

Why Africa is not the world's 'climate solution'

BY MARTHA GETACHEW BEKELE

ADDIS ABABA. When politicians nowadays talk about Africa and climate change, they tend to use the same words: "leadership," "opportunity," and "solutions." Africa is no longer presented primarily as vulnerable to the effects of rising temperatures, but rather as indispensable to the global response to climate change, with a focus on the continent's renewable-energy potential, natural carbon sinks, critical minerals, and young workforce.

This reframing has been welcomed as a corrective to older narratives of Africa's victimisation. But, on closer inspection, the growing recognition of the continent's role as a global climate leader reflects an effort to shift responsibility for the climate crisis away from historical emitters and toward those now expected to "deliver solutions."

With the 2027 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP32) in Addis Ababa already dominating political discussions across the continent, African leaders must choose their language more carefully than they have in the past. If the "solutions" narrative is adopted uncritically, it will reinforce structural arrangements that sustain Africa's continued exploitation.

The African Union's communications have helped legitimise this framing, as have declarations from the first two Africa Climate Summits. The latter paired the language of climate justice with the goal of attracting investment, as if addressing Africa's climate challenges is simply a matter of demonstrating the continent's investability, rather than redressing historical injustices.

While the language of "leadership" appears empowering, it transfers the burden of climate action from developed countries' budgets to private markets and developing countries' balance sheets. It rearranges reality – to borrow a phrase from critics of development discourse – and renders climate change an ahistorical and apolitical problem.

Unpacking this narrative exposes its contradictions. First, Africa is framed as a potential provider of renewable solutions that will accelerate the global energy transition.

But data show that while investment in clean energy is rising, consumption of energy from all sources – including fossil fuels – continues to grow. African countries therefore, risk adopting a framework that ignores the need to reduce fossil-fuel consumption and to



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support countries in adapting to climate change.

Second, Africa's forests, particularly the Congo Basin, are increasingly positioned as critical infrastructure for carbon offsets, which allow rich-country polluters to continue pumping out greenhouse-gas emissions.

Questions that should be political – which entities pay for these credits and whose land and livelihoods are reorganised as a result – are reduced to the technicalities of valuation and verification.

Mineral potential

Third, the "solutions" framework tends to focus on Africa's abundant supply of critical minerals, which are required for the batteries and other clean technologies driving the green transition.

But this follows a familiar pattern: Officials present extraction as an indispensable "contribution" that can boost exports, even though African countries often have little to no control over processing or pricing, resulting in limited value capture.

Fourth, African leaders have started referring to the continent's population as an economic asset. Thus, Africans are regarded as inputs for green in-

dustrialisation and clean manufacturing, rather than as citizens whose dignity must be secured through fair wages and decent work.

This framing obscures who benefits from these transitions and whose labor ultimately becomes expendable.

When climate justice is no longer a question of liability and obligation, but instead is regarded as a technical financing challenge, Africa's supposed leadership on climate solutions is channelled through the same market logic underlying its long history of exploitation (and which helped create the climate crisis). Africa risks falling into an old trap: serving the interests of wealthy countries while remaining structurally disadvantaged.

The continent's leaders must develop an Afrocentric climate position rooted in the principle of special needs and special circumstances, which reflects the continent's structural inequalities caused by slavery, colonialism, genocide, and ecocide; marginalisation in the global economy; and heightened vulnerability to climate change.

Such a position must insist that Africa's low emissions, limited capacity to adapt, and historical underdevelopment justify differentiated treatment, unconditional public finance, preservation of policy space, and access to affordable and adaptable non-proprietary technologies.

Ahead of COP32, African policymakers must recognise that climate governance increasingly prioritises capital mobilisation over redistribution. As a result, they should be prepared to defend justice-based claims while avoiding dependence on debt-creating climate-finance instruments, including concessional loans.

Their longer-term focus should be on strategically delinking from a system that consistently frames Africa as mainly a supplier of carbon sinks, critical minerals, and mitigation assets for decarbonisation elsewhere.

Wealthy countries are responsible for the bulk of historic emissions. This reality must form the backbone of Africa's climate stance, without apology or dilution.

The continent's leaders should recognise "climate leadership" for what it really is: a symbolic move motivated by the desire of some of the largest global emitters to avoid the consequences of their actions.

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CLIMATE CHANGE

Africa is regarded as the most vulnerable continent to the impacts of climate change, even though it contributes only around 3–4 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Temperatures across the continent have been rising about 0.3 °C per decade, placing recent years among the warmest on record and intensifying extreme weather events.