Maasai International Solidarity Alliance

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POLICY BRIEF

Using International Carbon Credits to meet EU Climate Targets? Not a fair/sustainable solution.

Focus: International carbon credits, human rights and environmental integrity

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SUMMARY

On 2.7.2025, the European Commission (EC) proposed to integrate “high-quality” international carbon credits to meet its the 2040 climate target. The EC argues this will support the EU and third countries in achieving net greenhouse gas reduction trajectories compatible with the Paris agreement objective. The EC justifies this with system flexibility and efficiency and reserves the possibility of a later revision.

This proposal entails considerable risks for human rights violations, undermines ambitious climate policy and threatens ecological integrity. It creates a significant incentive to outsource emission reduction measures instead of achieving actual reductions within the EU. As a result, pressure on land in the Global South might further increase - resulting in land grabbing. Without clearly defined, verifiable and enforceable rules as well as complete transparency, there is a risk that the proposed amendment will legitimize global pseudo-solutions and lead to a relapse into old mistakes of climate policy. Numerous studies have shown the negative human rights impacts of carbon projects on local communities, including the right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples, driving people off their land. The late and current UN Special Rapporteurs on the rights of Indigenous Peoples have raised serious concerns about carbon markets and called for a moratorium.

Carbon projects are false solutions. A meta study concluded that “less than 16 % of the carbon credits issued to the investigated projects constitute real emission reductions” (Probst et al., 2024). Furthermore, ecosystem restoration has limited potential for climate change mitigation even if orchestrated with a pervasive shift towards sustainable, low-emissions economies globally (Tölgyesi et al., 2025).

The EC does not need international credits to meet its climate goals. The ESABCC (European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change) clearly states in their assessment from June 2025 that reaching the 90 % goal by 2040 is feasible domestically.

KEY POLITICAL MESSAGES:

- The EU must focus on climate responsibility and justice and ensure an ambitious, socially just, transparent climate policy with priority for real domestic reductions.
- The EU should not institutionalise greenwashing and structural land grabbing by approving international carbon credits to meet its target.
- The EU must take their responsibility towards respecting human rights seriously.
- If the EU wants to use international carbon credits at all, it should only be to increase ambition beyond 90%, not to meet its target. Furthermore, land-based projects should be excluded altogether.

THE THREE MAIN ISSUES WITH THE COMMISSION PROPOSAL

1. Outsourcing 3% of the EU’s emissions of 1990 means outsourcing up to 30 % of our climate mitigation commitment

The „3% of 1990“ rule de facto means a much larger share of the emissions budget for the target year. Calculations by the Ökoinstitut, Carbon Market Watch and the New Climate Institute show an actual margin of 140 –150 Mt CO2e per year, approx. 30% of permissible emissions in 2040. This is because 3 % in the baseline data from 1990 are much higher compared to 3 % of the 2040 target.

The value was not specifically justified but introduced as „political leeway“ in the proposal; in addition, an upward appeal is not excluded. The proposal does not contain any binding standards under EU law. „Credible and transformative activities“ are only mentioned in the explanatory memorandum which is not binding at all. In the absence of a precise definition and test procedures, the term becomes a gateway for greenwashing and bogus markets.

In practice, a significant part of the EU‘s climate responsibility could be outsourced via so-called and not defined „high-quality credits“, with high risks to integrity, ambition and climate justice.

Demands:

- The EUs responsibility is to decarbonize its own economy. International climate finance should, if at all, be additional to domestic action and not a substitution for it. Under no circumstances should international carbon markets play a role for compliance in the Emissions Trading System (ETS).

- The (Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) should reflect the highest ambition and not replace domestic action (Article 4 Paris Agreement). Crediting should, if at all, only be used for target exceedances (>90 %).

- Supporting developing countries should occur through dedicated climate finance mechanisms as outlined in Article 9 of the Paris agreement, not through offsetting domestic obligations.

2. „High Quality Credits“ are a gateway for human rights violations and land grabbing

The Commission refers to the general impact assessment for the 2040 target. Yet, a thorough impact assessment specifically looking at the risks, governance and human rights impacts of international offsets as well as enforcement mechanisms is completely lacking.

Article 6.2 of the Paris Agreement fails to uphold equity in projects. Countries are only required to disclose their cooperative approach without accountability or clear safeguards. It does not contain the requirement of an independent grievance mechanism to provide redress.

Although Article 6.4 of the Paris Agreement contains environmental and social safeguards as well as a grievance mechanism for redress, especially in relation to the right land, the mechanism is very weak. Furthermore, access to grievance and appeal mechanisms are not accessible for communities due to language barriers and costs involved.

There is no mandatory exclusion of problematic project types (land-based projects like forest management or soil carbon projects, or risky technological removals).

Demands:

- Mandatory exclusion of land-based projects like forest management or soil carbon projects, or risky technological removals. No crediting from projects with social or rule of law deficits.
- Exclusion of carbon credits in areas occupied by peasants, Indigenous Peoples, local communities or biodiversity hotspots. Projects not integrating social safeguards/gender equity should also be excluded.
- Independent and comprehensive ex-ante impact assessment on human rights, social/cultural effects and environmental integrity. The current procedures under Art. 6.2. And 6.4 are not strong enough. The assessment must furthermore properly account for lock-in risks, costs of inaction, and intergenerational fairness.
- Mandatory involvement of NGOs and victims‘ representatives in quality assurance, continuous evaluation of climate integrity and human rights situation. Elaboration of grievance mechanisms which are accessible to the affected population.
- Disclosure of all contracts, data and financial flows in international offsets; independent audits and public access to register data.

3. Risks to social justice and development options

Selling cheap reductions from the Global South weakens one's own national development paths and exacerbates international inequalities („climate equity gap“).

Most of the profits from offsets go to project developers and intermediaries in the Global North; only a fraction goes to local value creation.

Demands:

- Carbon finance vs. climate finance: Offsetting must never be seen as a substitute for climate finance under Article 9 of the Paris Agreement; this logic should be clarified in the EU-Commission proposal.

- Shifting the burden from the main polluters to the poor is undermining climate justice. Polluters must take climate action without delay and support our transition away from the fossil fuel economy. Indigenous Peoples should not bear the cost of our lifestyles.

Carbon Credits and the Human Rights of the Maasai in Tanzania

The study conducted by the Maasai International Solidarity Alliance (March 2025) on soil-carbon projects on the voluntary market documents:

- Missing, flawed FPIC process: information asymmetries, opaque processes, women and young people systematically excluded, contracts not transparent or accessible.

- Long-term contracts (30–40 years): lock-in effect for current and future generations, conflict with local land use planning cycles and reduced mobility to respond to drought.

- Risk of conflict & marginalisation: restriction of Indigenous knowledge and collective use of grazing areas, risk of intra-community and inter-communal tensions.

- Contract law and governance gaps: de facto withdrawal from contracts undermined, discrimination in disputes in favour of investors and authorities, currently no clear legal requirements due to the lack of legislation at the Tanzanian level.

- Lack of scientific evidence for carbon removal: No valid data that the imposed changes in grazing practices will lead to additional carbon storage.

MISA recommends a 5-year moratorium in Tanzania on all such projects on Maasai land and calls for robust legal and scientific frameworks. Investors such as Volkswagen are driving these problems and should withdraw from these projects.

CONCLUSION

According to the current state of science, civil society analysis and empirical evidence, the European Commission‘s proposal to integrate international carbon credits into the 2040 climate target entails considerable risks for human rights violations, loss of land for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and lacks ambitious climate policy and ecological integrity.

THE EU MUST FOCUS ON CLIMATE RESPONSIBILITY AND JUSTICE AND ENSURE AN AMBITIOUS, SOCIALLY JUST, TRANSPARENT CLIMATE POLICY WITH EXCLUSIVE FOCUS ON REAL DOMESTIC REDUCTIONS – AND MUST NOT FURTHER INSTITUTIONALISE GREENWASHING AND STRUCTURAL LAND GRABBING.

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