

Africa's pollution and land grab threat from UN carbon market

by The Gaia Foundation, Carbon Trade Watch and Timberwatch
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The United Nations' carbon offset mechanism is rewarding pollution, and could lead to a land grab for industrial biofuels, tree plantations, genetically modified crops and biochar projects in Africa.

A new briefing, titled "The CDM in Africa: marketing a new land grab", produced by the Gaia Foundation in collaboration with the African Biodiversity Network, Carbon Trade Watch, Timberwatch Coalition and Biofuelwatch, examines the experience of the United Nations' carbon market, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), and looks at emerging threats.

Through the CDM, developed countries claim to offset their emissions, by paying to support developing country projects that are supposed to either reduce greenhouse gas emissions, or absorb carbon dioxide. Until now, only 2% of CDM projects have been located in Africa, as the majority of current projects are connected to industrial emissions. However, increasing numbers of African biofuel and industrial tree plantation projects are entering the CDM pipeline. Further proposals to include other land-use methodologies could lead to an aggressive African land grab.

The briefing finds that the CDM creates perverse incentives for polluting activities. In the Niger Delta, an oil company is currently paid to stop its illegal gas flaring. In Durban, South Africa, a controversial toxic rubbish dump and community health hazard, which should have been closed years ago, is gaining CDM credits for generating "clean electricity" using methane from the dump as fuel.

Tamra Gilbertson of Carbon Trade Watch explains: "CDM support can end up rewarding companies for their failure to abide by the law. It subsidizes fossil fuel exploitation, and can undermine efforts to promote waste separation and reduction, while offering little or no financial benefit to the host country and causing harm to local communities."

Wally Menne of Timberwatch Coalition adds, "The supposed climate benefits are often exaggerated and highly questionable, with serious doubts that the projects are "additional" (i.e. would not have happened without CDM support). In Kuyasa, Cape Town, the much-hyped world's first "gold standard" CDM project has still failed to deliver in the 8 years since its launch, having not generated any credits or contributed towards mitigating climate change."

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In addition, the authors warn of escalating land grabs for CDM projects. Anne Maina of the African Biodiversity Network points out, "Africa is expected to make more land available for industrial-scale biofuel and tree plantations for CDM projects. These will have significant negative impacts on forests, wetlands and grassland ecosystems, affecting small-scale farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples and food prices. We challenge the harmful myth that there is plenty of land to spare in Africa."

A further threat comes from proposals to include new CDM methodologies that consider land use, agriculture and soil practices as "carbon sinks". Among the technologies being considered is "biochar" which involves the burying of soil, supposedly to sequester carbon.

Rachel Smolker of Biofuelwatch points out that: "There is scant evidence that biochar actually sequesters carbon or improves soil fertility. Support from the CDM or other markets would be extremely premature. Advocates are nonetheless calling for half a billion hectares of land dedicated to plantations for biochar feedstocks, as well as the use of massive amounts of agriculture and forestry residues. This will only exacerbate the current land grab that Africa is already experiencing."

Additional proposals to include crops that are genetically modified for resistance to herbicides are also being considered, as it is claimed that using herbicides instead of tilling for weeds reduces carbon emissions lost from soil. However, studies cast doubt that this leads to a net reduction of emissions. Furthermore, the moment a field is ploughed, the sequestered carbon emissions are released again.

Teresa Anderson of the Gaia Foundation adds: "African countries have been strong advocates against GM crops, as patented seeds and GM cross-pollination threaten the continent's crop diversity and farmers' rights. The CDM poses a threat to Africa's food security by expanding into these new and unsound methodologies."

The authors warn that African countries hoping for development or financial benefits by hosting CDM projects, should be wary of financial, social and environmental problems, impacts on communities, questionable climate benefits, and the likelihood of few or no real financial rewards. Instead, the carbon market provides an opportunity to further exploit Africa for its land and resources.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1) The briefing "The CDM in Africa: marketing a new land grab" is a joint briefing co-authored by the Gaia Foundation, African Biodiversity Network, Carbon Trade Watch, Timberwatch and Biofuelwatch. It can be downloaded at: http://www.gaiafoundation.org/sites/default/files/CDM_Briefing_Feb2011_lowres.pdf

2) More information about the threat to African communities from biofuels can be found in the briefing "Agrofuels and the Myth of the Marginal Lands" by Gaia Foundation, African Biodiversity Network, Biofuelwatch and others:

<http://www.gaiafoundation.org/sites/default/files/Agrofuels&MarginalMyth.pdf>

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3) More information about the threat to Africa from biochar can be found in the briefing "Biochar Land Grabbing: the impacts on Africa" by ABN, Biofuelwatch and the Gaia Foundation:

[http://www.gaiafoundation.org/sites/default/files/Biochar%20Africa%20briefing\(2010\).pdf](http://www.gaiafoundation.org/sites/default/files/Biochar%20Africa%20briefing(2010).pdf)

4) More information regarding the efficacy of GM "no-till" agriculture for carbon sequestration can be found in the "Agricultural Practices and Carbon Sequestration" fact sheet by Union of Concerned Scientists.

http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/science_and_impacts/science/ag-carbon-sequest-fact-sheet.html

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