

Climate justice education: A priority for Africa

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Introduction

The voices of 150 African women resonated loudly at the second Women's Climate Assembly where participants from 17 countries across Central and West Africa came together in Lagos, Nigeria in September 2023. They came to learn and share more about their linked struggles under the banner of *African Women Unite for climate justice, reparations, and development alternatives*. It is women who are most impacted by the escalating climate crisis, yet their voices are largely mute. The Assembly aimed to change this.

With the support of non-governmental organisations working in solidarity with community women and a steering group of women's movements and grassroots networks, the assembly provided a crucial political space for women from Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Guinea Conakry Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. They participated in various activities from teach-ins, political education workshops, singing, poetry, to poster and banner making. Participants exchanged knowledge, on building and supporting women-led movements; on development alternatives, moving from an extractivist economic model to a just, people-centred one. The assembly also joined the third African People's Counter COP 2023, where they learnt more about green colonialism. The two parallel events provided a much-needed platform to strengthen people in their collective struggles, towards climate justice on the continent. [African Voices Call For Radical Action At Women's Climate Assembly | WomIn African Alliance](#)

The Women's Climate Assembly is a contemporary example of adult learning and education (ALE) in action at a time when Africa is warming faster than the global average. From deadly floods in West Africa, droughts, and famine in East Africa to devastating cyclones in Southern Africa, the climate emergency calls for drastic action if Africa is to avoid carbon emissions breaching 1.5 degrees of climate warming. No

longer will women accept being mere spectators to the global crisis deeply affecting their lives and livelihoods.

In this article, I will argue that climate justice education is a priority for Africa. I start by sketching the context, which links accelerated climate change to colonialism. I then discuss a related concept of cognitive justice which is central to climate justice education. Two illustrative stories are then told of African climate justice education in action, before moving to closure.

Setting the scene

Climate Colonialism

Africa is a vast continent with over a billion people and 55 countries. It is home to diverse economies, resources, ecosystems, and cultures. All countries were colonised except for Ethiopia and Liberia. The major colonial powers were Great Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal. Colonialism has left indelible legacies. Climate change and colonialism are inextricably linked. Addressing the effects of climate change cannot be achieved without also addressing the legacies of colonialism. Therefore, considering the impact of historic and ongoing colonialist practices is essential in tackling climate change. Colonialism is responsible for centuries of harmful extractive practices across Africa, and elsewhere, that have driven wealth in the Global North and poverty in the Global South. (Okunola, 2023)

The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s sixth report on the impact of global warming on the planet asserts that colonialism has exacerbated the effects of climate change. Historical, and ongoing forms of colonialism have helped to increase the vulnerability of specific people and places to the effects of climate change. (Harriet Mercer, 2022) Colonialism can refer to the practice of acquiring full or partial control over another group's territory; it can include the occupation of that land by settlers as well as the economic exploitation of land to benefit the colonising group. Research has shown direct links between dispossessing Indigenous people of their land and environmental damage. As Mercer states, "Connecting climate change to such acts of colonization involves recognizing that historic injustices are not consigned to history: their legacies are alive in the present."

The first connection to colonialism is about the historic causes of climate change. The Global North is responsible for the climate crisis, with the Global North countries responsible for over 92% of carbon emissions. Yet, it's Global South countries – which are disproportionately impacted by poverty that also has its root in exploitative colonial activities and practices – that are experiencing the worst impacts of climate change, particularly extreme weather events. As Greenpeace UK (2022) states, "The

environmental emergency is the legacy of colonialism.” This is because colonialism had established a model through which the air and lands of the Global South have been used as places to dump waste the Global North does not want. It’s this injustice that has sparked a wave of calls for climate reparations – essentially, calling on wealthy countries in the Global North (that have caused climate change) to financially support those countries that have done the least to cause climate change in responding to its impacts.

The second way climate colonialism is manifesting is through exploitation of resources of the Global South by Global North nations for their `green agendas`. There is a rush to mine ‘green minerals’ in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with tragic, exploitative practices on the mines and horrific environmental degradation. Carbon offsetting is often found to be a practice by which wealthy countries purchase the right to release a larger amount of greenhouse gases (GHG) than they had agreed on and invest in carbon sequestration facilities in the Global South to compensate for that. Western countries and companies can continue to pollute as normal, which disproportionately affects Indigenous, black, and poor people. Pursuing climate ambitions on the backs of the poorest people is referred to as ‘green colonialism’.

Zografos and Robbins (2020) define climate colonialism as “the deepening or expanding of domination of less powerful countries and peoples through initiatives that intensify foreign exploitation of poorer nations’ resources or undermine the sovereignty of native and Indigenous communities in the course of responding to the climate crisis” (p. 543). The legacy of colonialism has not only increased most peoples’ vulnerability to climate change, but also subjected them to climate policies that violate their individual and collective rights. (Stein & Hare, 2023)

Some of the emerging realities of accelerated climate change describe the existential crisis Africa faces. Africa is heating disproportionately quickly, and with little infrastructure and resources to mitigate heating and adapt to a warmer world. This is a grave injustice, given that Africa accounts for only two to three per cent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions from energy and industrial sources since the start of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and Europe. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) released its *State of the Climate in Africa 2019 Report* in October 2020 and draws the conclusion that average temperatures in Africa have increased over 1°C (greater than the global average indicated above) since 1901. (Hargreaves, 2023).

As Hargreaves (2023) elaborates, warming in large areas of the continent will likely exceed 2°C by 2080 to 2100 if emissions continue at their current levels. With this climate warming, the deterioration of food security has resulted in a 45.6 per cent increase in the number of undernourished people since 2012. In the Sahel region, its

reported that roughly 80 per cent of the farmland is degraded by rising temperatures and that conflicts rage as desperate people fight to control farmlands and scarce water bodies. Women constitute a sizeable percentage of the world's poor, and about half of the women in the world are active in agriculture. The WMO estimates that in developing countries, women constitute 60 per cent of food producers, and in low-income, food-deficit countries, 70 per cent of the same; the projected impacts of climate warming on agriculture will affect them severely. Droughts, floods, hurricanes, persistent malaria, and generalised water scarcity are likely to increase in the next few decades. In low-lying coastal areas, rising sea levels have taken metres of coastline, along with people's land, housing, and communal social services. The direct links between climate change and biodiversity loss is important to recognise – they need to be tackled together. Biodiversity (the diversity within species, between species, and within ecosystems) is declining faster than it has at any other time in human history. Biodiversity is essential for the wellbeing of all life forms.

Climate colonialism, which frames all these realities, becomes a key concept within climate justice education as does a related concept 'cognitive justice'.

Cognitive justice: Recognizing multiple knowledges.

Cognitive justice (Burt, 2020) is an essential part of the struggle for justice against domination which recognises the validity of different ways of knowing. de Sousa Santos (2014), informed by decolonial theory, highlights that the struggle for all forms of justice is inseparable from the struggle for cognitive justice and he introduces the idea of epistemicide, as 'the murder of knowledge' of 'the other', be it based on race, sex-gender, class, ethnicity, language, and so on. The ideology of science and technology has long dismissed other knowledges with women's embodied knowledge often referred to disparagingly as 'intuitive'.

Cognitive justice is integral to decolonial struggles and an example of cognitive justice at work, is the move to reclaim *ubuntu* as important for the future. Ubuntu is an African worldview and philosophy – it is an African-wide ethical paradigm that expresses the obligation to look after one another and the environment - all our wellbeing is mutually contingent. Ubuntu literally means: a person is a person through other people. There is complementarity between ubuntu and Latin America's *buen vivir*. Both reject modernity's nature-society duality and regard restorative justice as the principal mechanism to achieve harmony with the cosmos. (Terreblanche, 2018)

Decolonising knowledge involves collective, systemic, and systematic processes of dismantling the ways discourses and practices perpetuate cognitive injustices. The concept of cognitive justice illustrates how the legitimisation of Western knowledge

often involves an act of seizing power in the intellectual sphere by belittling or ignoring the knowledge held by diverse cultures and countries in the Global South – a form of epistemicide – central to the brutalising processes of colonisation. (Ghosh, 2021) Ghosh graphically illustrates how the destruction of people went along with destruction of their knowledge. This seizing of intellectual power often includes the domination of mechanisms of knowledge generation such as the media, universities, internet resources, and professional institutions.

The quest for global justice, de Sousa Santos argues, must be premised upon the quest for global cognitive justice. One criticism of cognitive justice has been that, in its attempt to value local and Indigenous knowledge systems, all knowledge becomes viewed as relative or, alternatively, that Western science reduces the reality of Indigenous knowledge to a quaint pseudoscience. de Sousa Santos states that cognitive justice has nothing to do with relativism or with an anti-science stance. The centrality of social and cognitive justice calls for the centrality of the struggle against injustice since societies are structurally unjust.

With this premise he has been developing the idea of the epistemologies of the South, epistemologies focused on validating knowledges born in struggle. (de Sousa Santos, 2014; 2018) All these knowledges are valid to the extent that they may also contribute to those struggles. This is a difficult point since it involves discussing epistemology as politics and politics as epistemology. But he invites us to have a deeper look into the reality that has been built on conceptions of neutral epistemologies. For centuries the validity of science alone has been affirmed. This has led humans to the verge of an imminent, fatal ecological crisis and deepening inequalities.

Similar understandings are reflected in the praxis of ecofeminists (Salleh, 2017; Walters et al, 2021) who make a direct link between ecological degradation, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racism. Cognitive justice is at the root of ecofeminism. They argue for the centrality of the knowledge and understandings of those people who are most marginalised and are on the front lines dealing with the fall-out of environmental destruction i.e., working class, poor, peasant and Indigenous women.

In a nutshell, capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy have been implicated in destroying other ways of knowing. Cognitive justice is an essential part of the struggle for justice against domination which recognises the validity of different ways of knowing. It counters the idea that science has monopoly of valid knowledge. Particularly through Indigenous people's influence, the humanist orientation of cognitive justice is expanded to include all life forms.

Stories of Climate Justice Education

Climate justice demands fundamental change in the political and economic order towards decolonised, socio-economic, gender and racial justice. Social movements and organisations of civil society are at the forefront of climate justice organising and educating. There is substantial evidence that those who gain most from the status quo will do little to change it with some governments denying the realities of accelerated climate change. Most states continue along a carbon-intensive energy paths, with devastating results. Growing numbers of scholars, on available evidence, have dire predictions for the human species. Environmental activist-scholars are warning that political, economic and community leadership are failing to provide systemic solutions to climate crises. Climate justice education, within a lifelong learning framework, includes learning and education throughout life, but here we focus mainly on adult learning and education within civil society.

Climate justice education is challenging the status quo; therefore, it is most often a bottom-up, grassroots endeavour. It is about foregrounding those people who have contributed least to 'crises' and are most affected by them – in the process acknowledging that their knowledge and understandings must contribute to the solutions. It's a vast landscape. The climate justice learning, and education responses are equally vast. We can't begin to know the full extent of the climate justice education initiatives within African civil society. I therefore choose two illustrative stories to describe climate justice education on the ground. (von Kotze et al, 2022)

Story One: WoMin African Alliance

WoMin is a cross Africa alliance which supports African women in communities of resistance against extractive projects. There are community organisations educating and organising both to support immediate struggles and to imagine alternative futures. A network of ecofeminists, the Womin African Alliance (WoMin), has a programme on Advancing African Ecofeminist Development Alternatives (AAEDA) which are ecofeminist, post-extractivist and transformative. This entails building African ecofeminist perspectives, conceptualizing, and advancing an African ecofeminist concept of the 'Just Transition', defining just, renewable energy alternatives, and supporting the democratization of decision-making through struggles of women and their communities. (Randriamaro, 2021)

Peasant, Indigenous and working-class women are leading communities to challenge degradation of their land and destruction of their livelihoods. WoMin collects their inspirational 'stories of struggles and resistance' that illustrate what women, collectively, do to defend the commons. (WoMin, 2021a, WoMin, 2021b) For example, a group of women in Bargny in Senegal (CFFA, 2021) have been bound to the ocean

over centuries. Commercial fishing and changes in climate are threatening their ways of life. They are defending the ocean and their land – they are imagining alternatives which allow them to continue with ancient ways. In Burkina Faso, women are saying no to gold mining as they defend a future for their children. Over 500 women's associations in West African countries, the NSS (Nous Sommes la Solution), have organised themselves into an ecofeminist movement that promotes agroecology and food sovereignty. They promote sustainable farming practices, often rooted in traditional practices held by women. As the leader, Mariama Soko, says: 'It's the Indigenous knowledge and the practices that have always supported food sovereignty and this knowhow is in the hands of the women ... Ecofeminism for me is the respect for all that we have around us.' (Shryock, 2021)

WoMin runs a Feminist School which crosses national boundaries, brings people together to learn from one another, to deepen their analysis of the issues and to build solidarity amongst one another. The women carry the burden of the crises because they are primary household food producers, caregivers and harvesters of water, energy and other basic goods needed for reproduction of life and well-being of people. But these roles also place them at the frontlines defending the natural world and its right to exist, without which the survival of all beings would not be possible.

To many African women who are defending their lives and livelihood, an ecofeminist analysis is not a theoretical construct – it makes practical sense. While not necessarily using the language, they know that patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and ecological degradation are entangled with one another. Using ecofeminist popular education, the schools reinforce and build towards strengthening movements of women with Pan-African consciousness.

In the educational and organising work, they invite possibilities of other knowledges and ways of seeing and being in the world, interrogating how Eurocentric thought, knowledge and power structures dominate present societies, and how that thought, and knowledge have consistently undermined colonised people. These processes help in the imagination of alternative futures.

The schools are part of an ecosystem of popular education activity – this includes solidarity exchanges across communities of resistance at the national and Pan-African levels; assemblies of women in struggle, as described earlier, to build the collective and strengthen movements; and the making and distribution of a wide range of popular education materials increasingly using visual media, such as film, animations, and photography. One is the documentary film made by WoMin, *Women Hold up the Sky* (WoMin, 2021). This is a vivid depiction of women, their ideas, and their struggles, many of whom have been part of the schools. <https://womenholdupthesky.co.za/>

The WoMin website and the Facebook Page is a rich source of climate justice education materials, resources, political debate, learning opportunities. [African Women Activists | WoMin](#) Their politics are clear: without confronting capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and neo-colonialism, socio-ecological justice is not possible.

Story Two: Xolobeni and African wisdom

As mentioned earlier, Ubuntu is an African-wide ethical paradigm that expresses the obligation to look after one another and the environment. Ubuntu - abbreviated from 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' - literally means: a person is a person through people'. It expresses an obligation to look after one another and the environment, believing that all our wellbeing is mutually contingent. Ubuntu, being for/through the other relies on an encounter with the other, a coming into being through the other, a building of relations and relationships. This is the core of care and, arguably, of education.

Nonhle Mbuthuma (2022, p. 91), the spokesperson for the Amadiba Crisis Committee of Xolobeni, a rural village in Pondoland, South Africa, describes how their community, and those still to come, would not survive if ubuntu was not practiced. She illustrates ubuntu at work when she says:

This culture helps people love and care for each other. For example, barter exchange: If you know that that family does not have livestock, you think "no let me do that and let me share". You know sharing is very rare these days, but my community has the kind of culture where if I left my child at home with your children, there is no problem. I'm not worried that my child will be stolen.... I am very proud of our community to say that we are feeding ourselves.

As an ethic of relationality, it is situated in the communitarian social fabric of caring and sharing. It resonates with other Indigenous people around the world. (Lange, 2023)

Since the 1950s when colonial powers were trying to colonise the whole of Pondoland, the Amaondo have been fighting for their right to determine their own future. Their land is agricultural and ancestral. Their ancestors fought for the land so that the present and future generations can survive and live in a peaceful environment. Today, Xolobeni is at the forefront of the fight for environmental and sustainable rights in their area. In 2021 the community won a legal battle against Australian mining company, Mineral Commodities (MRC) which sought to access what is claimed to be the world's 10th-largest deposit of ilmenite, a core titanium ore, on the Umgungundlovu land.

As one resident, Mam' Sonjica, says, 'They must not bring us mines. We do not want mines. They must not carry out extractivism in our oceans because that ocean gives us life. They must bring clinics, hospitals and fix the roads. (Ngcuka, 2022)

Learning from communities who are conserving their land, who know how to live sustainably, with a sense of 'enoughness', is key for climate justice education. It's the practice of cognitive justice where Indigenous, working class, peasant women and men's knowledge, skills and understandings are placed at the centre. It's a source of inspiration in the quest to challenge the worldview which has humans as superior and separate from Nature. It is an example of the kind of community with whom climate justice activists/scholars around the world can be in solidarity, Dawson (2022) argues:

In the face of mounting environmental and social calamities, the only coherent stance must be to join Indigenous and local communities around the world in demanding the return of stolen land, respect for their sovereignty, and a radical transformation of the Colonialism that characterizes the unsustainable behavior and policies of the wealthy.

Not so much an end as a beginning

The climate crisis is a clarion call for Africans to prioritise climate justice education at all ages and stages of life, in all educational and religious venues, on the streets, in the malls, in the workplaces, in the fields, around kitchen tables, on sports fields. It's a call to all of humanity to change how we live. There are many communities, networks, movements, and organisations trying to prefigure ways of undertaking collective action, which is more just, equal, and respectful. Individual and collective support for those at the forefront of confronting capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ecological degradation, creating conditions for greater equality, is important as part of imagining alternative futures. We all need to become ecologically literate.

We need to avoid climate colonialism, firstly by recognising that colonialism is a root cause and driver of climate change. This has long been recognized by Indigenous Peoples. The second recognition is that many institutions, including higher education, have been and continue to be complicit in settler colonialism, including through the production and dissemination of colonial knowledge, the occupation and degradation of Indigenous lands, and complicity in educational assimilation. (Stein & Hare, 2023)

The impacts of the 'climate crisis' are nothing new for Indigenous people who have for 500 years fought off the social, cultural, and environmental genocides of racist settler-colonialism, patriarchy, global capitalism, the 'externalities' of toxic, industrial and consumer waste, the killing, starvation and sickening of their people, forests, lands, air, seas, and rivers. (Walter, 2021) Cognitive justice, where multiple knowledges are

recognised, is key to climate justice education – as is our own learning through attentive listening to local perspectives and old wisdoms.

Climate justice requires radical systemic change. This radical change is unlikely to be led by those who have both created the catastrophe that is unfolding and are most invested in the status quo but through people’s action. People engaging in real-life struggles learn what climate justice means by the entanglement of co-constitutive local and global lives. Within their movements and actions, they challenge injustices and rehearse alternative ways of relating.

Unless climate justice learning works within the radical traditions of adult education and lifelong learning, it will not address the multiple injustices which drive contemporary ecological breakdown. This could lead to educational responses that are simplistic and do not address the systemic reasons for the climate emergencies that are unfolding. Ecofeminist popular educational approaches are critical to giving space for multiple epistemologies to emerge.

This moment, as we celebrate the ICAE’s remarkable 50 years, adult education networks - international, regional, national, local - need to commit ourselves to deepen collective and collaborative climate justice education partnerships. Important progress has been made as captured in an article, “Towards an emergent curriculum for climate justice adult educators/activists” <https://ajal.net.au/latest-issue/> and also in recent PIMA special bulletins on climate justice education www.pimanetwork.com/bulletinjanuary2023 and [Special Issue - Climate Justice | PIMA Network](#). But we can do much more.

Climate justice education is a political/pedagogical process for the educators/activists/ learners. Working together cooperatively allows us to practice and rehearse the common future we are working towards. Through respectful collaboration, together, we can extend our reach.

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Climate justice education: A priority for Africa

Shirley Walters

Abstract

The Women's Climate Assembly is a contemporary example of climate justice education in action at a time when Africa is heating disproportionately quickly, and with little infrastructure and resources to mitigate heating and adapt to a warmer world. This is a grave injustice, as Africa accounts for a tiny per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. The vast continent has over a billion people, in 55 countries, with diverse economies, resources, ecosystems, and cultures. All countries were colonised except for Ethiopia and Liberia. Climate change and colonialism are inextricably linked. Addressing the effects of climate change cannot be achieved without also addressing the legacies of colonialism. Therefore, considering the impact of historic and ongoing colonialist practices is essential in tackling climate change. Climate colonialism is a key concept within climate justice education, as is the related concept 'cognitive justice'. Climate justice education is a priority for Africa.

Keywords

Africa; climate justice education; colonialism; cognitive justice; ubuntu; ecofeminism; radical adult education.

L'éducation à la justice climatique : Une priorité pour l'Afrique

Shirley Walters

Résumé

L'Assemblée des femmes sur le climat est un exemple contemporain d'éducation à la justice climatique en action à une époque où l'Afrique se réchauffe de manière disproportionnée et rapide, avec peu d'infrastructures et de ressources pour atténuer le réchauffement et s'adapter à un monde plus chaud. Il s'agit d'une grave injustice, car l'Afrique ne représente qu'un petit pourcentage des émissions mondiales de dioxyde de carbone. Ce vaste continent compte plus d'un milliard d'habitants, répartis dans 55 pays, avec des économies, des ressources, des écosystèmes et des cultures diversifiés. Tous les pays ont été colonisés, à l'exception de l'Éthiopie et du Liberia. Le changement climatique et le colonialisme sont inextricablement liés. Il est impossible de s'attaquer aux effets du changement climatique sans s'attaquer également à l'héritage du colonialisme. Il est donc essentiel de prendre en compte l'impact des pratiques coloniales historiques et actuelles pour lutter contre le changement climatique. Le colonialisme climatique est un concept clé de l'éducation à la justice climatique, tout comme le concept connexe de "justice cognitive". L'éducation à la justice climatique est une priorité pour l'Afrique.

Mots-clés

Afrique, éducation à la justice climatique, colonialisme, justice cognitive, ubuntu, écoféminisme, éducation radicale des adultes.

Educación para la justicia climática: Una prioridad para África

Shirley Walters

Resumen

La Asamblea de Mujeres sobre el Clima es un ejemplo contemporáneo de educación para la justicia climática en acción, en un momento en que África se calienta de manera desproporcionada y rápida, con escasas infraestructuras y recursos para mitigar el calentamiento y adaptarse a un mundo más cálido. Se trata de una grave injusticia, ya que África representa un porcentaje ínfimo de las emisiones mundiales de dióxido de carbono. Este vasto continente cuenta con más de mil millones de habitantes distribuidos en 55 países, con economías, recursos, ecosistemas y culturas diversos. Todos los países fueron colonizados, excepto Etiopía y Liberia. El cambio climático y el colonialismo están inextricablemente unidos. No se pueden abordar los efectos del cambio climático sin abordar también los legados del colonialismo. Por lo tanto, es esencial tener en cuenta el impacto de las prácticas coloniales históricas y actuales para luchar contra el cambio climático. El colonialismo climático es un concepto clave dentro de la educación para la justicia climática, al igual que el concepto relacionado de "justicia cognitiva". La educación para la justicia climática es una prioridad para África.

Palabras clave

África, educación para la justicia climática, colonialismo, justicia cognitiva, ubuntu, ecofeminismo, educación radical de adultos.