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## [Words of caution about some terms used in this publication](#)

*This article is part of the publication [15 Years of REDD:](#)*

[A Mechanism Rotten at the Core](#)

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### **1. Slash-and-burn agriculture or shifting cultivation**

These terms describe a wide variety of farming systems where a plot of land in a forest or savannah is cleared and cultivated for a period of time and then left to regenerate. There is a growing recognition that shifting cultivation practises are part of complex land use systems that contribute to the diversity of forests and maintain their ecological functioning. Yet, rotational farming practises are still often pejoratively called 'slash-and-burn'. Using this expression feeds the false claim that shifting cultivation is a driver of deforestation. The World Bank and governments worldwide have a long track record of using the expression 'slash-and-burn' as part of their efforts to eradicate shifting cultivation. Many REDD activities have focused on banning or restricting shifting cultivation, for example by prohibiting the use of fire to prepare land for cultivation. For more information, see: [Survival International. Shifting cultivation. What is it and who does it?](#)

### **2. Selective logging**

This term is misleading. According to the logging industry, selective logging does not damage the forest because only a few carefully selected (commercially particularly valuable) trees are removed. In reality, however, most selective logging is industrial logging that destroys and degrades large areas of forest to extract those few commercially valuable trees. Describing the practise as selective hides the reality that especially in tropical forest regions, industrial logging - whether selective or not – has a long history of causing violent conflicts, abusive labour conditions and extremely damaging impacts to those living in the vicinity of these operations.

### **3. Net-zero emissions**

Many companies (and governments) have promised to reduce their climate-damaging emissions to net-zero. The little word net enables companies to continue to burn petroleum, gas and coal and at the same time claim that this is not damaging the climate. How does this magic work? They prepare a balance sheet that shows how the same amount of emissions they continue to push into the atmosphere has been taken out of the atmosphere by someone elsewhere (see carbon offsets for why this does not work for the climate and puts at risk forest peoples' sovereignty over their territories). Some insist that net-zero promises must include steep emission reductions, and that only 'hard to avoid' emissions should be offset, but this is not the reality. Net-zero emission promises

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disguise the growth in air traffic, the opening of new oil and gas fields, and so on. In essence, these promises are, above all, a tactic to protect corporate profiteering from fossil fuel burning. For more information, see: Friends of the Earth International et al. (2021). [The Big Con: How Big Polluters are advancing a “net zero” climate agenda to delay, deceive, and deny.](#)

#### **4. Carbon Offsets or Offsetting**

These terms has gained momentum as a tool in the context of the 'Green Economy' – because offsetting allows the continuation of an economic model built on destruction of 'nature' under the pretence that damage caused in one place can be compensated through extra activities to restore 'nature' elsewhere. To protect their profits tied to the availability of cheap fossil fuels as long as possible, companies have lobbied particularly hard for carbon offsetting as an alternative to government intervention that could speed up the end of fossil fuel burning.

For a short explanation of contradictions that plague carbon offsets and that make them a dangerous distraction to avoiding climate breakdown, see the WRM booklet [10 things communities should know about REDD.](#)

#### **5. Environmental racism**

Corporate exploitation that disproportionately exposes communities or neighbourhoods of majority black, indigenous and people of colour populations to the most toxic pollution and the most destructive, contaminating and risky operations are realities of environmental racism. Refusal to acknowledge these realities is another form of environmental racism. This racism also manifests itself when non-Western understandings of territoriality are not even recognized as existing or when Indigenous Peoples' cosmologies are portrayed as obstacles to corporate expansion. Indigenous Peoples regularly face environmental racism when their territories are declared Protected Areas or sites of REDD+ projects. The WRM Bulletin 223 – [Racism in the forests: a process of oppression at the service of capital explores how this racism manifests itself as structurally inherent in capitalism.](#)

#### **6. Carbon accounting**

Beyond the numbers widely taken to represent the volume of emissions released or allegedly offset, Carbon accounting hides perhaps more than it reveals. One thing it hides is the environmental racism inherent to the fossil fuel economy. Carbon accounting turns the violent conflicts at the sites of fossil fuel extraction, processing and refining as well as at the places where the carbon offsetting takes place into neat and conflict-free numbers on a carbon balance sheet.

In this context, carbon accounting is used to track governments' and companies' estimates of emissions produced by different parts of the economy or a company's business at the point where they are released into the atmosphere. This allows conflicts to continue, as the aim is not to end fossil fuel burning. Governments also use carbon accounting to show how many emissions caused in one part of the country's economy have been offset by extra storage of carbon in the country's soils, trees and other vegetation. Companies use carbon accounting also to show that their emissions have been balanced out through the purchase of carbon credits.

Carbon accounting created the now widely accepted assumption that the climate damage cause by different greenhouse gases and by emissions from different sources can be made comparable – through the unit CO<sub>2</sub>equivalents. This in turn paved the way for REDD and "nature-based solutions"

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– projects based on the assumption that avoiding allegedly planned deforestation can offset the climate damage caused by fossil fuel emissions. Carbon accounting is therefore a key tool for companies and governments promising to run their economies or businesses on net-zero emissions in the future.

For more information, see: Larry Lohmann (2009). [Neoliberalism and the Calculable World](#).

## 7. Commodification of nature

Commodification of nature strips a place of its uniqueness – the stories, memories and interactions between the human and non-human life that make a place different from others - and re-defines it by the units of whatever it is those driving the commodification are interested in at the time the commodification is initiated. Territories identified by a peoples' distinct memories, stories and cosmologies were turned into land plotted on maps that show where which minerals, fertile soils, water reservoirs, or valuable trees can be found. Once thus mapped, private or state ownership could be claimed and minerals, water, trees etc. be re-labelled resources available for sale. More recently, ecological functions such as the carbon storage capacity of forests are the target of commodification. In the process, a forest's value is determined only by its capacity to store carbon. Each forest's alleged carbon content is mapped by modern-day land surveyors and the priced unit this time is the tonnes of carbon per hectare of forest.

As history has shown, processes of commodification involve violent conflict and displacement. The commodification of ecological functions such as the carbon storage capacity of forests is no exception. Maps showing the distribution of the carbon storage capacity across different forests or across different parts of a forest are already used by companies to restrict communities' access to their territories: REDD projects would not be possible without stripping forests of their uniqueness and reducing them to 'carbon storage facilities' offered up to corporate polluters and where the only thing that counts, is counted and turned into money is the tonnes of carbon in the trees.

For more information, see the WRM briefing [Trade in Ecosystem Services. When payment for environmental services delivers a permit to destroy](#) (available also in Bahasa Indonesia)

## 8. Certification / safeguards

That carbon offsets in general, and REDD projects in particular are prone to creating conflicts when project owners turn the land used by forest peoples into a carbon offset area, has never been disputed by proponents of carbon markets and REDD. Their response to those warning about such violence has been the development of voluntary guidelines that were said to be capable of preventing such conflicts. The UN climate negotiators have adopted such a set of safeguards and large REDD programmes have often pointed to their 'rigorous safeguards' to ward off criticism. In reality, these safeguards have neither prevented conflict nor have they ensured that the REDD funding largess of the past 15 years has trickled down to those who faced the prescribed land use changes, the communities whose land has been declared a REDD project area. To sell carbon credits, REDD projects, however, needed a stronger marketing tool: certification. Certification standards help dress up the REDD projects' stories of hypothetical futures without the projects with a lot of confusing calculations and mathematical formulas.

Certification therefore offers an external stamp of approval that turns stories about allegedly planned future emissions that were avoided into a marketable product: the tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>equivalent allegedly not released into the atmosphere as planned. Many certified REDD projects have been shown to

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have massively exaggerated the volume of emissions they allegedly avoided. Most REDD projects rely on a certification standard called Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) which is managed by an organisation called Verra. As widely documented, certification has neither prevented projects from selling carbon credits that exist on paper only nor has it avoided conflicts and the violation of community rights to their land.

For more information, see the WRM materials on [certification](#).

## 9. Fire and forests

A passage from an article in the WRM Bulletin 238 [Good fire or bad fire, who decides? A reflection on fire and forests](#) highlights how a capitalist conception of fire today dominates the world and determines whether a particular form of fire is judged to be good or bad: "Under capitalism, fire moves from the open landscape into boilers, turbines and combustion chambers. At the same time, the open fire used for thousands of years to create and maintain forests and agricultural fields becomes suspect, denigrated, even criminalized. A vastly more intense, destructive, fossil-fuelled fire inside engines and turbines, meanwhile, becomes a sign of civilization and progress, together with the extraction and waste that accompanies it. So when you turn on the TV during the dry season in the tree plantation zones of Chile or Portugal or the state forests of western North America, you can count on seeing scary reports about uncontrollable wildfires and the outlaws rumoured to be behind them. The reports never mention the fossil-fuelled fires that simultaneously rage invisibly inside every local automobile and thermal power station. Fires that – despite global warming and the devastation that accompanies fossil-fuel extraction – no one would ever dream of regarding as criminal. Nor do the reports mention that these two problematic phenomena are merely opposite sides of the same coin."

Few arenas demonstrate the impact of this dominant capitalist conception of fire on dominant responses to climate breakdown more clearly than REDD offsets: the use of small controlled fires for shifting cultivation is being denigrated and criminalized to supply carbon credits to those fuelling climate breakdown with their fossil-fuelled fire inside engines and turbines.

## 10. Protected Areas

The term is burdened with the violent colonial conception of Protected Areas as the means to protect 'nature' from Indigenous Peoples and preserve it as 'pristine wilderness' reserved for Elite trophy hunting and the enjoyment of scenic beauty and safari tourism. This colonial and racist approach to conservation has brought forth the 'fortress conservation' mind-set that exposes communities whose territories have been declared Protected Areas to unspeakable atrocities, human rights violations, violent evictions and the targeted destruction of their livelihoods. (1) Despite attestations from conservationist NGOs that these are the ugly deeds of the past, for many communities inside Protected Areas violent attacks remain a reality to this day. International conservationist NGOs are in one way or another involved in most Protected Areas, often in an alliance with companies that are driving deforestation elsewhere.

(1) WRM Bulletin 249 (2020). [Protected Areas feed corporate profiting and destruction](#).

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