



## Uprooted

I S S U E 3 9 1



*Timothy Byakola and Chris Lang discover that in the complex chain of relationships in the carbon market, no-one wants to take responsibility when things go wrong. Even if it means people are being driven out of their homes.*

It all sounds so easy. 'When we decide to fly we can't get around the pollution (CO2 and other gases) that this causes, but we can compensate for these emissions by planting and protecting trees that 'soak up' the CO2 as they grow,' a Dutch company called GreenSeat explains on its website. They calculate that for the paltry sum of \$28 you would be able to cover the costs of planting 66 trees to 'compensate' for the CO2 emissions of a return flight from Frankfurt to Kampala. But a closer look on the ground at one of these projects, in Mount Elgon National Park in Uganda, reveals serious problems which are invisible to anyone paying to offset their guilt about flying. A Dutch organization called the FACE (Forests Absorbing Carbon-dioxide Emissions) Foundation is GreenSeat's main partner in the project and is largely responsible for overseeing the tree-planting activities, working with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA).



The UWA-FACE project involves planting a two to three kilometres wide strip of trees just inside the 211 kilometre boundary of the National Park. To date, 8,500 hectares out of a planned total of 25,000 hectares have been planted, according to FACE Foundation Director Denis Sliker.

No-one is saying that the project hasn't brought benefits. It has improved forest regeneration along the park's boundary, especially in areas that had been used for agriculture. The project is certified by independent bodies and is routinely monitored.

Fred Kizza, FACE's project co-ordinator in Uganda, claims that the project has improved income and standards of living among local communities. A contracted certifier of the project, Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS), says the same thing: 'The project has provided significant amounts of paid labour and training to the surrounding communities in an area where there are very few other sources of paid labour.'

It seems that the Mount Elgon project ticks all the right boxes.

### Uprooting communities

But local council officials dispute the employment claims. They point out that most of the jobs are only available during the planting period and employ very

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few people. They also complain that the project has taken away what little local communities had. Collecting firewood has become a serious problem and people have had to abandon the preparation of foods that take a long time to cook such as beans. FACE's Denis Sliker, from his office in the Netherlands, refers to an impact assessment carried out in 2001, which found that employment was the main plus point of the project. According to the report, the main negative impacts were increased scarcity of land, reduction of access to park resources and the increase of dangerous animals. 'Closer research,' Sliker says, 'demonstrated that the negative impacts were caused by the conversion of the area into a National Park rather than reforestation by UWA-Face. In the absence of the project, people would have experienced the same impacts.'

In 1993, a year before the UWA-FACE tree-planting project started, the Ugandan Government declared Mount Elgon a National Park. The people living within its boundaries lost all their rights. According to SGS they never had any: 'The encroachers have never had legal rights to farm the land and UWA are legally entitled to evict settlers from inside the boundary.' The Government ruthlessly evicted people from the park without any compensation. Several court cases on behalf of local communities have not yielded much.

UWA's park rangers receive paramilitary training. 'The wildlife people who operate there are very militarized, and have killed over 50 people. People feel that the Government favours animals more than the people,' David Wakikona, Member of Parliament for Manjiya County told the Ugandan newspaper New Vision. Masokoyi Swalikh, Mbale District Vice Chairman, said that UWA's approach has resulted in conflicts where communities have deliberately destroyed the trees - for them a symbol of their exclusion from land that was once theirs. In 2003, for example, a strip of eucalyptus trees over four kilometres long marking the park boundary was destroyed in one night. Park rangers actively patrol the boundary region and prevent villagers from grazing their goats and cows.

In March 2002, UWA evicted more people from Mount Elgon, many of whom had lived on the land for over 40 years. Park rangers destroyed villagers' houses and cut down their crops. With nowhere to go, the evicted people were forced to move to neighbouring villages where they lived in caves and mosques. The families living in the caves had to keep fires burning all night to protect their children from the cold.

Cosia Masolo, an elder who lived in nearby Mabembe village for over 50 years describes the current situation: 'When the UWA people came with their tree-planting activities, they stopped us from getting important materials from the forest. We were stopped from going up to get malewa (bamboo shoots), which is a very important traditional food here and is a source of income.' Since eviction, Masolo, who has 20 children, now lives on a piece of land covering just a third of a hectare.

In 2002, SGS stated that in order for the tree-planting project to continue, more people will have to be evicted. They even recommended that 'more speed may be required to ensure the evictions are carried out successfully.'

When contacted by us, Niels Korthals Altes of GreenSeat denied at first that any evictions had taken place. 'That's not the case in our projects for sure,' he said. When it was pointed out to him that SGS mentioned the evictions in its Public Summary, Korthals Altes said he couldn't answer specific questions on this and suggested asking the FACE Foundation. A few days later, he acknowledged that evictions had indeed taken place, but he denied GreenSeat had any responsibility. 'Evicting people is not part of the UWA-FACE project,' he said. 'It is a result of the Government's decision to enforce the laws regarding farming in the National Park.'

Denis Sliker, FACE's director, was also in denial mode. 'We carry out a reforestation project in a project area which has been assigned by the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the Ugandan Government as a National Park,' he said. 'If for some reason there is uncertainty on that area then that needs to be solved. If the Ugandan Government decides, together with the UWA, that there should be an eviction then it's their responsibility. That is not our responsibility.'

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Slieker explained that the boundary of the tree-planting project includes a 10 metre-wide strip of eucalyptus trees. 'This is designed to provide a resource that can be managed by local communities to provide pole and firewood, reducing the pressure on the park's resources,' he said.

'People aren't being evicted right now,' he added. 'At this point we have stopped the major planting activities.' The main reason for stopping, he explained, is lack of funding. 'Of course the issues that you mention worry us as well. If we were to proceed on a larger scale we would require some investigation on the evictions that you mention,' he conceded.

The FACE Foundation (who plant the trees), and GreenSeat (who sell the offsets that pay for them), have a further problem - they cannot guarantee that the trees planted will survive. In February 2004, New Vision reported that the police were holding 45 people 'suspected of encroaching on Mount Elgon National Park and destroying 1,700 trees' - trees planted by FACE.

According to Slieker, this is not a problem from a carbon point of view. 'Millions of trees have been planted, so a number of 1,700 is to be seen in that perspective,' he said. 'Of course some trees die if you plant such a large area, some trees just won't live, they'll be overtaken by other trees. That's normal in an ecosystem. That is already incorporated in the CO2 calculation model. The model calculates the net positive benefit in carbon sequestration. We even take into account the risk of people cutting down trees. If that happens we do not get the carbon credits. It's as simple as that.'

## Offsetting responsibility

But GreenSeat and FACE cannot even guarantee the climatic impact of the Mount Elgon project. The only way of knowing the true impact of the project on carbon stored is by following the thousands of people who have been evicted from the national park and comparing their carbon emissions before and after the evictions. It is simply impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy the actions of people evicted from Mount Elgon National Park. Some of them may clear other areas of forest to continue farming. Others may overgraze the land around the park, causing soil erosion. Others may try to continue farming in the National Park. Others may move to the city and take up a higher carbon emitting lifestyle. GreenSeat is supported by WWF Netherlands and among GreenSeat's customers are the Dutch House of Representatives and Senate, the Body Shop and Amnesty International. In response to our questions, Ruud Bosgraaf, press officer for Amnesty International Dutch Section, said, 'We are not aware of any involvement by GreenSeat in evictions in Mount Elgon.' Bosgraaf is right - GreenSeat has not evicted anyone. Neither has the FACE Foundation, nor has SGS.

But on its website GreenSeat advertises its tree-planting project in Uganda to sell carbon offsets. The planting is along the boundary of the National Park and is part of the management of the Mount Elgon National Park. The FACE Foundation's partner at Mount Elgon, the Ugandan Wildlife Authority, has forcibly evicted people with its military-trained rangers. If the tree-planting is to continue, more people will be evicted.

Rather than offsetting carbon emissions, GreenSeat, FACE and SGS have been offsetting their own responsibility for evictions.

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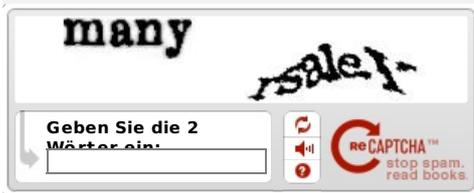
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