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The text below is extracted from the article: Corbera, E. and A. Martin (2015) Carbon offsets: accommodation or resistance? *Environment and Planning A*, 47: 2023-2030.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this exciting panel, and for letting me sit next to some of my most admired scholars... I will reflect today on some of the issues that I have recently addressed with my colleague Adrian Martin, from the University of East Anglia, in a special issue of the journal *Environment and Planning A*, published last October and entitled “Carbon offsets: accommodation or resistance?”

In December 2015, 195 countries gathered in Paris and adopted the first-ever universal, legally binding global climate deal. They expressed their joint willingness to keep the global average temperature below 2 degrees Celsius by the end of this century (whatever this means), but they did not adopt any explicit emission reductions targets against which they could be held accountable for. In the end, the glass half full for some, half empty for others. In my view, nothing substantially new after Paris.

For political reasons, the words ‘carbon markets’ or ‘carbon offsetting’ do not explicitly appear in the Agreement. However, these approaches are indirectly referred to in several of the Agreement’s provisions. Article 6, for example, encourages “cooperative approaches that involve the use of internationally transferred mitigation outcomes towards nationally determined contributions”, which in turn suggests that approaches like the Clean Development Mechanism will continue to have a role in international climate change mitigation. Article 5 also refers to another important “north-south” cooperation framework, that is the idea of reducing emissions from land-use change, deforestation, degradation or managing forests to “enhance carbon stocks”, the so-called REDD+ mechanism, the funding of which might be attached to quantified and verified emission reductions.

These provisions are not surprising to any of us. They are “business as usual” in international climate policy. Carbon trading and offsetting activities have become mainstream mitigation options during the last 15 years; there are now 18 regional, national or subnational carbon markets in operation worldwide. The Clean Development Mechanism alone has almost 8000 projects and programs of activities approved and running. It is also true, nonetheless, that the financial value from both carbon markets and offset-based projects has progressively diminished.

Carbon trading and offsetting activities constitute a process of *commodification* through which a given good that formerly existed *outside* the economy, a tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent that is not emitted into the atmosphere, enters the world of money, markets and thus of potential speculation and financialisation. Property rights over any emission reductions are transferred to project developers and subsequently to carbon buyers. Researchers have shown that local people are transferring such rights with insufficient knowledge about *what* they are selling and how much these rights are worth, which raises the question of whether the particular nature of carbon and carbon markets means that such property transfer is vehemently unfair.

As Larry Lohmann and Peter Newell have argued in the past, a specific discursive and institutional framework accompanies the commodification of carbon. There is a narrative that naturalizes the idea that a ton of carbon dioxide can be abstracted from its cultural and ecological context and is thus physically commensurate, ethically equivalent and exchangeable with units anywhere else. And there is a policy framework that facilitates such practice. The idea that polluting companies in the northern hemisphere should pay workers in India, rural women in Kenya or small farmers in Tanzania to ‘clean up the air’ has become very often uncritically adopted by project developers, and by other participants too. Getting involved in projects that provide short-term benefits and that might result in sustained finance over time becomes a powerful incentive that overrides other potential concerns participants might have.

Carbon offsets have also an ‘unruly’ or ‘uncooperative’ character: their commodification is not simple because of uncertainties in the measurement and realization of project-based emission reductions. Some have demonstrated how carbon offsets rely on ‘problematic’ procedures and accounting assumptions about emission reductions, and how such challenges often translated into unmet social benefits, such as delayed or reduced carbon payments. Seemingly, complex property relations around land use have complicated who is to be held accountable for emission reductions and both carbon and non-carbon benefits.

I would sustain that the evidence that carbon offsetting activities are contributing to deepen capital accumulation by some while dispossessing others from carbon rights and/or land resources is still thin, but very much needed in order to make a stronger case for undermining this type of mitigation policy frameworks. The work of Gareth Bryant and colleagues around CDM projects in India is revealing in this regard: their analyses demonstrate, both quantitatively and qualitatively, how the most economically powerful actors in the projects’ value chain, including carbon buyers, developers, and standard-provision organizations, have made profits at the expense of local participants.

Seemingly, we need to understand how the interplay between projects' design and the existing social-ecological and cultural conditions influences outcomes. I recall the example, and there are many others in the literature, of a carbon-led agricultural development project in Kenya where project developers' awareness of local gendered relations allowed for the implementation of a broad portfolio of agricultural activities that were interesting and attractive for both men and women. One can probably say with confidence that local participation in carbon-offsetting activities can be more explained by people's willingness to engage in a development-like project and to benefit from its co-benefits than by the direct financial returns they might derive from carbon sales, as far as their participation does not result in significant labor, economic or time-related burdens.

In conclusion, the ethics of burden shifting and the dispossessing nature of carbon trading should be understood in terms of the local, social-ecological conditions and project designs that determine real-world outcomes. In places, the project participants can result better off, at least in some respects, whereas in other cases local communities are not even considered as relevant participants and end up as evident losers. But the carbon market component of these projects remains problematic, especially if we want to consider these activities as "development". Thousands of communities are being financially incentivized to enter into a market that currently suffers from massive oversupply, bottomed out prices and no concrete prospect of a revival in demand. It is also a market that is so complex that brokers are key figures in the commodity chain and can draw substantial rents from what remains of a sale price. This complexity also precludes strong understanding of the market along lines that would normally constitute 'informed consent'. Therefore, viewed like this, it is easy to sympathize with the view that the carbon-offset market, and carbon markets more generally, are designed to serve polluters, not the victims of pollution in the global South.

Thank you for your attention.