
India: Pushing “REDD plus” at the expense of forests and forest dwellers

The Copenhagen Accord - the agreement reached by a group of countries at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit and imposed on the rest - was defined by Transnational Institute's Praful Bidwai as “a travesty of what the world needs to avert climate change”: The two degrees Celsius increase target in global temperature is 0.5 degrees above the target accepted by the majority of UN nations; poor countries are mainly left to fend for themselves in terms of adapting to climate change; and eventually, violations of the Copenhagen Accord would have no meaningful consequences.

The agreement is also instrumental in driving what is termed "REDD plus". Paragraph 6 says: “We recognize the crucial role of reducing emission from deforestation and forest degradation and the need to enhance removals of greenhouse gas emission by forests and agree on the need to provide positive incentives to such actions through the immediate establishment of a mechanism including REDDplus, to enable the mobilization of financial resources from developed countries.”

Though “REDD plus” has been left undefined and the question of what kind of forest protection will be financed and how will be a matter of further negotiations, the core of REDD plus is making forests a mode of earning carbon permits. It entails carbon offsets, more business, permission to emit somewhere else.

A briefing of the Indian organisation Campaign for Survival and Dignity (1) reveals the key role played by the Indian government in pushing "REDD plus" at the expense of forest dwellers: “In fact, the government of India was one of a few countries who objected to including any binding requirement that people's rights should be respected in the negotiating text. India has also been one of the only countries in the world pushing for inclusion of plantation activities in carbon trading under REDD (this is what makes it "REDD plus").”

According to the group, the government of India wants to include afforestation and plantation programmes in REDD plus, so that they are eligible for receiving money, and expects to earn “carbon credits” on the basis of carbon supposedly stored in forests. They say that “both these points are mentioned in the draft negotiating text of December 15th. In the Indian context, this model will lead to land grabbing and conflict as:

- Despite the Forest Rights Act of 2006, the legal rights of adivasis and forest dwellers are still not being recognised. For instance, rights to minor forest produce, grazing areas, community forests, etc. have hardly been recognised anywhere in the country. Without legally recognised community forest rights, it will be easy for companies and the government to grab and sell community forests and resources for REDD credits. The negotiating text of December 15th also only “encourages” countries to respect forest rights rather than requiring them to do so.

- There is no agreed upon method by which carbon absorption or storage in a forest can be measured. Forests do not consist of just standing trees – trees grow, fires and other disasters take place, people and wildlife consume nontimber forest produce, etc. Forests are constantly changing. How will this be accounted for? Trading on forest carbon credits will lead companies and the

government to shut off forests from all use by people, on the one hand, and on the other will encourage fictional carbon storage figures. This is exactly what has already happened in carbon forestry projects in Brazil and elsewhere. Moreover, and most fundamentally, carbon trading simply allows the industrial countries to avoid reducing their own emissions. Carbon trading in forests will thus simply become a giant scam, harming both the environment and people.

- If, as the government is demanding, afforestation is made part of REDD, these dangers increase. Afforestation programmes often take place on cultivated lands (including shifting cultivation fallows), village commons, community pasture lands etc. that actually belong to and are being used by people. Such programs are already leading to evictions of people and/or displacement from their livelihoods across the country. They also often involve destroying biodiversity-rich natural open forests and grasslands; REDD would encourage this, since it does not distinguish between plantations and natural forests. In October 2008, the Standing Committee on Environment and Forests sharply criticised such programs, saying that 'afforestation ... deprives forest dwellers and adivasis of some or all of their lands and impacts their livelihoods and basic needs – for which they are neither informed, nor consulted, nor compensated.' Till date, however, no central afforestation program has included even a reference to forest rights, leave alone complied with legal requirements.

- In the meantime, the government continues to run such programs through the administrative scheme of 'Joint Forest Management' – where forest guards control the 'participatory' bodies. These programs often cause divisions and conflict in the community, while ignoring people's actual legal rights. Institutionalisation of such programs through REDD will cause even more conflict and marginalisation of forest dwellers.

- Finally, a carbon trading model involving private companies will create a huge financial incentive for wholesale takeovers of forests. A recent survey found that the world's largest investment companies are tracking REDD very closely. With such funds, there will be a rush by private companies seeking access to public forest land for plantations as well as control over official forest protection programs. Reliance, ITC and other companies have been demanding access to 'degraded' forests for commercial afforestation for many years, and this scheme could legitimise their demand. The lack of legal rights combined with such pressure will make land grabbing very likely.”

REDD trading schemes see the forest for the wood that can be bought and sold for its carbon content denying its living nature, its condition of ecosystem which is inhabited by and used by people and wildlife. Campaign for Survival and Dignity fears that “if the talks simply say that trees are what is important, what is to prevent companies from destroying natural forests and grasslands to replace them with commercial plantations (thereby damaging the environment and potentially releasing even more carbon)?”

They claim that “if forest protection is being sought, surely the government should be trying to strengthen global forest governance - not weaken it by bringing in private companies and trading.”

(1) “REDDPLUS AT COPENHAGEN. Little Known Scheme Poses Major Dangers for Forests, Adivasis, Other Forest Dwellers”, Campaign for Survival and Dignity, <http://www.forestrightsact.com/climate-change/item/download/3>

