyone else.

Those who do carbon accounting for REDD projects are obligated to ignore many good things that could be happening without REDD. This means that they must maintain a colonialist attitude: “Those people in the Global South can’t do this, only I can do it.” This is a requirement in carbon

accounting.

It gets worse. Those who do carbon accounting also have to show buyers exactly how many credits they are going to receive, because only in this way can they quantify how much fossil fuel they will be able to burn after having bought those credits. Therefore, forest-dependent communities and other actors in the Global South not only must be shown to be incapable of taking constructive action without REDD money; they also have to be shown to be statistically predictable in terms of what they would do without REDD money. There can only be one “baseline” for a REDD project, and that “baseline” must be quantifiable.

Many who critique REDD think that its problem is that predictions about what would happen without a REDD project are not precise enough. But the only way to make them more precise is to try to make people in the Global South more predictable and passive; and the only way to achieve that is by repeatedly reinforcing the colonial myth that native populations are lower than animals: with no imitative, with no free will, with no future they can call their own, with no future that they can build themselves.

Therefore, REDD’s colonialism is not just the appropriation of land. Its colonialism is also the technical and mathematical carbon accounting. And the more precise they try to make this accounting, the more colonialist it will become. REDD has survived, in part, because its critics who demand more precise “baselines” do not realize that in so doing, they are also demanding more colonialism.