
Indonesia: Fate of Fishing Villages in the Climate Crisis and the Failure of 'Blue Carbon'

Blue Carbon (or Blue REDD+) appeared as a new carbon offset scheme between emissions and carbon absorption in coastal territories. However, organizations in Indonesia warn that the Blue Carbon initiative is a strategy to change the coastal and marine territories into tradable assets.

Sugeng Haryanto, a 57-year-old fisherman from Jepara coast, Central Java, pushes his boat to the dock every week. For the last month, Sugeng could not go out to fish. High waves and strong winds were the main reason for Sugeng to keep his boat and fishing gear tied up in the harbor. He did not want to risk losing his life like some of his friends.

These days, fishing communities in Indonesia face climate-related problems that are difficult to understand. **From a reduced fishing period to natural disasters that occur every year in a growing number of coastal territories in Indonesia.** Those territories include mangrove forests, seagrass meadows and intertidal saltmarshes. Due to these difficulties, fishers in Indonesia can only go to the sea for less than 150 days within a year. This means that the other 215 days they must refrain from any fishing activities.

Indonesian fishing communities are experiencing firsthand the harmful effects of the climate crisis. Throughout the last five years, at least 737 coastal villages suffered landslides, 2 651 were flooded, 307 were hit by flash floods, 1 484 were hit by tidal waves and 1 422 were impacted by tornadoes. In addition, 790 were hit by earthquakes, 6 were hit by a tsunami, and 54 coastal villages were affected by a volcano eruption. (1)

The fate of millions of fishers lies at the negotiation table every year during the UN climate talks. Unfortunately, these climate discussions have lost orientation as they fail to address the real and underlying problems of this crisis.

Now, not only the fishing boats are moored for longer and longer periods of time but **the fate of fishers' livelihoods and control over their territories is tied to the threat of this multidimensional crisis and the so-called solutions that accompany the crisis.**

When Carbon turns Blue

One of the UN reactions to this multidimensional crisis is a scheme called **Blue Carbon. Also known as Blue REDD**, it was introduced by UNEP and other UN agencies in 2009. Through many international meetings, UNEP asserted the importance of bringing **a new carbon offset scheme between emissions and carbon absorption in coastal territories.** According to its proponents, coastal territories rich in plants, such as mangrove forests, seagrass meadows and intertidal saltmarshes, take up and store large amounts of carbon dioxide. (2)

A 2009 publication from several UN agencies titled "Blue Carbon: the Role of Healthy Oceans in Binding Carbon," affirms that the protection, management, and restoration of marine ecosystems

would increase their capacity to absorb carbon to almost 10 per cent of the required global emission reductions. (3)

The Blue Carbon research conducted by Indonesia's Marine and Fisheries Research and Development Agency (Balitbang KP) states that seagrass beds have the potential to absorb around 4.88 tons of carbon per hectare per year. In total, seagrass meadows in Indonesia could store 16.11 million tons of carbon per year. And, in total, mangroves in Indonesia could store 122.22 million tons of carbon per year.

To this day, Blue Carbon is promoted continuously through international meetings as well as in the yearly UN Climate Summits. During the Our Ocean Conference held in Bali in 2018, **the Indonesian government encouraged marine conservation and Blue Carbon projects, aiming to include 20 million hectares by 2020 into such schemes.** By 2018, the area established for marine conservation reached 19.14 million hectares.

The Indonesian organization People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice (KIARA) highlights that **marine conservation has so far not been implemented as a bottom-up activity - originating from the knowledge and wisdom of the Indonesian maritime communities - but as a top-down activity, forced by the state. As a result, people in coastal communities become the victims of what from their perspective amounts to eco-fascist projects.**

Swapping Carbon? Planting Mangrove Trees

The Livelihoods Fund is supported by private companies. It invests since 2011 in offset projects around the world linked to the investors' supply chains. Three of these projects are in mangrove territories: one in Indonesia, one in India and one in Senegal. On their website, **Livelihoods Fund says that in Indonesia, until today, 18 million trees have been planted. In India, they claim that 16 million trees have been planted and in Senegal, 79 million trees.** (4)

Projects last for 20 years and **investors (private companies) will receive carbon credits from the mangrove trees planted by coastal communities.** Based on this, **these industries can continue their business as usual** (and emissions as usual) while claiming to have reduced their carbon emissions.

The investors of Livelihoods Fund are: agribusiness Danone; French multinational Schneider Electric; French bank group Credit Agricole; French luxury goods manufacturer Hermès International; French travel group Voyageurs du Monde; French postal service company La Poste Group; tire manufacturer Michelin; fragrance and flavors company Firmenich; French public financial institution Caisse des dépôts et consignations and German software and technology company SAP.

Repeating the Failures of REDD+

Blue Carbon was invented as a version of the REDD+ scheme (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) **for coastal and mangrove territories.** For almost 15 years, REDD+ has been promoted as a solution to deforestation in tropical forests. But deforestation continues. Unfortunately, REDD+ is a business-oriented scheme that gives rise to a variety of problems. Like elsewhere, **REDD+ projects in Indonesia have caused conflicts.**

One example is a REDD+ project in Henda village, Borneo Indonesia, organized by UNDP and funded by the Norwegian government. Research showed how this project has actually caused

horizontal conflicts within the community. The conflict was caused by a lack of transparency and discriminatory management of REDD+ funds at the village level. One of the reasons for the conflict lay in the empowerment program linked to the REDD+ project did not involve all in the community which inevitably created jealousy among villagers. (4)

Another REDD+ project in the village of Mantangai Hulu also caused vertical conflicts with donors and the government. This REDD+ project was organized by the Kalimantan Forests and Climate Partnership (KFCP) and funded by the Australian government. The Mantangai Hulu village community granted their 120,000 hectares of forest to KFCP for a REDD+ pilot project. **When it became obvious that the project was more beneficial to the local facilitators, government and the donors, the village community organized resistance to the project.** The distribution of REDD+ funds was also not transparent and did not involve community participation. (5)

The failure of REDD+ to halt deforestation while causing many conflicts within and with communities should be an important lesson for world leaders to be more careful in responding to the climate crisis. At the same time, maritime communities in Indonesia are calling for action to address the climate crisis. However, **the proposed policies tend to be a 'patchwork', offering false solutions with emission reduction targets that are insufficient and dependent on offsets.**

Negotiations and possible solutions for facing the climate crisis need to return to the knowledge and needs of communities. **No more patchy solutions such as Blue Carbon or alike, which in fact put more burden on the State finance, increasing foreign debt.** The amount of debt also opens the doors for more corruption. These offset mechanisms, proposed by the World Bank, were always based on loans. However, on 2018, Indonesia's Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries refused the loan mechanism. But unfortunately, the implemented mechanism still relies into foreign investment and carbon trading, which creates the same problems as with the mechanism proposed by the World Bank.

Commodification of a Crisis

KIARA sees **the Blue Carbon initiative as a pretext to change the coastal and marine territories into tradable assets.** There are at least three reasons why the Blue Carbon Initiative is not the solution to the climate crisis.

First, the accounting of the carbon stored in the Blue Carbon projects is done in such a way that **it reaps profit for some individuals or a particular group but excludes many in the community who are affected by Blue Carbon projects because they can no longer use the mangroves or seagrass meadows like they did before.** Meanwhile, the existence and role of coastal communities in maintaining coastal ecosystems intact through using mangroves to harvest medicinal herbs, cosmetic ingredients, and as a source of food, are neglected.

Second, it is argued that one of the causes of the climate crisis is the destruction of mangroves due to poor management. **In Indonesia, damage to mangroves and coastal ecosystems results from patterns of extractive and exploitative developments such as coastal reclamation for hotels, apartments, or paid recreation areas, industrial shrimp farms, expansion of oil palm plantations on the coast and massive coastal mining.** KIARA's Center for Data and Information notes that throughout 2018, there were at least 42 coastal areas in Indonesia that were reclaimed for such purposes.

Third, Blue Carbon is **unable to change the behavior of companies responsible for large**

amounts of carbon emissions as it is merely a carbon offset.

Coastal territories have unique characteristics and are very vulnerable. Coasts are a transition area between land and sea. Pressure, both natural and human, is very evident. **The Blue Carbon initiative opens opportunities for elites to pawn and capture benefits in the name of climate change.**

Meanwhile, due to its vulnerability, coastal territories and communities will continue to be harmed by onshore developments, the worsening effects of climate change as well as the false solutions promoted at the UN climate negotiations.

Crucial decisions that will influence just how hard fishing communities across Indonesia will be hit by the multidimensional climate crisis will have to be taken in the next decade. Instead of the government building a powerful maritime vision and glorifying the archipelago's past, it would be wise to first focus on reducing the effects of the climate crisis on artisanal fishers while **saving the Indonesian coastal and maritime world from the entrapment of carbon trading.**

Don't sell our sea in the name of carbon trading!
Our Sea, Our Identity, We Are the Sea!

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(1) Indonesia Center for Data and Information, 2019

(2) For more info on Blue Carbon, see WRM, "[Blue Carbon](#)" and "[Blue REDD](#)": [Transforming coastal ecosystems into merchandise](#), 2014

(3) [Access the publication](#)

(4) [Access their website](#)

(5) Anggraeni, Nur. (2013). *Melestarikan Tradisi, Meningkatkan Kesejahteraan: Pandangan Tentang Dampak Program REDD+ di Kalimantan Tengah*. Master Thesis UGM

(6) Firnaherera, Vice Admira. (2013). *Konflik Pengelolaan REDD+: Studi Kasus di Desa Mantangai Hulu, Kecamatan Mantangai, Kabupaten Kapuas, Propinsi Kalimantan Tengah*. Master Thesis UGM
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