Europe's quest for energy
fuels green colonialism in Africa

By Roland Ngam

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As Europe ends its economic ties to Putin's Russia, it has been pouring billions of dollars into Africa to urgently develop new energy infrastructure. African governments and elites have seized this opportunity, but these investments have failed to drive development aimed at the poor. ROLAND NGAM argues that "green colonialism" must give way to new democratic infrastructure projects that benefit local populations.

The global energy market was upended when the European Union (EU) moved to wean itself off Russian gas, oil and coal in response to the invasion of its neighbour, Ukraine. In Africa, governments and businesses alike saw this as a major opportunity to generate cash for national development projects. The EU's decision to define natural gas and nuclear power as "green" or "sustainable" sources of energy in July 2022 further lifted African leaders' spirits in a post-Covid context where a variety of challenges require urgent attention.

While Europe understandably looks to distance itself from any economic association with Putin's Russia, often the alternative involves unequal relations that constitute little more than a kind of "green colonialism". As billions of dollars pour into Africa from the Global North to urgently develop new energy infrastructure, little of it makes its way into local economies or development where strong economic support measures are required. Instead, as in the days of classical colonialism, value is extracted from Africa and shipped out to northern investors, while locals are left to deal with the aftermath on their own.

World leaders gather at the Africa Climate Summit, held in Kenya in September 2023

Europe's scramble to find alternative energy sources

According to the Centre for Strategic International Studies, Russia typically shipped between 155 billion cubic metres (BCM) and 200 BCM of gas to the EU every year until 2021 (Tsafos, 2022). Just over 15 BCM of these shipments were liquefied natural gas (LNG) according to the International Energy Agency. This relationship changed, probably forever, when Russian Leader Vladimir Putin declared a so-called "special military operation" against Ukraine.

Exports from Russia to the EU market ground to a halt almost overnight. Direct imports by pipeline slowed to a trickle. In January 2023 just 4,6% of the imported gas in Europe came by pipeline from Russia, and about the same amount of Russian gas came to Europe in form of LNG.

The United States and a partnership of countries agreed to send 15 BCM of LNG to Europe in 2022 and between January and November 2022, the EU imported more than 50 BCM of LNG from the US, i.e. more than double the volumes from the year before (Spinnler, 2023).

Important as that may sound, that still leaves a gaping hole in supply that the EU needs to fill. Droughts and floods have further constrained energy supply in Europe and all signs point to constrained energy availability in the years ahead.

In France, which until 2022 had been a major exporter of energy to other European countries, at least 50% of all nuclear reactors have been shut down due to a variety of issues, including technical problems and scorching weather conditions that reduced supplies of water required to remove and dump surplus heat from steam circuits (de Beaupuy, 2023). So Europe's energy markets are going to remain out of control for a while – an opportunity that African leaders are doing their best to leverage quickly.

Africa eyes the European market

Germany, which used to import around 50 BCM of gas per annum from Russia, most of it through the Nord Stream pipeline, is scrambling to diversify its energy sources ››

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and storage facilities. In December 2022, the first LNG terminal in Wilhelmshafen in Niedersachsen started operating. Chancellor Olaf Scholz had previously promised that further LNG terminals in Brunsbüttel near Bremen and Lubmin and Stade near Hamburg will be finished in 2023 and private investors were about to build another terminal in Lubmin. Each of the terminals will handle at least five BCM of gas per year.

All that infrastructure needs a lot of gas contracts and it has been raining cash in Africa lately – but not necessarily for ordinary Africans. A number of African states have already received in excess of US$150 billion for gas projects, including Mozambique, Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, Egypt, Gabon, South Sudan, Algeria, Angola, Ghana, Tanzania, Morocco, South Africa, Libya, Tunisia, Congo-Brazzaville, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone. More countries, such as Rwanda, Uganda, Mauretania, Somalia and Malawi, are developing oil and gas projects on a smaller scale.

In July 2022, Algeria, which already supplies Italy with 20 BCM of gas per year, agreed during then-prime minister Mario Draghi's visit to the country to increase its production by up to nine BCM in 2023. However, a recent audit by Algeria's state-owned oil company, Sonatrach, shows that Algeria can only deliver an additional four BCM to Italy. However, that would require using all available resources of the Transmed gas pipeline. Capacity may not necessarily be an issue in the long term, as French president Emmanuel Macron visited Algeria in August 2022 and signed investment deals to expand gas infrastructure.

Morocco also stands to gain from the new scramble for energy sources. Chariot Limited and Predator Oil & Gas Holdings PLC have made significant finds in the country, announcing that recoverable capacity in the Anchois Gas Development Project has increased to 113.2 BCM and that it already has the necessary funds to invest in the project.

Senegal is set to extract 2.5 million tons of gas from its Sangomar-Greater Tortue Ahmeyim oil & gas field in 2023. The project's floating production, storage and offloading (FPSO) vessel is already on its way (Barradas, 2023). That number is not big enough for Germany, with Olaf Scholz offering Senegal financial support to ramp up its annual production capacity to at least 10 million tons per annum. Senegal stands to make about 1.4 billion Euro from the project between 2023 and 2025.

On 16 September 2022, Nigeria, the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) and Morocco launched the US$25 billion Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline Project (NMGP). The 5,600km pipeline is expected to run through Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco before finally landing in Europe, supplying 84.9 MCM of gas per day. Nigeria and Morocco do not have the cash to fund the project, but the Organisation of Petroleum

Exporting Countries (Opec) has stepped in to pay for the feasibility study. If results are positive, it will spearhead the search for investors.

Mozambique already has a lot of cash. After Islamic insurgents halted Total's lucrative Cabo Delgado projects for a number of years, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Rwandan soldiers drove the insurgency back and LNG ships are departing for Europe again. President Filipe Nyusi is smiling all the way to the bank. The Total Cabo Delgado project is bigger than Mozambique's entire GDP and over its lifespan the country hopes to collect at least US$100 billion from the project (de Beaupuy *et al.*, 2021).

According to Fredson Guilengue, a project manager at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Johannesburg office, the Mozambican state sees the project as a quick way to earn money for urgent national development priorities, which have been made even more urgent by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Neighbouring South Africa, which consumes 5 MCM of gas per year, also wants to become a major player in oil and gas. Currently, most of the gas used in the country comes from Mozambique. Recent finds show that the country has about 60 TCF of gas offshore, much of it in Block 11B/12B in the Outeniqua Basin. The government intends to start exploiting in the that area to meet the demands of its ravenous energy market.

Both Shell and Total have made significant oil and gas finds further north in Namibia. The Shell find especially is significant, holding between 250 to 300 million barrels of oil and gas equivalent.

Colonialism with a green façade?

Three things can be said about the current rush for African gas. Firstly, all the talk of keeping gas, oil and coal "in the ground" in the run-up to and after the COP26 climate negotiations has all but disappeared.

African leaders kicked up a fuss when UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance Mark Carney and others led the charge to keep fossil fuels in the ground. In May 2022, former President of the African Union Macky Sall said that "Africa must be able to exploit its large gas reserves for another 20 or 30 years to further its development and provide access to electricity to the 600 million people who are still deprived. It would be unfair to stop us." He was speaking not only on Senegal's behalf, but also for all the countries that want to get in on the LNG action.

In August 2022, South African Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy Gwede Mantashe issued a series of tweets saying, "We need to explore and exploit the minerals that our country is endowed with to grow our economy ... It is comforting to see that there is consensus that gas and nuclear form part of the green technologies in the Just Energy Transition. We must be systematic in our approach and appreciate that the upstream petroleum and fishing industries can coexist."

Nigeria and Egypt's energy ministers have also railed against what they see as colonialist bullying behaviour by the Global North. They are determined to "pollute now and clean up later" just like other nations have before them, the consequences be damned.

Secondly, the major projects that are being developed in Africa are specifically geared for the export market. There is very little infrastructure being developed to serve the ➤➤

needs of the local market. As a result, "green colonialism" will further exacerbate ecocide and poverty in communities where these projects are housed.

Africa has a long history of disappointment with large-scale agriculture, mining and fossil fuel projects that were sold as salvation initiatives but which really had very little impact on the socioeconomic conditions of host communities over the long term.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is perhaps the poster child for this resource curse. Despite more than a century of resource extraction (rubber, copper, cobalt, gold, platinum, etc.) by Belgium and later by Congolese companies like Gecamines, the DRC is still among the five poorest nations in the world, according to the World Bank. The pervasive presence of artisanal and small-scale mines in the country comes with major human rights challenges such as child labour, slavery, sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and children.

Corruption is rampant. Former President Joseph Kabila signed a massive $6-billion-infrastructure-for-minerals "contrat du siècle" (the deal of the century) with Chinese investors China Railway Group Ltd and Sinohydro in 2007 in the hope that it would deliver much-needed transport and energy infrastructure to the country (*Jeane Afrique*, 2022). The infrastructure had not materialised a decade later – but many politicians got very rich from it.

Investigations revealed that none of the 31 hospitals planned by Beijing had been built, nor the two universities, the roads and bridges, etc. While all this is going on, desperate men, women and children spend hours every day digging for coltan in artisanal mines controlled by syndicates in the eastern part of the country.

Kabila's successor, Felix Tshisekedi, has begun auctioning off 30 oil and gas fields in the heart of the Congo Basin rainforest, a move that represents a massive threat to global efforts around carbon capture and sequestration (Lakhani, 2022). Initiatives such as the One Forest Summit that brought together the countries of the Congo Basin (Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, the DRC and the Central African Republic) in March 2023 are key to ensuring the protection of the rainforest but they need to drive more resources to central Africa than what politicians get from logging, charcoal and fossil interests who seek to expand the frontier of accumulation.

In Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, the presence of oil companies has long been considered a curse. The petroleum industry is characterised by "poor leadership, corruption and environmental degradation. Oil spills are a common occurrence due to lax security, pilfering and piracy. No water body in the Niger Delta has been spared the pollution.

Activist Nnimmo Bassey has been investigating the actions of oil companies in the Niger Delta for over 30 years. In his book, *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood (n.d.),* he writes: "Average life expectancy in Nigeria is currently 52 years. In the Niger Delta it is 41 years. Only about 30 per cent of the people in the Niger Delta have access to safe drinking water. By the time Bayelsa State was created in 1996, there were less than 20 km of all-weather roads in the area ... The resulting corrupt system of patronage and wastage has significantly fuelled militarisation, repression and violence."

Ken Saro Wiwa was hanged in 1995 by the Abacha regime after he accused the Nigerian government and oil companies such as Shell and BP of waging an ecological war against the Ogoni people. When the "Ogoni Nine" were hanged,[1] the government did not require petroleum companies to give any share of their profits to local communities. It is only recently that the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) was adopted, requiring oil companies to pay a measly 3% of operating profits to host communities. This pales in comparison to the devastation that they leave in their wake.

Across the border in Cameroon it is no different. In fact, anger over who benefits from the National Refinery Company (Sonara) revenue led to the civil war that has been tearing the country apart for the past six years.

Although Sonara is located in the former Anglophone West Cameroon territory, it used to hire mostly Francophone workers from East Cameroon, and it set up French-language schools and services to cater for these workers. It was only after civil war broke out that the company scrambled to increase its quota of Anglophone workers and set up a school where people can learn in English – almost 50 years after the company was founded.

The revenues from oil and gas have not contributed to the development of the region. For many years, revenue from Sonara was never included in the national budget. Nobody knows where it went. These territories see Macron's visit as direct support for Francophones' usurpation of their resources.

Today's "green" projects adhere to a similar pattern. Transition minerals in the DRC are mined by artisanal miners with the usual accompanying armed militias, child labour and sex traffickers. A UN report recently provided solid evidence that Rwanda was sponsoring armed militias in the DRC to get its hands on some of the country's mineral wealth. In Ouarzazate, Morocco, where the government convinced local communities to hand over their land in return for jobs and development, optimism has turned to bitter disappointment. Young people have started taking to the streets having realised that the promise of jobs was all smoke and mirrors.

Grab the resources and run?

Europe's thirst for gas is radically expanding "green grabbing" – i.e. the seizing of land and assets with or without compensation for so-called "green projects" – on a massive scale.

Part of Senegal's oil and gas fields are on Sangomar Island in the Saloum Delta, a Unesco World Heritage Area. According to climate expert Ibrahima Thiam, local communities whose access to these areas had already been restricted by government edicts, now stand to lose even more fishing areas to the gas projects, which will certainly fuel migration to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and Ecowas countries. He visited the Sangomar oil project recently and found many members of the local community are angry about the restrictions to their fishing areas and the growing poverty.

RLS Southern Africa's Guilengue notes that communities in Cabo Delgado have similarly already lost land, sea and forest resources that neither the government nor Total will ever replace. This comes after Total's investment attracted Islamist insurgents to the area, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Mozambique, the SADC and even France brought in soldiers from Rwanda and SADC to beat back the insurgents but local communities have been abandoned to their fate.

In response to turbulence on the energy markets, major European economies' investments in Africa show scant regard for environmental concerns. Progress towards ›› switching to more sustainable ways of living and producing have been rolled back in a matter of months.

That is not to say that Africa cannot work with the Global North. Collaborations are possible. However, such collaborations must be environmentally sustainable and they must be based on democratic principles.

Speaking at the Ben Turok Memorial Lecture in December 2022, economist Yanis Varoufakis said that a democratic green transition is possible if the Global North works in a democratic way to transfer real technology and resources to the Global South for green projects. He specifically mentioned solar and wind projects, for which installation costs have fallen dramatically over the past decade.

While there is certainly a need for transition energy sources, Europe's quest for energy independence can also be achieved by supporting the rollout of energy infrastructure in Africa. This could then lead to win-win sharing of energy between both continents in the same manner that gas infrastructure has received massive cash bailouts from EU governments in the past year.

Germany is already trying to do that through its support for hydrogen projects in Namibia, South Africa and Egypt. However, more EU countries need to get involved in such projects, especially where they help African countries meet the needs of their local communities first. That is a sure path to ensuring stability on both continents.

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ENDNOTE

1 The "Ogoni Nine" were a group of activists from the Ogoni region of Nigeria, which included outspoken author and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, who opposed the operating practices of the Royal Dutch Shell oil corporation. They were executed on10 November 1995 by the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha.