



# Carbon colonialism and the new land grab: Plantation forestry in Uganda and its livelihood impacts



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## ABSTRACT

Private sector investment has become increasingly central to development in the global south, and in recent years these interventions have taken a 'green' turn. This is demonstrated via investment in economic activities associated with environmental claims, including plantation forestry and carbon trading initiatives. Many of these green initiatives represent market-based responses to climate change that rely upon the implementation of mitigation strategies in the global south to offset industrial and polluting activities in the global north. In this paper we explore the activities of Green Resources, the largest plantation forestry operator on the African continent.

Through an examination of the activities of Green Resources in Uganda, this paper argues that while private sector international investment in plantation forestry for carbon offsetting is widely supported as responding to the nation's environmental crisis, it is part of a carbon colonialism and neoliberal land grab. There are profound adverse local livelihood outcomes that arise on the basis of this carbon colonialism. After discussing these themes in turn, this paper concludes that the commodification and fetishising of carbon via global carbon markets disconnects northern-based carbon credit consumers from adverse local livelihood impacts for those living in, and adjacent to, forestry plantations. These impacts point to the limits of north–south market-based green development interventions as solutions to climate change.

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## 1. Introduction

Private investment has become a 'new salvation' for world development in the global south. Commitments 'to this faith' are strongly articulated in relation to the African continent, where the food, agriculture, timber, biofuels, oil and mining sectors – backed by claims that promise strong economic returns – have become significant targets for private investment activities (McMichael, 2013; Carmody, 2013). In a world of climate change, much of this international private sector investment is now associated with 'green' forms of development; demonstrated in the expansion of investment activities that make claims to environmental benefits and/or sustainable development, including carbon offset and other mitigation initiatives. The so-called bio-economy – referring to market-based activities that reduce complex ecosystems, as well as the socio-political contexts in which they are situated, into

biomass – is widely championed as a win-win-win strategy that will deliver positive economic, environmental and social outcomes at the local level, and its expansion is part of a broader neoliberal conservation of nature.

In this paper we examine the confluence of policy, discourse and other mechanisms that provide the enabling conditions for privatized green development. We take the case of plantation forestry as one example of bio-economic development on the African continent to demonstrate the links between neoliberal conservation and the privatization of land and forestry resources. Through our case study of one of the largest plantation forestry companies on the African continent, the Norwegian owned 'Green Resources', we demonstrate privatized plantation forestry as one form for enabling contemporary carbon colonialism and a neoliberal land grab. Our research findings also contribute to the growing body of literature that documents the livelihood impacts of neoliberal enclosures. While Green Resources operates in four countries, we examine their activities in Uganda, where the company holds two licenses for the production of timber and the sale of carbon credits. Given the scale of Green Resources' operations, and alongside the

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expansion of plantation forestry for timber and carbon offset in Africa, our case study provides insights related to the local level impacts of plantation forestry and carbon markets that may provide insights elsewhere.

On the basis of our findings, we conclude by arguing that carbon markets fetish carbon, demonstrated in the disconnection between northern carbon offset markets and the adverse local livelihood impacts associated with the neoliberal enclosure of land for forestry plantations. As a result, the livelihood impacts of this neoliberal land grab are relegated to the margins as externalities in the burgeoning global carbon economy.

## 2. Background

Framed in terms of environmentally responsible forms of socio-economic development, the global bio-economy is characterized by investment in carbon-offset (and other) projects that frequently links investors from the global north with smallholder and peasant farmers in the global south. There is plenty of hype about bio-economic forms of development, including by the World Economic Forum, who predict biomass will generate \$300 billion in profits by 2020 (ETC Group, 2010). In response to such estimates, there is rapidly expanding private sector investment in green bio-economy related development interventions.

Forests and plantation forestry are amongst sites being targeted by investors, with foreign investors now playing a dominant role in African forestry in particular, and backed by government uptake of industrial forest and land management models (German et al., 2014). The FAO estimate plantation forestry, in particular, has grown by 48.1 percent between 1990 and 2010, including dramatic growth on the African continent. These conditions have led some to conclude that Africa will be the central hub for plantation forestry by 2022 (Kroger, 2013). And given the increasing allocation of concessions to private sector international interests, it can be expected that global private interests will dominate the governance and management of African plantation forestry; conditions Kroger (2014) describe as a 'Forestry Empire', with outcomes that shift land rights, access and livelihoods.

In this context, local and indigenous knowledge of and approaches to forest management has been largely replaced by scientific logic and management regimes. The introduction of modern forestry regimes is legitimized by policy, industry and other narratives that re-define forests as 'unproductive', 'under-utilized', and empty, or as *terra nullius*, the outcome of which denies the centrality of forests to local livelihoods (German et al., 2014; Makki, 2013).

The introduction of scientific industrial forestry management approaches – including largescale monocultures – has occurred alongside the burgeoning of forest and forestry related ecosystem services markets. Previous literature has identified mitigation against climate change as an important component of these market mechanisms (Fairhead et al., 2012). Leach and Scoones (2013) have described carbon markets, an exemplar in climate change related ecosystem services, as being based upon the premise that carbon is a commodity that is able to be priced and traded. This neoliberalisation of nature (Fairhead et al., 2012; Büscher, 2013) extends a reductive logic by assuming that carbon sequestration that takes place in one part of the world is able to offset carbon pollution elsewhere.

However, the reduction and transformation of forests and forestry systems into disembodied and dislocated commodities disconnects carbon (and other forest products) from the broader ecosystem and carbon cycle in which it is situated. In so doing, it facilitates a rupture between the site of nature's production value (that is, a forestry plantation and carbon sequestration as part of the

carbon cycle) and its consumption (that is, the purchase of carbon offsets). The outcome of this renders carbon a commodity fetish (Lohmann, 2011); given the disconnection between the social, ecological and economic contexts in which carbon is produced and consumed. More specifically, this fetishizing disconnects carbon markets – including the buyers of carbon credits – from the lived realities of those whose livelihoods are directly affected by the socio-political and ecological basis of the carbon economy (Tienhaara, 2012).

The privatization and commodification of forest resources facilitates carbon colonialism. By this we refer to the new constraints ushered in by the carbon economy, including the rupture in historical land law, thereby constraining local community usufruct rights to land and forest products (German et al., 2014). The outcome of this rupture serves to reinforce economic inequalities by denying local access to land, with outcomes that some refer to as a neoliberal land grab (see for example Borrás et al., 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012). In utilising the term 'land grab', we acknowledge the contestation related to its meanings and use, including the methodologies by which the phenomena has come to be measured and understood, or what is widely referred to as 'the politics of evidence' (Scoones et al., 2013). Alongside these concerns related to the methods underpinning the 'literature rush' on this topic in recent years, Edelman (2013) and Oya (2013), amongst others, have called for on-going research to ground in effective and detailed long term research methods. This epistemological debate notwithstanding – and the related debate about use of the term 'land grab' – the form and processes of the carbon colonial land grab are enabling industrialized countries to maintain high levels of carbon emissions on the basis of their offsetting activities, while restricting development options for those where offset activities are located (Bottazzi et al., 2013).

Previous research in this field has identified the extent to which the activities of private investors might constrain local and indigenous rights, with findings that demonstrate the extent to which local people are expected to bare the costs of green development interventions (see for example Daniel and Mittal, 2010; German et al., 2014; Bottazzi et al., 2013). As stated within the introduction, our work contributes to this growing body of literature, by scrutinizing the local level consequences associated with putting a price on carbon in the African context. Our findings add to the literature that finds climate change mitigation strategies that focus singularly on carbon, including reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, over emphasize the importance of carbon sinks, while overlooking broader livelihood outcomes.

## 3. Conceptual framework – privatizing and greening development

Understandings of the pathways to achieve socio-economic and environmentally responsible forms of development, and the very premise of 'development', have taken many different routes over the last century. While the post World War Two period was characterized by supremely confident visions of rapid industrialization and social transformation, such ideas were abandoned by the 1970s and 1980s as policy makers and critical thinkers reached for new models of development. Seminal authors such as Baran led from the left, critiquing Rostow-like assumptions and hopes that centralized economic growth and modernization. Baran's work was built upon by the likes of Gunder-Frank, Amin, Cardoso, Sunkel, Brenner and Palma. However, by the mid-1980s these left critiques fell out of favour, and by the end of the 1980s – not withstanding the emerging ecological critiques of development triggered by Carson's classic *Silent Spring* (1962), alongside feminist critiques from Boserup and others – the World Bank and so-

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