

The New Humanitarian |

Journalism from the heart of crises

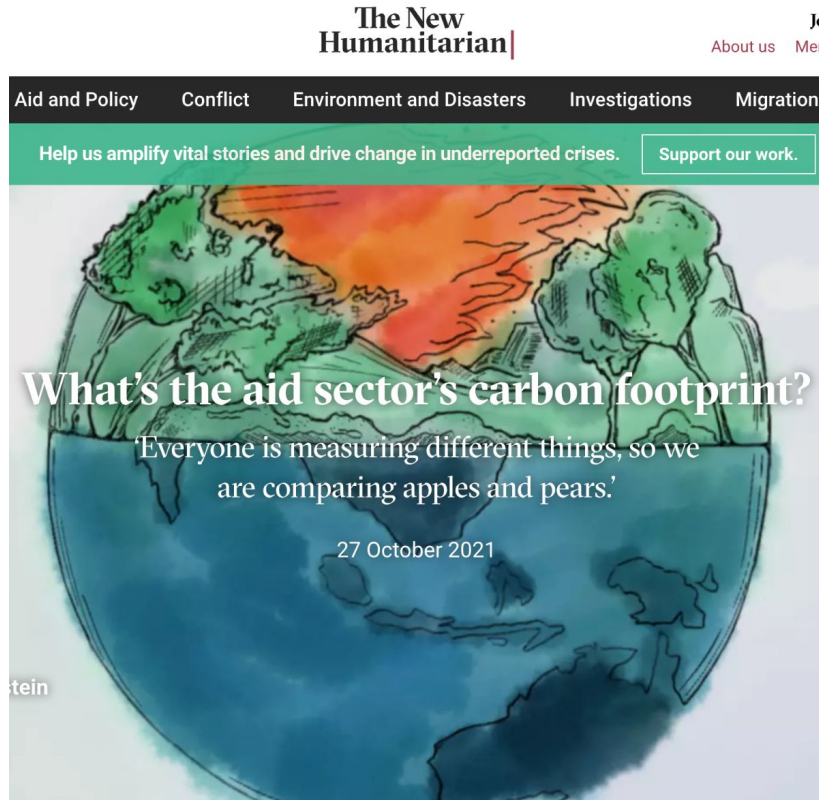


Jacob Goldberg

Journalist

Not a climate expert

What's the aid sector's carbon footprint? (2021)



- The UN considers itself mostly carbon neutral because it buys carbon credits.
- The UN purchases carbon credits from the Clean Development Mechanism, one of the world's largest carbon offsetting schemes.



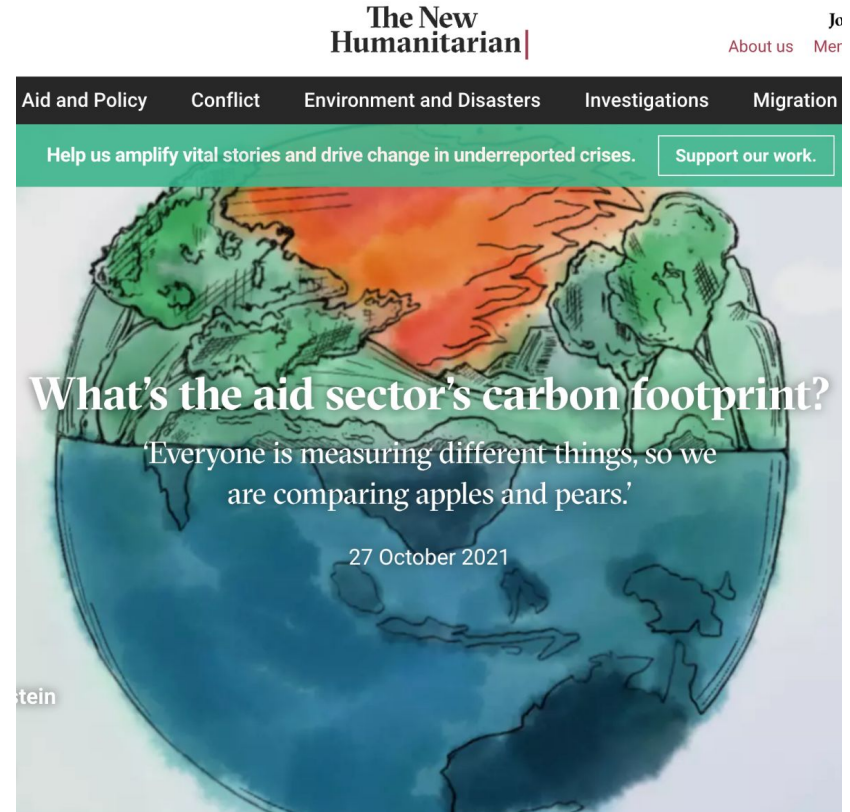
Between 2018 and 2021, the UN said it had achieved near-total climate neutrality, despite reporting emissions of nearly 7 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide – roughly equal to the annual emissions of 1.5 million gasoline-powered cars.

This claim was only made possible by offsetting.

Is the UN really climate neutral?

A 2017 study by the Öko-Institut found that 85% of carbon offset projects used by the EU under the Clean Development Mechanism had a low likelihood of significantly reducing emissions.

Mystery solved?



Not so fast

Maybe the UN buys only the highest-quality carbon credits available from the Clean Development Mechanism?

Why does it matter?

- The UN is hardly the biggest offender when it comes to claims of climate neutrality or greenhouse gas emissions.
- Roughly 100 companies are responsible for more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

BUT

- The UN's offsetting practices undermine its leadership on efforts to slow the pace of global warming.
- The UN helps governments meet their climate commitments under the Paris Agreement and organises the annual COP climate conferences.

“I do think it matters what the UN does... The UN is effectively overseeing the world’s effort to address the climate problem.”

– Joe Romm

Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media

University of Pennsylvania

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Jacob Goldberg, Léopold Salzenstein, Sarah Brown, and Shaz Syed

Method

Asking every UN agency sustainability focal point for offsetting data

- 33 entities provided data
- 15 failed to respond or declined to share information

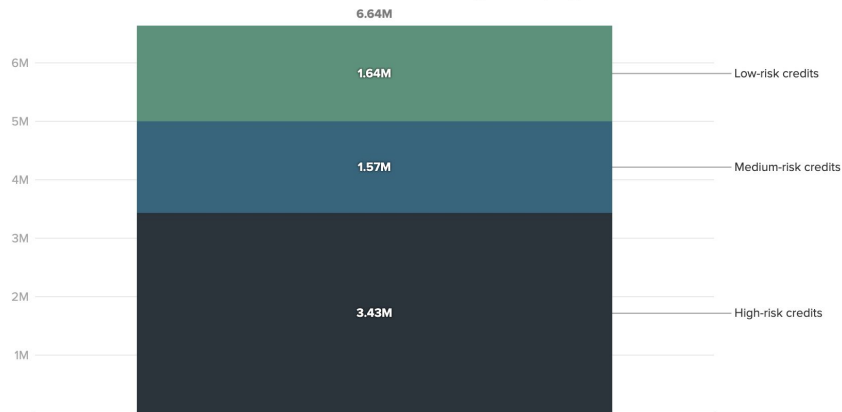
Finding #1: Randomly assigned

- UN agencies do not select their own credits from the CDM
- “These are allocated through UNFCCC and they have certain criteria for their selection. I suggest you reach out to UNFCCC on this matter.”
- UNFCCC buys them from the Adaptation Fund
- The credits are “randomly assigned” by the Adaptation Fund to UNFCCC and then assigned again by UNFCCC to the purchasing UN entities.

Finding #2: Non-additionality

- Identified 6.6 million credits from over 700 projects
 - Represents more than 75% of the UN's 2012-2022 offset portfolio
- 40% come from wind and hydropower projects
- More than 50% come from projects considered high-risk

More than half of UN carbon credits come from high-risk projects



Graph data based on analysis of more than 75% of the UN's 2012-2022 offset portfolio.

Source: [Carbon Offset Guide](#) / [The New Humanitarian](#) • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • [Download PDF](#)

Can you judge additionality based on project type?

- Yes?
- BeZero ratings: Out of almost 300,000 credits the UN bought from these 23 projects, more than 60% were issued by projects that, according to BeZero, have a moderately low, low, or very low likelihood of achieving their stated greenhouse gas reductions.

Finding #3: Cheap credits

- The UN spent an average of about \$1.30 on each of the credits it disclosed to reporters.
- WFP bought more than half its credits – 500,000 – for just 12 euro cents each.
- UNFCCC bought nearly 60,000 for 12 US dollar cents each.

“The reason [CDM credits] are cheap is because they’re not genuine.”

– Joe Romm again

Finding #4: Harmful projects

**13 projects in UN offset portfolio
linked to displacement, environmental
damage, and health concerns**



1. Caieiras Landfill Gas Emission Reduction 112,744 credits

- Brazil's largest landfill. Locals have protested, calling for it to be closed because of fumes and negative impact on property values.

4. Teles Pires Hydropower Plant Project 28,956 credits

- The plant's construction allegedly involved destroying forests and Indigenous lands, and harming biodiversity and fisheries in Brazil.

2. Hubei Duhe Pankou Hydropower Plant 62,416 credits

- Accused by International Rivers of displacing at least 23,000 people in Hubei Province, China.

8. Xiaoxi Hydropower Project 12,746 credits

- Accused by International Rivers of forcibly evicting and then inadequately compensating around 7,500 people in Hunan Province, China.

3. Allain Duhangan Hydroelectric Project 39,606 credits

- Built on land inhabited by villagers in Himachal Pradesh, India, who have protested about the dam's impact on their farms and income from tourism.

13. Shenzhen Xiaping Landfill Gas Collection and Utilization Project 3,841 credits

- Residents in China's Guangdong Province protested the landfill in 2014 over environmental concerns and nicknamed it "the smelliest landfill in history".



A UN-backed carbon offsetting project is poisoning my neighbourhood

A project that releases toxic fumes into a densely populated area should not be able to earn revenue from the sale of carbon credits.



Ranjit Devraj

Journalist and former Sukhdev Vihar resident



Ranjit Devraj/TNH

Sukhdev Vihar residents protest against the Okhla waste-to-energy plant in March 2019.


We have also **supplied both the UN and India's environmental court with evidence that the energy produced by the Okhla plant is nowhere near clean**. In fact, the equipment required to turn the city's waste into RDF was never installed, and **the plant instead generates energy by burning a combination of diesel, wet kitchen waste, and plastic**.

India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change reprimanded the plant over these instances of non-compliance in 2019.

We've also seen half-burnt plastic among the ash from the Okhla plant's incinerator. This indicates that the incinerator is not hot enough to eliminate harmful particles like dioxins and furans. It was therefore no surprise that an inspection ordered by India's environmental court in 2020 found that **the plant's emissions of dioxins and furans were nearly nine times the permitted amount**.

“The commitment to offset the residual emissions remains unchanged, and the UN System has continued to utilise Clean Development Mechanism [credits] for offsetting.”

– UNEP



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Climate change News 21 December 2023

UN defends questionable offsetting practices in new emissions report


Despite evidence to the contrary, the world body claims to have offset 92% of last year's emissions.



Jacob Goldberg
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Léopold Salzenstein
Data and investigative journalist based in France



“UNHCR acknowledges and has taken note of the concerns raised in [The New Humanitarian’s] article... We are assessing our carbon offsetting initiatives and have actively consulted with UNFCCC in recent months.”

OFFICE OF FEDERAL PROSECUTION IN THE STATE OF AMAZONAS

CONSIDERING... that a joint investigation by the New Humanitarian and Mongabay in September 2023 raised serious questions about the United Nations' own claims to be almost entirely carbon neutral based on its purchases of carbon credits...

WE DECIDE TO RECOMMEND to the governor of the state of Amazonas... **suspend the trade of carbon credits in Brazil or abroad coming from indigenous and traditional territories in the state of Amazonas.**

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