

R9 Greenwashing: the hidden face of carbon offsetting

Proposer: écolo j

Agenda item: 6. Resolutions

Motion text

Over the last few years, we've seen many claims from countries, governments, institutions - like the European Union, and even from private companies (Pepsi, Amazon, fossils fuels companies such as Total Energies, Exxon, Shell, and so on) pledging to achieve "net zero carbon emissions" by 2050 or 2040 for "bolder" claims (looking at you, Amazon).

It sounds amazing. But how do they plan to make it happen ?

Firstly we have to explain what "net zero" actually means exactly, and why it's not such a great promise.

Net zero carbon emissions does not mean that a country or a company will stop emitting CO₂ into the atmosphere, but rather that they won't emit more than they already did. To achieve this goal, they can drastically diminish their activities... or continue as they do and "compensate" it by paying carbon offsets.

Those are the mandatory offsets that companies with massive carbon emissions have to buy to stay under the maximum amount they can emit per year. It was decided and set up in the Kyoto protocol in 1997 and then updated in the Paris agreement in 2015. The conditions are stricter, and not every project can be funded¹.

They are also the voluntary offsets, which compose the majority of the market. Companies can buy large amounts of offsets, like they would with stocks, in order to finance all sorts of projects. The prices for these can go as little as 10\$ for a ton of CO₂².

Even individuals such as ourselves are encouraged to buy into these plans when making purchases with certain companies (e.g. when buying a plane ticket with an airline, you can pay an additional fee to compensate for your flight emission).

What does the money from these carbon offsets plans actually do ? There are

companies specialized in carbon offsetting, like Nature Conservancy in the United States of America. They pledge that the money will help create climate regulation projects, such as wind farms, solar panels fields, biogas factories, protect forests from being cut down or for planting new trees. Forestry is the most popular choice, since it's really cheap.

There's also capturing the excess of methane emissions. It's more "nichey", but could be more effective than the others. Unfortunately, it's also the more expensive option, so it's not largely funded for the moment.

Here comes the controversy part.

On paper, it looks amazing, as if these companies (the ones selling the carbon offset, and the ones buying it) actually are interested in doing their part. But in the majority, these are just schemes, completely bogus, useless projects that have next to zero impact. They only serve to give them a good conscience and good press.

In some cases, the forest was never under threat of logging and was already considered a reserve. In others, the projects were funded, but then the forests were heavily logged anyway. One instance is in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (USA), where an offset market was created by Nature Conservancy in 2011 to "protect" 2000 acres of forest. Chevrolet was the first to fund it, but Disney funded the project from 2014 to 2022.

It gave the massive company the image of a carbon reducer leader. But the area was already protected before the market was set up, and there had been little to no danger of over-harvesting in the region³. The bought offsets are thus meaningless.

There are so many more examples of this kind, and not just in the United States of America, but all over the world, including in the Global South and in Europe.

"To actually make a difference, carbon offsets have to take more carbon out of the atmosphere or prevent more emissions that would otherwise have happened without them. This is called additionality. Without it, the credits are not offsetting anything."⁴

Another huge problem is the respect to indigenous lives in the territories "protected". In most cases, they are not even consulted about the future of their territories, or are even delocalized from them.

One case in particular comes to mind : the case of the communities of the Pira Paraná River, in Colombia, where companies have imposed a multi-million dollar

deal on them. They claim that the deal was signed by a false representative of their tribe. The Court agreed to their claim and ordered that the tribe officials be met and decide whether or not to sign a new, better deal.⁵

Last but certainly not least: the biggest risk we incur since these schemes' creation is that people and companies will emit more carbon emissions because they think they are compensating with the offsets, ignoring the real solution, i.e. reduction instead of compensation. And it may very well already be the case.

Climate change is the biggest fight our world and future generations will have to overcome, and it has to be taken seriously. We cannot continue as it is. We each have to limit our impact. Everyone can do their part, but not when big industries are emitting more carbon into the air than an entire population would in their entire lifetime. Policies have to be created about this. And they have been, but they weren't the firmest, and loopholes were taken by those who can.

We, the Federation of Young Europeans Greens, require our government officials proper and demanding laws, regulations and control on carbon offsetting: not just for mandatory ones, imposed by governments, but for voluntary ones as well. They compose the largest portion of this market and are proven ineffective and even harmful to our collective efforts. We also ask for more transparency and real effective change to be made to meet the climate pledges.

If we want this to be an efficient tool in the fight against climate change (and it can be), not just a greenwashing scheme, companies and industries will also have to, finally, stop doing as they do, and reduce their activities.

Our collective survival depends on it.

¹ For instance, the European Union does not permit forestry carbon offset projects.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61SWIYwCaSE&list=TLPOMjEwNzIwMj0y10b5niyV0w&index=5&ab_channel=TheEconomist (23/07/24)

²Ibid.

³https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW3gaeLByyY&list=TLPOMjEwNzIwMj0y10b5niyV0w&index=4&ab_channel=WendoverProductions (21/07/24 - 23/07/24 - from 3:08 min. to 3:46 min.)

⁴https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0Z_tzv9XCg&ab_channel=BloombergOriginals (from 21/07/24 to 23/7/2024 - 2:06 minutes to 2:22 minutes)

⁵<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240710-amazon-tribes-win-lawsuit-over-carbon-credits-in-colombia> (23/07/24)

Sources

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- <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/carbon-credits-hot-air> (23/07/24)
- <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240710-amazon-tribes-win-lawsuit-over-carbon-credits-in-colombia> (24/07/24)
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Reason

It is time for FYEG and the Global North to take responsibility for the greenwashing caused by the carbon offsetting. We hope other Member Organisations of the Federation of the Young European Greens will be interested in this topic that is fundamental for an organisation willing to take environmental, social and

historical responsibility.