
India: Forests and tree plantations under carbon offset schemes

The new abstractions created by the climate change discourse in the form of REDD and REDD+ have come to deepen the commodification of forests as greater mobility is created and trading across countries and continents is made possible through climate mitigation and forestry schemes, say Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon from the Indian organization Kalpavriksh, in the recent publication “Banking on Forests: Assets for a Climate Cure?”

Still without an international agreement established, both REDD and REDD+ work on a dual financing mechanism as of today, with money to be generated voluntarily both from bilateral or multilateral grants as well as a market based carbon trading mechanism where forest carbon in a different country can be traded for meeting emission targets. The UN-REDD programme states that it is an “effort to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forests, offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development” while REDD+ money goes to maintain enclosures of forests and to generate new ‘carbon stocks’ - which means in practice creating tree plantations. In both cases the final attempt is to conserve carbon or create carbon sinks.

Kalpavriksh's report explains that in India, the “National Mission for a Green India” (GIM) approved in February 2011, is part of India's National Action Plan On Climate Change (NAPCC) and seeks to increase forest/tree cover on 5million hectares of forest/non- forest lands as well as improve the quality of the forest cover on another 5 million hectares. In order to achieve this, the Mission would link with ongoing programmes which include availing benefits under REDD+, CDM and other carbon market mechanisms.

Not just forests but other ecosystems as well will be considered in order to enhance carbon sequestration and storage, bringing in lands under other multiple uses such as marginal lands. However, lands which the GIM identifies as marginal farming lands or wastelands are already under multiple yet formally unrecognised community uses, such as for grazing or as part of shifting cultivation cycles, and their transfer to afforestation schemes will bring impacts on the socio-economic conditions of communities dependent on them. It has been highlighted by forest peoples' movements that afforestation programmes change the nature of ecosystems as well as directly reduce peoples' access to forest produce and animal fodder depriving forest dwellers and adivasi (Indigenous People) of some or all of their lands.

Kalpavriksh's authors conclude that “the GIM is clearly carbon compliant, keeping the doors open to whichever way the climate change negotiations head on the issue of carbon sinks. In this carbon led discourse, the country is ready to receive money through grants, private sector trading as well as other carbon forestry programmes.” They also point out that since 2009, the State Forest Departments have also been receiving money collected over the years towards compensating for or payment of Net Present Value (NPV) for the diversion of forest land for non-forest use such as mining, industrial or infrastructure expansion in the country. That money has been used for afforestation schemes, like was the case of the state of Uttarakh and which has allocated money for

plantations through local Joint Forest Management (JFM) committees. The state of Karnataka has also proposed monoculture plantations including commercial plants like biofuels. Similarly the state of Madhya Pradesh has proposed 38.8% and the state of Himachal Pradesh has proposed 28.4% for plantations out of their total proposed NPV budget for 2010-2011.

The report of Kalpavriksh is conclusive in that the various processes which have either treated forests as commodities or conservation enclosures find in the GIM a place, treating forests “as a mobile, tradable commodity either at the national or the global scale. Each time the unit of measurement changes, it adds more money to the forest coffers, either through the pretext of diversion or conservation. The GIM also works well within a global system where it is possible to show forests as sovereign assets which can be made available, at a cost, to provide carbon forest credits to global players.”

While a legally binding agreement on emissions reductions is unlikely to be agreed in the near future, many predict a future of carbon market REDD and therefore, opening the road for further commodification of Indian’s forests and expansion of monoculture tree plantations.

Article based on: “Banking on Forests: Assets for a Climate Cure?”, by Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon,
Kalpavriksh, <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/list-of-books/books-in-print/201-env-a-development-books/90-environment-a-dev-books>; and two briefing papers: “Compensatory Afforestation and Net Present Value Payments for Diversion of Forest Land in India” and “Loss or Gain. The National Mission for a Green India” by the same authors, sent by Kanchi Kohli,
e-mail: kalpavriksh.delhi@gmail.com.