

## **Africa Climate Summit: Historic Turn or Wasted Opportunity?**

**Article by Jennifer Kwao, Roland Ngam**

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In the context of broken promises and a deepening climate crisis on the African continent, the bar was set high for an Africa-focused and –led climate summit. From 4 to 6 September, delegates and dignitaries from around the world descended on Nairobi, Kenya for the Africa Climate Summit under the theme "Driving Green Growth and Climate Finance Solutions for Africa and the World".

While some pinned their hopes on the summit breaking the deadlock on climate finance, others saw it as an opportunity to put African solutions to the climate crisis on the map. Others still expected African leaders to advance the critical look at their climate action ahead of negotiations at COP28 in Dubai. Civil society already critical and mobilised against corporate influence over the meeting certainly expected more accountability, even as they organised a People's Summit on the sidelines.

With such high expectations, the summit could not afford to under-deliver. On the sidelines of the summit, Jennifer Kwao asked climate justice researcher Roland Ngam whether the meeting lived up to expectations and what the alternatives to the green growth model it promoted are.

### **Jennifer Kwao: What does the Africa Climate Summit mean for Africa?**

**Roland Ngam:** Coming decades after the Rio Summit, and other similar gatherings, the inaugural edition of the African Climate Summit (ACS) was really long overdue. We are a continent beset by climate crises. We face the biggest impacts of climate challenges caused by others, and we do not have the capacity to respond quickly to many of these issues. So it is an important event that should have happened a long time ago in terms of consolidating African positions in UN COP negotiations and in negotiations with highly industrialised nations and blocs like the European Union.

### **What is your assessment of the summit so far?**

Unfortunately, the organisation seems to have been a bit hasty. The planning is not so well done. It's clear that those most coordinated and coming here with a clear agenda are organisations, corporations, and partners from the Global North.

To echo the UNHCR African chief's statement at the summit: "When you come to these gatherings, do not just show up to meetings. You need to hold people to account". Unfortunately, I have not seen a clear questioning of the system or of Africa's political economy and its future in the global constellation in the meetings I have followed. A lot of the discussion seems more concerned with what people can capture and accumulate. Just looking at the agenda, many of the discussions are about carbon markets. It is about Africa as a carbon sink, but we are not getting enough money for that. What are we planning to do in terms of the global stocktake? How do we plan to hold the highly industrialised nations to

account for historic pollution?

We know that the pollution that is already locked in is causing serious harm to African countries. We're talking major droughts in the Sahel, famine in Madagascar, massive rains in Cote D'Ivoire, DRC, and so on. Like HOMEF's Nimo Bassey said last year, "COP is lost and damaged". And the African Climate Summit is unfortunately starting off just like COP, and it could very quickly also become lost and damaged.

**There's been a lot of talk about growth and investment, which sounds exactly like the EU's Green Deal and green growth agenda. Where are the African solutions? What would those look like?**

African solutions really would be radical in terms of demanding reparations – not just adaptation and mitigation finance – for the Global North's historic pollution and continued damage to the environment. It would be demanding also reparations for the offshoring of the Global North's extraction, which has damaged our environment and really impoverished our people. We make some of the cars that are used in the Global North. Our children are pulled out of classrooms to dig up the transition minerals that they use in their electric cars. Every day, there are massive dumps of pesticides, insecticides and fertilisers to produce citrus fruits, avocados, bananas, strawberries, nuts, grapes and so on for the EU. A few people get rich off of that, but the majority inherit only poverty and toxic chemicals, some of which are banned in the EU. And of course we have to remember that the EU dumps a lot of its electronic waste in Africa.

Reparation is really the number one thing we should be demanding. The second one is that we need to be demanding massive transfers of technology and resources to improve all Africans' lives, not to get government officials to buy bigger cars. We are here to improve the lives of all African citizens and we should be working towards that objective.

**Could our leaders not argue that the discussion on expanding energy production and access, for example, is precisely about helping the ordinary African?**

Well, it clearly isn't. Just look at the hydrogen corridor between South Africa and Namibia, for instance. South Africa's Electricity Minister Kgosientsho Ramokgopa said very clearly that the solutions that are on the table right now are market-based, that is policies developed to incentivise private-sector participation. In other words, they are going to create a framework and they will let private investors come in and leverage the 9-billion-euros opportunity that Germany is offering for green hydrogen projects for example. In addition, African governments want to liberalise energy markets, which would mean companies like Electricité de France take up massive 20 to 30-year contracts. Things like what we've seen, for example, in Zimbabwe with the upgrades to a power plant in Hwange, which were done by China through concessional and non-concessional loans. What are we doing to transform energy markets in such a way that the grid, or at least power generation, is owned by African citizens? We are not seeing it. Ordinary Africans are locked out of the negotiation rooms at a time when people-owned and managed grids are more possible than ever before.

**Do you think the case for climate reparations for Africa is dead given that this conference is almost not speaking about that?**

Unfortunately, too many governments are afraid to bring up this topic because they do not want to rub their partners the wrong way. It is about politeness. It is about kowtowing as usual to former colonial powers. It is about staying within the same paradigm. It is shocking that the person who made the statement: "Who put the CO2 up there that is causing the problem? I'm sorry: PAY UP! You need to pay up!" is a billionaire, Mo Ibrahim. It is by and large activists who have always pushed governments to

achieve the small wins that we are getting. If we look at the language used, it is activists around the world who pushed for “loss and damage” and won that victory at COP 27. It was not governments. But loss and damage is just an insignificant achievement compared to the trillions of dollars that were stolen from the Global South through exploitation of our peoples and environment. And we need to keep up this fight. We have to drag our governments kicking and screaming to the table, just like we did with loss and damage.

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**African leaders are singing a new song; they are talking about what Africa has to offer and presenting Africa as a business opportunity rather than a burden. Do you find this an appropriate framing, given the historical context of Africa’s resources benefitting everyone but its people and economies?**

I think that, like South Africa’s President Ramaphosa said during the recent Summit for a New Global Financing Pact convened by French President Macron, Africa is often treated like a beggar. The number one thing we should understand right now is that it is thanks to the environmentalism of the poor that the planet is still livable. It is thanks to the majority that the planet does not exhaust its carbon credit within the first couple of months every year. The world really needs to understand that to keep that trend, Africa needs financial support as well as technological support so that the majority can live decently while helping the planet stay within its remaining carbon budget.

We are here because of the few in the highly industrialised nations who cause the extractivism, pollution, productivism, hyper-consumerism, and supermarketisation that have driven the world to the brink.

Remember that Africa does not appear on the map in terms of carbon emissions. Every year we are somewhere at 3.9 per cent or less, which tells you that if we were to change course and start polluting like the others, then the risk of three, four, five degrees warming or even higher is much greater. So African countries should be using their negligible contribution to the climate crisis as major leverage – more assertively and aggressively than what we are seeing now.

**If not a business opportunity, what should Africa’s climate action be about?**

A transformation opportunity. Decency. Quality of life. Happiness. We do not want the 7 billion majority to remain poor. Our aim should be to enable most people on the planet to live sustainable lives with access to universal basic infrastructure: decent housing, education, hospitals, roads, internet, resilient communities, etc. Most people do not want to live in 18-bedroom mansions, neither do they want to drive luxury cars. And so what we have to try and do is to ensure that these people are comfortable in their communities. Give them access to internet, health, schools, hospitals, and good roads. This is the ideal that every person seeks. And giving people those basic comforts within their communities should be the absolute priority of COP processes.

**What new path could Africa chart without taking on this growth blueprint from the Global North? Are there models that we’re not hearing of, that we should be pursuing?**

We need to understand that modern capitalism is a relatively recent invention. The Rostovian social

Darwinist development model with its Fordist production system is not more than a century old. The orgy of advertising that we see on our screens every day, which gives us a warped understanding of what development should look like, what self-actualisation should look like, what women should look like – all of those things have really damaged the human psyche. But at the same time we still have alternatives, healthy circular ontologies that still exist and in which many people still live, in harmony with nature. And these communities exist all over the world. Whether we talk about *buen vivir* in Latin America or we look at different ontologies in Africa, – for example Ubuntu of the Bantu ontologies, Voodoo of the Yoruba – all these are secular, very healthy ontologies based around respect, conviviality, happiness, fairness, honesty, mutual respect, ecology, only using according to one's needs, and so on. And that is the kind of model that we should be taking forward. Because when everybody is happy and satisfied, when we are able to share the earth's resources and carbon budget amongst everybody in an honest, democratic way, then we can finally bring global emissions under control.

The economy on steroids that we have right now works only for a tiny minority, and this is what we should try and dismantle. That would be climate justice.

*This interview was conducted at the Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi on 5 September 2023.*

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