



If another world is possible, who is doing the imagining? Building an ecofeminist development alternative in a time of deep systemic crisis

The year 2019 will mark 25 years since the start of international talks through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties to address the climate crisis. Year on year, carbon emissions causing climate change have escalated, taking us ever closer to climate catastrophe and corresponding ecological and social collapse. 2018 has been reported as the fourth hottest year in recorded history, characterised by numerous natural disasters in the form of forest fires, droughts, and tsunamis, all linked to the changing climate.

Governments, entrusted with the future of humans and all other life on the planet, have failed. This is because the COP is dominated by corporate interests and their powerful governments who manipulate negotiations and stall progress in the service of power and profit. The current configuration of the climate negotiations will never yield a just and fair outcome.

If we are to really develop and build solutions, we need an overhaul in thinking and doing. This article explores the core nature of the problem as WoMin understands it, including an examination of extractivism and its consequences. We expose and interrogate the mainstream or 'false' solutions proposed by global North governments, intergovernmental bodies like the UNFCCC and International Finance Institutions (IFIs).

We also consider approaches more akin to our vision of a different world: the just transition, climate justice, and feminism. Building on these, we propose the building of an African ecofeminist development alternative through a bottom-up Africa-wide charter building process and touch on some of the challenges and key political questions which will need to be addressed as we build.

1. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The World in Crisis

The world is in deep social, economic and ecological crisis. We are witnessing deepening inequality and poverty, the large-scale destruction of ecosystems upon which all life depends, and looming climate catastrophe. The very survival of people on earth and the planet itself is under threat.

At the very moment when bold and transformative solutions are needed, we witness the rise of right wing forces whose reactionary agenda is only fuelling the crisis. Their climate denialism, renewed fossil fuels energy drive, push to exploit new frontiers of nature (the oceans, the atmosphere through geoengineering feats, and the forest lungs of the earth) for profit, and their violent repression of social dissent are all markers of deepening crisis for the majority of the world's poor now and into the immediate future.

Africa and other parts of the global South are subject to another round of deepening colonisation as corporations and their host governments in the global north and parts of the global south chase the untapped and highly profitable frontiers of Africa's mineral and natural wealth. This gives impetus to what WoMin calls an extractivist development model (or extractivism), which sees economies of poor countries subject to the logic of large scale extraction, with no value add, of usually non-renewable natural resources under highly unequal and exploitative conditions. This is just another link in the chain of perpetual colonisation and exploitation of Africa and its peoples.

This new era of natural resource colonisation is presented as the opportunity for Africa's Rising by multilateral and intergovernmental bodies, including Africa's 'own' – the

African Union and its Agenda 2063 and the African Mining Vision (African Union 2009), adopted by the Heads of African States at the February 2009 AU summit; the World Bank and its Strategy for African Mining (World Bank 1992); as well as the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), to name a few. It is unfortunate but Africa's Rising through a 'transformed, accountable and transparent extractives sector' is also the development mantra that has been uncritically adopted by significant swathes of African civil society.

Extractivism is deeply patriarchal and racist, relying on the cheap paid labour of black working-class men who work under extremely exploitative and dangerous conditions.

And its operations and its profit base cannot be separated from the unpaid care work of women as they labour to reproduce workers and their families through subsistence food production, the provisioning of water and fuel, and their care for the sick and the elderly. Extractivism's externalised costs – pollution, forced dislocation, water grabs and violence – cause significant ill-health for workers and affected communities and it is women's labour which replaces absent health and care services. WoMin argues that all of this work of care represents an invisible and no cost subsidy to the profits of corporations.

Communities to be affected by large-scale development projects are denied voice in decision-making. The corporates mislead through false promises about local development and jobs. Whilst traditional and local leaders are corrupted to swindle communities out of their land and birthright. Women, who may be the primary users of land, are not regarded as 'owners' and denied their right to participate in decisions about development for which they pay the highest price.

WoMin argues that mining and the extractivist economy is violent – whole local ecosystems in water bodies, forests and land are destroyed, communities are forcibly removed and their livelihoods destroyed, and the labour of workers and women is violently exploited. Geographic areas subject to extractives activities are militarised (occupied by the state military) and/or securitised (where private security companies 'mimic' the state military) to repress resistance and guarantee the social conditions necessary for extraction to continue unhindered. In this process, communities are subjected to threat and intimidation, as well as physical violence, including assassinations. Activists defending land, rivers, forests and the oceans are among the most at risk in the world today. In 2017 alone, 207 environmental defenders were killed – the deadliest year to date.¹ For women, this violence is most often sexualised. From the Niger Delta to the oil fields of Uganda to the diamond fields of Marange, Zimbabwe – women from affected communities endure sexualised violence, sexual harassment, threats of rape and rape by the military and private security.

Climate and ecological catastrophe in Africa

WoMin's work centres the looming climate and ecological catastrophe in Africa, its links to extractivist development and its gendered impacts. The most concrete markers of this crisis are:

- In November 2018, the United Nations' World Meteorological Organization (WMO) predicted that 2018 would be the fourth-warmest consecutive year on record for the Earth. And, drawing on five different data sets monitoring the Earth's climate, the global average temperature for the first 10 months of 2018 was about 1 degree Celsius above what it was in the late 1800s, considered the end of the pre-industrial period. This takes the World's climate just .5 degrees short of the maximum projected increase promised at the Paris COP in 2015.

- The 2018 report of the distinguished Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in October 2018, makes for an extremely depressing read. The voluntary national pledges for carbon emission cuts made by countries after the Paris agreement combined take us to a very conservative 3-degree temperature increase. And given that the commitments are not legally enforceable it is highly probable countries will overshoot the commitments. The IPCC projects that, without unprecedented efforts to cut fossil-fuel use in half in less than 15 years and eliminate their use almost entirely in 30 years, we are on track to achieve the maximum 1.5 degree temperature change in less than 12 years. Increases beyond this would cut corn yields in parts of Africa by half, degrade virtually all coral reefs, and overwhelm coastal areas and island states across the planet. The WMO projects a much more radical global average temperature increase of 5- to 9-degrees by 2100.

- For millions of people across Africa Latin America and Asia, climate change translates into more regular and extreme droughts, storms and flooding with the World Food Programme concluding that this now accounts for up to 90 percent of all natural disasters. Climate change is projected to increase the number of hungry people by 20 percent to 2050.² Those most at risk live in Africa. This impacts heavily on African women living in rural areas who constitute not less than 50% of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa.³
- Roughly 13 million hectares per year in South America, Africa and south East Asia is converted from forest to agricultural or other land uses. It is estimated that if deforestation continues at this rate, *all* of the world's forests will be depleted within a century and many ecosystems will be utterly destroyed.⁴
- The World Health Organisation (WHO) projects that climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress between 2030 and 2050.⁵ It is areas with weak health infrastructure – mostly in the Global South – that will be least able to prepare, respond and cope with this future-reality.
- The planet is in the midst of a sixth wave of mass extinction of plant and animal life in the past half-billion years. Species extinction 'normally' occurs at a rate of between 1 to 5 per year. The Centre for Biological Diversity, drawing on scientific studies, estimates that literally dozens of species are going extinct every day. This species extinction is driven by pollution, invasive species, and increasingly by climate change.⁶ By 2050, Africa is expected to lose 50% of its birds and mammals, and Asian fisheries will most likely completely collapse.⁷
- A World Bank research report *Groundswell—Preparing for Internal Climate Migration* concludes that crop failure, water scarcity and rises in sea levels, linked to climate change, will transform more than 143 million people into "climate migrants". Most of this impact will be felt in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, representing about 55 percent of the developing world's populations.⁸

2. WHAT RESPONSES TO THESE CRISES?

In the midst of the greatest systemic crisis, and as we write this article, governments from around the world gathered at the UNFCCC COP in Poland for the 24th session of failed climate talks. These intergovernmental talks, so critical to the fate of the planet and all life, are being further stymied by

powerful governments and the check books of their powerful corporations. The 1997 agreement (the Kyoto Protocol) which held the seeds of a just deal has been eroded year-on-year culminating in the 2016 Paris agreement which agreed voluntary emission reduction targets and national plans bringing in targets well beyond what is needed to keep climate change below the 1.5 degrees mark. The US has consistently undermined progress, and with Trump and his climate denialism and big coal America-first philosophy, can only create further damage. He is joined by his right-wing compatriots around the world including the Bolsonaro populist regime in Brazil regime, and the Polish pro-coal, pro-Trump Duda state.

The Paris agreement saw the consolidation of a commitment to market-based solutions to the climate crisis. These solutions, which fail to address the root causes of the climate crisis, are about maintaining the system and status quo. These 'quick fixes', promoted by big corporations and supported by many governments around the world, adopt a win-win posture for making profits and dealing with the planetary crisis. So called solutions such as carbon trading, which allows rich and historically polluting countries to buy credits from non-polluting countries therefore shifting the burden to change, have already been tested and failed to deliver on emission reductions, whilst generating a host of other human rights and environmental violations. When science progressively tells us that remaining fossil fuels need to stay under the ground to keep global temperatures within liveable limits, the industry pushes for unproven technologies to 'clean' coal. Other examples of what WoMin and others in the climate justice movement call 'false solutions' are biofuels (the conversion of food crops into liquid fuel), geoengineering (the manipulation of the planet's atmosphere to 'suck out' carbon dioxide or deflect sunlight such as artificial trees, steel filings in the ocean etc.), nuclear power and mega dams. These efforts not only distract us from real solutions, they also delay urgent action.

Climate and environmental justice organisations have long held a critique of the climate negotiations and the market solutions being proposed ahead of the needed commitments to stop fossil fuels extraction and energy generation; radically reshape production; and put in place the systems necessary for circular economies enabling the very necessary recycling and reuse of materials. Many movements have drawn on and defended **climate justice** as the way to address the crises because it demands that the unjust capitalist system be dismantled to take care of the planet and provide redress for historical violations. Climate justice also starts to propose ways in which the climate debt can be paid, including advancing notions of a basic income grant which deals with future joblessness. But the concept has generally failed to respond to the interests of workers, who stand to lose their jobs and livelihoods in the fossil fuels, industrial agriculture and other carbon emitting sectors, and does not deeply address the relationship between patriarchy and climate injustice.

The second idea responding to the climate crisis and proposing parts of the solution needed is that of the **just transition**. Much of the thinking and proposals related to a just transition have emerged from organized trade unions, and address job losses in sectors such as energy, agriculture and transport as a result of climate mitigation efforts and the energy transition. The language of the just transition has been grasped and redefined in recent years by social movements of indigenous peoples, peasants, fishers and forest dwellers, as well as the climate and environmental justice movements. Evolving concepts of the just transition address work and livelihoods in an attempt to bridge labour and communities, and the payment of climate debt to support worker transitions and climate mitigation for affected communities. While there have been some early efforts on the part of feminist collectives to engage in the just transition debates there have, to date, been none addressing an African



feminist perspective and no concerted effort to build ideas from below.

Feminist perspectives on patriarchy, capitalism and the exploitation of women's bodies and women's labour generally fail to address how these systems are also organized around the large-scale exploitation of nature. This has resulted in ecosystem damage and climate change, the ultimate threat to the survival of humanity. An ecofeminist perspective is thus critical to imagining and advancing a genuine and deep development alternative for women, all people and the planet. The formal women's movement is not at the forefront of driving an ecofeminist agenda but these political commitments, not framed as such, imbue and shape the struggles of grassroots rural women across the world. This is where WoMin draws its inspirations and ideas about African ecofeminism – from the concrete defensive and offensive struggles of women who bear the brunt of extractivist patriarchy.

3. WOMEN'S WAYS LEAD US TO THE SOLUTIONS THE PLANET AND THE PEOPLE NEED

Peasant and working-class women in Africa bear the brunt of climate-destroying 'development' projects which grab, pollute and destroy their lands, water, and forests, undermine cultural and historical ties to territories, exploit their labour (paid and unpaid), and violate their bodies and health. And women form the core of struggles to defend the land, lives, livelihoods and future of their families and communities. Their struggle is one that defends a way of life and an existence that cannot be replaced. This is their development alternative. Yet women have limited voice and authority in decision-making about development at all levels of society. We note the ways in which African peasant and working-class women care for, replenish and reproduce nature and humans.

In WoMin's work we witness the numerous ways in which women offer a living example of the principles and practices which must shape a sustainable future for humanity and the planet:

- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women contesting the Grand Inga Dam, which will exceed the Three Gorges in China when concluded, are defending one of the largest remaining rainforests in the world (an act that is aligned with the defence of the planet) as well as the livelihoods and continued existence of their communities and the next generation of Congolese. Theirs is a struggle and a defense much greater than themselves.
- In Nigeria, women have been engaged in a long resistance against the ravages of the oil industry – its polluting effects, its destruction of water bodies and local livelihoods, but also a resistance against the war, social instability and violence

which has characterized the oil industry in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Women's movement has historically been a movement for peace.

- In almost all of the contexts in which WoMin works in solidarity with partners and women's movements, women are defending land and forms of production which contribute to the cooling of the planet. Women and other farmers are defending their indigenous seeds and their agroecological practices which are healthy for people and good for the planet. Theirs is a planetary defence.
- Finally, women centre the defence of care in their families and communities. They struggle for the rights of future generations. And they resist dispossessions to safeguard the well-being of their families and communities.

Now, more than ever, as the world hurtles towards a systemic catastrophe, voices from grassroots communities, especially women, who are too often excluded from decision-making and most affected by the current model, must be heard.

4. BUILDING A JUST DEVELOPMENT VISION AND MOVEMENT FOR AFRICAN WOMEN

In July 2018, a group of feminists, claiming an ecofeminist perspective, and climate justice activists convened in Mogale, Johannesburg to discuss the global crises confronting us today and the deep social and economic changes needed to achieve a just and sustainable future. This forum adopted an African Ecofeminist Declaration on the Just Transition to inform the climate and labour movements. But, most importantly, it birthed a process of building an African ecofeminist charter for a just transition or a just development charter (a language women may feel more comfortable with) as a tool to deepen a grassroots-led women's movement in the region.

The declaration is a statement written by the representatives of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), mainly NGOs and academia and some movements, that attended the gathering. It provides a working frame and a clear set of political demands, which can guide efforts in our organisations, networks and alliances, campaigns and universities. However, it does not and cannot speak directly to the interests and perspectives of most of Africa's women.

To support organising from below and to build a genuine grassroots driven perspective on just development alternatives the groups agreed to build a charter process with women in communities, people's organisations and movements. In answering the question 'what is the world you want?' or 'what do women in your community want from development' women would construct the content of the charter. It was agreed that the methods would need to be creative, enabling voice and perspective through story-telling, testimony, theatre, poetry, drawing and movement. The different dimensions of conversation and proposal would be documented through photo, video, writing, voice recordings and so on. The methodology is in the process of development and we welcome collaboration in building out an approach. Women would need to lead the process of writing the charter and seeking endorsement from their peers across the continent.

This process involves key chapters of the African women's movements – WoMin, the Rural Women's Assembly, and the World March of Women – and the main network leading the climate and EJ movement in Africa, Friends of the Earth, as well as some of the most critical groups at the national level. We have reached out to other movements such as the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance and have also been in discussion with AWID; we hope for their support.

The process is not without its complications and challenges which we will need to work through as we build. Firstly, it will be important to engage the organised labour movement, through ITUC for example, at the regional level. And at the local and national level, we will need to deepen efforts to connect and build with organised and unorganised labour. This will not be easy, but we will have to find a way of walking with workers in imagining and building out this just development agenda. Secondly, we will need to carefully navigate the question of keeping fossil fuels underground. This has been a regular point of divergence, recently confirmed at the Thematic Social Forum on Mining and the Extractives Economy in South Africa, November 2018. For African economies organised around natural resource extraction – whether minerals, metals or fossil fuels – we must be thinking carefully about the transition as a just economic transition. And finally, we will need to bridge the divide between the movements opposing mining altogether, and those who believe there will be need for extraction in support of the just transition. This will require creative thinking about different scales and forms of extraction, set against a wider agenda of challenging excessive consumption by the few and too little consumption by the many, and thinking about the very necessary recycling and reuse of materials.

5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Tinkering at the margins of change by reinventing capitalism and its spawn extractivism into 'green' capitalism is not delivering, and will never give us, the kind of change we require. An uncritical approach to the alternatives, including a technologically and politically agnostic view on renewables is also unlikely to work for the majority of people on the planet, or for nature. WoMin believes that the seeds of change lie within the spaces where nature and people meet and create harmony. Indeed, it is built from the ground up, where women are resisting exploitation of their lands, water, and forests, and seeking to preserve and honour what nature gives to us. And yet we cannot be naive that this kind of approach will not bump up against very strong forces which seek to preserve the status quo. It is in the clarity, conviction, and determination that an alternative world is possible and that it will be created.

- 1 Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32938779>.
2. <http://www1.wfp.org/climate-action>
3. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf>
4. <https://www.conserve-energy-future.com/>
5. <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>
6. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/03/stop-biodiversity-loss-or-we-could-face-our-own-extinction-warns-un>
8. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/03/climate-migrants-report-world-bank-spd/>

Note: *This is a draft and the final version will be published in the forthcoming edition of the AWDF Bread and Butter series*



How you can join:

If your organisation is interested in contributing to and supporting the Charter process contact trusha.reddy@womin.org.za