

# Centring Emission Rights Expropriation and the Role of Unpaid Women's Labour: Rethinking Climate Justice from an African Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract

The implementation of market-based top-down climate mitigation policies is resulting in the expropriation of emission rights of non-polluters while fuelling accumulation by powerful actors. Redirecting political energy from African feminism to alternative non-extractivist climate solutions requires the recognition of the role of women's unpaid reproductive labour in enabling the production and extraction of an emerging commodity in the scramble for African resources: carbon credits<sup>1</sup>. Uncovering the injustices behind false solutions and top-down green policies also requires collaborative and intersectional work among different social movements.

**Keywords:** Green Extractivism, carbon credits, carbon markets, rural subsistence, non-extractivist alternatives.

## Introduction

For a century and a half, Africa's resources have been extracted and exploited, fuelling external wealth accumulation. Along with the transfer of resources to the metropolises, these processes have resulted in the impoverishment and underdevelopment of former colonies (Pereira and Tsikata, 2021). But what does extractivism look like in the context of climate change and the pursuit of solutions to the current environmental crisis? Furthermore, which forms should political responses take within African feminism in re-strategising and reversing the unevenness of the burden carried by and imposed on women in the Global

South? To answer these questions, it is important to understand how significant the role of women's unpaid reproductive labour is in enabling the production of carbon credits. Furthermore, we need to appreciate how affected households increasingly depend on women's unpaid productive and reproductive labour in order to survive the impact of projects that aim to extract emission rights. Thus, this brief paper is a call to action for African feminists on the continent to challenge injustices resulting from the expropriation of emission rights and to redirect our political energy into resisting and pursuing alternatives.

## **Carbon credits as the next big commodity to be extracted from Africa**

The response of capitalism to the climate crisis is the new wave of green investments, aligned with the imperative of reducing emissions. Hence, projects such as tree plantations and biofuel production, in addition to investing in "more sustainable" portfolios like renewable energy projects (water, solar, and wind energy), are now in vogue. But such investments have essentially resulted in further expropriation, inequality and exclusion while fuelling capital accumulation in the name of the "fight against climate change."

At the same time, more efforts are being directed to other projects that maximise emission reduction and carbon sequestration to respond to global demands for carbon credits. The World Bank Group's (2023) *Climate Change and Development Report* strongly states that African countries should turn their efforts towards reducing as much as 70% of their emissions by investing an average of 1,4% of their gross domestic product annually. But what exactly does it mean to reduce emissions in African countries?

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+)<sup>2</sup> is one of the most known mechanisms deployed to reduce emissions. It relies mostly on projects that allow for an "exchange" between carbon emitters (e.g. owners of oil refineries) and owners of carbon sequestration processes (e.g. a forest reserve), who are understood to be producers of carbon credits. What this means is that besides "tangible" resources like minerals, intangibles such as rights for emissions are also being capitalised and extracted. This constitutes the essence of green extractivism —a variation of extractivism in which the commodity

that is being extracted are emission rights. Green extractivism, as a framework, goes further in terms of understanding what is being expropriated from the rural poor. It goes beyond the understanding of extractivism as expropriating livelihoods and/or exploiting labour, underscoring the fact that besides land and labour, affected households are also losing their right to emit in a bid to “produce” carbon credits.

An empirical example of this process is the implementation of REDD+ in Mozambique. The Gilé National Reserve is a colonial conservation area that contributes to as much as 50% of income and food for more than 8,000 households located in the buffer zone of the reserve. With the re-designation of this reserve as a REDD+ conservation area, households have been restricted from accessing the forest and its resources. Fishing and hunting are no longer options for residents and access to the forest to collect medicinal plants, fruits, mushrooms, and other forest resources has also been restricted. Moreover, because they are residing in the buffer zone, they have been forced to change their production systems and techniques in order to protect the biodiversity of the reserve and to accommodate maximum carbon sequestration (i.e. the “production” of more carbon credits). In other words, affected households have been forced to give up their rights to emit. These include the ability for households to rightfully use and benefit from ecological resources, such as practising agriculture without imposed restrictions, fishing, hunting, and even use of the forest for traditional ends.

By using the extractivism framework, one is able to grasp how emission rights are being expropriated, transformed into carbon credits and transferred to industrialised countries or multinationals as carbon credits (“permits to pollute”) (Bruna 2022). In practice, for instance, restricting households of hunting or fishing rights for their subsistence reduces a certain amount of emissions in Mozambique (e.g. one ton of CO<sub>2</sub>e is avoided or reduced by one household), so that a buyer of carbon credits (e.g. a factory in an industrialised region) can compensate their pollution (also proportionate to one ton of CO<sub>2</sub>e – equivalent carbon dioxide emissions). So, whatever emissions are avoided/reduced/sequestered in Mozambique are going to be extracted to compensate for emissions elsewhere.

The creation of this new commodity known as “carbon credits” means that there is an increased demand for land, water and biodiversity for its production. Inevitably, this in turn leads to expropriation and exclusion. It also implies changes in the ways of living and livelihood strategies of rural households. Rural peoples are forced to shift from their local farming techniques to the imposed labour-intensive techniques required for the protection of the biodiversity in the reserves and to maximise the production of carbon credits. A good example is switching from the traditional slash-and-burn techniques to those like slash-and-char that would require more labour to clean the same size of land. Overall, rural households have to avoid emissions in various ways so that carbon credits are “produced” – and then transferred to buyers who have the license to keep polluting – or the right to keep emitting or compensating for their emissions.

Green extractivism includes those projects that are essentially expropriating and extracting emission rights and transforming them into carbon credits to be sold in international markets. It is not only limited to conservation areas, but also includes multiple ways of producing carbon credits, such as REDD+ based on reforestation where households are contracted to plant and take care of trees that maximise carbon sequestration. Such projects promote avoidance of forest degradation through implementing what project developers considered to be “more sustainable farming techniques”, such as climate-smart agriculture that usually require more labour from the household to maintain productivity levels. They also include substituting household technologies (e.g. selling of clean cooking stoves and solar panels) and many other projects that aim at reducing emissions by directly affecting or imposing changes on the livelihoods, strategies, and ways of living of rural households.

So, one could argue that climate crisis solutions are all about reducing emissions. However, looking closely at carbon market schemes, these solutions are actually all about expropriating emission rights. Rural households are denied their ability to rightfully use ecological resources and biodiversity. So, the production of “carbon credits” is based on cutting into the necessary consumption of the rural poor and denying them the right to emit, by either restricting their access to conservation areas or through the imposition of farming techniques that require more labour from the household to maintain social reproduction. But where exactly is this labour coming from?

## Unpaid reproductive women's labour fuelling global climate solutions

Once again, natural resources, biodiversity, and labour from Global South countries constitute the main “raw materials” for salvaging capitalism's recurring crises. But the gendered implications of these processes must be highlighted. When emission rights are expropriated from households, they are forced to adopt alternative strategies for survival and to guarantee subsistence and social reproduction. Women's labour is critical in realising these goals. *Feminist Africa* has documented how the costs of extractivism are borne by women through their unremunerated social reproduction work and cheap labour (Pereira and Tsikata 2021; Andrews 2021). In the face of an environmental crisis, capitalism puts a price on rural women's ability to relate to nature and appropriates the relationship between rural subsistence and the environment.

By cutting into the basic consumption of rural households and restricting their emissions, capitalism forces them to adopt alternative livelihood strategies, including men migrating to urban centres in search of jobs. The women who stay behind are left with the burden of subsistence farming, even selling their labour to neighbouring farms. This is in addition to women's traditional caring and social reproduction responsibilities. Moreover, because of REDD+, women have to endure longer distances to access water and forest resources. As if all that is not egregious enough, they are forced to use more labour-intensive farming techniques prescribed by the guidelines of “climate-smart agriculture.”

In sum, expropriating emission rights from rural households means more labour exploitation, particularly the unpaid reproductive labour of women. Ultimately, the burden of the climate crisis solution is carried by rural women as affected households increasingly depend on female unpaid productive and reproductive labour to respond continuously to the loss of resources and livelihood opportunities.

## **Redirecting political energy to pursuing non-extractivist alternatives**

Social science has provided evidence of the social inefficiency of carbon markets schemes, but the environmental efficacy of such schemes has also been questioned. Among other issues, overestimation of emission reductions is a big problem (see Gill-Wiehl, Kammen and Haya 2024; Haya et al. 2023). In other words, the quantity of emissions reduced is higher on paper than in reality. What this means is that carbon credits might not be effectively compensating for the quantity of emissions they claim to be recompensing. At the end of the day, because carbon credits are not effectively compensating for the requisite emissions, the latter are likely to be increasing.

Despite issues of social and environmental efficacy and powerful contestation from transnational social movements, carbon markets are currently being promoted not only as the necessary solution, but also as a growth opportunity for Africa. The biggest proponent of this theory is the African Carbon Markets Initiative (ACMI), a consortium of Global North private sector actors that was launched in 2022<sup>3</sup>. Ostensibly, the primary aim of ACMI is to transform carbon credits into one of the biggest exports from Africa. In reality, maximising the production of carbon credits, as historically seen in the rush for resources during the previous scramble for Africa, will only lead to land expropriation, negative environmental effects, and negative impacts on rural subsistence and development (Bruna 2022; Bruna and Monjane 2023) and expropriation of emission rights. A deeper understanding of the unfolding green extractivism has opened our eyes to the fact that top-down climate change mitigation, adaptation policies, and energy transition are equally based on uneven economic, social and ecological exchange-relations that are unconscionable to African countries. It is a “new” form of colonialism (Mwangi 2023).

Moreover, the fact that the Global North plans to transform carbon credits into the number one export from Africa is very telling. It reveals the potential extent to which extraction and expropriation of emission rights will impact rural livelihoods, particularly for African women. This calls for re-strategising on the part of African feminists to forge clearer pathways for climate action from below, leading to more equitable and just environmental futures. This

paper is a call to redirect political energy in resisting and pursuing alternatives to the top-down mitigation pathways and false solutions like those endorsed in ACMI. But more importantly, Africa should pursue alternatives that lead to non-extractivist solutions which speak to the priorities and socioeconomic vulnerabilities of its societies. In short, the continent should move away from instrumentalising its resources and labour power for the benefit of external global climate and economic goals.

As Britwum (2022) argues, awareness of how persistent inequalities are produced by capitalism and its modification of patriarchy emphasises the need for feminist scholarship and activism to seek alternative frameworks and to pursue transformative agendas. By centring women's unpaid reproductive labour when addressing the asymmetric and exploitative relations being perpetuated by carbon credits production, we would be unmasking injustices behind false solutions and top-down green policies. This could also be useful for collaborative and intersectional work among different social movements such as those advocating for justice in the areas of land, gender, agriculture, and the environment. Andrews (2021) also suggests that to confront extractivist models of development, African feminist alternatives should be put forward on all fronts, including trade, finance, budgeting, law, agriculture, and technology at international, regional, national, local, and household levels.

Environmental social movements globally call for climate reparation or the payment of climate debt in order to compensate nations that suffer from climate change impacts. However, African feminist scholarship and activism should critically analyse which models of compensation benefit those most affected by climate change. The extractivist, market-based model currently adopted in regional and international green policies benefits mostly financial brokers in the Global North (Mwangi 2023).

Policies that aim to solve environmental vulnerability usually lack the understanding that the root causes of the problem lie in two main factors. First, is the fact that developmental policies and programmes adopted to mitigate climate change continue to be based on the extraction of natural resources. Second, is the problem of exploiting African labour, particularly women's unpaid productive and reproductive labour. Historically, this is what has determined socioeconomic vulnerability, which in turn creates environmental vulnerability.

Without a thorough and wide-ranging reassessment of these issues, it would be impossible to move away from the colonial and extractivist model that resulted in the impoverishment of Africa in the first place.

In the midst of a global imperative to reduce emissions, it is urgent to demand alternative ways for the biggest polluters to cut their own emissions. These alternative strategies should focus on changing consumption and production patterns and levels, rather than relying on compensating emissions or decarbonising the economy with technological fixes, which subsequently require further extraction to maintain the same patterns of consumerism and ways of living in the Global North.

But before systemic and structural changes are adopted, carbon markets continue to grow. At a minimum, we need to strategise and pursue better terms of incorporation within the existing system. This includes bargaining for better prices of African carbon credits and better mechanisms of compensation of expropriated households that actually account for ecological losses. Additionally, more action is needed regarding ongoing regulation of carbon markets in Africa. New or existing regulations, laws and policies are being shaped to accommodate extraction of emission rights and other market-based solutions to climate change. Knowledge gaps, regulation, and legislation (regarding property rights, compensation mechanisms, pricing, and so on) are contributing to the risk embedded in these schemes. These developments call for collaborative and integrated work from African feminists. The challenge lies in the convergence of diverse agendas of varied social movements without stifling the African feminist agenda.

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## Notes

1. Critical perspectives consider carbon credits as the equivalent of “permits to pollute.” The carbon market consists of the purchase and sale of carbon credits, which allow buyers to continue polluting, or compensating for their pollution, the equivalent in tons of carbon dioxide or the equivalent amount of a different greenhouse gas (usually referred to as CO<sub>2</sub>e). For more information see, (<https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-are-carbon-markets-and-why-are-they-important>, February 2024).
2. REDD+ is a climate change mitigation solution developed by Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Forest Carbon Partnership refers to REDD+ as countries' efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and foster conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks ([Forest Carbon Partnership Facility n.d.](#); see also [UN Climate Change 2024](#); [UN Environment Programme 2024](#)).
3. With the support of the UN, USAID, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and others (see Africa Carbon Markets Initiative 2023).

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