Voluntary carbon markets:
Slow violence for indigenous communities in the Global South?

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At the inaugural Africa Climate Summit, held in Nairobi in September 2023, discussions about carbon trading dominated many conversations. Kenyan President William Ruto said Africa's carbon sinks provide an "unparalleled economic goldmine" and called for "a new way of doing business." Many commentators, however, believe the real winners in the carbon trading markets are the financial brokers in the developed countries who operate these controversial global markets. LIZ MWANGI elaborates on this perspective.

The Nairobi Declaration, signed at the Africa Climate Summit on 6 September 2023, emphasises the need to create a global carbon tax regime that would enable countries in the Global South to receive a form of compensation for the impact of climate change which is largely exacerbated by the Global North (Malesi, 2023). While the need to hold large carbon emitters accountable for their action is without doubt necessary, research conducted by various scholars (Gilbertson *et al*., 2009; Böhm *et al*. 2012) has shown how carbon trading may not only be a new form of colonialism – "a scramble for Africa's forest carbon" (Pearce, 2023) – but a slow violence targeted at indigenous communities located in the Global South.

When did the race towards the financialisation of carbon begin?

The 1992 Rio Summit saw the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which introduced negotiations around the emission of greenhouse gases as a way to curb and mitigate anthropogenic climate ➤➤

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change effects (Rio Summit Declaration, 1992). Five years later, in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol went on to provide a working framework towards the reduction of these emissions (Kyoto Protocol, 1997), giving rise to the trading of carbon emissions and carbon offsets. In effect, through the Kyoto Protocol, the marketing and the financialisation of nature enabled the rise of what one might call green capitalism (Bracking, 2020). In simpler terms, through carbon credits, Global North/developed countries would be able to buy off their rights to pollute from Global South/least developed countries via projects or initiatives said to sequester carbon from trees and other 'biodiverse-rich' regions.

Within the financial world, the rise of carbon markets has been praised by some as an innovative economic strategy to conserve and protect the environment; more so given the belief that local communities will also be uplifted as a result (UNEP, 2015). This framing of carbon markets, however, is questionable. A closer look at the African context reveals how the hyper-financialisation of the natural world not only creates "a fictitious capital" (Thibodeau, 2010) that has large implications for the environment, but also tends to lead to more damage, benefitting those who are far away from the spaces carbon tends to be harvested from. Power Shift Africa, a think-tank that advocates for climate justice and action across the continent, released a report in 2022 stating that in the end the largest winners of the carbon trading markets are the polluters (fossil-fuel companies) and financial brokers who operate and exist within the world economic markets (Power Shift Africa, 2023).

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It is not surprising that Interpol, an international police information-sharing network, has warned that if not closely regulated, carbon trading might "become the next global white collar crime" (Henderson, 2011: pp. 83-9).

In August 2023, Liberia signed a carbon offset deal with an Emirati company that would see the country concede 10% of its territory (Hearst, 2023). According to Hearst, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which also happens to be one of the world's largest oil producers, would be able to "harvest" carbon credits that would have been conserved and protected through the one million hectares of forest/land it would acquire through this deal. These credits would then be sold off to other major global polluters.

There is much criticism surrounding Global North and large greenhouse gas-emitting countries seeking to engage in carbon trading with countries in the Global South. As one environmental scholar highlights, "the idea that you can simply make an equation whereby if you buy up a certain area of land ... then that will ensure offsets of your carbon emissions through the natural ability of this ecosystem to sequester carbon is really dubious" (Hearst, 2023). Waring, a senior lecturer on climate change at Imperial College, London, further states that "there aren't enough trees in the world to offset society's carbon emissions – and there never will be" (2021). There is a need to conduct a more comprehensive evaluation to understand the viability and potential impact mass reforestation would have on the earth's climate and the global cycle (Buis, 2019). This would be crucial especially given the fact that in the recent past, a vast number of carbon offsets have been found to be completely worthless with others suggesting that the market could be "broken" (Greenfield, 2023).

Repackaged oppression: A look at carbon colonialism

During the Africa Climate Summit, the UAE committed to purchasing $450-million worth of carbon credit from the African Carbon Markets Initiative (ACMI) (Miriri, 2023). The ACMI was launched in 2022, during COP27, with an aim of scaling voluntary carbon markets across Africa. The initiative has set out to produce 300 million annual credits on voluntary offset markets by 2030 and 1.5 billion by 2050, so as to "make carbon credits one of Africa's leading export products" (Caramel, 2023). Central to achieving these targets, amongst others, is the aim to "promote justice, equity and inclusiveness" when it comes to Africa's agency in the global carbon marketplace. At surface level, this bold and ambitious goal may appear to offer promise but on a much deeper level one begins to see how encouraging further extraction from the "goldmine," (re)creates colonial systems of oppression which have long been synonymous with Africa. It is interesting to note that the ACMI is currently steered by a committee of experts, one of whom happens to be David Antonioli who is the ex-CEO of Verra, the world's largest carbon credit certifier ➤➤

(Africa Carbon Markets Initiative, 2022). In early 2023, Antonioli resigned as CEO of Verra following accusations levelled against the organisation for "approving millions of worthless offsets used by major companies" (Greenfield, 2023).

Carbon colonialism, then, is the process in which countries in the Global North, most of which are economically more developed, continue to pass on injustice(s) to poorer countries through carbon trading (Bachram, 2004). Schlosberg (2013) argues that carbon trading is a manifestation of new forms of colonialism: developed countries can gain an upper hand in setting the carbon standards that often lead to what some have termed "carbon dumping" in least developed countries (Parsons, 2023). Moreover this increases inequalities in bargaining power. As countries in the Global North buy off their rights to continue their industrial pursuits and practices, thus continuing to leave an even larger toxic and harmful trail in the environment, many poorer countries in the Global South are left to their mercy. The fact that this largely unregulated market has been left to the invisible hand of the economy tends to further (re)create many loopholes that encourage further oppression and exploitation of people and the planet. Researchers at the University of California Berkeley's Carbon Trading Project found that the "current system of generating rainforest protection carbon credits was not fit for purpose and was open to exploitation" (Greenfield, 2023). Other researchers have warned that credit credibility seriously threatens forests (Balmford, *et al*., 2023).

A slow violence: Let them eat carbon

We know very well that climate change does not exist in a vacuum. Although the African continent, alongside other countries located within the Global South, have experienced the harsher realities of its effects, climate change remains a global issue. To say a region or country, such as Kenya, exists in its own ecological space where carbon is grown and generated and assume that this 'grown commodity' will neutralise the effects of a Global North country is quite questionable. These ecological spaces, which are far away from the spaces where the carbon is being massively generated, in a way, give rise to what one may term sacrifice zones built upon the notion of slow violence. It's a kind of violence "that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Davies, 2022:5). Often, this violence tends to maximise and exploit the vulnerability of ecosystems and marginalised communities that are poor and disempowered. Out of desperation to sustain their livelihoods given the pressures exacerbated by the introduction of such sacrifice zones, social conflicts tend to arise.

Take for example, the "Nhambita Community Carbon Project" that was set up in a rural area in Mozambique by Envirotrade, a carbon trading firm. Through the project, farmers were encouraged to "grow carbon" which would in turn enable them to receive money from the harvests and "fight off poverty". However, as Africa (2012) notes, this rising ecosystem service has not only aggravated food insecurity as farmers turn towards growing carbon and taking care of designated "carbon-zones" for the benefit of polluters, it also fails to consider the human rights of the community members who were not consulted prior to the signing of the deal. Toulmin (2009) notes that there is a great risk

that carbon markets will encourage monoculture farming in place of a more diverse range of forest species (in the case of REDD+ projects[1]) if they conserve more carbon per area. Emerging research has also shown how the process of carbon sequestration within forests accounts for less than 30% of the environmental gains related to REDD+ projects (*ibid*).

In addition, under the Nhambita project, one of the stipulations of the deal extends to future generations of farmers. In another words, should a farmer die, his/her heirs would be left to carry on the "carbon burden" until the end of the contract deal (*ibid*). Power, in this sense, continues to rest in the hands of the elite groups and strips away any rights from local communities and the indigenous people living within such localities. It is no wonder then that during the Summit more than 500 civil society groups and organisations marched in Nairobi to raise their voices against basing the climate agenda on western propaganda such as carbon markets (News Wire, 2023). Indigenous peoples and local communities are often "othered" in these spaces and simply seen as cheap labour for this market. The civil society groups called instead for debt relief and reparations/compensation to be delivered, placing the more urgent needs of Global South countries and their people at the forefront.

Sacrifice 'ecological spaces' and zones

Sacrifice zones have tended to be located in less developed countries that either serve as wastelands or dumping sites for the Global North (Voyles, 2015). Agbogbloshie, a former wetland in Accra, Ghana, which is home to the world's largest e-waste dumping site, is an example of an environmental sacrifice zone on the African continent. Harsher environmental realities are exacerbated as pollution becomes a traded commodity in the global markets. According to Lerner (2012), an environmental justice activist, sacrifice zones continue to "… dramatize the fact that low-income and minority populations … are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that more affluent people can avoid." This recreates the already mentioned systems of oppression that are closely interlinked with race, class, gender and economic disparities (Juskus, 2023). As more powerful groups seek to reap the rewards and financial gains from these markets, access to land, land grabbing and land rights also continue to be contested issues (Cotula *et al*., 2009).

Within the environmental sector, a new term has emerged. "Green grabbing," first coined by Vidal (2008), refers to the way in which land is appropriated to meet an environmental end. Through this appropriation the rights to the land and to access it moves from those who occupy it (who are often weaker both politically and economically) and into the hands of more elite and powerful individuals. Cases of green grabbing related to carbon markets have been reported in countries such as Uganda where more than 20,000 people were forcefully removed from their village to make room for a carbon trading project carried out by a British forestry company (Kron, 2011). In a ruthless act that involved the burning down of the villages, the locals were forcefully driven off their land to make room for planting pine and eucalyptus trees that would supposedly generate carbon credits. Interestingly, the eucalyptus tree is closely associated ➤➤

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with high levels of land degradation as it easily and heavily erodes soil nutrients (Boss, 2022). Cutere has argued that in this particular case, the pine trees further aggravated the situation by hindering and reducing water sources (Böhm & Dabhi, 2009). Here we have a two-fold violation of human rights and livelihoods, as well as the land itself. A report carried out by the Oakland Institute (Mousseau, 2019) revealed how, for the carbon trading firms, such areas are often seen as "unused bushland" simply available for their exploitation.

The case in Uganda is just one example. Energy Monitor (Gordon, 2022) reports that Kenya had one of the most notorious forced evictions of indigenous people from their ancestral homeland and forest for carbon-related initiatives. In 2014, more than 1,000 Sengwer people (an indigenous community in Kenya) were removed from Embobut Forest in Cherangani Hills (Vidal, 2014; Sena, 2015) to make way for a carbon offset project. Their villages were torched and they have become squatters. In many ways, one can see how the atrocities that were a feature of Kenya's ruthless colonial government when indigenous communities were forcefully evicted from their lands, continue to echo in today's post-colonial, 'democratic' government. Quite paradoxically, scholars such as Lohmann (2000) have pointed to the fact that by removing people from their lands and forcefully causing migration, this displacement may actually lead to more carbon emissions than those allegedly captured by those projects:

> *[A]ny communities displaced from carbon plantations ... would have to have their activities monitored closely for (say) a century, no matter where they had migrated to, to determine precisely to what extent they were encroaching on forests or grasslands elsewhere, and thus releasing the carbon stored in those ecosystems to the atmosphere (Lohmann, 2000:8).*

Dalby (2013: pp. 38-47) has also heavily criticised this practice, stating that "to turn forests into carbon sinks [also] creates complicated links between metropolitan and peripheral areas." When communities are evicted from their lands, not only does this have an impact on societies, but also on the larger ecological systems and human relationships. The loss of practices and knowledge around soil care by communities, as well as the changing fertility and chemical composition of the soil (Fairhead and Scoones, 2012) are but a few of these indirect shifting dynamics that tend to occur.

Is there an alternative?

How can we redesign carbon markets to serve the people and the natural world. Given that most of these offset markets tend to be located in indigenous lands and

communities, placing the people at the heart of these projects is not only necessary, but should be mandatory for all future projects. A community-based model of carbon markets that is built with and for the people should be applied for all carbon-offset projects. Taking into consideration the living dynamics and histories of the people occupying the land would be more beneficial in the long run. If done successfully, these markets may increase the much-needed financial flows to communities for forest protection and conservation.

Globally, only a quarter of countries recognise or explicitly recognise the rights to govern carbon. In Africa, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are the only countries that explicitly recognise community rights to carbon. Vietnam is the only country in the world that has a benefit-sharing scheme when it comes to carbon credits (Gordon, 2022). It is commendable that in terms of Kenya's Carbon Trading and Carbon Benefit Sharing Bill of 2023, local communities are set to receive and be allocated at least 40% of the benefits reaped from such projects (Wambua & Otieno, 2022). The Bill was signed into law on 1 September, only days before the Africa Climate Summit. At present, it exists only in the law and a close following of its implementation is needed to ensure that the 40% reaches the local communities.

Thinking beyond carbon markets ...

Soovacool (2010) proposes a new method that involves phasing out carbon credits entirely and creating a carbon development fund instead. In this case, carbon emitters would be taxed on their emissions, rather than buying off the rights to continue to pollute. Power Shift Africa, as cited above, has proposed other methods of financing climate action. These include the call for the cancellation of schemes such as "debt-for-nature," doing so in the service of the wellbeing of African people. Further, there is a need to ensure that climate finance allocated for mitigation and adaptation purposes is not simply pledged but is delivered through systems that reach grassroot communities. What is needed is support for new financial flows that enhance and place both the planet and the people at the centre, without causing further damage or harm.

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ENDNOTE

1. For more on REDD+ see https://unfccc.int/topics/land-use/workstreams/redd/what-is-redd NA