

Trading the Absurd

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Caroline shifts nervously in her chair and asks if this angle is OK. After reassurance she smiles shyly at the camera and begins to describe the impacts of fossil fuel company Sasol on her community in South Africa. "Sasol is one of the companies that are known for causing a lot of pollution in my community. People living in Sasolberg are suffering with many kinds of illnesses, respiratory and asthma," she says in a soft voice which belies the seriousness of her words. Her almost childlike voice could make you underestimate the power of this young woman. However she has been a vocal and effective community leader in the struggle against the activities of Sasol. Now she faces a new threat that comes, perversely, in the name of sustainable development.

Sasol are applying for carbon credits through the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol for a natural gas pipeline they want to build which will reduce pollution by avoiding opening a coal mine. It's a kind of climate blackmail where industry will only choose the better option for the environment if given significant financial rewards. Instead of the polluter paying, the polluter is compensated. But in the case of Sasol the problems don't end there. As Caroline gets into her flow, her smile disappears when she talks about the project. "I feel that Sasol should not be credited because projects in CDM should not benefit companies like Sasol that are not contributing towards sustainable development. People are sick and Sasol is not respecting the lives of the community." For her it is a betrayal of the struggle that the company that continues to damage her community is being rewarded by the international community when its core business remains unchanged.

RHETORIC AND REALITY

The story of the Sasol CDM project does not end there but from here on the devil is in the detail. In theory the CDM sounds like a wonderful idea, making everybody with vested interests happy. The Majority World theoretically gets some extra investment for renewable technology and the industrialized polluters get to carry on as usual. "Win-win" as they say. But the reality of the emerging climate markets is far uglier than this rosy picture suggests. For one thing, CDM projects are supposed to be "additional". That is, the project shouldn't have been likely to happen anyway without the revenue from carbon credits. During an interview with researcher Graham Erion, a Sasol employee admitted that that wasn't the case with their project. "We would have done this project anyway" with the motivation for it "mainly financial." Credits sold would be pure profit for the fossil fuel giant.

We begin to see why Caroline is angry. Sasol, however, is not the only fly in the CDM ointment. South Africa is full of examples of bad projects. Even WWF-accredited projects that use the best criteria (so-called "Gold Standard") are riddled with problems, as exposed by Erion in his paper "Low Hanging Fruit Always Rots First".

Yet the South Africa example is not an isolated case unique to that country. Projects all over the globe have come in for criticism lately, from HFC (a powerful greenhouse gas) projects in India to tree plantations in Ecuador. As the Centre for Science and the Environment in India state: "CDM cannot become an industry hobby-horse made for industry, by industry."

Criticism is also not only coming from the Majority World. In the UK Friends of the Earth director Tony Juniper warns that the UK Government is "doing accounting tricks with emissions trading." This wider critique of carbon trading schemes reflects concerns felt by African journalist Firoze Manji as he takes a seat to record his own feelings on carbon trading. Waving his arms around frenetically, he looks mischievously into the camera and exclaims, "Imagine if you said well okay this year New York only had X number of murders and in Nairobi they had Y number of murders. So Nairobi has under-killed this year so it can sell off how many people can be killed somewhere

else. I mean it's absurd.” But such absurd logic is indeed what is being used to justify the global carbon trading shell game.

You can download Graham Erion’s paper

The filmed testimonies mentioned in the article are available online at www.raisedvoices.net and you can order a DVD or CDrom copy by contacting [heidi\[at\]carbontradewatch.org](mailto:heidi@carbontradewatch.org)