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Awash with green: tackling the environment commercially

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KIERAN FORD, SEP 13 2011

“You can now buy complacency, political apathy and self-satisfaction. But you cannot buy the survival of the planet”[1]

George Monbiot speaks of one of the most prominent methods of combating climate change in global governance today – **carbon trading**. In the poly-centric world of contemporary global governance, states, transnational corporations (TNCs) and individuals all have the chance to combat climate change, caused by gas emissions. By paying companies or states to provide an equal carbon reduction to your emission, your release of emissions in to the atmosphere is balanced and thus becomes ‘carbon neutral.’ The ‘carbon market’ is becoming so successful, that between 2005 and 2006 the market nearly doubled in size, from US\$11 billion to US\$21.5 billion.[2] The purpose of this essay is to account for the success and popularity of carbon trading. I approach this first by exploring the mainstream discourse surround this method – ecological modernisation. I then explore the vast literature of criticism, through which, it will become apparent that the reasons behind the success of the carbon market have very little to do with a need or desire to reduce global emissions, but instead to further the success of Western economies through a process of ‘greenwashing’[3] current unsustainable practise. Through this exploration of the reality of carbon-offsetting it becomes clear that the carbon market is not only unaccountable and susceptible to fraud, it is scientifically unreliable and impacts disproportionately on local populations in the global South – giving rise to calls of ‘CO2lonialism’[4]. The essay concludes by accounting for the success in the carbon market in relation to genuine solutions to climate change, and paints a negative picture for the future, if global environmental governance continues to prioritise profit over the lives of future generations.

Carbon offsetting takes many shapes and sizes to cater for individuals, TNCs, or states. On an individual level, one can ‘offset’ ones carbon, by purchasing credits in order that, for instance, trees could be planted in order that their effect on carbon reduction will balance your emissions from for instance, a flight.[5] TNCs use carbon offsetting on a voluntary basis, often as a marketing tool; carbon neutrality being a selling point for consumers. This demand has given rise to many carbon offsetting companies such as Carbon Neutral Company[6] or GreenSeat[7]. On a global level, carbon trading is used to achieve agreed reductions in emissions from states through binding agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol. The Kyoto Protocol binds 37 countries and the European Union to reduce their emissions by 5% from their emissions levels in 1990.[8] Each country is given ‘credits’ according to that level of carbon emissions (1990 minus 5%) and three mechanisms exist in which to use these credits. The three mechanisms allow for countries that emit less than their allotted credits to sell their credits to other states (emissions trading) for states to over-pollute yet still retain overall reductions; to fund carbon-reducing projects (in order to offset emissions rather than reduce output) in developing nations (the Clean Development Mechanism or CDM); or for nations to fund carbon-reducing projects in other nations also with their own reduction targets under Kyoto (Joint Implementation or JI)[9].

One of the reasons why the carbon market gained so much support as a tool for combating climate change was that it fits squarely within the dominant discourse of global environmental governance: ecological modernisation. Propelled into the mainstream thought on the environment by the Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future,”[10] as the best path towards achieving sustainable development, ecological modernisation argues for the strong compatibility of economic growth and environmental protection.[11] As Adams writes: “here is the vision of

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Brundtland, with economic growth in a capitalist economy working within the constraints of ecological sustainability.”[12] The emphasis within the discourse is not to radically change the world we live in (such as other discourses – particularly civic environmentalism[13]) but to promote “a gradual transformation of the state and market to promote green regulation, technology, investment and trade.”[14] The tools of carbon-offsetting and carbon trading allow for reductions in carbon emissions to be achieved where they are cheapest, and therefore to incur less harm to the economy. The use of carbon trading creates new markets by turning carbon into a commodity, and by providing incentives to reduce emissions.[15] The discourse also relies heavily on the hegemonic position of neo-liberalism in mainstream political thought, with heavy emphasis on the role of the market and the individualisation of the body politic – individuals and TNCs are expected to act alone to achieve success and evade failure. A report by Carbon Trade Watch also notes that this individualisation is part of a wider discourse that shields us from questioning the greater social and economic reasons behind our lack of environmental sustainability. The report’s call for collective action to combat climate change[16] will be considered amongst suggestions for improved global environmental governance in the last section of this essay.

The discourse of ecological modernisation is incredibly dominant across global environmental governance. Discourses, being inherently hegemonic act as a set of beliefs and statements that also silence and de-legitimise counter-discourses.[17] Throughout the remainder of the essay it becomes apparent just how dominant the discourse of ecological modernisation and its supporters in positions of power are, in the face of widespread and well-documented criticism of the discourse and particular it’s primary method of the use of carbon markets. In the following section, I explore some of the most common criticisms of carbon markets. Through such a critique it becomes clear that not only do carbon markets lack utility in genuinely combating climate change, but that the criticisms also reveal the reasons why the method is so popular amongst businesses and states as a method of globally tackling environmental issues.

Heidi Bachram wrote an article entitled: “Climate Fraud and Carbon Colonialism: The New Trade in Greenhouse Gases.”[18] I shall examine these two criticisms first – fraud and colonialism.

Bachram suggests that carbon trading is fraudulent for two reasons. One, the science of calculating the benefits of a particular carbon offset scheme is so unscientific and such guesswork that “with such an imagined alternative future in mind, a corporate polluter can conjure up huge estimates of the emissions that would be supposedly produced without the company’s CDM or JI project.”[19] Companies can therefore do two things: sell more credits, and as a result, pollute more. The environmental impact is worsened, yet the company makes more profit.[20] Secondly, there is a lack of regulation in the market. Bachram cited one example where the UK government paid out incentives to a company to make a reduction in pollutants, when, at the same time, the company was required to make those reductions independently under EU law. The lack of carbon trading regulations meant that UK taxpayers’ money was used by a private-sector firm to keep EU law.[21] The same report by Carbon Trade Watch (CTW), mentioned earlier, highlights another example of ‘climate fraud’ when the Rolling Stones offset 2000 trees for a tour in 2003. They paid £8.50 per tree to a carbon offsetting company Future Forests (who claim they plant trees, but in fact simply purchase carbon credits from forestry owners) but CTW managed to obtain the information that out of the total £16,140 paid to Future Forests, only £860 made it to the forest owners, Highlands and Islands Enterprise – the rest was kept by the company.[22] The ability to make vast amounts of money out of carbon markets make carbon trading a lucrative solution to environmental issues – which goes some way to explain its prominence on the global stage.

Bachram’s second claim was that carbon markets accounted for a new colonialism. This claim is corroborated by many others including the Norwegian journalist, Harald Eraker, investigating offset projects in Uganda, who coined the phrase ‘CO2lonialism’.[23] The reason for this criticism, lies in the fact that offsetting projects – especially CDM projects – are projects that are situated in the global South, in order to offset the continuing pollution from the global North. In the case of offset plantations – this can in many cases mean vast tracts of a developing country’s land being bought for very little. For instance, the Norwegian company Tree Farms, bought 5,160 hectares of forest reserve land in Uganda for only US\$410 per hectare. The vulnerability of developing countries in the face of the global North was made evident in another case in Uganda, when, in response to a request for a fairer deal, Ugandan negotiators were told, “our plane leaves to Germany tonight; if you don’t sign now, there will be no deal.”[24] Moreover, as a World

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Rainforest Movement briefing mentions, Uganda is leasing off its land for 99 years – which means that Uganda will not be able to use its own land to offset any future emissions it may have.[25]

These vast plantations have great impact on local populations. In an attempt to appease local communities evicted from lands now reserved to protect the unsustainable lives of the global North, local farmers were allowed to farm the plantation lands. The true impact of this was that local communities ended up being plantation managers and carers for free – or even, in some cases, paying the land owners to use the land. In one example, a family was forced to pay as rent, 100 of the 250kg of maize produced in the harvest. An EU-supported study likened the system to that of a feudal system.[26] The same logic that supported colonialism and feudalism – greater economic gains for those in power over the vulnerable – remain in place today in the case of carbon markets – in order to support the continuing pollution of the powerful.

Analogies of the medieval era also surround another critique of carbon trading. George Monbiot and Carbon Trade Watch, both draw on the historical sale of absolutions, to describe the dark amorality of carbon markets. Citing John Lothrop Motley, writing in 1855, Monbiot quotes: “the sale of absolutions was the source of large fortunes to the priests... God’s pardon for crimes already committed, or about to be committed, was advertised according to a graduated tariff.”[27] CTW notes how monks felt they had a surplus of ‘good’ as monks that they could therefore sell to those with a sin ‘deficit.’[28] The analogies are uncanny. The sale of carbon ‘absolutions’ in the form of offset credits is a great source of “large fortunes” to many companies such as GreenSeat[29], Terrapass, or Future Forests[30]. Under the Kyoto Protocol, those with a surplus have a capacity to sell to those with a deficit under the ‘emissions trading’ mechanism.[31] Most importantly, is to note how a great deal of literature on the issue considers emissions, and the continuous rise in global emissions to be a ‘crime.’

What is most surprising, when considering the success of carbon markets, is the lack of scientific reliability and credibility that surrounds the entire issue. The majority of the scientific criticisms centres around ‘carbon sinks.’ Carbon sinks (usually tree plantations) are projects that ‘soak up’ CO₂ in order to offset any emissions. Many studies and reports have shown that carbon sinks lack the scientific evidence to prove their worth, but have great scientific weight to prove that they lack any utility in combating climate change.

The basic concept of carbon-offsetting is to balance the carbon cycle. Carbon goes in, so you manage the atmosphere and take carbon out. However, the carbon cycle is an incredibly complex natural process, and one that houses great scientific uncertainty. One of the complexities is the fact that there not only exists an active carbon cycle of plants, organisms, water and the atmosphere, but also an inert pool of carbon housed within fossil fuels. The offset logic suggests that the carbon released from the inert pool into the active cycle can be balanced by the use of plants as carbon ‘sponges’ yet the scientific evidence for this simply does not exist. There is uncertainty particularly in two things: the capacity for each plant or tree to soak up carbon; and the impact that the transfer of carbon from the inert pool to the active cycle has on the atmosphere. This is particularly salient when one considers that the transfer from the active cycle to the inert pool is a process that takes millennia – the same process that gave us coal and gas in the first place.[32]

Yet, the amount of carbon balancing possible and the amount of plantation trees that are given the chance to return to the inert pool is minimal when one considers the amount of ‘carbon leakage’ that plantations – particularly monoculture plantations – produce. Carbon leakage is the unwanted release of carbon as a result of carbon sink projects. This can come as a direct result of monoculture plantations which often lead to a lack in biodiversity, soil degradation, and a loss in plant and organism life – all of which release carbon back into the carbon cycle. Indirect carbon leakage also results from the eviction of local populations within plantations. Overcrowding at plantation boundaries for instance (e.g. in Mbale district, surrounding a plantation run by the Dutch organisation FACE, 450 people live in every square kilometre[33]), leads to overly heavy agriculture, and further degradation of land, and further ‘leakage.’[34] Evictions of local populations can lead to further ‘leakage’ because people, hugely angry at their treatment by the authorities, take out their anger in the destruction of plantation trees.[35]

Plantations have often been the cause of conflict between local populations and authorities and this is no less the case in Mount Elgon National Park (MENP) Uganda where a plantation project is run by FACE and the Uganda

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Wildlife Authority (UWA). FACE, though constantly in denial of their responsibility, are implicated in the long-running dispute over the border of MENP because their 10-metre wide eucalyptus plantation has re-created the park border that has been the scene of clashes between indigenous peoples and the paramilitary UWA since MENP became a national park in 1993. As Lang and Byakola put it, “rather than offsetting carbon emissions... FACE... [has] been offsetting their own responsibility for evictions.”[36]

In the face of all the criticisms and lack of scientific credibility for carbon trading, Carbon Trade Watch explain the continual use of carbon trading as a useful tool for TNCs to ‘greenwash’ their actions – and in so doing, delay the transition to a low-carbon economy.[37] Despite arguments laid out in documents such as the Stern report that describe clearly that “the benefits of strong and early action [against climate change; shift to a low-carbon economy] far outweigh the economic costs of not acting,”[38] states, TNCs and individuals are simply not prepared to change. ‘Greenwashing’, according to CTW, is the constant use of jargon, and the repetition of the narrative of carbon-trading that, in the words of a US-based offsets website, Terrapass “me and my car are doing something good for the planet.”[39] As a tool, a recent Carbon Neutral Company report explains how “the most effective strategies [of ‘carbon management’] can deliver a number of benefits beyond carbon reductions including an increase in sales, cost reductions, staff engagement and an enhanced corporate reputation.”[40] ‘Carbon management’ is clearly however a tool of greenwashing where carbon reductions are a subordinate benefit to the others, and BP (who spent millions on their re-branding to ‘Beyond Petroleum’) is a prime example. BP’s business adviser Kerryn Schrak explains why they withdrew a carbon-offsetting project: “very few people had heard of the programme and, even if they had, they didn’t understand it... We were spending a lot of money purchasing offsets for a customer base who had no idea we were doing it for them.”[41] It is clear then, that not only is carbon-offsetting a great tool for marketing and a great way to make money; if it stops working as a marketing tool, companies will spare no time in removing the projects.

The strength of the argument against the use of the carbon market is clearly weighty, yet the dominance of the carbon market as a tool in global governance also clearly demonstrates the strength of its discourse. In the final section of the essay, I explore a counter discourse – civic environmentalism – and explore some of the methods and tools this discourse promotes. This, again, adds weight to the reasons why carbon trading has been the ‘easiest’ option for global governance.

Civic Environmentalism is the ‘bottom-up’ approach to solving environmental issues.[42] It rejects the importance of governance through the use of markets as a ‘top-down’ approach that will only breed conflict. Though civic environmentalism is a plural discourse and highly fluctuating between more radical resistance forms of a more reform-based discourse, “an overarching theme is that the inclusion of local stakeholder participation and indigenous knowledge is a necessary precondition.”[43] Baekstrand and Loevbrand promote a more reform-based approach in which small-scale projects in the global South are operated more in conjunction with local populations. This approach could only operate though, with the greater recognition amongst the power base of the global North that the developing world’s consumption must reduce.

This is where we hit the crux of the issue. The types of changes that would need to be implemented under this competing discourse are vast. The use of vast amounts of the global South in the hands of the global North would have to cease and offsetting by planting trees would have to end. Yet, if this were to happen, a change in the Western paradigm would have to shift too. Not only would the science of global governance against environmental issues be revealed as the power of the ecological modernisation discourse is removed, but Western TNCs would have to embrace a shift to a low-carbon economy that required genuine change rather than simply the absolution of climate sins. As mentioned by Carbon Trade Watch earlier, a more cooperative approach would also awaken the public to the wider economic and social processes that gave us climate change in the first place.[44] The nature of the ecological modernisation discourse to shield these processes however plays to the strengths of TNCs. The discourse is so strong in the current ‘climate’ that a shift in paradigm is not needed in order to retain the legitimacy from the uninformed masses. The future of environmental global governance seems to remain in the unscientific, amoral use of carbon markets.

In conclusion therefore, we have learnt that the primary method of globally managing environmental issues is through

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the use of carbon trading. This has resulted from the hegemonic success of the ecological modernisation discourse – a discourse immortalised in the Brundtland report in 1987. The strength of this discourse has allowed this practise to remain at the forefront of summitry and policy decision-making even in the face of such scientific criticism; multiple reports highlighting the fraudulent nature of companies in the lucrative business of carbon trading; the new colonialism arising from a heavy reliance on monoculture plantations to offset the pollutants of the global North; the devastating impact of carbon plantations on local populations and the promotion of alternative methods and discourses to solve environmental issues on a global level. Rather than providing a genuine solution to climate change, carbon trading “is like pushing the food around on your plate to create the impression that you have eaten it.”[45]

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