Interview with Patrick Byakagaba

Ash Farber, ZeroMission
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Introduction

Patrick Byakagaba is a researcher at Makerere University, specializing in Environmental Governance and Policy. He has previously studied Natural Resource Management and Sustainable Agriculture in Oslo before completing his PhD in Forest Governance. Today, he researches agroforestry and carbon sequestration in Uganda; supports the government on the development of their climate policy and acts as Chair of the Uganda Forests Working Group to support the development of forestry policy and ensure best practice. He stated that "I think we have a civic obligation as academics to have a contribution to how decisions are made in our areas of competence or expertise"

We reached out to him for an interview to get his take on the Trees for Global Benefits project in Uganda and the importance of funding resilience.

How do you see the carbon market as an instrument to help individuals in Uganda and reach global climate targets?

First of all, we need to go back to what carbon trading means, it came from the signing of the Rio Convention in 1992. The idea of trading in carbon started around that time, but was actualized with the Kyoto Protocol, which was the real start of the voluntary markets. As a new market, it was always bound to have challenges in terms of getting people to understand and appreciate what it can do.

But now with the signing of the Paris Agreement, almost every country in the world has faith in trading carbon, which is reflected in article six. You clearly see that the world has converged and there's a level of consensus that it's the right thing to do. So in terms of whether I agree with carbon trading or not, my view on it is just that I agree with the rest of the world.

Now we talk of high integrity credits, meaning they are not only contributing towards climate mitigation but also contribute to the well-being and livelihoods of local people. Carbon credits are a credible way of addressing climate change.
The majority of local people in Uganda trade in the voluntary market, because the regulated market is very cumbersome and extremely bureaucratic so individual

farmers are typically unable to navigate it. Also the prices are normally lower, in part because there are so few actors in that space so there is less competition on all sides. If you look at the different standards that are being used in the voluntary market, there is a level of certainty around the credibility and integrity of the credits. These projects are relatively small, so accurately assessing them is fairly simple and multiple studies show positive outcomes at household and community level.

Why do you think carbon trading is such a divisive issue?

In my view, the biggest reason for the difference of opinion around carbon trading is differences in ideology. As researchers, as academics, as policymakers, there are those who do not at all believe in the trading of ecosystem services and particularly the trade of carbon.

It is an ideological difference and quite often you'll find that the critical research is there to justify the ideology that their pre-existing opinions are based on.
The authors are presenting a certain narrative to justify a particular theory, without necessarily looking at how their research method and theoretical frameworks will inevitably shape the findings. Thus, the research method generates the results, rather than any independent inquiry.

Lately I have chosen to appreciate that we are different, and we cannot force people to think what they do not agree with. If someone believes it is wrong to pay for climate mitigation measures or to compensate for ones own emissions based on their ideology, they are entitled to that opinion. However, it is very important that they declare their views, it's good practice to declare your interest or your opinion if you're doing research and presenting your findings as an objective view.

Do you see the difference in research findings to also be linked to who is doing the research?

Of course, if you fail to provide or understand the local context in any research, you're most likely to only be gaining a superficial understanding of what’s going on.
Because of this, there is a huge divide between researchers from the global north and those of us who are in the South when it comes to our understanding of carbon project in Uganda, and the south more broadly. And it's understandable that the

nuances are missed by those from the global north when they come here for two weeks or one month. I'm a Ugandan, but I need a lot of time to be in the field, to properly get to know the specific local context, the social, cultural, economic context of what I'm studying. So, if a person comes here for a few weeks or a month they are mostly likely going to might miss it. But I still believe that the main difference between us and most researchers from the global north is ideological.

When I research carbon projects, I look at the way they are being implemented. But there are others who approach the research with the position that we should never even have thought about using carbon projects to mitigate climate change in the first place, and this really impacts the results and conclusions they make. I think it's unfortunate that we have people who believe that, but is their right to believe that.

However, the rest of the world think trading carbon is one of the few ways in which we can address the imbalance and the inequity of climate change, and we know the world agrees with this because it is written in the Paris Agreement under article five and six. We all have different roles and responsibilities under the Paris Agreement and the global north is mostly responsible for what we are going through globally. In my view, polluters paying people who are mitigating climate change is a fair way of addressing that inequity, because without this, governments and companies in the Global North will continue to pollute and we do not have any instrument to hold them accountable. So you're safer having at least one instrument that can provide some financial accountability.

How does being part of the TGB project compare to other land use practices?

First of all, in all of our farming communities, trees have always been part of our farming practice, there are very few communities that do not include either fruit trees or trees for firewood on their land. We are not as advanced as Europeans or Americans who are using gas or electricity: everyone here is using biomass for all their energy needs. Around 92% of the population is using biomass and the source of biomass is the farm, so either you maintain existing trees or you plant more. And if you look at the TGB project, they typically work with smallholders who are integrating

trees, so you will not find a huge woodlots of 100s of hectares.

You'll find people who have individual trees on their farm, and they collectively sell the carbon in a cooperative manner in order to satisfy the requirements of the standard. The trees they grow positively interact with the crops that they are growing, this means they do not in any way reduce the yields of the food crops. For example, growing coffee requires shade so you find them growing trees that will create that shade, resulting in better yields and there's evidence of this from some of the research we've done, if you go to Brazil, you'll hear the same thing.

In relation to the alternatives, land size is a huge factor. If you have half a hectare, there is no sugar company that will engage you because it's going to conflict with your food security. Tobacco is no longer popular crop here, it used to be, but it could not compete with food crops for price. So I think part of the reason why Trees for Global Benefits has been so successful is because of the positive interaction of the trees and the crops people growing. If they had any issue with the crop yields, I can tell you people would drop out because these farmers are not daft. They make decisions based on returns.

Is it right to say TGB has found a strong niche for who they work with and what farmers get in return?

Yeah, if you look at the statistics, the majority of farmers where the project operates have a bit less than one hectare of land, there are very few people with large pieces of land. So the project has identified the right category of people, those with small pieces of land, people have to grow food crops, but also need trees for shade or for fuel; but also for fruits because TGB encourages people to have fruit trees like jackfruit, avocado and mangos. These trees are generating income from carbon and fruit production, so it’s a double win for the farmers really.

But the project must consider what species are appropriate for the communities, that's why they don't deal with introduced species like eucalyptus and pine. (I grow these species on my land, but I have a dedicated wood lot so these species are not competing with my food production). It is important to ensure the project fits with the needs and aspirations of the communities you're working

with, you do not want your project to leave participants with more risks to their livelihood.

Where are TGB operates, nearly everybody has trees on their land if they're in the project or not, most of the farms will look similar and have similar farming practices, crops and trees. And that shows you that the TGB has not significantly changed people's land use practices, the main difference is the kind of tree species people are growing can be different.

How do you respond to claims that the project increases inequality within communities?

First of all, you have to decide if we are talking about inequality or inequity, because there is a big difference. Because if I grow beans and maize, nobody asks how I have shared my revenue. When I grow trees and sell carbon, which is my product, I own the credits fully and I can decide whom to sell it to and how I use the proceeds of that sale. It's OK to think about revenue sharing, but it has to be at my discretion, as the owner.

This is a very important discussion we need to start having, because these credits are not from a forest that is held in trust, they are from personal land. And if I put in effort, labor and all the other inputs to grow these trees, and then you say please share x% of your proceeds, I think that's also very unfair. That's why I started by asking you, is it about equity or equality.

But to go straight to your question on whether the projects can create inequalities in terms of land? The answer is no, because the type of tenure system we have can clearly define who owns the land. We are not talking about people growing trees on community owned land and taking the benefits themselves, we are talking about people growing trees on their the land they own.

I think again it goes back to people, some of our researchers from the global north lack in that context, they assume all the land in Africa is communally owned. It probably was in the 1800s, but that train left the station, yet there is still often the

assumption is that all land in Africa is communally owned. Yes, we have pockets of community owned land, but most is privately owned.

How does TGB contribute to climate resilience?

When looking at resilience we need to think of four things: two P's and two R's. The two P's are prevention and preparedness, while the two R's are response and recovery, this makes up the main focus of managing disasters and I will contextualize each point.

Growing trees on farmland prevents soil erosion, a huge risk that trees help mitigate, because heavy rains are becoming more frequent, and if you have soil run off, you have reduced fertility and ultimately reduced crop yields, trees protect against this. Also, TGB gives access to carbon payments and other income streams, so farmers are more prepared if a certain aspect of their livelihood is impacted by extreme weather. Trees aren't impacted by drought like annual crops are, so if your maize production is down, you have a buffer from carbon payments and fruit producing trees. The likelihood of extreme weather events is only increasing and we can't stop them, we can only be prepared for when they do come.

Ultimately, project activities mean that recovering from droughts or heavy rain is easier, because they reduce the negative outcomes to begin with, and the communities are better able to restore their livelihoods.