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Auctioning off Africa's last hinterland

Rather than negotiating social and technical investments, the Nairobi Climate Summit further endorsed the suffocation of Africa for Western benefits

Last week, African delegates converged in Nairobi, Kenya, joined by thousands of their people and global leaders. The Africa Climate Summit sought to hash out climate action and negotiation priorities for the continent. However, the adopted Nairobi declaration, as well as the delegates' fixation on carbon markets, are instead further pitting its people apart.

Ironically, while Africa contributes less than 4 per cent of the global carbon emissions driving climate change, it suffers disproportionately from the climate crisis. It is no news that climate change is severely impacting Africa, undermining economies, public health, food security and social structures. From the shifting sands of its Sahel region to the rising tides of its coastlines swallowing millions of lives and livelihoods – and to heightened security risks as climatic shifts intensify competition for diminishing resources – the reality is bleak, with climate scientists predicting even more disastrous future scenarios.

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Combating the impacts of climate change on the continent will require adequate funding to develop climate-resilient and green energy infrastructures for sustainable development. But financing Africa's mitigation and adaptation projects has become a tall order for its governments, and pledges from the Global North to support the continent in meeting its climate aspirations have fallen short. According to the Africa Development Bank (AFDB), the continent will require an average of $1.4 trillion between 2020-30 to address its climate troubles. But with many national budgets tethered to huge foreign debts and climate actions competing with development priorities, this is almost impossible.

Facing this array of challenges, the Nairobi Summit was centred around the theme of 'Driving Green Growth and Climate Finance Solutions for Africa and the World'. True to its theme, the Summit attracted a notable $23 bn in grants and commitments for green growth, as well as mitigation and adaptation initiatives across the continent, with further investments in view.

False Solutions

The adopted Nairobi declaration highlighted critical points for action in Africa. These included a call for a global carbon tax on fossil trade activities, an urgent reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions and accelerated investments in clean energy projects on the continent, leveraging its natural green assets. The pact also called for the restructuring of multilateral finance systems to relieve African nations of debt repayments hindering their climate actions.

However, on the side-lines of the Summit, some 500 African climate campaigners and civil society wailed. In a protest dubbed the 'Real Africa Climate Summit', they labelled the outcomes of the meeting exclusive of the African vision and fraught with a Western agenda. A primary bone of contention dwelt on the decision of African leaders to adopt carbon trading and credits as means to mobilise funds to meet their climate finance objectives; At the Summit, Dr Akinwunmi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank Group, emphasised that 'Africa must develop its own carbon markets, properly price its carbon and turn its vast carbon sink into new sources of enormous wealth. Africa cannot be nature-rich and cash-poor.'

Given Africa's rich forests and green lands, it is no surprise that its leaders and foreign interests are eyeing them as carbon sinks for gain.

In the wake of these sentiments, the meeting witnessed remarkable commitments. The United Arab Emirates pledged to buy $450 million worth of carbon credits from the Africa Carbon Market Initiative (ACMI) – an initiative launched last year by several African governments at the COP 27 Summit in Egypt.

But what is the fuss about carbon credits? The Kyoto Protocol first introduced the ground for emissions trading and other related financial instruments. Essentially, carbon credits are permits that allow entities with significant greenhouse gas emissions to offset their carbon footprints by purchasing credits from established carbon markets. The monies for these credits are utilised in managing eco-friendly projects like tree planting and forest preservation programs that sequester an

equivalent amount of carbon corresponding to the credits bought. The global voluntary carbon offset market is worth around $2 bn.

Given Africa's rich forests and green lands, it is no surprise that its leaders and foreign interests are eyeing them as carbon sinks for gain. At the Nairobi meeting, John Kerry, the United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate present at the assembly, encouraged African governments to shore up climate finance by playing in the carbon market, leveraging their vast forest resources.

Perpetuating the status quo

However, this approach warrants deeper scrutiny, both in terms of its effectiveness in reducing global emissions and its broader implications for the continent. Supporters of this approach argue that shelling out monies to purchase climate credits will sooner or later incentivise emitters to decrease emissions for cost savings. They also claim that this will provide Africa with crucial climate financing, especially in light of unmet climate pledges by developed countries responsible for most emissions. However, this rationale is not only illusionary but also raises a moral question. Why should Africa, which contributes the least to global emissions bear the brunt of mitigation responsibilities while the primary culprits persist in their harmful emissions?

In a report released on the side-line of the Summit, climate think-thank, Power Shift Africa rightly described carbon credits as 'essentially, pollution permits – an imaginary commodity created to benefit the wealthy, not the climate'.

Carbon credits perpetuate the status quo of global emissions because wealthy nations and corporations will always prioritise the profits from their emitting enterprises over the cost of credits. Also, while this approach may give affluent nations and corporations a veneer of responsibility, they often exacerbate the consequences of their actions on vulnerable communities. This is evident in how the increasing commodification of Africa's ecosystems is ushering in a new era of eco-colonialism and capitalism on the continent wherein corporations are making a dash for Africa's green assets all the while offering tokens for it.

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Moreover, there's an underbelly to these markets that often goes unnoticed, particularly in many areas of Africa with weak governance structures that fail to shield locals from corporate exploitation. Examples include Uganda and Kenya, where land acquisitions for

affected communities, the Summit further endorsed the suffocation of Africa for continuous benefits.

carbon sinks are infringing on indigenous rights displacing communities and side-lining them from decision-making – thereby deepening socio-economic inequalities.

Tragically, many African countries present at the Nairobi Summit are grappling with climate-induced crises. These disruptions, driven by relentless fossil fuel emissions, have upended countless lives. Rather than negotiate for targeted social investments, technical support and capacity for affected communities, the Summit further endorsed the suffocation of Africa for continuous benefits.

At COP 27, negotiators reached a landmark agreement to establish a loss and damage finance mechanism, marking a political victory for developing nations reeling from the impacts of climate change. However, core aspects of the fund's operationalisation were deferred to COP 28. Nairobi should have served as an opportunity for African leaders to outline compensation parameters for climate victims on the continent. Even though its final text underscored the need to implement the loss and damage fund, Africa's increasing fixation on carbon markets watered the urgency of this demand.



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