A grand retreat; promoters of climate smart agriculture start counting “non carbon” and “non mitigation” benefits from the projects

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The 38 session of the SBSTA is underway at Bonn Germany. One of the important items on the agenda of the SBSTA is to take a decision on whether SBSTA should undertake a work programme on agriculture. There have been acrimonious debates on the matter with many of the developing countries strongly ranged to prioritize adaptation over mitigation approaches in the agriculture. They fear that a work programme on agriculture, might ultimately promote mitigation in agriculture, while for majority of the farmers in the world adaptation to the increasing adverse impacts of climate change and sustaining food production remains a cause of concern. Agriculture contributes to around 13% of the total GHG emission globally and along with land use change and deforestation, it accounts for almost one-third of total global GHG emissions. A number of developed countries led by US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand and many premier agricultural and research institution believe that agriculture and huge mitigation potential, which must be explored along with any co benefits of adaptation that might occur. A number of civil society organizations across continents strongly believe that mitigation domination in ag and cc debate will promote the interests of ag business companies, big farmers, industrial agriculture, will take away focus from reducing emission at source in Annex 1 countries and result in further reduced resilience of farmers and small holders agriculture.

Besides the US, Australia, new Zealand and Canada, a number of institutions including WB, UNDP, IFAD, FAO have also been promoting mitigation in agriculture. The main strength behind their arguments comes much from CGIAR (and also IPCC) suggesting huge mitigation potential in agriculture and therefore, the need to mitigate in agriculture. It is also said that 90% of the mitigation potential exists in soil carbon sequestration and largely in developing countries (more than 70%). However, equally ample potential in livestock, reducing fertilizer intensity, reducing use of energy on farm and along the production and supply chain are prominent by their absence, which again suggests that the developed countries are not ready to undertake the food system transition in their backyards, and are only trying to shift the burden of mitigation to the poor developing and least developed (primarily ag countries).

The critics of mitigation approach in agriculture cite non-permanence of soil carbon, difficulties in assessment and measurement, much of the benefits going to project developers and proponents rather than farmers, questionable

proposed methodologies and loss of farmers sovereignty (IATP, 2012, 2011, MISEREOR, 2011, GAIA, 2011, Beyond Copenhagen, 2012 etc.).

As against this countries and institutions including UN institutions pitching openly in support of mitigation in agriculture, cite benefits from six nonedescript projects in Africa (Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia etc.) involving few thousand farmers (How can small-scale farmers benefit from carbon markets, CGIAR, 2013). This is quite an advance from their position when they had only one Kenya Agriculture Carbon Project to talk about (See IATP for a brilliant analysis of Kenya ag carbon project)! The main arguments advanced for climate smart (mitigation focused ag projects) was that it provides a triple win solution providing food security, improvement in farmers income and climate change prevention. In a recently released Policy brief (cited above) by the CGIAR, marks a grand retreat from the triple win solution. It reveals a number of facts that these promoters are not ready to say. Some of these are;

1. **No clear benefits in food security/resilience or financial benefits to farmers**

The policy brief citing benefits from these projects forgets to mention achievement in first two objectives (food security and improvement in farmers income). Rather it admits that financial benefits from the projects have been too meager for the famers (US$ 3 to US$ 5 per year per ha). The real volte face is that it talks more about "non carbon" and "non mitigation" benefits and includes arguments beginning from ambiguous and bordering on absurd, as benefits, viz cultivate strong relationship between project managers and farmers, empower local actors to manage projects, developing partnerships for scaling up, support conflict resolution mechanisms within the farmers groups, addressing gender dynamics of the project. While each one of these might be laudable objectives in itself, these are not the ones for which these projects were set up in the first place. These are obviously not only unintended but largely uncontrolled (benefits being putting up for failed projects). Many of these projects promoted by international NGOs like CARE, ECOTRUST, World Vision, CAAC definitely seem to be looking for face saving listing the benefits, which many believe are too insignificant and neither worth asking for. They also talk about improved agricultural productivity without citing a single data. Data to show mitigation benefits, would be extremely difficult to come about, as we know.

2. **There is no money honey**

Many of the developing countries are also led to believe that agriculture carbon projects would enable them access to scarce finance in ag. However, the policy briefs admit that there is hardly any interest in big investors in these projects. To quote "As a result, it is mainly from voluntary carbon markets and donor funds that have financed African ag carbon projects." FAO estimates that some 17 billion Euros will need to be invested between 2010 to 2013 to set up a soil carbon market, which seems highly unlikely with these results. According to FAO, setting up soil carbon projects may require an investment of US$ 12 to US$6oo per ha.

3. **Recommendations to tie NAMAS with conditionality**

   The brief also recommends that due to lack of enough investors for these projects, they should be supported by funds that countries might receive for implementing their NAMAs, suggesting that financial support to NAMAs might also now be tied to certain conditionalities. Till now, it was largely believed that developing countries would receive financial assistance to implement their NAMAs by way to untied funds to encourage mitigation and adaptation actions.

4. **Projects leading to social conflicts**

   It is equally likely that these uncertain, uncontrolled and indeterminate projects promising money from carbon credits will lead to social tensions should the projects do not result in desired benefits. The brief speaks of high probability of social tensions, which might be based on experience and ground realities. It further says that in certain projects, managers were replaced every four months. These multiple layer mechanisms to ensure accountability might be too much for their worth prove too much for simple farmers in poor countries.

5. **Doubts persist over MRV methodologies in soil carbon assessment**

   The policy brief and the project outcomes admit that the MRV methodologies are premature to assess carbon in the soils. It states " an important barrier to further development and scaling up of these projects is the complexity of the carbon Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV)…..additional investments should be made to improve and simplify the methodologies." The complexity of the methodology is clear when the 100,000 million US$ project could fix a baseline despite deploying multiple approaches and methods! The conclusion that it makes is quite forthright, which obliquely admits prioritization of adaptation over mitigation approaches and also outcomes. It suggests, "Additionally, efforts to develop agriculture carbon projects, and climate smart agriculture projects more generally, will be closely linked to their ability to measure and communicate non –mitigation benefits – for climate resilience, livelihoods, food security and ecosystems."

   One wonders why these projects not support these objectives upfront!