

Carbon Trading and the Sundarbans

United States Interest conflicts with local people's rights



Capitalist Approach of Climate Change

Recently a boost of debate on market mechanism of climate change is observed over the world. Carbon trading, particularly REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), CDM (Clean Development Mechanism), and LULUCF (Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry) are some hot cakes now and on the table of Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and high profile green organisations. The discussion had started in 1997 when market approach of climate change was initiated under Flexible Mechanism of Kyoto Protocol. But the question of money was given priority when Copenhagen Climate Conference (COP-15) failed due to geo-political warp and woof between Annex-1, advance developed and most vulnerable countries. The intentions are accelerated in recent Cancun Climate Conference (COP-16). Bangladesh is also a part this capitalist climate game.

Fencing the Sundarbans

A report of Bangladeshi national vernacular newspaper on 9 November 2010 stated that Bangladesh can get around 150 billion Taka by selling reserved carbon of the Sundarbans (Mahmud, 2010). The amount of money estimated in a survey headed 'Sundarbans Forest Carbon Inventory-2009' conducted by Forest Department (FD) of Bangladesh under assistance from USDA Forest Service, USAID and other collaborators. It is to mention that USAID has been supporting to establish co-management in the Protected Areas (PA) of Bangladesh through Nishorgo Support Project (NSP) since 2003 which was succeeded by Integrated Protected Area Co-management (IPAC) project from 2008 (USAID, 2009). IPAC is a project to establish sustainable co-management through institutionalisation and policy formation. It is being implemented by Forest Department, Fisheries Department and Department of Environment (DOE) with technical and implementation support from 6 International and National NGOs, 2 universities and 7 corporate institutions (IRG, 2009).



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According to the report, objective of survey is to estimate reserve of carbons of the Sundarbans and support to sell it in international markets. The Sundarbans can capture 56 million tonne of carbon (annually?) and its price is at least 150 billion taka in the international markets, the index said. The index estimated that Bain (*avicennia alba*), Passur (*xylocarpus mekongensis*) and Kankra (*bruguiera gymnorhiza*) trees reserve high amount of carbon while Geoa (*excoecaria agallocha*) and Keora (*sonneratia apetala*) reserve least, and Sundari (*heritiera fomes*) reserves moderate amount of carbon. The report did not disclose the amount of carbon captured by each variety of the mangrove trees.

The newspaper did not discover whether the amount, Taka 150 billion, can be got for once or per year. Therefore, the report stated that Indonesia has got US\$ 1 billion (approximately Taka 70 billion) from Oslo Fund by selling their carbon reserve. The Bonojibi Odhikar Suraksha Mancho (BOSM) and Sundarbans Watch Group (SWG), two civil society watchdogs working on the Sundarbans applied to disclose the report, but the authority denied.

My Trees, My Culture

The Sundarbans is the largest single tract mangrove forest in the world. The total area of the forest is 6017 km² in which 61 percent covered by land and 39 percent by water. It is a rich area of biodiversity with 334 plant species, 39 species of animal, 53 species of mammal, 330 species of birds, 120 species of fishes and 8 species of amphibians (Giri, Tieszen, Loveland, Masek, & Duke, 2010). It is not only a treasure of beauty but also a potential source of economic development. A large amount of forest resources including 11,000 tonne fuel wood, 28,000 tonne Golpata (*nypa palm*, for roof of local house), 650 tonne Mele (reed, for making local mat), 9,000 tonne Geoa (*excoecaria agallocha*, for newsprint paper and matchbox) and 7,500 tonne branches of Sundary (*heritiera fomes*, for Hardboard) are collected annually from the Sundarbans. It is the largest national source of honey also. The Moual (honey collector) communities collect more than 250 tonne honey yearly from the Sundarbans (Mehedi, Shelley, & Hossain, 2009).

More than 300 thousand people of the adjacent 5 districts directly and other more than 1 million people indirectly depend on the Sundarbans for their life and livelihoods. These Bawali (wood & golpata collector), Moual (honey collector), Jele (fisher folk), Chunari (snail collector), Sutar (boat maker), Kathkurani (dry wood collector) and indigenous Munda communities has been living in this region since at least 250 years ago (Mehedi, 2010). They believe on several goddess and saints of the Sundarbans and their mysterious acts which protect the forest biodiversity. Irrespective of religion and race, they honour and pay worship to Bonobibi and other gods. These beliefs and culture, traditional knowledge, skills and customary laws developed through hundreds years of practices. It is not simply a part of their culture; it also ensures sustainable use of the forest resources (Kabir & Hossain, 2008).

The forest and its people are parts of the whole ecology and are interrelated with each other. The forest is surviving the people as a source of their life and as a safeguard from natural disasters. Consequentially the people protect the forest by sustainable level of resource collection. Any eviction from the forest will destroy the livelihood and culture of forest people. On the other hand, the forest will be denuded by the profit-driven aggression.

The Vicious Axis of Greed

But selling carbon is emerged as more important to the power-nexus than the rights of forest people, sustainable use of the forest and economic development of the region through establishment of forest-based industries as they are interested to serve the interest of most emitted industrialised countries. Though REDD is a romantic and extremely appealing idea in the common eyes. But the devil is in the details of it. While the major multilateral institutions, including United Nations, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and many large environmental organisations are supporting it, forest dependent communities (Global Forest Coalition, 2010), environmental activists (Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, 2010), indigenous organisations (Indigenous Environmental Network, 2010) and social movement leaders (Via Campesina, 2009) realise REDD as a Trojan Horse.

The whole world is now urging for a legal binding protocol of reducing carbon emission before the end of Kyoto Protocol in 2012. A number of most emitting Annex-1 countries already have set limit of emission. The United States is also under civic and political pressure and initiated a policy to limit emission from some sectors. In the mean time, Barak Obama pledged to cut 17 percent by 2020 and 83 percent by 2050 (CNN, 2010). In these consequences, multinational corporate companies would face shrinking of their profit making process. To continue their market expansion and economic aggression, the capitalist governments of rich countries are creating opportunities to invest in the poor and least developed countries (LDCs) by using carbon trading mechanisms. Calculating carbon sequestration capacity of carbon reservoirs (forest) and carbon sinks (sea) has emerged as an emergency for the developed countries like USA. It is to mention that the least developed and developing countries has no binding to reduce carbon emission according to UNFCCC.

From this perspective, the rich countries including USA and European Union has already purchased forest carbon reserves of Brazil (REDD Plus, 2010), Indonesia (REDD Monitor.org, 2010), Thailand, Congo, Ghana, Kenya (MMERAUER, 2010), Ecuador (Fast Start Finance, 2010), Guatemala, Cambodia (Climate Connect, 2010), Papua New genie and many other LDCs. Additionally the most polluting industries have been shifted to these countries. It brings profits in twofold: on the one hand, the developed countries can show that they have reduced emissions from industrial sector, and they can adjust emission with the purchased carbon from other poor countries. On the other hand, the cruel market expansion is confirmed through shifting profit-treadmills. Therefore, Carbon Trading is not different from neoliberal economic order; it is new form of imperialism.

Fair Price? What is fair?

According to the report published Bangla daily, per tonne carbon is selling at US\$ 15-20 in international market? It is totally extravagant. Price of carbon is far lower than it described. On 14 February per tonne carbon sold for only US\$ 2.75 which was average US\$ 4.00 in last few years and it is only one-sixth to one-eighth of Carbon Offset (Hamilton, Chokkalingam, & Bendana, 2010). Considering long term impact of carbon emission, per kilogram (not tonne) carbon should be priced at least 15 dollar. Even the environmentalists who are supporting Carbon Trade estimated the rate should be at least 50 dollar per tonne. But the price never upraised than 15 dollar after 2005.

Therefore, on the one side, the poor countries do not get fair price of their carbon. On the other side, corporate companies are accelerating their emissions since carbon trading is more profitable than emission cut. It is clear that no capitalist market mechanism can reduce actual emission of the world whether it is REDD, CDM or LULUCF. All of these mechanisms are accelerating the emission and destroy of the earth.

The REDD campaigners are shouting that the money received from this approach will create an opportunity for the poor countries towards economic growth, development of forest peoples and finally environmental equilibrium of the country. The real picture is totally reverse: indigenous communities of Central Africa has totally evicted from their forests by REDD project implementers. In some areas of the world, REDD project agents finished their liability by providing non-countable grants and bribery like education and health services, energy efficient oven and laptops for the protesting leaders.

In the name of carbon trading, most of the forest covered areas of poor and least developed countries might go under control of transnational corporate companies in near future. These most vulnerable countries may get a very minimum amount from REDD and other mechanism due to fluctuation of market. Besides, the Annex-1 countries may not pay the demanded compensation, which is an agreed issue now, as they do not keep their promise of donating at least 0.7 percent of their GDP to the LDCs. They never fulfil this commitment and now the amount is shrinking day-by-day. Some rich countries are also trying to shift their ODA to the climate fund.

The Known Faces

In 2009, the 'Carbon Bill' was presented at US Congress. 'Emission Reducing Targets' accounts the lion part of this bill which stated: "United States will invest to protect native forests of Africa, Latin America and Asia and these forests can sequester more carbon from atmosphere. As a result, US companies may enjoy that amount of carbon as purchased credit (Point Carbon, 2009). In the same year, US Forest Service published a leaflet with describing its mission in Bangladesh. Estimating carbon reserves and searching options for carbon financing is its major motto, as stated (USDA Forest Service, 2009).

All initial activities has been done very carefully and sequentially. In October 2009, USAID organised a high level Workshop in a paush hotel in Dhaka. In the workshop US Ambassador recommended that Bangladesh should take the opportunities of Carbon Trading. He also warned that Developing Countries' may liable for 40 percent of global emission within near future (US Embassy - Dhaka, 2009). Just after few days of this workshop, a study funded by USAID showed that carbon emitted from biomass fuel (Black Carbon) of Asia is affecting the atmosphere at an alarming level (USAID, 2010). USAID and other collaborators under IPAC placed the 'Sundarbans Forest Carbon Inventory 2009' on the table. In the mean time, European Union has joined the USAID collaborators in funding at Sundarbans.

A long term objective of United States can be clearly chalked out from recent sequential activities. Excessive estimation of carbon reserve and warning on biomass fuel consumption may unite in same point: selling the forest carbon! Any Bangladeshi can remember the late 90's when a large number of high profile energy specialists estimated that the country have trillions of natural gas and those should be exported! Now, we know, those reports were prepared for serving corporate interests, not Bangladeshi people.

Crack in the Foundation

There is a serious error in the definition of UN REDD Project. According to the definition, the UN defines a forest as any area larger than 500 square metres with crown cover of 10 per cent and trees capable of growing two metres high. The differences between native forests and monoculture industrial tree plantations cannot be identified by this definition (UN-REDD, 2009).

This definition is so forge that the corporate companies (or any other) can plant Oil Palm, Pine, Eucalyptus or even genetically modified plant varieties replacing clear cut the Keora due to its lower sequestration capacity, and to make more profit. Using the opportunities of 'temporarily unstocked areas' the REDD Project implementing agencies can clear cut the forest for industrial monoculture plantation (Lang, 2009). As a result, the forest dependent communities will be deprived from their traditional and basic human rights on the forest and, on the other hand the Government, transnational companies and other project implementing agencies will clear cut the Sundarbans and plant commercially viable trees. Already the Palm Oil companies have destroyed the swamp forests of Indonesia and Malaysia under REDD Project (Hance & Butler, 2011).

The UN REDD Programme is totally conflicting with United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights where both of the the state parties and UN system is committed to ensure Forest People and Indigenous Communities fundamental rights on the forest resources.

Struggle is Right: Rights is Life

Form and implementation strategy of UN-REDD is still on the table to be finalised by world leaders. A part of the activists critique REDD for commodification of nature and natural resources. The other parts justify REDD for protecting forest biodiversity and resolving climate crisis. According to their opinion, it is the only way to stop global warming. The human rights and environmentalists protested both of the opinions. REDD cannot change its characteristics due to its market-based approach and continue allowing more emission even when human rights measures will be incorporated in it. It is an alternative initiative to legalise the destruction of the earth by rich countries and giant companies.

Reducing carbon emission at source is required to save the mother earth from devastating impacts of climate change. To this end, demands for a legally binding protocol and to stop excessive emission at source. A united and combined campaign is essential to achieve these goals. Local and international level laws should be adopt with options of punishment for excessive emission of transnational giant companies. Supporting the climate victims of LDCs (including poor countries) is a must for developed countries. But existing international systems are totally ineffective because they fail to protect aggression of industrialised most emitting countries to the poor people of most vulnerable countries.

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