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GREENWASHING THE GLOBAL SOUTH: CARBON MARKETS AND THE LEGACY OF COLONIAL EXTRACTION

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Abstract
This paper critically examines carbon offset markets through a postcolonialism lens, arguing that these mechanisms embody a form of climate colonialism. Although often presented as pragmatic solutions to global climate change, carbon offsets tend to reproduce entrenched patterns of exploitation and inequality. Specifically, carbon offsets enable the Global North to continue emitting greenhouse gases while outsourcing environmental responsibility to the Global South, which effectively becomes a carbon sink. Drawing on document-based qualitative analysis on policy discourses, real-world case studies, and postcolonial theory, this research examines how carbon markets facilitate land dispossession, resource extraction, and the accumulation of ecological debt. These processes echo historical colonial structures of domination and dependency. The paper foregrounds critical perspectives from the Global South, highlighting resistance to carbon offset practices and emphasizing the need for decolonial approaches to climate governance. Ultimately, it challenges dominant "green economy" narratives and advocates for climate justice rooted in equity, historical accountability, and non-market-based alternatives.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism is not a relic of the past, nor is it confined to the boundaries of former territories. It remains a powerful, structuring force that shapes contemporary environmental injustices and global climate governance. The historical processes of extraction, dispossession, and racial capitalism under colonial rule have fundamentally altered relationships between people and nature, laying the groundwork for the climate crisis we face today. These colonial legacies persist through uneven global power relations, where the Global South–though contributing the least to global emissions–bears the brunt of climate impacts, while wealth and power remain concentrated in the Global North (Fuentes-George, 2023). This enduring environmental hierarchy contains how we conceptualize and address climate change, embedding colonial logics into the very frameworks designed to solve the crisis (Bhambra & Newell, 2023).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has acknowledged that colonialism is both a historical driver and an ongoing factor in shaping climate vulnerability (Bhambra & Newell, 2023). African environmental histories–for instance–reveal how colonial forestry regimes, agricultural systems, and hydroelectric projects prioritized imperial interests over local livelihoods, marginalizing communities and degrading ecosystems–an extractive pattern that echoes in contemporary climate policies. The impacts of climate change thus intersect with deep structural inequalities, where green initiatives like carbon offsets, REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) schemes, and market-based solutions often reproduce the very colonial dynamics they purport to resolve (Sultana, 2022).

These dynamics are visible in contemporary carbon offset projects across the Global South. In Indonesia for example, the REDD+ programs in Kalimantan and Papua have been criticized for limiting indigenous communities' access to ancestral lands and for transferring decision-making power to international NGOs and foreign donors. Similarly, in Kenya, the Kasigau Corridor REDD+ project—hailed as a model for community-based conservation—has faced scrutiny for inadequate benefit distribution and restricted grazing rights for local communities (Corbera & Schroeder, 2011). Furthermore, in Brazil, REDD+ initiatives in the Amazon, such as the Suruí Forest Carbon Project, have generated tensions between indigenous groups and corporate investors, exposing how carbon markets can reinforce asymmetrical control over land and resources (Alkmin, 2023). These cases illustrate that carbon offset markets often operate through mechanisms of dispossession, dependency, and governance externalization—features that closely mirror colonial structure.

The dynamic is particularly evident in the architecture of global carbon markets, where the Global South is once again cast as a resource frontier–not for minerals, spices, or labor–but for carbon sequestration. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol institutionalized mechanisms such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and Joint Implementation (JI), allowing industrialized countries to meet emissions targets by purchasing credits from projects in the Global South, rather than reducing their own emissions at the source (Bumpus & Liverman, 2010). Private actors and non-govermental organizations further expanded this logic through voluntary carbon markets, creating a system where the Global South's forests, lands, and communities are enlisted into the service of a supposedly green global economy (Hartnett, 2021). This commodification of carbon reproduces patterns of carbon colonialism–a term that critiques how market-based climate solutions displace the costs and burdens of mitigation onto marginalized communities, often dispossessing them of their lands and resources, while enabling the Global North to maintain its high-consumption lifestyles (Zaamout, 2020).

The greenwashing of colonial relations–where environmental discourses obscure the continuity of extractive practices–reinforces the illusion that market-based solutions can resolve the climate crisis without addressing the structural drivers of inequality and exploitation. Carbon markets, framed as "win-win" mechanisms for climate mitigation and development, ultimately mask the failure of high-emitting countries to undertake deep decarbonization, while reinscribing colonial logics of control over territories, knowledge, and ecological futures in the Global South (Bumpus & Liverman, 2010); Peet et al., 2011). In this context, green initiatives often operate as a form of epistemic violence, marginalizing indigenous and local environmental knowledge systems in favor of technocratic, market-driven frameworks that prioritize capital accumulation over justice (Sultana, 2022).

Decolonial approaches to climate governance are thus urgently needed–not only to address the material consequences of colonialism but also to dismantle the epistemological hierarchies that devalue alternative ways of knowing and living with the earth. Climate justice demands a radical rethinking of global climate policy: one that centers the needs, rights, and knowledge of those most affected by climate change, and that confronts the root causes of the crisis in systems of global capitalism, imperialism, and racialized extraction (Fuentes-George, 2023; Sultana, 2022). Without such a shift, carbon markets and offset schemes risk deepening the very inequalities they claim to address–reinscribing the Global South as a site of sacrifice in a new, green-washed chapter of colonial extraction (Fuentes-George, 2023; B. Haya et al., 2020).

This research aims to critically interrogate the carbon offset market as a contemporary manifestation of climate colonialism. While previous studies have explored carbon markets in relation to issues of environmental justice and market logics (Bumpus & Liverman, 2010), there remains a gap in explicitly linking the mechanism of carbon offsets to the historical and ongoing structures of colonial extraction. This study advances the field by reframing carbon offsets not merely as technical solutions for climate mitigation but as political instruments that extend the spatial and temporal reach of colonial relations (B. K. Haya et al., 2023).

The primary goal of this research is to critically examine how carbon offset markets perpetuate the dynamics of climate colonialism. This research seeks to uncover how carbon markets–framed as a mechanism for sustainable development–paradoxically enable the Global

North to outsource its environmental responsibilities while displacing the costs and burdens onto marginalized communities in the Global South. It seeks to answer the following research question: How does carbon offset contribute to climate colonialism? By addressing this question, the research aims to deepen the understanding of carbon markets as a form of greenwashing that obscures and reproduces the historical legacies of colonialism within the contemporary environmental governance regime.

Conceptual Framework

Carbon Offset

Carbon offset markets, though intended as tools to reduce global emissions, often serve to reproduce neocolonial relationships between the Global North and South (Evite & Zara, 2023). These schemes allow wealthier countries and corporations to maintain high-emission activities by purchasing credits generated through projects in the Global South, effectively outsourcing responsibility for climate action while reaping the benefits of continued economic growth. This dynamic not only reinforces the Global South's role as a provider of environmental services but also sustains the exploitative patterns of extraction that have long defined colonial relationships (Sultana, 2022). In this system, land, forests, and ecosystems in the South are turned into "carbon sinks" for the North, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and environmental inequity.

Critics have raised significant concerns about the implications of carbon offset markets for environmental justice and indigenous sovereignty. Many offset projects–whether afforestation or any renewable energy initiatives–are established on lands that hold deep cultural, spiritual, and economic significance for indigenous people and local communities. These projects frequently lead to displacement, loss of access to resources, and the erosion of traditional practices, echoing colonial patterns of land dispossession and marginalization (Ciscell, 2010; Sultana, 2022). Furthermore, by focusing on offsetting rather than systemic change, these markets can impede industrial development and self-determination in the Global South, locking these regions into roles as carbon providers rather than enabling them to chart their own development pathways (Evite & Zara, 2023).

The diversity of offset projects and the complexity of governance frameworks across compliance and voluntary markets add layers of opacity to the system, making it challenging to ensure accountability and meaningful outcomes (Lovell & Liverman, 2010). Carbon markets allow the Global North to maintain unsustainable consumption patterns while placing the weight of emissions reductions on the Global South. These practices are deeply embedded in what Sultana (2022) calls climate coloniality–the ongoing reproduction of colonial patterns while placing the weight of emissions reductions on the Global South.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism emerged in the 1990s as a critical framework aimed at dismantling colonial mindsets and interrogating dominant Western-centric narratives that have long shaped global knowledge systems and power structures (Young, 2020). At its core, postcolonial theory calls for the decolonization of thought and affirms the value of knowledges produced outside the West–particularly those rooted in indigenous, sub-altern, and Global South epistemologies (Young, 2020). Within geography, postcolonialism has been especially influential in analyzing how spatial relations are shape by histories of empire, focusing on the politics of representation, voice, and the uneven power dynamics embedded in landscapes and everyday practices (Castree et al., 2020).

These insights are especially relevant when analyzing contemporary climate governance, including the functioning of carbon offset markets. Postcolonial theory provides the tools to critique how such markets often reinscribe colonial hierarchies by positioning the Global South as a "passive recipient" of environmental interventions designed by actors in the Global North. The carbon offsetting schemes–often marketed as climate solutions–can be seen through a postcolonial lens as

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contemporary forms of spatial and ecological control; where land and labor in the South are (again) extracted under the pretext of global benefit, but without addressing deeper historical injustices.

Postcolonialism also emphasizes the importance of agency: who gets to speak for whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences (Castree et al., 2020). This is crucial when examining how indigenous communities and marginalized groups are often excluded from the design and governance of offset projects that directly affect their land, culture, and livelihoods. Postcolonial analysis helps reveal how these groups are not only subjected to global climate policies but are also actively resisting and rearticulating alternative visions of environmental justice and sovereignty.

These perspectives are vital for understanding how carbon markets operate within broader regimes of racial capitalism and climate colonialism, where the South continues to bear the environmental and social costs of a crisis it did not primarily cause. Postcolonialism offers a critical methodology for exposing how carbon offsets may greenwash ongoing extraction and inequality, while also pointing toward more just and decolonial climate futures.

Climate Colonialism

Recent studies have underscored the deep and persistent ties between climate change and the legacy of colonialism. The term “climate colonialism” has emerged to describe how present-day climate solutions–especially those grounded in market logic–often reinforce historical patterns of domination and exploitation (Alkmin, 2023). One prominent example is the use of carbon offset schemes which are designed to preserve forests and reduce emissions but frequently do so at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty and land rights. Projects like REDD+ can limit local control and disrupt traditional land practices, replicating older colonial patterns where outside forces imposed authority over Indigenous territories (Alkmin, 2023).

This is not an isolated occurrence. Historically, colonial powers used climate and environmental theories to legitimize their imperial projects–claiming, for example that tropical regions produced indolence or backwardness, thus justifying conquest and “civilizing missions” (Mahony & Endfield, 2018). These ideologies helped naturalize racial hierarchies and enabled the violent restructuring of land and labor systems. Today, the same assumptions often appear in more subtle forms through climate initiatives imposed on the Global South, where interventions are crafted and governed largely by actors in the Global North, often with little regard for local knowledge or agency.

The disproportionate impacts of climate change on the Global South are not just the result of geography or poor infrastructure–they reflect centuries of extractive colonial economies and uneven development (Sultana, 2022). As Sultana explains, the “coloniality of climate” refers to the way climate action is entangled with racial capitalism, systemic dispossession, and historical climate debts. Carbon markets–in this context–are not merely flawed instruments, they actively sustain a global economic order in which the South is expected to absorb the burdens of mitigation while the North maintains its carbon-intensive lifestyles. This dynamic enables corporations and governments in wealthy countries to greenwash their emissions through offset purchases, projecting an image of sustainability while continuing to benefit from structural inequality.

In this light, carbon offset programs must be viewed not just as technocratic climate tools, but as instruments that can perpetuate climate injustice under a green veneer. Far from offering just or equitable solutions, they often entrench the very power imbalances they claim to address–rendering the Global South a backdrop for climate mitigation, while historical and structural inequalities remain unchallenged. Understanding carbon markets through the lends of climate colonialism is thus essential to exposing the ways in which greenwashing obscures ongoing environmental and social exploitation.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative research method, which is particularly suited for critically examining the complex, context-specific, and power-laden dynamics of carbon offsets and climate colonialism. As Lamont (2021) emphasizes, qualitative research enables an in-depth

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exploration of meanings, power relations, and social processes that quantitative approaches may overlook. The study adopts a document-based qualitative approach, focusing on document review as its main data collection technique. This method involves systematic analysis of various textual and visual sources—such as policy documents, international climate agreements, carbon market reports, NGO publications, corporate sustainability reports, and media discourses—to identify how carbon markets are represented, legitimized, and contested within global climate governance.

The document review allows the author to trace recurring themes, discursive framings, and ideological narratives that link carbon offset mechanisms to historical and ongoing structures of colonial extraction. By critically engaging with these documents, the study aims to reveal how climate governance mechanisms are embedded in colonial legacies and how they reproduce inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. This methodological approach provides a nuanced and interpretative understanding of the intersection between carbon governance, postcolonial power structures, and global environmental discourse, aligning with Lamont's emphasis on contextual and meaning-centered analysis in International Relations research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Revealing the Continuities of Colonial Extraction

Carbon offset markets, particularly mechanisms like REDD+, reveal a persistent continuity of colonial extraction, reframed through environmental discourse. Although marketed as progressive climate solutions, these mechanisms often re-establish historical power imbalances, where lab, labor, and ecosystems in the Global South are appropriated for the benefit of actors in the Global North. As (Alkmin, 2023) notes, REDD+ undermines Indigenous autonomy by imposing externally designed conservation models that mirror colonial land management regimes. Hirokawa (2021) similarly critiques REDD+ as structurally colonial, highlighting its reinforcement of centralized control over local ecologies and communities. Central to REDD+ is the commodification of nature, where forests are primarily valued for their capacity to store carbon rather than their ecological, cultural, or spiritual significance. For instrance, the Katingan Mentaya Project in Indonesia has faced criticism for restricting community access to peatlands and privileging international investors, while Kenya's Kasigau Corridor REDD+ has been challenged for inequitable benefit sharing. Similarly, in Brazil, the Suruí Forest Carbon Project revealed tensions between indigenous autonomy and corporate verification systems. According to (Cabello & Gilbertson, 2012), this model reflects a neoliberal logic of land enclosure, treating ecosystems as carbon assets to be traded for profit. In this way, REDD+ extends the colonial rationale of land dispossession–only now justified by sustainability and global climate goals.

Even efforts to frame REDD+ as inclusive often fall short in practice. (Scheba & Scheba, 2017) show that while REDD+ promotes narratives of "good governance" and participation, the actual decision-making remains exclusionary–especially for traditional forest users. Participation is often symbolic, with power and financial control retained by external agencies or intermediaries. Crucially, as (Mohammed, 2011) points out, the distribution of benefits within REDD+ is also skewed. When financial rewards are based on the size of landholdings or the volume of emissions reduced, wealthier landowners are disproportionately favored. Poorer communities–especially those who already practice low-impact, sustainable land use–may receive little to no compensation, despite being essential stewards of the forest. This reinforces pre-existing inequalities and continues the legacy of colonial dispossession, now through carbon economics. Taken together, these dynamics show how carbon offset mechanism like REDD+ do not break from the past, but rather repackage colonial structures in the language of climate governance, redirecting value and authority away from the Global South while maintaining global hierarchies of control and benefit (Tsai, 2020). These cases highlight the urgency for stricter social-safeguard criteria under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, ensuring that REDD+ and similar carbon programs prioritize community rights rather than corporate profitability.

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Greenwashing as Ideological Masking

Carbon offset markets do not merely function as tools for reducing emissions; they operate as ideological instruments that obscure and legitimize the continuation of environmental injustice. Through persuasive terms like "carbon neutrality," "sustainability," and "win-win solutions," these mechanism construct an illusion of climate responsibility while deflecting attention from the underlying structures of exploitation. This process–commonly referred to as greenwashing– creates a misleading image of environmental progress that masks the continuation of colonial dynamics. A striking example is the Bukaleba Forestry Project in Uganda, where carbon credits generated for European firms led to local displacement—demonstrating how "carbon neutrality" narratives obscure on-the-ground injustices.

As (Checker, 2011) argues, sustainability projects often serve elite and corporate interests, displacing vulnerable communities in the name of green development–a process she terms "environmental gentrification." Dunlap (2023) expands this critique, suggesting that the green economy operates as a form of counterinsurgency, soothing public anxiety about ecological breakdown while safeguarding capitalist and imperial interests. Similarly Böhm et al. (2012) emphasize that carbon markets commodify nature and facilitate the appropriation of land and labor in the Global South under the guise of ecological protection.

Through these practices, carbon offsets act as legitimizing tools for the Global North. High-emitting nations and corporations continue their carbon-intensive activities while purchasing offsets that make them appear environmentally conscious. This deferral of responsibility maintains their dominance within the global climate regime. Meanwhile, communities in the Global South–whose lands and forests are used for these offsets–rarely see equitable benefits, further entrenching historical inequalities.

Moreover, as Hughes et al. (2022) highlight, dominant environmental discourses often erase Indigenous epistemologies and depoliticize justice claims. The focus on technocratic, market-based solutions sidelines the historical and structural roots of the climate crisis, including colonialism, land theft, and racial capitalism. As a result, carbon offsetting becomes a powerful narrative tool–it signals progress without challenging the colonial foundations of the climate crisis. In short, carbon offset markets contribute to climate colonialism not only through material dispossession but also though discursive control. By masking inequality and repackaging exploitation as sustainability, they legitimize the continued extraction of value from the Global South while shielding the Global North from meaningful accountability. Addressing such greenwashing requires transparent verification systems under UNFCCC oversight and mandatory disclosure of social impacts in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), ensuring that sustainability claims align with justice outcomes.

The Global South as a Carbon Dumping Ground

Carbon offset markets relegate the Global South of the role of a carbon dumping ground – absorbing the environmental burdens of the Global North while reaping few of the benefits. This spatial reconfiguration reflects a broader pattern of ecological outsourcing, where the responsibility for climate mitigation is displaced onto poorer countries, even though they have contributed the least to the problem. As (Evite & Zara, 2023) emphasize, offset schemes allow high-emitting countries to externalize their obligations, while land and ecosystems in the Global South are commodified to absorb excess emissions. World Bank (2022) showed that over 70% of voluntary carbon credits originate from developing countries, yet more than 80% of purchasers are corporations in the Global North—a stark illustration of ecological outsourcing. The magnitude of this injustice is stark: (Singh, 2023) estimate the Global North's carbon debt to the South at over $3,000 trillion – a figure that underscores the historical asymmetry of responsibility. Yet this debt remains largely unacknowledged in international climate policy. Instead, attempts to define responsibility, such as Godard (2012)'s claims that only emissions since 1990 are relevant, strategically obscure the long history of extractive industrialization that built the North's wealth at the South's expense. This erasure of historical harm not only sidesteps climate justice but legitimizes continued exploitation under the pretense of

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neutrality. Such asymmetries call for reforms within the UNFCCC framework—particularly through the operationalization of the Loss and Damage Fund and equitable governance of carbon markets at future COP meetings—to ensure historical accountability and fair compensation.

These global dynamics are mirrored in trade and production systems. As Malik & Lan (2016) note, carbon-intensive industries are often relocated to the Global South, where weaker environmental regulations make it easier to externalize environmental costs. At the same time, offset projects offer limited benefits to host communities. Mathur et al., (2014) show that these communities frequently struggle to access the promised social or economic gains, facing complex governance structures that exclude them from meaningful participation or control.

Together, these trends illustrate what Sultana (2022) terms the coloniality of climate–a system structured by racial capitalism and historical dispossession that determines who shoulders the risks of climate change and who profits from its mitigation. Carbon offsetting contributes to climate colonialism by transforming the Global South into both the site of environmental sacrifice its carbon-intensive development path. In essence, carbon markets not only reinforce environmental injustice; they embody a moral and political failure to confront the root causes of the climate crisis. By burdening the Global South with the task of cleaning up the North's emissions, they preserve the global hierarchies forged through centuries of colonial exploitation–repackaged now in the language of environmental responsibility. Ultimately, recognizing these empirical patterns can inform more equitable climate-finance mechanisms, guiding policymakers toward decolonial and community-based climate action frameworks within multilateral negotiations.

Recommendation Towards Climate Colonialism

Confronting climate colonialism requires a shift from market-based climate governance to approaches rooted in justice, historical accountability, and decolonization. This begins with recognizing the carbon and ecological debt owed by the Global North to the Global South due to centuries of environmental extraction and unequal development. Reparative frameworks must be integrated into climate finance and policy, acknowledging the structural roots of global climate inequality.

A decolonial climate strategy must move beyond carbon markets like offsets, which commodify nature and perpetuate dispossession. Instead, it should support community-led, non-market alternatives that prioritize Indigenous knowledge systems, collective stewardship, and local sovereignty. This includes respecting the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and ensuring that affected communities have the power to shape climate solutions on their own terms.

Moreover, epistemic justice is central to decolonization. Climate policy and discourse must embrace plural knowledge systems, elevating Indigenous and Global South perspectives often sidelined by Western technocratic frameworks. Decolonizing climate governance means redistributing power, not just emissions, and building systems that value care, autonomy, and equity over market efficiency. In essence, addressing climate colonialism requires rejecting offset-based greenwashing and reimagining climate action through the lens of reparations, sovereignty, and climate justice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how carbon offset markets, particularly through mechanisms like REDD+, function as instruments of climate colonialism. By situating carbon offsets within a postcolonial framework, the research reveals that these mechanisms–while marketed as climate solutions–largely reproduce historical patterns of exploitation, land appropriation, and systemic inequality. Through qualitative analysis and critical engagement with policy discourses and scholarly critiques, it becomes evident that carbon markets allow the Global North to externalize climate responsibility, turning the Global South into a carbon sink without addressing underlying issues of environmental justice or historical accountability.

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Carbon offsetting not only perpetuates material dispossession but also operates ideologically–greenwashing harmful practices and legitimizing continued emissions through market-based solutions. The asymmetrical structures of global climate governance reflect the ongoing colonial logic embedded in sustainability discourses, which prioritize technocratic fixes over systemic change. This research underscores the need to move beyond superficial emissions accounting and instead center climate justice, historical responsibility, and epistemological pluralism in global climate action.

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