

# Climate Change and Ecological Pan-Africanism

By Hisham Aidi

## Abstract

**Africa is often overlooked in international policy conversations about climate change, but the continent has not been spared extreme weather events. On the eve of COP26, in Glasgow, United Kingdom, in October 2021, and as the African Union formulates a climate strategy for the continent, it is worth recalling how global warming is affecting different parts of Africa and how the continent fits into policy conversations on climate change.**

A new biography of Thomas Sankara notes that the revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso was, in the mid-1980s, one of the first heads of state to warn of the dangers of climate change and to call for a coordinated cross-border African response. The Burkinabe president understood that it was “*the pollution that we pour into nature into the seas*” that was causing “*the ecological perturbation of the seasons*,” and leading to the advancement of the desert, forest fires, and dropping water tables<sup>1</sup>. Sankara was warning of ecological catastrophe at a time when scientific awareness about climate change was growing, and environmental disasters were in the headlines (including the Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986, the Bhopal gas disaster of 1984, and famine in the Sahel).

1. Brian J. Peterson, Thomas Sankara: A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa (Indiana University Press 2021) <https://iupress.org/9780253053763/thomas-sankara/>

As a “*planetary thinker*,” Sankara emphasized that the world’s ecological systems were interdependent, that “*devastating the Amazon today has consequences in our Burkina Faso*,” and that there was a need for intra-African solidarity: “*African Unity is a necessity and no longer simply a choice*.” African solidarity was needed to counter the Great Powers’ tactics of “*balkanization and domination*”<sup>2</sup>. Sankara would propose a fifteen-kilometer wide “*Green Belt*” across the Sahel to contain the advance of the desert. This project would be put off, following the revolutionary leader’s untimely death in October 1987. Nowadays, on the eve of COP26 in Glasgow in October 2021, and as the African Union formulates a climate strategy for the continent and reconsiders the Green Belt project, it is worth recalling how global warming is affecting different parts of Africa and how the continent fits into policy conversations on climate change.

2. <https://iupress.org/9780253053763/thomas-sankara/> p.205.

## Climate Emergency

In August 2021, the United Nations-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a sobering report describing the state of the planet. The panel observed that average global temperatures will continue to rise until at least 2050: “Global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least the mid-century under all-emissions scenarios considered. Global warming of 1.5 ° Celsius and 2.0° Celsius will be exceeded during the 21st century unless deep reductions in CO2 and other greenhouse gas emissions occur in the coming decades”<sup>3</sup>. The report states that the evidence is “unequivocal” that this increased temperature is due to human-induced change and greenhouse gas, and not natural change (The lion’s share of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions are the result of fossil fuels, mainly coal, petroleum and natural gas, with deforestation and other changes in land use contributing to a lesser degree). The IPCC concluded that if the international community manages to reduce greenhouse emissions, reaching net zero by 2050, the temperature rise would be 1.5 ° Celsius above pre-industrial levels<sup>4</sup> (and this was also the target adopted by the G7 countries in May 2021)<sup>5</sup>. If nation-states, however, fail to reduce emissions, and the global average temperature keeps on rising to 2° or 3° or 4° Celsius, compared with the pre-industrial era, then some calamitous “tipping points” will be reached leading to rising sea levels (that will threaten the existence of some island nations), the melting of ice sheets in Greenland and the West Antarctic, and the disappearance of certain plant and animal species. The report notes that the world’s glaciers are melting at a rate “unprecedented” in at least the last 2000 years.

The ten biggest emitters of greenhouse gases are China, the United States, the European Union, India, Russia, Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, Iran, and Canada<sup>6</sup>, and while a number of world leaders have supported the aim of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, current policies

3. [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf).

4. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.

5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-57203400#:~:text=G7%20environment%20ministers%20have%20agreed,global%20temperatures%20to%201.5C.&text=Ministers%20also%20agreed%20to%20stop,by%20the%20end%20of%202021>.

6. <https://www.climatecentral.org/news/greenhouse-gas-emissions-by-country-19167>

in the major polluting countries are still unsatisfactory. By contrast, the African continent, home to 15% of the world’s population is responsible for only 4% of global carbon emissions<sup>7</sup>. As the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions has shown, of the seven countries in the world that emit two-thirds of total global greenhouse gas emissions, none are African<sup>8</sup>.

## Global Public Good

Making adjustments to achieve zero global carbon emissions constitutes what political scientists would call a public good. States may have an interest in reducing global warming, but since there is no global authority to enforce an agreement on greenhouse emissions, no major power wants to make cuts for fear of others ‘cheating’ or in case such a move to reduce emissions leaves it at a disadvantage. As Harvard scholar Stephen Walt recently observed, the COVID crisis illustrates how difficult it is to coordinate action among self-interested states<sup>9</sup>. During the pandemic, the major powers blamed one another for the problem, competed to get vaccines for themselves while leaving billions of people without the medicine, and unilaterally imposed travel restrictions<sup>10</sup>. And the climate emergency is a much greater challenge, requiring getting the entire world to make adjustments for zero carbon emissions. For realists, major powers will act on climate change only if global warming and climate-induced migration is seen as a security threat; only then, will states begin providing assistance to help developing countries shift to renewable energy<sup>11</sup>. The Copenhagen Accord of 2009 for instance, was based on this realist thinking and called for international cooperation on adaptation, allocating \$30 billion for adaptation and mitigation<sup>12</sup>.

Liberal scholars of international relations on the other hand, stress the importance of global governance and the

7. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/climate-change-will-not-be-fixed-without-africa/>

8. <https://www.c2es.org/content/international-emissions/>

9. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/13/realist-guide-to-solving-climate-change/>

10. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/a-healthy-dose-of-realism-stopping-covid-19-doesnt-start-with-the-who/>

11. Steve Vanderheiden, *Atmospheric Justice: A Political Theory of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011) <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195334609.001.0001/acprof-9780195334609>

12. <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/29/climate-change-adaptation-and-international-relations-theory/>

pivotal role that the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), UNFCCC Secretariat, UNDP, World Bank, and other international bodies will play in shaping the agenda, and global discourse around climate change. Realists retort that it is nation-states, especially the major powers, that dominate international organizations, and it is only state action that will empower the United Nations to act. Thus, Anatol Lieven wrote in his recent book, *Climate Change and the Nation-State* (2021), international institutions like the UN may appear influential, but their mandates only serve to pressure nation-states into action<sup>13</sup>. It is states, galvanized by nationalism, that can address the climate emergency. He argued that only once governments frame climate change as a destabilizing force that will adversely affect a population's security and welfare, will a civic nationalism, that valorizes fighting climate change, emerge and push states to act. Dependency theorists, in turn, observe that international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are driven by American-style free-market thinking that does not favor placing limits on private-sector emissions<sup>14</sup>. This is where constructivist scholars will respond by underscoring the role of transnational social movements and the role of discursive power, noting that it is 'epistemic communities' of scientists and various transnational networks (NGOs, civil society organizations, etc.) that can disseminate knowledge and new norms, thereby shifting popular attitudes and making it electorally costly for heads of states to ignore the climate crisis<sup>15</sup>.

## 'Traumatic Decarbonisation'

Africa is often overlooked in international policy conversations about climate change, except when South Africa's role as an emitter is mentioned<sup>16</sup>. But the continent has not been spared extreme weather events. The Algerian and Tunisian wildfires of August 2021 lend support to the IPCC report's dire warnings. As wildfires raged on both sides of the Mediterranean, temperatures in some North African and Middle Eastern countries hit record highs (51.5 degrees in Iraq; 51 degrees in Iran). By

some accounts, the Middle East and parts of North Africa are warming at twice the global average. Greenhouse gas emissions have tripled in the Middle East in the last thirty years, all of which could make cities unlivable, spurring migration and exacerbating ethnic conflict<sup>17</sup>. It's worth noting that climate change aggravated the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis, since it was an extended drought that drove the rural poor into Syrian cities. Climate change is a 'threat multiplier' in various parts of the Middle East and Africa. Recent research shows that rising temperatures and increased rainfall variability are undermining food security for farmers across Eastern and Southern Africa, most of whom already live at subsistence levels<sup>18</sup>. Poor governance and inadequate data on future climate change are making farming a more hazardous enterprise. Experts note that weather data tools like climate wizard.org and ServirClimateServe are useful, but local farmers still need to have the access and training to use them<sup>19</sup>.

The situation in West Africa is particularly grim. A February 2021 report, *West Africa at the Precipice*<sup>20</sup> painted a picture of climate stress and insecurity in that region, highlighting the susceptibility to climate change of fragile states. According to the World Bank, 6500 square kilometers of the coastal areas in West Africa could be degraded by rising sea levels, as population rates swell, making the region home to an estimated 85 million people by 2050<sup>21</sup>. Rising sea levels are already leading to skirmishes over fishing grounds between Senegal and Mauritania. Irregular rainfall has made life more precarious for the estimated 25 million Sahelian herders, who travel south during the dry season, and then north during the rainy season<sup>22</sup>. Millions have been displaced in Mali, Togo, Senegal, and Ivory Coast<sup>23</sup>. And conflict has broken out on the frontier between Burkina Faso and Mali, and in Nigeria's 'Middle Belt' region<sup>24</sup>.

17. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/24/the-middle-east-is-becoming-literally-uninhabitable/>

18. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-92798-5\\_2](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-92798-5_2)

19. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-92798-5\\_2](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-92798-5_2)

20. <https://igarape.org.br/en/west-africa-at-the-precipice-visualizing-climate-stress-and-insecurity/>

21. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/06/07/report-universal-access-to-sustainable-energy-will-remain-elusive-without-addressing-inequalities>

22. <https://www.climate-refugees.org/perspectives/2020/10/4/sahel>

23. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2021/1/600a92e4125/grim-milestone-sahel-violence-displaces-2-million-inside-countries.html>

24. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>

13. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/313/313184/climate-change-and-the-nation-state/9780141990545.html>

14. <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/11/climate-change-and-international-relations/>

15. <https://niice.org.np/archives/6365>

16. <https://africaprogram.medium.com/africa-is-overlooked-in-the-climate-change-conversation-we-must-change-that-6cf89862d159>

An emerging field of research is looking at how the shift away from carbon to renewable energy will impact fragile states that rely heavily on oil. The argument here is that ‘traumatic decarbonization’, could undermine peace accords and reignite conflict in different parts of Africa, just as the transition towards a green economy could spark conflict over oil and key minerals. As a June 2021 study by USIP states, institutions of governance and rule of law in fragile states are weak, with politics often revolving around bargains between political heavyweights, that is intra-elite agreements financed by oil money. Incumbents use oil revenue to stave off foes and placate allies, so when oil prices drop as happened in the 2010s, peace accords become more difficult to sustain<sup>25</sup>.

As political scientist Alex de Waal wrote recently, the transition to a “*global green economy*” will not simply unleash power struggles over existing resources but will also lead elites of oil-reliant states to seek new revenue in mining or illicit activities which could trigger even more conflict<sup>26</sup>. For instance, when Sudan lost oil revenues, following the secession of South Sudan, Khartoum sought new revenue by renting out troops to the Gulf States to be used in war in Libya and Yemen. Similarly, in South Sudan, political leaders purchased the quiescence of armed groups with oil money; when oil prices fell, a civil war broke out. In Nigeria, the COVID-19 pandemic and oil market competition led to a steep drop in oil prices in 2020. The West African nation which gets 65%-85% of its government revenue from oil rents, found itself in the middle of a crisis. The Nigerian government would borrow massively to maintain a vast patronage system, in face of rising food insecurity, unemployment, and violent protests<sup>27</sup>.

## Great Green Wall

But there are also important positive initiatives. For the first time in decades, African leaders have revived Sankara’s idea of a Great Green Wall. In 2007, the African Union, along with international partners, raised \$8 billion (of an estimated \$14 billion) for the construction of an 8000-kilometer Great Green Wall, which will cut across 21 states to contain the desertification process<sup>28</sup>. This Green Wall aims to restore the degraded landscapes of the Sahel, by planting trees and bushes, which will hold an estimated 275 million tons of carbon. In 2019, the African Development Bank launched a \$1.3 billion investment project in the Sahel<sup>29</sup>. West African leaders have also adopted the ECOWAS Renewable Energy Policy (EREP) which aims to increase the share of renewable energy in the region’s electricity mix to 48% by 2030<sup>30</sup>. African-led multilateral initiatives have also sought to address climate-related problems. For example, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, founded in 1964, has mediated water-related conflict between Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria, and in 2018 presented a regional stabilization strategy aimed at environmental sustainability<sup>31</sup>. Most African states have also ratified environmental treaties, from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement COP21. There are various awareness campaigns underway as well, including the African Union’s Agenda 2063 The Blue Fund, and the African Development Bank’s Desert to Power Project. And, in 2016, the world’s largest solar power plant project, the Noor power plant, was commissioned in Ouarzazate, Morocco. These initiatives are to be commended. But as Felix Tshisekedi, president of the African Union, declared at the Leaders’ Summit on Climate in April 2021, the major powers still need to fulfill their formal pledges and reminded the developed countries<sup>32</sup> of their commitment to raise \$100 million by 2025 for Africa’s green revolution. As Sankara would have said, a more unified front is needed to pressure the major powers to deliver on their promises.

25. <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/carbon-compact-decarbonization-and-peace-in-fragile-states-in-africa-and-the-middle-east/>

26. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/can-world-go-green-without-destabilizing-oil-pumping-nations>

27. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-15/nigeria-s-cratering-economy-may-become-africa-s-biggest-threat>

28. <https://www.unccd.int/actions/great-green-wall-initiative>

29. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/unga-2019-sahel-threats-necessitate-global-response-issoufou-30378>

30. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960148120304109>

31. <https://cblt.org/implementation-of-regional-stabilization-strategy/>

32. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/climate-change-will-not-be-fixed-without-africa/>

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Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

## About the Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South: A public good for strengthening public policy. The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank tasked with the mission of contributing to the improvement of international, economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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