POLICY PAPER

Exploring the Mobility Impacts of Climate Mitigation Strategies

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Climate Diplomacy

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Summary

Voluntary migration can serve as a key adaptation strategy for individuals and communities to reduce their vulnerability to climate impacts. At the same time, mobility can pose specific challenges to both moving and receiving communities, including strain on local resources and intercommunal tensions. Further, other forms of mobility, including forced displacement, often give rise to human rights violations and conflict.

While human mobility dynamics have been relatively well-explored in the context of voluntary migration as a form of climate adaptation, less attention has been paid to the mobility impacts associated with climate mitigation strategies. However, issues have already arisen: a review of worldwide carbon offsetting projects from 2018 to 2023 found that 70% of the projects had evidence of harming Indigenous peoples and local communities.

This policy paper aims to fill this gap by looking at the case of land-based carbon credit schemes, which are growing in prevalence as a climate change mitigation approach globally. It argues for the need to integrate conflict sensitivity into the design of climate mitigation interventions by exploring how improperly managed carbon credit schemes can displace local communities and Indigenous peoples, especially in areas with contested land tenure. Practical examples are pulled from forest management schemes in Kenya and Peru, as well as peatland rewetting and conservation schemes in Indonesia to capture the interplay between climate mitigation, land use competition and mobility impacts in practice. The paper concludes with recommendations on integrating conflict sensitivity and equity considerations into carbon credit design, as well as minimising reliance on carbon credits through deep emission reduction efforts.

Contents

Introduction

Mobility and climate

The relationship between climate change and human mobility is influenced by a complex interplay of social, political, economic and environmental factors. Mobility in the context of climate and environmental change has traditionally been conceptualised in terms of climate adaptation and responses to climate impacts and shocks, with adverse changes to the physical environment leading to people's decision—or forcing people—to leave (Tacoli 2009). Some forms of human mobility, especially voluntary migration, have been recognised as effective adaptation strategies to climate change, allowing households to diversify income sources, reduce pressure on local resources, and build resilience through remittances. Migrants' contributions to their communities of origin can also support local adaptation efforts, with returning migrants transferring new skills and new understandings of climate change responses (Gemenne and Blocher 2016; Boncour and Burson 2010).

While the linkages between mobility and adaptation responses to climate impacts have been widely studied, less attention has been paid to the mobility impacts of mitigation measures taken to address climate change, particularly in terms of forced displacement or relocation. This research gap extends to the climate and conflict literature. As Ide (2025) highlights, current understanding of climate conflicts focuses heavily on tensions related to the impacts of climate change, particularly intense inter-group conflicts in the Global South. Meanwhile, a broader understanding that considers tensions resulting from the direct and indirect effects of both climate inaction and climate action, namely, mitigation efforts to reduce or remove emissions, is needed (Ide 2025).

As global mitigation efforts to achieve Paris Agreement temperature targets rise, it is increasingly important to understand the changes in mobility patterns as a result of climate mitigation interventions. Globally, net zero emissions pledges have become a common ambition in the international climate policy arena, requiring a significant expansion of large-scale climate mitigation projects in the coming years (Hare et al. 2022; IPCC 2018). To reach global net zero emissions targets, many industrialised countries intend to offset residual emissions from hard-to-abate sectors, often relying on international carbon markets in which projects that reduce or remove carbon emissions are assigned a corresponding number of carbon credits to be sold (Jeudy-Hugo, Lo Re and Falduto 2021).

Many of these projects fall in the category of land-based climate change mitigation initiatives, for example Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) and nature-based carbon removals.[1] These measures can have a profound influence on local livelihoods. Approaches such as reforestation, afforestation and peatland restoration, while potentially offering ecosystem co-benefits, have high land requirements and can conflict with competing land uses, raising potential justice implications for local populations and marginal land users (Buylova et al. 2021; Maher and Symons 2022). These impacts are often compounded by intersecting vulnerabilities, such as gender and socioeconomic status (Rüttinger, Vivekananda and Steinkraus 2023).

The conflict potential of these projects is intensified by the fact that, given limited land availability in high-income countries, private and state investors have increasingly directed their investments and land acquisitions to countries in the Global South. However, the land acquired there is often far from being empty—rather it is used by local communities for farming, grazing, or cultural purposes (Geissel et al. 2024). Moreover, the appropriation of land in the Global South from multinational companies in the Global North frequently reflects historical patterns of colonial and neo-colonial resource alienation (Fairhead et al. 2012). This reflects an overall asymmetry in global climate governance, with minimal input from communities directly or indirectly affected by climate mitigation strategies (Counsell 2023).

[1] Carbon dioxide removal (CDR) is the "enhancement of biological or geochemical sinks and direct air capture and storage" through human activity (Honegger, Burns and Morrow 2021). It involves capturing carbon from the atmosphere and durably storing it in another carbon pool. Nature-based CDR covers approaches such as reforestation and afforestation to enhance natural forest carbon sinks and soil carbon sink enhancement through biochar, peatland restoration, or wetland conservation, among others (Buylova et al. 2021).

Indeed, various advocacy groups, notably Indigenous and environmental justice groups, have argued that carbon markets represent a new rush for land grabbing or "green grabbing" (Friends of the Earth International 2023). The international push for net zero opens significant finance opportunities for countries to sell carbon offsets, yet at the same time puts pressure on land in the Global South. Green grabbing can lead to the dispossession and displacement of local communities, intensifying inequalities and disrupting local and Indigenous livelihoods (Fairhead et al. 2012; Redvers et al. 2025). Incentives to commodify ecosystems and conflicting interests between residents and project stakeholders can contribute to land rights abuses, particularly for marginalised communities in areas where land tenure is disputed (Yasmi et al. 2012; Myers et al. 2021). This creates a troubling dynamic where efforts to address climate change can inadvertently harm the very communities most vulnerable to its effects.

Need to integrate conflict sensitivity into climate mitigation

In this paper, we argue that conflict sensitivity must be integrated into climate mitigation strategy design and implementation. As global efforts to achieve net zero emissions accelerate, carbon credit schemes and land-based removal methods are expanding rapidly, often with insufficient consideration for local contexts and existing land rights. This oversight has led to serious unintended consequences, particularly in regions with contested land tenure systems. Improperly managed carbon credit schemes can drive land grabbing and resource competition, displacing local communities and Indigenous peoples. Addressing this research gap of mobility in the context of climate mitigation is needed for effective climate governance that respects human rights and promotes sustainable development.

Kakamega, Kenya

Regional spotlights

Global cases of carbon offsetting and displacement

A review of worldwide carbon offsetting projects in the five years from 2018 to 2023 found that 70% of the projects had evidence of harming Indigenous peoples and local communities (Dunne and Quiroz 2023). These cases are spread globally across many different jurisdictions, governance and project types.

In this section, we explore incidences of displacement and land competition tied to land-based climate mitigation and carbon offsetting projects to understand how these dynamics play out in reality. We examine cases from the Mau Forest in Kenya, Central Kalimantan in Indonesia, and the Peruvian Amazon for a wide geographic spread and projects in regionally or globally significant ecosystems.

This paper should be viewed as a preliminary exploration. As a desk-based study relying on available published information, which is limited as this is an emerging topic, no validation or primary account of the projects was possible.

Kenya: Displacement of the Ogiek People in the Mau Forest

Kenya's Mau Forest, one of the largest in East Africa and a critical water catchment for the region, is gaining increasing interest from the government and project developers as a valuable carbon sink for carbon offsetting projects (Erickson-Davis 2024; Marshall 2023). However, the consequences of poorly managed interventions are evident in the case of the Ogiek people, a hunter-gatherer society in the Mau Forest, which overlooks Kenya's Rift Valley. The community garnered international media attention in late 2023 with reports documenting the forced eviction of approximately 700 Ogiek individuals without prior consultation, as well as destruction of homes by Kenya Forest Service rangers, ostensibly to reclaim the land from human encroachment and illegal logging (Marshall 2023).

Experts from the Forest People's Programme and the International Lawyers Project, however, assert that the evictions are related to the Kenyan government's efforts to solidify territorial and financial control over the forest, noting it will become "an increasingly lucrative asset" (Marshall 2023). They point to a collaboration framework signed the month prior by the Kenyan government and the Dubai-based company Blue Carbon for the development of REDD+ projects and carbon credits (PRNewOU 2023). A joint statement from Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group International and Survival International echoed this sentiment, calling on the Kenyan government to clarify if the evictions were indeed linked to recent carbon credit deals (Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group International and Survival International 2023).

Recent announcements by the central government that Forest Service Rangers will receive improved training and better equipment to ensure forest conservation and climate action may suggest that such efforts to secure forest rights will increase in coming years. The publication of the 2024 Climate Change (Carbon Markets) Regulations, which provide a framework for implementing carbon reduction and removal projects in Kenya, further indicate Kenya's intent to increase its usage of carbon markets going forward (EY Global 2024).

The evictions come after a 2017 African Court of Human and People's Rights ruling that the Ogiek people are entitled to live on their traditional lands, ruling against the government claims that evictions were necessary to protect the Mau Forest (BBC News 2017). However, in September 2024, the Kenyan Environment and Land Court at Nakuru contradicted the African Court of Human and People's Rights decision, dismissing Ogiek land claims in East Mau (OHCHR 2025). Following a series of public forums over five months, which faced criticism for being exclusionary and inadequately consulting with the Ogiek community, the Kenyan government began a land demarcation process in April 2025 (OHCHR 2025). Ongoing legal challenges highlight the tensions between Kenya's climate and carbon market finance ambitions and the land rights of the Ogiek people.

Indonesia: Carbon market expansion and displacement

Indonesia is a unique case both in its high forest cover and biodiversity, as well as growing use of carbon markets for financing, which have increasingly been linked to forced displacement of Indigenous peoples from their land. Indonesia's forest cover is approximately 51% of the country's total land area, placing it behind only Brazil and the Democratic Republic of Congo in tropical forest coverage (Global Forest Watch 2025). Despite this high forest cover, deforestation rates remain relatively high, having declined from almost 90% forest cover in 1970s (Jong 2021). Additionally, Indonesia retains the largest tropical peatlands in the world, despite the equally high rate of land clearing for agricultural purposes (Wijayaa et al. 2015).

Indonesia has demonstrated increasing interest in the use of carbon markets. It officially launched its international carbon trading market in January 2025 after announcing it at COP29 in Baku (Sari and Siahaan 2025). Newly elected President Prabowo Subianto announced the goal to raise 65 billion USD in carbon credit sales by 2028, which would be used to fund conservation projects (Sari and Siahaan 2025). Indonesia has developed its own National Registry System for Climate Change Control to track projects and sales of carbon credits, yet it has not linked its registry with leading certification bodies such as Verra and Gold Standard (Sari and Siahaan 2025). Critics however have questioned the credibility of the system and whether it is adequately developed to use for international credit transfers (Sari and Siahaan 2025).

Indonesia further updated its conservation law in 2024, establishing preservation areas as a new conservation category that act as buffers on established conservation zones (Jong 2024). These areas prohibit non-conservation land uses, including collecting firewood, harvesting plants and hunting, which can effectively criminalise Indigenous communities' activities (Jong 2024). Further, should landowners not agree to conservation activities in these preservation areas, the law states they must cede their land rights (Jong 2024). While companies whose concession areas overlap with preservation areas can benefit from conservation-linked activities like carbon trading and ecotourism, for Indigenous peoples, the law can effectively lead to their displacement by criminalising subsistence and cultural activities (Jong 2024).

The Katingan Peatland Restoration and Conservation Project illustrates the impacts of land-based carbon mitigation projects on Indigenous peoples. Established by the Indonesian company Rimba Makmur Utama (RMU), the project seeks to restore nearly 150,000 hectares of peatlands in Central Kalimantan Province (Verified Carbon Standard 2016). Carbon credits are calculated against a counterfactual baseline scenario, which assumes that in the absence of the project, much of the area would be converted to industrial plantations (Verified Carbon Standard 2016). Beyond the central project area, there is a broader project zone of slightly more than 300,000 acres. The project collaborates with 34 villages to prevent deforestation, forest degradation, wildfires and peatland draining (Environmental Justice Atlas 2025). There are approximately 43,000 residents of villages surrounding the project area, many of whom rely on the peat forest for their livelihoods (Beeler 2016).

Activities like logging, controlled burns, and draining for agriculture are not permitted in the managed project area, interfering with communities' ability to support themselves on the land. While the RMU has provided some money to communities for training in alternative agriculture practices, and the establishment of fire patrols in 19 villages have created some jobs, the benefits are not uniform (Beeler 2016). In the village of Bapinang Hilir, marginal rice farmers have been particularly affected, increasingly needing to rely on herbicides in the absence of traditional fire-based clearing methods, thereby increasing production costs and damaging soil and water resources (Environmental Justice Atlas 2025; WRM 2022). Combined with the new conservation law, the presence of the Katingan Project has limited what people can do with their traditional land, opening the door to displacement if they are unable to support themselves.

Peru: Amazon Forest conservation and community conflicts

With nearly 60% of its land area covered by Amazon rainforest, Peru has long been host to land-based carbon offsetting projects. Combined with its high cultural diversity and numbers of Indigenous peoples, Peru's forest and land conservation projects demonstrate the complex interplay between conservation goals and the rights of people living in or near protected areas, particularly where land tenure is unclear or contested.

The Alto Mayo Protected Forest project, launched in 2009, seeks to protect 182,000 hectares of the Peruvian Amazon and improve livelihoods for communities in the region through the carbon credit earnings (Conservation International 2025). Indeed, between 2008 and 2020, deforestation in the Alto Mayo decreased by 59% (Conservation International 2025). Project developers entered into more than 1,300 conservation agreements with local communities, covering approximately 80% of people living within the protected forest (Conservation International 2025). However, behind the apparent success in reducing deforestation, there have been persistent reports of conflict and grievances among local communities.

There is a complicated land tenure situation in the project area. Some residents lack formal land titles, while others moved before the Alto Mayo protected area was established or purchased the land not knowing it was protected (Greenfield 2023). While many residents have signed conservation agreements, others fear doing so means losing the right to live on their land, and hundreds have decided not to renew their conservation agreements. Residents reported a series of clearances between January and May 2021, with approximately 50 homes demolished by park guards and police (Greenfield 2023).

A similar pattern of conflict is evident in Cordillera Azul National Park. The conservation area was founded in 2001 and overlaps with the traditional lands of the Indigenous Kichwa People (Davey 2023). The Kichwa living in the area supported themselves through hunting, fishing and gathering – activities that were subsequently restricted following the creation of the park. The land use restrictions have led to food insecurity in some communities, with some residents further indicating that they can no longer afford to send their children to school. While the project has generated more than 80 million USD in carbon credit revenue, local Indigenous and rural communities have raised concerns about exclusion and lack of consultation (Davey 2023).

In April 2023, a successful legal challenge by the Kichwa ruled that their rights had been violated by the government's actions (Davey 2022). The ruling stated that the Kichwa must be allowed full access to the forests and benefit sharing from the sale of carbon credits. However, just over a week later, the decision was overturned, ostensibly on procedural grounds. The government argued that the park did not overlap with Kichwa ancestral lands, as such territory had not been legally defined, and that residents raised objections to the park too late (Davey 2022). However, communities contend they were not adequately informed of the meaning of the project, with some even coming away from meetings believing the park to be a coal mine due to language barriers (Davey 2022). Ongoing legal proceedings have made the future of Kichwa land rights unclear.

Discussion

The cases from Kenya, Indonesia and Peru reveal similarities in how land-based carbon mitigation projects affect local communities across different regional and governance contexts. Across all three regions, inadequate prior consultation and consent emerges as a fundamental issue, whether through outright exclusion of the Ogiek people from decision-making, language barriers preventing Kichwa communities from understanding project implications, or inadequate consultation with Indonesian Indigenous groups facing criminalisation of traditional practices. The cases demonstrate how contested or informal land tenure systems create vulnerabilities that carbon projects can exploit, with communities lacking formal titles becoming particularly susceptible to displacement.

The commodification of ecosystem services consistently transforms traditional land use patterns, restricting subsistence activities essential for community livelihoods—from hunting and gathering in Peru to controlled burns in Indonesia. Notably, while project developers and governments capture the majority of carbon credit revenues, affected communities receive minimal compensation relative to their losses, creating stark benefit-sharing inequities.

While the need for climate mitigation and ecosystem preservation is clear, these patterns of marginalisation of local communities and Indigenous peoples as a result of land-based carbon offsetting initiatives is concerning. It must not be the most vulnerable communities who face the double burden of climate vulnerability and new legal or de facto dispossession triggered by climate mitigation interventions.

San Juan Bautista, Peru

Conclusion and recommendations

There is an indisputable need for significant carbon emission reductions and carbon removals to meet global temperature goals. International carbon markets and the sale of carbon credits are expected to grow to help meet this need. However, the unintended consequences of land-based climate mitigation projects, if not managed carefully, could undermine communities that are already most vulnerable to climate change. It is therefore necessary to regulate mitigation strategies to ensure human rights and conflict sensitivity remain at their core to ensure climate justice is not sacrificed in pursuit of carbon neutrality.

Towards this end, global mechanisms, including UN processes, need to set strong international principles and standards for human rights and conflict sensitivity for governments and companies to follow. Governments, in addition to implementing international standards and best practices for conflict-sensitive carbon offsets, should pursue the highest possible ambition domestic emission reductions and explore alternate funding mechanisms to support ecosystem conservation abroad. Civil society has an important role in holding government and private sector actors accountable.

Specifically, recommendations include to:

Integrate equity considerations and robust safeguards for Indigenous peoples and local communities' rights into project design.

- **Establish independent grievance mechanisms for communities** affected by carbon offset projects, ensuring accessible procedures in local languages and culturally appropriate formats.
- **Prioritise meaningful participation in decision making**, recognising and integrating traditional land management practices as valid and valuable contributions to climate mitigation.
- **Ensure equitable benefit-sharing** of project revenues, including community-controlled funds to invest in local priority areas.
- **Create compensation mechanisms for economic losses** resulting from land use restrictions, including support for livelihood transitions and alternative income generation that respects cultural practices.

Maximise collective mitigation ambition and ensure the environmental integrity and social quality of carbon credits.

- **Increase transparency of climate targets through separate emission reduction and removal targets**, as well as limits on maximum contributions coming from international carbon credit sales. Consider a logic of domestic plus international targets, as opposed to the latter offsetting the former. Legally binding domestic emission reduction floors that cannot be offset with international credits could be a way for national governments to operationalise this.
- **Ensure quality of carbon credits through stringent baselines, durable carbon storage with permanence safeguards, long-term monitoring, and integrated equity and social considerations.** While these criteria will increase the cost of carbon credits, only the credits with the highest environmental integrity should be funded, and the high cost should encourage increased domestic emission reductions.
- **Explore alternate financing approaches such as payments for ecosystem services** that reward traditional land management practices without requiring aggressive land use restrictions or displacement, as well as increased and additional direct climate finance with no transfer of mitigation outcomes.

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