



Africa Climate Summit promised a lot but in the end delivered very little

By Roland Ngam

When all was said and done, the first ever Africa Climate Summit was all about money, money and more money, asserts ROLAND NGAM, who was there and who came away with constructive ideas of what could have been done differently – and how it should be done next time around.

Introduction

Thirty-one years after the Rio summit about 12,000 people from across Africa and the rest of the world descended on Nairobi for the African Union's (AU's) maiden Africa Climate Summit. That this was the first time the African continent was organising such an event with climate emergency as its number one priority suggests that the continent that bears the biggest burden of the climate emergency is not giving the crisis the urgent attention it deserves.

Regrettably, the Africa Climate Summit was another reminder that climate negotiations are, to borrow the metonymy of Nigerian architect and prominent international environmental activist, Nnimmo Bassey, “lost and damaged”.

It was COP lite. *On prend les mêmes et on recommence*, as they say in French, which can be roughly translated as “same old, same old”. The same actors and vacuous talking points, only this time with more chaos; the queues in the accreditation centre (it took ten soldiers an eternity to find my pre-printed badge)! And more disregard for the ‘too independent, free-thinking’ of civil society. (Ugandan climate justice activist Vanessa Nakate’s intervention was given the graveyard slot after the ‘important guests’ had exited the main conference room and were already enjoying *Nyama choma*, *Kachumbari* and *Ugali* somewhere in town.)

The summit was all about money. Corporate solutions, and pretty much more of the same. That was already obvious in the grandiloquent theme of the gathering, ‘Green Growth and Climate Finance for Africa and the World’. The Concept Note¹ stated: “Africa needs to capitalise on this existing momentum by (a) driving a holistic Green Growth Agenda that takes advantage of its vast resources, and (b) securing Climate Finance >>



tailored to Africa's needs to achieve its growth ambitions". Financial and corporate solutions dominated the discussions as well as the final declaration and the Africa Climate Summit probably did nothing to shift the goalposts in any significant way.

Colombia's Vice President, Francia Elena Márquez Mina, was the only one of all the leaders that spoke at the summit who mentioned the words "mother earth," recognising that nature exists for nature's sake, not just to be plundered and exploited by human beings; that what we are really seeking to do is replace anthropocentric ontologies with ecocentric ones; that women in particular bear a disproportionate burden due to global heating; as well as the necessity for South-South cooperation in problem solving. Not an African.

Another speaker who adopted a decidedly more ecocentric stance during his interventions was UN Secretary-General António Guterres who said, "it is time to end the injustices that are holding Africa back". Again, not an African. Also surprisingly, the only person who was very loud about reparations and no-strings attached money for loss and damage ("who put the CO₂ up there? I'm sorry - pay up!") was billionaire Mo Ibrahim.

Surely there is something seriously wrong with thinking that is heavily skewed towards techno fixes, corporate solutions and more pledges from the Global North, with the Global South just adopting the posture of hapless victim with begging bowl in hand and no agency at all?

The Chairperson of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat, and the African Union Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, H.E. Josefa Leonel Correia Sacko, must be patting each other on the backs right now for a job well done.

We must question if the Africa Climate Summit is going to help roll back global heating in a meaningful way or just become another part of the multilateral slow grind.

The Summit was divided into three parts: the workshop for the African heads of states and governments, monarchs and foreign dignitaries; the ministerial day; and finally, the declaration and closing event on the third and final day. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC's) Africa Climate Week took place concurrently and all around the main conference centre partner activities (by the AU, African Development Bank, Lake Chad Basin, etc.), bilaterals as well as an expo centre were held. Kenya's first lady also had a pavilion that was dedicated mostly to discussing the gendered impacts of climate change and there was a Kenya Tourism Board initiative plugging the country's attractions hard, as it should.

Twenty African presidents showed up for the presidential event, as did European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and UN Secretary-General Guterres.

Right out of the blocks host Kenyan President William Ruto underlined the topic that would dominate the discussions: finance! In his welcome address, he said, "we must see in green growth not just a climate imperative but also a fountain of multibillion dollar opportunities that the world is poised to capitalise (sic)". The rest of his speech was littered with business-friendly language: "I invite us to adopt an opportunity lens..."; "the unparalleled opportunity that climate represents for Africa..."; "an unparalleled gold mine..."; "some of our assets are not in the balance sheet"; "we can be a region that helps others achieve their net zero objectives..."; "trillions of dollars are looking for investment



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opportunities as the need to decarbonise our economies heightens”. President Ruto was a man on a mission to secure the bag.

He even absolved the countries responsible for the climate emergency of the primary duty to fix the mess that they created: “The conversation of North vs South must come to an end; the conversation of who did what is not a luxury we can afford.” It was clear that African leaders were playing nice in order to get something in return.

It was a bit painful to watch AU Commissioner Sacko stumble through her speech, even forgetting former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe’s name at some stage. Why did she not speak in Portuguese, her first language?

One by one, African leaders rattled off a litany of grievances. Africa contributed less than 4% of global CO₂ emissions but was bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. They were dealing with the challenges by planting trees here and there, but more was needed for adaptation and mitigation. That is all they kept talking about – planting trees. They urged the countries of the Global North to honour their Paris pledges.

While it is true that Africa produces less than 4% of annual global emissions and that it has some of the world’s most efficient carbon sinks, including the Congo Basin rainforest and the West African rainforest (in Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc.), it would have been nice to hear someone put a clear face to the climate disaster.

Instead, there was a blanket statement along the lines of “Africa has been witnessing droughts, flooding and although we cause only 4% of...”. Africa’s political class arrogated to themselves the role of mediator between the continent and foreign investors, although they do not face climatic shocks in any significant way.

Sacko said in her opening statement, “climate change is a pandemic in Africa”. In recent times, we have seen:

- About seven coups in West Africa’s ‘coup belt’ where decades of drought and searing heat have decimated the flora and fauna, causing some of the worst malnutrition and precarity that exists anywhere in the world;
- Multi-year droughts in the horn of Africa that has been causing displacement, crop failures and an increase in child malnutrition;
- The first famine caused by climate change in Madagascar;
- Multi-year droughts in Southern Africa that killed millions of livestock in Angola, Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe;
- Rainfall and flooding that claimed dozens of lives and washed away thousands of homes in South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Senegal and many other countries in 2022-23.
- Torrential rainfall and flooding that claimed 5,000 lives in Libya. ➤



Predictably, von der Leyen, like other major world leaders, outlined the very hard work that they had already done to tackle the climate crisis. She mentioned the one billion Euro contribution allocated to the EU Global Gateway² initiative to unlock investments in green initiatives in Africa, from dams in the DRC to strengthening government capacity to access green bonds elsewhere. Interestingly, that is exactly the same amount of money that the EU is giving one country, Tunisia, to stop migrants from crossing over into Europe.

Von der Leyen underscored that the EU's future climate action would be built around three pillars: 1) attracting private capital to Africa (green bonds and the like); 2) carbon pricing and markets (pricing for polluter pay policies); and 3) carbon targets for every entity. It was the same political speak with little ownership for causing the problem or ambitious declaration of funds transfer from the Global North to the Global South.

Mo Ibrahim later narrated an anecdote told to him by former EU President Jean-Claude Juncker. Juncker had told him that EU politicians knew the right thing to do, but then they did not know how to get elected if they did the right thing. Mo Ibrahim added politicians from the Global North were happy to go to summits and announce big pledges that made them look good but which they could not honour. This behaviour was behind the litany of broken promises from Paris to Sharm El-Sheik and beyond. Prescient words, but they did not dampen the ardour of the leaders and NGOs in attendance.

The Ministerial Day

On day two, the big news was that access to the Tsavo Hall, where the dignitaries' workshops had been arranged, was cut off to most of the 12,000 delegates invited to the gathering. In other words, most people in attendance should not have made the trip at all. Henceforth, access would be limited to the large contingent of delegates from Europe, America, the African Union and African governments. Civil society organisations were largely limited to either watching the discussions from the safe distance of spill-over rooms or following discussions between UN agencies and civil society elsewhere.

One could have registered for the conference, downloaded the app and followed the key parts online as they were also streamed on some platforms. Of course, Kenya may have known beforehand that they needed to cut off access to some meeting rooms, but they wanted delegates to make the journey before they pulled the plug. Twenty thousand delegates, artists, vendors, etc. to accommodate, feed and entertain over five to seven days – that is a lot of revenue for the country.

During the many panels that were organised on the first two days, consultants and government officials from the Global North were eager to tell Africans that they had a great opportunity to end energy poverty through ... concessional and non-concessional loans. Take the hydrogen panel for example. There were discussions about how blended finance could help Africa rapidly scale up its green hydrogen potential. South Africa's Electricity Minister Kgosientsho Ramokgopa said that work was underway to develop a South Africa-Namibia hydrogen corridor. Policies were at an advanced stage of preparation to unlock investment from ... private capital.

Similarly the US Assistant Secretary for International Trade and Development underscored the need for private capital to come to the party. She also stressed the need



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for concessional and non-concessional financing to flow into Africa, and that Africa needed to create the right policy frameworks and capacity for that to happen.

Colombia's former president, Iván Duque Márquez, remarked that although Africa emitted less than 4% of global greenhouse gases (GHG), negative land use on the continent was too high. He encouraged African nations to conserve more in order to get more funding. In return, the continent's conservation efforts could be rewarded in the form of investments in carbon credits as well as green and blue bonds. Such schemes were not perfect, but it was necessary to start somewhere.

Money and dollar signs aside, there were many interesting civil society events. For example, the current Secretary General of United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa), Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi, hosted an important panel on what African cities were doing to both decarbonise and prepare for the increasing impacts of climate change. Most of the attendees agreed that African cities were largely helpless in the face of climate change. They were reacting with their own funds, and little else coming from outside. Waste collection and management is often never spoken about in many African cities. Some, like the Malian activist Rokia Doumbia, who speak up to complain about piles of rubbish in the streets, end up in jail for "abusing and insulting the president".

Other discussions focused on restorative agriculture, clean cooking solutions, the modus operandi of carbon markets, reforming development finance institutions, ending energy poverty in Africa, green industrialisation, mining and metallurgy, etc. Clean cooking emerged as a very strong discussion topic. There were some solutions on show at the pavilion and delegates were convinced that the over one billion Africans who lack access to clean cooking had a key role to play in decarbonising the continent's energy sector.

Day three

On 8 September, President Ruto announced that US\$23 billion worth of investments and pledges had been struck during the conference. These included:

- A US\$4.5 billion finance initiative to unlock Africa's clean energy potential (announced by COP28 President Sultan Al Jaber);
- A US\$12 million deal between Kenya and the EU to kickstart a hydrogen value chain in Kenya;
- A US\$1 billion African Development Bank & Global Centre on Adaptation initiative to finance youth-led businesses and startups across Africa;
- A US\$450 million purchase of African carbon credits by United Arab Emirates investors by 2030;
- A US\$30 million African Development Bank initiative for food security and climate resilience in Africa; >>



- A US\$30 million US government initiative for food security and climate resilience efforts in Africa; and
- £34 million from the United Kingdom for new projects across 15 African countries to help women, at-risk communities and over 400,000 farmers build resilience against the effects of climate change.

Kenya also scored major deals with Germany (debt relief), the Bezos Earth Fund (forest restoration) and specialist climate and impact fund manager Camco (debt funding).

The Summit adopted the 'African Leaders Nairobi Declaration' on Climate Change and Call to Action,' which is at long last a demonstration of African leaders stepping up to the challenge of climate change. That it took this long to mobilise high-level efforts to deal with the challenge in a continent that bears the biggest burden of the climate crises is baffling.

The Nairobi Declaration calls for urgent transformation of Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) so that they start treating African countries and entities fairly. Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister of Barbados, said DFIs "were not created with us in mind and that still shows today". Too often, African entities are considered risky bets and the money they get is at rates that are four or five times higher than the rates offered to nations and entities in the Global North. Too many African countries are also dealing with astronomical debt and for that reason cannot react to the most basic needs of their citizens. Much suffering comes from austerity policies pushed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and it is good that the conference called that out.

The Nairobi Declaration calls for a global tax regime to finance climate action. A tax regime is a good idea, but it cannot be global. It must be paid by the nations and corporations that are responsible for dumping the CO₂ that is causing the challenges we face today. These entities are known and they are still raking in billions in profits as they ramp up pollution. Oil and gas giants earned over US\$220 billion in 2022. We know that BP, Shell Global, ExxonMobil are responsible for damaging millions of hectares of prime arable land across the planet. We know that pesticides and chemicals companies like Corteva, Bayer, ChemChina and others dump large amounts of toxic chemicals into our waterways every year. We know about Coca Cola and plastic bottles, banks that funded slave ships, colonial plantations, large-scale commercial farms in Africa, and funding of polluting industries, and so on.

Meek supplication is not going to coax just and fair reparations out of these offenders. What would be revolutionary would be to demand the imposition of heavy taxes and fines specifically on these companies and the countries that have enabled their behaviour for so many years. While President Ruto may want to absolve them of any responsibility, to do that would not be climate justice. As Mo Ibrahim said at the Africa Climate Summit:

... we are dodging all the time talking about how to get more money, oh climate finance blab la bla. Tax carbon! Use the market! You guys in the rich countries told us that you invented capitalism. You invented the markets. Why aren't you applying market forces to carbon? Because people make promises. Oh, those poor guys in Africa, they have a problem there ... we are kind people. We gonna offer them



some money. How about one hundred billion dollars for climate funding? But then, actually things are tight. Sorry, we cannot make it this year. In those guys minds, it is charity! It is charity! And that is a mistake! It should not be charity. This should be an international clear agreement. You break it, you own it. Without that dynamic, nothing will change.

The decision to establish the Africa Climate Summit as a biennial event convened by the African Union and hosted by AU member states is a good decision, although long overdue, and its format must change. Its core constituency must be the African people who must also stop acting like beggars and explicitly call out those who are responsible for global heating.

The Africa Great Green Wall Initiative, an AU project that has the potential to restore degraded forests and build resilience in the Sahel, was invisible at the Summit, and only mentioned by the Green Climate Fund and others as a footnote. That this was the case at a time when the Sahel is literally burning is confounding. One only needs to look at the parts of the Sahel where regreening⁹ is happening to realise what can be achieved if local communities and clear support come together. Initiatives like the Africa Great Green Wall should be what the Africa Climate Summit is about.

Secondly, the primary audience of the African Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action is foreigners, specifically Global North entities, not Africans. The Africans mentioned once or twice in the document, i.e. the youth and smallholder farmers, the custodians of the environment, are mere accessories. Those who bear the brunt of climate change, i.e. women and children, are only portrayed as victims and mere props to justify the begging bowl that is being held out.

Thirdly, there is too much focus on a neoliberal trickle-down growth paradigm for development, although this time they want it to be green: “Attracting local, regional and global investment”; “Propelling Africa’s economic growth and job creation”; “Focusing our economic development plans on climate-positive growth”; “Advancing green industrialisation”. Massive inflows of foreign capital to develop industrialisation policies within current economic paradigms will yield the same results with a few beneficiaries (the connected urban elite) and a legacy of poverty and inequality elsewhere on the continent. Young people are thoroughly fed up with politics as usual. They want system change, a new way of life that is not based on constant industrialisation and plunder of the environment.

The time has come for the African Union to appoint a Climate Commissioner. The Declaration does not say anything about this, but it no longer makes sense to graft this major responsibility onto the Rural Economy and Agriculture portfolio as just another of its responsibilities.

Conclusion

Interestingly, the ‘Synthesis report’⁵ of the Technical Dialogue of the First Global Stocktake that was released by the co-facilitators on Friday September 8, i.e. two days after the end of the Africa Climate Summit, stated in key finding 4: “global emissions are not in line with modelled global mitigation pathways consistent with the temperature goal of the >>



Paris Agreement, and there is a rapidly narrowing window to raise ambition and implement existing commitments in order to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels”.

The Synthesis Report in many ways calls out the Africa Climate Summit and its corporatised solutions as part of the problem:

- Where we needed to put a clear face to the climate crisis for all to see, the talks were dominated by politicians who live in secure leafy suburbs and never get to experience what climate catastrophe looks like.
- Where the Africa Climate Summit needed to explicitly name and shame perennial abusers for their toxic behaviour, we saw only meek supplication for peanuts.
- Where African leaders needed to demand reparations and transfers of no-strings attached technology and resources to the Global South as payment for centuries of plunder, exploitation, transfer pricing, illicit financial flows, burning through the entire planet’s carbon budget, etc., we heard only talk about concessional and non-concessional loans. Loans to further enrich polluting nations, lobbyists and connected politicians!
- Where innovative ideas for a democratic, indigenous, people-led transformation of the environment were required, we only saw more neoliberal trickle-down policies that place venture capital, Global North lobbyists, banks and polluting nations at the heart of the climate solution. This is bound to fail of course. With the hard right turn that we are witnessing in the politics of too many countries, we are more likely going to see more of the same kind of tokenism instead of diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, until it’s time for the next conference.
- Where Africa needed to launch a wider South-South discussion for coordinated action and fair policies, the continent’s leaders locked themselves in rooms with venture capital from the Global North to beg for pledges.

It is time for African leaders to break with the typical cap-in-hand behaviour that only attracts money for themselves and their cronies in capital cities. The other Africa, i.e. the majority, those who protect the planet and look after it day after day and those who are already experiencing the destructive effects of floods, droughts and erratic weather, demand radical ideas for a just and fair transition.

The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

ENDNOTES

1. The Concept Note, titled “Green Growth and Climate Finance for Africa and the World”, is available at <https://africaclimatesummit.org/downloads/Africa-Climate-Summit-Concept-Note.pdf>
2. See https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en
3. See the African Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2023/09/08/the_african_leaders_nairobi_declaration_on_climate_change_rev-eng.pdf
4. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv8keCMroWU>
5. See <https://unfccc.int/documents/631600> **NA**