The Great REDD+ Climate Illusion

A flawed equation for forests, people, and planet

NOVEMBER 2024

Global Forest Coalition

Introduction

The fossil fuel industry's power and influence are staggering. Despite the overwhelming scientific consensus that fossil fuels are the primary drivers of the climate crisis, these polluters have embedded themselves in the decision-making spaces meant to address environmental destruction. Buzzwords like "carbon neutral," "net zero," and "nature-based solutions," (NBS) are euphemistic names for schemes that allow polluters to continue their harmful activities under the guise of climate action. These terms hide the reality that "offsetting" greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere does nothing to halt the extraction and burning of fossil fuels responsible for the climate crisis. Planting trees in one part of the world cannot undo the damage caused by unchecked oil and gas production, nor can it replace the millennia of conservation and protection by Indigenous Peoples and local communities, who have been the stewards of forests since time immemorial.

Scientists agree that the world needs drastic emissions reductions—and soon. However, schemes like NBS and "net zero" are designed not to protect the planet or people, but to maintain the interests and influence of these powerful lobbies and keep profits flowing to the corporations they represent. Sadly, these false solutions are repeatedly endorsed in global climate negotiations, allowing the fossil fuel industry to shape climate change policy while continuing business as usual. As we face escalating ecological and social disasters, these corporations perpetuate the extractive, petro-capitalist systems that fuel both the climate crisis and displacement of the communities safeguarding our ecosystems.

The message is being lost: to have any chance of curbing the catastrophic effects of climate change, we need to stop the big polluters causing the climate crisis to keep fossil fuels in the ground and ensure justice and reparations for those most affected. We must also protect primary forests and biodiversity—not as part of offset schemes but as irreplaceable ecosystems with inherent value. Anything less is a distraction—this includes REDD+.

REDD+, at its core, commodifies forests by reducing their value to mere carbon sinks, overlooking their true role as complex ecosystems that regulate the planet's climate, support local communities and Indigenous Peoples, and sustain irreplaceable biodiversity.

Is REDD+ reducing deforestation?

This briefer builds on the findings of GFC's recent publication, Who Really Benefits? How REDD+ Fails Forests and Those Who Protect Them, expanding on REDD+ and the broader carbon offsetting frameworks within it. The previous briefer showed that while REDD+ was designed to combat deforestation, evidence from countries like Brazil and Indonesia shows that it has failed to achieve any significant reductions in deforestation. At the same time, biodiversity has continued to suffer. These programs, often involving monoculture tree plantations which are known to harm communities and the environment, do not work—you cannot quickly recover the years of complex interrelations that are already lost when forests are decimated.

The previous briefer also highlighted how REDD+, at its core, commodifies forests by reducing their value to mere carbon sinks, overlooking their true role as complex ecosystems that regulate the planet's climate, support Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and sustain irreplaceable biodiversity. It prioritizes offsets over ecological integrity and community rights. Forests are not treated as inherently valuable as essential living ecosystems, but rather as resources that can be used and commodified into base molecules like "carbon". This not only goes against Indigenous worldviews that consider life as inherently valuable on its own, but REDD+ also further neglects and oppresses Indigenous Peoples and local communities, leading to displacement and conflicts, loss of livelihoods and cultural practices. Indigenous Peoples are already protecting forests, and to continuously harm them through these programs demonstrates the inherently incompatible nature of REDD+ with forests and forest peoples.

The market-driven nature of REDD+ also disregards traditional knowledge and deeper understandings of forests' ecological and spiritual roles. There is an urgent need for community-driven, rights-based strategies, including funding for those *already* doing the work. Yet, despite its demonstrated fundamental flaws, REDD+ remains a large part of the climate discourse due to ongoing support from multilateral financial institutions (like the World Bank and the Green Climate Fund), its inclusion in the negotiations of Article 6.4 of the Paris Agreement, and its role in voluntary carbon markets. This cannot continue.

A protest against REDD+ on a beach in Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photo by Souparna Lahiri, GFC

Who is funding REDD+?

There are over 700 REDD+ projects across 57 countries, supported by both bilateral and multilateral funding. Major players include the UN-REDD Programme and the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, each covering 50+ countries.

Since 2008, over US$ 5.6 billion (or up to almost $10 billion) of public money has been pledged to multilateral climate funds supporting REDD+, with $3 billion approved for projects. Major contributors are Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Despite these investments, deforestation continues. Issues like leakage, lack of permanence, and counting of monoculture plantations as forests have underscored REDD+'s ineffectiveness.

In light of this, what roles do governments play in supporting REDD+? What are their motivations? Should funding for REDD+ projects be stopped entirely?

Offsetting controversy

Carbon offsetting—both within REDD+ and elsewhere—remains an ineffective and harmful mechanism. Through a closer look at experiences in Colombia, Cambodia, Kenya, Uganda, Indonesia, Peru, and Brazil, we aim to demonstrate the deeper issues of commodifying nature.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines offsets as "the reduction, avoidance or removal of a unit of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by one entity, purchased by another entity to counterbalance a unit of GHG emissions by that other entity." According to the Climate Land Ambition & Rights Alliance (CLARA), "promoters talk about offsets as if emissions 'over here' will be effectively canceled out by some other activity 'over there.' But those emissions still happened regardless. Avoiding emissions or reducing emissions in another place does not change that." In other words, offsetting is not actually addressing the root causes of climate change.

In 2022, the IPCC reported the need for rapid and deep reductions in GHG emissions, highlighting concerns about the effectiveness, permanence, and additionality of carbon offsets. Yet offsets are still being discussed and highlighted in the Paris Agreement despite their many flaws, and are even at the center of so-called actions in Article 6. Meanwhile, the real problem—and real solutions—to the climate crisis are being ignored in favor of ineffective and problematic frameworks that prioritize short-term financial gains and political expediency over long-term ecological and social resilience.

Offsets enable major polluters, including oil and gas companies, to continue emitting by "offsetting" their polluting activities through projects like afforestation, reforestation or "deforestation avoidance" under REDD+ programs. This approach enables these corporations and governments to continue to pollute rather than engaging in and committing to genuine climate action.

A study by the Carbon Market Watch (CMW) emphasized patterns in REDD+ projects, including inflated baselines, unverifiable carbon savings, and generally ineffective outcomes. The uneven playing field created by these flaws means that while some projects are presented as successful, often fail to deliver real environmental benefits. Large corporations, including those in the fossil fuel industry, can easily exploit flawed and cheap credits, allowing them to continue to pollute while hiding behind "carbon neutrality." By purchasing questionable and cheap credits, they can claim to cancel out their emissions without actually making any meaningful changes.

Verification, cancellations, and phantom credits

The carbon offset verification company Verra was recently forced to cancel many of its credits and faced a backlash after mounting evidence showed that large numbers of its credits are fake, ineffective, and linked to environmental and human rights violations. There is widespread evidence linking its credits to illegal logging, land grabbing, and "timber laundering." A 2023 Guardian investigation revealed that over 90% of Verra's credits were "phantom"—seeming not to exist at all —and provided no tangible climate benefit. Although Vera says it will revise its methodologies by 2025, these ineffective credits remain active, perpetuating environmental and social harm.

Once verified, these projects lack oversight. Kenya's Kasigau REDD+ project, one of the oldest certified by Verra, has faced controversy over systemic sexual harassment and abuse. A joint investigation by the Center for Research on Multinational Corporations and the Kenya Human Rights Commission uncovered rampant sexual abuse at the project, managed by Wildlife Works. Although these Verra-verified carbon credits claim to promote women's and community empowerment, these allegations suggest otherwise. The controversy raises questions about the verification of carbon credits in general. Voluntary carbon markets are self-regulated, with auditing firms paid by project developers, making certifications questionable. Verra reportedly asked Wildlife Works to address these issues, yet they reveal deep systemic power imbalances inherent in "conservation" models where oppressive systems are allowed to fester through top-down and fortress-style conservation.

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Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented reports of violence, forced evictions, and property destruction against Indigenous communities in Cambodia's Southern Cardamom REDD+ project, which is approved by Verra. The NGO Wildlife Alliance, a co-manager of the project, did not follow free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) protocols. There were also reports of NGO staff, often accompanied by government rangers and military police, forcibly and violently evicting community members. Wildlife Alliance claimed they had overwhelming community support for the project throughout, but the report indicates that this is false, with actual support ranging from 10-16%. The NGO continued to argue that HRW was misrepresenting the data to further its own agenda and that the project had been successful. However, data from Global Forest Watch shows that 1,400 hectares of primary forest were lost from 2016-2022 and the project failed to protect the forest from large hydropower dam construction. Illegal logging is also still rampant, and forests are increasingly at risk. There is considerable secrecy surrounding the revenue generated by the project and the amount, if any, reaching the community.

Despite ongoing investigations into numerous human rights abuse complaints reported by Mongabay and others, Wildlife Alliance plans to establish another REDD+ offsetting project nearby without adequately addressing these serious allegations or demonstrating meaningful results. While some argue that the Cardamom forest is being protected by the REDD+ initiative, this is impossible to demonstrate, as additionality is not possible to prove. The forest's Indigenous community had already successfully halted a hydropower dam in 2014. The fact that the project failed to prevent further dam developments raises questions about why it should receive credit for the community's ongoing successful land protection efforts.

Another Verra-accredited project in Cambodia, the Tumring Project led by the Korea Forest Service, was celebrated in 2020 as a model REDD+ project but has since faced losing a reported 22% of its trees since the project's inception. Despite its failure to curb deforestation, it is still selling carbon credits.

These examples illustrate how REDD+ offsetting projects prioritize profit over genuine conservation. They are also based on a flawed, self-regulated verification system where auditors are paid by the developers and companies purchase credits with no oversight, perpetuating a system that allows rights violations and environmental degradation to continue unchecked. Because of these problems and the fact that deforestation is not reducing in areas where REDD+ programs operate, funding should not persist.

Another significant issue with offsets is leakage. Demand for forest commodities often shifts from protected areas to non-protected areas, meaning that protecting one area does not eliminate deforestation; it simply relocates it. A CMW report highlighted extensive under-reporting of leakage. Although Verra's REDD+ methodologies require developers to estimate leakage deductions, CMW found that 59% of Verra's projects reported no deductions at all, and those that did applied lower rates. This overestimation leads to over-crediting, allowing projects to claim more carbon credits than they deserve by failing to account for the emissions caused by displaced activities. Consequently, any environmental benefits claimed by these projects are overstated, leading to carbon credits that do not reflect genuine reductions in emissions.

Indigenous Minangkabau women in Indonesia carefully tend rice paddies, honoring generations-old traditions of rice cultivation. Photo by GFC/Chaus

Protected areas, land-grabs, and colonialism

REDD+ offset projects often lead to land grabbing, displacement, and grave human rights violations. They frequently overlook or disregard Indigenous land rights and governance, and many projects are implemented without FPIC from Indigenous Peoples in the areas they operate. This is not unique to one area, but is prevalent in many projects across the Global South, highlighting a persistent and fundamental flaw in the REDD+ design.

Another example of land grabbing and displacement of communities due to offsetting is the Mount Elgon REDD+ project in Uganda, led by the Dutch company FACE Foundation. The Ugandan government, with support from the World Bank, designated the area as a National Protected Park as part of its carbon offset strategy. Instead of protecting the forest or the Indigenous communities, the project forcibly displaced the Benet people, who had been stewards of the land for generations. Evictions were brutal and violent, destroying homes and livelihoods under the pretense of forest conservation.

This highlights an insidious part of conservation strategies dating back to colonial times—the removal of Indigenous Peoples from their lands in the name of "conservation". Historically, colonial projects imposed the idea of a pristine wilderness separate from humanity, leading to the paternalistic establishment of many national parks globally. Indigenous communities were often forcibly removed, with the parks relegated to leisure use, frequently at a cost. This pattern persists today, including in Africa, where Indigenous communities are displaced to make way for tourism. This is also happening in Tanzania with the Maasai.

Many REDD+ projects, especially those designated as protected areas and national parks, follow this colonial model of "fortress conservation." While many areas are still used for tourism, others are exploited for monoculture plantations or carbon offset projects. Indigenous communities are often viewed as threats to these projects or are compelled to adapt to new ways of life to survive.

The Mount Elgon National Park exemplifies how the establishment of protected areas under REDD+ mirrors colonial strategies of dispossession, where land is enclosed, and Indigenous peoples are forcibly removed to make way for carbon trading and international conservation goals. These projects often disregard the fact that Indigenous peoples have been managing and protecting these forests long before the arrival of external actors. This model of "fortress conservation" exacerbates land conflicts and human rights abuses, reinforcing the colonial idea that nature should be protected from people, rather than by people.

As GRAIN highlights, projects like this often disregard FPIC, which is critical in respecting Indigenous land rights. The forced evictions and destruction of livelihoods are not isolated incidents, but rather part of a broader pattern where REDD+ projects serve corporate interests at the expense of local communities. Despite promises of protecting forests and empowering communities, the real beneficiaries are often foreign investors and carbon credit buyers, while those living in these ecosystems face dispossession and violence. This underscores a key flaw in REDD+ architecture: it commodifies and facilitates the grabbing of forests and its resources, without delivering any meaningful climate or social benefits, leaving a trail of injustice behind.

GFC's previous briefer highlighted the lack of meaningful deforestation data in Brazil and Indonesia, both of which host numerous Verra-approved REDD+ projects. Despite this, deforestation rates remain unchanged, and land grabbing continues to be a significant issue. Notable carbon offset projects in these countries, previously verified by Verra, have faced considerable criticism. The Jari project in Brazil was found to be selling credits from public lands without state approval, including to large corporations like CNN, BMW, and Janssen, and reports indicate ongoing land-grabbing problems. An investigation revealed that the project was operating on disputed land. In Indonesia, the Katingan Mentaya and Rimba Raya projects have been accused of overstating their effectiveness in preventing deforestation and excluding local communities from decision-making processes.

In June 2023, a separate investigation found that the Cumbal Indigenous reservation in Colombia was selling carbon credits without the knowledge of many community members. Chevron, which emitted 745 million metric tons of C02 equivalent in 2023 and whose emissions are steadily rising, was the only company to purchase credits from the REDD+ Environmental Project for the Protection of Pachamama Cumbal. Chevron claimed its audits indicated sufficient community consultation, despite positive conservation results being reported before any community members were aware of the offsetting scheme. This situation underscores the neocolonial frameworks present in offsetting projects, as Chevron continues to pollute while buying credits from an Indigenous community that remains unaware of—and does not benefit from—the program.

Community members formed the Cumbal Environmental Collective, where they tried to obtain information about the project without success. This investigation highlights the deeper problem of REDD+ offset schemes and their notorious secrecy. There is no transparency, and the community members in question did not receive any benefits, creating significant tensions within the broader community. Further questions arose around the management of the project, as well as the questionable history of those involved. Some of the community filed a tutela action in court, where the judge recognized that FPIC was violated, ordering the defendants to rectify this within six months. Sources confirm that the project is still trading credits, with Chevron and Zeuss being major players.

While deforestation rates in Colombia are reported to be declining, attributing this to REDD+ initiatives is misguided. In 2022, the Colombian government announced plans to reduce deforestation by limiting agribusiness expansions, as well as creating reserves where Indigenous communities can harvest non-timber forest resources. Additionally, peace talks between the government and guerilla groups may have contributed to this decline. However, according to the Associated Press, deforestation rates in the Andean region are rising again due to fires, cattle ranching, drug crops, and illegal mining—demonstrating leakage, where deforestation is simply moved from one area to another.

This project is not unique; hundreds of similar projects have been implemented in Colombia over the past six years. Factors contributing to this increase include tax breaks for fossil fuel companies from the Colombian government after purchasing credits, the ability to profit quickly with minimal oversight, and, importantly, the fact that approximately 600,000 square kilometers of land is already safeguarded by Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities who have governance over the areas. This situation allows companies like Chevron to claim credits for the absence of deforestation that was already not occurring while continuing to profit from oil and gas.

Overall, community members who are actively protecting their forests and land are not benefitting from these projects; some are even facing lawsuits. They are still being told they need REDD+ to protect their ancestral homes. Colombia's Environment Minister has stated that the lack of regulations on carbon offsetting projects means they are negotiated without government oversight, allowing companies to exploit communities.

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Regarding FPIC and community involvement, it is crucial to identify who is included and who is not. An interview conducted by WRM with Letícia Yawanawa, an Indigenous leader from Acre, in Brazil and Dercy Teles de Carvalho, the ex-president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, revealed that women are often completely excluded from all stages of REDD+ planning, if any consultation occurs at all. Women see little to no financial benefit, and Indigenous communities receive scant resources.

Dercy also noted that in her community, new regulations introduced in 2010 affected women's cultural practices by prohibiting them from cultivating farmland in the forest according to their traditional methods. This disproportionately impacted women, who were the ones who worked the land and led to a reliance on purchasing food from external sources, jeopardizing their food sovereignty. Reports also indicated increasing rates of sexual violence, including against minors, due to the influx of external agents.

Forcing changes to women's livelihoods or subjecting them to violence perpetuates a cycle of cultural loss. REDD+ projects become neocolonial initiatives when they fail to consult communities meaningfully, exclude women, impose non-traditional—often labeled "modern and developed"—ways of life, undermine Indigenous sovereignty, and continue to harm women and their cultures.

REDD+ , logging, and monoculture tree plantations

These projects undermine the original intent of REDD+ by being located in areas where the risk of deforestation is already minimal. They do not actively reduce deforestation; instead, they merely "avoid" it, in theory. In some cases, logging is still permitted, allowing deforestation to continue even after credits are sold. For instance, some REDD+ projects in Peru often combine logging with forest management, contributing to ongoing forest degradation.

Additionally, monoculture tree plantations are frequently employed in reforestation efforts within REDD+ offset schemes. However, these plantations do not enhance carbon stocks—natural forests do this far better. Regular harvesting also releases any stored CO2 back into the atmosphere, whereas real forests absorb carbon for decades and support biodiversity.

A monoculture tree plantation. Such plantations are not capable of replicating the complex roles of natural forest ecosystems.

As climate change impacts weather patterns, uncontrolled forest fires are increasing each year. Although controlled fires can aid forest regeneration (whether naturally or through human intervention), uncontrolled fires pose serious problems. Wildfires are burning at alarming rates globally, releasing more carbon into the atmosphere and diminishing forests' ability to absorb carbon. This is particularly detrimental with monoculture tree plantations, which studies show burn more intensely and facilitate the spread of fires. In contrast, old-growth forests are superior in mitigating fire spread, storing carbon, and fostering biodiversity.

Despite these issues, monoculture plantations are on the rise. The connection between offset projects and monoculture plantations dates back decades and is developing in increasingly insidious ways. A mid-2024 report by the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) indicates that requests to establish more tree plantations have nearly doubled in the last three years. While afforestation and reforestation projects have the lowest approval rates, they are significantly expanding in land use and generating notably larger volumes of carbon credits. Major beneficiaries include logging and pulp and paper companies, so-called climate firms, companies with substantial carbon outputs (for example, Total Energies), large conservation NGOs (such as WWF or the Nature Conservancy), and governments (See full WRM report for more).

Research continues to demonstrate the harmful impacts of monoculture tree plantations. They displace communities, destroy biodiversity, and encourage the destruction of old-growth forests. "Offsetting" emissions while establishing ineffective and harmful monoculture tree plantations is not a climate solution; instead, it poses significant climate and human rights challenges. The increasing number of requests highlights, at best, a flawed logic behind offsets, and at worst, the drive of destructive industries to profit from false solutions.

REDD+ is fundamentally flawed. It is overly dependent on carbon accounting that fails to address critical issues like permanence and leakage. Moreover, it perpetuates the colonial histories that shaped the creation of national parks rather than addressing these deep-seated inequities. Inconsistent monitoring and reporting, combined with a lack of transparency, make it nearly impossible to accurately track the effectiveness of these projects.

REDD+ has failed.

Looking at the data—rising atmospheric carbon levels, escalating global deforestation, and the growth of carbon offsetting schemes, including REDD+—reveals a troubling trend. REDD+ is not delivering its promised results. Deforestation continues to rise, and the communities that protect forests are not only being neglected but are subjected to widespread human rights violations, land grabbing, displacement, and exploitation. Further, new research indicates that forests, lands, and oceans are absorbing CO2 less effectively as the planet warms. We cannot rely on these "carbon sinks" to do their work, even though the IPCC is continuing to rely on their carbon capture potential.

Intent does not equate to action. While there may have been well-meaning intentions behind REDD+, it is time to recognize that the program has failed and that urgent course corrections are needed. Offsetting schemes, particularly those benefiting corporations with large carbon footprints, allow polluters to profit under the guise of climate action while failing to deliver any meaningful, equitable solutions. We cannot afford further delays.

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To genuinely reduce deforestation and biodiversity loss, we need to shift towards bottom-up, rights-and-community-based approaches that have been proven to be effective. These solutions must be driven by forest-dependent communities, specifically Indigenous Peoples and local communities, taking into account women in all of their diversities, youth, and Elders, and directly supported through both financial and policy frameworks. These communities have successfully safeguarded forests for generations, and their knowledge, leadership, and rights must be at the forefront of climate action.

We can no longer afford to be distracted by corporate greenwashing and the false promises of large-scale offsetting schemes. True climate justice and forest protection will come from elevating and funding the ideas and solutions of those who are already defending our ecosystems and working tirelessly to ensure a liveable planet for all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Cover Art courtesy of NO REDD AFRICA/Cassandra