

Degrowth in an African periphery

Recentring decoloniality around circular ontologies

– By Roland Ngam

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In this article ROLAND NGAM focuses on Africa and the disarticulated colonial model on which it is built and argues that in order to build a fairer system that works for the majority, the world needs to quickly shift to an ecocentric degrowth ontology that leverages Africa's rich cultural heritage for the wellbeing of all people.

There is a train that comes from Namibia and Malawi. There is a train that comes from Zambia and Zimbabwe. There is a train that comes from Angola and Mozambique, From Lesotho, from Botswana, from Swaziland,

From all the hinterland of Southern and Central Africa. This train carries young and old, African men

Who are conscripted to come and work on contract, In the golden mineral mines of Johannesburg

And its surrounding metropolis, sixteen hours or more a day For almost no pay.

Deep, deep, deep down in the belly of the earth

When they are digging and drilling that shiny mighty evasive stone,

Or when they dish that mishmash mush food into their iron plates with the iron shank.

Or when they sit in their stinking, funky, filthy, Flea-ridden barracks and hostels.

They think about the loved ones they may never see again Because they might have already been forcibly removed From where they last left them,

Or wantonly murdered in the dead of night

By roving, marauding gangs of no particular origin, We are told. They think about their lands, their herds That were taken away from them

With the gun, and the bomb, and the teargas, the Gatling and the cannon. And when they hear that Choo-Choo train

They always curse, curse the coal train, The coal train that brought them to Johannesburg.

Hugh Masekela – Stimela - 1973

There is no doubt about it: the origins of the world's numerous economic inequality challenges lie in the current iteration of the colonial capitalist system that shifted the frontier of capital accumulation from Europe to the Global South. Colonialism, the neoliberal economic order and the austerity policies that came with the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the late eighties have left many African people and communities without infrastructure, education or jobs. Through no fault of theirs, Africans are barely eking out a living on the ruins of what used to be beautiful, idyllic communities where their ancestors lived – mostly well – on their lands and on their own terms, without the kind of mental stress they are constantly under today. Worse still, the environment on which they still depend for their food and sustenance seems to be irretrievably damaged and they will be worst affected by the unfairness of the immanent green colonialism on which the just energy transition project is built.

Many Africans are governed by political systems that they barely understand and, needless to say, this is a ticking time bomb. Sooner or later, the world is going to witness an African Spring, much bigger and probably more violent than the Arab Spring.

On a broader level, the modern economy is built on a paradigm of exploitation, constant growth, and unfair wealth distribution. Although major advances in medicine, technology and governance have brought significant improvements to the lives of people everywhere over the last 100 years, unfair economic models have also dealt devastating blows to the financial and physical health of many – in fact, billions – of people as well as the planet's finite resources during the same period.

Over time, a shrinking group of people and interests has been appropriating most of the surpluses that millions of workers produce every day. The unfairness in wealth distribution has a face, and it has consequences. The closer you get to the core of global politics and business, the better off you find that people are. The farther away you move from the centre to the outer rings of this circle, the more difficult and dreary existence is for billions of people. The world's growing inequality and climate challenges require urgent litigation of the neoliberal economic order and if we do a proper job of this, then it can only lead to one conclusion: the hegemonic capitalism model has failed dismally.

The invention of Africa

Africa, under its current political iteration within the Westphalian state system, is the product of plantation capitalism. You can go through a list of countries and it is clear exactly why they were created: Nigeria (palm oil, groundnut oil), Senegal (cotton, groundnut oil), Cameroon (cocoa, coffee, bananas, rubber), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (rubber, cocoa, timber), Kenya (coffee, tea), South Africa (gold, diamonds), Liberia (rubber), etc.

Plantation capitalism worked in an insidious way to integrate African territories into the global system, albeit with no rights to dictate commodity choices, terms of trade or even what they could get for their labour. It proletarianised Africans and almost eliminated the notion of a peasantry. Depeasantisation was enabled and accelerated by taxation and forced labour regimes that required Africans to either contribute money or labour to empire-building activities.

Although the global centre laid claim to colonies and presented them as their property, the wealth from colonies did not necessarily accrue to all citizens of the Global North equally. Rather, slavery and then colonialism was underpinned by trading companies with a large investor base. Surpluses were extracted through an elaborate network of companies owned by banks, royals, wealthy families and shareholders. Here are just a few examples of the concessions that operated in Africa:

- Nigeria – the Royal Niger Company;
- South Africa – The Dutch East India Company, the British South Africa Company;
- Ubangi-Shari (now Congo Brazzaville and Central African Republic) – *Compagnie des Sultanats du Haut-Oubangui, Société commerciale, industrielle et agricole du Haut-Ogooué, la Société du Haut-Ogooué, Compagnie Minière de l'Ogoué; Compagnie Française du Haut & Bas-Congo*
- French West Africa (Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) – *Compagnie française de l'Afrique occidentale (CFAO);*
- DRC – King Leopold, *Compagnie Française du Bas Congo, Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (ABIR), Société Anversoise, Katanga Trust, Kasai Trust; and*
- Liberia – Goodrich, Firestone.

Once they were constituted, colonial projects became the single most important economic units in the polities. They became the focus of all labour, transportation, administration and socioeconomic life of the colony. It is therefore not surprising that the vast majority of Africa's major cities today developed around the colonial nucleus in which they were constituted.

South Africa is an exemplar of the colonial appropriation systems. At the height of the colonial experience, hundreds of thousands of able-bodied young men were shipped into the country to work in the mines. They came from the entire Southern African region. The nature of their work was such that only men were brought in to do it. They were housed in hostels and spent months at a time deep in the bowels of cities like Johannesburg and Kimberley. When their months-long work was done, they were not even allowed to stay in the cities that their sweat helped build. The riches and good life that accrued from mining were for the enjoyment of whites only.

Colonial-era trade yielded investors profits beyond their wildest imagination and this spurred an unprecedented scramble for a piece of the pie. When the scramble turned into a stampede, King Leopold II of Belgium encouraged German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to convene

a conference where spheres of influence would be carved out and shared equally among the rivals. Fighting was bad for business. The money generated through colonialism built the highly-industrialised countries. It built their banks, the skyscrapers, the highways and neat lawns, the gated communities and the cultural wealth of core empire.

While colonialism made the Global North rich, it left ugly legacies in the Global South. In many areas, large holes still stand where mines used to be. The mineral wealth from these gaping holes now rests on the English King's crown and in other homes across the globe – everywhere except in the homes of the young men who broke their backs for hours every day deep in the bowels of the African underbelly.

Food systems changed forever, and as Africa urbanised, it consumed mostly the type of food that it did not produce. It also changed the socioeconomic realities within communities. Before the colonial experience, the responsibility for producing food was shared equally between men and women. However, with the arrival of concessions, men were progressively drawn into cash crop production and growing food crops became a woman's responsibility. Men quickly understood that if they married more wives and produced more children, they could produce more commodities and pocket the proceeds. Polygyny thus became even more common across Africa (Jacoby, 1995).

When colonialism ended, the commodities that had defined the various colonies continued to be their biggest revenue generator. Agricultural commodities often represented up to 80% of some countries' GDPs. Nkwame Nkrumah notes in *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) that the general modus operandi of neo-colonialism is to use foreign capital as a tool for the exploitation rather than the development of less developed parts of the world.

Many African countries attempted to diversify their economies through import substitution industrialisation policies. However, they soon ran into structural and liquidity challenges. In many countries, the public sector bill was ballooning and expensive projects (dams, sugar mills, aluminium plants, etc.) were not yielding enough revenue and loans were needed to stabilise countries. The reaction of development finance institutions was to put African countries under some of the toughest austerity measures that the world has ever seen.

Energy colonialism within the just transition

Thirty percent of the world's mineral resources are found in Africa. The continent has a critical role to play in the just energy transition as well as the global ambition to cap warming at 1.5° relative to preindustrial levels. Although – judging by current global trends – it is clear that the world is not going to cut CO₂ emissions by 40% before 2030, there is nevertheless major movement in key industries (auto, energy) to produce cleaner technologies.

The US' Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has turbocharged transportation electrification in that country. Thanks to the IRA's \$7,500 subsidy, sales of electric vehicles topped one million in 2023. There is also a big jump

in the demand for clean energy. Between 2020 and 2023, South African households installed over 4,000MW of rooftop photovoltaic (PV) systems.

The big jump in the demand for clean technologies worldwide means that we require large volumes of energy transition minerals (rare earths, graphite, copper, lithium, cobalt, manganese, etc.) as well as water and the land that Africa has in abundance. The World Bank has predicted in its *Minerals for Climate Action* report (2020) that mining of transition minerals has to increase by at least 500% (3 billion tonnes of mineral sand metals) to meet the world's demand for clean energy technologies.

This reality is already causing a new scramble for Africa. China has a head start on the major Global North economies because it signed a raft of contracts with countries from Madagascar to Niger at the height of the commodity boom of the 2000s. In 2007, it signed a nine billion dollar transition minerals for infrastructure contract dubbed "*the Deal of the Century*" with the DRC which gave it control over some of that country's largest copper and cobalt deposits in Kolwezi worth over \$100 billion.

The rest of the world is catching up though. Electric car manufacturer Tesla has signed a contract with mining giant Glencore to acquire minerals from DRC. The Russian Wagner Group has been in operation in the Central African Republic in a minerals-for-security arrangement for almost 10 years.

The interest in transition minerals is big but there is much bigger interest in fossil fuels like oil and gas following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since 2021, over \$500 billion dollars have been invested in various fossil fuel projects across Africa. In Mozambique, Total's gas project worth \$20 billion, i.e. bigger than the host country's entire GDP, has caused civil unrest and terrorist activity to escalate in Cabo Delgado. The violence has already claimed over 4,000 lives and displaced half the population of Cabo Delgado province.

In Senegal, DRC and Uganda, oil and gas projects have caused green grabbing, i.e. the taking over of prime forests and wetlands for fossil fuel projects and presenting them as good for the just energy transition. The Uganda-Tanzania heated oil pipeline will run through the Murchison Falls, the Bugoma forest and the Lake Victoria Basin. In the DRC, the government has approved exploration concessions in the middle of the Congo Basin Rainforest, the world's most effective natural carbon capture resource. In Senegal, the Sangomar offshore oil project has been set up in the middle of a Unesco-recognised world heritage reserve. These projects claim that they will help reduce dependency on biomass or coal, and say they are therefore good for the just energy transition.

Energy colonialism projects replicate asymmetric colonial relationships between core and periphery states. While the core states are decarbonising their economies, cleaning up their air, waterways and streets, they are doing so to the detriment of countries in the Global

South that supply the mineral resources and sometimes labour required

for these transitions. Once again, the large corporations that produce commodities in Africa for use in the Global North are externalising their pollution and exploitative work conditions to Africa.

No land is too sacred to be dug open and its biodiversity ripped apart if it has deposits of the resources they are looking for. Protests by indigenous communities do not matter either. Multinational corporations work with the comprador elite to clear any land they want of its inhabitants. Wherever these projects are rolled out, from Mozambique to Cameroon, Uganda and Senegal, environmental requirements have been hastily modified to ensure their approval. From Cameroon to Sierra Leone, French-based company, Bolloré, with its interest in international logistics to Africa, has worked with African governments to push entire villages off their lands to make way for oil palm plantations. The palm oil they produce is used to make ethanol for major brands like Shell and Total.

Calculations show that the highly industrialised nations have emitted at least 1.6 trillion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent since the beginning of the industrial revolution. To cap global warming at say 2°, we have to stay within a budget of one trillion tonnes of CO₂e emissions.¹

Unfortunately, once again, that entire budget is being burned up by the rich nations. Research for the World Inequality Report shows that the average individual in North America used up about 20 tonnes of CO₂e in 2019 compared to only 1.6 tonnes for sub-Saharan Africans (Chancel, 2021:2). The reckless behaviour of highly industrialised countries creates a problem that shall be shared equally among the earth's inhabitants, in some cases placing unjustified stress on poor countries like Mali, Niger, Malawi, Madagascar that they cannot handle.

Although Africa bears almost no responsibility for global greenhouse gas emissions, it is already witnessing an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Madagascar suffered the world's first famine caused by anthropogenic climate change. The event pushed over two million people into acute vulnerability and required significant efforts by the international community and the World Food Programme to be brought under control. The Horn of Africa and Southern Africa have also suffered major famine episodes in the late 2010s that affected over one million people. Countries like Uganda and Kenya are already witnessing significant challenges as their coffee trees come under more pressure from heat episodes and parasites like coffee borer disease.

The Sahel region which has witnessed many episodes of drought over the last half a century has experienced a significant increase in drought and in crop failures since 2010. These events are partly to blame for the instability in the region. Youth in countries like Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger have been migrating from villages and small towns to large cities as attacks from armed insurgents and the effects

of climate change especially begin to bite. Favourable weather saw over 120,000 youth from the Sahel arrive on the Italian island of Lampedusa in September 2023. If efforts are not made to bolster Sahel towns and cities, this trend will continue to grow.

The case for degrowth

In 1972, a group of experts assessed development trends and compared them to the stock of resources that the earth had left. Their assessment led them to the following conclusion:

By now it should be clear that all of these trades-offs arise from one simple fact – the earth is finite. The closer any human activity comes to the limit of the earth's ability to support that activity, the more apparent and unresolvable the trade-offs become. (Meadows *et al.*, 1972: 86)

They argued that some of the earth's resource challenges could be resolved through

techno-fixes, i.e. improvements in technology and its ability to develop more efficient processes. However, there were other problems that the world could not deal with quickly. For example, when toxic chemicals and pollutants were dumped into water bodies, the earth required a very long time to metabolise them. This called for a more cautious approach to utilisation of resources. The stark reminder by the Meadows report that we live in a world of finite resources led Andre Amar (Duverger, 2009) to say that "*La décroissance, au moins sous certaines formes, apparaît aujourd'hui comme nécessaire*" (today, degrowth appears to be a necessity, at least in some areas).

The Meadows report was not a stark enough warning to people like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher who championed neoliberal policies that have created a system of footloose capital and greatly dispersed value chains. Once again, there was great pushback against these policies. This is symbolised in José Bové's resistance against the McDonaldisation of France, the Zapatista resistance against the North American Free Trade Area in the 1990s and, more recently, the *Gilets Jaunes* uprising in France.

For a long time, people were unhappy with the hegemonic system, but there was not very strong mobilisation against the system. Now, people are fed up. Too many people live from pay check to pay check. It is in this context that degrowth has become an urgent necessity.

Degrowth is a paradigm, a philosophy if you will, that calls for an end to the kind of annual growth that is typically represented through Gross Domestic Product (GDP) numbers and for the prioritisation of a fairer and more balanced type of improvement that works for all human beings as well as the planet. Writing in *Leur*

Ecologie et la Notre, André Gorz (2010) says that the world needs a socio-economic and cultural revolution that is going to abolish the pillars of

capitalism under its current form and introduce a new relationship between individuals and 1) their community; 2) environment; and 3) nature.

That is what degrowth is. It is neither an economic theory nor an already clearly codified set of laws. For his part, Latouche (2010) defines degrowth as: *“En effet, il peut s’entendre en un sens littéral, celui d’une inversion de la courbe de croissance du produit intérieur brut (PIB), cet indice statistique fétiche censé mesurer la richesse ; ou en un sens symbolique : décroître, c’est sortir de l’idéologie de la croissance, c’est-à-dire du productivisme”* (“in fact, it can be defined from a literal point of view, that is inverting the GDP growth curve, or from a symbolic standpoint, that is getting out of the productivism mindset”).

Although degrowth proponents have posited that it is not just an economic theory but rather a complete questioning of the utility of the *‘homo economicus’* ontology, some experts still insist on looking at it completely and only as economic theory. This leads them to offer preconceived rebuttals that deliberately leave out what degrowthers seek to achieve. Of course, abandoning all growth and progress would immediately be labelled heretical by many people, especially in the Global South. Which growth do you want them to abandon? This is what one often hears in Africa.

In fact, some academics in the Global South believe that they should not concern themselves with concepts like degrowth (Rodriguez-Labajos *et al.*, 2019). They believe that Global North experts pontificating to people who are still poor is patronising at best, or even an insult, considering that they bear no responsibility for causing global warming or rising inequalities. However, this position ignores a number of key facts.

To not participate in the degrowth debate is to cede correction of mistakes of the past to the same parties that created the problem and are even now still kicking the can down the road. The global economy is so integrated now that one simply cannot sit in their corner and say: “you deal with the mess that you created. I will just sit here and do my own thing”. The UK government has announced a decision to postpone a ban on sales of new fossil-fuel powered cars from 2030 to 2035. Across Western Europe conservative parties are pushing the narrative that the climate agenda is not a priority right now. Those decisions have a big impact on Africa that is already dealing with the consequences of climate change.

As Latouche (2010) and Foster (2023) have pointed out, degrowth cannot be rolled out in the same way in all parts of the world. The Global South certainly cannot approach the degrowth debate from the same position as the countries of the Global North. They cannot stand on the same principles and demand the same or similar changes. Africa has a population of two billion people, 60% of whom still live in poverty. Although the continent is urbanising rapidly, it is only growing at about 1.1% per year, and services in many urban areas are either in a piteous state or non-existent. The entire African continent produces less than

400 gigawatts of electricity and over 600 million people have no access to electricity at all.

The Global North will focus on certain things (e.g. demilitarisation, decarbonising the transport sector, phasing out coal, offering farmers a living wage, class action lawsuits against rogue corporations, etc.) and the Global South will have to do different things (decolonising how we build, educate ourselves, travel, etc.; reconnecting with circular ontologies; abandoning austerity measures; ending reliance on food imports, etc.).

The deep levels of deregulation engineered by the Post Washington Consensus have created value chains that bring together dozens of countries to manufacture a single item. It sometimes takes up to more than 20 countries to produce one product. This is certainly the case for mobile phones where the rare earths may come from the DRC and China, the chip from Taiwan, the design from the US, the assembly from China and so on. South Africa for example is a major manufacturing site for Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Volkswagen, Ford and other car brands. It is also a major supplier of fruit to supermarkets all over the world. This value chain model often offshores the dirtier and labour-intensive processes to the Global South.

While the shareholders of Tesla and Apple get to pocket large profits year after year, countries like the DRC inherit contaminated waterways, endemic poverty, disembowelled landscapes and artisanal mines with thousands of workers who can cause social unrest or even switch to militias at any moment. Bringing large corporations to account will require everybody working together.

The citizens of the Netherlands need to know how Shell behaves in Nigeria. The citizens of the US need to know how the cheap meat on their supermarket shelves is produced in the Amazon. Those who call for electric cars need to know how transition minerals are mined in the DRC.

Degrowth and then what?

From a Global South perspective, it is very clear: the savings from degrowth must go towards building a better world, and in large part this means repairing some of the damage that the Global North has done to Africa. We must understand what has caused the emaciated children with flies all over their bodies whose images NGOs use to appeal for donations in many Global North media: it is precisely the genocidal activities of empire and their corporations that led to the arrested or maldevelopment in these countries. Many parts of Africa are poor because their wealth is being transported to the Global North every day, and it has to stop.

Savings do not have to flow to Africa in the form of cash. For every dollar saved by reforming the financial sector or rogue behaviour from large corporations, we can provide universal basic infrastructure in Africa. Different mechanisms can be put in place for country-to-country as well as city-to-city relationships that provide roads, internet,

schools, hospitals and mass transit systems in Africa. It is very important to provide a lot of direct support to communities rather than relying on African governments to do that work.

Many Global North countries are well aware that many African leaders were not put there by their citizens. Elections in Africa have become a process of manufacturing credibility before the international community. The West knows very well that every time aid is given to Africa, there is a massive spike in money transfers from Africa to Europe or America.

We have to ask ourselves what would happen if degrowth policies are not rolled out to repair some of the damage that colonialism and bad corporate behaviour has done to Africa. For example, we have seen an increase in Mediterranean crossings to Europe by migrants from Africa in the last decade. A lot of that is due to dishonest relationships between European Union (EU) countries and corporations working in tandem with illegitimate African leaders. Climate change is obviously a problem, but what little resources many communities have has a way of vanishing into foreign bank accounts. If EU corporations do not stop stealing uranium from Niger, gold from Burkina Faso and so on, the so-called illegal migrations will get worse.

Another example: Africa has a lot of fossil fuel deposits – South Africa has enough coal to last 200 years; Nigeria has enough oil and gas to last a century. The carbon credit that we have left has to be better managed to cap warming below 1.5-2°. That will only happen if we phase out fossil fuels. The expectation that African countries should just move away from these fuel sources to green ones without adequate support is unrealistic. African countries must be given the resources that they need to operationalise a just energy transition. That support should not happen in the form of concessional loans. It cannot happen as loans. African nations deserve no-strings- attached grants and massive transfers of technology to end energy poverty on the continent. That is only fair.

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ENDNOTE

1 CO₂e or “carbon dioxide equivalent” is a measurement of the total greenhouse gases emitted, expressed in terms of the equivalent measurement of carbon dioxide.