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Green land grabbing : money-spinning operations, dispossessed communities, little impact on CO₂ emissions

In an article published on hungerexplained in July 2024 regarding the latest developments observed in the field of land grabbing, Jomo Kwame Sundaram drew attention to the emergence of "green land grabbing" [[read p.3](#)].

What is this ?

It essentially involves the **grabbing of land by carbon sequestration projects in order to offset carbon emissions from other activities.**

The principle is quite simple. An investment fund buys land, usually in a low- or middle-income country located in the 'South' (Africa, Asia, Latin America), and plants trees there. As the trees grow, they will sequester carbon in their trunks, branches, and roots. The fund will issue carbon credits corresponding to the sequestered carbon and sell them to companies that will thus 'offset' the emissions generated by their operations.



In an article on this topic [\[read\]](#), [GRAIN](#)¹ mentions the case of Microsoft, the multinational created by Bill Gates [\[read\]](#), which, in June 2024, purchased 8 million carbon credits from the [Timberland Investment Group](#) (TIG)² fund, which **'is raising US\$1 billion to buy and convert pasture lands to large-scale eucalyptus plantations across the Southern Cone of Latin America.'** This purchase, however, is just one of the operations in which Microsoft is involved. By multiplying these purchases and obtaining enough of these credits, **Microsoft will be able to achieve the goal of net zero emissions, without even having to change the nature of its emitting activities or reduce its emissions!**

This is the approach that is now being substituted to the one we have criticised on hungerexplained back in 2013, when condemning the REDD+³ programme and its "carbon concessions" [\[read p.10\]](#), which sometimes lead to absurd and very unfavourable situations for local populations whose livelihood traditionally depends largely on the forest.

The main advantage of these concessions was that they allowed companies to continue their activities without having to resize or invest in cleaner technologies. However, the real cost of the adjustment was transferred to local populations who suffered the consequences of the restrictions imposed on the land included in the "carbon concessions." Furthermore, the compensations these communities received were incomparable to the value of the carbon credits from the sale of which investors derived their profit. This mechanism primarily favoured the rich and powerful, to the detriment of the poor and weak [\[read\]](#). Additionally, numerous scandals surrounding the REDD+ programme have shown that the sequestered carbon was greatly overestimated and that the rights of local populations were often violated [\[read about an example in Cambodia documented by Human Rights Watch here\]](#).

The new formula adopted, that is supposed to be of **'high integrity'**, is **tree planting**. Let's see whether this is true, as the areas involved have been multiplied by 3 over the past three years according to the [World Rainforest Movement](#) (WRM) [\[read\]](#).

¹ GRAIN describes itself as **'a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems'** [\[read\]](#). We have already had several opportunities to report on the work conducted by this organisation [\[read for example here and here\]](#).

² TIG describes itself as a group that **'seeks to deliver sustainable timberland investments to institutional investors at scale'**. The group provides **'expertise, rigor, and diligence to every aspect of the management of [their] clients' assets'** and gives **'access to a complex and technical asset class'** [\[read\]](#).

³ REDD : Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries. The symbol '+' stands for additional forest-related activities that protect the climate, namely sustainable management of forests and the conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. According to the [Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), the REDD+ programme covers a forest area of approximately 1.7 billion hectares, which are over 90% of tropical forests and over 75% of forests in developing countries [\[read\]](#).

Of course, TIG is not the only fund participating in this new formula. For instance, the major Dutch bank Rabobank is also involved. GRAIN informs us that through its Acorn programme of tree planting on the lands of small coffee and cocoa production units in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Rabobank sells carbon credits at a price of \$28 each, of which it takes 20% for itself and its local partner, with the remainder going to the producers. The problem, as GRAIN tells us, is that these credits are issued based on **an overestimation by 600% of the carbon sequestered** by the planted trees. Furthermore, **'the Côte d'Ivoire government says Rabobank is likely double dipping as its project overlaps with a World Bank-funded scheme that has already generated and sold carbon credits from trees planted on small cacao farms in the same area!'**» [\[read p.3\]](#)

This appears, therefore, to be a very profitable business that operates in some kind of a virtual world disconnected from reality, which, in the words of GRAIN, has seen the emergence of a **'new industry of climate consultants and carbon brokers'** who continue **'promoting the idea that emissions from fossil fuels can and should be offset by planting trees or other crops that sequester carbon'**. Not exactly a display of great integrity!

The resurgence of land grabbing

You will probably remember that after the colonial waves of the 19th century and that of the establishment of large industrial plantations in the 20th century, which saw the seizing of vast stretches of land at the expense of local populations, there was a wave of land grabbing involving tens of millions of hectares by countries and companies, at the time and in the wake of the food security crisis of 2007–08 [\[read p.7 and following\]](#).

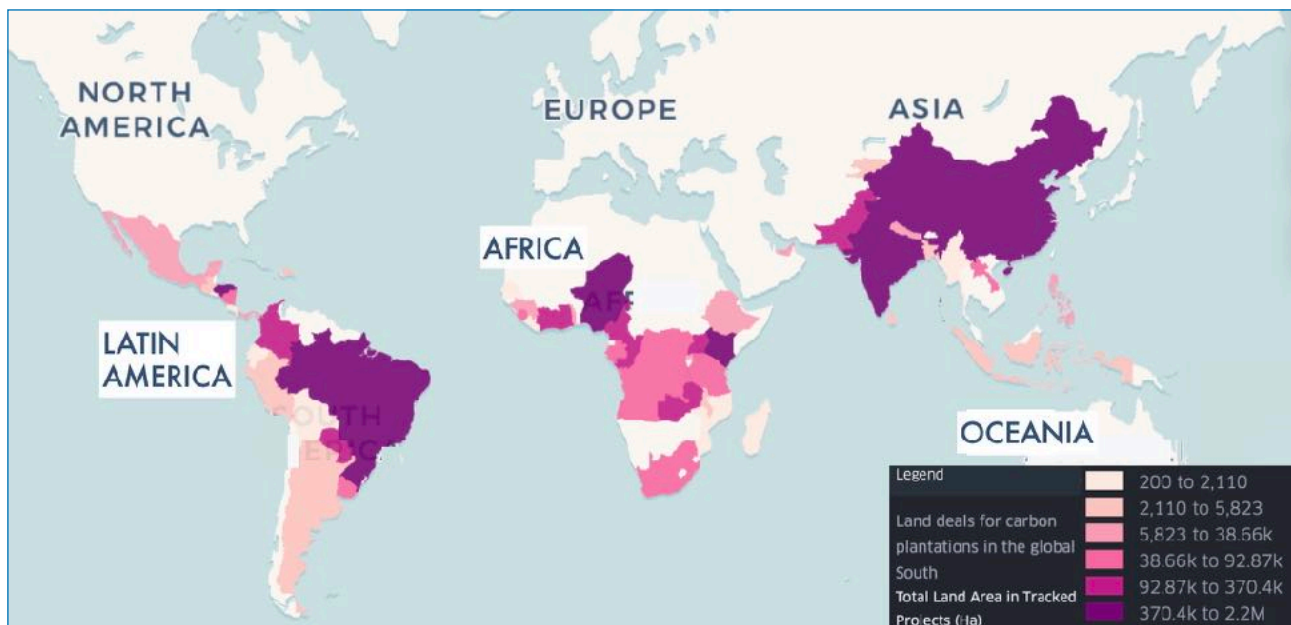
This movement, which had slowed down, has picked up again and GRAIN estimates that it involves **'279 large-scale tree and crop planting projects for carbon credits that corporations have initiated since 2016 in the global South... [that] cover over 9.1 million hectares of land -- an area roughly the size of Portugal.'** (Figure 1).

In total, 52 countries are involved in these projects, with 4 countries hosting half of the projects (China, India, Brazil and Colombia) for their own industries.

The beneficiaries of this process are companies headquartered in Europe (89), China (46), India (31), and the United States (30). Among others, we find Meta, Apple, Danone, Coca-Cola, Mercado Libre, Carrefour and Amazon. Several banks and major financial operators are also involved in these projects.

The amount of money involved potentially amounts to 25 billion dollars and has already led to scandals, embezzlement, and fraud, some telling examples of which are given in GRAIN's article.

Figure 1 – Area of land deals for carbon plantations in low and middle-income countries, by country



Source: based on [GRAIN, 2025](#)

The main sham, however, is to claim that these tree plantations could provide a solution to climate change, given that the amount of carbon sequestered is negligible compared to the over 40 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent emitted by human activities in 2022 [\[read\]](#). In fact, GRAIN estimates that the emission reductions from the analysed projects ‘**would only amount to 55 million tonnes of CO₂ per year**’. Do the math yourself to realise that this would represent less than **1.4 per thousand!!** We are far from achieving the goal!

In addition, if the plantations established are like the forest in the photo on the first page of this article (taken from the TIG website), it is clear that their impact on biodiversity would be negative, as very few plants or animals live in this type of dark and dense plantation⁴.

Conclusion

The outcome of this operation is easy to assess: lucrative financial transactions, local communities losing their land or access to government lands they once used, and being subjected to constraints in exchange for a meagre compensation, as well as a negligible reduction of CO₂ emissions, all wrapped in a very professional communication.

⁴ We have here a typical example of the danger of trying to solve a problem (greenhouse gas emissions, in this case) without considering the impact that the proposed solutions would have on other related issues, such as biodiversity or the poverty of local populations. This is a trap to avoid, and one that we have already highlighted to our readers several times on [hungerexplained](#).

To know more

- GRAIN, [From land grabbers to carbon cowboys: a new scramble for community lands takes off](#), 2024.
- World Rainforest Movement, [A new destructive business: Carbon credits from tree plantations](#), 2024.
- Human Rights Watch, [Carbon Offsetting's Casualties – Violations of Chong Indigenous People's Rights in Cambodia's Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project](#), 2024.

Website :

- Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change : [What is REDD+](#).

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained](#) related to the topic:

- Opinion: [Land Grabs Squeeze Rural Poor Worldwide](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2024.
- Opinion: [Carbon Markets Biased, Distorted, Undermined](#), by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2024.
- [When dealing with complex and intertwined crises, mainstream economic solutions prove ineffective and generate more inequalities – The case of the climate crisis](#), 2022.
- [Forests: rural communities caught between markets and the objective of conserving the planet](#), 2013.
- [Land: an unequally distributed, threatened but essential resource](#), 2013.