

## **A NEW DANGER FOR ADIVASIS AND OTHER FOREST DWELLERS International Climate Scheme REDD Means More Grabbing of Forests, Forest Lands**

A new danger is developing for India's adivasis and forest dwellers which has hardly been noticed. This new danger is a proposed scheme being finalised in the international climate change talks called **“Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation of forests” (REDD)**.

### **What is REDD?**

Climate change is caused by the release of certain gases – especially carbon dioxide – which trap heat, resulting in a gradual warming of the temperature of the Earth. Gases like these are mainly released when fuels like coal and petrol are burnt, but they are also released when forests are cleared; estimates say 20% of global emissions result from deforestation. Living forests can store carbon dioxide, while growing trees also absorb it under certain conditions.

Therefore, the World Bank and some other international organisations, corporations and a few large NGOs are promoting the idea that protecting forests will reduce climate change. Forests are seen as “carbon dioxide sinks”. The scheme that is being negotiated now – which is called 'REDD' - says that rich countries and their companies, instead of reducing the amount of carbon dioxide they emit, can pay developing countries to preserve forests and “capture” carbon in these “carbon sinks.”

Indeed, REDD supporters say that private companies should be able to engage in “carbon trading”, i.e. buying and selling credits earned by “absorbing carbon” through forest preservation (even though there is no easy or agreed way to calculate how much carbon dioxide a forest is actually storing or absorbing). The World Bank strongly supports this.

### **The First Danger: REDD as a Way to Deny People's Rights**

The problem with this approach is that forests are not just trees that can be “preserved” for their carbon absorption (as they were earlier seen as just sources of timber); people use and depend on forests, forest produce, forest land and other resources for livelihoods. In India, the government has not recognised most forest dwellers' rights to forest resources and their common lands. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 is being violated daily, and in particular its community rights provisions are not being implemented at all. If people's rights are not recognised, but money is provided for “protecting” forests, there will clearly be attempts to grab these lands and forests in order to claim this money.

If the government intended to address these issues, it would have clearly stated that any REDD program is subject to people's rights. But in fact, **in all the government's statements on REDD, there is not a single reference to people's forest rights or the Forest Rights Act.** Even the “Technical Paper” released by the Ministry in August entirely ignores people's rights. **It is clear that the government will use REDD as an instrument for reasserting its control over people's forests and lands.**

### **The Second Danger: Government Promoting Joint Forest Management Through REDD**

Instead of respecting people's legal forest rights, the government is saying that it will implement REDD through the “participatory” system of Joint Forest Management (JFM). But forest guards serve as the secretaries and joint account holders of JFM committees (known as Van Suraksha Samitis), making it impossible for the community to have any control over these bodies and ensuring that only contractors, traders and others close to the Department become their office bearers. If the government

is truly interested in “participation”, why is it not respecting people's rights to protect and manage their forests under the Forest Rights Act? The Act has superseded JFM, which has no statutory basis. Moreover, several studies show that community protection is more effective than government systems.

### **The Third Danger: REDD and Land Grabbing in the Name of Afforestation**

Unlike many other governments, which want money only for preserving forests, the Government of India wants REDD payments to include afforestation and tree planting (a system called “REDD plus”). Thus, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh told the US Secretary of State that he wanted US support for “rewarding” India for “expanding forest cover.” **But the government's plantation programs have, till date, been taking place without regard for people's legal forest rights.**

- Plantations often take place on common lands and customary community lands on which people's rights are poorly recorded. People are displaced from their lands and denied access to non-timber forest produce, grazing areas and other livelihood uses.
- As the **Standing Committee on Environment and Forests** said in 2008, “afforestation ... deprives forest dwellers and adivasis of some or all of their lands and impacts their livelihoods and basic needs – for which they are neither informed, nor consulted, nor compensated.”
- The Forest Rights Act of 2006 recognises the right and the power of communities to protect, manage and sustainably use their customary forests, water bodies, wildlife and biodiversity. As such, under the law, afforestation should be decided and controlled by the local community.
- Plantations often destroy grasslands, open scrub jungles and other natural ecosystems that people rely on for forest produce and other needs. In the process they cause major environmental damage, drain groundwater and may even end up releasing extra carbon.

**Yet none of the plantation guidelines of the Environment Ministry till date have made any reference to forest rights, resulting in widespread violations, which will greatly increase if there is a financial incentive for grabbing people's lands and using them in this manner. This is already visible in the case of several internationally financed forestry projects in India.**

In its submission on REDD<sup>1</sup>, the Government of India has said afforestation programmes should be supported by a “market based” approach, i.e. carbon trading. Indeed, India's National Action Plan on the Clean Development Mechanism (2003) estimated that plantations could take up 5 million tonnes of carbon, earning \$125 million in 5 years. For years, paper/pulp companies have been seeking to get forest land for afforestation. If this approach is adopted, they will have a perfect pretext to take over forest land for their own purposes – and, indeed, earn money in the process.

***REDD is likely to become a massive scam, helping rich countries, the government and private companies to mint money at the expense of forest dwellers. Sustainable forest protection and afforestation can only be done through democratic institutions based on clearly recognised people's forest rights. Hence:***

- The government of India must withdraw its support for REDD;
- Private companies should be barred from any benefits from forest protection, and forests and other natural resources should not be subjected to carbon trading in any form;
- The Forest Rights Act must be implemented in full, community rights and powers recognized and all plantation and other forestry programmes brought under local community control.