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

by The Gaia Foundation, Carbon Trade Watch and Timberwatch
Tuesday, 15 March 2011

The United Nationâ€™s 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 AfricaÂ

A new briefing, titled â€œThe CDM in Africa: marketing a new land grabâ€•, 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 Nationâ€™s carbon market, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), and looks at emerging threats.Â

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.Â 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 â€œclean electricityâ€• using methane from the dump as fuel.

Tamra Gilbertson of Carbon Trade Watch explains: â€œCDM support can end up rewarding companies for their failure to abide by the law.Â 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.â€•

Wally Menne of Timberwatch Coalition adds, â€œThe supposed climate benefits are often exaggerated and highly questionable, with serious doubts that the projects are â€˜additionalâ€™ (i.e. would not have happened without CDM support). In Kuyasa, Cape Town, the much-hyped worldâ€™s first â€œgold standardâ€• CDM project has still failed to deliver in the 8 years its launch, having not generated any credits or contributed towards mitigating climate change.â€•Â

Â

In addition, the authors warn of escalating land grabs for CDM projects.Â Anne Maina of the African Biodiversity Network points out, â€œAfrica is expected to make more land available for industrial-scale biofuel and tree plantations for CDM projects.Â 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.â€•Â Â

A further threat comes from proposals to include new CDM methodologies that consider land use, agriculture and soil practices as â€œcarbon sinksâ€•.Â Among the technologies being considered is â€œbiocharâ€• which involves the burying of c soil, supposedly to sequester carbon.

Rachel Smolker of Biofuelwatch points out that: â€œThere is scant evidence that biochar actually sequesters carbon or improves soil fertility.Â Support from the CDM or other markets would be extremely premature.Â 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.Â This will only exacerbate the current land grab that Africa is already experiencing.â€•

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.Â However, studies cast doubt that this leads to a net reduction of emissions.Â Furthermore, the moment a field is ploughed, the â€œsequesteredâ€• carbon emissions are released again.

Teresa Anderson of the Gaia Foundation adds: â€œAfrican countries have been strong advocates against GM crops, as patented seeds and GM cross-pollination threaten the continentâ€™s crop diversity and farmersâ€™ rights. The CDM poses a threat to Africaâ€™s food security by expanding into these new and unsound methodologies.â€•

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.Â Instead, the carbon market provides an opportunity to further exploit Africa for its land and resources.Â

download

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1) The briefing â€œThe CDM in Africa: marketing a new land grabâ€• is a joint briefing co-authored by the Gaia Foundation, African Biodiversity Network, Carbon Trade Watch, Timberwatch and Biofuelwatch.Â 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 â€œAgrofuels and the Myth of the Marginal Landsâ€• by Gaia Foundation, African Biodiversity Network, Biofuelwatch and others:

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

Â

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

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

4) More information regarding the efficacy of GM â€œno-tillâ€• agriculture for carbon sequestration can be found in the â€œAgricultural Practices and Carbon Sequestrationâ€• fact sheet by Union of Concerned Scientists.

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

5) The authors can be contacted for more information at:

Wally Menne, Timberwatch: plantnet@iafrica.comÂ Â +27 824 442 083

Tamra Gilbertson, Carbon Trade Watch: tamra@carbontradewatch.org +34 625 498 083

Oscar Reyes, Carbon Trade Watch: oscar@carbontradewatch.org +34 644 139 190

Teresa Anderson, The Gaia Foundation: teresa@gaianet.org Â +44 (0) 20 7428 0055

Anne Maina, African Biodiversity Network: annenjiku@gmail.com +254 202 675 043

Rachel Smolker, Biofuelwatch: rsmolker@riseup.net Â