

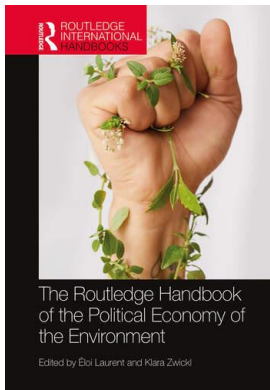
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10

NATURAL RESOURCES, CLIMATE CHANGE AND INEQUALITY IN AFRICA

James C. Murombedzi

Introduction

The use and governance of natural resources are among the most central issues for the daily lives of the majority of Africans. Patterns of rural resource use are fundamental to rural and national economies, as well as to local and global concerns about sustainability. Resource degradation through unsustainable use patterns as well as climate change have resulted in a global environmental and developmental emergency whose impacts include increasing concentration of wealth, growing poverty and inequality.

Institutional histories and political interests fundamentally shape rights over natural resources, and rights are central to the ways in which those resources are used. In this regard, the desire of European powers to capture and exploit African resources played a key role in the transformative process of colonialism (Ocheni and Nwankwo 2012). The core characteristic of the colonial project was the alienation of natural resources and the imposition of new forms of centralized political authority over access to land and resources that had previously been controlled by more localized institutions. The expropriatory processes associated with the imposition of new forms of resource ownership and control occasioned the creation or in some cases the exacerbation of inequalities, which has endured into the present day. Significantly, colonialism was about controlling natural resources, and many of the inequalities on the continent today are reflected in unequal access to the continent's natural resources (*ibid.*).

Today extreme global economic inequality is largely a result of corporate-led globalization (Joyce 2010; Piketty 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic not only exposes but also further exacerbates the inequality (Stiglitz 2020).¹ In 2006, the first study to tally household wealth worldwide (McGillivray 2006) concluded that the richest 1% of world population owned 39.9% of the world's household wealth, which is greater than the wealth of the world's poorest 95%. Since then, a slew of studies of inequality and maldistribution, focusing *inter alia* on income, employment, assets, access and power inequalities,² have all demonstrated that global wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small wealthy elite. Oxfam (2020) in particular makes a case against the increasing concentration of wealth in a few men as a result of a flawed sexist economic system.³ The causes of inequality are many but are mostly located in the historical process of production and distribution. Contemporary developments, including environmental degradation and climate change, exacerbate inequalities between high- and low-income

countries, as well as in-country inequalities. In Africa, while precolonial forms of inequality have influenced the continent's encounter with colonialism and been reproduced and sometimes exacerbated in the colonial period, colonialism itself has created new and more extreme forms of inequality that define the continent's social condition today. Colonial dispossession, particularly pronounced in settler colonial societies (Moyo and Yeros 2013), has led to enclosures, created poverty and exacerbated inequalities.

The colonial state in Africa was established to control labour, capital and resources for external European purposes. This set of political objectives resulted in the concentration of central bureaucratic and executive power. The state's powers of coercion were used to limit independent forms of social organization. Governance was not democratic, representative or accountable. States claimed wide powers over natural resources, particularly land, which was generally placed under discretionary bureaucratic control with customary rights subordinated to claims explicitly recognized by the colonial administration. Even under the British indirect rule, this meant concentrating fused executive, legislative and judicial powers in externally recognized local authorities who bolstered what Mamdani (1996) has called "the fist of colonial power." Shivji (1998: 48) notes, "There is a deep structural link between the use and control of resources and the organization and exercise of power. Control over resources is the ultimate source of power."

The colonial instrumentation of Africa in the global economy resulted in a predatory exploitation of its raw materials. This process shaped the continent into a series of enclave economies structured around the control of land and mineral resources, and their supply to the colonial centres. These enclave economies have other fundamental characteristics. Firstly, they are based on the exploitation of a single resource and its exportation in raw unprocessed form, or in partially processed form, for value addition in another economy. Thus for instance many African economies are exporters of a single dominant mineral ore, such as iron ore or copper, or agricultural commodity, such as cotton or palm oil. A second key characteristic is that the enclave is the creation of a small formal labour force in the enclave and the consignment of reproduction of labour outside of the formal economy. This is particularly pronounced in the former settler colonial societies which were structured on an ideology of white supremacy (South Africa, Rhodesia, South West Africa, Portuguese East Africa and Angola), creating an enclave formal economy employing one-fifth of the labour force.⁴ The informal sector is characterized by 'customary land tenure' systems where land ownership is effectively vested in the state and thus land use is subject to a high level of state intervention. The state can control commodity and labour markets through economic and extra-economic means of coercion. The formal sector, on the other hand, is characterized by private land tenure systems (freehold or leasehold) which give rights holders a higher degree of control and flexibility regarding land use (Kanyenze and Kondo 2011).

The formal/informal dichotomy in turn informed the huge disparities between the unskilled and semi-skilled native labour force and the skilled non-native labour force. Control over land and mineral resources became the basis on which equity and equality of opportunity – access to nutrition, education and job opportunities – was constructed and highly skewed in favour of the formal sector, resulting in a highly underdeveloped informal sector characterized by low levels of remuneration, low nutrition, high unemployment and high poverty.

The next section explores how contemporary forms of natural resources control have continued almost unchanged from colonial times, entrenching access by new elites and creating new forms of exclusion and inequality. The section seeks to demonstrate how erratic growth and structural adjustment policies of the 1970s and 1980s eroded many of the social policy gains of the early independence period in Africa. The resultant market-driven development approaches informed a logic of hyper-exploitation of natural resources which in turn

exacerbated inequalities. This is followed by a section which explores the impacts of climate change on inequality. This section recognizes that although climate impacts are new and accelerating, they amplify existing vulnerabilities and inequalities and contribute to further degradation of natural resources on which the majority of the poor are dependent. Many of these vulnerabilities are historically located, although the new threats also create new forms of exclusion and inequalities. The final section concludes with some suggestions for policy reforms which could inform progress towards greater equity and sustainability.

Contemporary natural resources control and inequality

Most African economies are predominantly agrarian: the bulk of the populations are rural and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. These economies are based on the super-exploitation of peasant labour in order to subsidize labour reproduction for the formal sector. In turn the exploitation of peasant labour becomes increasingly feminized as male labour is absorbed into the formal sector to the exclusion of female labour. This gendered exploitation is reflected in the extreme inequality between men and women, urban and rural, and black and white in the colonial and post-colonial African economies (Kanyenze and Kondo 2011).

Natural resources governance issues such as land and resource tenure continue to underpin evolving relations between states and citizens in the post-colonial era. Post-independence African governments tended to reinforce centralized authority over natural resources as states sought to consolidate the political authority needed to drive modernization processes and to control patronage resources. Post-colonial Africa has continued on a neoliberal development trajectory which not only creates unsustainable use of natural resources, but also exacerbates the historical inequalities of colonial exploitation (Schneider 2003; Gatwiri et al. 2019).

Natural resources, with their historic grounding in the public domain and their high economic values, are central to the patronage interests that allow governing elites to maintain powers and privileges. This political logic shapes natural resource governance patterns across the continent. For example, agricultural policy in agrarian nations has evolved according to political interests bent towards controlling producers' access to markets and inputs in order to extract rent. Similarly, forestry policy and management institutions across the continent are crafted according to central patronage interests in controlling and extracting rents from both formal and informal patterns of trade and utilization of products such as timber and charcoal (Oyono 2004).

While the continent is engaged in various projects to restructure economies away from the historical limitations into more inclusive and equitable trajectories, such transformational initiatives rarely seek to transcend the neoliberal hegemony.⁵ Various attempts have been made to promote equitable access to land and natural resources through redistributive processes such as land reform (Cousins and Scoones 2010; Hall and Kepe 2017; Moyo and Yeros 2013), economic empowerment programmes such as in South Africa and so on. However, these policy reforms are occurring in contexts characterized by the enclosure and privatization of public lands (see e.g. Harvey 2003). In Africa, this phase of globalization is creating new enclosures and dispossessions and thus exacerbating the natural resource-based inequalities of the colonial era (Oakland Institute 2011).

Natural resource degradation contributes to growing inequality. Conservative estimates show that industrial gas emissions have increased by almost 50%; more than 300 million ha of forest have been cleared; and many communities in developing countries have lost rights and access to lands and forests to large multinational corporations acting in collaboration with national governments. Although poverty has been reduced in a few industrializing countries, nearly 20% of the world's population remains in absolute poverty (Watts and Ford 2012), and

more continue to be impoverished through land and resource expropriations. The commodification and privatization of the environment has accelerated through increased 'green grabs,' carbon sequestration schemes such as REDD+, water privatization, and the creation of new protected areas on lands expropriated from the poor and marginalized, as well as the suppression of indigenous forms of production and consumption.

One of the key attributes of hyper-globalization is accelerated commodification of nature. As Polanyi (1944) prognosticated, the growth of capital depends in part on its ability to create new (and fictitious) commodities. While the emergence of the market economy was marked the replacement of traditional relations with market relations and the commodification of land and labour, the commercialization of the relationship with nature has been detrimental to both nature and humans (Klein 2008; Polanyi 2001). In addition to the inequalities created by natural resource commodification and exploitation, climate change has emerged as a new driver of inequality, driven by neoliberal commodification and the endless pursuit of growth. We turn now to a discussion of climate change and inequality in Africa.

Climate change and inequality

The analytical framework for understanding the relationship between climate change and inequality remains relatively underdeveloped (Lichenko and Silva 2014). Inequality is multidimensional, while the social impacts of climate change are complex, multifaceted and context specific. However, as noted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its Fifth Assessment Report (AR5), "despite the recognition of these complex interactions between climate change and inequality, the literature shows no single conceptual framework that captures them concurrently" (IPCC 2014: 803). As the physical impacts of climate change have become more glaring, focus has also shifted from discourses on the reality of anthropogenic interference with the climate system to understanding the social impacts of climate change and proposing appropriate policy response to aid adaptation to climate impacts.

Consequently, since the turn of the century, greater attention has been paid to the social impacts of climate change, particularly on poverty and vulnerability. Within the global climate governance framework, a World Bank report (2002) presented at the 8th conference of the UNFCCC highlighted the challenges presented by climate change for the achievement of the MDGs. The Stern report (2007) noted that climate change was expected to increase poverty owing to its effects on agriculture, flooding, malnutrition, water resources and health. These have been followed by numerous other studies and reports exploring the social impacts of climate change.⁶ Working Group II (WGII) of the IPCC has contributed significantly to the focus on the human dimensions of climate impacts by providing extensive compilation of the evidence on the dynamic interaction between climate change, livelihoods and poverty.

The AR5 of the IPCC concludes that climate change exacerbates inequalities and notes that socially and geographically disadvantaged people – including people facing discrimination based on gender, age, race, class, caste, indigeneity and disability – are particularly affected negatively by climate hazards (IPCC 2014). As noted earlier, exacerbation of inequality can happen through disproportionate erosion of physical, human and social assets. However, as demonstrated by Nazrul Islam and Winkel (2017), climate change creates a vicious cycle whereby initial inequality makes disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change, resulting in greater subsequent inequality through three channels. First, inequality increases the exposure of the disadvantaged social groups to climate hazards. Because of the exposure level, inequality increases the disadvantaged groups' susceptibility to damages

caused by climate hazards. Third, inequality decreases these groups' relative ability to adapt and recover from climate change damages.

Climate change has also become the defining context of natural resources use and control in recent times. An inescapable irony of climate change is that those economies whose development has led to climate change are the least vulnerable to its impacts, while countries that emit the least are the most vulnerable to climate change. This exacerbates inequalities between the nations of the developed North and those of the global South. "Climate change is inextricably linked to economic inequality: it is a crisis that is driven by the greenhouse gas emissions of the 'haves' that hits the 'have-nots' the hardest" (Oxfam 2015). GDP growth can be directly linked to carbon emissions, and those economies with the highest rates of GDP are also those that historically have the highest rates of GHG emissions (WMO 2020).

Many countries, particularly the vulnerable, are already experiencing the negative impacts of climate change. Vulnerability to climate change in Africa has its origins in the colonial encounters of the continent and the West. Centuries of European colonialism, including the creation of new nations in service of Western imperial interests, placed the new nations in a vulnerable position. Mass human rights violations, forced labour and then violent exits by colonial powers left many countries in poverty, with weak institutions and primed for internal conflicts. Climate change and colonial history are a toxic combination. The IPCC (2007, 2014, 2019) establish that climate disasters have a greater impact on developing countries with weak infrastructure than on wealthier countries.

Vulnerability to climate change is globally generalized and locally specific. While everyone is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, developing countries are much more vulnerable because of the structural and historical factors which restrict their abilities to absorb the costs of climate-related events such as droughts, floods and heat waves, as well as to adapt their economies to operate efficiently and sustainably in a changing climate. They also have less ability to take advantage of the opportunities of responding to climate change – such as investment in clean renewable energy and climate-proofing infrastructure and the adoption of smart agriculture options – without external assistance. It is estimated that COVID-19 will cost the world economy up to 5% of GDP. Climate impacts in Africa are already costing most of the continent's economies between 3% and 5% of GDP annually (UNECA/ACPC undated), with some incurring losses of up to 10% of GDP.

Many poor countries are already affected by frequent floods, storms and droughts. Even if the Paris Agreement and other measures succeed in keeping temperature rises below 1.5 degrees, these impacts will continue and even worsen for several decades to come. Recent estimates suggest that climate change will reduce GDP per capita in Africa between 66% and 90% by 2100 (Hsiang 2016). Under a high-warming scenario, West Africa and Eastern Africa would experience a reduction in GDP per capita by about 15% by 2050 (UNECA/ACPC undated).

It is broadly accepted that climate change exacerbates existing inequalities. In the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) context of the global climate change negotiations, developing countries have historically premised their demands on the 'ecological debt' owed them by developed countries. This ecological debt emanates from the high carbon footprint of the industrialized nations, particularly from resource extraction and fossil fuel burning for energy. Indeed, the ideas of ecological debt and 'ecologically unequal exchange' have led to the development of the climate justice movement (Parks and Roberts 2010), represented in Africa by the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA).

There is an observed linear relationship between GDP and emissions. High-income nations are responsible for over 90% of greenhouse gas emissions, while those countries with low

cumulative emissions are among the poorest (WMO forthcoming). Africa contributes less than 4% of cumulative GHG concentrations in the atmosphere and is disproportionately vulnerable to climate impacts (Sy 2018). The global North is responsible for about 50% of all materials consumption, and the bulk of these are extracted from the global South. This extraction is made possible by patterns of control and ownership established during the colonial period and maintained in the post-colonial period. The excess development in the North causes de-development in the South. It follows from this that equality between low- and high-income countries cannot be achieved if the global North does not reduce its ecological impact.

Thus, in addition to its impacts on inequalities within countries, climate change increases inequalities between countries. Greater across-country inequality may indeed increase the exposure of the disadvantaged countries to climate hazards and decrease their capacity to build resilience. We can also speculate that the global climate response itself could exacerbate inequalities between rich and poor countries. In terms of the Paris Agreement, all nations must voluntarily commit to limiting greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the impacts of climate change. For poor countries, these commitments are typically conditional on the availability of external financing. Financing itself is rarely unconditional. Already, African economies are spending up to 9% of their annual GDP (UNECA/ACPC undated) to finance climate adaptations and responses to the impacts of extreme weather and climate events.

Climate actions undertaken in the context of the global climate governance agreement could also exacerbate Africa's vulnerability through a second pathway. As Lord Stern observed, "the effort to control climate change impacts virtually every element of a country's economy so countries have traditionally been nervous about what they're going to be asked to do" (BBC 2020). This is particularly true of high-income countries whose economic, social and environmental activities remain carbon intensive. The pursuit of economic growth drives ever-increasing exploitation of natural resources and GHG emissions. This makes it impossible to decarbonize economies at a rate fast enough to meet the Paris Agreement threshold of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius by reducing carbon emissions by 45% by 2030, and reaching net zero emissions by 2050. To achieve this target, industrialized nations must abandon growth as a political and economic objective.

African countries, on the other hand, with low carbon intensity and greater vulnerability to climate impacts, have been most committed to a working climate governance regime. As such the continent has by and large made vastly ambitious commitments to mitigate emissions. These commitments are in some instances clearly prejudicial to their own development. Meanwhile the big emitters are enlarging their carbon footprint.⁷ Thus, for example, in the 2020 Petersberg Climate Dialogue,⁸ an annual global meeting of environment and climate ministers, leaders undertook to design their COVID-19 pandemic responses in a way that will drive a transition to more sustainable, zero-carbon societies rather than propping up the polluting practices of the past. Already, however, indications are that there is a gap between these optimistic statements and the unfolding realities on the ground. Governments in some of the leading polluting nations are including bailouts for brown energy and excluding green industries from stimulus packages. The US government has mobilized a massive \$2 trillion to support industries and workers affected by the pandemic. This compromises their climate commitments and thus potentially exacerbate inequalities with less powerful nations.

Climate change not only exacerbates inequalities between nations, it also amplifies the vulnerabilities of those communities whose livelihoods are directly dependent on access to natural resources. Most of Africa's rural households' livelihoods are based on access to agricultural land and associated natural resources such as forests and water. Access to these resources is already inequitable because of historical factors. Climate change not only increases the related

challenges, but also creates new forms of contestation and alienation within the communities for natural resources. Thus pastoral communities and sedentary communities compete for water and grazing lands, and sedentary communities' access to vital forest products is increasingly contested. As rainfall patterns vary, competition for access to land is also increasing. Climate change will affect the productivity of the land, change access to natural resources and create new conditions for further primitive accumulation, as already evidenced in the expansion in land acquisitions for biofuel production on lands belonging to vulnerable communities.

Conclusion: towards an equitable world order?

The use and control of natural resources has historically generated inequality in Africa. Climate change and the responses to it have exacerbated these inequalities. The dominance of the market, representing corporate interests over social and environmental interests, is clearly socially, economically and environmentally unsustainable. Instead of the current production system that emphasizes market mechanisms to allocate the costs and benefits of nature, what is required is a social structure of accumulation that places economic justice over profit and, more practically, institutes an inclusive, sustainable model for growth (Tabb 2012).

Environmental policies in Africa must focus on better environmental protection and social outcomes in order to reduce inequality. The majority of the rural poor, to varying extents, are directly dependent on the environment and natural resources for their livelihoods. Resource extraction negatively impacts them, as does the degradation and loss of biodiversity emanating from climate change and variability. In addition, environmental policies should also ensure tenure security for the poor in order to incentivize the emergence and development of environmental management institutions that are aligned to the livelihood objectives of the poor.

With reference to climate change, it has been proven that it is possible to decouple emissions from GDP by transitioning to renewables (UNECA 2020). However, this alone is not sufficient to ensure the achievement of the 45% reduction of emissions by 2030 recommended by the IPCC (2018). There are many processes around the world today seeking alternatives to the destructive logic of the hegemonic models of production and consumption. These are evident in a wide range of rich experiences in alternative technology, renewable energy and new regulatory regimes that exist in different parts of the world. It is therefore imperative that high-income nations should abandon growth as a political and economic objective, scale down energy use and meet their obligations to finance climate actions in low-income countries in order to limit emissions and support development in low-income countries. Managed reduction of resource use through efficiency, investment in the circular economy, reduction of planned obsolescence and similar measures will contribute towards shifting the focus away from growth. Development in the global South would need to avoid the pitfalls of fossil fuel-intensive and inequitable development of the North. Progressive development trajectories should shift from growth alone, a focus emanating from the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s (Heidhues and Obare 2011), and focus on other imperatives such as human and environmental wellbeing. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change proposes, "equitable socioeconomic development in Africa may strengthen its resilience to various external shocks, including climate change" (IPCC 2014: 1121).

Notes

- 1 Stiglitz (2020: 20) notes, "COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequalities between countries just as it has within countries. The least developed economies have poorer health conditions, health systems that are less prepared to deal with the pandemic, and people living in conditions that make them more

- vulnerable to contagion, and they simply do not have the resources that advanced economies have to respond to the economic aftermath.” <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/09/pdf/COVID19-and-global-inequality-joseph-stiglitz.pdf>; page 20.
- 2 See e.g. Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (January 2015) *Who Pays? A Distributional Analysis of the Tax Systems in All Fifty States*; OXFAM (2015) *Wealth: Having It All and Wanting More*, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/wealth-having-it-all-and-wanting-more-338125>; Thomas Piketty (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*; Stiglitz, J. (2012) *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*; Alvaredo, F. et al. (2018) *World Inequality Report 2018*.
 - 3 Oxfam (2020) “Economic inequality is out of control. In 2019, the world’s billionaires, only 2,153 people, had more wealth than 4.6 billion people. This great divide is based on a flawed and sexist economic system that values the wealth of the privileged few, mostly men, more than the billions of hours of the most essential work.”
 - 4 Kanyenze and Kondo (2011) explore the contradiction of Zimbabwe, where a rich, diverse resource base co-exists with endemic poverty. They conclude that one reason lies in the colonial economy, which was predicated on an ideology of white supremacy, creating an enclave formal economy employing only one-fifth of the labour force, with the rest forced into informality.
 - 5 Murombedzi, J.C. (2016), *Inequality and Natural Resources in Africa*. World Social Science Report 2016. UNESCO.
 - 6 For a synopsis of studies see e.g. S. Nazrul Islam and J. Winkel (2017). *Climate Change and Social Inequality*. www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf.
 - 7 In March 2020 China approved five new coal-fired power plants with a total of 7,960 MW (as opposed to 6,310 MW coal-fired power stations approved in the country in all of 2019). In Canada, the government has extended direct tax relief to the Alberta tar sands industry as well as for the renovation of oil wells in Saskatchewan and British Columbia as part of its bailout plan to industries. Australia has also put in place provisions to waive oil and gas exploration fees and approved the expansion of the Acland coal mine. In the UK, the Bank of England has undertaken to buy debt from oil companies as part of its coronavirus stimulus programme. Similarly, the EU has agreed that member states’ COVID-19 pandemic response must be aligned with the Union’s Green Deal, and the European Central Bank has issued 870 billion euro through its Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme to buy back bonds to stabilize the Euro. Some of the bonds purchased in the first three weeks of the programme include oil majors Shell, ENI and Total. These patterns of COVID-19 stimulus packages benefitting the fossil fuel industries are also evident in the BRICS countries. Quite clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic is imposing Faustian choices on countries resulting in the more powerful countries embarking on stimulus packages which promote the interests of powerful fossil fuel concerns.
 - 8 Video conference on 29/4/2020.

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