Africa, my Africa!

Welcome to this special edition of the WRM bulletin looking at Africa through the eyes of Africans. To many people in the world, Africa is an exotic continent filled with dances and songs of both people and birds.
Africa is a big continent. Its land mass covers 31 million square kilometres and takes up 20% of the earth. It is the second largest continent in the world and has a population of some 900 million people, meaning that it is less populous than India and China.

Africa is one of the richest areas in natural resources and cultural diversity. The blessing of the continent with natural resources has been termed a curse, but a resource can only be made a curse by the activities of man. Statisticians claim that up to 41% of Africans live with less than 1US$ per day. We, however, note that the quality of a person's life cannot be measured by how many United States of America's dollars he or she has in the bank. Our environment is our life!

Africa is the centre of the world. She is the birthplace of humanity and retains much of the humaneness that has been lost in many parts of the world. The strength of the continent is her biodiversity, cultural diversity and rich store of knowledge and wisdom. This bulletin lays out for us the many and sustained assault on Africa by greedy speculators, transnational extractive corporations and international financial institutions. This diversity must be defended and protected. Africa was once covered by lush tropical forests and was awash with clean water bodies and home to a huge number of species, some of which are not yet documented. Years of mindless exploitation has led to massive deforestation and resulted in displacement of peoples.

Years of colonialism pushed African governments into plantation agriculture with the focus on supplying raw materials to Europe and North America. International division of labour required skilled labour in the metropolis and low-level manpower in the dependencies and as the scholar, Walter Rodney (in his book How Europe Underdeveloped Africa) summarised as follows: "the most convincing evidence as to the superficiality of the talk about colonialism having 'modernised' Africa is the fact that the vast majority of Africans went into colonialism with a hoe and came out with a hoe."

Colonialism and the current neo-colonial relations ensure that lands that would have been utilized for production of foods for the continent are turned into plantations whose products are mainly for export. Lands that were used for the production of cassava, yams and other local staples became plantations for the production of tea, rubber, oil palm, cotton, coffee, sugar, cocoa and groundnuts. Today huge swaths of land are being converted into agrofuels plantations simply to feed the machines in North and entrench the dependency situation of Africans. Very annoyingly some of our lands are labelled as marginal lands and set aside for crops such as jatropha. The labelling of lands as marginal is just a linguistic weapon for marginalising and displacing poor communities for the benefit of land grabbers.

The fact that Africa is rich in mineral resources has engendered severe and violent conflicts. These conflicts are not only those that manifest as wars, there are several other underreported cases that

occur as irresponsible extractive industry operators rip through the continent grabbing what they can and leaving the land scarred and the people impoverished. Recall the recent conflicts that brought Liberia and Sierra Leone to their knees; the conflicts that ravaged the Congolese region and the ongoing situation in the oil fields of Nigeria's Niger Delta.

Talking of the delta brings to mind the destruction of the beautiful mangroves that lined the tropical shorelines of the continent, offering spawning grounds for various aquatic species and protecting the land against ravaging waves and coastal erosion. Today, oil company activities and industrial shrimp farming pose serious threats.

Climate Change is a human rights issue and this fact has been recognised by the United Nations. No one contests the fact that it is unjust for industrialised nations to continue with their record carbon emissions while suggesting that actions taken in less industrialised nations in Africa and the rest of the South would compensate for inactions at home. Justice demands that countries of the North take robust actions at home to stem carbon emissions at source and by so doing show some seriousness in tackling the real manifestation of climate crisis that is threatening the survival of many nations and peoples.

One of the key failures of the Kyoto protocol is that it did not unambiguously pin the blame for the problem on hydrocarbons. As long as this was the case, the frameworks for handling the problem were fundamentally flawed. Conventional wisdom instructs us to tackle the root causes of problems rather than the symptoms if we wish to radically pursue long lasting solutions. Prodigious carbon emission cannot be a mark of progress and development.

The Kyoto protocol was set on a market ideology and this has blocked the pathway to real and just solutions to climate change. Even the agreement reached at Bali (December 2007) on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) is hinged on the same market ideology. It allows Northern countries to finance forestry projects using the World Bank's carbon funds and claim carbon credits that offer permission to carry on polluting at home. The REDD scheme is already sending red alerts through the South as communities worry that control of their forests and lands will be taken over by carbon traders and speculators thereby further marginalising them and placing them at greater risk than the climate chaos itself has done.
The destructive march of transnational oil corporations from the West and the East must be checked. The footprints of these corporations can be seen in the Gulf of Guinea and is increasingly emerging on the Eastern shores of the continent and oil companies are implicated in the violent conflicts in Sudan as in the rest of the world. Communities in Africa are beginning to demand a halt to any new oil field development in the region because the world is better off if the carbon is left in the ground. Reliance on oil as a revenue spinner and as an energy resource of the future is akin to living in a fool's paradise because it is a diminishing/finite resource and because the future of crude oil is already history.

We offer you a rich African dish that is sure to make you think, and hopefully resolve to stand in solidarity with the brave peoples of this continent as they defend their patrimony. Enjoy!

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