Industrial Consumption: A largely invisible yet decisive underlying cause of the crisis

Industrial consumption is an intrinsic aspect of capitalist's logic of increasing accumulation. It is also an underlying cause of the current crisis, which is being reinforced by initiatives promoting a 'green' label for the same production chains. This article highlights the voices of Justiça Ambiental! in Mozambique and the African ecofeminist alliance WoMIN.

This article highlights the voices of two organizations: Justiça Ambiental! (JA!) in Mozambique, which is accompanying the struggles in Cabo Delgado against the extraction of offshore and inland gas deposits; and WoMIN, an African ecofeminist alliance that works with movements of women and communities impacted by mining activities.

The world is in the midst of a serious and manifold crisis, one that brings together concerns over environmental devastation, climate chaos, loss of biological diversity, large-scale deforestation, social inequality, food insecurity, increasing poverty levels, and the concentration of power and land into fewer hands. And the list could go on and on. Industrial consumption is a vital aspect of what is driving this crisis, that is, an underlying cause. These are causes that operate on a global scale and consist of economic, political and social components that influence each other.

It is important to remark that the term *industrial consumption* should be understood not as the individual act of consuming, but rather as a consequence of the systemic logic of the capitalist economy of ever increasing accumulation. That means that each company, in order to make more profits, needs to grow and, in many cases, produce more and promote bigger and new markets for expansion; but to produce more, a company also needs to consume more resources (particularly energy, land and water).

Massive amounts of energy, from different sources, are distributed to industries to feed their production chains. Thousands of hectares of fertile land are turned into cash crops for industrial purposes. Mines and industrial plantations around the world siphon off and pollute enormous amounts of already scarce water sources. (1) Land is increasingly under the control of fewer individuals. Each day, enormous quantities of herbicides, insecticides, fungicides and fertilizers are produced and used by tree plantation companies and other agribusiness sectors. Minerals and fossil fuels continue to be extracted and transported across the globe via long and frequently militarized corridors of pipelines, waterways and roads. Ports, airports, highways and storage units are constantly being built and expanded to facilitate faster and cheaper connections between industries and markets. And so on. This systemic logic of ever-increasing production and consumption reinforces, at the same time, models of structural oppression, racism and patriarchy.

Industrial consumption, by and large, is now being reinforced by official and corporate initiatives trying to promote a new 'green' label for the same economic model. The targets set by companies and governments to reduce pollution, deforestation and biodiversity loss are mostly presented next to economic packages endorsing economic growth, free trade and globalized capitalism. And what does this mean? Basically, more industrial consumption and production. Likewise, the so-called 'green' or

‘low carbon’ economy is being promoted alongside market-based policies that pretend to offset the pollution and destruction that is intrinsic to such an economic model. In a nutshell, the so-called ‘transition’ aims to maintain and allow the same economic model that is actually driving the crisis to continue uninterrupted.

Gas Extraction in Mozambique

The labelling of gas as a ‘clean fuel’ is a case in point. We talked with friends from the organization Justiça Ambiental! (JA!), in Mozambique, where several companies have been involved in the exploration and extraction of so-called natural gas in Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique.

They told us the following: “Gas is not a transition fuel, and it is definitely not a clean energy. Gas is even worse than coal in the short term, due to its release of methane (*the main component of such naturally occurring gas*) into the atmosphere. Methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, traps 86 times more heat than carbon dioxide over a 20 year timeframe, turning it into the biggest threat to climate change. Gas destroys the environment and pollutes the air, sea and land, just like oil or coal. If we really want to deal with the climate crisis, and ensure a future for the youth and coming generations, we need to cut emissions drastically and stop gas, oil and coal projects”.

JA! explained that Cabo Delgado was a popular tourist destination, due to its beautiful coast, forests and peoples. The majority of local inhabitants consist of peasants, small farmers and fisherfolk. In the beginning of 2000, a huge gas field was discovered, one of the biggest in the world. Transnational corporations such as Anadarko and Exxon Mobil (US), ENI (Italy), Shell (The Netherlands), Total (France), China National Petroleum Corporation (China), Kogas (South Korea), Galp (Portugal), Mitsui E&P (Japan), and many more, rushed to take part in this extraction opportunity and the gas boom, and of course make huge profits. Mozambique, they affirmed, “embarked on this new utopia of discourses of development: better life for the communities, gas as a transition energy source, and many more.”

“The reality of the impacts of gas exploration is well known and documented, but the Mozambican government and many sectors of civil society decided to ignore the voices of the few of us that had the courage to rise against this illusion, pointing out the evident threat of believing that with us it would be different, that we would not fall into the resource curse”, JA! denounced. “Most of the people had very high expectations as to how the gas industry would finally fuel Mozambique’s development (similar to the beliefs in the coal boom era), and serve as an opportunity to repay the illegal debts contracted by our government.”

So the gas rush started, for offshore exploration and the inland Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project. JA! described how Environmental Impact Assessments were carried out as quickly as possible, contracts were signed behind closed doors, and reallocation plans were implemented without proper consultation and without taking into account peoples’ needs and requests. Even before the exploration started and way before the first projected profits started to be made, problems began to occur on the ground.

“Peasant communities were reallocated to new houses but the land promises were not fulfilled, so they are not able to grow their own food as they always did. Fisherfolk were reallocated to areas very far from the sea, even after repeatedly asking to be reallocated near the coast to allow them to continue earning their livelihoods from fishing. As Mr. Burahani, one of the fishermen, said: ‘I don’t know how to do anything other than fishing’, so this has made communities dependent on the

purchase of food products, at a time when the cost of basic products is constantly increasing."

To make things worse, at the beginning of 2017 attacks by insurgents started to take place. "The real motivations that led to the outbreak of this conflict, where horrible crimes are being committed, are still unknown, but their connection to the gas exploration is undeniable", they explained. "Government forces and mercenaries hired to counter the insurgency have also been involved in major human rights violations, and the militarization and conflict in the area, alongside the injustices related to the gas projects, have been destroying peoples' lives. Journalists, community activists and civil society organisations working on the ground are being attacked, prevented to do their work, or just simply disappearing without a trace. Once a peaceful province, Cabo Delgado is now a province at war, with more than 3,000 dead and 600,000 internally displaced people, and hundreds of thousands facing famine, diseases and violence."

Mining in Africa

The so-called 'green' economy is pushing for the electrification and digitalization of many commodities and industries, from electric cars to the use of 'block chain' digital technology for the agricultural industry. This requires a vast amount of mineral resources, besides the usual ones that are needed for the current level of consumption. We talked with our friends from WoMIN to hear more about the situations experienced in different countries in Africa.

They told us the following: "It is critical to challenge the assumptions of the 'green' economy when many of the costs, many of them violent, are being borne by communities in the Global South where unsustainable, unfettered, and destructive large-scale extractivism is taking place. Building renewable energy systems and technologies that would make a 'green' economy possible (solar panels, batteries etc.) will increase demand for rare earth minerals and metals – many of which can be sourced in high volumes in African countries".

As an example, they mentioned the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where roughly half the world's cobalt reserves are located. (2) The levels of pollution and violence faced by the communities where this extraction is taking place, is already high, with the wellbeing and security of millions of people and the planet sacrificed in favour of profits for a select few. (3) "It cannot be a 'green' economy for a privileged few in the Global North while Black and Brown communities across the Global South, along with their lands and territories, are paying such a terrible price," WoMin stated.

Furthermore, they also highlighted the following: "In almost every context in which large-scale resource extraction is taking place across the continent, there are high levels of violence that impact the communities that live there, and impact women in particular ways. Environmental defenders and communities who resist these mining projects also face high levels of repression for taking a stand".

One example is Marange in Zimbabwe, which has been a battlefield for the control of the territory's vast diamond wealth for the past 15 years. (4) "At that time, the traditional communities residing in Marange were invaded by tens of thousands of artisanal miners, merchants and dealers, who took control of their land, flouted traditional practices, and perpetrated rape, murder and armed robbery upon each other and the local communities", outlined WoMin.

In November 2008, the Zimbabwe National Army was deployed to drive out the artisanal miners and dealers as the state moved in to take full control over the lucrative diamond fields. There was a massacre of artisanal miners and villagers, and hundreds of villagers fled their traditional homes.

“Over 200 miners were gunned down within five weeks, and it is estimated that hundreds of women were raped, including being gang raped by both the soldiers and artisanal miners. Rape and sexual violence in many forms have often been used as a way of controlling and repressing women and communities in mining areas”, they denounced.

To highlight these voices, the Rise Against Repression (5) platform was created, which documents the repression and violence that environmental defenders and communities face in mining and other extractive sites across the African continent, with a strong focus on women.

WoMin explained that many communities in mining areas also face pollution and the degradation of their lands and territories, upon which they depend for their lives and livelihoods. In Bargny, Senegal, where women fish processors have been resisting destructive so-called development projects for over a decade (6) – the pollution from the Sendou coal-fired power plant caused immense harm to the surrounding environment and community. Sponsored by the African Development Bank (AfDB), the West African Development Bank (BOAD), the Netherlands Development Bank (FMO) and the private Compagnie Bancaire de l’Afrique de l’Ouest (CBAO) – the Sendou project posed a huge threat to the community where fishing and fish processing by women are important sources of livelihood. In January 2019, Sendou I released wastewater into the women’s fish transformation site at Khelcom, which caused significant loss and damage to their harvest of dried fish. “Given that women do the work of fish processing and selling, and they are also in charge of the agricultural activities, they have also been the hardest hit”, they warned.

A transition to what?

It becomes imperative to expose the dangers that hide under the transition to a ‘green’ or ‘low carbon’ economy. The interests at play are clear and industrial consumption is set to continue expanding. As our friends from WoMIN told us: “Any moves toward a just ‘transition’ starts with the people – namely the people who are most directly affected and who have carried the heaviest cost of the climate crisis and the current extractives-driven, neo-liberal economic paradigm that informs so-called ‘development’ and ‘progress.’”

Such a systemic change, in which the autonomy of those communities living with and by their territories is respected, needs imagining from below. This includes an active process of listening and understanding as to where the changes need to come from; an imagining of a transition from below. As our friends from JA! clearly stated: “The fight is for radical and systemic changes in our societies in order to dismantle the current system that is oppressing and exploiting nature and the peoples of the world, towards a world that is socially and economically just. The fundamental pillars for the needed changes should be justice, equity and the sustainable use of our commons.”

(1) WRM Bulletin 230, Water and Pulp: The North’s Thirst and the South’s Resistance
(2) Cobalt reserves worldwide as of 2020, by country
(3) Raconteur, 2019, Cobalt: the dark side of a clean future
(4) Rise Against Repression, The women of chiadzwa
(5) Rise Against Repression
(6) Womin, Women Stand their Ground against BIG Coal ; Watch a short video on the Bargny struggle here.