

Editorial

-- by Martin Nicol

The contradictions of green extractivism





Uneasy contradictions in development policy in Africa were laid bare in February 2025 by a disastrous accident at a copper mine in Zambia. An unmonitored and badly constructed tailings dam failed, releasing some 50 million litres of toxic mine sludge to pollute the Kafue River. Fish died, livestock were poisoned, farmers' crops were destroyed and people along the river, the longest in Zambia, lost their water supply. As the poisoned water flowed downstream, engineers had to cut off water to Zambia's second biggest city Kitwe, 30km from the mine with a population of over 600,000. By the date of publication, the scale of the catastrophe was still to be measured.

Zambia is promoting its mining industry as champion of green energy and an icon for the transition away from fossil fuels. In 2024, its government launched the *National Three Million Tonnes Copper Production Strategy by 2031* which aims to more than treble copper output over five years. Copper is a critical component in renewable energy systems as well as in energy-saving electronic technology. Yet it was a copper mine that caused the environmental disaster in the Kafue River.

Africa complains that its people see few benefits from its natural wealth, yet governments go out of their way to boost extractivism. They offer incentives and special treatment to international investors in mining, while failing to invest themselves in responsible regulation. The Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA) is notoriously under-capacitated and under-funded. ZEMA is said to have approved the design of the failed tailings dam. They don't monitor and they don't enforce the law.

The Chambishi mine was started in 1960, by British investors led by Sir Ronald ("Mr Copper") Prain of Roan Selection Trust. Then it was nationalised. The current operators happen to be Chinese (who have apologised for the accident). This disaster is on them. But tailings dam pollution is an inevitable consequence of mining and its transformative effects on the environment. A total of 170 major tailings dam failures have been counted worldwide since 1960 (WISE Uranium Project, 2025).

The logic of extractivism, which is supported by most governing elites in Africa, is based on profit, not sustainable and equitable development. In March 2025, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) President Felix Tshisekedi was said to have offered the United States and Europe special access to the country's vast mineral resources if they assist in breaking the Rwanda-supported M23 rebels who have taken control of the area around Lake Kivu in the east.

Mark Volmink's article on extractivism in this issue of *New Agenda* provides an analysis of why "rich" African countries needing to reach development goals are so often unable to access their natural resource wealth themselves.

The regular Africa Diary column salutes the new leadership of the African Union (AU), the chairperson and executive members elected at the AU Summit in February 2025. One of their many stretch goals is to pilot African initiatives towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), due for achievement by 2030. We feature two contributions on the SDGs - with two very different perspectives. Mulugeta Dinbabo and Perfect Mazani take the SDGs at face value and describe the framework that is in place to monitor African progress on the ambitious SDGs. Crain Soudien, on the other hand, highlights aspects of northern bias and racism in the mechanisms of the SDGs.

The progress assessment carried out by the United Nations in 2024 reveals that the world is severely off track to realize the 2030 SDG Agenda. Among the detailed targets that were assessable (given the data available), only 17% display progress sufficient for achievement by 2030. "Nearly half (48 per cent) exhibit moderate to severe deviations from the desired trajectory, with 30 per cent showing marginal progress and 18 per cent moderate progress. Alarming, 18 per cent indicate stagnation and 17 per cent regression below the 2015 baseline levels" (DESA, 2024:4). The comprehensive assessment underscores the urgent need for intensified efforts to put the SDGs on course.

The fourth Ben Turok Memorial Lecture was delivered by human rights and climate justice activist Dr Kumi Naidoo, on 9 December, the anniversary of Turok's death. Naidoo's call was to mobilise and organise at the grassroots level. He emphasised that people have far more agency than they are credited with, despite the legacies of colonialism, slavery, imperialism and now climate change. "We have power as enforcers of transparency and accountability, and as shapers of our own destiny," he said.

Countries and health programmes all over the world were sent reeling after the United States government suddenly cut its aid funding commitments. The cut came without warning and was immediate - allowing no time for partner countries and organisations to manage the decision. But then the UK government announced it would cut its own foreign aid spending by 40% - and the French and others have indicated they will follow. Optimists have said this is actually a wake-up call for Africa and a great opportunity for the continent to assert its independence. Foreign aid has rarely been associated with economic development and it has distorted both politics and policy. The new president of Ghana, John Mahama, said, "It sends a signal to Africa that the time has come for us to be more self-reliant." Hardship and death will be the immediate consequence of the cuts in aid. In the longer term, Africa has worthy ambitions to integrate its markets, expand inter-continental trade and move beyond extractivism.

A Living Rights Festival was hosted by the Institute for African Alternatives in Cape Town in October-December 2024. This is featured in a collection of articles, reflections and images in this edition of *New Agenda* that cover art and performance as well as politics. We thank the poets and artists for their work and acknowledge the many cultural workers and academics who shared their thoughts and creations at the Festival.



Revised editorial policy and new policy on Artificial Intelligence

In January 2025, *New Agenda* revised its [editorial policies](#) following guidelines suggested by colleagues at Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL). This has been posted on the OJS platform managed by our partners at the University of the Western Cape. From issue 97, the journal will move away from our long-standing use of the generic Harvard style of referencing. Instead we will implement the [APA7](#), an internationally respected standard which is regularly amended to keep pace with the best ways of allowing readers to locate the wide variety of resources cited by authors – from videos and podcasts to disappearing messages and the latest AI assistant, Claude.

Along with other publications, *New Agenda*, has had to confront many problems presented by authors' use of AI in the material they submit. This has been particularly obvious in the very large number of references attached to some submissions. The increased density of referencing, encouraged by the ability of AI to winkle out the most obscure scholarship, requires more resources – editorial attention and production time. If the so-called “efficiencies” in research become as high as AI enthusiasts envision, the volume of references will increase further. In a culture characterised by publication pressure, this means quality peer reviews will take more time.

It seems a race to the bottom. A ban would not be feasible, as markers of AI are often impossible to detect, so in the context of enthusiastic and uncritical use of AI, we have crafted a new policy to ensure maximum transparency by requiring authors to disclose if and how they have used AI. This policy will be in place from Issue 97 – and readers can see it on *New Agenda*'s page on UWC's e-publications website in the section on [Journal Policies](#) entitled “Artificial Intelligence (AI) – assisted technology”.

REFERENCES

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