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Voluntary Corporate Measures are no equivalent of Governmental Policies

Nele Mariën, Friends of the Earth International

Voluntary corporate measures are increasingly being promoted to stand alongside governmental and intergovernmental actions as equal instruments for protecting the environment and human rights. This approach is deeply flawed. Experience across sectors and regions shows that voluntary corporate initiatives — from human rights pledges to multi-stakeholder certification schemes — have failed to prevent abuses, protect communities, or deliver justice¹.

The first problem is **the absence of accountability**. Voluntary frameworks rely on companies to monitor and report on their own human rights and environmental impacts. They are self-defined and self-evaluated, with no sanctions for non-compliance and no mechanisms for independent verification. Affected peoples and workers are rarely included in decision-making. Even the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights remain non-binding and have not ensured access to justice or remedy².

Secondly, **conflicts of interest undermine credibility**. Most voluntary schemes and audits are financed by the very corporations they are meant to scrutinise. This makes them structurally incapable of confronting systemic harms. In extractive industries, agriculture, finance, and manufacturing, corporate “human rights” commitments have coexisted with land grabbing, pollution, and violence against defenders. The resulting reports serve more to reassure investors than to protect rights holders³.

A third limitation is **the denial of remedy and reparation**. Voluntary initiatives offer consultation and reporting, but not legally enforceable redress. Communities affected by toxic spills, deforestation, or forced displacement cannot rely on a company’s code of conduct for justice. On the contrary, voluntary initiatives frequently seek ways out of acknowledging the wrongdoings.⁴ Moreover, such frameworks allow governments to shift responsibility to private actors, weakening the state’s obligation to protect human rights.

Finally, **profit imperatives will always be more defining for corporate behaviour than the voluntary mechanisms they are part of**. Corporate governance prioritises returns to shareholders, not respect for human dignity. Without binding rules, voluntary promises will always be subordinated to financial interest⁵.

For these reasons, **placing voluntary corporate measures on the same level as governmental policy creates a false equivalence**. States have binding duties under international human rights and environmental law. Corporations must be held to comparable obligations through **mandatory accountability mechanisms**, including liability for harm and access to justice for affected peoples. Real progress requires **binding corporate accountability** — not voluntary pledges that perpetuate impunity and the illusion of responsibility.

¹Vrije Universiteit Antwerpen, Voluntary Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives have failed. How to move forward? https://business-society.org/vids_pods/voluntary-corporate-social-responsibility-initiatives-have-failed-how-to-move-forward, 2021

²European Coalition for Corporate Justice, Justice delayed: 10 years of UN Guiding Principles <https://corporatejustice.org/news/justice-delayed-10-years-of-un-guiding-principles>, 2021

³The failure of transparency as self-regulation <https://drcaroladams.net/the-failure-of-transparency-as-self-regulation>, 2025

⁴Milieudefensie, Not out of the Woods <https://en.milieudefensie.nl/news/palm-oil-certification-not-out-of-the-woods.pdf>, 2021

⁵Milton Friedman, “The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits”, The New York Times Magazine, 13 September 1970

SAVE THE WHALES...

From the carbon and biodiversity markets!

Voices from Indigenous peoples



Alberto Achito Lubiasa, a Eyasake traditional authority of the **Embera Dobida** People of Colombia of the Nussi Purru territory states “in our cosmovision whales are our sacred daughters. To use whales for carbon credits and Big Oil’s greenwash is offensive to the Embera Dobida People. Whale offsets would make global warming worse and threaten our future.”

Ilsa Banuvi Caisamo also of the **Embera People** of the Chocó in Colombia asks “How dare you use my sisters the whales as an excuse to keep destroying the planet? Every year, the humpback whales - our sisters - come to give birth to their calves. According to our Law of Origin, “Embera Wera” became a whale in the Ensenada de Utría. That is why she sacredly returns every year to our homeland to greet us, visit us, and to give birth. We were taught to protect her and to respect her whenever she

comes. We deeply reject the use of whales as market mechanisms. Whales are not chickens for you to breed and sell for personal or corporate gain. Climate change will not be solved by using our whales as offsets. Nor will the forests or biodiversity be saved by using them for market mechanisms. [You, Polluters] have to look within and make structural changes in your patterns of consumption and production. You should learn from us, the Embera People, we only take what is necessary... in harmony with what Mother Earth provides. Therefore, I call upon the World Bank, IMF, industrialized nations and countries that destroy the environment to renounce your greed.”

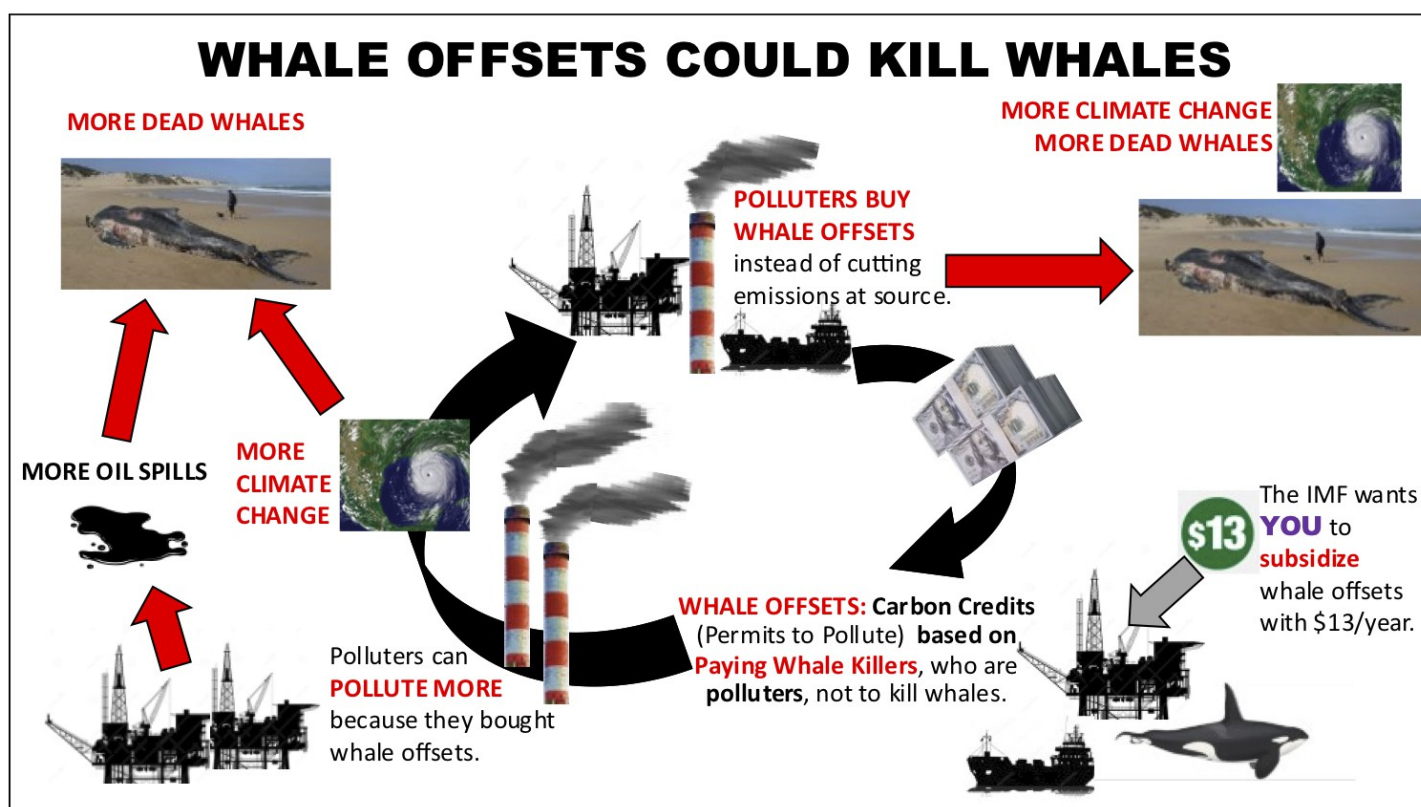
Adrienne Aakaluk Titus (Iñupiaq) of the Indigenous Environmental Network explains Indigenous Peoples’ connectivity with whales and opposition to whale off-

sets. “As Indigenous Peoples of the Global North and Global South, we are connected through the oceans and the relatives who travel these waters. It is our inherent right to speak for the animals, birds and living and non-living beings, the oceans, rivers and lands to ensure a healthy Mother Earth for generations to come. There is a symbiotic relationship which has allowed us to thrive in our ecosystems. We demand a stop to using our sea and land relatives for carbon and biodiversity market schemes to allow business to continue as usual. We need an Indigenous-led just transition for the world to heal. This is only possible if we stop capitalizing on what is left of the ecosystems that have been maintained by our Peoples since time immemorial with little or no carbon

footprint. Our peoples have suffered the brunt of extractive industries, but contribute the least to this carbon emissions crisis causing climate disasters. We say NO! to the expropriation of whales and other animals for the carbon and biodiversity markets. Be better. Do better. Our food security, ways of life and humanity itself depend upon it.”

WATCH “NO to using our sisters the whales are not carbon offsets!”

by Embera Wandra



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Submissions are welcome from all civil society groups.
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Women's Traditional Knowledge on Health

Alejandra Duarte, Women4Biodiversity

The interconnections between biodiversity and health go far beyond zoonotic or infectious diseases. Biodiversity is the foundation of human well-being, physical, emotional, and spiritual; and it nourishes our cultures, knowledge, and practices of care. Within this context, Indigenous and local communities' women play a central role in the preservation and transmission of traditional health knowledge systems. Their expertise encompasses the use of medicinal plants, seed conservation, ritual healing, and community-based therapeutic practices that address reproductive, maternal, and general health needs. Their roles in caregiving, seed conservation, and ecosystem management demonstrate how gendered knowledge systems contribute to adaptive capacity and resilience. Traditional healing knowledge is both cumulative and empirical, developed through long-term observation of ecological processes and sustained intergenerational learning. Its continuity depends on deep interaction with ecosystems and on

oral and experiential transmission, often embedded in rituals and social networks.

Understanding and strengthening these systems requires the meaningful participation of knowledge holders, recognizing their authority and contributions to biodiversity governance. Despite their vital importance, global biodiversity and health strategies remain largely gender-neutral and fail to integrate traditional knowledge. Current discussions tend to focus primarily on the technical and scientific aspects of integrating health strategies into international policy. However, health cannot rely solely on technical knowledge, as many aspects of modern medicine originate from traditional knowledge. These discussions must therefore move beyond the scientific and institutional sphere to acknowledge and include the cultural, spiritual, and community-based dimensions of health. This omission prevents the social and systemic transformation needed to address ecological crises.

The role of “resource Demobilization” in “resource mobilization”

Merel Van Der Mark, Forest and Finance Coalition

Have you ever tried to mop a floor while water from the tap keeps running onto it?

This is what indigenous peoples and traditional communities are facing as they try to protect their territories. Mobilizing money to protect their territories has proven to be extremely difficult and time consuming. Meanwhile, there seems to be no lack of finance for the bulldozers that keep operating at full speed as companies and their suppliers continue to grab lands, destroy livelihoods and violate human rights. Over the past decade, banks have invested at least USD 429 billion in tropical forest-risk commodities.

Most worrying, there is an upward trend, with banks increasing their financing for these companies in the past years. This money pipeline towards destruction has to be stopped, and for that, we need strong financial regulations. Without that, the effort to mobilize resources for forest protection will be a futile exercise. ***Like mopping up a floor with the tap running .***