

Why Carbon Offsets are Not the Solution - From Ineffectiveness to Green Colonialism

Bianca Carrera, 25.12.21

Everytime we hear that more and more governments, as well as big multinational companies such as [Walmart](#), [EasyJet](#) or [Saudi Aramco](#); claim their commitment towards achieving ‘net-zero’ emissions in the near future. For many, these announcements sound like an immense relief: “*at last, those accountable for almost the entirety of our emissions are seeing sense*” one could think, “*a greener future, now that all these players produce ‘zero emissions’, must await us!*”. In fact, this is the reaction that they are trying to prompt, one of relative hope, and all because of the ambiguous but surprisingly powerful term ‘net zero’.

Although it might be obvious for those in the field, the concept of net zero and its functioning is actually pretty unknown for the general public, or rather, misunderstood. Far from meaning that the State or company claiming it does not produce any emission whatsoever, what net zero truly means is that emissions are neutral. That is to say,

that even if the party emits emissions, these are compensated and countered by measures or projects that tackle carbon absorption of the quantity being emitted. For example, an emission of some dozen tons of CO₂ by a firm is compensated with the funding of the construction of a park whose trees will absorb the same dozen tons of CO₂; hence making the total emissions of the firm 0 according to the scheme.

These projects meant to stabilize the balance of emissions are called ‘carbon offsets’, and its appearance has revolutionized the carbon market. Now, companies within this market are not only able to pollute by purchasing the carbon rights of developing countries, but they are also able to invest in carbon offsets that will both allegedly reduce the effects of their emissions and help improve their corporate image in the eyes of the world(also known as green washing). Such attractiveness has made it be at the core of any recent climate change debate, posing itself as the only alternative to the attainment of climate justice while maintaining ‘green growth’ and a ‘healthy economy’. As could not have been otherwise, carbon offsets were said to be [central in the EU’s Green Overhaul](#) announced early this year, and were not less at COP26, where countries reaffirmed their willingness to implement Article 6 of the Paris Agreement -stating that carbon offsets are a solution to the climate crisis- and agreed to make offsetting even easier by [removing taxes from bilateral offset deals between countries](#).

However, this environmental policy might not be as promising as it has been pictured to be. In spite of the billions that are being spent in propaganda campaigns marketing carbon offsetting as the solution, trying to make us believe that an oil empire like Aramco or an airline like EasyJet can genuinely be carbon neutral; committed NGOs like Greenpeace, researchers, activists and indigenous peoples' groups are starting to make their voice heard against what they claim is a “scam”¹ and an “excuse for imperialism”².

The first reason why carbon offsets are not our way out of the climate crisis is simply because they are not effective. Meant to absorb the tons of polluting gases that companies throw at the atmosphere, a 2017 study by the European Commission exposed that 85% of offset projects under the UN's Clean Development Mechanism scheme failed to effectively reduce emissions, yet not countering the polluting costs they were built to balance. According to [Greenpeace](#), this is because newly-planted trees -the most common offset activity- can take up to 20 years to capture the amount of emissions that the scheme promises. Taking into account that the [2018 IPCC report](#) stated that humanity had 12 years to severely reduce carbon emissions in order to stick below 1.5 C° and avoid serious consequences, it looks like offsets are far from providing a realistic solution to what we urgently need. Besides, in the timeframe

during which these projects are supposed to operate, droughts and forest fires are expected to increase, which would not only waste the resources invested but also release even more CO₂ to the atmosphere, as a study³ from Nature suggests.

Nonetheless, timing is not the only technical flaw making offsets inefficient. Another big problem lies in the fact that companies investing in the offset scheme do little to improve the livelihoods of the people directly affected by the pollution emitted. Environmental projects are more often than not located in the rural and deserted areas of global South countries⁴, not in the surrounding areas of the polluting industrial compounds of the company itself. This means that even if a firm could succeed to offset the totality of its emissions -which as we have analysed, it is not likely at all-, even in that utopian hypothetical case, the communities living close to the firm's emissions would still suffer the same exposure and risk. According to the [European Environment Agency](#), air pollution is the major cause of premature death and disease, as well as the single largest environmental health risk in Europe. Such risk will not fade away if we only outsource our climate responsibilities abroad, without addressing the local challenges of pollution nor rethinking the entire economic and production system.

¹ Greenberg, C. (2021) Carbon offsets are a scam. *Greenpeace International*

² Clementine (2021) Green colonialism... or the fight against climate change as an excuse for imperialism. *International Public Policy Review*.

³ Gatti, L.V., Basso, L.S., Miller, J.B. *et al.* (2021) Amazonia as a carbon source linked to deforestation and climate change. *Nature* 595, 388–393. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03629-6>

⁴ See the map showing the location of offset projects [here](#), from Dagens Nyheter Magazine

That being said, one should not forget another pivotal dimension of the carbon offset scheme, which is its tight link to green colonialism. Green colonialism is a big umbrella that gathers within it several different activities that contribute to the perpetuation of Western supremacy and social inequality. Inspired by what William Easterly described as the ‘white man’s burden’ -the belief on the West’s societal advancement, and hence duty to expand its good practices to the rest of the world-, it can take the shape of land appropriation for the extraction of materials needed for green technology, but often that of the establishment of protected zones and environmental projects without taking any consideration of indigenous communities.

As a matter of fact, these offset projects do more harm than good as maintained by indigenous peoples themselves, who actively protested such initiatives at this year’s COP26 in Glasgow, claiming the conference -which overtly endorsed the scheme, as exposed above- was “*a continuation of colonialism*”⁵. The facts on the ground, reported by studies, tell us that offsets operating in the Brazilian rainforests usually result in local peoples being displaced from their lands⁶. The same applies to those carried out in Africa, where [Amnesty International](#) has attested that the Kenyan Sengwer people were being forcefully and illegally evicted from their ancestral home to make space for

development programs; or where the Oakland Institute⁷ revealed that the communities surrounding an offset plantation in Uganda faced hunger resulting from “*restrictions placed by the project on access to land, water, firewood, along with perilous working conditions for Green Resources’ workers*”.

Furthermore, offset projects put a price on nature, commodifying it and removing from it its sacred complexion attributed by the people who live alongside it -claims the Indigenous Environmental Network in a [2016 press release](#). They change the centuries long dynamics of communities that have been protecting forests and natural lands to our day, or how Jess Wang, graduate student at Columbia Climate School, puts it “*Rich countries are investing in the Global South and dictating how to maintain land and forests to people who have lived there for, in some cases, thousands of years*”. Taking into account that indigenous knowledge is “*an invaluable basis for developing adaptation and natural resource management strategies*”⁸, ignoring it is not just perpetuating white supremacy, but also dooming humanity to face the irreversible risks of the climate crisis.

Having seen how carbon offsets are both ineffective and a pretext for the continuation of the colonial practices we are trying to eradicate, we still have not mentioned the worst, which is that they convey the idea

⁵ Indigenous land defender Ita Mendoza for the [Guardian](#)

⁶ Greenleaf, M. (2020). The value of the untenured forest: Land rights, green labor, and forest carbon in the Brazilian Amazon. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(2), 286–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1579197>

⁷ Lyons, K., Richards, C. and Westoby, P. (2014) The Darker Side of Green Plantation Forestry and Carbon Violence in Uganda. The Case of Green Resources’ Forestry-Based Carbon Markets. *The Oakland Institute*

⁸ IPCC AR4 Synthesis Report, September 2007

that things are improving when they actually are not, they are getting worse⁹. They are a distraction, and put the urgency and the attention away from the policies we ought to be pursuing, such as the real reduction of emissions and the abandonment of the business as usual economic system. They ultimately, as Greenpeace collaborator Alia Al Ghussain puts it, *“allow companies like BP and Shell as well as airlines to continue with their unsustainable behaviour while shifting their responsibility for the climate onto the consumer”*.

This being said, it is important to bear in mind that some reforestation and other environmental projects carried out under the offset scheme are actually positive, and do help at alleviating the situation in some places to some extent. Therefore, this article does not imply that all projects should be cancelled nor blamed, but rather, it strives to shed light on the dangers of using offsets as a way to greenwash big companies corporate image, in addition to of portraying it as the ultimate solution to distract attention from the deep transformative and ground-breaking policies that are required. Moreover, it attempts to highlight the need to expand the area of maneuverability of such projects to local areas where the pollution is produced, as well as calls on Western institutions to stop dictating how indigenous peoples have to handle their lands, start listening to their demands and start learning from them to implement the solutions that our nature desperately needs.

⁹ Emissions in 2022-2023 are expected to break all records, according to [Forbes](#).

Resources

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