
Carbon Illusions in the Brazilian Amazon

WRM recently published the study 'Neocolonialism in the Amazon: REDD Projects in Portel, Brazil', regarding four REDD projects in the municipality of Portel, in the state of Pará in the Brazilian Amazon. (1) In line with certain aspects of this study, we will attempt to demonstrate how projects currently underway contribute to perpetuating certain fantasies inherent to the idea of carbon trading through REDD projects.

The REDD project in Portel is led by investors from industrialized countries. It began in 2008 and is projected to last until 2055. The initiative comprises four projects covering a total area of over 7,000km². The project's proponents claim to carry out actions in this area that prevent the forest from being destroyed and bring benefits to the local population. In exchange, following verification of their projects by Verra, a private certification body, they are authorized to trade carbon credits from the supposedly avoided emissions. Even though it is still in its early stages, the enterprise has already made possible the sale of over 23 million carbon credits (2) 'produced' in Portel, which the study estimates are equivalent to over US\$120 million.

What is striking is not the figures themselves, but the degree of financialization of nature that carbon markets represent. For investors, it is an additional opportunity to profit from controlling land, but through an abstract commodity – carbon credits. With a REDD project, the forest can be appropriated by investors at a much lower cost and with greater discretion than, for example, through soybean monoculture, extensive cattle rearing or mining. Thus, the capacity to obtain considerable profit margins without needing to actually 'produce' a physical commodity seems to be the most obvious reason for the euphoric multiplication of investments in REDD.

Those behind the REDD projects in Portel claim that it is a win-win venture for everyone because:

- the project contributes to mitigating the climate crisis by reducing emissions;
- the local population benefits from social actions;
- the investors are financially rewarded for the environmental and social services provided.

We are in no doubt about the last statement – the proponents of the projects in Portel are indeed receiving huge returns on their investments. What we intend to highlight below are the fantasies regarding the first two assumptions.

Reducing emissions: a good story

The four projects in Portel demonstrate a common characteristic of REDD projects, which is that a good story is a vital element for 'producing' and selling carbon credits. In the case of Portel, the projects' proponents are aware that the destruction of the Amazon is a real and widely known phenomenon, so have seized the opportunity to exaggerate the deforestation forecast had it not been for the projects' implementation. In REDD projects, this forecast is precisely what determines the number of credits that can be traded by their proponents.

Portel is no different. The fictitious nature of the 'deforestation story' supposedly avoided by REDD

projects is based on questionable ‘technical’ parameters. One of them, for example, concerns the area used to estimate the projected deforestation. By including the Transamazon Highway in this area, the projected deforestation is significantly greater than if it had not been included in the REDD project. Thus, the projection of carbon credits generated – and therefore the projects’ potential profit – automatically becomes considerably greater. (3)

Residents of the project areas we spoke to during a visit to Portel in May 2022 believe that the projected deforestation presented by the developers if the projects are not executed does not match the reality of their territories. Similarly, they cannot understand how the results presented so far show that the projects have avoided so much deforestation to the point of generating so much revenue. After all, according to the residents, all they seem to have done is donate wood-burning stoves and food baskets to residents, fill out forms and collect signatures.

Project owners might claim that: all the calculations presented in the projects are based on scientific methodologies; the projections and results are verified by third-party consulting companies (that they themselves hire!); the scheme is accredited by Verra, the leading international institution in carbon credit certification. However, researchers from different universities have shown that these methodologies have regularly overestimated the capacity of projects (4) to avoid emissions. These and other flaws have called Verra’s reliability into question (5), suggesting that the certification systems for REDD projects have been a key element in generating profits based on the argument of environmental impact mitigation.

REDD enthusiasts argue that these are ‘technical’ flaws that can be corrected, or that more efficient safeguards are needed. However, the ‘technical’ jargon and arguments mask their underlying political intentions and, most of all, distract from the REDD mechanism’s fundamental problem. It is widely known that the main cause of global warming is the emissions caused by burning fossil fuels. If fossil fuels represent a continuous (and increasing!) release of carbon trapped underground into the atmosphere, believing that the natural cycles of the biosphere (including the mere non-destruction of forests) can ‘compensate’ for their emissions (6) is an illusion. This is a structural inconsistency that has gone hand in hand with the logic of carbon markets since their inception.

It is also worth mentioning that the stories often told in REDD project documentation consider local populations to be a threat to forests. In the case of Portel, the fact that the projects consider the activities of the ribeirinhos (7) to be partly responsible for the emissions lessens the burden of responsibility of agribusiness and predatory extractivism – which are actually highly destructive.

Benefits for the local population?

From the social point of view, the REDD initiative in Portel has two peculiarities. The first is charity actions – basically the already mentioned donations of stoves and food baskets, as well as the formulation of the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR). The CAR is a self-declaration related to land use and required by the Brazilian legislation. These actions have been carried out by an organization called Amigos dos Ribeirinhos, which in the project’s documentation is repeatedly presented as a nonprofit charity organization. However, according to available public records, it is a private company owned by a North American named Michael Greene, who, in turn, appears as the main project coordinator in Portel.

The second peculiarity is the listing of 1252 riverine families as proponents of one of the REDD projects, in conjunction with the abovementioned company owned by Michael Greene. According to the documentation, these families “duly signed confirming agreement with REDD Carbon Credit

Project”, and supposedly are represented by the president of the Portel Rural Producers’ Union. However, there is no document with the signatures or legal consent of the people listed to be found on the Verra database. It seems there was no legal authorization granted by the families to participate in the REDD project.

Dwellers we talked to in May 2022 were surprised to find out the land they live on is listed in the projects. They could never have imagined that their land has generated a commodity of which they are unaware, and whose sale has generated million-dollar revenues that they obviously do not know about either. And neither could they suppose that among the buyers of the carbon credits from the projects in Portel are some of the world’s largest companies, like giants of aviation Boeing, Delta Airlines and Air France, Amazon (e-commerce), Samsung (technology) and Repsol (oil), among others.

Reinforcing the argument of the previous section that the REDD mechanism does not reduce emissions, ventures like that in Portel end up underwriting the expansion plans of various corporations for which there will be no barriers to the increased emissions forecast. After all, now they can ‘offset’ or ‘neutralize’ these emissions by buying certified credits from Portel, thus advertising their alleged environmental and social responsibility. Therefore, in terms of ‘social benefits’, one is dealing with a perverse scheme where:

- people who live in the area of the projects lose autonomy over their territory, since the carbon absorbed belongs to the polluting corporations that buy it and no longer to them;
- people who live in the vicinity of operational sites of polluting corporations that buy the credits will continue to suffer their direct impacts, since the supposed offset in emissions permits them to continue and even to expand their emissions;
- those responsible for the climate crisis are free to continue to profit from the burning of fossil fuels and to intensify the climate crisis, whose impacts disproportionately affect communities of the South that depend on forests and small scale agriculture.

Renewed colonialism

The peculiarities of the age aside, the REDD venture in Portel takes us back to the early days of European colonization in Brazil. The difference is that nowadays, instead of little mirrors and adornments, the foreign entrepreneurs that arrive in Portel seduce the population with stoves, food baskets and help to obtain the CAR – which actually is a document demanded by the Brazilian legislation, but, furthermore, is a fundamental document for the proponents to implement their REDD project and to appropriate the wealth produced in these lands. The valuable product to be extracted and sold in the global North is not Brazilwood, but carbon credits, an unimaginably more abstract commodity. The colonizers, in the past self-considered carriers and disseminators of civilization, now present themselves as saviors of the forest and bastions of climate crisis impact mitigation – a problem they themselves created.

Efficacy and illusion

Lastly, the venture in Portel corroborates the fact that the REDD mechanism can be rather effective... for some: effective in the appropriation of forest lands by private interests; effective in ‘producing’ an invisible, high quality commodity; effective in guaranteeing profits for foreign investors; effective in ensuring that large scale corporations get greenwashed through the purchase of carbon credits. However, in terms of the capacity to tackle the climate crisis, the initiative in Portel does not reveal anything new: the REDD mechanism and carbon markets continue to be a major illusion that at the

end of the day makes a contribution in the direction opposite to the objective that justified its creation. Meanwhile, communities that depend on forests carry on having their rights violated and their self-determination compromised – even if unwittingly.

World Rainforest Movement (WRM)

The facts about the REDD initiative in Portel presented in this brief article, as well as other problems that permeate the case, may be looked up in greater detail in the WRM report [‘Neocolonialismo na Amazônia: Projetos REDD em Portel, Brasil’](#).

- (1) WRM, [Neocolonialismo na Amazônia: Projetos REDD em Portel, Brasil](#) (November 2022).
- (2) Equivalent to 23 million tons of carbon that supposedly would have been released into the atmosphere in the absence of the projects.
- (3) In order to better understand how these forecasts are made, consult the WRM publication “10 things communities should know about REDD”, [available here](#).
- (4) PNAS, [Overstated carbon emission reductions from voluntary REDD+ projects in the Brazilian Amazon](#), 2022.
- (5) The Guardian, [Carbon offsets used by major airlines based on flawed system, warn experts](#), 2021.
- (6) WRM, [Todo o carbono é igual? Carbono fóssil, violência e poder](#), 2022.
- (7) The term ribeirinho relates to the traditional population that inhabits the region’s river banks. Their main economic activities are fishing, the gathering of fruits and subsistence agriculture.