

<https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/carbon-offsets-are-not-our-get-out-jail-free-card>

Carbon offsets are not our get-out-of-jail free card

Version I:

The era of carbon offsets is drawing to a close. Buying carbon credits in exchange for a clean conscience while you carry on flying, buying diesel cars and powering your home with fossil fuels is no longer acceptable or widely accepted.

Carbon credits are increasingly coming under fire for essentially allowing some to continue on their polluting ways while the rest of us are left scrambling to contain the climate crisis. The Secretary-General of the United Nations is the first to call everyone to action. “We are still not doing enough, nor moving fast enough, to prevent irreversible and catastrophic climate disruption,” he says.

Meanwhile, scientists, activists and concerned citizens have started to voice their concerns over how carbon offsets have been used by polluters as a free pass for inaction.

Carbon offsets schemes were set up to allow the largest polluters who exceed permitted emissions’ levels to fund projects, such as reforestation, that reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the air, essentially balancing out their emissions equation.

The types of carbon offset projects that are implemented are diverse. They range from forestry sequestration projects (which remove CO₂ from the atmosphere when trees grow) to energy efficiency and renewable energy projects (which reduce future CO₂ emissions in the atmosphere).

UN Environment’s operations have been [carbon neutral since 2008](#) thanks, in part, to the purchase of carbon credits. Since then, the organization has also reduced its emissions by 35 per cent. Many organizations and individuals are buying carbon credits to offset the greenhouse gas emissions involved in travel, principally flying.

Carbon offsets are useful while infrastructure and industry make the transition to electric mobility, alternative energy and the new

Version II:

Buying carbon credits in exchange for a clean conscience while you carry on flying, buying diesel cars and powering your homes with fossil fuels is being challenged by people concerned about climate change.

Scientists, activists and concerned citizens have started to voice their concerns over how carbon offsets have been used by polluters as a free pass for inaction. Annual emissions have to reduce by 29-32 gigatonnes of equivalent carbon dioxide (CO_{2e}) by 2030 to maintain a fighting chance to stay below 1.5°C. This is a five-fold increase on current ambition.

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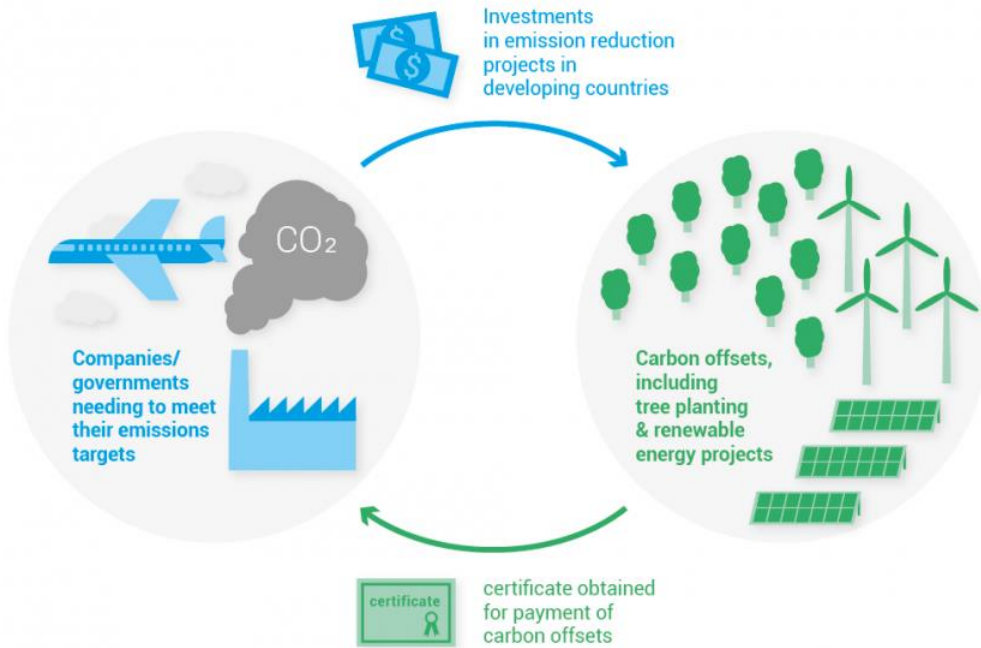
Carbon offsets are useful while infrastructure and industry make the transition to electric mobility, alternative energy and the new

technology necessary for low- and zero-carbon lifestyles. Where there are no viable alternatives in the short term, an offset scheme promises to cancel out the emissions in one place with emission-reducing actions in another.

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Offsets are only part of the answer

The climate crisis is now considered our gravest existential threat. Fifty per cent of climate changing pollutants have been pumped into our atmosphere—from power stations, cars, agriculture—since just 1990, and this amount is growing every second.

If we are serious about averting catastrophic planetary changes, we need to reduce emissions by 45 per cent by 2030. Trees planted today can't grow fast enough to achieve this goal and reduce by half our current emissions. And carbon offset projects will never be able to curb the emissions growth if coal power stations continue to be built and petrol cars continue to be bought, and our growing global population continues to consume as it does today.

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| <p>continue to plant trees and protect forests and peatlands. Renewable energy and energy efficiency projects are critical and offset schemes play an important role in funding and upscaling them.</p> <p>What we must look at, though, is how these actions sum up to reflect the true cost of emissions and the urgency of their reduction. The one-for-one model has been proved wrong. If one tonne of sequestered CO₂ is the price of one carbon credit, that offset must include not simply the emissions today, but also factor in the missing 45 per cent emissions' reduction, as well as the future projected increase.</p> <p>Shoa Ehsani, a UN Environment official who closely tracks UN Environment's carbon footprint, says carbon offsetting uptake has been slow. "One of the reasons offsets haven't been selling is because the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement are non-enforceable. The main procurers of offsets are supposed to be nations trying to meet the targets they promised to meet. But they have reneged on their promises and targets. If the nations of the G20, responsible for 81 per cent of total emissions, are to meet targets, offsets remain an important mechanism for them unless they manage a 45 per cent emissions reduction on their own (which would be fantastic)."</p> | <p>continue to plant trees and protect forests and peatlands. Renewable energy and energy efficiency projects are critical and offset schemes play an important role in funding and upscaling them.</p> <p>What we must look at, though, is how these actions sum up to reflect the true cost of emissions and the urgency of their reduction. It cannot simply be a one-for-one model. If one tonne of sequestered CO₂ is the price of one carbon credit, we still need to deliver the missing 45 per cent emissions' reduction, as well as the future projected increase.</p> <p>Shoa Ehsani, a UN Environment official who closely tracks UN Environment's carbon footprint, says carbon offsetting uptake has been slow. "One of the reasons offsets haven't been selling is because the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement are non-enforceable. The main procurers of offsets are supposed to be nations trying to meet the targets they promised to meet. If the nations of the G20, responsible for 81 per cent of total emissions, are to meet targets, offsets remain an important mechanism for them unless they manage a 45 per cent emissions reduction on their own (which would be fantastic)."</p> <p>The projects that offset schemes support are vital: trees must be planted, existing forests and peatlands that hold and absorb carbon must be protected. Renewable energy and energy efficiency projects are critical and offset schemes can have a part to play in delivering</p> |
| <p>A tool for speeding up climate action</p> <p>Offsets also risk giving the dangerous illusion of a "fix" that will allow our billowing emissions to just continue to grow.</p> <p>"UN Environment supports carbon offsets as a temporary measure leading up to 2030, and a tool for speeding up climate action," says UN Environment climate specialist Niklas Hagelberg. "However, it is not a silver bullet, and the danger is that it can lead to complacency. The October 2018 report by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change made it clear that if we are to have any hope of</p> | <p>A tool for speeding up climate action</p> <p>Offsets also risk giving the dangerous illusion of a "fix" that will allow our billowing emissions to just continue to grow.</p> <p>"UN Environment supports carbon offsets as a temporary measure leading up to 2030, and a tool for speeding up climate action," says UN Environment climate specialist Niklas Hagelberg. "However, it is not a silver bullet, and the danger is that it can lead to complacency. The October 2018 report by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change made it clear that if we are to have any hope of</p> |

curbing global warming we need to transition away from carbon for good: by travelling electric, embracing renewable energy, eating less meat and wasting less food.

“To secure popular support for decarbonization, the public needs to be informed about the positive effects of emission reductions, their benefits for cleaner air, health and new energy jobs,” he adds. “We should tax carbon, not people. We know fossil fuel subsidies are unfair when non-polluting alternatives are here right now. Making such a huge transition will require all the tools at our disposal, though, and offsets, if examined and applied with clear eyes, can aid the transition where sudden and drastic change might instead set us further back.”

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