

15 YEARS



A MECHANISM ROTTEN AT THE CORE

15 Years of REDD A Mechanism Rotten at the Core

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Foreword

Since it was introduced in 2007, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) has become the dominant forest policy around the world, impacting forest-dependent communities in countries with tropical forests in particular.

The experience of the past 15 years has shown an overwhelming record of REDD's catastrophic failure to address deforestation and forest degradation – and worse: it has also intensified the climate crisis and left the causes of deforestation untouched. REDD, in fact, has become an underlying cause of deforestation and climate change itself.

This should not be a surprise: the logic at the core of this scheme is rotten.

For 15 years, REDD has helped to conceal crimes of carbon offset projects through 'creative' carbon accounting, 'green' propaganda and endless climate commitments

It allows the main drivers of pollution and deforestation to continue and expand their business legally. It is a logic that allows polluting companies, governments and elites to deny that fossil fuel extraction is at the root of the climate crisis, while deceiving many people into believing that the problems are being addressed and nothing really has to change. It is a logic based on colonial, racist and patriarchal oppressions, that blames those who have maintained and protected forests and other life spaces for generations for destroying them, that shames them for keeping their ancestral practices, livelihoods and beliefs, and that denies them access to their territories.

For 15 years, REDD has helped to conceal crimes of carbon offset projects through 'creative' carbon accounting, 'green' propaganda and endless climate commitments that companies and governments make based on misleading and false promises.

Indigenous Peoples and other communities living in and around REDD projects have been consistently denied access to their ancestral forests. They have seen their communities and crops destroyed or have been evicted. They have been forbidden from carrying on with their way of life, and prevented from continuing their agricultural, fishing or hunting activities. Trees have been planted in industrial-scale monocultures on land that communities depended upon for their survival and on land they regard as sacred, burial sites and places of ritual. Many REDD projects deploy guards, military or security forces to protect the carbon commodity that is stored in trees, resulting in more violence and fear, especially for women and girls. Many REDD projects also use tactics of coercion and manipulation to get the land, destroying social fabric and creating conflicts within communities.

Because of REDD, fossil fuel companies and the industrial and financial complex that depends on them have been able to continue devastating, deforesting and polluting more and more territories and life spaces. They have been able to do so with impunity. To them, REDD is not a catastrophic failure.

Many forest communities have opposed REDD since its introduction. 15 years on, opposition against this dangerous distraction to addressing the causes of deforestation is needed more than ever; opposition that is louder and stronger. And it cannot be only against REDD, but also against its new names like 'nature-based solutions', 'net zero' or any other term that will be invented based on the same deceptive and deceiving logic.

This publication gathers 11 articles that reflect on fundamental and dangerous dimensions of REDD. We hope that each of them will help to strengthen our arguments and actions against offsetting and to uncover it for what it really is: a racist scheme that can never be improved or fixed because it is designed to 'keep the oil flowing' and, with this, the capitalist system that is driving the current climate, forest and social crises.

WRM International Secretariat

Words of caution about some terms used in this publication

A term may appear many times throughout the publication and will each time be highlighted like this.

1 **Slash-and-burn agriculture** or **shifting cultivation** describes a wide variety of farming systems where a plot of land in a forest or savannah is cleared and cultivated for a period of time and then left to regenerate. There is a growing recognition that *shifting cultivation* practises are part of complex land use systems that contribute to the diversity of forests and maintain their ecological functioning. Yet, rotational farming practises are still often pejoratively called ‘*slash-and-burn*’. Using this expression feeds the false claim that *shifting cultivation* is a driver of deforestation. The World Bank and governments worldwide have a long track record of using the expression ‘*slash-and-burn*’ as part of their efforts to eradicate *shifting cultivation*. Many REDD activities have focused on banning or restricting *shifting cultivation*, for example by prohibiting the use of fire to prepare land for cultivation.

For more information, see: Survival International. Shifting cultivation. What is it and who does it? <https://www.survivalinternational.org/about/swidden>

2 **Selective logging.** This term is misleading. According to the logging industry, *selective logging* does not damage the forest because only a few carefully selected (commercially particularly valuable) trees are removed. In reality, however, most *selective logging* is *industrial logging* that destroys and degrades large areas of forest to extract those few commercially valuable trees. Describing the practise as *selective* hides the reality that especially in tropical forest regions, *industrial logging* - whether selective or not - has a long history of causing violent conflicts, abusive labour conditions and extremely damaging impacts to those living in the vicinity of these operations.

3 **Net-zero emissions.** Many companies (and governments) have promised to reduce their climate-damaging emissions to *net-zero*. The little word net enables companies to continue to burn petroleum, gas and coal and at the same time claim that this is not damaging the climate. How does this magic work? They prepare a balance sheet that shows how the same amount of emissions they continue to push *into* the atmosphere has been taken out of the atmosphere by someone elsewhere (see *carbon offsets* for why this does not work for the climate and puts at risk forest peoples’ sovereignty over their territories). Some insist that *net-zero* promises must include steep emission reductions, and that only ‘hard to avoid’ emissions should be offset, but this is not the reality. *Net-zero* emission promises disguise the growth in air traffic, the opening of new oil and gas fields, and so on. In essence, these promises are, above all, a tactic to protect corporate profiteering from fossil fuel burning.

For more information, see: Friends of the Earth International et al. (2021). The Big Con: How Big Polluters are advancing a “net zero” climate agenda to delay, deceive, and deny. <https://www.foei.org/resources/publications/net-zero-climate-agenda-big-con>

4 Carbon Offsets or Offsetting has gained momentum as a tool in the context of the 'Green Economy' – because *offsetting* allows the continuation of an economic model built on destruction of 'nature' under the pretence that damage caused in one place can be compensated through extra activities to restore 'nature' elsewhere. To protect their profits tied to the availability of cheap fossil fuels as long as possible, companies have lobbied particularly hard for *carbon offsetting* as an alternative to government intervention that could speed up the end of fossil fuel burning.

For a short explanation of contradictions that plague carbon offsets and that make them a dangerous distraction to avoiding climate breakdown, see the WRM booklet 10 things communities should know about REDD. <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/10-things-communities-should-know-about-redd>

5 Environmental racism. Corporate exploitation that disproportionately exposes communities or neighbourhoods of majority black, indigenous and people of colour populations to the most toxic pollution and the most destructive, contaminating and risky operations are realities of *environmental racism*. Refusal to acknowledge these realities is another form of *environmental racism*. This *racism* also manifests itself when non-Western understandings of territoriality are not even recognized as existing or when Indigenous Peoples' cosmologies are portrayed as obstacles to corporate expansion. Indigenous Peoples regularly face *environmental racism* when their territories are declared Protected Areas or sites of REDD+ projects. *The WRM Bulletin 223 – Racism in the forests: a process of oppression at the service of capital* explores how this racism manifests itself as structurally inherent in capitalism. <https://wrm.org.uy/bulletins/issue-223/>

6 Carbon accounting. Beyond the numbers widely taken to represent the volume of emissions released or allegedly offset, *Carbon accounting* hides perhaps more than it reveals. One thing it hides is the *environmental racism* inherent to the fossil fuel economy. *Carbon accounting* turns the violent conflicts at the sites of fossil fuel extraction, processing and refining as well as at the places where the carbon offsetting takes place into neat and conflict-free numbers on a carbon balance sheet.

In this context, *carbon accounting* is used to track governments' and companies' *estimates of emissions* produced by different parts of the economy or a company's business at the point where they are released into the atmosphere. This allows conflicts to continue, as the aim is not to end fossil fuel burning. Governments also use *carbon accounting* to show how many emissions caused in one part of the country's economy have been *offset* by extra storage of carbon in the country's soils, trees and other vegetation. Companies use *carbon accounting* also to show that their emissions have been balanced out through the purchase of *carbon credits*.

Carbon accounting created the now widely accepted assumption that the climate damage cause by different greenhouse gases and by emissions from different sources can be made comparable – through the unit CO₂ *equivalents*. This in turn paved the way for REDD and "nature-based solutions" – projects based on the assumption that avoiding allegedly planned deforestation can offset the climate damage caused by fossil fuel emissions. *Carbon accounting* is therefore a key tool for companies and governments promising to run their economies or businesses on *net-zero emissions* in the future.

For more information, see: Larry Lohmann (2009). *Neoliberalism and the Calculable World*. <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/neoliberalism-and-calculable-world>

7 **Commodification of nature** strips a place of its uniqueness – the stories, memories and interactions between the human and non-human life that make a place different from others – and re-defines it by the units of whatever it is those driving the *commodification* are interested in at the time the *commodification* is initiated. Territories identified by a peoples’ distinct memories, stories and cosmologies were turned into land plotted on maps that show where which minerals, fertile soils, water reservoirs, or valuable trees can be found. Once thus mapped, private or state ownership could be claimed and minerals, water, trees etc. be re-labelled resources available for sale. More recently, ecological functions such as the carbon storage capacity of forests are the target of *commodification*. In the process, a forest’s value is determined only by its capacity to store carbon. Each forest’s alleged carbon content is mapped by modern-day land surveyors and the priced unit this time is the tonnes of carbon per hectare of forest.

As history has shown, processes of *commodification* involve violent conflict and displacement. The *commodification* of ecological functions such as the carbon storage capacity of forests is no exception. Maps showing the distribution of the carbon storage capacity across different forests or across different parts of a forest are already used by companies to restrict communities’ access to their territories: REDD projects would not be possible without stripping forests of their uniqueness and reducing them to ‘carbon storage facilities’ offered up to corporate polluters and where the only thing that counts, is counted and turned into money is the tonnes of carbon in the trees.

For more information, see the WRM briefing Trade in Ecosystem Services. When payment for environmental services delivers a permit to destroy. <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/trade-in-ecosystem-services-when-payment-for-environmental-services-delivers-a-permit-to-destroy> (available also in Bahasa Indonesia)

8 **Certification / safeguards.** That *carbon offsets* in general, and REDD projects in particular are prone to creating conflicts when project owners turn the land used by forest peoples into a *carbon offset* area, has never been disputed by proponents of carbon markets and REDD. Their response to those warning about such violence has been the development of *voluntary guidelines* that were said to be capable of preventing such conflicts. The UN climate negotiators have adopted such a set of *safeguards* and large REDD programmes have often pointed to their ‘rigorous safeguards’ to ward off criticism. In reality, these *safeguards* have neither prevented conflict nor have they ensured that the REDD funding largess of the past 15 years has trickled down to those who faced the prescribed land use changes, the communities whose land has been declared a REDD project area. To sell carbon credits, REDD projects, however, needed a stronger marketing tool: *certification*.

Certification standards help dress up the REDD projects’ stories of hypothetical futures without the projects with a lot of confusing calculations and mathematical formulas.

Certification therefore offers an external stamp of approval that turns stories about allegedly planned future emissions that were avoided into a marketable product: the tonnes of CO₂ *equivalent* allegedly not released into the atmosphere as planned. Many certified REDD projects have been shown to have massively exaggerated the volume of emissions they allegedly avoided. Most REDD projects rely on a *certification* standard

called Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) which is managed by an organisation called Verra. As widely documented, certification has neither prevented projects from selling carbon credits that exist on paper only nor has it avoided conflicts and the violation of community rights to their land.

For more information, see the WRM materials on certification at <https://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/certification-schemes>

9 Fire and forests. A passage from an article in the WRM Bulletin 238 - *Good fire or bad fire, who decides?* A reflection on fire and forests highlights how a capitalist conception of fire today dominates the world and determines whether a particular form of fire is judged to be good or bad: “Under capitalism, fire moves from the open landscape into boilers, turbines and combustion chambers. At the same time, the open fire used for thousands of years to create and maintain forests and agricultural fields becomes suspect, denigrated, even criminalized. A vastly more intense, destructive, fossil-fuelled fire inside engines and turbines, meanwhile, becomes a sign of civilization and progress, together with the extraction and waste that accompanies it. So when you turn on the TV during the dry season in the tree plantation zones of Chile or Portugal or the state forests of western North America, you can count on seeing scary reports about uncontrollable wildfires and the outlaws rumoured to be behind them. The reports never mention the fossil-fuelled fires that simultaneously rage invisibly inside every local automobile and thermal power station. Fires that – despite global warming and the devastation that accompanies fossil-fuel extraction – no one would ever dream of regarding as criminal. Nor do the reports mention that these two problematic phenomena are merely opposite sides of the same coin.”

Few arenas demonstrate the impact of this dominant capitalist conception of *fire* on dominant responses to climate breakdown more clearly than REDD *offsets*: the use of small controlled *fires* for *shifting cultivation* is being denigrated and criminalized to supply carbon credits to those fuelling climate breakdown with their *fossil-fuelled fire* inside engines and turbines. <https://wrm.org.uy/bulletins/issue-238/>

10 Protected Areas. The term is burdened with the violent colonial conception of *Protected Areas* as the means to protect ‘nature’ from Indigenous Peoples and preserve it as ‘pristine wilderness’ reserved for Elite trophy hunting and the enjoyment of scenic beauty and safari tourism. This colonial and racist approach to conservation has brought forth the ‘fortress conservation’ mind-set that exposes communities whose territories have been declared *Protected Areas* to unspeakable atrocities, human rights violations, violent evictions and the targeted destruction of their livelihoods. (1) Despite attestations from conservationist NGOs that these are the ugly deeds of the past, for many communities inside *Protected Areas* violent attacks remain a reality to this day. International conservationist NGOs are in one way or another involved in most *Protected Areas*, often in an alliance with companies that are driving deforestation elsewhere.

(1) WRM Bulletin 249 (2020). Protected Areas feed corporate profiting and destruction. <https://wrm.org.uy/bulletins/issue-249/>



REDD: Not just a failure

REDD has dominated international forest policy for the past 15 years with the promise of making trees more valuable standing than cut down and in doing so, provide a rapid and cheap way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The companies that pocket billions from turning forests into monoculture plantations, cattle pastures or destroying them for mines, hydrodams and other infrastructure, were not interested in REDD. REDD has undoubtedly failed to reduce large-scale deforestation. Yet, focussing on the obvious failure of REDD, provides an incomplete picture of its damaging legacy.

REDD is the abbreviation in English for 'Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation'; it has dominated international forest policy for the past 15 years. The starting point for REDD was the assumption that offering financial rewards will convince those responsible for destroying forests to drop their plans; in exchange for the REDD payment, they would protect the forest instead. REDD would thus make the trees worth more standing than cut down and in doing so, provide a rapid and cheap way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. For REDD proponents,

all that was needed to end deforestation, was an offer of financial rewards to protect, not destroy.

But the companies that pocket billions from turning forests into oil palm or soy plantations, cattle pastures or destroying them for mines, hydroelectric reservoirs, highways and other infrastructure, were not interested in REDD. Some were not interested, because they could still earn much more if they continued to destroy forests. Anyone “who responds to purely economic incentives would opt for palm oil,” as the pro-REDD group Ecosystem Market Place already wrote in 2014. Others were not interested because their deforestation was illegal. Which company was going to apply for REDD payments, saying it would be willing to drop plans to illegally destroy forests? There were also those who engaged in deforestation mainly as a way of claiming ownership to land, or strengthening their ownership claims. To this group, the promise of REDD payments was of little interest because their primary motivation to clear land was not immediate financial profit¹.

15 years on, the concept introduced into the UN climate negotiations with the promise that it would lead to rapid and cheap reduction of emissions from tropical forest destruction, has failed to drive down large-scale deforestation. In countries like Brazil, Peru or the Democratic Republic of Congo, deforestation has even been rising since REDD was introduced².

This failure of REDD to reduce deforestation has been widely documented³. A recent study on the effectiveness of German government funding for REDD explains why REDD success stories nonetheless abound: a “downward adjustment of expectations” about what REDD was to achieve has allowed proponents of REDD to construct “seemingly positive effects in the context of the instrument’s limited appeal.” The price for this adjustment: “diluting the broader goal of stopping deforestation.”⁴

Focussing only on the obvious failure of REDD to help bring down forest loss, however, seems to present an incomplete picture of the instrument’s damaging legacy.

REDD is not a failure for everyone

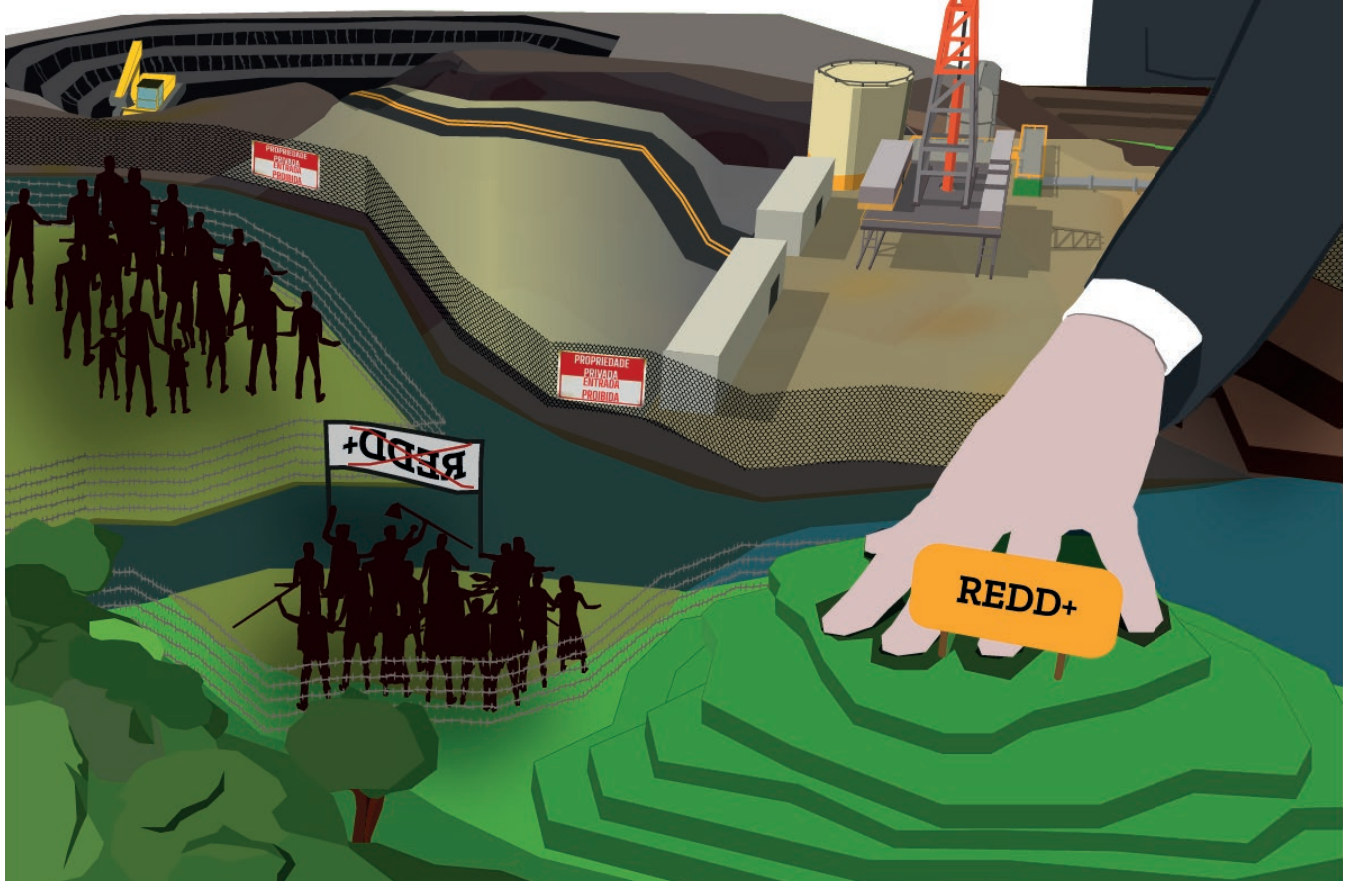
REDD has not failed for those who used it as a tool to increase control over land cultivated by forest-dependent communities. The story that ‘**slash-and-burn**’ agriculture is destroying the forest; that peasant farming is causing deforestation and that forest peoples’ cultivation practises need to be ‘modernized’ is – despite being false and reinforcing colonial patterns of domination – even more widely accepted today than it was 15 years ago⁵. What’s more: because almost all REDD activities focus on changing how peasants and forest peoples use forests, *not* on large-scale deforestation, corporate destruction has been made less visible as a result of REDD.

REDD, and particularly its latest incarnation called ‘nature-based solutions’ (NbS) or ‘nature climate solutions’, also did not fail the fossil fuel industry. REDD has provided an excuse for this industry to continue to destroy the underground carbon stores that are at the core of both, their business model and climate breakdown. With REDD, and

now NbS, oil, coal and fossil gas companies claim that they can continue their profitable destruction without damaging the climate. All they have to do is pay someone who claims to be saving carbon elsewhere⁶. Airlines, mining companies, agro-industries, fertilizer and food corporations, among others, have also enlisted REDD as a strategy to maintain the capitalist model of fossil fuel-dependent modes of production and consumption from which they profit.

The reality, however, is that it is impossible to compensation the climate impact that is caused when carbon is released from underground carbon deposits which have taken millions of years to form. Pretending that such compensation can be achieved through paying for REDD activities such as planting more trees or avoiding allegedly planned deforestation, is a dangerous illusion (see *Is all carbon the same? Fossil carbon, violence and power*). By nurturing that illusion, REDD helps delay unavoidable discussions about ending fossil fuel burning, and in doing so, becomes itself a driver of climate breakdown.

Last but not least, consulting firms, international conservation NGOs and think tanks all have benefited from industrialized countries' and philanthropies' generous REDD funding programmes and corporate carbon offset purchases⁷. Specialized REDD sales agencies, private sector REDD project owners, **certification** standard developers and auditing companies, too, have carved out a lucrative niche for themselves. For them, REDD has not been a failure either.



What's Hiding Behind the Letters R – E – D – D?

What do the letters REDD stand for?

It's an abbreviation in English for 'reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation'.

Why are forests discussed at UN climate meetings?

The fact that carbon is found in coal, petroleum and gas as well as in trees is often used to argue that reducing deforestation is important to prevent climate chaos (see *Is all carbon the same? Fossil carbon, violence and power*). The panel of scientists advising the UN on climate issues has sanctioned this questionable argument by claiming that to avoid climate breakdown what matters is how much of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide is piling up in the atmosphere, not where this carbon dioxide comes from⁸. Fossil fuel companies and industrialized country governments are using this argument to distract from the urgent need to protect the ancient underground carbon stores from which most of the carbon in greenhouse gases originates. This means ending the extraction of coal, petroleum and gas. REDD helps delay this unavoidable decision by pretending that protecting forests (or planting millions of trees) can undo the damage caused by continued fossil carbon burning. It is therefore a dangerous distraction.

Why are there so many different names for REDD and what's the difference between them?

The explanation of how REDD was to help end deforestation has changed several times since REDD was introduced in 2005. These changes in part reflect the influence of different interest groups on the design of REDD. Initially, REDD was to bring about a reduction in emissions from deforestation by offering money to companies that destroy forests. With each subsequent change, more activities became eligible for what at the time was believed to be a door-opener to large volumes of international funding. Tree planting, logging, forest conservation and intensification of traditional agriculture practises such as **shifting cultivation** were eventually declared activities eligible for REDD funding. There are *at least* five different variations of REDD, each with its own name.

- It started in 2005 with **RED**, where the focus was on D=deforestation. The assumption was that RED payments would make forests worth more standing than cut down. RED money would convince companies planning to destroy forests to stop cutting down the trees.

- A second D=degradation, was added in 2007: **REDD** enabled payments also to those who damage a forest but where some trees are kept standing so that what remains is still called a forest in international statistics.

In both RED and REDD, payments were promised if whoever planned to destroy or degrade a forest was willing to discarded these plans. This was a very perverse incentive because it was inviting blackmail: if you don't pay me, I will destroy the forest.

- Shortly after, a +/plus was added: **REDD+** enabled payments to logging and plantation companies as well as to the conservation industry. Specifically, the “+” adds ‘enhancement of carbon stocks’ (plantations), ‘sustainable forest management’ (industrial logging) and conservation (protected areas) as activities for which REDD payments can be requested.

The arguments for these additions vary. Among the most common justifications are that trees soak up carbon as they grow, so planting many trees should be good for the climate⁹ and that logging companies need extra money so they can afford to log more carefully and practise ‘**selective logging**’ with special care for the climate.

The argument for adding conservation to the list is even more problematic. For those who already protect forests to qualify for REDD funding, they need to agree to one of the following stories: **1** some of their activities (**shifting cultivation**, typically) is harming the forest and they will need to stop or change these activities in exchange for REDD money. Or, **2** their forest is threatened by intruders encroaching on their territory. This intrusion and the deforestation resulting from it can only be addressed because of the REDD money; without REDD, those who were protecting the forest would not have enough funding to stop the deforestation.

These stories either reinforce the false perception that forest-dependant populations are driving deforestation or that they absolve the state of its obligation to prevent intrusion and destruction of forests in Indigenous Peoples’ territories. The second story line ignores that in many countries, protecting indigenous territories against intrusion is a legal obligation of state authorities. REDD puts that responsibility onto forest-dependent peoples whose forests are being invaded.

- The next change produced the names **landscape REDD+** and **jurisdictional REDD+**. The argument for this was that REDD+ needed to cover larger areas beyond just individual projects. REDD programmes covering whole regions, provinces or entire nation states were now said to be needed to reduce deforestation. Otherwise, the destruction might just move outside the REDD project borders. The 2016 UN’s Paris Agreement on climate change refers to this version of REDD. Because it involves many different areas of forest under different tenure and ownership regimes, governments assume the responsibility to account for changes in the volume of carbon stored in the forests under jurisdictional REDD+. The carbon accounts of individual REDD+ projects have to somehow be integrated into the government’s national or province-wide forest carbon balance sheet. The World Bank’s BioCarbon Fund initiated such initiatives. In the so-called voluntary carbon market, individual REDD projects continue to dominate, even though these projects are expected to somehow be integrated into jurisdictional REDD+ plans. How and when this will happen, and what it will mean for individual REDD projects, remains unclear.

- REDD was never a name that worked well for the PR departments; the term was too long, too technical, too hard to explain, too cumbersome to translate into other languages. With opposition to REDD rising and the flaws in the REDD design becoming ever more apparent, large conservation NGOs began to promote REDD under yet another name: **Nature-Based Solutions (NbS)** or **Nature Climate Solutions**¹⁰.

- **Indigenous REDD** was a concession to pressure from Indigenous Peoples reminding those who had promoted REDD that it was Indigenous Peoples' resistance to forest destruction and the demarcation of indigenous territories that was keeping forests standing in many places. This proposal emerged after conservation was made an eligible activity under REDD. The demarcation and legal recognition of indigenous territories has been a core demand from Indigenous Peoples to engage in Indigenous REDD. In most cases, this promise has yet to be fulfilled¹¹.

Who came up with the idea and who promotes REDD?

Discussions go back to the beginning of the UN climate talks. Projects that claim to reduce emissions through avoiding deforestation (palm oil or soy companies not clearing forests to expand their plantations, for example) were excluded from carbon trading under the UN's Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Climate negotiators gave four main reasons for this decision: **1)** these projects would generate so many carbon credits that they would 'flood the market' and drive down the price of carbon credits; **2)** forests can burn down, and when they do, the compensation of the fossil carbon emissions is lost (storage of carbon in forests lacked the permanence necessary to allow for compensation of fossil carbon releases was the language used in the debate at the time); **3)** slowing deforestation in the limited area of a forest carbon offset project does not stop forest destroyers from simply continuing their destruction elsewhere; and **4)** there is no direct way to measure how much carbon is stored in a forest, therefore the figures are very unreliable and the calculations revealed large variations and inaccuracies.

International conservation NGOs like Environmental Defense and the Nature Conservancy and think tanks like the World Resources Institute (WRI) had campaigned hard to see forest offset projects included into the Kyoto Protocol's carbon trading mechanism. They continued their campaigns and in 2005, the "Coalition for Rainforest Nations", through representatives for the governments of Papua New Guinea and Costa Rica re-introduced the idea to the UN climate negotiations as RED (reducing emissions from deforestation, see above). This coalition is often wrongly described as a coalition of rainforest nations while its correct name "Coalition for Rainforest Nations" reveals its true nature as an NGO. It was created by two Columbia Business School graduates from the US and Italy, one of whom grew up in Papua New Guinea and has regularly been on the country's delegation at UN climate conferences.

Supported by industrialized country governments such as Norway, Germany and UK, this "Coalition for Rainforest Nations" played a key role in seeing REDD firmly rooted in the UN climate negotiations in Bali, Indonesia, in 2007. The same year, the World Bank, launched the **Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)**, with the intention to "jump-start a forest carbon market"¹². It later also launched the **BioCarbon Fund** and the **Forest Investment Program (FIP)**. Together with initiatives such as the German government's **REDD Early Movers (REM)** programme and the Norwegian government's **Norway International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI)**, these programmes have spear-headed REDD+ in many countries in the global South.

Even though the arguments for not including forest carbon in the Kyoto Protocol's offset mechanisms remained unchanged, REDD was established as an international forest policy

tool. Supported by a wide range of government and philanthropic funding programmes, a whole new industry appeared. It included consultancies, REDD project companies like Wildlife Works Carbon, **certification** standards like the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standards (CCBS) and specialised sales agents for REDD projects. With jobs and careers now tied to REDD, the question of effectiveness and whether the idea is really fit for purpose are unlikely to be at the top of the list for this group of REDD proponents.

What about the money promised by REDD?

Funding for REDD has mainly come from four sources. Most funds have come from governments, directly and through entities like the World Bank and the Green Climate Fund¹³. Philanthropies and companies interested in buying carbon credits have funded individual REDD projects and organisations promoting REDD.

The World Bank and other bilateral REDD initiatives used their ‘technical assistance’ to oversee the preparation of ‘baselines’ of emissions from deforestation and carbon stored in trees and the setting up of systems to measure, report and verify (MRV) movements of forest carbon. They also readied sectors for inclusion in **carbon accounting** and carbon trading schemes and set in motion the necessary legal changes to enable Southern countries’ participation in carbon markets under the UN’s Paris Agreement or other international carbon trading schemes such as the aviation industry’s CORSIA¹⁴.

The World Bank in particular has also used REDD initiatives like the **Forest Investment Programme (FIP)**, the **Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)**¹⁵ or the **BioCarbon Fund Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes (ISFL)** to further open up Southern economies to carbon and agriculture commodities markets. For example, the ISFL involves activities in five countries (Ethiopia, Zambia, Indonesia, Colombia and Mexico). Its impact on national policies that affect peasant farming may be long-lasting and prepare the ground for pushing peasant farming deeper into industrial agriculture. The BioCarbon Fund makes no secret of the initiative’s goal: to pioneer programmes that enable countries and the private sector “to adopt changes in the way farmers work on the ground.”¹⁶ Even if these programmes sell few carbon credits in the end, they will still push peasant farming deeper into agro-industrial production and undermine traditional cultivation practices such as **shifting cultivation** and the use of controlled fires for soil preparation.

REDD payments and carbon credits despite rising deforestation. How is this possible?

In 2019, the Green Climate Fund paid US\$ 96.5 million to the government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil for allegedly reducing deforestation; since 2015, the German government’s REDD Early Movers programme has transferred millions of dollars in REDD+ ‘performance’ payments to the governments of the Brazilian states of Acre (EUR 25 million / US\$ 28 million) and Mato Grosso (EUR 44 million). This money was paid out even though deforestation has been rising in both states since REDD was introduced.

It has not been unusual for money to be paid out under REDD even though deforestation in the REDD programme or project area has been rising. This has to do with how 'success' is defined under REDD. In the case of the Green Climate Fund and REDD Early Movers payments, the governments involved agreed that REDD payments would be made as long as actual deforestation stayed below the average deforestation rate during some period of time in the past. In the case of the Brazilian states of Acre and Mato Grosso, the peak years of deforestation, 2004 and 2005, were included in the calculation. Deforestation had fallen drastically after those years, due to measures taken by the Brazilian government to reduce deforestation before REDD even existed. These included demarcation of Indigenous Peoples' territories and regular checks and fines for those found to be destroying forest illegally. When REDD was introduced, demarcation and law enforcement were replaced by the financial incentives logic on which REDD is based. The result: deforestation has been going up again.

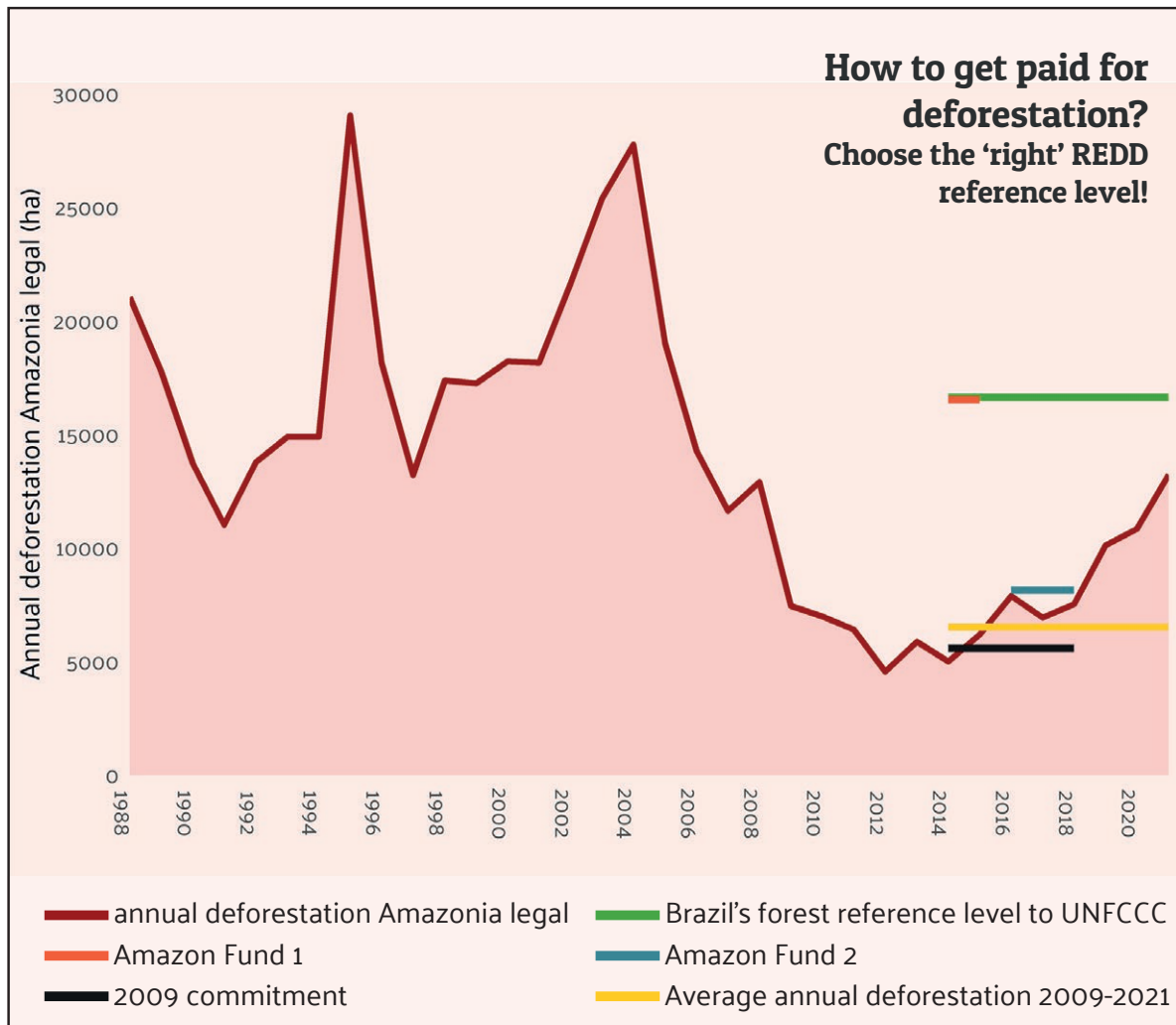
Why are they still receiving REDD payments? Because the reference period was chosen so that a very high past deforestation could be shown. Therefore, even massive increases in deforestation after REDD was introduced are considered a REDD success: because deforestation was much higher at some time in the past, deforestation now – even if increasing – is less than it might have been without REDD.

The following image shows how the amount of the REDD payment depends on the negotiated reference numbers rather than on what actually happens in the forest. The dark green line indicates actual deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. The coloured bars between 2014 and 2018 show different reference figures that were negotiated by the Brazilian government under different REDD initiatives. While the government missed its own 2009 commitment to reduce deforestation, it was still eligible for REDD funding. The amount of REDD funding received did depend less on the actual deforestation but on the difference between the actual deforestation and the negotiated reference number (the red line): The higher deforestation was assumed under the reference number, the more money was paid out under REDD – even if deforestation was rising.

Such jurisdictional REDD+ payments turn to the past to set an (inflated) baseline. Individual REDD+ projects use an even more dubious method: They compare actual deforestation within the project with the fictional story of how much deforestation *would have happened* without the REDD project. Several reports have exposed how this method has led to wild exaggeration of alleged emission savings¹⁷.

To make matters worse, REDD includes an inbuilt perverse incentive to exaggerate the forest destruction that allegedly *would have happened* without the REDD project: **The bigger the hypothetical destruction, the bigger the difference between actual deforestation and what the project owner claims would have happened. And it is this difference that is turned into carbon credits that the project can sell.** Many, if not most, existing REDD projects are based on implausible claims that forests were going to be destroyed without the REDD project¹⁸.

It has not been unusual for money to be paid out under REDD even though deforestation in the REDD programme or project area has been rising.



Brazilian Amazon deforestation could double under UNDP proposal FP100 reference level choice and still generate 'results-based REDD+ payments.

- (a) *FREL*. Brazilian Forest Reference Level UNFCCC. *Basis for conversion to tons CO₂ claimed as mitigation outcome in UNDP proposal to GCF RfP pilot program results-based REDD+ payment*: Average 1996-2010: 16.640km²
- (b) Reference level Brazilian *Amazon Fund 1* for payments 2011-2015: Average 2001-2010: 16.540km²
- (c) Reference level Brazilian *Amazon Fund 2* for payments 2016-2020: Average 2006-2015: 8.150km²
- (d) 2009 Brazilian government *commitment* to reduce deforestation in the Amazon by 80 percent by 2020, compared to 1996-2005 average: 3.925km²

One such example is a REDD project managed by the world's largest conservation NGOs, The Nature Conservancy (TNC). TNC's REDD story is that without the project, TNC was going to log the forest and take out the most valuable timber in the coming years. This is very implausible, not least because two decades earlier, TNC had run a successful fundraising campaign to buy the land. In the fundraising campaign TNC had argued that buying the forest would protect it from the threat of logging¹⁹.

REDD as a tool to increase control over land used by forest peoples

Conflicts caused by REDD projects and their negative impact on forest peoples have been widely documented²⁰. Those conflicts frequently occur where projects

are set up on land for which ownership is disputed. Conflicts arise, for example, when the REDD project places restrictions on the use of the land inside the REDD project area. Those imposing the restrictions tend to ignore that their claim to the land may be disputed and that forest peoples have long been using the territory now declared a REDD project²¹.

Restrictions often include bans on collecting firewood and farming practises using fire. Families affected by REDD projects have also reported access restrictions and confiscation of their livestock, for example where the REDD project does no longer allow people to use the land previously available to them as grazing land for their animals. Human-wildlife conflicts have also been reported to increase. Families affected by the Kasigau Corridor REDD project in Kenya, for example, reported that their crops are frequently destroyed by elephants without adequate compensation from the REDD project or the nearby National Park. Each claims the elephants were the others' responsibility with communities caught in the middle, left without compensation for their destroyed crops.

REDD has also made it easier for governments and conservation NGOs to justify programmes restricting practises such as **shifting cultivation** (“**slash-and-burn**”). Many of these initiatives impose changes that make forest peoples' and peasant farming practises more dependent on technology and introduce farming methods controlled by corporations. They may promote practises that rely on the use of fertilizers and specialized, corporate-controlled seeds to supposedly increase yield per hectare (so that forest peoples will clear less land, the argument goes). This allows corporations, consultants and state agencies to increase control over land used by forest peoples and integrate peasant farming deeper into the globalized food commodities markets. This way, REDD contributes to peasants and forest-dependant peoples losing their autonomy and ancestral knowledge and culture over their land and life spaces.

Many REDD projects also use drones and cameras to monitor who is using land and how areas within the REDD project are used²². Sometimes, this monitoring is presented as something positive, a way of spotting intruders destroying forests inside Indigenous Peoples' territories illegally, for example. But isn't this kind of monitoring a way of controlling how, where and when a community uses its territory, especially in areas where rights to the land are in dispute? Will forest peoples be fined if drone images taken by the REDD project show that they have cut trees on their territory, say, for construction of a community house? Will REDD project developers and consultants be able to collect crucial information from the digital mapping equipment they provide to community members involved in a REDD activity? Who controls this information?

Whether focused on forest communities' farming practises or their forest use, REDD in its actual implementation has tended to put communities' autonomy and food sovereignty at risk in one way or another. It has also increased the influence that REDD project managers and consultants have over land use in forests inside the REDD project. By assigning a financial value to trees as carbon stores, REDD (and “nature-based solutions” more broadly) has also fuelled the grab for land as a way of cashing in on the new carbon value of the land²³.

REDD as a driver of climate chaos

By proving a popular excuse to delay the end of fossil fuel burning, REDD is in fact driving the continuation and expansion of fossil fuel use. With pressure growing on corporations to show that they are ‘taking action to reduce their climate impact’, many present themselves as enthusiastic defenders of forests. Oil companies like Eni and Shell write about their “commitment to protecting and conserving forests” (Eni) and how “nature-based solutions can make a big contribution to Shell’s ambition to be a **net-zero emissions** energy business by 2050, or sooner” (Shell).

Yet these same companies lack comparable enthusiasm to commit to “protecting and conserving” the **underground** carbon stores that they continue to destroy to extract oil, coal and gas. Where is the commitment to ending this destruction which is the principal cause of climate breakdown?

A REDD-Monitor article from December 2020 sums up why companies like Eni, Shell and many others are so enthusiastic about forests, REDD and “nature-based solutions” or nature climate solutions: “Big Polluters love them because they allow business as usual to continue. A series of oil and gas corporations including Shell, BP, Total, Gazprom, Eni, Petronas, PetroChina, and Occidental, have recently announced deliveries of “carbon neutral” liquified natural gas. Fossil fuels, of course, cannot be “carbon neutral” and claims that the emissions have been “offset” by buying carbon credits are pure greenwash. Climate scams such as REDD and natural climate solutions exist for exactly that purpose. To allow the fossil fuel industry to greenwash itself²⁴.

It’s allowing such greenwashing of continued fossil fuel burning, and the economic exploitation and socio-ecological and cultural destruction inextricably tied to fossil fuel extractivism that makes REDD much worse than just a colossal failure to help bring down forest loss.

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trends in specific countries, see also the Global Forest Watch dataset at: <https://tinyurl.com/ncseahyh>

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20 Among the REDD+ projects that have caused conflict are the Kasigau Corridor REDD project in Kenya, the Cardamon Mountains REDD projects in Cambodia, the Alto Mayo, Cordillera Azul and Tambopata REDD+ projects in Peru, the Russas and Valparaiso REDD projects in Brazil, the Katingan REDD+ project in Indonesia, the Mai Ndombe REDD projects in the DR Congo. REDD-Monitor has published articles on all of these projects. www.redd-monitor.org. See also: Nel, A (2017). Contested carbon: Carbon forestry as a speculatively virtual, falteringly material and disputed territorial assemblage. *Geoforum* 81: 144–152; Flynn, G. (2021). REDD+ Projects Still Struggling to Live up to Expectations in Cambodia. <https://cambodianess.com/article/redd-projects-still-struggling-to-live-up-to-expectations-in-cambodia>

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Oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Photo: Ecuador sin petróleo



Is all Carbon the same? Fossil carbon, violence and power

The underlying assumption behind REDD is a dangerous lie: That the climate impact of all carbon is the same - be it the carbon released from vegetation ('Biotic Carbon') or the carbon that is released from burning oil, gas or coal ('Fossil Carbon'). This assumption obfuscates the fact that the burning of 'Fossil Carbon' is driving climate change. It also conceals the violence, destruction and abuses at the root of the fossil fuel empires. So, what exactly are the differences and why are they so important?

Conventional scientists and decision-makers have largely endorsed the idea that the climate impact of all **carbon** is the same... be it the **carbon** released from vegetation or the **carbon** that is released from burning oil, gas or coal. This is a key underlying assumption behind carbon markets, REDD+, '**net zero emissions**,' 'zero net deforestation' and now also the so-called 'nature-based solutions.' Essentially, without the assumption that emissions from different sources have the same impact on the climate, **carbon offsets** could not be established.

Regardless of its source, when **carbon** comes into contact with oxygen, it

turns into the gas carbon dioxide. And it is also true that the excessive accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere imbalances the climate. Beyond the climate impact, this over accumulation of carbon dioxide is also tied to stories of violence, power and dispossession.

In the context of today's climate chaos, claiming that the climate impact of all **carbon** is the same is a dangerous lie.

Why do so many people, scientists such as those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) included, continue to insist that there is no difference between the climate impact of the **carbon** that is present above the ground and that which is released when oil, coal and gas are extracted from the ground?

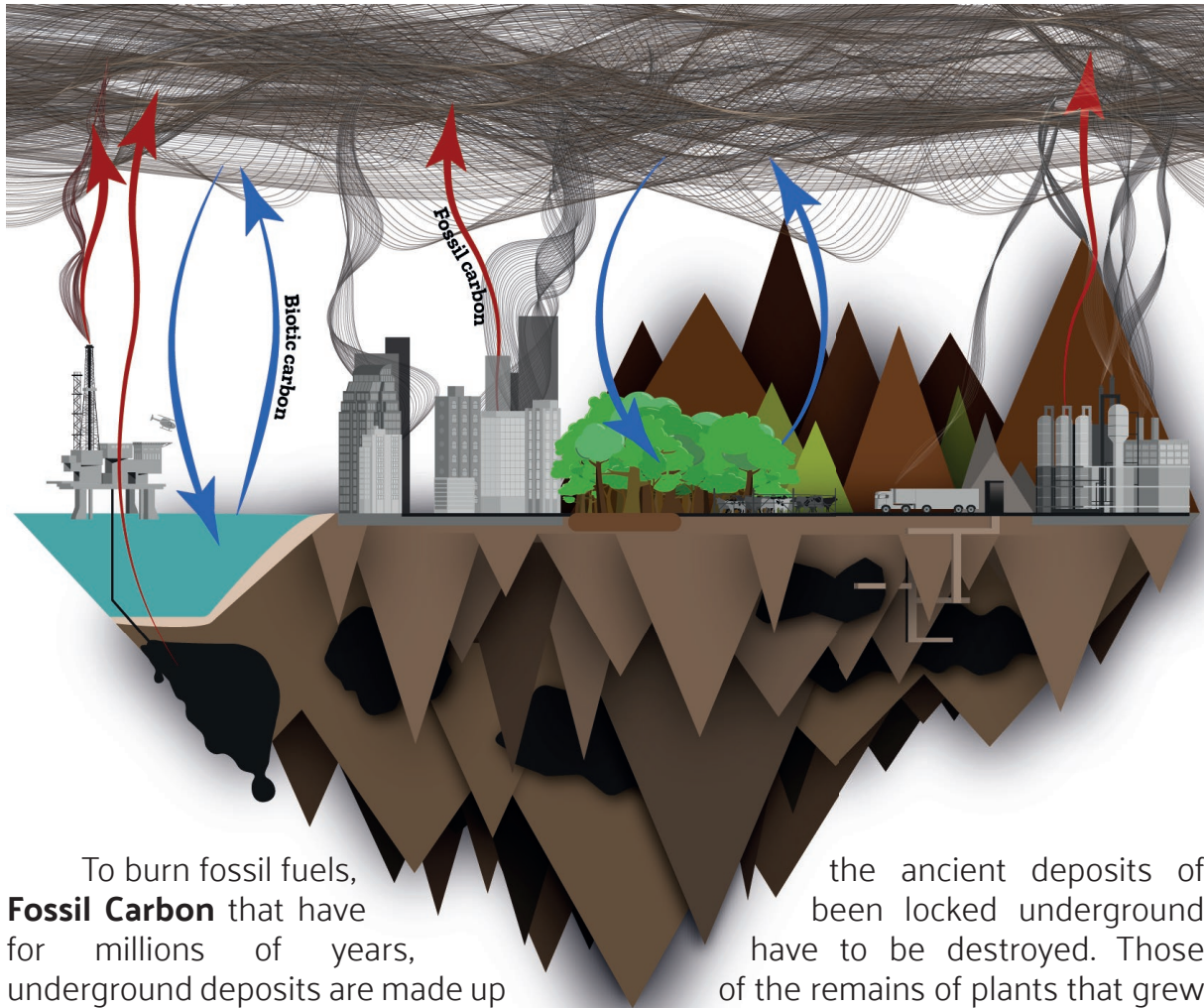
Of course it is easier and more convenient to assume that the climate impact of all carbon is the same. It is the basis for claiming that greenhouse gases from different sources (factories, refineries, land use, transport, cement production, energy generation and so on) and even different greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane and other gases linked to industrial production), have the same impact on the climate and that therefore, the damage caused by emissions from one source can be compensated by reducing emissions from another. That is why the scientists advising the UN climate negotiations converted different gases that cause climate change into equivalent units of carbon dioxide or CO₂e. This equivalence is a precondition for **offsetting**. But **carbon** from different sources is not the same. Claiming that it is, conceals the violent histories, conflicts and oppression related to **carbon** extraction in most parts of the world.

It is crucial to recognize that the climate impact of releasing **carbon** that was locked up underground for millions of years and which is now burned as petroleum, gas or coal in large quantities over a short period of time, is different from the impact caused when the fast-moving carbon cycle in which some **carbon** is temporarily stored above ground, in trees for example, is released.

[In the context of today's climate chaos, claiming that the climate impact of all carbon is the same is a dangerous lie.]

And why is this difference so important?

The carbon that circulates in the air, oceans, vegetation and soils (above the ground) is often referred to as **Biotic Carbon**. It can be stored temporarily in any of these places, including vegetation, such as trees. From there, this **Biotic Carbon** can easily be released naturally, through fires, storms or insect outbreaks, to name some prominent examples. Yet, historic large-scale forest destruction, especially in industrialized countries and for the expansion of industrial agriculture, has resulted in much **carbon** that could be stored in forests instead being accumulated in the atmosphere. Land clearance and deforestation have created an imbalance in the **Biotic Carbon** cycle: too much **Biotic Carbon** is building up in the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide. This adds to the carbon dioxide that has accumulated in the atmosphere as a result of fossil fuel burning.



To burn fossil fuels, **Fossil Carbon** that have been locked underground for millions of years, are made up of the remains of plants that grew millions of years ago. The process that turned vegetation into **Fossil Carbon** involved huge amounts of time, pressure and heat, and resulted in the carbon becoming extremely concentrated. This high concentration of carbon in the **Fossil Carbon** deposits underground makes it such a powerful carrier of energy. Small quantities of **Fossil Carbon** contain a lot of energy, compared with that contained in wood or charcoal.

In order to turn the **Fossil Carbon** into petrol, diesel and coal, humans need large machines to dig up and extract the carbon in those underground deposits. When this **Fossil Carbon** that has been locked away from the atmosphere for millions of years is burnt as fossil fuel, it will stay aboveground for a considerably long time.

The world's vegetation, oceans and soils can only absorb so much of this excess; and are certainly not able to absorb enough of it, and fast enough, to contain the CO₂ imbalance in the earth's atmosphere. As a result, much of this excess **Fossil Carbon** piles up in the atmosphere, where it impacts the global climate.

Most scientists now recognize that the burning of **Fossil Carbon** is driving climate change. Yet, in their talks and policy recommendations they treat **Fossil and Biotic Carbon** as having the same impact on the climate. The consequence is that the climate debate is focused on 'equivalent' greenhouse gases in the atmosphere rather than on preventing that more **Fossil Carbon** is released from its underground deposits.

This is very problematic. By promoting the false assumption that all **carbon** is the same, scientists and policy-makers are also radically downplaying the fossil fuel industry's contribution as the main cause of the climate chaos. And the damage goes even further. Claiming that all **carbon** is the same also helps conceal the violence, ecological destruction and the abuse of power that have been the foundation of the corporate fossil fuel empires. It also spreads this violence and abuse to where **offset** projects are supposedly storing an equivalent amount of the released **carbon**.

This convenient 'all **carbon** is the same' narrative has allowed fossil fuel companies and all the industries that depend on such fuels to continue business as usual, despite the almost three decades of UN climate negotiations. It has also protected corporate and financial profits, while slogans of 'carbon neutral' or '**net zero emissions**' are providing legitimacy for continued corporate destruction.

Making the fossil fuel industry accountable!

Capitalism depends on **Fossil Carbon**'s energy. Fossil fuels are the engine and ingredient that today's globalized (green) capitalism is addicted to. Climate chaos is thus a direct consequence of the constant destruction of underground **Fossil Carbon** deposits and their burning as fossil fuels. The false narrative of claiming equivalence between **Biotic Carbon** and **Fossil Carbon** is clearly political. It allows the fossil fuel industry and its allies to continue their very profitable and destructive businesses. Such an equivalence is another example of the power of the fossil fuel industry, which has over the last two centuries destroyed and militarized the territories it is occupying to extract, process and transport **Fossil Carbon** along immense networks of infrastructure, pipelines, roads, ports and waterways, all the way to the deadly polluting refineries and the pollution hotspots around them.

When, for example, giant oil company Shell falsely claims to be compensating the **Fossil Carbon** it extracts by planting large-scale tree plantations, at least three lies are being disseminated: the first is that **Fossil Carbon** can be made equivalent and its climate damage compensated with the temporary storage of **Biotic Carbon** above the ground. The second lie is that the 'climate change problem' is being addressed, while the reality is that **offsets** allow the continuation of fossil fuel burning. And the third is that 'nature' is just there, empty, for companies to grab as their **carbon offset** stores. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is important to expose the lies and false narratives that are behind these assumptions. Buying into the false assumption that **Fossil Carbon** and **Biotic Carbon** affect the climate in the same way simply means that climate chaos, and the on-going destruction of territories, is further accelerated.

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Further reading:

Carbon Trading – A Critical Conversation on Climate Change, Privatisation and Power, Larry Lohmann: <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/publication/carbon-trading-critical-conversation-climate-change-privatisation-power/>

What do forests have to do with climate change, carbon markets and REDD+? - A Toolkit for community activists: <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/what-do-forests-have-to-do-with-climate-change-carbon-markets-and-redd>

Chasing Carbon Unicorns: The Deception of Carbon Markets and “Net Zero”: <https://www.foei.org/publication/chasing-unicorns-carbon-markets-net-zero/>



Ending colonialism means ending REDD+

For REDD+ to work, it has to divide people in three classes. One is that which supposedly saves the forests – ‘active people with initiative’. A second class supposedly lets forests die when no REDD+ money is being paid to keep them alive – ‘predictably passive beings’. And a third class which mainly applauds the first class efforts. This comes from the divisions among humans that colonialists and racists have been inventing and reinventing for centuries. The fact is that REDD+ works best when it is most colonialist. How has it managed to cover up its true nature for so many years?

Before it can make money for anybody, REDD+ first has to divide the world's people into three different classes.

One class is the class that supposedly saves forests. This is the class that pays the money that, it claims, makes the difference between saving forests and letting them die.

In return for paying the money that supposedly makes this difference, this first class is allowed to go on extracting and using fossil fuels – activities crucial to its

identity, its wealth, its power. For this class, REDD+ needs to be an investment that pays off. For every dollar spent on REDD+, more than a dollar must be saved on not having to give up fossil fuels.

Then there is a second class. This is the class that supposedly lets forests die when no REDD+ money is being paid to keep them alive.

It might be that this class lets forests die because, without REDD+ money, it just isn't powerful enough to stop the advance of logging, mining, dams and commercial plantation agriculture into its territories. Or maybe it lets forests die because, without REDD+ money, it can't learn how to make them absorb enough of the carbon dioxide that is being given off by fossil fuel burning. Or maybe because, without REDD+ money, this class are just natural-born forest killers, ignorantly **'slashing and burning,'** collecting firewood and forest goods, hiring themselves out to logging or mining companies, or building villages where they're not supposed to.

Whatever: the important thing is that, for REDD+ to work, a second class of predictably passive beings has to be invented in order to make a first class of active people with initiative stand out in contrast. Otherwise it would be impossible to argue that the saving of some stand of trees was the 'result' of REDD+ money rather than rural people's own organizing abilities, say, or increased rainfall.

Finally, there is a third class. This class is the audience for the claim of the first class that they are saving the world's forests from the doom that would otherwise follow from the inaction of the second class. The applause of this third class is crucial to the first class' survival.

An Old Dualism

Does the contrast between first and second classes sound familiar? It should, because it's a descendant of the divisions among human beings that colonialists and racists have been inventing and reinventing for centuries.

The divide between the first and second classes is like the old imperialist divide between white conquerors who "make history" and nonwhite "people without history"¹ who dully scratch around on the land in the same ways year after year. It's like the old contrast that thinkers like John Locke made between 'productive,' private-property-owning Europeans and Indigenous Peoples, who never made any 'improvements' to their land and thus were not entitled to it². It's like the dichotomy that capitalists promote when they say that it is their distinctive 'initiative' and 'ingenuity' that entitles them to harvest the sweat of their lazy, less intelligent workers.

In fact, REDD+ works best when it is most colonialist. The more that the second class is portrayed as helpless, and the more predictable the future of their forests, the easier it is to invent precise numbers for how many trees have been 'saved' by REDD+ money. Not only is REDD+ founded on racism; it also has built-in incentives to become more and more racist the more refined and 'improved' it becomes.

Why has all this provoked so little scandal? How has REDD+ managed to cover up its colonialist nature for so many years?

Hiding behind Jargon

The secret is **carbon accounting**.

REDD+'s **carbon accounting** is like the law and literature of classical colonialism. It's there to maintain inequality. The difference is that REDD+ **carbon accounting** doesn't proclaim its double standard openly. It hides it under literally millions of pages of technical jargon. It never uses words like 'second-class people' and 'first-class people'. It never uses words like 'waste' to refer to the lands of second-class people, nor 'productive hectares' to refer to the lands of first-class people. Instead it uses the terms 'baseline' and 'project or programme funded by REDD+'.

How has REDD+ managed to cover up its colonialist nature for so many years?

'Baseline' is a code word for 'fate'. A baseline is whatever colonial powers have decided cannot change until they arrive to make a difference. It might be the static nature of the savages (noble or otherwise) who inhabit forested territories. It might be something like Locke's vision of the Americas as a territory destined to eternal backwardness until the arrival of Europeans. Or it might refer to the unstoppable march of capitalist progress into ever more 'sacrifice zones' of extraction on earth or in outer space: the universal destiny imagined by many capitalist ideologues today.

In any case, the 'baseline' rate of forest destruction in a REDD+ project zone is always statistically predictable – whether through economic modelling, satellite imagery, tree measurements, linear extrapolation from selected examples, or whatever other method. REDD+'s carbon accountants are professionally committed to the assumption that, in principle, they can predict the futures of forest peoples' forests the same way that chemists predict the outcomes of chemical reactions.

A REDD+ project is different. Under the rules of REDD+ **carbon accounting**, what a REDD+ project will do is never allowed to be statistically predicted from the previous behaviour of REDD+ consultants or REDD+ money. Unlike a baseline, a REDD+ project is never defined by the past. While forest peoples are imagined to be confined by statistical destiny, REDD+ funders are not.

Without this dualistic fiction, REDD+ projects could never be defined as 'additional' (making a difference). The 'results' that REDD+ money delivers could never be calculated, and carbon pollution permits could never be generated.

REDD+ consultants – and the companies and governments they work for – would no doubt be extremely offended if carbon accountants tried to predict their future carbon-related behaviour on the basis of their dismal past records, and then boiled it down to a single number. Forest peoples, however, are expected to sit still while carbon accountants dictate to them what the inevitable fate of their territories will be if they don't accept REDD+ projects.

In many ways, then, REDD+ **carbon accounting** is just one more exercise in colonialist history-writing. Falsely treating forest dwellers as peoples trapped by the past, carbon accountants simultaneously erase inconvenient parts of their own record. REDD+ without colonialism is as inconceivable as extractivism without colonialism.

REDD+ without colonialism is as inconceivable as extractivism without colonialism.

Going Forward with REDD+ Criticism

The racism of REDD+ **carbon accounting**, in short, goes a lot deeper than just the fact that carbon accountants usually have white skins (although they do). The real issue is that REDD+ **carbon accounting** is colonialist even when it is used by people with black, brown, yellow or red skins. And the better that REDD+ does its technical job of showing that REDD+ money makes a difference, the more colonialist it becomes.

Ironically, this is true even when REDD+ tries to treat Indigenous Peoples and peasants as active parties in saving forests instead of as irresponsible forest encroachers. REDD+ has no choice but to assume that forest people's practices, however good they are, can be made measurably more effective with REDD+ money. But REDD+ money needs carbon molecule accounting in order to quantify the pollution rights that REDD+ provides to fossil-fuelled industry.

Which means that forest peoples' beneficial practices can only be recognized and 'activated' when they are chronicled, measured, reconceptualized, reorganized, certified and paid for by what are typically Northern-dominated institutions. Institutions that are contractually obligated to defend the continued extraction of oil, coal and gas that is a danger so many other forest peoples worldwide.

REDD+ needs to be eliminated, not reformed.

So once again it's a 'white supplement' that makes the REDD+ money flow. Not political organizing among forest peoples themselves, which, it is assumed without evidence, can never be effective. Under REDD+, Indigenous Peoples and peasants can earn recognition for their forest practices – and their own agency – only when they are taught to treat them as means of manufacturing cheap pollution rights for dominant powers.

This is why REDD+ needs to be eliminated, not reformed. Reforms that urge 'more accurate baselines' and 'Indigenous REDD+' can lead only to intensified colonialism and weaker forest movements. At a time when even some of '**carbon offsets**' longest-standing proponents are finding that they can no longer defend the practice³, it's time for critics of REDD+ to become even tougher so that the institution can be ended once and for all.

Larry Lohmann
The CornerHouse

¹ Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History, 2010, <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520268180/europe-and-the-people-without-history>

2 The 18th Century Common, Locke's American Wasteland, 2018, <https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/lockes-american-wasteland/>

3 REDD/Monitor, Bloomberg Green: "How the Carbon Offset Market is Slowing the Fight Against Climate Change", 2021, <https://redd-monitor.org/2021/04/29/bloomberg-green-how-the-carbon-offset-market-is-slowing-the-fight-against-climate-change/>; and The Conversation, Climate scientists: concept of net zero is a dangerous trap, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/climate-scientists-concept-of-net-zero-is-a-dangerous-trap-157368>

A photograph of Tom Goldtooth, a man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a dark jacket and an orange scarf. He is speaking into a microphone at a protest. Other people are visible in the background, some holding signs. A woman with long dark hair and an orange scarf stands next to him. The photo is credited to Tom Goldtooth and Bioneers.org.

Tom Goldtooth
Photo: Bioneers.org

**“It is not just the takings of our land...
It is the takings of our identity”**

Interview with Tom Goldtooth, Indigenous Environmental Network

To reflect on what REDD+ has meant for Indigenous Peoples and their struggles requires inserting this mechanism into a much broader reflection on the history of Indigenous Peoples. A history marked by resistance to colonization and racism as well as to capitalism and neoliberal globalization. In this perspective, resistance to REDD+ is not an issue only for Indigenous Peoples in tropical forests; it is about their historical global struggle for justice.

WRM talks with Tom Goldtooth, from the Indigenous Environmental Network, and also a member of the WRM Advisory Committee.

WRM: Please say a bit about yourself, why and how you got engaged with the REDD+ issue, considering that you come from a region without tropical forests or REDD+ projects.

It has always been a land issue. And that includes all the different resources and concepts of how to look at nature.

Tom: I was given a mandate by some Indigenous tribes, Indigenous spiritual leaders and grassroots groups in 1998 when we had a meeting about climate change in the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) I was representing. I think it is good for people to know that the US government recognizes all of our 574 individual tribes, including Alaska Natives, and some aspects of our sovereignty. IEN is a grassroots community-based organisation with our membership. We are not representatives of the elected Indigenous leadership. When I use the word *traditional* it means original ways.

In the 1700s and 1800s there was a tremendous conflict with the arrival of the settlers, the colonizers from Europe. At first, we were pretty nice to the settlers; that is our nature, how we are. But after a while, we learned that these people had their own agenda: taking over our lands. And it always has been recognized in the North that with colonization always comes the Church. The Church needs to give its blessings to the taking over of a whole country by basically European colonizers. International law at that time was based on laws from Europe, but it was illegal to conquer an entire continent without getting the blessings of the Church. They said we were uncivilized. In fact, they said we did not have souls, s-o-u-l-s, that we were less than human. That is part of the process of colonization. It is crucial to understand some of the background of Indigenous Peoples of the North. But the same process basically took place in those lands and territories of the Amazon and tropical forests with original Peoples there, Indigenous Peoples, inhabitants.

So there is a long history of colonization and the takings of land, t-a-k-i-n-g-s. It has always been a land issue. And that includes all the different resources and concepts of how to look at nature. For example, the colonists that came to North America wanted the trees at the East coast to build their shipping fleet. Those shipping fleets were operated either as businesses of the State, of individuals or by corporations. And a lot of people don't know that over hundreds of thousands of years they had devastated their own forests in Europe. So they were searching for more timber for their ships and other products. The Spanish were looking for minerals for example, the Dutch had their own interests, but all based on colonialism.

So with that in mind, our Network was given the responsibility to start working on climate change in 1998. Buenos Aires was my first UN climate meeting and there were only five Indigenous Peoples in attendance. I was not familiar with the issues around **carbon offset** mechanisms. But as I continued to attend those meetings, I soon heard about emission trading mechanisms and I heard more about the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and it interested me, because IEN is not limited to the United States or Canada. In the formation of our Network in 1990, we have always had participation of Indigenous Peoples from the global South, especially around concerns of the protection of biodiversity. Those were the beginning years of the formation of the UN Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD). In those early years of 1990, most of the primary issues were about toxic chemicals around landfills, toxic dumps, and the dumping of nuclear waste on Indigenous lands. But as we continued,

we started to identify the terminology of environmental injustice and **environmental racism**, which expanded the dialogue with our 574 tribes and beyond with our people in so-called Canada.

Those terminologies created one of our frameworks for addressing the inequity issues that we were facing by the government of the United States. We were seeing how to maintain our healthy ecosystems, but they were seeing only so-called *resources*. The Indigenous Peoples that were and are practitioners of the Indigenous knowledge, the Indigenous lifeways, have always advised us to not look at nature as natural resources, to not look at it as resources. So, we were guided by traditional knowledge holders, who always said we should not participate in the colonialist framework that looks at nature from a capitalist or monetary perspective. Our Network was formed by this kind of community representatives of our tribes, members that still carry on our Indigenous traditional knowledge, our original instructions that were given to us from the beginning of time.

In many ways, the struggles against this economic globalization and against carbon markets are the same struggle.

Since we had participation in the formation of IEN from Indigenous Peoples from Latin America and Africa, and the Philippines, we have always put ourselves in a position that we also have to explore what their issues are. We want to be engaged in issues that could violate the human rights of those brothers and sisters from the global South. That is why I accepted the invitation to go to [the UN climate meeting in] Durban. I started to see that mitigation plans were merging at the UN level, and that they talked as if those plans on carbon markets were going to save Mother Earth and save our People, and get us to a level where we don't have to worry about global warming, about a changing climate. I have always been cautious of the federal government here in the US, but I am more cautious of UN meetings where they bring governments, but also the World Bank, large NGOs and corporations. So all my red flags go out. It was in these UN meetings that I heard about Kyoto and some of the debates around forests, and that there was a fight to keep them from becoming an **offset** scheme. So, I learned how the CDM became the biggest **offset** scheme in the world and later all these things come together including forests as carbon sinks. This really became a concern for me.

I do come from a forested region here in the Great Lakes along the borders of the U.S. and Canada. I am surrounded by forests. I understand the relationship to the trees. The trees have spirit. According to our traditional knowledge we understand how trees breathe, so I understand the concept of carbon. But I soon learned that people living in the forests in the global South are really at a huge risk and there are serious issues, like land grabbing if the forest were included not only in these carbon sinks but also as a CDM. And I had to look at new terminology, like the concepts of afforestation, and reforestation, and how those could be considered as methodology in the CDM. But straight up calling them a forest carbon credit, was something we started to organize around, but then after a while came RED, with one D, and then it became REDD, and then REDD+.

Like the CDM, REDD+ was launched by the World Bank. I started to look at the financial mechanisms that were supporting this false solution, the development institutions. This is where I started to make the link between how we as IEN can help support the rights of our Indigenous brothers and sisters in the global South from forested areas, because we were also getting involved, since 1996, with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). And by going to the CBD is where these issues of concern started to come together, understanding the role of the World Bank and the development institutions. They are behind something that we are really familiar with here in the North and that is the neoliberal globalization that started to show its ugly head. And I remember we used that term, economic globalization and its link to capitalism.

Part of IEN was then also building alliances with other marginalized people of colour here in the U.S., and working and establishing networks globally with organisations that are fighting capitalism, fighting economic globalization. So, it all started to come together for us, to get more involved and try to put a stop to REDD+, it became a symbol of our resistance. In many ways, the struggles against this economic globalization and against carbon markets are the same struggle. I like to stress that. And, if for us carbon markets are part of the continuation of colonization, it was not a surprise that during the 2007 UN climate meeting in Bali, the World Bank, the UN and the development paradigm found a way to work around forest **offsets**, which were couched inside a strange acronym and language like REDD+. I feel that it was meant to create confusion and conflict, very much loaded with climate misinformation.

Of course, the conservation organizations were behind it, like WWF, and we were already started to get profiled as the bad people. Even at that time, the NGOs tried to find friendly Indigenous Peoples that would work with them, and they were trying to put us against each other, not only here in the Americas, but also in SE Asia, in Indonesia, and a UN climate meeting in Bali. It was not surprising to me that the conservation NGOs who were behind this started to act as ‘third party verifiers’ and it started to show that they were going to make money from REDD+. And they have been making money: Conservation International (CI), WWF, Environmental Defence Fund (EDF), and others, based here in Washington D.C. They have built out their organisations in the last decades to set up **carbon offsets** and verifying these phoney programmes. That’s my response to your question.

REDD+ is just a continuation of that same colonial, capitalist, patriarchal logic that has taken this planet to the brink of violence and damage.

WRM: You said that REDD+ has become a symbol in your broader resistance struggle. What makes you say this?

I mentioned colonialism, colonization, so these colonist programmes, like REDD+, they are founded on the development logic. They are built on a primus that countries in the global South can follow the Western example of capitalist expansion and be pulled out of poverty. But as Indigenous Peoples of the North I know that this

is not true. And we know this has been the lie since World War II. So, I think it has been beneficial for me coming from the belly of the beast, of the United States, to be able to understand this linkage to colonization, to the colonialist logic of development.

The impacts on Indigenous Peoples are profound and deep. REDD+ is just a continuation of that same colonial, capitalist, patriarchal logic that has taken this planet to the brink of violence and damage. It is almost impossible to say what the impacts of REDD+ have been in the last 15 years because REDD+ is embedded in a system that goes back more than 500 years. From my perspective in the North, it brings up that historical trauma that comes with what took place since the colonization of our lands in the North. It is not just the takings of land and our trees and our water, our mountains and our grasslands, but it is the takings of our identity. It is the replacement of our Indigenous traditional ceremonies with Christianity, it is taking of our language, it comes with literally the rape of our children, the historical trauma that is documented in Canada in the Church-founded residential schools. This is a serious point. If we compare 15 years of a global initiative that has such an impact on the lives and future of our Indigenous Peoples of the tropical forests, this is no different to us than the past 500 years.

I'm concerned how these carbon market mechanisms with benefit-sharing promises are resulting in the division of our Indigenous Peoples and that hurts deeply, because it impacts our national, regional and global solidarity, and how we work together. Many of us worked for 19 years on the drafting of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and that was not easy to do. And to see initiatives such as REDD+ becoming a divisive tool, a divide-and-conquer strategy. But again, these are not new impacts, there has been a history of these type of tactics used by colonial governments and their agents: the corporations. This level of racism is not new. Indigenous Peoples, have the answers to climate change. But if we are being divided, then we are not able to lead the way that this world needs. The people who promote REDD+ are truly causing the climate crisis in this sense. They have a lot to answer for.

WRM: In response to the critiques and impacts, REDD+ promoters created the Cancun **safeguards, best practices, **certification** standards, participatory REDD+, and so on, arguing they can prevent human rights violations. What is your view?**

I see **safeguards** as smokescreens that are used to silence us, to silence our indigenous brothers and sisters. To make it sound like they are going to take responsibility. They create **safeguards** to confuse and shift the narrative away from the destruction, away from the violence that comes with that destruction, which they are responsible for. They don't tell the people in the Amazon that the money comes from polluting companies. They don't tell them that in some far away place there might be a refinery, a city of refineries, that are continuing to emit toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases that are causing long contamination and respiratory illnesses to local communities where those oil refineries are, killing people. They will not tell them all the impacts of violence and destruction that REDD+ is responsible for.

I have talked to some Indigenous People after organisations like EDF or Conservation International (CI) do workshops, and I ask them "Did they tell you

where the money comes from?” And they said, “No, I think it comes from the World Bank”, I said, “No, it comes from Chevron”, because in this case Chevron was the one, and they were surprised, appalled. “Gazprom”, “What?”, they said. So this is how it works. And I also told them “did you know that there are Indigenous Peoples, black people, poor white people, Mexican Spanish speaking people, who live next to the oil refinery in Richmond, California, in the San Francisco area, who are dying from respiratory illnesses from the emissions from those oil refineries? And these companies are telling people that they have become carbon neutral. They are telling people that they are investing their money in the forest in the Amazon to protect people”.

These are mechanisms certifying land theft

In the North I have had to explain this greenwash. People in the forests don't understand how that works, but they feel that they are being violated, that they are being convinced that it is good to take money coming from REDD+. So that is why the sole discussion of **safeguards** confuses and shifts the narrative away from the violence and destruction that these carbon cowboys are responsible for, and the governments who are pushing that. So many people in conservation organizations believe that REDD+ can work. They are confused and don't see how racist REDD+ and other **offset** programs really are. I have told them that these are mechanisms certifying land theft, and they don't like me to speak like that- Certifying Land Thefts. **Safeguards** for justifying more fossil fuels and pollution? It is just insane. Best practices? For what? Dispossession? It is ridiculous.

Multimillionaire Jeff Bezos established the Jeff Bezos Earth Fund. He put a hundred million US dollars right after the UN climate meeting in Bali to fund WWF, Environmental Defense Fund, CI and TNC. Behind that funding is the agenda to help pushing their conservation **offsets** and carbon, capture and storage programs. That is 400 million dollars in the pocket of organisations pushing this agenda! IEN and other organisations are still trying to put together our campaigns to fight this.

There will continue to be human rights violations, evictions. Who is going to hold the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo accountable? Who is going to hold the President of Brazil accountable? They want to erase the history of the original Indigenous Peoples of their countries. They want to re-write history. They want to ignore that the First Peoples have inherent rights. That is what they are afraid of.

WRM: Some indigenous organisations have actively engaged with REDD+, resulting in proposals like 'Indigenous REDD+' and campaigns like 'No Rights, No REDD'. Looking back, do you think it is possible to conciliate the fundamental rights and values Indigenous Peoples defend, with what REDD+ stands for?

That whole history I have working on REDD+ has caught up to us, you could say. It always has been an issue that has taken its toll. I was invited to the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil, in 2009. One invited me to a meeting with Indigenous Peoples to explain from my perspective the concerns and issues we have regarding the implementation of REDD+. When I showed up, Steve Schwartzmann from EDF looked at me and asked “why is he here?” He already had conflicts with me. It was

that time that the NGOs started to reach out to our Indigenous Peoples. EDF had a lot of money and they got the favouritism from a lot of leadership from the Amazon, including COICA. So COICA started to work with the NGOs and developed the concept of 'Indigenous REDD+'.

But it has been a long road. I have a long history working on this, and there was a strategy in Bangkok, Thailand, when there was a UN climate meeting there, and we strategized [about rights and REDD]. I did not think then and I still don't think now that the governments where forest-dwelling communities and Indigenous Peoples live will grant rights to the Indigenous Peoples; that means, land rights, titles to their lands, and in the Amazon that means sub-surface rights as well. But, looking back, I think I made a mistake, because there was a strategy at the UN meeting in Thailand, with the SE Asia folks who were trying to make REDD+ work, along with other Indigenous delegates from the Amazon, COICA, and we strategized a protest at that UN meeting using the slogan 'No Rights, No REDD'. It received some attention. To this day, there are some debates around that strategy. Was that a good strategy? It raised the question: is there a possibility in Peru or even Colombia or even in Brazil of granting rights to Indigenous Peoples? Land rights in forest areas? I do not think so. And that strategy has been behind the 'Indigenous REDD+' approach.

I have talked with some Indigenous People on the question: how can you reconcile with your Indigenous ways, your cosmovision, your spirituality, how can you reconcile, to participate in a whiteman capitalist market system? Even if you gain the ability to implement an Indigenous-based REDD+ initiative, you still have to participate in the commodification and privatization of your forests and the carbon in your trees. It is not the government who is doing that, not outside entities, you are doing that now as Indigenous Peoples. It seems so contradicting when our Indigenous brothers and sisters in the Amazon are fighting oil concessions and in any Indigenous REDD+ project, they find out the REDD+ funding is coming from Chevron and other polluters. And does one reconcile that? I still ask that question. I don't know how they can reconcile that. It means that they put aside that Indigenous spiritual knowledge in order to participate in climate capitalism.

When I follow up on this issue with people from the grassroots of the Amazon, right in the remote villages, they get it; it is not complicated. They often don't support it. And in recent years, they started to question Indigenous alliances of the Amazon acting as intermediaries and brokers for REDD+ projects. It is very political in the Amazon, as it is where I come from in the north. For IEN I always treasure real mechanisms that insure meaningful participation and for such complicated issues of carbon markets and **offset** regimes, the principles of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) must be truly implemented. The full information on all aspects of these REDD+ schemes, and now so-called 'Nature-Based Solutions', is critical in these complex political relationships in the Amazon. It is a complex political structure. Chief Ninawa HuniKui from Acre, Brazil, has his perspective and his position and there are groups trying to divide his people about this issue. The same with Marlon Santi, from the Sarayako in Ecuador, when he started to speak out on this. Even Gloria Ushigua from the Sápara of the Amazon in Ecuador has differences with her relatives from her village that support bringing a REDD+ project into the area. Having information is very important. The principle of implementing FPIC is very important. Indigenous

Peoples and forest dependent communities must have thorough and complete understanding of the complexities of REDD+ projects and how they involve polluting industries actually owning the carbon in the forests. I really am concerned and pray there is no bloodshed within the villages over these issues.

WRM: What are the main challenges for Indigenous Peoples with the renewed push for REDD+ under the good sounding name: ‘Nature-Based Solutions’?

I have been thinking about this and we have been speaking about it as false solutions. Our challenge is, how do we convey that this is a kind of final frontier of colonization that is systematically taking over Mother Earth through privatization and commodification? This global process is doing this through mechanisms that separates and quantifies the Mother Earth’s cycles and functions, such as carbon and biodiversity and turning them into ‘units’ to be sold in financial and speculative markets.

How can we convey this and develop popular education materials to connect the dots of the structures of a fossil economy and the financialization of nature that has no respect of human rights and the rights of Indigenous Peoples. How do we build our movement of resistance so that our pipeline organizers, our oil fighters and earth defenders on the frontlines understand?

The instruments of governments of colonized countries are around property rights. So ‘Nature-Based Solutions’ is about **offsets**. Polluting corporations provide the money to put land as **offsets**, as conservation **offsets**, and at the end of the day, it is the corporations who own these lands that have been put aside. This is the plan behind the 30x30 plan [cover 30% of the world’s territory under Protected Areas by 2030]. So the re-branding of ‘Nature Based Solutions’ from REDD+ is dangerous right now.

We are seeing a huge push for this around the world, living here in the United States, the belly of the beast, there is a bill, a legislation right now, called the ‘growing climate solutions act’, that gives the U.S. Department of Agriculture the authority to create an on-line **carbon offset** registry system, that is going to help the farmers getting into the **carbon offset** voluntary market. So that is where REDD+ is also found here. But it is also still found in other places inside carbon pricing systems, like in Colombia. The major issue now is how are we going to stop this matrix system that allows for these pipelines? These programmes like carbon pricing are getting more and more complex. Taxes with REDD+, carbon banking, green bonds, it goes on and on.

All of these land-based **offsets** are being considered nature-friendly. How can you argue with something that is protecting nature? That is what the people ask me. We are concerned because we are losing the battle, we are losing the battle here in Washington D.C., the false solutions that Biden is pushing for, because he is neoliberal. And this is all about capitalism and colonialism. And some of the environmental groups they say, “well, don’t push it here, we got to work with Biden”. But we can’t, we continue to campaign, with many educational campaigns.

On top of this, there are the ‘**net-zero emissions**’ pledges of many corporations. And it is important to link the issues and talk about this as well. Underneath the umbrella of ‘**net-zero emissions**’ they are using two approaches. They will either buy land-based **offsets** which are called ‘Nature-Based Solutions’ or using carbon capture and storage. Both of these approaches prolongate and support the fossil fuel industry. This does not allow the politics of U.S. and Canada, of Europe and other fossil fuel countries, to move away from fossil fuels. It does not allow them to keep them in the ground, but to keep business as usual. So we will continue to have pipelines, we will continue to have tanker traffic, we will continue to have the transportation of dirty energy, fossil fuels, until we hit the core of the matrix, the issues, and that is the ‘Nature-Based Solutions,’ which is the ultimate privatization of the Mother Earth of Nature.

Demonstration against the false solutions of the Green Capitalism in Xapuri, Acre, Brazil



10 Years of REDD+ in Acre and its impacts on indigenous women and female extrativistas ¹

For years, proponents of REDD+ like WWF and the World Bank have advertised the REDD+ program in the state of Acre in the Brazilian Amazon as a model for the world. WRM talked to Letícia Yawanawa, an indigenous leader from Acre, and Dercy Teles de Carvalho, ex-president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union and an advocate for extrativistas about how REDD+ has affected the lives of women in communities that depend on forests.

The REDD+ program in the state of Acre in the Brazilian Amazon region has been used as a model for the world for many years by promoters of REDD+ like WWF and the World Bank. But in all of the assessments of this program, little is said about the impacts of REDD+ on the lives of women in communities that depend on forests. WRM talked to Letícia Yawanawa, an indigenous leader from Acre, and Dercy

Teles de Carvalho, ex-president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union and an advocate for *extrativistas*.

Acre is a state in the Brazilian Amazon region. More than 80% of its territory is covered by forest. The history of the process of **commodification of nature** in Acre began in 1999 with the arrival in power at the state level of the Workers' Party. This government named itself the 'government of the forest' and adopted a narrative that said it was possible to start a new business cycle in Acre, while keeping the 'forest standing', and make the state join the era of so called 'green capitalism'.

A milestone in this process took place in 2010 with the approval of the state SISA law, creating the State System of Incentives for Environmental Services. This law made feasible the first jurisdictional REDD+ program in the world, encompassing the whole of the state's territory². In 2012, the German government, through its public bank KfW and its REM (REDD Early Movers) program rewarded the government of Acre for having created this law and for the reduction in deforestation in the state in the previous decade, when REDD+ did not exist. Then, KfW forwarded 16 million euros (more than 18.5 million US dollars) over 4 years, followed by other sums in their millions.

WWF, one of the international NGOs that helped formulate the SISA law, has called the REDD+ program of the government of Acre "a pioneering initiative"³. The program received strong support also from the World Bank, which over the years facilitated visits by people linked to NGOs and governments from other countries of the global South to Acre, and considered it a great example of REDD+ in the world.

WRM talked to Letícia Yawanawá, in the indigenous language Atai Yawanawá. She has been active in the indigenous movement since 1996 and currently is a council member of the indigenous women's organization SITOAKORE – Organization of Indigenous Women of Acre, Southern Amazônia and Northwest Rondônia. She headed the organization for two terms. Letícia is also part of the National Council of Indigenous Women (CONAMI). WRM also talked to Dercy Teles de Carvalho, who was born in Xapuri, Acre, and lives in *Colocação*⁴ Pimenteira, part of the Boa Vista rubber tree area. In 1981, she was elected the first woman president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, the first of her state and one of the first in Brazil. She preceded Chico Mendes, who was elected at the end of 1982.

WRM: How do you evaluate these 10 years of REDD+ in Acre with regard to Indigenous Peoples? This is a program that has always said that Indigenous Peoples would be one of the priorities.

Letícia: My evaluation is very negative. I was a council member of SISA for almost 6 years. When the coordinator of REM/SISA arrived from COPs (UN Climate Conferences), she would say that many indigenous people would benefit. Then I started to observe what benefits Indigenous Peoples had. What I remember from when I was the coordinator of SITOAKORE and would spend time in indigenous lands was that I did not see any community that had a single benefit from this REDD+ program. Furthermore, we still have lands that need to be demarcated here and this was never supported; land demarcation is a struggle.

Now, what I would see in the city, in the government, is that they had some pretty departments, well equipped, with lots of technicians from other places that stood to gain from SISA. But I did not see one indigenous person working there, neither women nor men. You cannot say that indigenous people do not have the capacity; there are many indigenous women, relatives, who are educated as well and who could be working there, but we used to see, and continue to see to this day, only the technicians.

As a council member of SISA in the past, I said that the resources that came for the Indigenous Peoples should be something that yielded results, that stayed in the villages, that stayed there for the good of the community. Walking into the SISA office was very pretty, but the Indigenous Peoples did not even have a structure of reference for Indigenous Peoples, neither for women, nor for men. I would say these things and often people would look at me saying she only comes here to criticize. There are other relatives that would come for a meeting at SISA, they would receive a daily allowance and they could not say anything.

I was never well regarded by the government. They were compelled to call our organization because we were an organization of women and we were all legal, which is what they ask for. So there was no way not to invite us, also because we were an organization with representativeness in three states, the whole of Acre, Southern Amazônia, which is Boca do Acre municipality, and Northwestern Rondônia. While SISA would present itself as working with 20-30 associations, I would say: that is a lie! Because most of them do not exist any more. Nowadays you see other [associations] NGOs that looked after these resources, CPI (Pro-Indigenous Commission) itself, AMAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agro-forestry Agents of Acre).

WRM: The REDD+ program brought about a change in the organization of the peoples, creating more associations so that the government could distribute resources. You have already said that you did not see any changes, that the REDD money also did not help in the demarcation of indigenous lands. How did all of this affect indigenous women in their communities?

Letícia: As the coordinator of the women's organization, I said that we indigenous women were neither bees nor ants, to live just by smelling. We live from concrete action, however little. There was a meeting with people from many countries in a very luxurious hotel here. There were authorities from various countries. But they did not invite me because they did not want me to show up and tell the truth.

But I went to this meeting. I waited for everyone to speak. There were many people looking at me, worried, because they knew I was going to speak. So then I asked to speak, because I was a council member of REM/SISA, I was a full member. We were four women and I said: look, women, I am going to speak. I do not lie, I do not say things that are not correct. They have talked about various budgets, worth millions and millions. Then I said: where are the millions? We, women, where are we included in these millions? Everybody looked startled. I said: where are we? We are forgotten in the middle of the forest with this REM program, which is the same program as REDD. The woman from Germany, Christina, she heard me, she said: Ms. Letícia, I need to talk to you. I waited and when she left she stopped caring. She did

not even look at me again. Then I wrote a letter resigning from the council.

So I do not see a good result, we women were not included, maybe for the CPI people or our relative Francisca Arara, she is the representative of the government, but not of the indigenous women in the villages. Because an indigenous association that has a woman elected by the village, that is something else, let's make this clear. I'm not mocking, I'm telling the truth. Women have no participation. If there are women that go to another country, they are representatives of the government that is different. But the indigenous women of Acre do not have any participation.

And how has REDD affected women working as extrativistas inside the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve over the course of these 10 years, where various REDD+ projects were implemented to supposedly benefit families and women? For example, the 'green grant', a project of 'planted forest' and forest management, which is the name given to selective logging.

Dercy: In 2010 when the government of Acre took on the REDD+ policy, it decreed 'zero fire' and brought in the 'green grant'. It was a quarterly payment to compensate for the fact that people could no longer open up farmland in the forest. This was an irrecoverable cultural loss because it was always the women, both indigenous women and the women *extrativistas* who worked the land. With this ban from 2010 on, they stopped producing. And food is one of the fundamental things in life, without food nobody manages to live and be happy. The women used to plant vegetables and sell them. Today, people depend on buying food, polished rice that comes from another state, from Mato Grosso. The 'green grant' is charity, I don't know if the amount has increased, but it used to be 100 reais [less than 19 US dollars] per month. And right now, ICMBio⁵ is distributing big sacks of industrialized products inside the Reserve. So it is something that affects women's lives deeply because they also cease to hand down to their children this culture, of producing what one consumes, without agrochemicals, with quality, in the community itself.

With regard to the 'planted forest' project, also called 'agro-forestry system', I talked to a woman who took part in this program and she complained a lot. Firstly in relation to the volume of work that gets added to the family's life. Secondly, because while they received the saplings to plant, they had no support to carry out the work, like a brush cutter and fuel, to maintain the agro-forestry system according to what they wanted. And the family was constantly demanded about this maintenance by the president of the association that was leading this project and visited regularly to check if things were within the standards set for the project. She said her life became hellish. Another problem was that the saplings were only offered outside of the rainy season, because the plants were meant to take hold during the dry season. For this reason, many of the plants did not sustain themselves, because people were unable to irrigate them. In conclusion, it only worked for 5 people, and these 5 people were all linked to the government, in other words, they didn't do any heavy lifting. They would pay someone to do the work. That is why it worked for them.

About 'forest management', this in fact had nothing sustainable about it, on the contrary, it opened up precedents for the communities themselves to destroy the forest. Why did the government, in these 20 years it governed Acre with this discourse

of sustainable development, not implement any policy to ensure the sustainability of families? This management did not leave resources that might change families' lives, on the contrary, it impoverished them. And created a precedent for families to continue selling wood regardless of whether there was a company doing management or not, they are selling to large-scale ranchers for them to fence off their pasture lands. And we know that this will only cause the impoverishment of the population, especially of women, who will end up in the peripheries of cities, needy, seeing the daughters they still have selling their bodies or joining factions [linked to the drug trade].

This is a very complicated fact because we know that before, women managed to raise their children within a cultural standard of respect and responsibility. Nowadays we see girls aged 14, 15, with babies on their arms, there are cases of sexual abuse of minors and there are families that have been destroyed. But people remain anonymous, invisible and nothing changes. So the entry of these external agents led to a deep de-characterization of the way of life, and left behind only ruins, nothing positive.

There is a range of other elements that contributed to a sort of naturalization of what is happening. For example, the most modern cell phones are inside the Reserves, in various different corners. Television too. These are elements that disperse attention, that prevent people from reflecting. Another element that contributed significantly is the evangelical churches. They contributed to this process of people's dispersion in relation to reality and to the future.

People have no means to counter, because they (REDD+'s promoters) use language that nobody manages to understand what it means.

WRM: One of the proposals of the REDD+ program is to transform indigenous women into micro-entrepreneurs, to create markets even abroad for their crafts. What do you think of these initiatives?

Letícia: I went round various indigenous lands. I saw that 90% of crafts makers are indigenous women, who make their crafts, their paintings, for their use and for sale. It creates self-sustainability within the village. There are many women, widows, sometimes women abandoned by their husbands, who are there, with their children. This woman helps herself, with her children, she does her craft work, it is with these women that we had a commitment to do something, to have a space for us to receive these women's crafts, to sell them and to give back the money to the women. This is what we said to them, this was the women's wish, but it did not happen.

Craft work has always been for our use, it has a symbolic value and it cannot be done in any old way. You are transforming that bead into a drawing that has meaning to remind ourselves of our paintings back when we did not have contact with the outside. And whenever we sell our crafts, we hold a ceremony. The person who takes it is blessed. There is a black ring that the Apurinã make, right? They hold a ritual when a woman has period cramps, it's really a women's thing, she puts it on not to have such bad cramps. So all crafts in our eyes have meaning, a cultural and spiritual value.

WRM: REDD+ states that it is a mechanism to reduce deforestation, but after 10 years of REDD in Acre, deforestation is increasing, and even more with Bolsonaro in power. How has this affected indigenous lands and Extractive Reservations? What are the challenges for women in dealing with this?

Dercy: Women from traditional communities used to have a lot of activities, including working with creepers. Recently I went to a locality and noticed an area that used to be forested, where in the past, when I was a health worker, I used to walk on foot, now the forest has disappeared. This has been harmful to women, because they used to make things out of creepers and earned some money: brooms, baskets to harvest corn or rice in the fields, or to keep used clothes, or to keep eggs in, because they are well ventilated and this helps keep them fresh. Nowadays this is no longer possible, there are no more creepers because everything has been turned over to pasture.

Deforestation sped up violently in this period of Bolsonaro in power, 2019, 2020, 2021, as a function of the devaluation of *extrativistas* activities. Since this *extrativista* activities cannot sustain the demand for consumption that came with the increase in *ramais* [large dirt roads] and the arrival of energy, people as parceling their *colocações* into lots, and as they do so, each one clears a number of hectares, so a big farm with many owners is gradually formed. Because one sells off 3 hectares, another sells 5, another, 6. Today, you leave the nearby town of Xapuri, and you can cross the Extractive Reserve, from one end to the other, by *ramais*.

About this whole process that came about with REDD+, my perspective is that we might reverse this picture based on an educational process in conjunction with these communities, with conversations in accessible language so that people can understand. If for no other reason, because people have no means to counter, because they [REDD+'s promoters] use language that nobody manages to understand what it means. And when you don't have information, you can't counter the argument.

As for women, we need to make an investment in the field of politics, really, to insert women in this debate so that they understand this process because we are the majority in Brazil. So, we can make the difference from the moment when we understand everything that is happening, the seriousness of this process, and we position ourselves politically.

[We are going to remain on our land, with money or without money, it is our obligation as Indigenous Peoples]

Letícia: We look upon this with much sadness. Our Samaúma, according to our history, to our spirituality, is a very large tree in the middle of the forest, that is why we call it a woman, she means fruit, she means shade, she is the greatest of all. Now things are worse because with tree after tree being felled, wood that grew for 40, 50 years being chopped down in a few minutes, it's very sad for us to see this.

If the Samaúma were a woman who could speak, she would be crying, she would be shouting when her children are taken away. With that come the droughts, which affect the people of our lands because our lands are surrounded by people we

don't even know. The animals end up leaving that deforested place, the *igarapés* – name given in the Brazilian Amazon region for a stream that flows into a river – are drying up, as are the rivers at the other end. As an indigenous woman, I look upon this with much sadness.

But we are going to remain on our land, with money or without money, it is our obligation as Indigenous Peoples. With support it will be better, and may there be budgets not only to benefit the government offices in the cities, but mainly support for the women, women need it.

1 *Extractivista / Extractivismo*. Not to be confused with extractive industries, *extractivismo* in the Brazilian context describes a way of life pursued by a variety of traditional communities. The harvesting of non-timber forest products, often in combination with subsistence agriculture, defines *extractivismo*. Rubber tapping, the extraction of latex from rubber trees growing inside the forest is one example. The palm fruit açai and Brazil nuts are other examples of products that form the basis of *extractive economies*. *Extractivismo* is often associated with rubber tapping and the Brazilian Amazon. However, there are traditional *extractivista* communities outside the Amazon region such as the *quebradeiras de coco babaçu* who gather and process the fruits of babaçu palms.

2 A program is termed “jurisdictional REDD+” when its implementation is not only on the land attributed to specific projects, but in a whole jurisdiction, like a department, a province, a state or a country. Read more here: <https://wrm.org.uy/pt/artigos-do-boletim-do-wrm/secao2/de-projetos-de-redd-para-redd-jurisdicional-mais-noticias-ruins-para-o-clima-e-as-comunidades/>

3 <https://www.wwf.org.br/?33524/Acre--primeiro-estado-a-realizar-transaes-com-REDD>

4 Name given to the place where rubber tappers and their families live and work; usually constituted by the home and an area meant for small-scale agriculture and livestock rearing, surrounded by rubber tree trails. The average size of these *colocações* is around 300 hectares.

5 ICMBio: Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity, the federal government agency responsible for the management of Extractive Reserve – RESEX.

El Cerrejon, coalmine in La Guajira, Colombia
Photo: Wikimedia

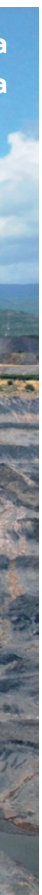


Blood coal for blood carbon in Colombia: Expansion of carbon taxes with REDD+ underscores the failure of carbon pricing

Countries in the global South have been ‘encouraged’ to build their own carbon pricing systems, which has often meant issuing laws and regulations that impact community territories. This article outlines the carbon pricing system in Colombia and reveals how mining companies have been using REDD+ to legally avoid paying taxes while claiming ‘carbon neutrality’. Glencore, a major multinational mining corporation which has caused pollution, violence and evictions in Colombia, is given a carbon tax break because of its investment in a land-grabbing offset program.

This article outlines how violent ‘blood coal’ producing corporations in Colombia are given a carbon tax break for investing in a land-grabbing forest **offset** program on the other side of the country - impacting Afro-Colombian communities and Indigenous Peoples on both sides.

Situated in the northeast of Colombia, the largest open pit coal mines in the western hemisphere span the regions of Cesar and La Guajira. The mines have been



the sites of violent extraction for decades since their installation in the 1980s by the notorious US corporation, Exxon. It is referred to as ‘blood coal’ in the region because of the historical and ongoing violence associated with the coal mining corporations. Groups and communities resisting its extraction are confronted with extreme violence from military and paramilitary forces, death threats, criminalization and intimidation. 98 percent of the coal is exported. Historically, the majority of the coal has gone to Europe¹.

Adding to the violence at extraction and combustion sites, the climate change mitigation policies themselves create financial loopholes and subsidies for the extractive industries. This is carbon pricing, which allows the use of **carbon offsets** instead of dealing with reducing fossil fuel extraction at source. **Carbon offsets** allow extractive industries to continue polluting. For years we have seen the flawed system equating emissions from fossil fuel energy overproduction with land-based conservation programs. Fossil fuel energy extraction should not be confused and mixed with the very complex and historically racist arena of conservationism. In the last five years, carbon pricing systems have proliferated in the global South.

Drawing on fifteen months of research in Colombia, this article outlines the carbon pricing system in this country and demonstrates how Glencore, a major multinational mining corporation, is eligible for tax cuts by buying **carbon credits** from REDD+ projects while claiming ‘carbon neutrality’. This article focuses on Glencore’s subsidiary Prodeco, which operates in the northeast region of Cesar. Yet, it is important to note that as of early 2021, Glencore is now the sole owner of the Cerrejón mining operation² and operates the vast mining operation in neighboring La Guajira, severely impacting Indigenous Wayúu communities³.

Carbon Pricing

At the UN Secretary-General’s Climate Leadership Summit in September 2014, due to the low prices of **carbon credits** at that moment, seventy-four countries, twenty-three states, provinces and cities, and over 1000 businesses and investors with more than US24 trillion dollars in assets met to discuss a series of new initiatives to ‘price carbon’. This move was despite overwhelming evidence that carbon markets were failing to reduce emissions.

The new carbon pricing plan aimed to link emissions trading systems, carbon taxes, REDD+ and other pricing programs. At the same time, the aim was to link pricing on a global scale in order to increase the ‘flexibility’ of the financial markets for the largest polluting industries and most powerful industrialized governments in the world.

Countries in the global South were encouraged to build their own national carbon pricing systems to get ready for a global carbon pricing system. This was further established through the plans put in place in Article 6 of the UN Paris Agreement. In 2015, the year the Paris Agreement was adopted at the UN climate meeting in Paris, France, Colombia committed to reduce 20 percent of its emissions by 2030. In order to do this, commitments were made to extend protected areas, reduce deforestation,

protect the *páramos* (specific wetlands), increase conservation of the river basins, and build up a program for climate change mitigation and adaptation frameworks. Since 2015, a series of laws for carbon pricing have also been introduced in Colombia.

The first was Law 1753 (2015), where Article 175 created a Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory. The law includes REDD+ to be regulated by the Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development. In 2016, the government passed an overarching tax reform law that included a carbon tax (Law 1819). The law applied a CO₂ tax to the combustion of gasoline, kerosene, jet fuel, ACPM and fuel oil, but notably not coal. Natural gas is also taxed but only for use in industry from hydrocarbon refining and petrochemicals, and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and only for sale to industrial users. The emissions from these fuels represent about 27 percent of the country's total emissions. The tax was initially set at 15,000 pesos (US\$5.5 dollars) per ton of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e) and is scheduled to increase annually until it reaches around US\$11 dollars per tCO₂e.

In 2017, Decree 926 included a 'carbon neutral' provision, allowing for **carbon offsets** to be purchased in place of paying the carbon tax through third-party verifiers. It is not uncommon for amendments or decrees for **offsets** to be introduced after an initial carbon tax is set up, as it happened in Mexico. Several projects are eligible to sell **carbon offset** credits in Colombia. Among them are REDD+ projects. Referred to as 'nested-REDD+ projects' (or sometimes also called 'jurisdictional REDD+', meaning that several projects in the same geographical area are put together), the Colombian government has allowed over 75 REDD+ project to be registered as of May 2021 and the numbers are rising fast.

REDD+ projects have been widely criticized for targeting Indigenous Peoples' ways of life and territories, driving up land prices, increasing violence and causing community division. Indigenous Peoples' organizations and forest-dwelling communities have argued that REDD+ is a colonial mechanism that allows corporations to take control of forests by putting a price on nature. On top of this, deforestation rates have not halted with REDD+.

[If corporations abide by the offset provisions, they are able to claim 'carbon neutrality' and avoid full taxation.]

Colombia was hailed as a Carbon Pricing Champion. In 2017, Colombia, as part of the Pacific Alliance Countries (Chile, Mexico, Colombia and Peru), signed the Cali Declaration to reaffirm the Paris Agreement and to strengthen the voluntary markets of the region. That same year, Colombia joined the World Bank Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition (CPLC) to link developed and developing countries in the carbon pricing markets. Colombia joined the One Planet Summit in Paris with Canada, Chile, Mexico, Costa Rica, and seven states from the US and Canada to launch the Carbon Pricing in the Americas cooperative framework and build a trading platform to link carbon markets across the hemisphere.

If corporations abide by the **offset** provisions, they are able to claim 'carbon neutrality' and avoid full taxation. These **carbon offsets** must have been generated after 1 January 2010 and implemented inside Colombia. The Colombian carbon tax program has thereby encouraged the development of more REDD+ projects.

Originally, the tax revenue was to go into the *Fondo Colombia Sostenible* (FCS–Colombia Sustainability Fund). This is an initiative of the Government of Colombia financed by Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland which carries out conservation programs, including REDD+, in 277 municipalities throughout Colombia. The fund is administered by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) based on a Joint Declaration of Intent (DCI) signed by Colombia, Norway, the United Kingdom and Germany at the 2015 UN climate talks in Paris. In 2019, during the climate talks in Madrid, Spain, the Fund was renewed.

It is important to remember that each of the carbon trades represents real pollution and real violence on communities at the pollution and extraction sites.

Colombia's Climate Change Law of 2018 integrates the domestic carbon pricing program. It includes, among other things, the *Programa Nacional de Cupos Transables de Emision de GEI* (PNCTE–National Programme of Tradable Emission Quotas of Greenhouse Gases) operated by the Government. The law allows for one carbon unit to be recognized and paid into the carbon tax **offset** scheme, thereby linking carbon trading, carbon taxes and **carbon offset** systems.

Colombia is further considering how to link its domestic programs to international markets. Yet, it is important to remember that each of the carbon trades represents real pollution and real violence on communities at the pollution and extraction sites.

Afro-Colombian communities impacted by coal mining and REDD+ in Colombia

The REDD+ projects Cocomasure and BioREDD+ are located on the Pacific coast where Afro-Colombians have land rights to more than 5 million of the 10 million hectares of tropical forest. Glencore's Colombian coal mining subsidiary, Prodeco, and oil company Chevron were among the first REDD+ buyers throughout Colombia.

Glencore/Prodeco's Director of the Environment explained that they were involved in the policy negotiations to build the carbon tax legislation but also informed by conservation NGOs: "The carbon tax started here in 2016 and began to be implemented in 2017 ... *It arose from us...* we participated in everything regarding the emergence and discussions of this legislation. We consulted on the birth of all of this legislation. But it really was a theme that for the mining industry in Colombia was relatively new. It took us a while to understand it and finally it was through allies like Conservation International because we already have several projects with them" (personal communication 2019, emphasis added).

The Cocomasure project began in 2011 and is located in the Choco-Darien Corridor in the Urabá Antioqueño. The project has generated 40,000 **carbon credits** throughout about 14,000 hectares where 20 communities live. The **carbon credits** have been purchased by Glencore's Colombian subsidiary, Prodeco, to compensate for its diesel fuel emissions caused during operations. This early project was emblematic

because it set a precedent for more REDD+ projects to be set up and later link to the Colombian carbon tax system.

On the other side of the country, Glencore/Prodeco's coal mines are located in the northeast Caribbean and also impact Afro-Colombian communities. The communities near the coal mines in Cesar suffer water scarcity, dangerous levels of pollution, years of violence and evictions, land grabbing and discrimination⁴. Prodeco opted to prepurchase REDD+ credits instead of paying the carbon tax.

The BioREDD+ program was developed by the USA development agency USAID in 2013 and replicated the Cocomasure REDD+ project in eight other communities.

Fondo Acción is the contract operator of the BioREDD+ project for USAID. Prodeco and Conservation International (CI) work together on several projects related to Payments for Environmental Services, and it was CI which encouraged Prodeco to get in touch with USAID. Prodeco signed the contract with Fondo Acción to purchase the credits. Fondo Acción has been involved with compensation and conservation finance for many years. They were the implementing NGO involved in the 2004 debt-for-nature-swap with the US. Prodeco's Director explained that Fondo Acción acted as a facilitator between Prodeco and the communities (personal communication 2019). He also explained that Fondo Acción knows how to communicate "to the private industry in their language, about contracts and the financial issues" (personal communication 2019). He went on to say:

"They [Conservation International] made contact with USAID and with Fondo Acción, which had been working on the REDD project in the Pacific for more than five years, even before carbon taxes were generated in Colombia. There is a USAID project which is a very, very large project, which is called the BioREDD project, which was basically the impulse that generated the structuring of the REDD project in the Pacific, by replicating the model of the REDD Project, that was a pioneer in the country." (personal communication 2019).

Fossil fuels must be phased out and kept in the ground, while the ongoing racist and socioeconomic violence at extraction, combustion and transport sites must stop now.

Despite the Director's confidence, when Fondo Acción approached communities to sell REDD+ credits to Prodeco, the communities said no. They resisted and said they would not be involved with a coal corporation. However, according to Prodeco's representative, it was Fondo Acción who argued on behalf of Prodeco:

"Because in fact they [the community assembly or *consejo*] said, "No, it is a mining company that is going to buy them. It is a mining company." But Fondo Acción, said, "They are not just any mining company, it is a responsible company, ta ta ta ta tan tan [blah, blah, blah] And we left with the commitment and we made the agreement, but we still have to explain who Prodeco is [to them] and learn more about them [the community]. That is a process we are in." (personal communication 2019).

In effect, with the REDD projects Prodeco would pay about one-quarter to one-third of the amount of the carbon tax, which adds up to a significant financial saving

for the company. Besides, Prodeco would garner not only tax benefits but good climate public relation endeavors for being categorized as 'carbon neutral'.

Today, the over 75 nested-REDD+ projects are essentially used as a fossil fuel subsidy/**offset** through the Colombian carbon tax program. Several of the programs are located in the Amazon with at least over 17 Indigenous communities involved.

While the UN, carbon brokers, development and conservation institutions argue about getting the **carbon accounting** correct, they miss the real point. There is no carbon calculus to fix this flawed system. Setting baselines, building it bigger and addressing the risk of premature carbon releases will never keep fossil fuels in the ground. It is time they stop mixing in conservationism with the need for drastic fossil fuel energy reduction. Fossil fuels must be phased out and kept in the ground, while the ongoing racist and socioeconomic violence at extraction, combustion and transport sites must stop now.

No blood carbon pricing system can achieve keeping blood coal, or any other fossil fuels, in the ground.

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The Katingan REDD+ project in Indonesia: The commodification of nature, labour and communities' reproduction

'Carbon concessions' established to generate and sell carbon credits are also deeply eroding communities' structures, their organization and community reproduction. This is the story of the Bapinang Hilir village in Indonesia. Despite being located outside the 'Katingan REDD+ project' concession area, it has been identified as inside the verified project zone by the certification schemes (VCS and CCBA). The article explores how the concession owners have profited from this inclusion at the cost of the Bapinang Hilir villagers.

Bapinang Hilir Village is located in the administrative area of Pulau Hanaut District, Kotawaringin Timur (East Kotawaringin) Regency, Indonesia. It is one of the thirteen regencies which comprise the Central Kalimantan Province on the island of Kalimantan. Its location in the estuary, bordering the Katingan River and the

Mentaya River, accounts for the tidal swamp area with a layer of peat and pyrite. This area began to be inhabited by migration flows due to the coal extraction in South Kalimantan 150 years ago through which the Banjarese People were evicted and displaced to the Mentaya River, a place where the capital circuit of crop commodities (coconut and rubber) was being prepared by the colonial administration.

The historical context in Bapinang Hilir post migration characterizes the conflicts over the frontier land between the capital circuits and the people living in this area. Capital injected from the outside mainly results in the expansion of industrial activities that devour the living spaces. Peatlands, being sensitive to change, clearly illustrate this ecological destruction, where the vortex of exploitation of humans and their environments is increasingly exacerbating the experience of marginalization for communities. In the last decade, the remaining commons have been increasingly enclosed for the carbon trading business.

This new chapter in the history of Bapinang Hilir shows the absolute expansion of capital accumulation that consumes not only the ecological life spaces, but also the reproduction of society¹. The excess (of pollution) that has been continuously sown by the financial and industrial capital of northern countries for the past two centuries is now considered a (climate) crisis and, in capital logic, this has become a commodity. This in turn has allowed the creation of carbon concessions that generate and sell carbon credits. Ironically, this model transfers the responsibility for 'reducing' emissions to small farmers in Bapinang Hilir. Yet, the carbon credits being generated are not reducing but in fact are only supposed to be compensating further pollution somewhere else.

The initial conclusion about a business scheme that does not only sell peat forest landscapes but also changes the community structures and organization – as required by carbon **certification** schemes – indicates the commodification of community reproduction. Thus, when referring to the carbon concessions established for selling carbon credits to largely northern countries and corporations, one cannot escape from also referring to how space (reproductive society and nature) is also systematically being commodified.

Katingan REDD+ Project

The land that is left without economic concessions or extractive activities is still considered communal land. However, since 2016, this remaining area has been under the control of PT Rimba Makmur Utama (RMU) for the Katingan Peatland Restoration and Conservation Project or Katingan REDD+ project, through the concession of the Ecosystem Restoration Timber Forest Product Utilization Permit (IUPHHK-RE). The Indonesian company RMU was founded in 2007 with the idea of profiting from forest conservation activities through carbon trading. RMU applied in 2008 for Ecosystem Restoration Concessions (ERC)² covering an area of 227,260 hectares located in Katingan and Kotawaringin Timur Regencies. Yet, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry only issued the concession in Katingan Regency in 2013, and the other in 2016, covering an area of 149,800 hectares (see Map of project area and project

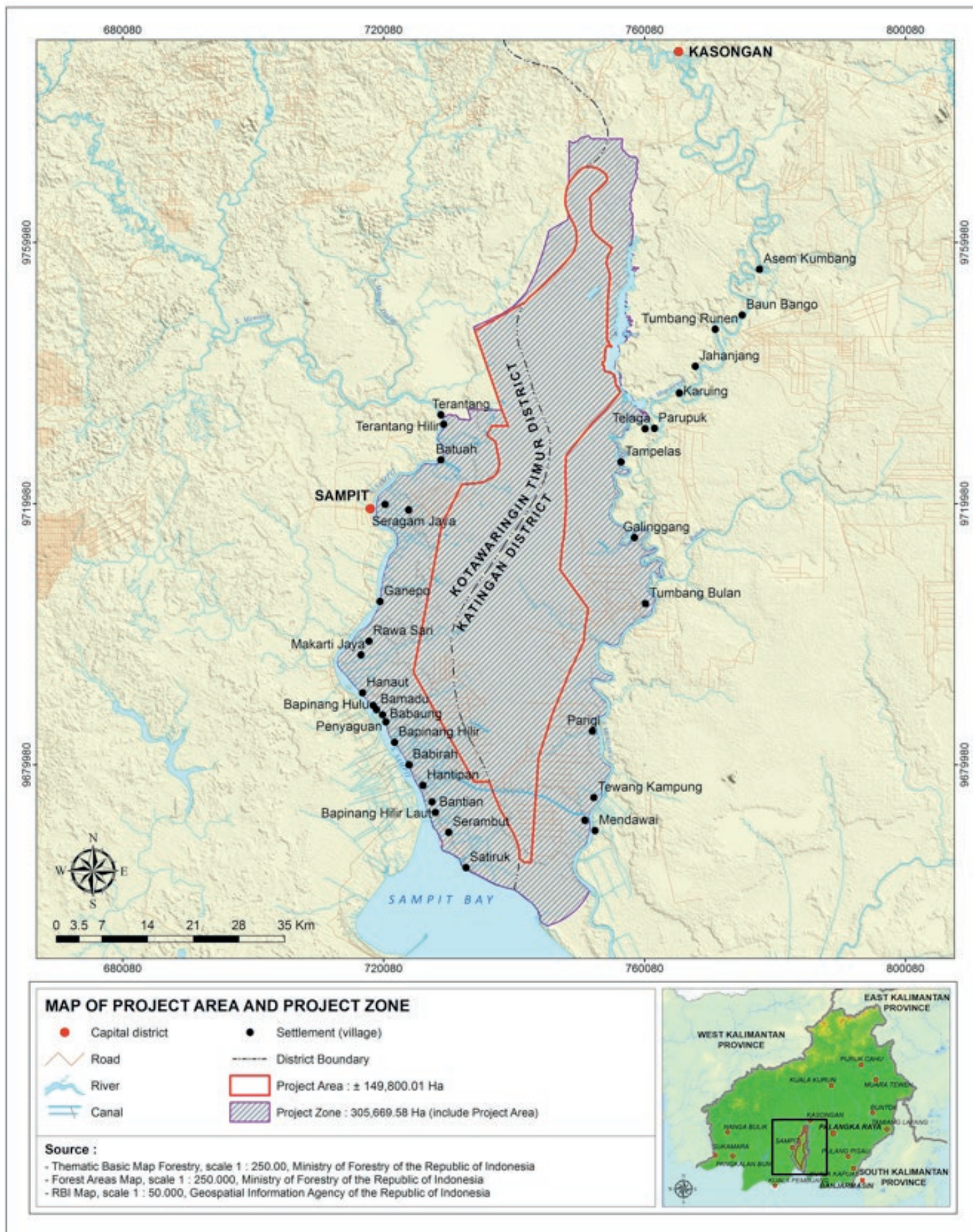
zone)³. When calculating the area of the Project Zone, which includes the area outside the Ecosystem Restoration Concessions, the area reaches 305,669 hectares, making the Katingan REDD+ project the largest emission reduction project in the world. The project has received the **certification** of Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) and the Climate, Community & Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA).

Although RMU's concession area is of 149,800 hectares, the total area accounted for as the VCS and CCBA verified project zone is of 305,669 hectares³. Before the carbon credits could be sold, RMU relied on investments from various organizations and companies, including The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, USAID Indonesia Forest and Climate Support, the Global Environmental Facility, the Clinton Foundation, Norway's development bank NORAD and the Puter Foundation, which is RMU's partner for community development activities.

In addition to the sale of carbon credits, RMU through the Puter Foundation receives funds from various companies and foundations to carry out community empowerment programs. The ones emerging in Bapinang Hilir include participatory mapping, empowerment of coconut sugar farmers, and programs encouraging the community to switch to organic horticultural farming. These funds can be seen as a way for RMU to meet the cost requirements for the **certification** schemes and as an incentive to make it easier to trade the carbon credits.

The carbon credits are calculated based on the scenario of the threat of deforestation from industrial plantation concessions, community cultivation rights and forest encroachment by the community. The amount of carbon dioxide that is expected to be avoided with the REDD+ project, according to the project document, makes the base for the amount of credits that can be sold. This is supposed to be based on calculations in the concession area (or project area) between a baseline scenario without the project and an imagined scenario with the project. However, this calculation also incorporates areas outside the concession, or what is referred to as the project zone, which includes the communities' settlements and agricultural land. These areas are a deduction factor for the carbon credits that can be sold. RMU itself acknowledges that these bear risks to land tenure and local politics and suggests that these can be reduced through approaches and agreements among communities³.

The VCS **certification** obtained by RMU has conditions. One of which is to ensure that the project does not have negative impacts on local communities and to encourage their participation in the project development and implementation process. The CCBS certificate is aimed to guarantee that the project improves the welfare of the people in the project zone. This is calculated by comparing scenarios of community welfare without activity intervention and community welfare after intervention. A CCBS certificate can increase the value of a carbon credit by around US1.6 dollars per tCO₂e (from an initial price of around 2.3 to 3.9 dollars as of 2016). In addition, this certificate is a determining factor for reducing the risks that could impact the amount of carbon that can be sold, as well as part of an emission reduction scenario that arise due to community encroachment. It is estimated that RMU has the potential to generate around US1.7 billion dollars for the 60-year concession period, without taking into account the grant funds that they are also obtaining³.



Map of Project Area and Project Zone

The emergence of carbon as one more capitalist commodity changes the labour and productive relations in the countryside dramatically.

RMU started interacting with communities through the Puter Foundation in 2012, using USAID funds, for mapping the communities' resources and livelihoods and preparing them to collaborate in the carbon business. This was the initial stage for the company to attempt to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the village government. After signing the MoU, the village would receive 100 million Indonesian rupiahs (around US7 thousand dollars) as well as two million rupiahs (around US140 dollars) per month for strengthening the village apparatus. Villagers could also submit proposals for the development of their economic activities. The community business development carried out is based on an agricultural program that introduces organic fertilizers and prohibits burning and using chemicals.

The first initiation stage was rejected by almost all village governments, creating RMU many difficulties to obtain a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This resistance was mobilized by the coconut elite who controlled village and sub-district administrations as well as the Hanaut Island Dayak Misik Farmers Group⁴. This refusal was prompted by the news circulating in the community in Katingan Regency that residents had difficulty accessing the forest due to the gradual restrictions on the use of residents in the concession area by RMU⁵. However, the provision of funds to the village government encouraged the aspiration of other village governments to cooperate with RMU as well as to develop suspicion between the village and the Dayak Misik Group.

The Dayak Misik Group, as the only customary group institution with an interest in expanding land through the issuance of the Certificate of Customary Land, is hampered by the control of the communal land by RMU. Other farmers who are not part of the Dayak Misik Group, like village administrations and owners of large coconut plantations in Bapinang Hilir, tend to support Dayak Misik because they consider the MoU between the village and RMU has meant the handing over of communal land and prohibiting villagers' entry into their forest. The emergence of appeals⁶ not to carry out activities that have the potential to reduce carbon credits, such as planting palm oil, harvesting wood and hunting, makes some farmers feel even more threatened⁷ by the MoU. In addition, RMU's control of land also makes land scarce.

In 2017, the sub-district administration was cleared of the coconut elite and the elected sub-district head was deemed to facilitate the process of signing the MoU. After the sub-district head was changed, almost all villages signed a cooperation agreement with RMU because they were tempted by other villages that had been given money.

Carbon business and human commodification

The emergence of carbon as one more capitalist commodity changes the labour

and productive relations in the countryside dramatically. Peasants, who had a certain level of autonomy, controlled the means of production and worked through their own power, are turned due to the REDD+ project into petty commodity producers⁸. By losing their autonomy, they have to produce commodities to get money in exchange for buying other commodities for consumption needs and thus integrate into the capitalist market economy, depending on the money they get from selling their labour.

The people of Bapinang Hilir and the indigenous people of Kalimantan in general have specific arrangements and divisions of labour in terms of **burning shrubs** before planting⁹. This is done in a way that the **fire** does not emit smoke and does not spread to other farmers' gardens. During the fire season, people who have gardens usually use their labor to prevent their crops from being devoured by the fire. Burning bushes became a contested issue in Bapinang Hilir in 2019-2020 due to the threat of 25 years imprisonment and a fine of 2 billion Indonesian rupiahs (around US14 thousand dollars) to who initiated a fire. In consequence, farmers generally switched to using herbicides to remove grass or, in small amounts, to secretly burn land. Land fires, which means uncontrolled fires, are generally caused by abandoned land and spread by the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations, like oil palm and acacia.

The 2015 land fires that left hard soils with high acidity and burned food gardens, was a result of the capital circuits that emerged 150 years ago. Along with this is the class differentiation. Small farmers are increasingly marginalized with land fires due to the hard and high acidity soil, elites who control the village administrations and have very large coconut plantations accumulate more land and middle farmers expand their oil palms. Marginal rice farmers are left to use herbicides because they are forbidden to use **fire**, significantly increasing the costs of growing rice and damaging the soil and water sources. One year after the big fires, the carbon business is annexing and enclose the remaining uncultivated land through ecosystem restoration concessions. The inspection of the carbon business is not only about land enclosures, restricting access to local communities, but also on how community reproduction is commodified.

The baseline and trajectory assessment of communities outside the concession area as well as the forms of intervention proposed and agreed upon by the certifier are the origins of the valuation of community reproductive activities. The reproduction in question does not only talk about marginal communities experiencing a crisis, but also the dynamics of agrarian change. What is being sold does not only cover marginal farmers, but also issues related to community habits (burning grass), long-term labour reproduction (education) and the class dynamics in rural areas (vacant land, restricted access by elites, marginal farmers).

Meanwhile, the REDD+ Katingan project is selling carbon credits to multinational polluters like oil company Shell and airline KLM. These companies claim to be 'carbon neutral' because they buy carbon credits generated by projects that in fact are structurally changing communities' fabrics and organization¹⁰.

The implication is a metabolic fracturing and the accompanying dynamics (ecological changes, class differentiation and marginalization) of being incorporated

as community's reproductive commodities. The interventions listed in the certificate validation report shows that the carbon business is not only commodifying the vast carbon landscape, but also producing new spaces where ecology (of which humans are a part) itself becomes a commodity.

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1 The reproduction of society in question refers to the social relations and processes that ensure or sustain social structures over time. See further in: Bachriadi, Dianto. 2020. 24.2: Manifesto Penataan Ulang Penguasaan Tanah 'Kawasan Hutan'. Bandung: ARCBooks.

2 <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/indonesia-what-is-an-ecosystem-restoration-concession>

3 RMU. 2016. Katingan Peatland Restoration and Conservation Project: Project Description VCS Version 3, CCB Standards Third Edition. Washington, DC: Verified Carbon Standards dan CCB Standards. https://www.katinganproject.com/uploads/default/modular/CCB_PROJ_DESC_ENG_1477_11MAY16.pdf

4 The Dayak Tani Misik Group is part of the Coordination Forum of the Dayak Misik Farmers (FKKT) Group (hereinafter referred to as the Dayak Misik) which was established in 2014 to provide land and forest security to the Dayak people and to prevent customary lands from being controlled by migrants and companies. The FKKT Dayak Misik has a program of handing five hectares of land to members of the Dayak Misik group through the issuance of a Certificate of Customary Land. In some places, the Dayak Misik is used as a scheme to fight against large-scale land tenure by mining corporations and palm oil. In Bapinang Hilir, the management of the Misik Dayak is controlled by an elite coconut family and its members are not limited to Dayak people, but also include Banjar and Malay people.

5 Prior to obtaining a concession in East Kotawaringin Regency, RMU obtained a concession in Katingan Regency in 2012. After obtaining the VCS certificate, RMU first succeeded in obtaining a Memorandum of Understanding with the majority of village governments in Katingan.

6 This appeal is accompanied by training on the cultivation of organic food crops and vegetables to farmers selected by RMU field officers. After the farmers returned to their respective areas, the farmers were given funds to establish pilot fields for food crops and organic fertilizers.

7 This threat creates high suspicion of outsiders which makes it difficult to interact and gain trust with the people of Bapinang Hilir. In order to detect whether outsiders are on the side of RMU or not, farmers ask questions regarding the permissibility of burning grass on their land.

8 The term peasant refers to a person who cultivates land in the countryside, controls the means of production, works through his own power whose surplus production is taken

by the authorities and the rest is used to exchange the products produced (from labor) for goods that - culturally - considered equal. While petty commodity producers are solely a group of people involved in farming for the purpose of producing commodities or people who are involved in capitalist commodity production relations in agriculture. Even though it seems inconsistent, especially when it comes to finding Indonesian equivalents, here petty commodity producers will also be referred to as 'farmers'.

9 For comparison, see Dove, Michael, R. 1988. *Sistem Perladangan di Indonesia: Suatu Studi-studi Kasus dari Kalimantan Barat*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press. And, Dove, Michael R. "Theories of swidden agriculture, and the political economy of ignorance" *Agroforestry systems* 1.2 (1983): 85-99, which provides a very detailed description of the land burning techniques used by the Dayak people in West Kalimantan in preparing agricultural land. Watson, G. A. 1984. "Utility Of Rice Cropping Strategies In Semuda Kecil Village, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia." Workshop on Research Priorities in Tidal Swamp Rice. Los Banos: International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). 49-67, also describes how people in the Mentaya River watershed cultivate rice through burning.

10 <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/driving-carbon-neutral-shells-restoration-and-conservation-project-in-indonesia>

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Community meeting in Nhambita, Mozambique



The legacy of the community carbon project in Nhambita, Mozambique: Nostalgia, disillusionment and indignation ¹

The UK company Envirotrade began a REDD+ project in 2003 that involved communities in the buffer zone of the Gorongosa National Park in northern Mozambique. The project sold carbon credits on the voluntary market. Envirotrade recruited hundreds of villagers to plant trees. Families that received payments during only seven years, were obliged to take care of the trees for many more years. In 2018, the company abandoned the region, leaving behind unfulfilled obligations, debts to villagers and hundreds of perplexed families.

In 2003, the now defunct British company Envirotrade began a REDD+ project among the communities surrounding and within the buffer zone of the Gorongosa National Park in Sofala province, central Mozambique. With the so-called 'Sofala community carbon project', it was claimed that there would be the development of



sustainable land use and of activities to achieve rural development in the region². This being a for-profit endeavor, the carbon captured through agro-forestry, forest conservation and avoided deforestation was sold on the voluntary carbon market. Envirotrade also recruited hundreds of members of families living in the region of Pungwe, of which Nhambita is a part, as ‘producers’. They were tasked with planting various tree species on the basis of a contract establishing payments over seven years, although producers’ responsibility to protect and take care of the trees extended beyond that period.

Beyond these agro-forestry activities, the project included the establishment of a local sawmill and carpentry shop that would use local materials in a sustainable fashion, and also the creation of a nursery for fruit-bearing plants and other species. The nursery aimed to support the agro-forestry activities and employed mostly women. Therefore, as well as the producers, the company had contractual ties with carpenters, nursery workers, extension workers and agents who patrolled the forest to prevent deforestation and **fires**.

Fifteen years later, in 2018, the project ended and left behind unfulfilled duties and hundreds of perplexed families. According to former producers, the company abandoned the region without saying goodbye to the communities and owing payments for tree planting and care services.

“Envirotrade did not leave on good terms. Envirotrade owes payments to many people. Firstly, it owes the producers three years’ worth of planting. Secondly, it owes the nursery workers who produced the saplings, also for three years they didn’t make the payments. Thirdly, they owe the men who protected the areas, who made the firebreaks, also three years [worth of debts]. Fourthly, they owe the people who belonged to the individual [forest] areas for the carbon, also three years. Lastly, they owe compensation to the workers.”³

According to the former carbon management company Envirotrade, which refutes the above statements, the business shut down due to the fall in the price of carbon on the global market and the consequent financial unfeasibility, since the revenue from carbon was what sustained the project financially⁴. Furthermore, the company considers itself the victim of an ‘anti-REDD+ campaign’ that supposedly discredited many years of Envirotrade’s work.

The question of whether the project actually resulted in the development of the region divides opinions in Nhambita. However, some former producers and Envirotrade technicians lament the ending of the project, mainly because of the loss of the monetary benefits they used to receive on a yearly basis.

Effects, legacy, outlook and strategies

There is doubt among the community of Nhambita as to the possibility or not of the project being taken up again by Envirotrade ‘or other interested parties’⁵. Between uncertainty and expectation, some producers on the one hand continue to preserve the trees planted, though not needing to look after them, while on the other opening up new areas for agriculture. While Envirotrade was in the region producers were

contractually forbidden from opening up new areas for other activities, including agriculture, since Envirotrade was interested in the largest possible amount of vegetation and biome in order to permit a greater capacity to capture carbon.

Visits paid to households in Nhambita revealed an abundance of fruit-bearing trees, especially mango and cashew trees, planted within the project's scope. Some of the producers visited signed multiple contracts, adopting different systems (*bordadura, consorciação, quinta*). This was possible mainly for those with greater availability of land.

One of the concerns raised by the producers interviewed was not knowing what to actually do with the trees. This raises a pertinent question about producers' degree of knowledge about the objectives and specificities of the project.

According to one producer,

*"We just kept the plants (...) there is an area [where] they were cutting trees down out of nervousness, because they weren't being paid, in the farms as well, they were cutting trees down. I asked why they were cutting, they said [because they were] forbidden for many years and then didn't get paid. The farms are full of plants and they [say] we are going to cut them down."*⁶

Beyond the asymmetry in terms of information between the company and producers, the fact that the narrative about better living conditions for the communities as a result of environmental projects was not borne out is also noteworthy. It was found that the company created a significant level of economic dependence within communities, resulting in a rupture in income and subsistence levels right after the company abandoned the region. Strategies to promote sovereignty and independence were not created – on the contrary.

Food sovereignty

One of the most notable criticisms leveled at the Nhambita carbon project by researchers and activists relates to the potential risk it represented to the region's food safety⁷, since the producers contracted (a few hundred of them) would tend to neglect food crop production in order to devote themselves to tree planting and care.

In fact, this was the perception of a local primary school teacher after observing the dynamics of implementation of the project over the course of some 10 years. She found that with the project, the community of Nhambita displayed a particularity vis-à-vis other communities where she taught. The peasants there dedicated fewer work hours to their farms to be able to invest their time in the agro-forestry activities. "[The peasants] got a little lost because they were more involved with the company and food production had become priority number 2". Although the income from tree planting helped make up their subsistence, "by leaving aside food production, they ended up losing out," she said.

The evidence suggests that the peasants joined the project simply because they would receive monetary payments. Although one cannot minimize the value to the community of the trees planted – for example, supplying shade and fruit⁸, as well

as protection from strong winds and cyclones –, within a broader perspective the trees do not seem to be of much use to producers. While some opt to open up new spaces, others cut down some of the trees planted (though on a small scale), which indicates that the project will end up producing the opposite effect from the one desired by its proponents, namely, Envirotrade, its funders and the carbon buyers. Certainly, what determined the acceptability of the project in the community was the structural lack of rural employment in Mozambique.

Obviously, in the absence of a specific study, it would be premature to assess the changes that occurred in Nhambita with regard to reduced local food production and diet. The phenomenon that seems to emerge with the ending of the project is a process of ‘re-agrarianization’ demonstrated by the return to agricultural practice as households’ main activity.

Perceptions of the impact

As referenced previously, there are divergent opinions about the economic impacts of the project on the community. In the opinion of the ‘nostalgics’, the project allowed people under contract to acquire certain materials and consumer goods, like cement bricks and zinc roofing to improve their homes, and certain electrical appliances (radios, solar panels etc), although few homes were built using non-local materials, as observed by our research team.

Among the more skeptical voices, the Nhambita community chief (*régulo*) stands out, for whom Envirotrade simply ‘exploited people’. This community leader refused to become a producer for Envirotrade because he considered the amounts offered insufficient in relation to the effort required to keep the trees alive and healthy, and that the contractual terms benefitted only Envirotrade. With his family, this leader decided to continue placing his bets on food production. Several other families opted not to get involved with the project.

The experience of some women is different from the other producers involved with the project. A female producer reported in an interview that she was hired to work at the Envirotrade nursery, from 6am to 4pm. She would work on her farm before and after these hours, not to mention the household’s social reproduction activities. When asked about this workload and the low wages received, she stated that it had been necessary for her survival and particularly for the health and education of her children. After the company’s abandonment, women like her – who were still owed money – lost their source of income from the nursery, lost their source of income from the trees planted and had to resort to their farms for their subsistence.

And what about the carbon?

Despite this divergence of opinions, there is a shared suspicion among several members of the Nhambita community: ‘Will carbon continue to be captured by the trees they planted and looked after? Will Envirotrade continue to sell carbon credits

even after it stopped remunerating them?’

As mentioned earlier, the model used in the Nhambita carbon project was to pay producers for seven years after planting. The company says such payments were advances, since producers undertook to look after and protect the trees over much longer periods, of up to 100 years⁹.

In the case of REDD+, it would not be illogical to think that Envirotrade continues to sell the carbon even if in the eyes of the peasants of the region the project seems to be abandoned. This suspicion was rebutted by the former carbon manager at Envirotrade¹⁰, who said the project had ended completely.

What instigates this suspicion is the fact that the peasants received a team that sought to check the forest inventory in 2019, after Envirotrade had abandoned the region. There are questions over whether the trees continue to serve their initial purpose (carbon capture) without the producers receiving the due financial benefits – not to mention the unpaid debts.

The traps of solutions to the climate crisis from above

Nhambita and other environmental projects to capture carbon demonstrate the fragilities and contradictions of what the authors of this article consider climate action from above. Although the narrative of the proponents of the project presented it as promoting sustainable land use and protecting local biodiversity on the one hand, and permitting rural development through the payment for environmental services to the peasants contracted on the other, the project failed in the following aspects:

- **Environmentalism condescension**

Besides the fact that this project was designed from the top down, its proponents disregarded the opinions, knowledge, experiences and true interests of the beneficiaries. Although the peasants were informed of the project’s environmental impacts and benefits, the producers had no knowledge of the project’s economic objectives. For example, they had no knowledge that carbon is a tradable good that would be sold on the international market, to whom it would be sold and for how much, what it was for etc. In other words, one found a considerable asymmetry of information about the real economic aims of the project: carbon capture and sale of its credits on the international market. Equally, producers were unaware that such carbon credits end up being used to accommodate polluting activities in other parts of the world.

The fact that the project was designed with no consideration given to producers’ aspirations and priorities meant that when the company made its exit, producers experienced a sudden drop in their income. After all, they had invested work and land in the project to obtain the economic benefits from the trees instead of concentrating their efforts on the activities that provide long-term benefits without any economic dependence on the company.

Despite the fact that the forest inventory mentioned certain benefits, producers

currently find themselves with the areas taken over by fruit-bearing trees and other species with little economic usefulness. The fruit end up rotting due to the lack of a market and of processing units. The current scenario in Nhambita is the result of policies unadjusted to local realities and priorities, and that accommodate external economic interests.

- **The failure of REDD+ and of the carbon market**

REDD+ projects that succeeded in their objective to halt deforestation are unknown, but many have succeeded in their objective to **offset** polluting activities. Some studies have already presented evidence that this kind of project, beyond adverse social effects, is not effective in reaching environmental goals, i.e., they question the efficacy of such policies in mitigating and combating climate change¹¹. However, one needs to reflect upon and question the grounding of policies like REDD+ for depending on international market stimuli in order to materialize. For example, one of the causes of Envirotrade's failure in Mozambique, as referred to above, was the drop in the price of carbon on the international market. Without the sale of carbon credits, the project became unviable financially, which reveals a dependence on the international market's price variability and stimuli.

Over the last 5 years, the price of carbon credits, as in the case of this type of REDD+ project, varied from US\$5 to US\$36 per ton¹². This variability represents risk for the implementation and sustainability of REDD+ projects that depend on the sale of carbon credits. Beyond the economic risk, this factor represents social risks, inasmuch as a low carbon price may mean fewer benefits for the households affected by the project, or even the failure of the project as happened with Envirotrade in Mozambique. However, there is also a risk to this scheme related to the exchange rate between the US Dollar and the Metical (local currency). The higher the value of the Dollar versus the Metical, greater revenues in local currency and more resources for social projects will be available. However, the opposite represents a risk. Therefore, beyond the dependence on the price of carbon, the success of these programs also depends on the volatility of the exchange rate. In other words, the subsistence of the producers involved will depend on dynamics of the international and currency markets, and will be subject to the risks that such a scheme involves.

Therefore, the way in which REDD+ was conceived displays not just social risks, like the intensification of rural poverty, but also promotes a scheme that continues debilitating the environment inasmuch as it permits polluters to carry on polluting. Differently put, the market logic within which REDD+ operates makes its economic component be dominant over environmental and social objectives.

- **Need to build climate justice**

The implementation of REDD+ in Mozambique, in particular the case of Nhambita, reveals how climate injustice materializes. Historically, Mozambique is among the countries with the smallest environmental footprints in the world. However, the country has become the host of multiple carbon capture projects, with high social costs, to allow major emitters like China and the USA, as well as transnational

corporations, to continue producing and industrializing. Further to operating in sectors such as mineral extraction (coal, ores, gas), plantations (eucalyptus, pine, rubber) and large-scale industrial agriculture, negatively affecting thousands of peasants, these companies also benefit from carbon markets. This strategy serves to clean up the image of these companies that self-classify as ‘carbon neutral’.

Projects to provide solutions to the climate crisis from above may seem attractive to the peasantry owing to their promises of money and better living conditions. However, this model has not been sustainable, as shown by the experience of Nhambita. Beyond the adverse effects of these policies, Mozambique has been impacted by extreme weather events with devastating effects. This means that countries that contributed the least to the environmental crisis are the ones that suffer the most from its impacts, as well as being the ones that host the ‘false solutions’ to climate change.

It is in this context that one must stress the need to deepen the notion and concept of climate justice, with a view to the adoption of policies and solutions for the environmental crisis that are economically sustainable and socially just, and that take into account the historical environmental footprint and the different priorities of countries with different levels of industrialization and economic development. In other words, the conception and design of policies of mitigation and adaptation to climate change must not be oblivious to the guiding principles of climate justice.

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Photos: Elton Júlio

Puzzle Pictures

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2 https://mer.markit.com/br-reg/public/project.jsp?project_id=100000000000169

3 Interview, former Envirotrade local technician.

4 <https://omrmz.org/omrweb/wp-content/uploads/DR-135-Mercado-de-carbono.pdf>

5 Interview 1, former producer.

6 Interview 2, former Envirotrade technician and producer.

7 <https://viacampesina.org/en/mozambique-carbon-trading-and-redd-farmers-grow-carbon-for-the-benefit-of-polluters/>

8 Some peasants interviewed associated the fact that Nhambita and neighboring communities suffered less than others from the effects of Tropical Cyclone IDAI, which devastated Sofala province in March 2019, with the existence of many trees in the region.

9 https://www.fern.org/fileadmin/uploads/fern/Documents/Nhambita_internet.pdf

10 It is a fact that neither this project nor Envirotrade appear in virtual portals where carbon credits are sold.

11 <https://redd-monitor.org/2019/02/15/recent-academic-review-describes-redd-readiness-in-indonesia-as-a-failure/>

12 <https://indices.ihsmarkit.com/#/Carbonindex>

REDD Project area in Mai Ndombe, DRC

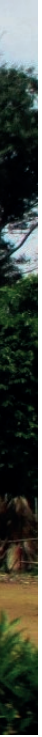
Photo: WRM



The PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ project in Mai-Ndombe, DRC: Conflicts and a complaint mechanism

The project discussed in this article is part of one of the biggest jurisdictional REDD+ initiatives in the world: the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project. Like most REDD+ projects, it features a complaints mechanism. Stories from affected communities reveal the false promise that this mechanism would help hold the project accountable towards those affected by it. The design of the complaint mechanism has systematically failed to resolve the communities' complaints. But then, why does this mechanism exist?

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has the biggest tropical forest area in Africa and, therefore, it is particularly targeted by REDD+ proponents such as the World Bank and conservation NGOs. The story they have told over the past 10-15 years is that forest-dependent people in the DRC are to blame for deforestation and that REDD+ projects will reduce this. That story misidentifies the key drivers of deforestation and targets communities, not the logging or mining industries, with restrictions on how they can use their forest. The result is both a rising rate of deforestation and numerous conflicts between communities and REDD+ project proponents (see, for example, the article Congo Basin Rainforest Project: Communities leery of "Conservation Revolution" from the WRM bulletin: www.wrm.org.uy/node/11935).



The DRC government adopted its REDD+ strategy in 2012, not least to pave the road to more funding from the World Bank and others. An investment plan to make the REDD+ strategy operational was elaborated for the period 2016-2020 and several legal instruments related to REDD+ were adopted.

This article focuses on a project that is part of one of the biggest jurisdictional REDD+ initiatives in the world: the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project in the province of Mai-Ndombe¹. Like most if not all REDD+ projects, implementation of the project has caused conflicts with communities whose land use was restricted by the project. Again, like most if not all REDD+ projects, the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project features a complaints mechanism. Although this mechanism is supposed to make a REDD+ project accountable towards those affected by it, in reality, the set-up of the mechanism makes it impossible to hold the project implementer accountable.

The failure of the complaints mechanism described in this article thus raises a broader question about the role that such mechanisms play in generating donor and public acceptance for REDD+ initiatives which claim to be participative. The dysfunctionality of the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project complaints mechanism is not a mere question of poor implementation. Contrary to the claimed idea behind its design, the complaints mechanism is implemented in a way that does not work and fails to resolve the communities' complaints.

The PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project

The province of Mai-Ndombe encompasses 12.3 million hectares, of which 80% is covered with forests. In 2016, the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) approved US\$13.1 million dollars for the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ project. It is the main component of a larger amount of funding agreed upon with the DRC government. The PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ project is the first phase of the Mai Ndombe REDD+ programme and is considered the most advanced jurisdictional REDD+ initiative in DRC. It is being implemented in four administrative areas (Mushie, Kwamouth, Bolobo and Yumbi).

The NGO WWF is the so-called 'local implementing agency', with responsibility for putting into practice the project in these four areas. With the stated objective to "reduce pressure on forests", project activities focus around reforestation, agricultural and fire control². The activities are part of the so-called Improved Management Project of Forested Landscapes (PGAPF, for its French acronym). In return for planting seedlings and protecting savannahs, communities are promised results-based payments, monetary benefits for delivery of the community providing a service such as the maintenance of agricultural feeder roads or setting up of a timber yard. Payments are supposed to be paid annually by the World Bank's Forest Investment Program (FIP), through WWF as intermediary.

For the interaction with communities, WWF set up Local Development Committees (CLDs) in each village. The CLD represents communities, acts as community contact point for project implementers, submits complaints and receives and distributes payments to community members for specific tasks. The project is

tasked with setting up 175 such CLDs. Each community inside the project area is expected to prepare a Natural Resource Management Plan. The plan would identify among others, areas to be protected and where trees should be planted.

Conflicts with communities

The DRC government claims that one of the pillars of DRC's REDD+ strategy, besides reducing deforestation, is improving living conditions of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the country.

Research carried out by a network of grassroots groups and supported by the Congolese organisation Action pour la Promotion et Protection des Peuples et Espèces Menacées (APEM) in partnership with the Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK), however, suggests that the reality is far from that aspiration. They met with people in more than twenty communities in the Mushie, Bolobo and Kwamouth administrative areas in 2018-19. During their meetings with women in particular, a long list of problems and conflicts related to the REDD+ project was exposed. The list includes:

- **Women are not allowed to continue traditional agricultural practices**

During the meetings women described how they traditionally manage savannahs. After ploughing the plot they plan to use for cultivation, **small fires** are set to burn the grasses that have been dug up. The **small fires** also create an ideal environment to collect mushrooms, fruits, caterpillars, leaves, and other crops. With the REDD+ project prohibiting these controlled burns, families are cut off from vital food sources. Women in the Bosina community denounced the lack of space to cultivate food crops in the savannahs. There were no consultations with the community on using those areas for REDD+ reforestation activities. As a result, women now have to walk much longer distances to find areas where they can grow manioc. Most of these locations are forested and thus women require the help of men to clear them. This creates not only a new dependency that women did not face before, but it also leads to more deforestation. As a result of the REDD+ project, the women's production of manioc has fallen. Women from the village of Maa explained how being prohibited from using the savannah takes away other sources of food and income too, in particular the collection of mushrooms. The REDD+ project has worsened the economic situation of families. This in turn impacts on, for example, their ability to pay for their children to go to school. At the same time, the risk of food insecurity and diseases has increased. Similar situations were described by people in other villages, including Bompensole, Mbala II, Camp Ferrera, Twa à Kwamouth, Lovwa, Nkô, Mbali and Bopaka.

- **No payments for reforestation activities**

The women from the communities of Bosina and Komambi reported that they have not received any money for the reforestation of fast-growing tree species and fruit trees which they planted for the project.

- **Inadequate choice of tree species for reforestation**

Members of the community of Maa exposed that the fast-growing species chosen by the project, like acacia and eucalyptus, are not in the interest of the communities. Women argued that they collect dead wood as firewood to cook for their families and do not need acacia or eucalyptus trees for that.

- **No payments for road maintenance**

Even though members of the community of Komambi worked in road maintenance and finalized their clearly defined task, they haven't been paid for this work. People living in the communities of Maa, camp Molart and Komambi reported the same problem. They explained that their work was even signed off by project representatives but, nevertheless, they did not receive their payments.

- **Delayed payments for providing 'environmental services'**

The payments to community members in Bosina categorized as 'environmental services' (protecting the savannah through suppression of **bushfires**) have not been paid out for two seasons. The communities of Masiambio, Lovwa, Komambi, Bompensole, Mbala II and Maseke also report delayed payments for their **bushfire** suppression work. In June 2019, after suffering from food scarcity due to having to abandon their fields for work on the **bushfire** suppression and the land allocation under the Natural Resource Management Plans and because they had still not received the payments, communities decided to protest by burning savannahs they were supposed to protect under the project. In the community of Maa, the chairperson of the CLD, who signed the contract with the REDD+ project around these payments, added he feels threatened due to this situation. The communities of Masiambio, Lovwa, Bosina, Bompensole, Komambi and Maseke also complained about delayed payments for making fire-breaks.

- **Payment contracts unilaterally decided by WWF**

The chairperson of the CLD in Komambi explained that the contracts of the REDD+ project to pay community members for their services to the project are unilaterally decided by the REDD+ proponents. He explained that he had no assistance to help him and the community to assess the terms of the contracts proposed by the project. Members of the Lovwa community added that while there is no stipulation of a fine or an adjusted amount to be paid in case of delayed payments from the project, the contract does foresee penalties for communities who do not fulfil their work well, in this case: suppression of **bushfires**.

- **Payments extremely low**

Community members in Komambi complained about the very low payment for the **bushfire** suppression and maintaining the firebreaks: US5 dollars per hectare per year. Members of the community of Maa also reported that they receive very little in return for several project activities they are engaged in. They argued that with the

pastoralist and share-cropping activities that they used to do before the project, they earned much more. They explained that that was one of the reasons not to be part of the REDD+ project anymore.

- **Lack of transparency in selecting the facilitators of the committees and chair of the CLD**

Members of the community of Lovoa criticised the lack of transparency in how the facilitators of the different groups within the Local Development Committee (CLD) were selected by the REDD+ project. Many communities exposed that they were not given the opportunity to elect their CLD chairpersons. They also reported a lack of financial reporting from the CLD to their communities. These problems have been communicated to WWF, however the NGO has not intervened and the problems continue.

- **Exacerbating longstanding land conflicts**

The REDD+ project promoters have exacerbated a longstanding land conflict on the boundaries between the Komambi and Maa communities. As part of creating the Natural Resource Management Plan for each community, REDD+ promoters produced a map that allocates part of Komambi's customary land to the customary land of the Maa community. This eventually reignited the longstanding land conflict and has led to a court case.

- **Creating new land conflicts**

A new sensitive land conflict arose when the maps produced as part of the Natural Resource Management Plan for each community were created. The boundary shown on the map between the Mongana and the Nkó villages was incorrect. Although both communities know exactly where the boundary between their customary territories is, authorities of both communities have seen the maps with the wrong boundaries. Members of the community of Nkó explained that this has led to more mistrust between the two communities, also because the REDD+ project promoters have not corrected the problem by revising the maps. Another land-related complaint was mentioned by the Chief of Masiambio who explained that their tenure rights over their customary land have not been respected. Similarly, in the Nkuru community, the villages refused to sign the minutes of the validation of the Natural Resource Management Plan because it allocated part of their land to the community of Hebi³.

- **Lack of information and participation**

Community members of Bosina reported that they had no participation in the elaboration of their Natural Resource Management Plan. Members of the community of Komambi added that they were not even consulted about the project in the first place. Besides, they denounced that WWF often uses another community, Maa, to represent them. The chief of the Maa community in turn said that he never gave permission for the project. After consulting with the members of his community, he

decided to write a letter and communicate that his community does not want to be part of the REDD+ project anymore. Villagers from Mongana stated that they did not know what the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ project is, and the community researchers found that only 20% of the village population consulted inside the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ had ever heard about REDD+.

[The complaints mechanism was designed without the communities that should benefit from it in the first place.]

A Dysfunctional Complaint Mechanism

In theory, established complaints mechanisms should become a very important tool in cases where conflicts arise, or rather, a last resort for communities to count on some accountability on their promised and agreed social benefits and rights. The exposed dysfunctionality of the complaints mechanism of the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project questions the real purpose of these complaints mechanisms in REDD+ projects overall. Are these really set up to resolve conflicts that arise from project implementation? What are the interests behind establishing such mechanisms?

In 2014, when the DRC government was still undergoing the preparatory phase of the REDD+ process, the World Bank paid US\$5.2 million dollars to the government in order to operationalize the REDD+ **safeguards**, including a complaints mechanism. Four years later, in 2018, the government decree n°047 of 9 May 2018 sets out the procedure for the approval of REDD+ investments in the DRC and the **safeguards** and standards to be developed. The decree also states that a mechanism for managing complaints and appeals is an imperative to the process. The national REDD+ standards awaiting validation include this in principle 3: REDD+ activities shall minimise loss and damage, provide for redress and put in place mechanisms for fair and equitable redress of any loss and/or damage suffered by communities and other stakeholders. However, according to official information from 2020, the mechanism is still in an experimental phase.

Yet, REDD+ promoters give the impression that complaints mechanisms are well established and functioning. The World Bank's Forest Investment Program (FIP) has elaborated a model of how the complaints mechanism should function for its REDD+ projects, composed of seven detailed steps of how complaints should be received, assessed, investigated and dealt with⁴. The PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ project claims that it has built the capacity of communities about the complaints mechanism.

But the field visits coordinated by APEM showed that communities have not been fully informed about this mechanism, they do not know how to use it and do not have the necessary assistance or guidance. The result is that in practice, the complaints mechanism is not really accessible for those negatively affected by the REDD+ project. The visits also showed that those local authorities identified as the entities tasked with receiving and processing complaints are not informed and/or not willing to process the complaints they receive.

The complaints mechanism was designed without the communities that

should benefit from it in the first place. Therefore, it is designed to the benefit of the party against whom a complaint is presented. For example, ways to facilitate that communities can present their complaints by, for example, having the information and forms available in local languages, are lacking. Another example is that there are no clear definitions around deadlines, access to information and transparency in the overall procedure. The field visits also noted that among the 26 villages visited only the chairs of the CLDs of Bosina and Nkô knew about the complaints mechanism.

All of this indicates that the real intention and interest was not in creating an accessible complaints mechanism in the first place. The result has been the strengthening of unequal power relations. The façade of a mechanism that has been created works to the detriment of the complainants: the communities. The complaints mechanism's development and design is another example of the top-down approach that defines the whole architecture of REDD+.

Testing the Mechanism

The APEM team decided to support several communities in testing the functioning of the complaints mechanism. They helped communities to present official complaints to the competent authorities, ensuring that the complaints were prepared and presented in line with the complaint mechanism guidelines. The communities in dialogue with APEM opted to focus on issues such as the recognition of customary land rights; the lack of space for women to cultivate their food crops; the top-down selection of tree species for reforestation; the non-participatory ways of producing maps in each of the communities; the absence of community participation in the project; and the lack of proper information to communities and/or the lack of consent to the REDD+ project.

The communities of Komambi and Maa were the first to present their complaint to the competent authority in Mushie on 10 November 2019. Initially, their complaint was refused, with the explanation that the mechanism was not yet operational. After the complainants insisted, the person who did not want to receive the complaint the first time around presented another argument: He claimed that he had not received any guidance on how to deal with complaints and that he had not received any complaint so far.

After insisting for 5 days, the complaint was finally received and a confirmation handed over to the complainants. The confirmation document, however, lacked a registration number to clearly identify the complaint that had just been submitted. The complainants were only given a verbal promise that the complaint would be looked into. Apparently, nothing happened afterwards. During a visit to the FIP office in Kinshasa on 18 December 2019 to obtain information on the status of the complaint, the 'safeguards' officer stated that he had not received any complaints.

Final remarks

The case of the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project shows that all these years and millions of dollars spent on supposedly preparing countries for implementing REDD+ projects in line with the **safeguards** adopted at UN climate conferences for preventing conflicts and human rights violations, have been largely wasted. The social problems and local conflicts have systematically appeared since the first REDD+ projects took off almost 15 years ago⁵. Besides, preliminary analysis in the PIREDD/Plateau REDD+ Project shows that the project's activities have not decreased annual forest loss.

This case also shows that REDD+ promoters are definitely not concerned about communities and what they have to say about defending the forest. REDD+ promoters like the World Bank and WWF impose their own ideas and plans. They do not seem to have any concern about protecting communities from social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts and human rights violations in general. **Safeguards** have remained paper work. Even worse, they open the door for more conflicts when existing conflicts remain unsolved and REDD+ proponents can claim they use social and environmental standards for their **offset** projects.

The bottom line is that complaint mechanisms and discussions around **safeguards** seem to work very well to ensure donors can keep funding conflict-prone and controversial schemes like REDD+. These fake complaints mechanism creates the appearance of accountability for when something goes wrong. The reality is that there is no intention to be held accountable because conflicts are unavoidable under the reality of REDD+ implementation where communities are blamed for deforestation and face imposition of land-use changes and restrictions. This also ignores that these communities have managed these same forests well and protected them without third party intervention. If that is the intention of REDD+ projects, why would anyone expect that a complaints mechanism functions to resolve the very conflicts arising from what the REDD+ project pursues - the land-use restrictions on communities?

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1 Article based on the information from the unpublished APEM report “*Retour d’expérience de suivi des plaintes et recours des communautés locales dans la mise en œuvre de la REDD+ dans la Province de Mai-Ndombe en République Démocratique du Congo : Cas de PIREDD/Plateaux*” (Feedback from the monitoring of complaints and appeals from local communities in the implementation of REDD + in the Province of Mai-Ndombe in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Case of PIREDD / Plateaux). The information in the APEM report is based on several field visits by members of the NGO during 2018-2019 to communities in the PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ project. The visits were undertaken to understand if and how the project's complaints mechanism is functioning. For further

information see also “REDD-MINUS: The Rhetoric and Reality of the Mai Ndombe REDD+ Programme”, Norah Berk and Prince Lungungu, December 2020 <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/redd-minus.pdf>

2 WWF, REDD+: PIREDD-plateaux, an encouraging model in the fight against deforestation in the DRC, <https://www.wwfdrc.org/?26981/REDD-PIREDD-plateaux-an-encouraging-model-in-the-fight-against-deforestation-in-the-DRC>

3 Of the 24 Natural Resource management Plans that were prepared in the territory of Bolobo, 9 were validated / approved without objection, 11 were validated / approved by communities under condition that errors be corrected and in four cases, communities refused to approve the Plans due to the severity of the conflicts that the Plans had created. These conflicts continue to this day.

4 Programme d’investissement pour la Forêt de La Republique Democratique Du Congo PIF RDC, https://pifrdc.org/glis_c/MGPR_PIF

5 REDD: A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies, <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies>

Logging in the area of the Grande Mayumba Project in Gabon
Photo: Muyissi.



Dangerous for communities and the climate: Nature-based solutions in Gabon

At the UN climate conference in 2021, the government of Gabon presented itself as champion in the fight against climate breakdown. Would fossil fuel extraction in Gabon come to an end? No. The rhetoric amounted to greenwash. At its core are a deal signed in 2019 with the fossil fuel producer Norway and the Grande Mayumba project. Communities fear the carbon offset project will bring more hardship for families who have seen artisanal fishing along the coast heavily restricted while reeling from uncompensated destruction of their crops by elephants pushed into closer contact by industrial logging and oil palm plantations.

In the months leading up to the November 2021 UN climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, UK media reports highlighted the importance of forests, and forests in Gabon in particular, for the climate¹. They support the claim that to help protect the climate, countries like Gabon must be paid to maintain their forests, and the carbon

stored in them². The UK-based NGO Chatham House even ran an hour-long podcast³ where Gabon's minister of forests, oceans and climate change, Lee White, laid out this argument.

The sudden UK media interest in forests in Gabon has a lot to do with carbon emissions. Industrialized country governments, companies and big conservation NGOs claim that forests can compensate for the (climate) damage caused when underground carbon stores are destroyed to extract coal, oil and gas. How? By protecting forests that were allegedly at risk of being destroyed. Preventing this allegedly planned destruction keeps carbon in the forest – and out of the atmosphere (see article in this publication *Is all carbon the same? Fossil carbon, violence and power*). This line of argument is popular with corporations because it allows them to continue profiting from fossil fuels as long as they pay some project that claims to protect forests at risk, plant extra trees or restore damaged peat lands. This dangerous idea that destruction of underground carbon stores can be compensated by claiming above-ground carbon stored in forests has been promoted under the name of REDD – or more recently, 'Nature-Based Solutions' (see article in this publication *REDD: Not just a failure*)⁴.

Two examples from Gabon demonstrate why Nature-Based 'Solutions' will lead to more climate chaos because they don't help end the extraction of coal, oil and gas. Like REDD over the past 15 years, those so-called solutions will also expose communities to more conflict and violence and do nothing to reduce emissions from industrial logging or agribusiness.

The Norway-Gabon Agreement: payment for reduced deforestation while deforestation rises

In a deal signed in September 2019, the government of Norway commits to pay USD 150 million to the government of Gabon if the latter can show that it has reduced deforestation below an agreed level⁵. The argument is that avoiding deforestation means that a certain amount of carbon dioxide is not released into the atmosphere because trees that were allegedly about to be cut will remain standing – and avoiding these emissions helps reduce emissions in the atmosphere.

The benefits of such a deal for the government of Norway are obvious: for a small payment (small in comparison to the profits made from destroying underground carbon stores off the Norwegian coast), the government of Norway can present itself to the world as a champion in the fight against climate change. Meanwhile, the same Norwegian government that is urging people in Gabon to protect their above-ground forest carbon stores, because they are important for climate protection, continues to destroy its underground carbon stores to extract oil and gas, and profit even more from the sale of these fossil fuels⁶.

The deal was also welcomed by Gabon's minister of forests, oceans and climate change⁷. The major oil producing nation could use the deal to divert attention away from the climate damage caused by drilling for oil and gas offshore and, instead, claim leadership on Nature-Based Solutions and protection of carbon stored in forests in

Gabon instead. The deal even allowed the government of Norway to pay out the first USD 17 million in June 2021⁸, even though deforestation in Gabon – a country where 60% of roads are logging roads and 44% of its forests are handed over to companies as timber concessions⁹ – has been rising.

It's worth noting that such perversities are not an exception when it comes to payments for allegedly reduced forest emissions (REDD).¹⁰ Regularly, countries and corporations most responsible for causing climate breakdown are paying others who claim to have reduced emissions from deforestation even though deforestation in a country or inside a REDD project is rising;¹¹ or payments are made for claims that deforestation of forests at risk of destruction has been avoided even though there is no plausible indication that the risk of deforestation existed. The consequence: the companies and countries most responsible for climate breakdown can claim that their trade agreements, products and services, are somehow “carbon neutral” and produce “**net-zero**” emissions – **and** continue profiting from the fossil fuel burning and deforestation that is still associated with them.

For Lee White, the USD 150 million deal with Norway is just the beginning. In the October 2021 Chatham House podcast, White tells listeners that “every year, Gabon absorbs about 100 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, net. So, we’re offsetting all of our emissions. We’re not aiming for carbon neutrality, we are carbon neutral. We are even much better than that. We’re absorbing about a quarter to a third of the UK’s annual emissions into our rainforests.”¹²

It isn't far from this line of argument to the claim by industrialized countries and corporations that they do not need to stop burning coal, oil and gas at home to claim ‘carbon neutrality’; instead, they can just pay, say Gabon, to protect the carbon stored in their forests. That, the argument goes, is just as good as halting the destruction of the remaining underground carbon stores; no need for industrialized countries and corporations to stop burning them as fossil fuels.

Obviously, **offsetting** isn't just as good as putting an end to destroying underground carbon deposits. In fact, **offsetting** means communities whose land is destroyed by coal mines and oil fields will continue to be exposed to violence and toxic pollution that are inextricably linked with fossil fuel extraction. **Offsetting** also means that the communities whose neighbourhood is impacted by refineries continue to be exposed to devastating health impacts. And **offsetting** means more land at the **offsetting** end of the equation is being controlled to serve the interests of corporations – as carbon stores, in this case – while peasant families and forest peoples are told to stop cultivating food in the forest.

The Grande Mayumba project: A threat to community livelihoods disguised as a ‘Nature-Based Solution’

In September 2021, the government of Gabon presented a proposal that will enable companies to profit from **carbon offset** projects based on the same argument as the deal between the governments of Norway and Gabon: if the project demonstrates that forests were allegedly at risk of being destroyed, and that these

forests are protected by the project, it can sell the carbon saved through this forest protection to companies that want to continue burning fossil fuel and at the same time claim that the climate damage from this fossil fuel burning has been compensated¹³. One such project already exists in Gabon's southwestern province of Nyanga: the Grande Mayumba project.

The Grande Mayumba project dates back to 2011, when the government of Gabon and a company then called SFM Africa Ltd.¹⁴ set up the Grande Mayumba Development Company (GMDC) as a public-private partnership. The government of Gabon owns 34 per cent of the company, while 66 per cent are in the hands of SFM Africa Ltd., today known as African Conservation Development Group (ACDG)¹⁵.

Like other companies set up by South African businessman Alan Bernstein, SFM Africa Ltd. and African Conservation Development Group are registered in countries often referred to as fiscal havens. These are countries which are popular with tax dodgers, among others because companies registered there pay very low taxes and have to reveal very little information about their businesses and owners. In 1999, Bernstein registered his company SFM International Ltd. in Bermuda. The African Conservation Development Group, which he set up later, is registered in Mauritius. According to the investigative webportal Ojo Público, SFM International Ltd. was part of a web of companies involved in selling carbon credits and tax avoidance in connection with a reforestation project in Ucayali province in Peru¹⁶. In 2011, SFM International Ltd. declared bankruptcy.



Communities in Nyanga province, Gabon, call for the suspension of the Grande Mayumba NBS Project (November, 2021)

Key documents about the project are kept secret

Very little substantive documentation is publically available about the Grande Mayumba Development Company or the Grande Mayumba project. In fact, the only substantive public document is a contract signed on 20 October 2011 between the Grande Mayumba Development Company and its wholly-owned logging subsidiary Nyanga Forestry Operations. That contract refers to another contract which was signed on 20 April 2011 and which created the Grande Mayumba Development Company. However, this contract about the Grande Mayumba Development Company does not seem to have been made public.

Community members and representatives of civil society organisations who came together in the town of Mayumba in September and November 2021, were alarmed about the secrecy surrounding the Grande Mayumba project. A 5 March 2021 press release by the African Conservation Development Group (ACDG) claims that “the project has been carefully designed through an extensive consultation process over a number of years”¹⁷. By contrast, community members present at the meetings said they were not aware of any consultation, and certainly none that had presented the project in its full dimension. They said they had never seen a detailed map of the concession area, were unaware who is behind ACDG or that the Grande Mayumba Development Company is a private-public partnership with the state of Gabon as shareholder. They were also unaware that Nyanga Forestry Operations (NFO), the company they knew only as an unreliable logging company, is in fact a subsidiary of the Grande Mayumba Development Company. Like any other logging company, NFO has a legal obligation to negotiate and pay a financial contribution to communities affected by its operations. Article 251 of the Forest Code of Gabon requires that a logging company agree such a contribution as part of the negotiation of *cahiers de charge*¹⁸ with communities affected by its operations. NFO has yet to honour this legal obligation. Meanwhile, community representatives wondered how much money NFO has already paid over the past ten years to the Grande Mayumba Development Company for the timber it has extracted from the logging concession on their ancestral land (remember that NFO is a subsidiary of the Grande Mayumba Development Company)¹⁹.

Luxury Lodges

In a 2019 interview, Alan Bernstein mentions plans for a luxury lodge complex in Loango National Park, to the North of the Grande Mayumba project concessions²⁰. In its 12 January 2021 press release, the ACDG states that in Loango National Park a “lodge is being developed by The African Conservation Development Group (ACDG) under concession from the National Agency of National Parks (Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux, ANPN).”²¹ A report on the tourism industry in Gabon also notes that “in February 2013 the ANPN signed a conservation tourism concession agreement in the form of a PPP [private-public partnership] with Sustainable Forestry Management (SFM) Safari Gabon, a subsidiary of Mauritius-based landscape conservation and

development firm SFM Africa. The agreement will see the creation of a circuit of luxury, sustainable safari lodges, starting with two lodges in Loanga and Pongara national parks that will aim to attract 2000 visitors a year.”²²

Loango and Pongara National Parks are located well outside the vast Grande Mayumba project concession area. A 2 March 2021 article linking the lodge construction to the Gabonese government’s investment fund FGIS and its subsidiary Luxury Green Resorts does not mention ACDG or the Grande Mayumba project²³. But the comment from Alan Bernstein in the 2019 interview mentions lodges in Loango National Park. How exactly the construction of the luxury lodge at Loango Park is linked to the Grande Mayumba project, and whether SFM Safari Gabon is part of the Grande Mayumba Development Company or is carrying out business activities in Gabon as a separate entity owned by Alan Bernstein, remains unclear.

The Grande Mayumba project apparently consists of six separate, large concession contracts covering an area equivalent to 3 percent of Gabon’s land mass.

Big announcements, no money?

The now defunct SFM Africa website described the Grande Mayumba Development Company as a partnership “to consolidate and develop a forest land area of 631,100 ha and a marine area of 260,900 ha on the basis of an ecologically sound and economically optimal long-term land management plan (Grande Mayumba Sustainable Development Plan).”

Representatives from communities inside the Grande Mayumba concession area and civil society organisations who came together in September and November 2021, were surprised to find out that the Grande Mayumba project apparently consists of six separate, large concession contracts covering an area equivalent to 3 percent of Gabon’s land mass. They were unaware that the land within this large concession area would be dedicated to “five primary business components – forestry, agribusiness, fisheries, ecotourism and infrastructure development”²⁴ and that a substantial portion of the logging concession would be turned into a ‘conservation forest’, possibly a new **Protected Area**.

In media reports, interviews and blog posts, Alan Bernstein mentions many business activities in connection with his companies and the Grande Mayumba project. This, too, was news to community representatives. The activities mentioned by Bernstein range from a sugar cane plantation project he expects to produce 250,000 tonnes of sugar per year, a new²⁵ wood processing mill at Mangali (a village near the Mayumba town), a chain of luxury ecotourism lodges, construction of port facilities at Mayumba lagoon, and the setting up of an oyster farm to support artisanal fishing.

The logging carried out by Nyanga Forestry Operations apart, community members have not been informed about any of the planned activities; they do not know when they will start or how they will affect their lives and livelihoods. People

are particularly concerned about the fisheries and conservation activities mentioned in the sparse information that exists about the Grande Mayumba project.

The livelihoods of artisanal fisherfolk in Mayumba are already being put in jeopardy in recent months by the extension of the Mayumba National Park, a marine protected area. They now have to fish 10 km away from the shore. This makes their fishing impossible – and dangerous because most artisanal fishermen go out in small boats, many without outboard motor. Meanwhile, commercial fishing fleets that have recently been granted a government license can be seen from ashore, operating day and night, seemingly undisturbed. The restrictions imposed by the Marine Park administration on artisanal fishing affect food sovereignty in the town of Mayumba and beyond. “You can’t even buy any fish anymore here in Mayumba,” people remarked, explaining that Mayumba had always been the place to go to for anyone who was looking for fresh fish in southern Gabon.

Whether Bernstein’s plans will ever materialize, is hard to say. He has been speaking about most of these activities in the present tense for a decade. Yet, only the luxury lodge construction in Loango National Park and the logging by NFO are already underway, with some preliminary activities said to be taking place at the location of the sugar cane plantation site.

One reason for the slow start of most activities seems to be that African Conservation Development Group, and SFM Africa / SFM Gabon before it, have yet to find the money to put their grand plans into practise. In a July 2021 article, their “director of debt capital” explains that the company hopes to raise up to USD300 million from selling bonds (private investors lend money to the company and receive regular interest payments while the company is using their capital)²⁶. A portion of these bonds would be linked to carbon credits that the company hopes to generate from the Grande Mayumba project. Some 10 years ago, SFM Africa co-founder Kevin Leo-Smith already wrote that the company was about to launch a ‘green bond’ to kick-start the Grande Mayumba project. It remains to be seen whether their fundraising plans will materialise this time.

Implausible deforestation story calls emission reduction claim into question

In their story of what would have happened to the forests without the Grande Mayumba project, ACDG writes on its website that 52 per cent (225 million tonnes CO₂) of the carbon stored in the forest would be lost over the next 25 years. With their Grande Mayumba project, they claim that instead of 52 per cent, only 5 percent of the carbon in the forest inside their concession will be released into the atmosphere over 25 years. The difference between the 52 per cent of forest carbon they say would have been destroyed without the Grande Mayumba project and the 5 per cent with their project is the amount of carbon the project claims to save: emissions worth around 200 million tonnes CO₂²⁷. That means 200 million carbon credits the company hopes to sell to companies or countries like Norway that want to continue to profit from fossil fuel burning *and* claim to not harm the climate.

The numbers in the paragraph raise many questions to which the ACDG website fails to provide answers. Fact is that for ten of the 25 years taken as reference in the calculations, the Grande Mayumba Development Company subsidiary NFO has been logging inside the Grande Mayumba project concession. And the calculations on the ACDG website put deforestation inside the Grande Mayumba concession at 2,000% above the average annual deforestation of about 0.1 per cent in Gabon. No further information is provided as to why this should be a plausible assumption.

It is also implausible that the forests which the Grande Mayumba project intends to set aside as “conservation forest” would have been logged²⁸. A report on the expansion of **Protected Areas** in Gabon shows that a large portion of these forests is growing in terrain unsuitable for logging: “SFM recognises that much of the proposed area is prohibitively steep for logging, particularly along the border with Congo and the mountain ridges to the east.”²⁹ The report suggests that this portion of the concession could be a candidate for a future **Protected Area** expansion.

Assuming that 52 per cent of the carbon is stored in the forests in these mountain ridges and border areas with the Republic of Congo seems highly implausible, if not ludicrous. The climate will be worse off if carbon credits generated by the Grande Mayumba project ever come to market.

There are also worlds between the realities peasant communities and artisanal fisherfolk are facing in the Mayumba region today and the project which Alan Bernstein describes as being “in the vanguard of placing a value on ecosystem services” and “working to uplift communities.”³⁰ The communities’ experience with conservation is far from uplifting. It is one of conflict and uncompensated destruction of their crops by elephants pushed into closer contact with communities because oil palm plantations and commercial logging operations encroach on the forest. Communities are particularly concerned about the proposed “conservation forest”. They fear that they will be prohibited from using the forest they have protected for generations once it is declared a **Protected Area**.

The concern is unsurprising considering that the country’s Minister Lee White claims that “*artificially, much of rural Gabon is empty. So, we were able to create these National Parks with almost nobody in them.*”³¹ Lee White is wrong on both counts. Even though communities were forced under French colonial rule to abandon their villages and move to the roadsides, to make collecting taxes easier, they have maintained the ties to their ancestral land and villages continue to exist in places that have been declared National Parks. This would also be the case in the forest that the Grande Mayumba project has identified as “conservation forest”.

On 5 November 2021, communities of the department of Basse-Banio and the municipality of Mayumba which would be impacted by the Grande Mayumba project, released a declaration titled “*NO to the Grande Mayumba project*”. The communities work for the survival of their neighborhoods and villages and fight against social, environmental and climatic inequalities, called for the suspension of the Grande Mayumba project³².

Muyissi Environnement
Gabon, and WRM

1 See, for example, Sky News, 13 October 2021. Gabon: ‘Very difficult’ to protect Great Congo Basin unless country rewarded for conservation efforts, minister warns. <https://news.sky.com/story/gabon-very-very-difficult-to-protect-great-congo-basin-unless-country-rewarded-for-conservation-efforts-minister-warns-12407143>; Financial Times, 20 July 2021. Africa’s green superpower: why Gabon wants markets to help tackle climate change. <https://www.ft.com/content/4f0579ac-409f-41d2-bf40-410d5a2ee46b>

2 See footnote 1

3 Chatham House Podcast (2021): Episode 7. Climate Change in Africa with Minister Lee White. <https://soundcloud.com/chathamhouse/episode-7-climate-change-in>

4 WRM, REDD: A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies, <https://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/>

5 Gabon signs US\$150 million REDD deal with Norway. Shhh... Don’t mention corruption. <https://redd-monitor.org/2019/09/24/gabon-signs-us150-million-redd-deal-with-norway-shhh-dont-mention-corruption/>

6 For more information, see “Payment for non-performance”: Norway pays Gabon US\$17 million for increasing deforestation. <https://redd-monitor.org/2021/07/07/payment-for-non-performance-norway-pays-gabon-us17-million-for-increasing-deforestation/>

7 “Payment for non-performance”: Norway pays Gabon US\$17 million for increasing deforestation. <https://redd-monitor.org/2021/07/07/payment-for-non-performance-norway-pays-gabon-us17-million-for-increasing-deforestation/>

8 <https://www.nicfi.no/current/gabon-receives-first-payment-for-reducing-co2-emissions-under-historic-cafi-agreement/>

9 Olivier Hymas (2015). L’Okoumé, fils du manioc: Post-logging in remote rural forest areas of Gabon and its long-term impacts on development and the environment. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/79498104.pdf>

10 Ben Elgin (2020). These Trees Are Not What They Seem. How the Nature Conservancy, the world’s biggest environmental group, became a dealer of meaningless carbon offsets. Bloomberg Green. <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2020-nature-conservancy-carbon-offsets-trees/>

11 The website REDD-Monitor lists many examples: www.redd-monitor.org

12 Ibid 3, minute 39ff.

13 Journal Officiel de la Republique Gabonaise. 16 September 2021. Dossier 777.

14 <https://web.archive.org/web/20181102061457/http://www.sfmafrica.com/management-team>

15 <https://www.aihitdata.com/company/027E21BO/grande-mayumba/overview>

16 Ojo Público, 05 November 2017. Carbon Credits: The multimillion dollar offshore scheme in the Peruvian Amazon. <https://paradisepapers.ojo-publico.com/investigacion/carbon-credits-the-multimillion-dollar-offshore-scheme-in-the-peruvian-amazon/>

17 Grande Mayumba Development Company Signe un Accord de Convention Portuaire

Avec l'OPRAG. <https://afcondev.com/media/grande-mayumba-development-company-signs-port-convention-agreement-with-oprag>

18 Cahiers de charge can be seen as a recognition of communities' customary rights to land by states in the region that have maintained the colonial claim that all land belongs to the state. Cahiers de charge are agreements that list financial obligations of the company towards a community whose customary land falls inside the company concession.

19 Article 6 of the 20 October 2011 contract obliges NFO to pay, among others, a fee of FCFA 5,000 per cubic meter Okomué wood of the quality equal to or higher than CS and FCFA 5,000 per cubic meter cut for other species, where the wood is equal to or higher than B quality.

20 Gorillas, Forest Elephants Lure SFM Investment in Gabon's Forest. <https://www.bloomberqqint.com/onweb/gorillas-forest-elephants-lure-sfm-investment-in-gabon-s-forest>

21 Construction of ACDG's First Lodge in Gabon Under Way. <https://panafricanvisions.com/2021/01/construction-of-acdgs-first-lodge-in-gabon-under-way/>

22 Oxford Business Group. A more sustainable approach: Development and promotion with an eye on the longer term. <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/more-sustainable-approach-development-and-promotion-eye-longer-term>

23 Le Fonds gabonais d'investissements stratégiques veut valoriser le potentiel de l'écotourisme. <https://www.lenouveaugabon.com/fr/economie/0303-16540-le-fonds-gabonais-d-investissements-strategiques-veut-valoriser-le-potentiel-de-l-ecotourisme>

24 <https://web.archive.org/web/20181102061505/http://www.sfmafrica.com/projects/gabon>

25 The now defunct SFM Africa website already stated, in the present tense, that "trees harvested in the GMDC concession area are processed locally in the GMDC sawmill." No such mill existed at the time of writing.

26 <https://www.ft.com/content/4f0579ac-409f-41d2-bf40-410d5a2ee46b>

27 <https://afcondev.com/grande-mayumba>

28 "The Grande Mayumba Sustainable Development Plan, developed in partnership with the Gabonese Republic, designates 29% of Grande Mayumba for reduced impact logging in existing forestry areas and 13% for mixed agriculture on largely degraded grasslands, while 30% of Grande Mayumba's forestry concessions will be withdrawn from commercial forestry and proclaimed as a conservation area, due to its high biodiversity value. This means over 220,000 ha of the 730,000 ha land area will be permanently set aside for conservation, including representative forest and savannah ecosystems, as well as marine and freshwater environments." Alan Bernstein (2021). The convening power of natural capital. <https://forestlab.partners/perspective/perspective-01/natural-capital-investment-provides-a-new-development-model-for-africa>

29 CAFI. Accélérateur de réformes en Afrique centrale. Version 2019-18-12 Expansion des aires protégées et optimisation de l'utilisation des terres aux fins de production de cultures

vivrières au Gabon. https://www.cafi.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/05_Gabon%20Parks_Ag_Final%20prodoc_23.04.pdf pg 75/76

30 Putting a price on our natural environment could give Africa the edge. <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2021-05-19-putting-a-price-on-our-natural-environment-could-give-africa-the-edge/>

31 see footnote 3

32 NO to the Great Mayumba project. Declaration November 2021. <https://www.wrm.org.uy/action-alerts/gabon-communities-say-no-to-the-great-mayumba-project>

Founding Members of Markets for Natural Climate Solutions



BHP



IETA

In 2019, at COP25 in Madrid, IETA held a side event to launch its Markets for Natural Climate Solutions initiative.

Photo: REDD Monitor

Big polluters, carbon offsetting, and REDD+

Offsetting is a dangerous distraction from the root causes of the climate crisis. This false solution is the flip side to the oil's industry initial reaction to climate science: denial. Big Polluters did not invent carbon trading. But they have supported, heavily lobbied for and promoted carbon trading. They are also major buyers of carbon offsets. In recent years, Big Polluters' buying of carbon offsets has gone from a steady trickle to a flood - and conservation NGOs are among the main suppliers and supporters. Their support for carbon trading has also come in less visible forms.

Climate change denial and **carbon offsetting** have the same purpose - to allow Big Polluters to continue profiting from business as usual for as long as possible.

But **carbon offsetting** is perhaps even more dangerous than climate change denial because it appears to be acknowledging that the climate crisis is real, and gives the impression that Big Polluters are taking action to address it.

Offsetting is currently booming. Yet more than three decades of experiments with carbon trading reveal that **offsetting** is a spectacular failure. In terms of addressing the climate crisis, that is. **Offsetting** is a dangerous distraction that allows Big Polluters to continue business as usual.

Today, more than 1,500 corporations have made ‘**net zero**’ commitments¹. Almost two-thirds of all countries have ‘**net zero**’ commitments. But these commitments “are nothing more than a big con,” as Sara Shaw of Friends of the Earth International notes. Big Polluters plan to continue polluting, while hoping to greenwash their image with **offsets** and tree planting schemes.

The airline industry has developed its own carbon trading scheme called Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA). Under this scheme, emissions will increase without any limit and the aviation industry will use **offset** to justify continued pollution.

Oil companies have enthusiastically jumped on Natural Climate Solutions (sometimes referred to as Nature Based Solutions), in an attempt to give the impression that they suddenly care about the environment². At the same time, they continue exploring for new sources of profit in some of the most endangered ecosystems on the planet.

In 2019, Shell’s CEO Ben van Beurden announced that “another Brazil in terms of rainforest” is needed to address climate change through such Natural Climate Solutions³.

Total has bought **offsets** to create a fantasy of ‘carbon neutral’ liquefied natural gas⁴ and is planning to spend US100 million dollars a year⁵ on forest protection and tree planting⁶.

Meanwhile Eni plans to use 8.1 million hectares of land in Africa to **offset** its continued emissions⁷.

Big Tech companies have also joined in, with Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook all making ‘**net zero**’ commitments.

Exxon knew

These false solutions to the climate crisis are the flip side to Big Polluters initial reaction to climate science: denial.

In 2015, Inside Climate News carried out eight months of investigations into the history of Exxon and other oil companies’ relationship with climate science starting more than 40 years ago⁸.

The oil companies didn’t just know about the science, they were actively involved in carrying out cutting edge research into the impacts that burning fossil fuels has on the climate. Exxon, for example spent more than US1 million dollars on a tanker project aimed at finding out how much CO₂ is absorbed by the oceans.

As far back as 1977, Exxon’s senior scientist James Black told Exxon’s management committee that,

“In the first place, there is general scientific agreement that the most likely manner in which mankind is influencing the global climate is through carbon dioxide release from the burning of fossil fuels.”

He warned that doubling the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere would

increase average global temperatures by two or three degrees. He urged Exxon to act, saying that we have “a time window of five to 10 years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical”.

Instead of acting, Exxon became a climate denial leader. About a decade after starting its research into climate change, Exxon pushed campaigns to cast doubt on climate science and delay regulation of its industry. In 1989, Exxon was a founding member of the Global Climate Coalition. GCC spent about US\$1 million dollars per year lobbying against limits on greenhouse gas emissions. It opposed the Kyoto Protocol.

As George Monbiot exposed in his 2006 book ‘Heat’, Exxon also funded a large group of organisations that argued that climate science is not settled, environmentalists are Nazis, communists, crazies, terrorists, or frauds, and if governments took action on climate change, the global economy would collapse⁹.

The oil industry used the same tactics as the tobacco industry had to deny that smoking caused cancer. They even used some of the same people, such as Frederick Seitz, who was chairman of the George C Marshall Institute¹⁰. Seitz founded¹¹ the George C Marshall Institute in 1984, initially to support President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, or ‘Star Wars’. In the late 1980s, the Institute moved on to climate change denial – with generous funding from Exxon.

Before that, Seitz was permanent consultant to the tobacco company RJ Reynolds where he funded research to “refute the criticisms against cigarettes”.

IPCC

One of climate activists’ responses to the climate change denial campaign, particularly in the Global North, has been to elevate the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s publications to a status above any possible criticism. In their eyes, the IPCC has become the single authority on everything to do with climate science.

The IPCC¹² is a UN body, set up in 1988, with the aim of assessing the science around climate change. It provides governments with scientific information so that they can develop policies to address the climate crisis. The IPCC has produced a series of comprehensive Assessment Reports, the first of which was published in 1992. The most recent report came out in August 2021.

If anything, the IPCC’s assessments tend to be conservative. As George Monbiot points out¹³, this is not surprising given how many people have to approve the IPCC’s assessments before they are published.

However, as Larry Lohmann points out in his book ‘Carbon Trading: A critical conversation on climate change, privatisation and power’¹⁴, there is a great deal left out of the IPCC reports. Lohmann’s book was published in 2006, but it is more relevant than ever today.

While the UNFCCC has repeatedly discussed market mechanisms, the issue of leaving fossil fuels in the grounds remains firmly off the agenda.

Lohmann notes that before the IPCC put out its report on ‘Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry’ in 2000¹⁵, several governments, including the US, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Norway, had been pushing to be allowed to count the carbon stored on their forested land against continued emissions from burning fossil fuels. Many Northern governments were also keen to buy carbon credits from projects that reduced deforestation in tropical countries.

“It shouldn’t be a complete surprise,” Lohmann writes, “that the IPCC’s report provided the US and its allies with just the conclusions they needed.” But in order to do so, Lohmann writes, the report “had to abandon normal standards of technical rigour”.

“Thousands of relevant peer-reviewed references were missing – on deforestation, the history of forestry development projects, peasant resistance, forest commons regimes, investor behaviour, and so on.”

The IPCC’s authors assume that the carbon temporarily stored in trees and soil is identical to the carbon buried underground in fossil fuels. But in terms of the impact on climate, the two are completely different. The carbon in fossil fuels remains safely stored below ground and only interacts with the atmosphere when it is extracted and burned.

Carbon stored in trees and soils is only temporarily stored and is released to the atmosphere when trees die, or when the forest is logged, or cleared to make way for oil palm plantations, or when the forest burns (which we are seeing more and more frequently as the climate crisis intensifies).

In a recent paper published in the journal ‘Social Anthropology’¹⁶, Lohmann describes how UN climate scientists behave as if fossil fuels and extractivism are simply not relevant to climate science:

“In 2014, Sir John Houghton, founding member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, gave an interview explaining that UN climatologists were not permitted to mention the carbon locked up in fossil fuels in their analysis of climate change, but only carbon that had become more mobile in the form of CO₂. To follow what happens when carbon atoms cross one of the internal borders of the earth’s geophysical system into the atmosphere is ‘science’, Houghton said. But to analyse their movements toward that border ‘is not a science question’.”

And while the UNFCCC has repeatedly discussed market mechanisms, the issue of leaving fossil fuels in the grounds remains firmly off the agenda. The words ‘fossil fuels’ do not appear anywhere in the Paris Agreement¹⁷.

Big Polluters and carbon offsets

Big Polluters did not invent carbon trading. But they have supported and promoted carbon trading, and Big Polluters are major buyers of **carbon offsets**. In recent years Big Polluters’ buying of **carbon offsets** has gone from a steady trickle to a flood.

The world's first **offset** project was an agroforestry project in Guatemala¹⁸. The funding came from Applied Energy Services (AES), a US-based power company, to the tune of US2 million dollars. Starting in the late-1980s, AES funded tree planting in a project run by CARE in Guatemala to **offset** emissions from a new 181 MW coal-fired power plant that AES was building in Connecticut.

The project in Guatemala was a dismal failure¹⁹. Hannah Wittman a Professor at the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia has studied the impacts of the tree planting project on farmers' livelihoods. Wittman found frequent land use conflicts. When farmers started planting trees, less land was available for growing food, resulting in food shortages in the area.

Activities such as gathering fuelwood for cooking became criminalised, resulting in conflicts over rights to the trees. Ten years after the project started, an evaluation by Winrock International found that the tree planting project was falling far below what was needed for AES's **offset** target. Farmers did not receive direct payments for planting trees, and many were not aware that the trees were storing carbon to **offset** AES's coal-fired power plant.

But Big Polluters have not just funded **offsetting** projects to greenwash their destructive operations.

In 1999, 11 men and one woman held a meeting in Shell's headquarters. It was the first meeting of the International Emissions Trading Association. IETA, founded by Big Polluters, has lobbied for carbon market trading schemes ever since. IETA has placed its affiliates on country delegations at the UN climate negotiations.

The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was also involved in



Image by Ethan Cornell, courtesy of CLARA

setting up IETA. From 1990 to 1999, Frank Joshua was head of the UN's International Expert Group on Emissions trading. After helping create IETA, he became its first Executive Director.

IETA is one of the most prominent and influential trade associations at the UNFCCC. IETA's members include banks, carbon traders, consulting firms, project developers, oil companies (including BP, Chevron, Eni, Equinor, Shell, and Total), mining companies, and carbon standards and registries. IETA exists, "to ensure that climate change policies don't negatively impact the profits of Big Polluters," as a 2018 report by Corporate Accountability points out²⁰.

Obviously, it's no surprise that Big Polluters are lobbying for dangerous distractions like carbon trading. But they are doing so with the support of several so-called environmental organisations.

To give just one example, in 2019, IETA launched its Markets for Natural Climate Solutions during the UN climate negotiations in Madrid²¹. The founding members are four oil and gas companies (Shell, Chevron, BP, and Woodside Energy); a mining company (BHP); and a US-based tree planting organisation (the Arbor Day Foundation).

IETA's Advisory Panel included representatives from Conservation International, Environmental Defense Fund, Earth Innovation Institute, and The Nature Conservancy.

[In recent years Big Polluters' buying of carbon offsets has gone from a steady trickle to a flood.]

Enter Norway's Big Polluters and REDD+

Support for carbon trading from NGOs has also come in a less direct form.

On 27 September 2007, two men called Lars set a letter to Jens Stoltenberg, then-prime minister of Norway. "Not too late: Save the rainforest – save the climate!" was the headline.

The letter came from Lars Løvold, then-director of Rainforest Foundation Norway, and Lars Haltbrekken, then-chairman of the Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature (Friends of the Earth Norway).

Lars and Lars asked Stoltenberg to spend US1 billion dollars each year for five years to protect the rainforests as a way of addressing climate change. They argued that the money should not be used to create a **carbon offsetting** mechanism, but should be in addition to reducing emissions.

But then they invited Márcio Santilli from the Brazilian organisation Instituto Socioambiental to meet Norwegian politicians and promote their idea. That was a strange choice. In 2005, Santilli had written in favour of "international carbon emissions trading for the protection of tropical forests"²².

On 10 December 2007, the government of Norway announced that the country was "prepared to increase its support to prevent deforestation in developing countries to about three billion kroner [about US550 million dollars] a year".

Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg presented Norway's strategy to prevent deforestation at a meeting in Oslo, together with the Minister of the Environment, Erik Solheim, and the Minister of Petroleum and Energy, Åslaug Haga. The oil industry was behind Norway's support for REDD from the beginning²³.

The Norwegian government owns two-thirds of the shares in Norway's oil giant, Equinor. Until July 2021, the shares were managed by the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy – they have now been transferred to the Ministry of Trade and Industry²⁴.

Over the past 30 years, Equinor has drilled more than 100 wells north of the Arctic Circle. The company has no plans to stop. "Oil and gas production in northern areas," the company states on its website, "will be an important contributor to securing supply for the growing global energy demand."²⁵

From the beginning then, Norway's oil industry was involved in Norway's plans to save the rainforests. This is the dirty underbelly of REDD – using the rainforests to greenwash continued drilling and continued pollution.

On 13 December 2007, Stoltenberg was in Bali for the UN climate negotiations (COP 13). In his speech to the climate conference Stoltenberg told us that stopping deforestation would be quick and cheap²⁶:

"Through effective measures against deforestation we can achieve large cuts in greenhouse gas emissions – quickly and at low cost. The technology is well known and has been available for thousands of years. Everybody knows how not to cut down a tree."

Stoltenberg left no doubt that he was proposing a carbon trading mechanism to save the rainforests:

"In order to mobilise the resources necessary, we need to put a price on carbon. Then we create incentives to behave climate friendly. Then we make polluters pay for their emissions. Therefore we have to create a global system of carbon trading and CO₂ taxes."

The World Bank also launched its Forest Carbon Partnership Facility at COP 13 in Bali. Benoît Bosquet, a senior natural resources management specialist at the World Bank led the development of the FCPF and was the coordinator of the FCPF from 2008 to 2014. "The facility's ultimate goal is to jump-start a forest carbon market that tips the economic balance in favour of conserving forests," Bosquet said in a World Bank statement about the launch of the FCPF in Bali²⁷.

BP Technology Ventures Inc. stepped up with US5 million dollars funding for the FCPF, as did The Nature Conservancy. Over the years, most of the FCPF's funding came from the governments of Norway, Germany, and the UK.

Despite raising more than US 1 billion dollars, the FCPF has "proven to be a staggeringly ineffective way to reduce deforestation, with astronomical administrative costs and nothing to show in the way of prevented deforestation," as a 2017 anonymous commentary on the website REDD-Monitor noted²⁸.

Legitimising offsets

Recently there is a lot of discussion about ‘getting REDD right’. For example, the Finnish offsetting company, Compensate, argues that 91% of the projects it has looked at failed its evaluation process²⁹. A start-up called Sylvera says that almost half of REDD projects that it’s looked at “fall short”³⁰. And news portal Bloomberg Green has reported on how The Nature Conservancy’s forest **offset** projects in the US were actually not threatened with deforestation. The Nature Conservancy has become “a dealer of meaningless carbon offsets”, Bloomberg Green wrote.

But these arguments are legitimising **carbon offsetting** because they give the impression that the remaining 9%, or 50% are somehow ‘genuine **offsets**’. Bloomberg Green argues that “Scientifically, they [carbon offsets] make sense.” The implication is that **offsetting** just needs more (or better) regulation.

The reality is that no amount of regulation can get around the fact that it is not just some **offsets** (the bad ones, the meaningless ones) that are delaying climate action. The problem is the very concept of **offsetting** which has for decades successfully delayed meaningful action on the climate crisis. Oil companies are even buying **carbon offsets** in order to create “carbon neutral” fossil fuels. Which is clearly nonsense.

Offsets, REDD, and Natural Climate Solutions provide the perfect tool for Big Polluters giving the impression of taking climate action, while allowing their destructive extractivism to continue.

Chris Lang
REDD-Monitor.org

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2 REDD-Monitor: <https://redd-monitor.org/tag/natural-climate-solutions/>

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Recommended readings

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2. What do forests have to do with climate change, carbon markets and REDD+?

<https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/what-do-forests-have-to-do-with-climate-change-carbon-markets-and-redd>

3. Declaration “No to Nature Based Solutions!”

<https://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/more-than-200-groups-say-no-to-nature-based-solutions/>

4. Golpe Verde – Falsas Soluções para o desastre climático

Available in Portuguese (<https://cimi.org.br/2022/02/golpeverde/>)

5. Offsetting: climate-neutral through forest protection? An assessment of the ‘climate neutral’ claims related to the Tambopata-area: REDD project in Brazil nut concessions in Madre de Dios, Peru. Foodwatch

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6. See the REDD-Monitor website for more information in English

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