

African Climate Justice: Articulations and Activism

By Mithika Mwenda and Patrick Bond

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Introduction

Among several million climate protesters during the global Climate Strike of September 20, 2019 were thousands of Africans. Among two dozen African cities hosting protests, the youthful activists marched in Nairobi, Kenya, in Kampala, Uganda, in Dakar, Senegal, and in South Africa's Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban (Gdelt 2019). The latter country, by far Africa's most carbon-intensive, included protests against government and the major polluter Sasol, and began to unite South Africa's powerful but fragmented traditions of environmental justice activism. To understand the trajectory, in which until recently, the necessity of climate justice advocacy was foiled by a disarticulation between mainstream "climate action" and radical grassroots campaigning, requires a return to the point a decade earlier when vocal Africans made the case that the North was preparing Africa for a climate "holocaust": Copenhagen's 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC-COP15).

The word holocaust was used by a leading African negotiator, Lumumba Di-Aping, in December 2009 after the leaders of the United States, Brazil, South Africa, India and China conspired to sabotage existing UN process in a small side-room. The Copenhagen Accord was adopted outside the parameters of the main negotiations; hence this "league of super-polluters blew up the United Nations," according to Bill McKibben (2009) of 350.org. Emissions-reduction targets agreed upon by Barack Obama (US), Lula da Silva (Brazil), Jacob Zuma (South Africa), Manmohan Singh (India) and Wen Jiabao (China) – and then foisted onto the rest of the conference – were weak: no more than what will bring a catastrophic 3-degree Celsius (or more) increase in temperature by 2100. Moreover, there were no *binding* provisions, thus denuding the 1997 Kyoto Protocol of its main merit: a semblance of accountability and nominal enforceability (Vidal and Watts 2009).

However, it was also at this summit that, from the floor ten days earlier, a spontaneous protest occurred. Impatient with the leaders' negotiations, more than one hundred members and supporters of the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (Pacja) temporarily disrupted the formal event, addressing a rally at a makeshift podium at Copenhagen's Bella Centre. The attention of hundreds of media and conference participants was grabbed with a chant: "Two Degrees is Suicide: One Africa, One Degree!" Proclaiming, "No to Climate Colonialism, No to Climate Genocide!" the Pacja activists not only demanded much greater emissions cuts from the gathered leaders, but also offered a scathing critique of the continent's most visible official representative, Ethiopian leader Meles Zenawi, who had unilaterally reduced earlier African demands for the Global North's annual climate debt payments to the Global South from \$400 billion to just \$10 billion (Klein 2009, Bond 2012a).

The Pacja protest immediately followed a frank input to a strategy session of Africans by Di-Aping, the Sudanese diplomat who was formally the leader of the G77+China delegation. As he briefed Pacja and other civil society groups, Di-Aping “sat silently, tears rolling down his face,” according to a report (Welz 2009). “We have been asked to sign a suicide pact,” he said, explaining that in his home region, it was “better to stand and cry than to walk away.” For much of the continent, said Di-Aping, 2 degrees Celsius globally meant 3.5 degrees C: “certain death for Africa”, a type of “climate fascism” imposed on Africa by polluters, in exchange for which the Third World was promised fast track funding. But this funding promise was merely a carrot dangled to vulnerable countries as a compromise, a trick which worked to break the solidarity of the G77+China group.

Di-Aping was already posing an unprecedented threat to the rich countries’ stranglehold on the UNFCCC. Their initial offer of an annual \$10 billion “was not enough to buy us coffins” (Welz 2009). Di-Aping argued that the Copenhagen deal on offer was “worse than no deal... I would rather die with my dignity than sign a deal that will channel my people into a furnace.” As for the US president, Di-Aping was furious: “What is Obama going to tell his daughters? That their [Kenyan] relatives’ lives are not worth anything? It is unfortunate that after 500 years-plus of interaction with the West we are still considered ‘disposables’” (Welz 2009).

Di-Aping’s critiques were also, according to a witness, aimed inward: “Many African negotiating delegations were unprepared and some members were either lazy or had been ‘bought off’ by the industrialized nations. He singled out South Africa, saying that some members of that delegation had actively sought to disrupt the unity of the bloc” (Welz 2009). Di-Aping was roundly attacked by both Pretoria’s and the North’s negotiators for his rhetoric, and was not allowed to return to the UNFCCC negotiations. Yet his critique resonated, and at the same time, anti-apartheid South African Anglican Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (2009) wrote to the UNFCCC leadership, “We are facing impending disaster on a monstrous scale... A global goal of about 2 degrees C is to condemn Africa to incineration and no modern development.”

Two years later, the 2011 UNFCCC summit was held in Africa, but even worse power relations prevailed, as the host South Africa played into the hands of the U.S. State Department. In Durban, instead of a major demonstration inside, Pacja – having brought three busloads of activists from as faraway as Uganda – was outside marching with the main climate justice protest movement. But even that protest of 10,000 was watered down, because of collaboration with more conservative groups like the World Wildlife Fund (Bond 2012b).

The inability to emphasize either rapid action or climate justice meant that in 2015, the major emitters – the US, Europe, China, India, South Africa, Brazil, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Canada, Australia and Kazakhstan – agreed on new ways to undermine global climate governance in Paris. For example, not only was the voluntary character of the Copenhagen Accord reaffirmed, there was no accountability mechanism nor attempt to punish those countries which backslid. When in June 2017, just over four months after taking power, U.S. president Donald Trump announced he would withdraw the largest historic emitter from the deal, there was no

punishment, notwithstanding calls across the spectrum (from Naomi Klein to Joseph Stiglitz to Nicolas Sarkozy) for anti-US sanctions or a “border adjustment tax” (Bond 2019b).

Together with its fundamentally voluntary character, another fatal flaw in the Paris Climate Agreement is that the costs of climate-related “Loss and Damage” from climate change are being disproportionately borne by Africans and others who did the least to cause the problems. Thanks to a Paris provision, they have no recourse to claiming “climate debt” and polluter liability in lawsuits (Bond 2016). The Agreement also reintroduced the unworkable carbon trading gimmick, which failed miserably over the prior fifteen years, through the back door. Moreover, Paris negotiators neglected to include several major categories of emitters, especially militaries, air transport and shipping. There was no attempt to penalize fossil fuel companies, incentivize their Just Transition to post-carbon energy supply, nor even rhetorically endorse the need to leave fossil fuels underground. No progress was made to enhance African acquisition of climate-friendly technologies that have long been protected by Intellectual Property. And the negotiators back-slapped each other for this awful deal so loudly that critical activists’ objections simply could not be heard (Bond 2016). Against the euphoria of Paris, Pacja and a few other climate justice movements (e.g. Friends of the Earth International) provided lonely defiance at the COP21 media centre, denouncing the Paris Climate Agreement as another historic multilateral deceit.

At the 2018 UNFCCC summit in Katowice, Poland, implementation guidelines for the Paris Agreement included requests for countries to formally submit “transparency reports” about their emissions as well as analysing the Loss and Damage they were experiencing. But there are still no payment provisions, since the dysfunctional Green Climate Fund did not gather even five percent of its \$100 billion per year objective by 2020, as Obama had promised when selling the Copenhagen Accord to those who were skeptical.

Contesting climate justice

Nevertheless, there are some climate activists – mainly associated with the global Climate Action Network (CAN) – who resignedly consider Paris a first step in the right direction. In contrast, climate justice activists generally agree with climate scientist James Hansen, who called the deal “bullshit” (Milman 2015). Instead of constantly comparing to the low bar of Paris, many activists believe it is much more appropriate for Africans to heap scorn on the Paris Climate Agreement. One reason for doing so is to ensure that a future group of much more serious international negotiators will not continue these fatal mistakes. Another is that those who aim to drag their feet on emissions cuts, or avoid any climate debt liability, enthusiastically promote Paris. Thus, to legitimize the deal only encourages current and future elites to continue along this path, removing the urgency to make the substantial emissions cuts required, and slowing the necessary reconstruction of economies and societies in a manner consistent with survival and justice.

But while there is climate action paralysis from above, there are exciting new forms of climate justice movement-building from below, many of which can be found in Africa, including within

Pacja. Even the fragmented South African sites of struggle provide a degree of optimism for future unification once they impose much more substantial pressure on the carbon-addicted government of Cyril Ramaphosa, himself a former coal tycoon. Although Pacja defends its participation in UNFCCC and mainstream intergovernmental processes as a strategy to fight from within – so as to entrench climate justice narratives within both official and African civil society discourse – there is also a hybrid strategy based on building a mass movement from below. Struggles are being waged by Indigenous communities and local people in various African locations, especially where carbon-intensive, high-pollution extractive activities are taking place.

This mirrors climate justice activism internationally, where the most spectacular new post-Paris movements barely register the UNFCCC as a relevant force. Instead, they are committed to direct actions that block high-CO₂ activities and corporate polluters, e.g. Ende Gelände in Germany, Extinction Rebellion in Britain, and the US Sunrise Movement, as well as the Indigenous water protectors at Standing Rock. .

Meanwhile, the younger generation is already explaining to their elders why UN deal-makers and other high-carbon elites should stand aside. “I want you to panic,” Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg (2019a) insisted at the Davos World Economic Forum in early 2019: “Either we choose to go on as a civilization or we don’t.” Addressing the UN Climate Summit in September 2019, Thunberg (2019b) was even more furious: “We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you.”

This new development is overdue: a universal inter-generational rage, from which the youth can legitimately warn the older elites that Climate Strikes will join other forces for justice, telling us quite correctly and ever more loudly, “You’re stealing our future!” But as the most militant of climate activists begin to explore the two-decade old set of climate justice principles, analyses, strategies, tactics and alliances, a new problem arises: co-optation of the *language* of climate justice, without adherence to the *politics*. One example can be found in the way scholars have mainly ignored the single most formative site of popular, bottom-up articulation of climate justice: the April 2010 World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba. (The scholar.google.com citations for that conference since 2010 number just 657, as opposed to 16,100 for “climate justice.”) Another was the attempt to conjoin climate justice with schemes for carbon trading and offsets, as we see below.

Pacja rises

Founded in 2008 in Johannesburg during a meeting of Africa’s environmental ministers, Pacja initially emerged in part thanks to the prodding and financial support of a continental organization often considered to have a neoliberal orientation: the African Union’s

New Partnership for Africa's Development (Bond 2005). A second founding organization is also sometimes accused of using Africans, especially in civil society, for its own ends: Oxfam International (Bond, Brutus and Setshedi 2005, Ogunlesi 2013). Nevertheless, the network immediately developed an independent leadership team capable of fundraising without fear of state or international NGO manipulation.ⁱ

Another network of funders and supporters associated with the World Council of Churches – with Britain's Christian Aid, Germany's Diakonia, Finn Church Aid and Norwegian Church Aid prominent – gave support, followed by the Swedish International Development Agency and United Nations Environment Programme. Some Global North partners harbor expectations that the Global South's desperate civil society groups will follow an ideological and programming agenda consistent with that of funders (Wrong Kind of Green 2019). The most controversial of Pacja's partners were Mary Robinson's Foundation for Climate Justice (based at Trinity College in Dublin) and the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, for the reason that both insisted on pursuing market-oriented strategies – carbon trading and offsets – that were not working in Africa (CCS and Dartmouth 2012).

The entire terrain of global climate governance is riddled with "climate action" strategies of this sort, even if in some cases the word justice is invoked. And yet some of the most constructive networking was done in partnership with ClimDev Africa, a program of the African Development Bank (one of the main fossil financiers), Africa Union Commission and UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN ECA). Personalities sometimes play an outsized role, such as that of UN ECA African Climate Policy Center director James Murombedzi, a Zimbabwean rural development scholar and experienced manager within the UN. He continually presses his agency to be cognizant of politics and especially justice. This perspective allows Pacja a great many opportunities, including the logistical support required to regularly assemble its members, e.g. within ClimDev or annual meetings of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment, without losing its orientation to climate justice, not merely climate action.

As for Pacja's own membership and their local orientation, Todd Beer and Mwenda (2016) surveyed more than 1,000 members from forty-five African countries in 2015. They included environmentalists, climate specialists, religious denominations, NGOs and CBOs, trusts and foundations, and farmers and pastoralists' groups. Youth movements also began to join up. According to Pacja (2019), there is wide diversity in approaches, but in common, "over three-quarters of them indicate that the communities they work with have already been negatively impacted by climate change either a great deal or quite a lot." A quarter of the members have a base in rural areas, but two-thirds are engaged in agriculture and food security and sixty percent address deforestation. Nearly half of the members are engaged in national-level advocacy, and another seventeen percent work at the global scale.

There were certainly forces operating in Africa aiming to co-opt Pacja's (2019) policy and practical framings, e.g. "pro-poor development," "human rights," and "a global environment free from the threat of climate change with sustainable development, equity and justice for all." Such language has become quite common in what are otherwise *status quo* institutions, captured in the idea of "talk left, walk right." However, the difficulty these institutions faced in assimilating Pacja into the conventional climate action and eco-modernization camps

reflected the organization's commitments to values such as gender responsiveness and inclusiveness, professionalism, fairness and justice, and participatory democracy (Pacja 2019).

In Andre Gorz's (1967) *Strategy for Labor* terminology, the climate advocacy scene is dominated by those arguing for "reformist reforms," as opposed to the climate justice movement's "non-reformist reforms." In the former category, dominant reformist strategies generally accept and legitimize *status quo* institutional forms, endorse market mechanisms, and neglect to incorporate analysis highlighting class, race, gender, generation and geographical power relations. To illustrate the latter, the climate justice movement would typically make non-reformist demands upon their own local governments and the national negotiators who were involved in climate negotiations, if such reforms weaken the corporate power structure and continue its delegitimization, and in the process empower activists to demand further-reaching changes.

The strength of Pacja's advocacy is in part based on hostility to the high-emissions countries and corporations. When it comes to cutting emissions sufficiently for the world to remain below 1.5 degrees Celcius, Pacja's member poll found trust in the European Union to be only thirty-one percent, in China, twenty percent and in the US, seventeen percent, during Obama's presidency (Beer and Mwenda 2016). Also of interest are Pacja members' views on the Third Worldist developmental debate with the North, especially over whether the Southern countries should use their own high-carbon activities – e.g. fossil fuel extraction – to "develop." More than seventy-one percent disagree that "fossil fuels should be a primary avenue for development," and fifty-nine percent "disagree that their nations should develop any fossil fuel resources discovered within their borders."

One crucial question still to be fleshed out, however, is whether Pacja and its members will advocate for financial compensation to the communities and countries which *do* restrict their current and future fossil fuel extraction. One precedent is the demand made by Ecuadoran eco-feminist and Indigenous activists to forego extraction of \$10 billion worth of oil discovered in the Yasuní National Park (the world's greatest biodiversity hotspot, within the Amazon forest). The demand for the oil to be left "under the soil" was to be in exchange for the North's climate debt downpayment of \$3.6 billion to the Ecuadoran people, via grant-based social policy financing (Bond 2012a). Although the strategy was sabotaged by the German government in 2013, following which Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa permitted Chinese and Ecuadoran oil firms to begin drilling, "Yasunidos" advocacy continues (Leave Fossil Fuels Underground, 2018).

Another indication of Pacja members' ideology is the extent to which members "believe that a radical shift away from capitalism is the best way to address climate change," as Beer and Mwenda (2016) posed the question: "Over three quarters (77.7 percent) of respondents supported this position compared to less than a quarter (22.3 percent) who reported that global warming is best addressed within a system of capitalism."

The case of South Africa is especially worth exploring for more consideration of ideological disputes regarding climate justice. As shown explicitly during the UN Secretary General's climate summit in September 2019, the national government was in the same league as the

US, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Australia, in failing to make the cuts required for civilizational survival – hence not allowed to take the speaker’s podium. But one reason for Pretoria’s poor showing is the lack of unity by climate activists, including climate justice groups which continued to stumble instead of confidently marching forward.

South African climate justice versus the fossil economy

In spite of the excellent conditions for mobilization since the end of apartheid and notwithstanding many environmental struggles, South Africa has been one of the most difficult places to advocate for climate justice. The average resident emits nine tons of CO₂ annually, which is the eleventh highest among countries with at least 10 million residents. And measured in CO₂ per capita/GDP – in order to assess an economy’s carbon intensity – South Africa has the world’s third highest level, behind only Kazakhstan and the Czech Republic (World Bank 2019).

There is no *average*, though, because after the racial Apartheid system ended in 1994, what might be called “class Apartheid” processes took its place: wealthy white males still today retain enormous power and wealth, and they vastly over-pollute. Two thirds of the country’s citizens – mostly black and women – live in poverty, below the official line of \$3.30/day (Budlender et al 2015). With the rise in electricity prices, their power supplies are increasingly, dangerously dirty: wood, coal or paraffin for heating, lamps and stoves. They have ‘energy-switched’ backwards in time, unable to pay the parastatal corporation Eskom’s retail electricity bills. The price of a kilowatt hour quadrupled in price from 2009-18 due to a decision to build the world’s two largest coal-fired generators, both now under construction (Bond 2012a). Corruption, delays and the incompetent boiler manufacturer Hitachi doubled the construction costs of the two 4800 megawatt plants from \$8 billion each when financing was arranged in 2010 (primarily by the World Bank, in its largest ever loan) to \$15 billion each today (Bond 2014).

Can these contradiction-riddled conditions at the national scale give rise to a deeper climate justice movement, drawing on local strengths, and adding the renewed power of the youth? This is the question posed by many of the country’s environmental-justice and eco-socialist strategists, after a quarter-century of political liberation. But freedom has been profoundly distorted by neoliberal-nationalist ideology and crony-capitalist practices, including periodic repression of socio-economic rebellions. In the process, environmental justice has been side-lined.

Locally, however, fossil fuels are facing opposition. A petrochemical complex regularly poisons the third largest city, Durban, founded by white settlers on the east coast in the mid-nineteenth century. There, Africa’s largest oil refinery comes under repeated attacks for both local and global pollution by the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA). The quarter-century battle heated up in 2019 because, 1200 km down the Indian Ocean coast, 45 billion cubic meters (300 million barrels worth) of new offshore oil and gas condensate were discovered by Total. Announced by excitable politicians with great fanfare, doubts have subsequently developed about the extremely difficult conditions for extraction.

In the other direction, 2800 km up the coast at Rovuma in northern Mozambique, are even greater quantities of gas (\$128 billion worth is thrown around). Older gas fields at Pande and Temane are being drained by Sasol, of which twenty percent creates energy for local consumption and eighty percent is pumped 900 km to South Africa's main inland refinery in Secunda. There, drips of liquid petroleum are squeezed with such an intense application of energy that this small city of 40,000 is the world's single largest CO₂ emissions point source (Ashton 2011). Local activists fighting hard here are led by the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance. In between, in Durban, oil companies are swarming two miles offshore with exploratory drills nearly three miles deep in the Agulhas Current, which is considered the world's second most turbulent ocean waterway, after the US Gulf Coast. But notwithstanding all the anti-oil activism – divestment, “unburnable carbon” and stranded asset pressures, as well as direct-action protests – against the oil majors, four of them anticipate billions of dollars in profits once they set up rigs: ExxonMobil, Statoil, Eni and Sasol, the largest operators from the US, Norway, Italy and South Africa, respectively.

Durban is already the regional oil hub for refiners Shell and BP, alongside Malaysian-owned Engen. Nearby, within Africa's largest container harbour, are more massive oil storage facilities. On South Africa's cold Atlantic coast at Saldanha, Saudi Arabia's Aramco is also considering a major investment in oil storage. And two hours north of Durban at Richards Bay – home to one of world's largest coal export terminals – the parastatal port manager, Transnet, aims to set up an LPG terminal. In all this seaside ecological risk-taking, the corporations are being encouraged by the government's “Blue Economy” propaganda in which commodification of the ocean is financially attractive and supposedly ecologically benign, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding (Bond 2019a).

South Durban's SDCEA, the country's leading anti-oil campaigning force, regularly links local health and ecological damage to climate change, and opposes ocean degradation on behalf of local residents, thousands of fisherfolk, coastal small farms and even surfers. Victories have included lowering refinery sulphur emissions and delaying the nearby port-petrochemical complex's \$25 billion expansion. The asthma rate in the Settlers Primary School, between the two mega-refineries, had peaked at 52 percent of children in attendance in 2004, but is now substantially lower. But the group hasn't yet shut down the refineries – SDCEA's objective – nor even lowered their 350,000 barrels/day capacity. And while SDCEA insists that no more offshore oil and gas exploration occur, the parastatal firm Transnet doubled the size of an oil pipeline from Durban to the main consumption site, Johannesburg, in a controversial \$1.8 billion project from 2005-18 (Bond 2017).

Joining SDCEA, which is based in Durban's black communities of Wentworth, Merebank, Clairwood and Umlazi (and to some extent also the Bluff, a formerly white residential area), are conservationists from Oceans Not Oil and Wild Oceans. SDCEA has taken the lead, alongside its groundWork NGO allies, in working against offshore oil and gas, up and down the coastline from Mozambique to Cape Town. Inland, there is also courtroom guerrilla warfare by farmers and environmentalists to counteract threats by the U.S. firm Rhino to frack in the Drakensburg mountain range and nearby KwaZulu-Natal farmland. In the semi-desert Karoo, Shell's fracking division is retreating after a courtroom setback. Nevertheless, still lacking climate consciousness, the government's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research is planning a massive gas pipeline across the country.

‘Coalization’ continues

The main contributions to emissions from South Africa are from coal mines which supply ninety percent of Eskom’s generation inputs, as well as around eighty million tons of exports (*Mining Review*, 2019). The main battles against coal occur because of its local damage to public health, water, land and air. Although communities, NGOs and lawyers regularly raise climate-related objections to destructive coal mining and power plants, organized labor has been mainly pro-coal in its advocacy, although that could change.

In general, local anti-coal activists are not yet as militant and effective in changing the national consciousness as, for example, Germany’s Ende Gelände annual protests, in part because the society is still poorly organized for understanding and acting on climate politics. So progress currently relies upon pressure against financiers, legal strategies on difficult terrain, and mainly localistic protests. Some community disruptions occur in the immediate vicinity of coal mines and coal-fired power plants, such as road blockages. In two other battles, activists and lawyers used the courts and anti-financing campaigns to prevent privatized coal-fired plants from being built on schedule in 2018-19: the Japanese/Korean ‘Thabametsi’ (557MW), and Saudi-owned ‘Khanyisa’ (306MW) (Centre for Environmental Rights 2018).

However, the two biggest plants under construction anywhere in the world during the 2010s, Eskom’s ‘Medupi’ and ‘Kusile’ (both 4800MW), were partially completed by 2019, running years behind schedule and massively over-budget, with serious operating flaws, amidst regular labor, community and environmental protests. Finally, another brand new Chinese plant near the Zimbabwe border, ‘Musina-Makhado’ (3300MW) was still scheduled for construction at the heart of a new Special Economic Zone announced by Ramaphosa in mid-2018.

Fragmentation prevented the emergence of a general movement against climate change, although the 2010s witnessed the arrival of international NGOs with strong anti-coal agendas. Greenpeace Africa, for example, issues important research against the industry’s air and water pollution, and periodically engages in direct actions against the main electricity company and state officials, although these are mostly small-scale and symbolic. The South African branch of 350.org specifically targets coal industry financiers – and has been successful against several local banks – as part of a broader “decoalize Africa” campaign. Its main success was claimed in 2019 in Lamu, Kenya, against a Chinese coal-fired power plant with anticipated South African coal imports until Kenyan mines are developed. Unfortunately, the climate *justice* angle is quite weakly articulated by these NGOs, whether because they are so single-issue in nature or simply not yet sufficiently sensitive to race, class, gender, generational and other inequities.

Those with a forthright climate justice orientation include local NGOs who have their own community-based partners. The most prominent is Life after Coal, consisting of the hard-working groups Earthlife Africa and groundWork, and progressive lawyers at the Centre for Environmental Rights. Sometimes they attempt creative objections to Environmental Impact Assessments on grounds that climate change is not properly incorporated into planning, and

they harass state agencies for disclosure and stronger enforcement of environmental regulations. Sometimes their partners are involved in mass-based protest, although the last substantial one was when Durban hosted the 2011 UN climate summit. That counter-summit was messy, as it revealed persistent splits between the two philosophies: climate justice, led at the time by the Democratic Left Front (which is now dormant), and climate action consisting of mainstream NGOs such as WWF.

Today, the most militant network of grassroots anti-coal activists is Mining Affected Communities United in Action. Others include the Mining and Environmental Justice Community Network of South Africa and Women from Mining Affected Communities United in Action. Their highest-profile battles against coal are waged in sites like Somkhele and Fuleni – villages on the border of Africa’s oldest wildlife reserve, and in the coal-rich Mpumalanga province, especially around the most affected two towns, Witbank and Carolina. There, the Southern African Green Revolutionary Council has had an important impact, both in organizing and in motivating an eco-socialist ideology. However, no major victories can yet be claimed. There is also a very active Johannesburg-based eco-feminist fusion of continent-wide women farmers, environmentalists and sophisticated NGO critics: African Women Unite against Destructive Extraction, better known as WoMin. They are the most explicit in fighting coal using climate change narratives.

Movements fighting against coal on grounds of climate change are sometimes working at cross-purposes with a different set of NGOs whose aim is to merely ameliorate local damage from mining, and who rarely if ever consider climate change. Their “Alternative Mining Indaba” is an annual Cape Town meeting occurring at the same time the mining industry gathers for their Mining Indaba (Consultation). But it is an NGO-driven event which generally fails to connect the dots between micro-mining grievances and bigger-picture problems like climate, energy choices and general resource looting (Maguwu and Terreblanche 2016). As a result, the November 2018 Thematic Social Forum on Mining and Extractivism in Johannesburg offered a much more critical perspective, demanding “the right to say no!” to corporate land and mineral grabs (Bond 2018). Climate justice was a consistent theme there, too. But as the strength of communities grew, the conflicts with workers became increasingly vital to resolve.

Red and green fragments, not fusions – but in future?

As a final and perhaps most important consideration, South Africa also reveals age-old conflicts between environmentalists and organized labor over employment. Often insensitively, Greenpeace fought periodically with two of the largest trade unions, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and National Union of Mineworkers, whose members include workers in carbon-intensive sectors. Their struggles for better wages in the electricity plants, auto factories, mines, smelters and other heavy industries were openly waged since unions re-emerged in South Africa during the 1970s, and their strength of purpose was vital to ending apartheid. But they remained opposed to the loss of 100,000 jobs in the main coal district, Mpumalanga, because the government never provided details on what it meant by the oft-repeated mantra, calling for a Just Transition.

Numsa's staff were once visionary advocates of renewable energy democracy, and by the early 2010s, the union had developed one of the world's most ambitious Just Transition statements. But Numsa then turned in 2017-19 to fighting against "climate action" environmentalists over the 10,000 MW of privatized solar and wind projects being installed mainly by European corporations. As the union's deputy leader Karl Cloete (2018) explained, "the mandate of Renewable Energy projects must be to achieve service provision, meet universal needs, decommodify energy and provide an equitable dividend to communities and workers directly involved in production and consumption of energy."

The president of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union, Joseph Mathunjwa (2018), agreed that the privatized model should be discarded: "If we leave it to the market, we will not get to the roots of the climate and environmental crisis and workers will be discarded in the existing mining and energy sectors." The 800,000-strong SA Federation of Trade Unions held a mid-2018 Working Class Summit with similar rhetoric: "We must mobilize for a deep transformation of the current economic system of production and consumption, while at the same time including protecting workers' shop-floor concerns. We have to find a way of reconciling the interests of workers in energy-related industries and those of the working class facing the impacts of climate change" (Vavi 2018).

In short, the battle lines between labor and climate activists were drawn across five fields of action: speed, scale, scope, space and the state:

- The unions – especially Numsa – wanted a *slower* transition to renewables due to fear the state won't protect jobs.
- Their ideal of the appropriate *scale* for electricity generation, grid transmission and distribution was always national, not the decentralized, "small scale embedded generation" strategies favored by Climate Action neoliberals (the latter approach makes wide-scale electricity redistribution from rich to poor more difficult).
- The *scope* demanded by unions is often narrower – in protecting existing dirty-energy jobs – but in Numsa's case, it has also advocated for a more expansive post-capitalist vision.
- The geographical dilemma – '*space*' – is thorny, since the sunny, windy and tidal-power areas of South Africa generally don't overlap with the inland coal fields and power plants, so climate justice advocates found themselves challenged to address this disjuncture more explicitly.
- Finally, there were diverging views of the role of the *state*, particularly the parastatal Eskom, since Numsa and other unions insisted on rescuing it as part of their explicitly socialist political agenda, while many citizens and climate justice activists had already given up as a result of the energy agency's deep-rooted corruption and pro-coal bias.

There are very few encouraging sites of joint work where these five divides in emphasis can be reconciled. Whereas a team at the Alternative Information and Development Centre (2017) put together a 2017 *Million Climate Jobs* booklet and campaign to support

decarbonization, including in the coal fields, this particular approach to a Just Transition did not take root. Unions were too defensive. Many environmentalists – especially from the white middle classes – were unconscious of justice concerns.

Although in 2015 a major summit between Numsa, environmentalists and social movements addressed energy and climate change with great promise, at a time of consistent shortages and blackouts, there was no follow up. The summit declared opposition to “false solutions such as the introduction of nuclear energy on a huge scale, fracking, agrofuels/biofuels, carbon trading, clean coal and carbon sequestration” (Numsa 2015). But the need for unifying, joint demands on the state for a Just Transition has, since then, yet to be explored, much less realized.

The working class does have a few cases where, if not production, at least the consumption of coal-generated power is being politicized. Perhaps the most climate-conscious urban social movement of the post-apartheid era was the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, fighting a two-decade long struggle for energy justice. In part they were popular through encouraging 85 percent of the huge township’s residents to think of power as a ‘commons,’ hence illegally connecting electricity supply. They justified this in part because their visionary leaders regularly critique and protest Eskom’s coal-based generation. “For as long as Eskom uses coal, I won’t pay,” Cleopatra Shezi told MSN news in 2019, refusing to change her stance “unless they connect us to the solar system grid” (Lindeque 2019).

Two cyclones and a rain bomb

In mid-2019, the contradictions and limits of all these approaches came into focus when hundreds of regional activists in the Southern African People’s Solidarity Network held their annual meeting at the national museum in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Rural Women’s Assembly members offered testimonials from cyclone-affected sites in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and South Africa. It was their mutual aid against flooding, during the terrifying weeks of March-April 2019, that allowed for survival.

Idai and Kenneth were the worst cyclones on record in this region, and in between was a ‘Rain Bomb’ on Easter Monday that devastated South Durban and areas further down the coast. Scientists agree that these storms were more vicious due to climate change, for the temperature of the Indian Ocean offshore Beira, Mozambique was higher than normal by more than 2 degrees, the impact of which was to make Idai much more intense. With sustained winds of 195 kph at peak, Idai was the Southern Hemisphere’s third most destructive storm in recorded history, following cyclones in Madagascar in 1892 and Indonesia in 1973.

Governments estimated Idai’s fatalities at 1,078, with more than two million people suffering other loss and damage, and sustained threats of cholera. Two thirds of Mozambique’s and Zimbabwe’s staple maize crop was destroyed, not only by the flooding but also drought that hit elsewhere. Zimbabwe’s lack of rainfall from 2017-19 was unprecedented, and the main power source, the Zambezi River, dropped sufficiently low as to extinguish hydropower supply by October 2019 at the Kariba Dam, the world’s largest artificial lake. The Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (2019) confirmed that

“Mozambique ranks third among African countries most exposed to multiple weather-related hazards and suffers from periodic cyclones, droughts, floods, and related epidemics”

The links between Cyclone Idai and climate change were acknowledged by those with a social conscience. In mid-March, the South African government mainly sent their armed forces and technicians to help rebuild fallen pylons so as to restore the main electricity supply from Mozambique, from the Cahorra Bassa mega-dam on the Zambezi River. Eskom suffered a major set of blackouts the week Idai hit, due to the disruption of more than a megawatt of supply. The main agency assisting was a highly reputable South African charity, Gift of the Givers, which provides relief support across the world.

Five weeks later, on April 22, 17 cm of rain fell on Durban and its southern hinterlands, leaving seventy-one people dead. The prior record was October 2017 when only 10.8 cm fell in a day. And the following week, Cyclone Kenneth hit Mozambique – near the newly-discovered northern oil and gas fields – at the scarcely-populated border with Tanzania, so although winds reached 225 km/hour, there were only a few deaths.

The cyclones and rain bomb revealed the region’s terrible vulnerabilities, as did the 2019 drought in South Africa’s, Mozambique’s and Zimbabwe’s main food producing areas and Cape Town’s water shortage from 2015-18, which left the city’s residential taps nearly bone dry.

What is also much clearer after the 2019 extreme weather, is South Africa’s “subimperial” role in the region, including as a central force behind environmental damage. It is increasingly important – and easy – to show that the wealthiest South Africans have a climate debt liability for this damage. Fewer than three dozen corporations operating in South Africa – led by BHP Billiton, Sasol, Glencore, Anglo American, Arcelor Mittal and other smelting and mining houses in the Energy Intensive Users Group – are responsible for forty percent of the electricity consumption. In general, as University of Manchester climate scientist Kevin Anderson points out, “Almost 50 percent of global carbon emissions arise from the activities of around 10 percent of the global population”, an indicator of how extreme climate injustice has become (Sefali 2018).

This point was made after Cyclone Idai by the Rural Women’s Assembly (2019): “The three countries now affected by this unfolding disaster – Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi – have among the world’s lowest emissions rates. We demand that rich countries who continue to pollute the Earth’s atmosphere with greenhouse gas emissions commit to pay compensation for the damage and loss of life resulting from this latest storm”. As expressed by Anabela Lemos (2019), director of Justiça Ambiental! (Friends of the Earth Moçambique), “People in Mozambique know this is climate chaos. They know what’s going on. They are going to come and challenge everyone in northern countries and ask: why are you continuing to do this to us? Stop this genocide.”

The Harare-based Centre for Natural Resource Governance (2019) in Harare released a statement specifying how reparations could be made:

the rich countries must pay their climate debt to the Zimbabwean people – but the Zanu PF government and Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube cannot be trusted to manage the payments. Instead, we need trusted agencies in civil society to receive aid and direct transfers to the ordinary people affected. This could be done simply by arranging payout systems in the affected parts of Zimbabwe, so that everyone living in those areas would get a reparations payment. There is need to compensate families for loss of lives, destruction of homes and even loss of food, livestock and domestic utensils. The situation is dire in fragile states where governments have misplaced priorities – which relegates human security to humanitarian work of NGOs and well-wishers.

This doesn't yet change *everything* – but could and should

Even though these extreme incidents of climate damage are becoming more obvious, the construction of a South African climate justice movement has been elusive. One reason is the philosophical differences between the environmental justice and conservation movements. Occasionally these movements come together in specific sites of unity, such as defending against coal mining on the border of the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi reserve where the white rhino was saved from extinction.

But there are several missing links before they can generate a national movement with equivalent weight to, say, the Treatment Action Campaign which demanded that generic AIDS medicines be universally available. Their victory raised life expectancy from 52 to 64 years from 2005-15, by getting life-saving drugs to five million South Africans who previously could not afford them.

One gap in climate activism is the failure to reframe climate change the way Naomi Klein did in 2014: *This Changes Everything*. That would entail conjoining all manner of struggles over energy, transport, agricultural, production, suburbanization and waste disposal processes that cause climate change. But as labor movements such as the 1980s US Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers under the legendary Tony Mazzocchi have long pointed out, each step of the way there must be a set of *genuine* 'Just Transition' policies and projects that switch workers from dirty to clean jobs with no loss of pay, and with sensitivity to geographical impact.

The climate movement would then need more unity of purpose in everything from popular education, to militant activism, to media advocacy, to watchdogging the national policy process to lobbying legislatures, to filing regulatory objections – since Pretoria's environment and mining ministries generally behave as if they were in the pockets of the polluters – to building up climate-conscious case law in the courts. It would require more support from the various foundations and funding organizations that currently amplify infighting, turf wars and "silo" politics. Also required is stronger youth leadership, where signs included several local manifestations of the 2019 Climate Strike: strongest in Cape Town and Johannesburg, but with potential to spread across the country and continent with more leadership from the promising network, the South African Youth Climate Change Coalition.

Strategically-minded intellectuals were occasionally involved in climate justice activism, particularly the group of eco-socialists assembled by University of the Witwatersrand political economist Vishwas Satgar to develop a *Climate Crisis* critique. Satgar (2019) also helped mobilize the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign which in 2018 established a People's Climate Justice Charter. Some of the best anti-coal research comes from groundWork. Investigative journalists with a climate focus can be read regularly at *Daily Maverick* (led by Kevin Bloom) and the *Mail & Guardian* (especially Sipho Kings).

South Africa's climate justice ideas are recognized as being very different than the typical climate action approach, thanks to 1990s traditions of environmental justice and the 2004 founding of the international Durban Group for Climate Justice, which in the initial stages of global carbon trading offered the most systemic critique (Lohmann 2006). However, South Africa remains the world's most unequal society and cultures of activism differ dramatically from the components that would need to fuse for a proper national climate justice movement to emerge: environmental justice advocates (including within the conscientized middle-class), low-income communities, women, labor and especially the youth.

Conclusion

This then was the unsatisfying hybrid-climate justice politics unfolding in Africa in 2020, especially in a South Africa whose leaders chaired both the African Union and African Ministerial Conference on the Environment. While leading activists have demanded that fossil fuels should be phased out and solar access made universal as general policy standpoints, Africa's community struggles against the exploration, extraction, refining and combustion of coal, oil and gas resonate from the Niger Delta to Kenya's Lamu Port to KwaZulu-Natal coal fields and petrol refineries. While leftist trade unions increasingly propose radical versions of eco-socialism, they still defend carbon-intensive employment with an understandable desperation. A burgeoning youth and ecologically-aware middle-class feinted towards climate justice, but their stamina had not been tested. The mainstream climate action scene remained predictably tame and unambitious.

In this context, the vast majority of citizens were apathetic, and the upper-income elites lived in conditions akin to the richest First World habitats. These were the men and a few women who occupied the commanding heights of fossilized power, where profits and new discoveries were too sweet to kick their addictions – unless those promoting climate justice politics became much better organized, and brave enough for the conflagrations that inevitably lie ahead.

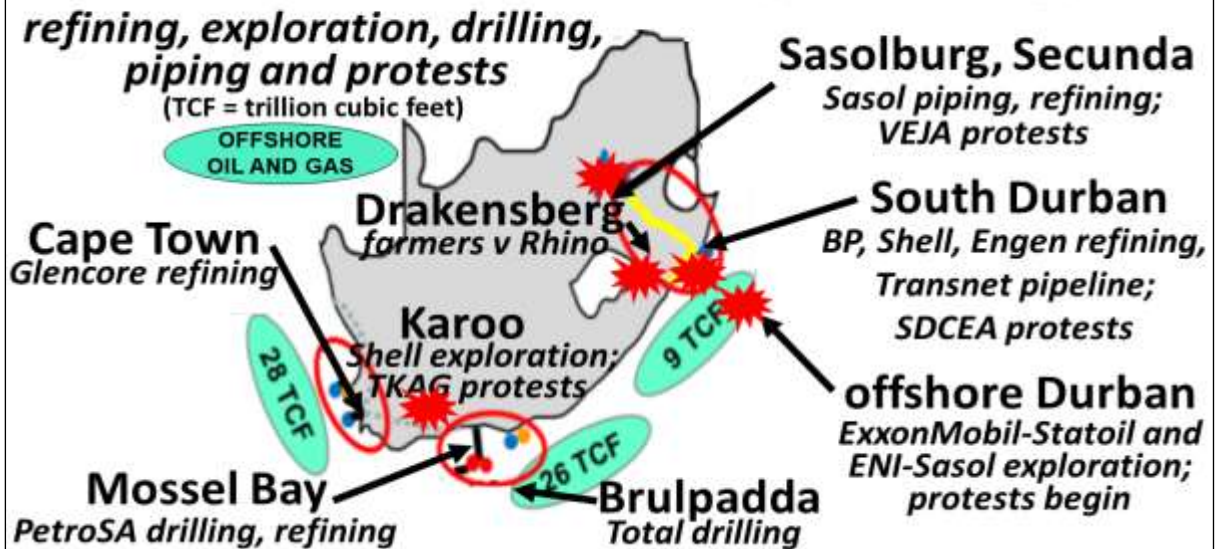
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South African oil and gas struggles



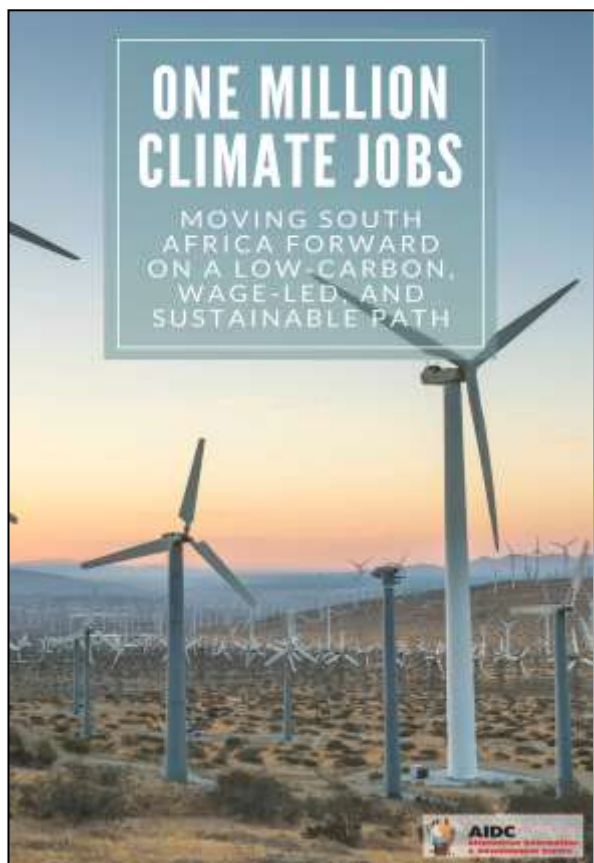
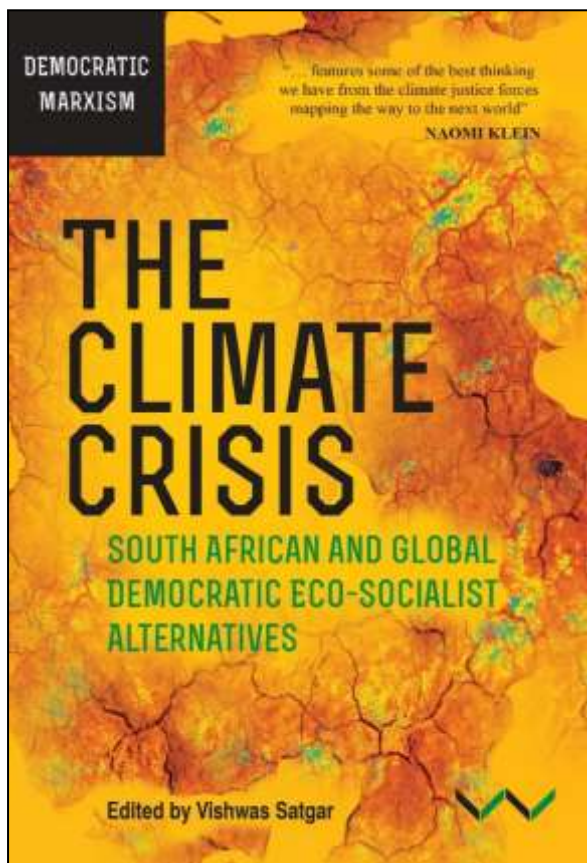
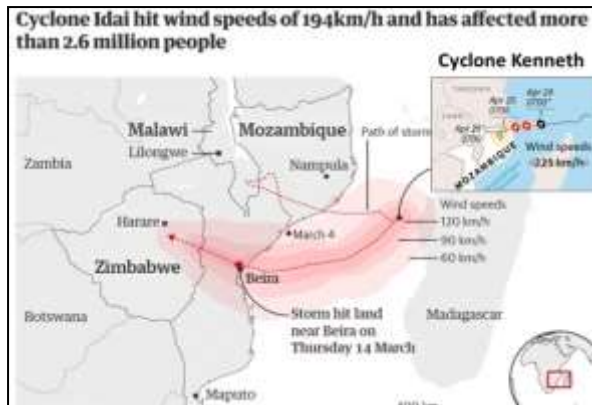
South African coal fields



Scenes from Somkhele mine, Fuleni resistance and a 2018 showdown at court



Source: Global Environmental Trust (Rob Symons)



ⁱ By way of disclosure, the chapter's first author was involved in leadership of Pacja from the outset. The second author has been active with several of the South African organisations mentioned, including the Durban counter-summit and South Durban Community Environmental Alliance.