Please sign-on a statement of solidarity to Open Letter from Acre/Brazil on REDD

by World Rainforest Movement
Thursday, 18 April 2013

The state of California is in the final stages of deciding whether or not to accept offset credits from REDD offset projects in Acre into the California cap-and-trade system. A working group set up to make recommendations on the issue to the CA government supported such an inclusion (the composition of the WG participants was far from balanced or without bias). Conservation organisations in the US and in Brazil as well as Acre state government officials are lobbying heavily for such an inclusion of REDD offset credits from Acre into the CA carbon trading scheme. They argue strongly that the process in Acre that set up REDD (the elaboration of the SISA law) was inclusive and with wide participation of civil society. The reality however was far from that! The Open Letter of groups from Acre and Brazil exposes that reality of a lack of genuine consultation and calls on the government of California to not accept REDD offsets from Acre for use in their trading scheme.

It is becoming increasingly clear that this decision is seen as a lifeline to REDD offsets and REDD in general, that accepting REDD offsets from Acre would set a precedent that would inject new life into the dashed hopes for REDD offsets being accepted in 'compliance' carbon markets, and that the consequences of the decision go beyond California and Acre.

We are therefore seeking your endorsement for a statement of solidarity (see below and attached) with the groups and individuals that are sending the Open Letter (also see below and attached) to the CA government.

Please let us know by monday, April 22, if your organisation wants to sign on to the statement of solidarity. Please respond to winnie@wrm.org.uy

The Open Letter as well as the short statement of solidarity are attached.

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STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY

To:

- The Honorable Jerry Brown, Governor of California

- The California REDD Offset Working Group

CC: Mary Nichols (Chair, California Air Resources Board), Ashley Conrad-Saydah (Assistant Secretary for Climate Policy, California Environmental Protection Agency), Arsenio Mataka (Assistant Secretary

for Environmental Justice and Tribal Affairs, California Environmental Protection Agency), La Ronda Bowen (Ombudsman, California Air Resources Board)

We are writing to express our endorsement of the Open Letter sent to you by Brazilian organizations and individuals urging you not to accept REDD offset credits from Acre into your cap-and-trade scheme.

We believe that their demand for a meaningful participation in any consultation process in Acre related to legislation or programmes linked to REDD activities that already or potentially affect their way of life is legitimate. Forest-dependent peoples have the right to give or withhold their consent to activities that deeply interfere with their way of living. Decisions regarding REDD+ legislation or programmes already do and will in future affect forest peoples' way of life. Given that such meaningful participation was absent from REDD+ processes in Acre or during the elaboration of recommendations to the government of California in this matter, we urge you not to include REDD offset credits into the California carbon trading scheme.

We also share the additional concerns on the REDD+ mechanism and support the demand made in the Open Letter that instead of including REDD offsets credits from Acre in its carbon trading scheme, California should rather engage in efforts to reduce emissions at home.

Yours sincerely,

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Open letter to the government of California

To:

- The Honorable Jerry Brown, Governor of California

- The California REDD Offset Working Group

CC: Mary Nichols (Chair, California Air Resources Board), Ashley Conrad-Saydah (Assistant Secretary for Climate Policy, California Environmental Protection Agency), Arsenio Mataka (Assistant Secretary

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As organizations and activists based in Acre and Brazil, as well as Chiapas and Mexico, we are writing to you to express our opposition to the proposal of the government of the U.S. state of California to â€œreduceâ€• its CO2 emissions through the acquisition of REDD+ offsets from the states of Acre and Chiapas, instead of pursuing emissions reductions in California itself. In addition to our opposition to this proposal, we also challenge the legitimacy of the â€œconsultationâ€• process underway in California with regard to this matter, due to the lack of effective participation by the communities in Acre and Chiapas who depend on the forests to maintain their way of life and will be directly affected by this REDD+ proposal. We would add that REDD+ will not effectively reduce global carbon emissions, and much less the destruction of the worldâ€™s forests; it deepens existing social and environmental injustice; it criminalizes the traditional practices of forest peoples and communities; and it is a profoundly neocolonial initiative.

A process is currently underway in California to assess how the government of the state should incorporate REDD+ offsets in its carbon cap-and-trade system. According to the state government, the inclusion of REDD+ credits would contribute to reducing Californiaâ€™s CO2 emissions. A REDD Offset Working Group was established and tasked with issuing recommendations on the matter. A public consultation period until April 30, 2013 was announced to solicit written comments and hold three workshops in the state. After this date, the working group will consider this â€œconsultationâ€• to be concluded and will submit its conclusions to the government of California.

The REDD Offset Working Group maintains that Acre is currently the state best prepared â€“ more so than Chiapas â€“ to provide the REDD+ credits that California is seeking. It also praises Acreâ€™s â€œpioneeringâ€• approach of developing a stat wide or â€œjurisdictionalâ€• initiative involving carbon emission reduction activities across different sectors, which has the potential to generate more significant and lower-cost reductions than individual REDD+ projects, it claims.

The working group also states that Acre is currently â€œthe most advanced REDD+ jurisdiction in the world.â€• But what is so â€œadvancedâ€• about Californiaâ€™s proposal to avoid solving the serious problem of local pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, which are its own responsibility, within its own territory? What is so â€œadvancedâ€• about attempting to solve this problem through actions that will negatively affect the lives of communities in Brazil and Mexico?

California wants to approve the incorporation of REDD+ offsets in its carbon cap-and-trade programme without hearing from the parties that would be affected by REDD+ activities.

By not undertaking a broad consultation on the acquisition of REDD+ credits from Acre and Chiapas within the communities that depend on the forests and will be affected by the REDD+ proposal, the government of California is violating the widely accepted international principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent. This principle grants local, indigenous and traditional communities the right to voice their opinion on any proposals that imply changes in their way of life and/or activities within their territories. These communities have the right to receive information and express their opinion on all aspects of the proposal, freely and without pressure. And, more importantly, these communities have the right to accept or reject the proposal, and their decisions must be respected. The state of California, by publishing information only on the internet â€“ a medium that is inaccessible for many people in Acre â€“ and solely in English (the people of Brazil speak Portuguese as well as numerous indigenous languages), and by not organizing any form of specific local consultation in Acre, is seriously violating this principle.

The fact that REDD+-related proposals are being pursued without the consent of the affected population reflects a systematic problem in Acre. A similar situation occurred in the process for the adoption of Law 2.308/10, which created the System of Incentives for Environmental Services (SISA). Although the government of Acre claims that the SISA law â€œis the result of wide-reaching discussion with society in Acre,â€• this â€œsocietyâ€• was limited in practice to a select group of governmental actors, consultants closely linked to the state government, and large NGOs, most of them international. Communities in Acre who depend on the forests were not able to learn more about the law, and much less discuss it, because the first version was drafted in English, and its content was highly technical. The Federal Public Ministry is currently investigating the constitutionality of this law, which raises doubts around the government of Californiaâ€™s assumption that the state of Acre is genuinely in a position to provide forest carbon credits on the carbon offset market without risks related to management and legitimacy.

REDD+ will not effectively reduce global carbon emissions or deforestation

REDD+ is based on suppositions used by â€œspecialistsâ€• interested in promoting REDD+ to compare two hypothetical situations: on the one hand, what is expected to happen to the forest as a result of REDD+ activities, and on the other, what would have happened without REDD+, which is something that no one will ever be able to confirm. This creates such a wide margin of uncertainty that it makes REDD+ a mechanism highly susceptible to fraud and corruption, and there are in fact already a number of cases being internationally investigated. At the same time, however, it also makes REDD+ a highly attractive proposal for those who want to profit from forests.

Since it began to pursue the lines of REDD+, â€œenvironmental servicesâ€• and the â€œgreen economyâ€•, the related public undertaken by the government of the state of Acre has heavily emphasized a new concept: the idea of the â€œstanding forestâ€• as the fastest, most efficient means of making money off of â€œpreservationâ€• and â€œemissions reductionâ€•, com the possibility of continuing to exploit the forest and thus obtain even more money and benefits. The concept of REDD+ follows this same line of thinking â€“ the goal is not to stop deforestation, but rather to reduce it. Indeed, deforestation in Acre was not halted when the current state administration, the so-called â€œforest governmentâ€•, took over in 1999; it actually increased from 5,300 km2 between 1988 and 1998 to 7,301 km2 during the following decade. The amount of wood extracted from the forests in Acre rose from 300,000 m3/year to one million m3/year in 2010, with around 75% removed from areas under â€œsustainable forest managementâ€• plans, certified in part by the FSC. The end result, clearly, was a significant increase in forest degradation and, therefore, deforestation as well.

The environmental destruction caused by the extraction of timber was highlighted in 2011 by the grievances voiced by extractivist communities (who earn a living from forests without destroying them, through activities such as rubber tapping) and social organizations regarding the activities of the timber company Laminados Triunfo. The extractivist families exposed the degradation of water resources, the growing scarcity of wild game, and the destruction of the forests and roads in the region caused by the logging activities of Laminados Triunfo, a company that has obtained the â€œgreen labelâ€• of FSC certification for part of its â€œsustainably managedâ€• areas. As a result of the companyâ€™s operations, the f who depend on rubber tapping were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the minimum area needed to conserve their own system of genuinely sustainable management, which is not based on wood extraction.

In the meantime, the cattle industry, another notable historic cause of deforestation in the Amazon, has also expanded in the state, with an increase from 800,000 head of cattle in 1998 to three million in 2010, reflecting another worrying trend.

REDD+ deepens social and environmental injustice

Despite the fact that all of the documents in Acre that defend REDD+ refer to the importance of the people who depend on the forests, REDD+ â€“ and, more generally, the â€œgreen economyâ€•, based on the commercialization of â€œenvironmen servicesâ€• and the â€œsustainableâ€• exploitation of forest resources â€“ is a proposal based on a limited view of the forest, ai benefiting business interests and a small group linked to the government, while deepening already existing environmental and social injustice. For example, this proposal has created more obstacles for the demarcation of indigenous lands in the state, which has come to a standstill, except for the territory of the Apolima-Arara, whose lands have nevertheless been invaded by non-indigenous people. There are at least 18 indigenous territories awaiting official demarcation, but no progress has been made due to the influence wielded by cattle ranchers and logging companies. In addition, the health and educational conditions of indigenous and extractivist communities continue to be alarming. The neglect of the authorities led, among other consequences, to the death of 22 indigenous children under the age of five in 2011, in the villages of the MadjÃ¡ (Kulina) and Hunikui (Kaxinawa) ethnic groups in Santa Rosa do Purus. Government neglect is also clearly reflected in the educational sector. The indigenous schools located at the headwaters of rivers and streams are frequently in a deplorable state, to say nothing of the quality of education. Of 120 indigenous schools, only 10 are classified as being in good condition.

Projects involving payment for environmental services undermine the relative sovereignty of extractivist communities over their traditional territories. Contracts are signed for at least 30 years, which means that during this entire period, local communities are prohibited from entering these areas, whether to extract small amounts of wood for their own use, to hunt or to fish. The result is the forcible confinement of the population to a limited area of land, and the criminalization of traditional practices through which forest communities have historically co-existed with, managed and preserved the forests until now. Due to this series of restrictions, extractivist communities are essentially being â€œpunishedâ€• for having preserved the forests in a way that included growing subsistence crops at small-scale and the controlled use of fire to clear land for planting. As compensation, they are offered meagre payments that not only discourage extractivist communities from remaining in the forest, but also devalue their way of life. The first REDD+ projects in the state have followed this same line, with the same prohibitions and the same meagre â€œcompensationâ€•.

Strangely, and contradictorily, communities who depend on forests are being increasingly led to participate in forest management projects for the extraction of timber, with the promise that this activity will be â€œsustainableâ€• and â€œcertifiedâ is an activity that is not among the traditional livelihood demands of these communities in their arduous struggle for the right to improve their quality of life, but the projects are heavily promoted by private business interests, who have the backing of the state government.

In the meantime, over recent years there has been a visible increase in land grabbing in the state of Acre, which is a structural problem that must be resolved if Brazil is truly committed to social justice in the rural regions and in the forests. In 2003, 444 landowners controlled 2.8 million hectares of land in Acre; in 2010, 583 owners controlled 6.2 million hectares, the equivalent of 78.9% of all registered land that year, reflecting a drastic rise in concentration of land ownership by large landholders. One factor contributing to this process was the legalization of lands illegally occupied by large landholders in the Amazon region through the federal governmentâ€™s â€œTerra Legalâ€• (â€˜Legal Landâ€™) program

REDD+ is a neocolonial proposal

REDD+ is not an idea that emerged from an indigenous village or extractivist forest community in Acre. It emerged at the international level, through the combination of, among others: (1) the conservationist interests of big environmental NGOs in the North, (2) the interests of national and sub-national governments in the North seeking low-cost alternatives to supposedly â€œoffsetâ€• their continued and excessive emissions of pollutants and greenhouse gases, (3) the interests of

national and sub-national governments in the South seeking to obtain financial resources for the â€œprotectionâ€• of forests in their countries, (4) the interests of corporations that could profit from market-tradable â€œoffsetâ€• credits, including through speculation on secondary (derivatives) markets, which would allow them to continue destroying the forests for the extraction of timber, minerals or oil, the establishment of monoculture plantations, etc., thus expanding their business opportunities, and (5) the interests of consultants and other actors involved in the financial capital market who want to turn â€œunexploitedâ€• forests into a new market for this type of capital, through the commercialization of â€œenvironmental servicesâ€• such as carbon sequestration, among others.

As a result, REDD+ has become a proposal that is promoted, and often imposed, by these various interest groups, many of them from the North, in countries and regions with tropical forests in the South, such as Acre, for example. It is a top-down proposal, implemented in communities that depend on forests, and is portrayed by its promoters as the â€œonlyâ€• possible way to save the forests today, with little effort made to explain the various aspects of this mechanism or the complex language of related laws, regulations, policies, etc. There is very little mention of the fact that the REDD+ mechanism has met with growing scepticism internationally. No international agreement has been reached on REDD+ so far, for a number of different reasons. These include, for example, the justified doubts about its effectiveness in mitigating the climate crisis (since more than 80% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are produced by the burning of fossil fuels, and the responsibility for this cannot be transferred from the North to the South, or to forest peoples and communities), as well as the violations and problems already observed in communities that depend on forests and are involved in the different REDD pilot projects around the world.

One of the most blatantly negative aspects of REDD+ is its neocolonial nature. Once again, the former colonial powers of Europe and other industrialized countries of the North, like the United States, are seeking to invest in an activity that essentially represents the â€œtheftâ€• of yet another â€œraw materialâ€• from the territories of the peoples of the South: the â€ reservesâ€• in their forests. In other words, through these mechanisms, the rights over the â€œcarbonâ€• in these forests, and t over the future use and management of the land where these forests are located â€“ even if that land belongs to the country, or to indigenous peoples or traditional communities â€“ are transferred to the corporations that acquire these rights as a means of supposedly offsetting their emissions, and to the banks that operate in the new speculative markets created around the rising trend of the â€œgreen economyâ€•. And all of this in order to maintain, at low cost, a lifestyle that is neither possible nor viable for the majority of the worldâ€™s population. In the case of California â€“ one of the worldâ€™s 10 bi economies â€“ the incorporation of REDD+ in its cap-and-trade programme would simply mean that instead of drastically reducing the pollution generated by its economic activities, and the serious environmental, climate and public health problems this entails for the people and environment of California and the rest of the world, the state would be seeking to change the way of life of the communities who depend on the forests in Acre and Mexico, who are not responsible for the problem, in order to preserve a certain amount of â€œcarbon stocksâ€•.

Conclusion

For all of these reasons, we consider this process illegitimate and recommend that the government of California cancel it, unless it undertakes, in the near future, a wide-reaching consultation with the parties affected in the territories from which it plans to obtain REDD offset credits. We would like to emphasize in advance that if this consultation process in Acre is left in the hands of the state government, it is very unlikely to be conducted in such a way as to allow the affected communities to give or withhold their free, prior and informed consent to the proposal.

Due to the uncertainty and injustice surrounding the REDD+ mechanism, the best option for the state of California would be to develop a comprehensive programme for the reduction of emissions within its own territory. This would not only serve as a sign to the government of the state of Acre that there are no prospects for the government and a small group of allies to attract copious financial resources, susceptible to fraud and corruption, in the name of â€œforest preservationâ€•. It would also benefit, above all, the communities in Acre who would therefore not be used to solve the pollution problems in a state and a country which are totally unknown to them and for which they bear no responsibility. In recent years, these communities have demanded, through various means, the enforcement of the Brazilian Constitution and the guarantee of

their basic rights to health care, education and the legalization of their territories. The government of Acreâ€™s â€œgreen economyâ€• policies have created more problems for the peoples who depend on forests, and even worse, they have caused divisions within these communities due to the co-option of some of their leaders by the state government.

Through this open letter, we also wish to express our solidarity with the communities who live near polluting industries in California. They too must be heard, especially with regard to their opinions on the pollution that impacts on their health and the health of their children. What do they propose to improve the well-being of their communities? Is REDD+ really the best way forward, considering that it represents, in practice, more pollution for them, and thus more environmental and social injustice? We hope that there is a broad consultation process that includes these communities, because the climate crisis creates the need for wisdom that can only result from the construction of alternatives with the participation of everyone, and especially of those who currently suffer most from the continued heavy pollution in the countries of the North, with its fossil fuel-based energy models. It is clear that we cannot let ourselves be guided by the opportunism and irresponsibility of a few when we address the future of the people and the planet, in both the North and the South.

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