

Winning the greenwashing race: BP sponsoring the 2012 Olympic games

by Carbon Trade Watch
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April 16th marks the 100 day countdown to the start of the Olympics: 100 days for some of the world's most disreputable corporations like Rio Tinto, Dow and BP to keep using the Olympics as a smokescreen for environmental and human rights abuses the world over. The list of Olympic Sponsors reads like a rogues gallery of some of the most controversial corporations in the world. It makes you wonder if they included how much pollution, turmoil and displacement has this company been responsible for as one of the selection criteria. If you are in London, come to the Launch of Greenwash Gold 2012 Campaign where members of communities impacted by Olympic sponsors all over the world will be introduced

As the Olympics prepare for the international games in July in London, UK, the organization committees are already under serious criticism for allowing BP, the oil giant, to be the major sponsor and official carbon offset partner of this event.

As the primary sponsor of the Olympics, BP is offering carbon offsets as a way to neutralise their transport emissions by buying carbon credits, which support low carbon development projects around the world. [i] The oil giant will use six projects around the world to supposedly offset the emissions from the games; a tree-planting project in Kenya; wind turbines in New Caledonia; bioenergy from landfill gas in Turkey; methane capture at a dairy farm in the US; a biomass project in Brazil; and biomass energy in China. These projects, which are strategically located one in each continent, are supposed to absorb the same amount of greenhouse gases that all the needed airplanes, ships and car transport, food deliveries, the lighting of huge stadiums and more than 5,000 official vehicles which BP will fuel itself. [ii]

So don't worry! We do not need to use less or be responsible of our own emissions. We do not even have to make the most polluting companies accountable for their dirty practices as long as they offer a cheap and easy solution that makes us think we (and them) are doing enough. As long as somewhere else there is a project taking all the measures needed to absorb the pollution, there should be no problem! Right? Well, not so much.

Carbon offsets are often presented as emissions reductions or as a way to be carbon neutral however they do not reduce emissions. Pollution continues at one location with the assumption that an equivalent emissions saving will happen somewhere else (mostly in the Global South). For corporate polluters, carbon offsets are in general a cheaper option than changing their polluting practices. Moreover, it has become an easy way to create a green image used as moral cover.

Some of the key problems with offsetting are: [iii]

- Somewhere else? Carbon offset projects do not report the amount of land that is needed to plant trees, install wind turbines, a hydro dam or other projects. They often result in land grabs, local environmental and social conflicts, as well as the repression of local communities and social movements. In other words, the people who have had least to do with causing climate change are those who are most adversely affected by these clean, development projects.

- Shifting responsibilities. Historically polluting governments and companies, which should be responsible for cleaning up the climate change problem, are allowed to buy credits from projects installed "somewhere else"TM. These projects often make existing conflicts for those living near them worse.
- 1 + 1 = 3. The value of offset projects is premised on constructing dubious "equivalences"TM between very different economic and industrial practices to ensure that a single commodity can be constructed and exchanged. This does not erase the reality that burning more coal and oil is in no way eliminated by building more wind farms or planting monoculture tree plantations.
- "Carbon neutral"TM Offset projects allow companies and countries to buy their way out of responsibility with theoretical compensations elsewhere, while legitimizing their dirty practices. This is simply called "greenwash"TM.
- Colonial paradigm. The use of "development"TM and "poverty"TM rhetoric masks the fundamental injustice of offsetting hands a new revenue stream to some of the most highly polluting industries, while simultaneously offering companies and governments, mostly from the North, a means to delay changing their own industrial practices and energy usage. The burden of the climate crises is then mostly placed onto local communities.
- Profitable future telling. Offsetting rests on "additionality"TM claims about what "would otherwise have happened"TM without project (an unknowable future). This offers polluters and financial consultancies the opportunity to create stories of possible futures calculations in order to secure carbon credits. The net result is that offsetting tends to increase rather than reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Locking in pollution. With many projects acting as the "savers"TM of the excess of emissions, it appears there is no reason for making real reductions at source.

BP's sponsorship provides however several new opportunities for the company to associate itself with the excitement of the Olympics, as a recent study showed how BP's brand image is benefiting from the sponsorship which it is still grappling to resurrect following the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster in 2010:[iv]

- Sustainability Partner: BP will provide what they call "responsible transport"TM, which in simple words means, agrofuels. They state "we will promote biofuels: from a new technology that unlocks the potential of energy grasses; a new technology that converts sugars into diesel and a new generation of advanced fuel molecule for blending with petrol".[v]
- Oil and Gas Partner: BP has the responsibility of providing fuel for more than 5,000 official Olympic vehicles. Yet an ENDS Report analysis discovered that over 99% of the fleet would be using conventional fuel, and that of BP's three listed "advanced" agrofuel projects, two can realistically be considered "first generation" (and thus much less sustainable) rather than "advanced". BP has previously failed to meet government sustainability targets for the first generation agrofuel it supplies in the UK.[vi]
- Carbon Offset Partner: BP promotes carbon offsets as a way to make the Olympics "carbon neutral". While offsets do not deal with the real causes of climate change, they often intensify social and environmental problems in the localities where these are implemented. Carbon trading takes us away from any real economic transformation, since it allows the constant over-production and over-consumption of energy, windfall profits, and "green" corporate images that benefit their sales.
- Cultural Olympiad: BP is able not only to strengthen its existing relationships with the Tate, Royal Opera House, British Museum and other London venues, but also host events all around the UK. Within the context of Olympic hype, BP is able to maximize its exposure as a supporter of the under-funded arts. However, this is taking place against a backdrop of increasing numbers of people from within the arts speaking out against BP's long-standing involvement in arts sponsorship.[vii]

With this context, early this year, several environmental groups sent an open letter to the International Olympic Committee stating that:[viii]

BP's positive reputation [also] allows its investments in controversial new "frontier oil" projects to go virtually unopposed.

by the media, the government and the public. Examples include the recent decision to go into Alberta's highly carbon-intensive and locally destructive tar sands, despite the calls by local Indigenous communities for no new tar sands extraction projects; and the announcement this month that BP's Russian partner organisation TNK-BP will accelerate development of five giant oil fields in the pristine and vulnerable Russian Arctic, in a deal said to be worth \$12 billion. BP's business model involves continuing to extract fossil fuels long into the future, playing a central role in ushering in irreversible climate change. In other words, it is one of the least sustainable companies on earth.

On February 23rd, Indymedia reported that hundreds of BP signs across London were targeted by activists protesting against the company's role as "Sustainability Partner" of the London 2012 Olympic Games. Around the capital, protesters hit petrol stations, advertising hoardings, and BP-sponsored cultural institutions as the Tate museum, disfiguring hundreds of the famous BP "sunflower" logos. One of those taking part in the action, Bridget Peterson, said, "BP has closed its solar business and is now plunging into highly polluting tar sands, exploring the pristine Arctic and restarting its deepwater drilling operations. These extreme forms of energy extraction are incompatible with stopping climate change, yet BP pursues them greedily while gloatingly advertising itself as 'Sustainability Partner'." [ix]

The official London 2012 Olympic Games website was faked by protesters on Wednesday 11th of April demanding that BP be dropped as one of the event's official sponsors.[x] The following day, BP's Annual General Meeting was once again an uncomfortable experience for the Board, since they were confronted by questions on oil spills, tar sands, Olympic sponsorship and interplanetary escape pods.[xi]

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[i] BP target neutral, <http://www.bptargetneutral.com/our-projects/>

[ii] Marketing, February 2012, BP's brand image benefits from London 2012 sponsorship, claims research, <http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/news/1117665/BPs-brand-image-benefits-London-2012-sponsorship-claims-research/>

[iii] For more information on offsets and the carbon market see: www.carbontradewatch.org

[iv] Marketing, February 2012, BP's brand image benefits from London 2012 sponsorship, claims research, <http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/news/1117665/BPs-brand-image-benefits-London-2012-sponsorship-claims-research/>

research/

[v] Fuelling the games, www.bp.com/sectiongenericarticle.do?categoryId=9036378&contentId=7067213

[vi] The ENDS Report, 23 August 2011, Queries over BP biofuels adverts, <http://www.endsreport.com/30154/queries-over-bp-biofuels-adverts>

[vii] An open letter to the organisers of the London 2012 Olympics (2012), <http://www.no-tar-sands.org/campaigns/british-petroleum-bp/bps-sponsorship-of-london-2012-oilympics/letter/>

[viii] An open letter to the organisers of the London 2012 Olympics (2012), <http://www.no-tar-sands.org/campaigns/british-petroleum-bp/bps-sponsorship-of-london-2012-oilympics/letter/>

[ix] <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2012/02/492855.html>

[x] Magnay, J, 11 April 2012, London 2012 Olympics: Anti-BP activists carry out sponsor sacking hoax as protests grow, Telegraph, www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/9198561/London-2012-Olympics-Anti-BP-activists-carry-out-sponsor-sacking-hoax-as-protests-grow.html

[xi] No Tar Sands Network, April 15 2012, Protesters dragged out of BP AGM after board avoids uncomfortable questions, <http://www.no-tar-sands.org/2012/04/protesters-dragged-out-of-bp-agm-after-board-avoids-uncomfortable-questions/>

[xii] More information on the event at: <http://londonminingnetwork.org/2012/03/launch-of-greenwash-gold-2012-campaign/>