

Voluntary Carbon Markets (VCM): Social and Human Rights Perspectives (ID: 1368)

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Abstract

The Voluntary Carbon Market (VCM) is one approach falling under the concept of Nature Based Solutions. VCM is a decentralised market where private organisations and individuals voluntarily buy and sell certified carbon credits as a means to remove or reduce greenhouse gases linked to human activities. Each credit sold, representing one tonne of CO₂ reduction/removal, is meant to support climate-positive projects. Investment in the VCM and carbon credit issuance has grown rapidly since 2016 with demand for credits potentially outstripping supply. At the same time, VCM is currently an unregulated market with a host of competing standards and certification bodies. From one perspective the VCM mobilises funds into practical on-the-ground action to manage climate change, build resilience, support sustainable development and deliver net benefits for people and biodiversity. Another perspective questions the VCM's legitimacy including accusations of greenwashing and a new source of human rights violations.

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the voluntary carbon market (VCM), its potential social and human rights impacts, the frameworks of standards associated with it, and the challenges in evaluating, mitigating, and managing social and human rights effects in VCM projects. The VCM projects highlighted in the paper concentrate specifically on forestry, agriculture, and habitat within tropical and subtropical regions, with the aim to promote sustainable habitat management, restore ecosystems, and prevent environmental degradation. The paper provides a brief introduction to the VCM history and trends, an overview of identified VCM project social and human rights issues and impacts and, a high-level analysis of social and human rights factors currently incorporated within the main existing VCM standards. Drawing on this information, the authors' propose a series of underlying root causes that are limiting projects' ability to avoid and effectively mitigate or remediate impacts and/or are causing unintended negative social and human rights impacts. The paper finishes with a set of recommendations to strengthen the avoidance and management of negative social and human rights impacts associated with VCM projects.

Methodology

This paper was compiled following a review of publications covering social and human rights issues associated with VCM projects. Figure 1 was informed by a review of social and human rights requirements incorporated within current published VCM Standards. In addition, the analysis and discussion were further informed by the authors practical experience of working on VCM projects, alongside input from a small number of additional social performance and human rights practitioners with direct experience in the VCM arena. Finally, the paper includes feedback from discussion of the authors'

presentation and other presentations at the IAIA Conference 2025 Session: *Embracing Nature: From Grey Solutions to Nature-Based Solutions*.

Introduction to the Voluntary Carbon Market

The VCM presents numerous opportunities and advantages for addressing climate change and assisting companies in achieving net-zero emissions. These advantages include the mobilization and release of capital to fund nature-based solution (NBS) projects. These VCM projects encompass community-based initiatives, renewable energy, reforestation, and carbon capture technologies.

The VCM is a decentralized system wherein individuals or organizations purchase credits from VCM projects to offset their carbon footprint. These carbon credits are termed "voluntary" because their use for emission reduction is neither legally mandated nor regulated at the present time. The formalization of the VCM was solidified at the Paris Climate Conference ([UNFCCC](#)).

Human Rights and Social Impacts and Issues of VCM projects

Fundamentally, successful outcomes of VCM projects focused on natural resources are dependent upon the affected rightsholders and stakeholders who are custodians and users of the land / habitats and resources that will generate the carbon credits. Avoidance or minimisation of negative social impacts and avoidance of human rights harm, alongside creation of social benefit should, in principle, be hardwired into VCM projects.

VCM projects can deliver positive impact by driving climate action and benefitting local communities, including sustainable livelihoods. Additional social co-benefits noted during the IAIA session and associated with NBS projects included improved health, water quality, food production, socio-economic status, community empowerment and, flood mitigation.

However, recent scandals raise doubts about VCM projects' ability to manage social impacts and human rights (Cabello, 2025), despite their stated commitment to net beneficial social and environmental outcomes. The following human rights harm and social impacts associated with VCM projects, both verified as well as allegations (Madhuri 2023), were identified:

- Livelihood displacement and resettlement (physical and economic)
- Community security (area patrols and/or government security forces activities)
- Community conflict
- Labour rights including child labour (workforce involved in NBS)
- Community and workforce health and safety (e.g. pesticide use)
- Unfair benefit sharing
- Corruption and bribery
- Grievance mechanism / remedy effectiveness
- Heightened negative impacts on vulnerable, marginalized groups including indigenous peoples

Many of the impacts listed above were also raised during the IAIA session as well as further impact and implementation challenges that apply to VCM and Nature Based Solutions (NBS) projects:

- Managing long timeframes required to successfully deliver projects;

- Over promising development outcomes to local affected communities; and,
- Limitations of geographically localized Environmental Social Impact Assessments (ESIA) for effectively identifying, understanding and assessing impacts and, the need for more strategic high level assessments (e.g. Strategic Environmental Assessments).

VCM Standards

Standards play a critical role in maintaining and driving the integrity and credibility of the VCM (ClimateSeed 2024). The standards provide the frameworks and methodologies necessary to certify and issue carbon credits as well as the environmental and social requirements (ClimateSeed 2024). For a project to issue carbon credits within the VCM, it must undergo certification by an internationally or nationally recognized standard. The certification process includes some consideration of social requirements. At a conceptual level the VCM standards generally require that projects have “no net harm” and state the need to identify and address negative environmental and socio-economic impacts.

The VCM has a multitude of standards which have been set by number of organisations (many are not-for-profit organisations) that assess and certify voluntary carbon credits e.g. Verra, the Gold Standard Foundation, American Carbon Registry and, Climate Action Reserve are some of the most known organisations. The Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market (ICVCM) is emerging as a global benchmark for high-integrity carbon credits through its established Core Carbon Principles and associated Assessment Framework. This range of VCM standards can present challenges for market participants and project affected stakeholders, leading to confusion, particularly since not all standards maintain the same level of quality or rigor.

It is important to recognize that the voluntary nature of the market implies that the application of standards and the integrity of the carbon offsets it generates are optional. This has led to accusations of greenwashing and the emergence of new sources of human rights violations.

To address the failures and scandals progress has been made. The **increasing scrutiny and questioning of the quality of carbon offsets**, particularly concerning human rights, have prompted a review and strengthening of standards over the past two years. The establishment of the ICVCM also represents a significant additional step towards enhancing the standards and providing a global reference point for high-integrity projects.

A brief analysis (figure 1.) of the most used independent standards was conducted to identify whether key social and human rights criteria were incorporated.

Figure 1. Analysis of Voluntary Carbon Standards

VCM Standards	The REDD+ Environmental Excellence Standard (TREES) (Aug 2021)	Verra Climate, Community and Biodiversity (CCB) Standards (June 2017)	Verra Sustainable Development Verified Impact Standard (Jan 2019)	Gold Standard (Dec 2024)	Core Carbon Principles including Sustainability Safeguards (Assessment Framework, Jan 2024)	American Carbon Registry (ACR Standard, July 2023)
Level	Sub-national & national	Project	Project	Project	Project	Project
Groups	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) and 'equivalent'	IPLCs & communities with values / livelihoods derived from the area	Stakeholders (any person potentially affected by the project)	IPLCs, affected stakeholders	IPLCs	affected communities and other stakeholders
Legal / Standards references	Cancun Safeguards (UNFCCC REDD+ safeguards), includes UNDRIP; REDD+ Social & Environmental Standards (SES)	Cancun Safeguards (UNFCCC REDD+ safeguards), includes UNDRIP; Land, territories and resources rights - ILO 169, UNGPs.	SDGs; ILO Core Labour Conventions; UNDRIP; ISO 14064:3 (2006)	Based upon IFC PS (2012), UNDP SES (2021), UNEP ESSF (2020), FAO FESM (2022), National legislation, UN Charter, ILO, UDHR	Builds on best-in-class standards including WB, IFC, UNDP, UNDRIP, UNEP, Cancun, ILO, applicable international human rights law, UNESCO conventions	UNFCCC Paris Agreement; Compliance with local, national, and international laws, regulations, conventions and agreements
SDGs	No	Partial (can use ...Millennium Development Goals)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cancun Safeguards	Yes.	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Gender	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Impact Assessment	No	No (IA manual reference given but no explicit requirement)	Partial (preliminary impact assessment only)	Partial (EIA as suggested form of evidence re. compliance with Standard)	No	Yes
Human Rights	Partial (land and resource related rights)	Partial (land and resource related rights)	Partial (workers rights, land/property/resources & FPIC)	Yes (refers to core human rights conventions / treaties)	Yes (refers to core human rights conventions / treaties)	Partial (no specific reference standards)
IPLC's rights under international law	Partial (no uniform standard; no indicators for rights)	Yes (per UNFCCC; addresses FPIC & rights to land & resources)	Yes (refers to UNDRIP, ILO 169)	Yes (refers to UNDRIP, ILO)	Yes (refers to UNDRIP, ILO)	Partial (no mention of requirements)
Land & Resource Rights	Partial (no uniform standard)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Carbon Rights	No	No	No	No	No	No
FPIC	Partial (No procedural guidance)	Yes (with indicators for IPs and LCs)	Yes	Yes (refers to UNDRIP, ILO)	Yes (for IPs & LCs)	Partial (when relevant)
Cultural Heritage	Partial (Tangible only)	Yes (no detail)	Yes (no detail)	Yes (tangible and intangible)	Yes (tangible and intangible)	Yes
Labour & Working Conditions	No	Yes (worker relations)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (remit not specified)
Community Health & Safety	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes (remit not specified)
Formal benefit sharing mechanism	No (benefit distribution follows international conventions & national/subnational legal frameworks)	No (optional)	No (benefit sharing part of standard but no formal mechanism)	No (part of managing full range of impacts)	Partial (requirement for transparency about the sharing of benefits with affected parties)	Partial (include discussion of robust benefit sharing arrangements)
Formal grievance mechanism	Partial (must provide "access to dispute resolution mechanisms", no mention of UNGP / effectiveness criteria)	Yes (no mention of UNGP / effectiveness criteria)	Yes (few details, no mention of UNGP / effectiveness criteria)	Yes (no mention of UNGP / effectiveness criteria)	Yes (no mention of UNGP / effectiveness criteria)	Yes (ACR's own GM including process details - criteria / principles seem pretty aligned to UNGPs, but few further details)

The review of the updated Standards identified a number of vulnerabilities with regards to social and human rights aspects, notably:

- Impact assessment - no specific requirement for any formal impact assessment process to rigorously identify, assess and prepare management measures for negative as well as positive impacts. Verra does require a “*preliminary assessment of the likely economic, social, cultural and environmental impact, including potential risks and fair and equitable benefit sharing in a context that respects the precautionary principle*”. This potentially reflects the historic focus within the standards and indicators on benefits rather than negative impacts upon communities;
- Human Rights – standards include generic references to international conventions as applied in the national context but no or limited reference to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs);
- Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) – FPIC is a requirement in all Standards for both affected indigenous peoples and other affected communities in relation to economic displacement, resettlement and cultural heritage where they have recognized rights (legal or traditional). FPIC is a complex ongoing process but the standards provide little information to support practical effective implementation;

- **Limited Implementation Detail** – the standards generally focus on concepts and high-level requirements with limited detail of what this requires in practice. Two important examples are Benefit sharing mechanisms and grievance redress. In the case of grievance redress the Verra Standard (v4.7) requires the development of a grievance redress procedure, and provides basic details of what the processes should include. Projects working to international good practice use the UNGPs approach and effectiveness criteria to strengthen the effectiveness of grievance redress procedures;
- **Affected Stakeholders** – the current standards have a blind spot with regards to consideration of economically or physically displaced affected stakeholders without formal or traditional rights to land, assets or natural resources. Examples might be migrants herding cattle or agricultural workers. These stakeholder can be some of the most vulnerable or disadvantaged in local society.

Analysis of Underlying Root Causes

Looking beyond the Standards’ requirements, recent events have underscored inconsistencies, inefficacies, and inadequate practices in the application of these standards. These inconsistencies are often linked to carbon accounting methodologies, such as whether the credit genuinely results in emissions reductions (Gifford, 2020). However, the quality and credibility of a carbon credit is also questioned when human rights are not considered. Carbon credits frequently fail to incorporate benefits for impacted communities, leading to negative social impacts and potentially exacerbating harm, including human rights violations (Allgood et al, 2024).

Feedback from practitioners and the authors experience have identified potential root causes that increase the risk of negative social impacts and potential human rights violations on VCM projects.

Limited understanding of the role of communities

As noted earlier natural resource and habitat focused VCM projects commonly rely on the host communities and other stakeholders to permanently change the way they interact with their local habitats and natural resources in order to enhance carbon storage in the landscape and secure carbon credits. Many project developers and financing institutions have limited understanding of the fundamental role of communities for long term successful project outcomes. This gap in awareness results in a failure to initiate or allow sufficient time for participative or community led approaches from the earliest stages of the project design onwards. The knowledge gap may be exacerbated by the number of project developers and financing institutions that have never undertaken a project of this nature previously. There may also be an assumption that these projects are in essence ‘positive’ and ‘good’ by default without due consideration of their complexity or the potential for unintended negative social consequences and human rights harm.

Time is of the essence – the rush to first offset

The rush to secure initial carbon offsets has numerous parallels with other industrial moments characterized by sudden booms or influxes of interest. This phenomenon is evident in the extractive sector, where large mining and oil and gas projects have significant negative impacts on communities. Additionally, the carbon offset industry is susceptible to the concept of the resource curse ‘Dutch disease’

(Li et al, 2023), wherein a boom in one sector leads to a decline in another. Consequently, the foundations of projects are often inadequately understood and established, with rushed timeframes (including expedited FPIC agreements) and, a sole focus on ticking the certification boxes, resulting in communities being disadvantaged, excluded, or marginalized.

Prioritization of emissions reduction

Offset projects primarily focus on emissions reduction, developing projects based on the most effective carbon accounting methodologies. Consequently, the emphasis on emissions reduction often comes at the expense of other critical aspects, such as environmental and community impacts. For instance, a conservation project aimed at meeting additionality and reduction targets might invest in a former logging plantation. This plantation may employ numerous local community members. Transitioning to a conservation project poses a significant risk of job loss for these community-based employees.

Further complexity arises with illegal logging. While halting illegal logging may seem beneficial, it is important to recognize that even illegal logging provides essential employment for local community members. The displacement of these employees can lead to severe implications, including loss of livelihood and potential human rights violations if military or police forces are deployed to remove illegal loggers. Additionally, there are connections to organized crime, further complicating the situation (Robledo, 2023).

Vulnerabilities in VCM Standards and their implementation

The earlier analysis in this paper highlights potential vulnerabilities in the VCM standards - both with gaps within the standards themselves but also in the implementation. A prime example emerging from the analysis of the various standards reveals that no standard requires or advocates for a robust impact assessment to be conducted at any stage of the project. Impact assessment, is the process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action (IAIA). Any activity results in an intervention and this can have positive or negative consequences. It is therefore vital to understand the potential impacts on a project on the local community. Based on the authors experience, many carbon offset projects, specifically afforestation, reforestation and conservation projects can have negative impacts if the affected communities are not involved or engaged at the start of a project. For example, the early social sensing work to understand community dynamics, livelihoods and dependencies heavily informs decision making about the best outcomes for the project. Impact assessment through the right scoping and framing can address social and human rights risks.

Lack of social and human rights specialists

The extractives sector has recognized the significance of subject matter expertise provided by social scientists in mitigating adverse effects and potential human rights violations associated with their projects. By integrating insights from social science disciplines, industry stakeholders can implement more robust strategies to safeguard communities, ensuring that development initiatives align with ethical and socially responsible practices (Kemp et al, 2020). Carbon offset projects often fail to adequately recognize the importance of community impacts, as evidenced by the insufficient engagement of social science subject matter experts. Social scientists or social performance practitioners provide critical expertise that directly

addresses the impacts of carbon projects on communities and are also able to bridge the gaps linked in the VCM standards' requirements and practical implementation. Similar to resource extraction projects, carbon offset initiatives have the potential to displace and marginalize communities. In response, standards have been updated to address these concerns, necessitating the implementation of robust grievance mechanisms, comprehensive community engagement, and adherence to principles such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) with the same rigor and integrity.

Recommendations

In order to address the effective identification, assessment and avoidance / management of social and human rights impacts the following recommendations are proposed. These recommendations also draw upon feedback relevant to VCM projects from the IAIA Session.

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Enhancing the knowledge and capacity of affected communities and project developers is a key approach to addressing deficiencies in the comprehension of rights and obligations, as observed in the high-level analysis of the standards. The analysis states that most standards necessitate the integration of social and human rights considerations into project development documents. Incorporating capacity-building measures targeting these aspects among communities and project developers significantly increases the likelihood of avoiding and where not possible mitigating any potential human rights issues including FPIC requirements. For instance, the [Conservation Coast](#) project highlights the effectiveness of this approach. Prior to initiating discussions on the carbon project, the proponent dedicated two years to extensive community engagement. This preparatory effort ensured that the community developed a thorough understanding of the project's requirements and implications. Furthermore, it enabled the project team to gain deeper insights into the community's profile, thereby facilitating the effective application of social and human rights considerations.

Impact assessment has the potential to play an important role in avoiding and effectively managing social and human rights impacts. Strengthening the VCM standards requirement around impact and risk assessment and the establishment and maintenance of an ongoing management systems is a key recommendation e.g. International Finance Corporation (IFC) performance standard 1 'Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social risk and Impacts' provides an internationally reference requirement.

The IAIA Session participative discussion included two key questions posed by the Session Chair: 'How can Impact Assessment support NBS?'; and, '[What is] My first step?'. The comments provide useful IA related recommendations that have applicability to VCM projects:

How can Impact Assessment support NBS?	[What is] My first step?
[Identify] ways to enhance the positive impacts and opportunities from a holistic approach	Valuation of the ecosystem through stakeholder engagement and local knowledge
Start early discussion how the value add of the project will be monitored	Education of our local government and investors on NBS
To prove the contribution of the project to relevant Sustainable Development Goals	Adjust EIA legislation to promote co-benefits

[Supports the] role of participatory monitoring in upscaling project	Demonstrate good practices during early stakeholder engagement
Provide Environmental and Social (E&S) input early in the project planning	Set metrics / indicators, monitor long term, report and share (and back round the cycle again) [management system approach]
By offering frameworks and guidance for this [assessing and managing impacts]	Engage between government, stakeholders and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)
Integrating E&S experts early in project design	Gather and share NBS examples (NBS often perceived as abstract buzz word)
Showing the business case for project design that balance human and environmental needs	Use SEA to link marine and terrestrial environments
Valuation of the ecosystem through stakeholder engagement and local knowledge	
By integrating options for implementation at [the] IA stage	

Ensuring the **involvement of qualified practitioners and subject matter experts** is essential for the effective application of social and human rights and integrated impact assessments in carbon projects. Professionals with extensive experience in social performance and human rights considerations possess the adaptability to address the diverse dynamics of various project models. Despite the positive environmental intentions of carbon projects, including conservation initiatives, these projects may introduce changes that adversely affect the affected communities.

Therefore, the engagement of practitioners and experts with a deep understanding of broader social impacts is critical. Their specialized skills and technical expertise allow them to identify, assess, and mitigate negative social consequences at the earliest stages of project development, ensuring that human rights considerations are adequately addressed and upheld throughout the project's lifecycle.

Carbon credit rating agencies hold significant potential in addressing the social and human rights implications of carbon projects. These agencies have recently entered the market to evaluate the quality of carbon credits at the project level. Their assessments aim to differentiate between high-quality carbon credits and those failing to fulfill their claimed benefits, thereby enabling them to exert substantial influence on market dynamics. Furthermore, the agencies assert their commitment to enhancing market transparency, ensuring independence, and promoting equitable pricing.

Agencies such as [Calyx Global](#) periodically publish reports that critically analyze the quality standards within the voluntary carbon market. In their most recent report, one prominent issue identified was the insufficient inclusion of social and environmental safeguards to mitigate negative impacts. While the presence of “do no harm” requirements was acknowledged, the report highlighted the inadequacy of guidance and information necessary to prevent adverse social impacts and potential human rights violations.

Given the growing scrutiny surrounding low-quality carbon credits and the increasing focus on avoiding greenwashing, corporations dedicated to achieving genuine emissions reductions are actively seeking

high-quality carbon credits. Carbon credit rating agencies play a crucial role in assisting these corporations by identifying credits that meet rigorous standards, which should inherently include measures to prevent negative social impacts and uphold human rights.

Learn the lessons of other projects including from NBS and VCM projects as well as lessons from renewable energy projects (and extractive and agricultural sectors). Renewable energy projects demonstrate that a project's perceived climate and environmental benefits do not necessarily translate into widespread acceptance, nor do they guarantee the absence of negative social impacts (Finley Brook and Thomas 2011). For instance, forest conservation projects may restrict land-connected peoples from accessing sites of cultural significance or vital food sources, leading to cultural and social dislocation. Additionally, the prohibition of illegal logging activities within conservation zones can create economic displacement for community members who rely on logging as a source of income to support their families.

An arguably contentious yet valuable recommendation involves deriving lessons from the resources and extractive industries. While this approach may initially appear misaligned with the objectives of carbon projects- considering that fossil fuels are a principal contributor to climate change—the resource sector has developed critical insights through its own history of scandals and controversies. These past shortcomings have catalyzed the establishment of frameworks such as the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (Hale et al 2011), alongside the foundational work of John Ruggie on Business and Human Rights (Ruggie, 2017).

Key lessons emerging from these historical challenges include the development of academic programs, specialized training courses, comprehensive guidance notes, and the accumulation of deep subject matter expertise. The professionals cultivated through these initiatives bring extensive, practical experience that equips them to effectively identify, evaluate, prevent, and address social and human rights impacts in a manner that is both objective and technically rigorous.

Conclusion

As with any nascent industry, where regulations are unclear and inconsistent, much of the product's integrity relies on adherence to a voluntary code. Consequently, there remains significant work to be done. The numerous reports, studies, and investigative media articles exposing human rights violations necessitate a collaborative effort between the voluntary carbon market and standards bodies to enhance the application of these standards. Applying the recommendations along with rigorous auditing and assessment of projects to identify and address human rights violations will be crucial.

The paper concludes that to avoid identified and potential negative impacts and human rights violations, which can be a result of the gaps in the standards and their application, the carbon project should better understand and address the underlying root causes. A key recommendation relevant to the IAIA community is a strengthening in the requirement to undertake impact assessment process and improve the quality of implementation. Without a fundamental rigorous assessment of a project's impacts and the subsequent definition of locally appropriate management measures these projects will continue to cause human rights harm and negative social consequences however well intended the Project Developer.

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