



HEKS/EPER Land Forum 2023 – 2 / 9 / 16 November 2023

The Land-Based Carbon Market: Perspectives from the Global South

Online Event – Report

Background

The HEKS/EPER Land Forum

Since 2017, the annual HEKS/EPER Land Forum has been raising relevant questions regarding land use rights of indigenous and traditional communities, with a focus on how these communities can be strengthened in their efforts to claim and secure their rights and to have access to land and natural resources, in particular in the face of climate change. “Right to Land and Food” and “Climate Justice” are two of the four priority areas of HEKS/EPER’s work.

The Land-Based Carbon Market

The 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement and its underlying climate models rely not only on rapid emission reductions, but also on large-scale afforestation and changes in land use practices. The land-based carbon market, selling credits to emitters – companies or state actors – worldwide, has experienced strong growth in recent years. But the extent to which these credits help mitigate the climate crisis is highly contested. Carbon projects have led to an increased pressure on land, even to land grabbing, particularly in the Global South. At the same time, there is a finance gap for climate change adaptation projects in regions most vulnerable to climate risks. For its Land Forum 2023, HEKS/EPER invited speakers to give perspectives from the Global South on if and how this market could be used, or what would be radical alternatives for climate justice beyond carbon colonialism.

Key Messages

The Speakers’ Key Arguments

The 2023 Land Forum aimed to gather diverse viewpoints on the land-based carbon market, which was reflected in the at times contrasting outlooks of the speakers. A central divide emerged among the keynote speakers, with some seeing the carbon market as a financial instrument with the potential to mobilize funds for communities in the Global South. In contrast, other speakers argued that the market functions as a colonialist tool, relieving the Global North of its climate crisis responsibilities and reinforcing the capitalist system, all while compromising land and human rights.

A recurring concern – and likely the most common ground among speakers – was the recognition of serious land and human rights risks and violations associated with carbon market projects, including a disregard for local culture, traditional land use and governance structures. Concrete examples of land and human rights violations were cited from different countries in Latin America and Africa, illustrating issues such as land grabbing. Alongside calls for improved safeguarding standards and for local communities to gain sovereignty in carbon projects, others deemed the market inherently unimprovable, entrenching unjust and colonial power structures.

The predominant focus on the CO₂ metric within the market was criticized for contributing to misinformation and misstatements regarding carbon neutrality. In addition, it is seen as increasing the risk of so-called “false solutions” such as monoculture plantations, neglecting the importance of prioritizing biodiversity, food security and climate resilience – critical considerations, especially in the context of the multiple and interconnected crises we are facing. The invited experts suggested a move away from offsetting or carbon neutrality claims towards mere contribution claims, as well as a shift to alternative indicators emphasizing various ecosystem services and invested labour efforts.

The discussion expanded to explore ideas for systemic change, with some suggesting a fundamental rejection and departure from the current carbon market system due to its perceived continuation of colonial structures and ineffectiveness in addressing the climate crisis. Alternative solutions suggested involved reforms to the tax system, aiming to limit illicit financial flows to tax havens, and strengthening state climate funds to support indigenous communities in protecting their territories. The speakers further underscored the importance of local resistance in the Global South, where oppressed communities voiced their concerns, and the need for sound strategies to further advocate for these communities’ rights.

Continuing the Debate

In light of the debate initiated by the speakers, what is the right way forward? Can the carbon market in the land use sector provide opportunities to trigger the transformation towards fair development in the Global South, and mobilize public and private finances for sustainable land use and effective climate adaptation and mitigation projects? Or is this market predominantly steered by the interests of the Global North, violating land and human rights and preventing real change, such as the radical reduction of CO₂ emissions?

Both perspectives as well as many in between were represented by the different speakers at the HEKS/EPER Land Forum 2023. This goes to show: There are no easy answers on if and how to participate in and/or advocate for the land-based carbon market, neither from a land rights perspective nor from a climate justice perspective. With its Land Forum 2023, HEKS/EPER aimed at providing a platform for this highly salient debate. The lively question rounds with the speakers as well as discussions amongst over 100 participants per session demonstrated the importance of this topic for any actor committed to addressing climate change in a just way. Hopefully, the Land Forum inspired participants to continue discussions within their own organizations, companies and networks – be that in the public and private sector, in civil society or in academia. This, in turn, has the potential to catalyze the reformation and change needed for a climate-just world, whether within or extending beyond the carbon market.

Understanding the System: The Land-Based Carbon Market and Its Impacts on the Ground (Session 1, 02 Nov 2023)

Introductions to and Perspectives on the Land-Based Carbon Market

The first session started with two keynote speeches designed to give everyone a basic understanding of the fundamental processes, main actors and contrasting perspectives surrounding the land-based carbon market.

Juan Pablo Castro, representing Climate Focus in Colombia, began by giving a brief history of carbon markets. He identified the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, where 192 parties designed and agreed on market mechanisms to combat climate change, as a milestone, as well as the Paris Agreement that further enabled carbon markets to finance projects that otherwise would not happen. Castro then dived into the functioning of these markets, describing buyers, intermediaries and project developers trading carbon units. He focused on the voluntary carbon market and shortly described the carbon project cycle, which includes a Project Design Document following the protocol of a specific carbon standard, as well as its third-party validation and verification for carbon credit issuance. He then explained the six main types of land-based projects in the voluntary carbon market, ranging from afforestation to the avoided conversion of e.g. grassland. It is the voluntary carbon market which has experienced enormous growth in recent years; while the compliance market is expected to regain importance once the Paris Article 6 negotiations are concluded. Castro emphasized that it is important to not portray carbon markets as the only solution to climate change and that – like in any other system – there would be flaws, but that the voluntary carbon market would evolve and provide a way to channel funds that would otherwise not be available.

Ivonne Yáñez from Acción Ecológica in Ecuador agreed with the history of carbon markets, but showed that while all these protocols and agreements were negotiated, the climate crisis got worse. She concluded from this that clearly, carbon markets are worsening rather than solving the problem. Yáñez identified a capitalist understanding of nature as one major problem. She argued that if an ecosystem is understood in terms of services, these services can be bought and appropriated and polluters can pay to pollute. The idea of offsetting then allows CO₂ emitters to green-wash their pollution with the claim to offset the damage elsewhere. Yáñez pointed out that the continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels and the claim of carbon neutrality through offsets is dangerous for the climate and the planet. Offsets would be based on the invention of a counterfactual future, which she sees as absurd. Yáñez argued that with such projects, very much including REDD+, it is often the local communities – those recreating life and biodiversity – who lose and whose rights are violated. According to Yáñez, carbon markets are colonial, which would be reflected, for example, in the fact that the markets' safeguards and standards are not aimed at guaranteeing people's rights, but only serve to strengthen confidence in the markets.

Speakers:

Juan Pablo Castro
Senior Manager Latin America (Colombia)



Ivonne Yáñez
Environmentalist and Founding member (Ecuador)



Impacts on the Ground – Carbon Project Examples

In the second part of the first session, two very different example of carbon projects were presented, which both allowed for a distinct analysis of opportunities and risks of the land-based carbon market.

The first example was presented by Aminata Finda Massaquoi, a journalist from Sierra Leone with Wonarpi, the Women's Network Against Rural Plantation Injustice. She gave an example from one district of Sierra Leone with a long history of land grabs starting in the 2000s, when companies grabbed peoples' lands for oil palm plantations, without their consent. Recently, new companies arrived to plant trees for carbon credits on the remaining land. Importantly, Massaquoi added, this land belongs to the people, including the women. It turned out that these new companies were "like new wine in old bottles", as the same people are involved in them as in the oil palm companies. People in the local communities have no knowledge about what carbon credits are. What remains is the fear that their land will be taken again – especially among women. Massaquoi concluded by saying that carbon investments are a big trend all over Africa. Whether the commodity is palm oil or carbon: People risk losing their land and their means of survival, particularly women. ([link to case video](#))

The second example was a carbon project presented by Christopher Amodo from the NGO Solidaridad in Uganda. The project works with 54,000 smallholder farmers and 14 coffee cooperatives and promotes sustainable agroforestry systems to increasingly interplant coffee with shade, fruit and medicinal plants. Amodo explained how the project, in part publicly funded, provides trainings on climate-smart and climate-resilient agricultural practices in order to reduce the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Soft loans support farmers to access native or naturalised tree seedlings and organic fertilizers. Traceable satellite and drone-based sensing monitoring on yearly increases in biomass support determine the carbon credit payouts to farmers, of which farmers receive 80% via mobile phone. According to Amodo, there is keen interest among farmers to participate in the project and the carbon payout would provide an important additional source of income for the farmers, at a time of year when revenues are low. ([link to project video](#))

Speakers:

Aminata Finda Massaquoi
Journalist and Land Rights Activist (Sierra Leone)



Christopher Amodo
Project Officer East and Central Africa (Uganda)



Improving the System: Avoiding Land and Human Rights Violations, Strengthening Climate Resilience (Session 2, 09 Nov 2023)

Strengthening Social Safeguards Including Free, Prior and Informed Consent to Protect Land and Human Rights

Reports and exposures of land and human rights violations in carbon market projects, in particular REDD+ projects, have been increasingly highlighted by NGOs and activists and taken up by media in recent years.

Silvia Gómez' organization, Gaia Amazonas, of which she is the Executive Director, has been observing such human rights violations for years in the Colombian Amazon. According to Gómez, REDD+ projects in the Colombian Amazon are ignoring social safeguards and Free, Prior and Informed Consent. Local traditional use of the forests and indigenous governance structures would be ignored by the carbon market intermediaries, with state regulation being completely absent. Gómez argued that the mechanism must be adapted to the territorial realities and that the sovereignty of indigenous communities must be respected by making them the owners and key actors of the projects, without having too many market intermediaries involved and with a clearly defined role of the state.

The case presented by Donal Yeang, Safeguards Senior Technical Manager at Conservation International in Cambodia, indicates the strong contextual differences in which REDD+ projects are implemented. Yeang talked about clearly structured safeguarding processes and government regulations in the case of Cambodia. He emphasized that Free, Prior, Informed Consent would not be a one-off activity, but an ongoing process. According to Yeang, the REDD+ projects in Cambodia consult with communities on benefit-sharing mechanisms, in which the community is informed about the revenue share they receive and where they can decide how they wish to use their share (in the form of cash, services or infrastructure). The projects further place emphasis on grievance redress mechanisms where issues and concerns can be submitted via anonymous complaint boxes in the communities.

Speakers:



Silvia Gómez Echeverry
Executive Director (Colombia)

Gaia Amazonas



Donal Yeang
Natural Climate Solution and Safeguards Senior Technical Manager (Cambodia)



From Carbon Offsetting to Contribution and How to Put Value to Healthy Ecosystems?

In view of the criticism of carbon neutrality claims on the one hand, and a severe funding gap for climate finance on the other hand, WWF Switzerland's vision of replacing traditional CO₂ offsetting or compensation, while keeping companies engaged in financing for people, nature and climate, comes as a promising approach. Katrin Oswald, Program Lead International Climate Projects at WWF Switzerland, pointedly argued that we should stop trying to improve the quality of carbon credits, as would have been attempted in vain for the last 20 years. Instead, a mindset shift would be needed with new incentives and new solutions. According to WWF Switzerland's climate framework, companies should focus on reducing their emissions first, and, second, pay a reasonable carbon price for the remaining emissions that considers the true social costs of carbon. With the funds generated from pricing the remaining emissions, companies could then support community-needs-based interventions for climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience.

The risks of focusing on the carbon metric to define the value and success of climate projects were further highlighted by Professor Irene Maria Cardoso and Assistant Professor Heitor Mancini Teixeira. According to the two Brazilian scientists, only looking at carbon will undermine biodiversity, food security and climate resilience aspects, while

favouring large-scale agrobusinesses focusing on commodity production. Instead, a holistic and systemic perspective on the functioning of agroecological and diversified agroecosystems would be required, which would not only serve as important carbon sinks through increased soil organic matter, but also increase resilience to climate change and improve agrobiodiversity. Professors Cardoso and Mancini advised to consider alternative indicators for project success, such as plant diversity (species richness, presence of leguminous species), insect diversity (abundance and diversity of pollinators), soil cover, lack of pesticides and herbicides, the use of landrace seeds, as well as the family labour input to value the amount of human labour put into the management of the system. A systemic perspective to measure and monitor the multiple benefits of agroecology can seem complex, but, as Cardoso and Mancini highlighted, be made possible by focusing on the right indicators and provide the basis to value a fair allocation of financial resources that is needed to scale out agroecology.

Speakers:



Katrin Oswald

Program Lead International Projects (Switzerland)



Irene Maria Cardoso

Professor at the Federal University of Viçosa (Brazil) and former President of the Brazilian Association of Agroecology



Heitor Mancini Teixeira

Assistant Professor (from Brazil) at Utrecht University



**Utrecht
University**

Changing the System: Alternatives Towards Climate Justice beyond Carbon Colonialism (Session 3, 16 Nov 2023)

Alternative Financial Flows beyond Market Mechanisms

The third session focused on how climate justice can be achieved beyond carbon markets. The first question that emerges is money and how it can be sourced and distributed outside market mechanisms.

Mukupha Nsenduluka, from the Tax Justice Network Africa and based in Kenya, explained why in this context, tax justice and climate justice must be considered together. The adaptation gap report by UNEP demonstrates that there is a widening gap – an increased need for climate adaptation finance – of between 194 and 366 billion USD per year. Nsenduluka then compared these numbers to the 480 billion USD the states worldwide are losing through corporate tax abuse and illicit financial flows every year. Closing these loopholes could therefore provide the necessary funding in just one year. Nsenduluka then analysed what she calls “the triple crisis of climate justice, natural resource justice and tax justice”, in particular in the mining sector. She highlighted the role of Switzerland as one of the most infamous secrecy jurisdictions, ranking fifth on the Global Tax Index, which is a ranking of countries most complicit in helping multinational corporations “optimize” or minimize corporate income tax. Nsenduluka clearly said that what we would need is an overhaul of the current international tax system, not through the OECD, but through the UN system. Closing the tax loopholes together with reparations for climate justice could mobilize resources for climate action. According to Nsenduluka, this can be achieved by political will and people power.

Leandro Gomes Cardoso from the National Secretary for Climate Change of the Ministry of Environment of Brazil talked about how the state can distribute public funds in a democratic way. He explained Brazil's National Climate Fund financing both mitigation and adaptation projects, having a very participative governance. Gomes argued that because Brazil's particular emissions profile, with agriculture, livestock, land use change and forests being very important, forests and agriculture become strategic sectors for Brazil to achieve net zero. The National Climate Fund would operate in two modalities, a modality of refundable fundings, composed by loans; the other modality is a non-refundable funding, i.e. grants allocated for local projects by local communities, NGOs and indigenous people. According to Gomes it is crucial to support local adaptation projects for resilience in vulnerable communities, in particular on indigenous territories. Restoration of native forests must be a priority to achieve net zero. At the same time loans and project preparation finance is crucial for subnational entities and companies where market mechanisms do not work. Together, Gomes sees this as a big opportunity for Brazil to reach net zero.

Speakers:



Mukupa Nsenduluka

Policy Officer for Tax and Natural Resource Governance (Kenya)



Leandro Gomes Cardoso

Department of Mitigation Policies, Adaptation and Implementation Instruments (Brazil)



Carbon Colonialism and the Defenders of the Forests

In the second block, we considered the question of who actually protects forests and ecosystems and had a closer look at the defenders of the forests and the lands. This also leads to the question of power and carbon colonialism.

The first speaker was Soumitra Ghosh from India, a social activist and researcher associated with the All India Forum of forest movements. Ghosh argued that the climate crisis had roots going back a long way in colonial history. He characterized colonialism as a force driven by profit-making, characterized by forcibly occupying territories, lands and peoples. According to him, it was this process, devoid of rationality, that led to the climate crisis impacting everything today. Ghosh explained that in the case of India, there was a long history of extracting industries destroying landscapes. These industries saw a need to offset their emissions, and with that to create huge plantations or solar parks, all again owned by multinational corporations and subsidized by the state. These actions represented yet another instance of land grabs, reflecting the recurring logic of colonialism, and would demonstrate why the carbon markets and their politics constitute a new way of colonialism. Ghosh asserted that the focus should shift from rationalizing the carbon market to fundamentally changing the system. According to him, it is therefore crucial to listen to the worldviews of the many people involved in grassroots struggles all around the world and to embrace their struggles.

Alfred Brownell is an environmental rights activist and lawyer from Liberia, president of Green Advocates. He emphasized the deep-rooted grievances linked to land grabbing, caused by a colonial investment model turning everything into a commodity and disregarding indigenous knowledge. Brownell then referred to Liberia, where such colonial exploitations, e.g. through rubber plantations, have a long history with massive deforestation, massive eviction of local communities, and their exploitation in slave labour. He highlighted that when resistance against these practices grows, the state often intervenes, resulting in the arrest of people. Brownell asserted that carbon deals represent a new form of colonialism under the guise of addressing the climate crisis. He cited the case of the company Blue Carbon, where a deal was signed with the Liberian state over almost a million of acres of land without the people's consent. While those involved in such deals would mistakenly view the land as free and unclaimed, it is actually the land of people who have a deep understanding of how to harmonize with nature. Brownell then talked about the resistance him and others have been building in Liberia, noting that oppressed communities have started to voice their

concerns. He emphasized the need for various strategies – legal, media, and local organizational strategies – to support these struggles and to closely collaborate with poor people in remote areas.

Speakers:



Soumitra Ghosh

Social Activist and Researcher associated with All India Forum of Forest Movements (India)



Alfred Brownell

Founding President Global Climate Legal Defense Network and Lead Campaigner Green Advocates (Liberia / USA)



▶ Video recordings

The video recordings of all three online sessions of the HEKS/EPER Land Forum 2023 are available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese at www.heks.ch/landforum.

This is HEKS/EPER

In its projects **worldwide** and in its work of raising awareness around development and social policy topics **in Switzerland**, HEKS/EPER's emphasis is on the four priorities of **climate justice, the right to land and food, refuge and migration, and inclusion**.

In 28 countries across four continents and jointly with 100 partner organizations and global alliances, **HEKS/EPER global cooperation** combats with its projects hunger, poverty and injustice and advocates for a life in dignity for all people. HEKS/EPER cultivates constant policy dialogue with all relevant humanitarian, development, and Government actors, protecting civil society actors, promoting peaceful coexistence, and reinforcing people and communities to advocate for their needs and rights, and to strive towards and self-determined perspectives.

HEKS/EPER campaigns for systemic change throughout its work enabling sustainable land and resource governance, securing basic services such as education or health and social schemes, fostering agroecological production and inclusive market systems. It promotes inclusive governance structures in the countries to overcome social, economic, and political discrimination of disenfranchised people.


Also, HEKS/EPER provides **humanitarian assistance** around the world for victims of disasters caused by natural hazards and armed conflicts and supports the social work of church organizations in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Through its work **in Switzerland**, HEKS/EPER fosters social inclusion for marginalized people, promotes equal opportunity and supports jobless people, asylum seekers, migrants, and socially deprived people with legal advice, vocational trainings, language courses and dialogue platforms.



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