

LUANGWA PROJECT

by Luca Chianca

in collaboration with Alessia Marzi

Photography by Alfredo Farina

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LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

We are in the heart of Southern Africa, along the banks of the Luangwa River, in Zambia. Over one million ha of savannah, forests and small villages inhabited by around one thousand people develop across this stream.

JAPHER

We are now entering the scope of the project for forest protection. Beyond the river is the unconstrained area, and here is the beginning of the protected areas with wild animals and plants.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

Though this vast area is now protected, white tourists are allowed to hunt. Upon our arrival, there is the dead body of a lion, left here as a trophy.

CHRISS B ZULU

Often, elephants destroy our crops, forcing us to walk for days to the nearest city to eat.

LUCA CHIANCA

What do you think about the white men who come here to kill lions? Is it fair for you?

CHRISS B ZULU

It is included in the programme.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

The programme is called the Luangwa Community Forests Project, the most significant protection project in Africa, which also generates carbon credits.

LUCA MANES – HEAD OF COMMUNICATION - NGO RECOMMON

This project aims to avoid the deforestation of vast areas in this territory, thus preserving and saving our forests with apparent positive effects on the environment and achievements to tackle climate change.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

In exchange, those in charge of the project that saved the forest can sell and purchase carbon credits compensating for the CO2 emissions spread in the atmosphere. In 2019, Eni also joined the governance of the project.

SIGFRIDO RANUCCI IN STUDIO

Eni's idea is to join the project to avoid deforestation, protect the environment and prevent climate change by containing population growth. This allows the collection of carbon credits. By 2024, such credits would equal 6 million tonnes of CO2. They can be sold or used to compensate for our CO2 emissions caused by fossil fuels. What is Eni concretely doing for the most ambitious project in Africa? Everything seems perfect until we check the progress and do the maths. Precisely as our Luca Chianca did.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

The REDD+ projects contribute to forest and unspoiled lands – like those surrounding the Luangwa River- in exchange for carbon compensation from polluting companies.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

Thales Pupo West is a researcher at the University of Environmental Sciences and Geography of Amsterdam. Some years ago, he had started designing projects related to carbon credits before changing his mind.

THALES PUPO WEST – RESEARCHER AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND GEOGRAPHY - UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

The more I worked on those projects and visited their implementation sites, the more I convinced myself they were ineffective.

LUCA CHIANCA

What is the main issue with these projects?

THALES PUPO WEST – RESEARCHER AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND GEOGRAPHY - UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

The issue is defining the area's status of deforestation before the project implementation. Overestimating this figure means the project loses credibility.

LUCA CHIANCA

And what were your opinions on the Luangwa project?

THALES PUPO WEST – RESEARCHER AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND GEOGRAPHY - UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

It is not having any impact.

LUCA CHIANCA

Is this a serious issue?

THALES PUPO WEST – RESEARCHER AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND GEOGRAPHY - UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Yes, as it means that the project should not issue carbon credits as it is not reducing deforestation. If these compensations do not exist, the companies cannot validly claim their carbon credits.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

In Luembe, we met the head of one out of the 17 municipalities included in the project area, which have been allocated funds thanks to the exploitation of carbon credits on behalf of Eni.

LUCA CHIANCA

My question is, was intense deforestation performed here before the project implementation?

GERALD MULOWA – HEAD OF THE LUEMBE COMMUNITY

There was not an intense deforestation. But now, the phenomenon is more controlled.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

Moreover, last December, BeZero – one of the most relevant rating agencies in the carbon credits market - downgraded the project from A to B.

SEBASTIEN CROSS – BEZERO RATING COMPANY - COFOUNDER

Most of the project area is included in an already protected national park. So, the likelihood that this project is making a difference is already reduced.

LUCA CHIANCA

What does this project downgrade mean for Eni?

SEBASTIEN CROSS – BEZERO RATING COMPANY - COFOUNDER

It means that we have a higher risk level of credit than others. However, carbon is just a piece of the cake. There are several other benefits, such as the impact on biodiversity and many social and economic consequences, so one should consider the whole picture as an investment portfolio of different elements.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

The project should also positively impact the territory. However, to see these benefits, a visit on-site is necessary.

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

These are the classrooms that we have used so far. As you can see, they are old and might be dangerous for the kids.

LUCA CHIANCA

Which problems are here?

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

The walls are cracked, the windows broken, and the floors are made of soil. Plus, the rooms are too warm with the aluminium sheets on the roof.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

This old elementary school is the only one serving this area where only 2000 people live along the Luangwa River. Close to the old classrooms is another building where the kids attend classes.

LUCA CHIANCA

How old are these kids, more or less?

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

They go from 10 to 14 years old.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

The children here go to school later, and they attend the lessons in different time slots, given the lack of available space. That's why Eni's REDD+ project has financed the construction of a new building.

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

This is the new school. Built one year ago. There are three classes in there.

LUCA CHIANCA

Why is it still empty one year later?

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

Because the building has not been officially assigned to the school yet.

LUCA CHIANCA

But there is nothing at all?

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

No

LUCA CHIANCA

What about the school desks?

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

No school desks

LUCA CHIANCA

And the chairs?

IVES MWANZA – ELEMENTARY TEACHER IN MSHALIRA

There are no chairs either. We guess the Company is earning a lot of money with this project, and we don't understand why they are doing so little for us.

LUCA CHIANCA

We visited this empty school. Is it just the building? How is that possible?

GERALD MULOWA – HEAD OF THE LUEMBE COMMUNITY

The money we obtain is not enough.

LUCA CHIANCA

But how can a multi-million project have no money to buy chairs?

GERALD MULOWA – HEAD OF THE LUEMBE COMMUNITY

We are unaware of their income, but this year, we have received around 50 thousand euros, most of which were used to transport construction materials in these remote areas.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

But in this village, located a few kilometres outside the protected areas, they have built an office and some houses for the organisation managing the project's funds. And they also bought a motorbike for its president.

ABAN NG'AMBI – PRESIDENT OF LUEMBE'S BOARD FOR COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Yes, with the money derived from carbon credits, they also gave us three more vehicles, two Land Cruisers and a truck.

LUCA CHIANCA

Does the motorbike work?

LABAN NG'AMBI – PRESIDENT OF LUEMBE'S BOARD FOR COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Pretty well.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

According to Eni, not less than 70% of the profit from the sale of carbon credits is reinvested in the territory. Still, they couldn't tell us the exact amount for confidentiality reasons.

ABDON MWAWZA

The project was imposed on the community.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

Joph is one of the farmers working close to the protected area. He owns a small cotton field.

JOSPH SALAKA – FARMER

They don't inform the community about what is going on.

LUCA CHIANCA

What do you expect from this project?

GERALD MULOWA – HEAD OF THE LUEMBE COMMUNITY

More transparency, as we don't understand a lot about the science and maths behind this carbon credit system.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

Among the project's initiatives, there is the willingness to avoid population growth as a negative factor impacting deforestation. Nonetheless, Recomon and Greenpeace discovered that, even before Eni's involvement, they had specified a higher population density when the project was introduced.

LUCA MANES – HEAD OF COMMUNICATION - NGO RECOMMON

The data reported in the initial documents is different from the actual population density. Therefore, if this figure is lower, as we think it is, there is a lower deforestation risk and consequently, the calculation of carbon credits must be downsized.

LUCA CHIANCA OFF-SCREEN

However, the project was validated by the US company Verra, the largest Company worldwide dealing with the voluntary market for carbon credits.

AXEL MICHAELOWA – DIRECTOR OF THE RESEARCH CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH

As stated by its name, the voluntary market has no regulations. The rule-makers are the private entities that generate and validate from 3 to 400 million carbon credits annually through their projects. For instance, on the boards of one of the two leading companies, Verra, are electric suppliers and oil and gas companies: they set their own standards.

SIGFRIDO RANUCCI IN STUDIO

According to Renoster, Zambia's project risks becoming history's most significant carbon credit manipulation. This situation derives from the fact that while the companies are committed to avoiding deforestation and limiting population growth, they are doing it in an inhabited area, already subject to protection. It is a piece of cake. Moreover, all these actions are certified by Verra, the same Company certifying 75% of the businesses involved in carbon credits. We were waiting for a reply from Eni, but it did not arrive on time. For information, we will report these contradictions on our website.