Emancipatory Feminism in the Time of Covid-19

Skosana, Dineo, Sibeko, Busi, Phalatse, Sonia, Morgan, Courtney, Mbithi-Dikgol, Jane, Konik, Inge, Hargreaves, Samantha, Cock, Jacklyn, Cherry, Jane, Bischoff, Christine, Benya, Asanda, Azeez, Hawzhin, Ntlokotse, Ruth, Satgar, Vishwas, Ntlokotse, Ruth, Satgar, Vishwas

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Skosana, Dineo, et al.

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INDIGENOUS EMANCIPATORY FEMINISM AND TRANSFORMATIVE RESISTANCE
INTRODUCTION

In Africa, Covid-19 meets a multiplicity of other crises all interlinked, mutually reinforcing and connected to the same systemic source: extractivist patriarchal capitalism.¹ The crises include climate and ecology and accompanying humanitarian distress; debt (sovereign and individual); hunger; water deprivation; war, civil conflict and associated displacement. These crises layer one upon the other, deepening existing crises and introducing new crises. Read together, for the majority of the world’s poor these manifold crises strip away their ability to live, resulting in a profound crisis of social reproduction.²

The impacts of these crises are unequally distributed and felt within Africa and, more generally, the global South in its most expansive definition.³ Bearing the brunt of the impacts are working-class and peasant women within the most impacted regions, who carry these many crises in their bodies, minds and hearts – for the work of social reproduction and care embraces this all.

As we look beyond Covid-19 and the many crises confronting Africa, the new guiding discourse amongst allies and friends (workers, civil society movements, progressive NGOs and so on) and enemies (the World Bank and other
international finance institutions [IFIs], the United Nations [UN], the G20 and more) is that of *recovery*, variously just, resilient, sustainable, inclusive and ‘green’. The political analysis, principles and strategies, and the goal of transformation guiding the content of the discourse and the pathways chosen, are wildly divergent, with capital and interests allied to corporations and the elite seeking to advance their genocidal and ecocidal ambitions under the veil of ‘reconstruction and development’. Trade unions, peasant and other social movements and progressive feminist organisations are keeping a vigilant and critical eye on these dangerous actors, working collectively and individually to counter their narrative with a vision and discourse of an alternative pathway to a different world that centres people, care, ecosystems and the earth.

This chapter builds on the analyses written by the WoMin African Alliance (where I am based) during the Covid-19 crisis, and our early explorations of pan-Africanism built from below in and through African women and their communities’ resistance to extractivism, and their struggles for justice and reparations. WoMin works on the frontiers of extractivism in the African context and the costs this model of capitalist accumulation externalises to women, their bodies and their labour. In our efforts, and increasingly so since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, we have centred the reparations due to African people for the climate debt, the sovereign debt, the colonial and neocolonial debt, and the reproductive debt to African working-class and peasant women. The reparations angling is radical and restorative, acknowledging the centuries of exploitation, theft and violence perpetrated against African peoples, which enabled the development of economies and societies in imperial Europe and North America. A just transition to a just future for Africans now and the generations of Africans to follow must be secured by the settlement of these debts as the basis for reconstruction and development that is guided by justice, determined by the majority, and guarantees a life for all on this earth.

Whilst WoMin has always identified as an African alliance, we have never expressly adopted a politics informed by pan-Africanism. To conceptualise alternatives to development, we have drawn upon political ideas that have emerged in contexts other than our continent: *buen vivir*; extractivism, post-extractivism and neo-extractivism; the commons; degrowth (for parts of the overdeveloped global North); circular economies and so forth. The growing crises and threats to life on our continent have prompted WoMin to search for living African alternatives as well as alternatives eclipsed by successive waves of colonisation and neocolonial extractivist capitalism. The frame guiding our work with women is thus ecological, feminist, socialist and expressly pan-African.
Since 2021, we have been supporting dialogues with working-class and peasant women in communities of resistance across the continent. This process will culminate in subregional convergences and a 2024 pan-African assembly which will adopt a statement crafted by women and share a collection of women’s stories and visual representations in beadwork and/or tapestry of the alternatives that women dream of.

The lexicon of alternatives which WoMin is now exploring encompasses pan-African solidarity which deliberately embraces the diaspora and contests colonial boundaries and accompanying xenophobias; endogenous practices and philosophies such as ubuntu and ways of addressing bodily and emotional trauma that draw upon African spiritualities; and a deepening understanding and defence of the living land commons: the customary communal land tenure systems which are widespread across our continent. This chapter explores some of the key political ideas that will shape WoMin’s journey with women in the next decade to decolonise ‘development’ and liberate the continent and its diverse peoples.

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTING CRISES IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

The crisis of climate and ecology
Global average temperatures have increased a frightening 0.8°C since 1880. The year 2019 broke all previous average temperature records and despite the economic slowdown triggered by the Covid-19 crisis, the Carbon Brief has forecast that 2020 is still set to hit record highs (Hausfather 2020; see also Barkham 2020). At the current trajectory, in terms of unconditional government pledges through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), average temperatures will, estimated very conservatively, increase by just over 3°C by 2100.

At the time of writing, scientists studying the frozen methane deposits in the Arctic Ocean – the ‘sleeping giants of the carbon cycle’ – reported that the methane is ‘seeping’ from the melting peat bogs over millions of hectares in Siberia (Tomala 2019). Methane has more than 80 times the warming power of carbon dioxide in the first 20 years after it reaches the atmosphere and therefore sets the pace for warming in the short to medium term. Researchers are concerned, given the volume of deposits, that a new climate feedback loop that could heighten the pace of global heating has been triggered. This process was accelerated by the Siberian wildfires in July 2020, as well as other wildfires that have raged across parts of the United States, Australia and Europe over the past few years.
Climate change is affecting different regions of the world differently, with Africa heating disproportionately quickly, and with little infrastructure and few 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. This percentage includes South Africa, which was ranked fourteenth in the list of the world’s top carbon emitters in 2018, which means that the relative contributions of all other African countries are microscopic in comparison.

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. Warming in large areas of the continent will well 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 (WMO 2020). In the Sahel region, Robert Muggah and José Cabrera (2019) report 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 (WMO 2020).

Finally, it is important to recognise the direct links between climate change and biodiversity loss. We need to address both in order to maintain nature and our well being. Biodiversity (the diversity within species, between species and within ecosystems) is declining faster than it has at any other time in human history. Thales Dantas (2018) asserts that the current rate of extinction is ten to hundreds of times higher than the average over the past ten million years and is accelerating. Humanity has already caused the loss of 83 per cent of all wild mammals and half of all wild plants. If low estimates of the number of affected species are accurate, between 200 and 2 000 extinctions are occurring every year.
Debt and financial flows out of Africa

The looting of Africa's wealth and deepening debt have rendered the continent's governments incapable of meeting basic social needs, mitigating climate crisis and supporting adaptation needs of citizens. Seamus Cleary (1989), Thandika Mkandawire and Chukwuma Soludo (2003), and Ndongo Sylla (2018) have evidenced that successive neoliberal structural adjustment policies and the accompanying privatisation of key public services (education, health care, water and sanitation) under the direction of IFIs such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have hollowed out state capacity, thus gravely undermining the readiness of African countries to deal with Covid-19, as well as other pandemics such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS.

The rise of the extractive sectors in Africa in the past decade or more has led to the vast looting of Africa's wealth, well captured in the results of the High-Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa (High-Level Panel 2015), and severely compromises the ability of states to fulfil their developmental responsibilities. In February 2015, after three years of research and analysis, this panel reported that Africa was losing more than US$50 billion every year to illicit financial flows (IFFs). This is defined as money which is earned, transferred or utilised through illegal means and originates from (i) corporate tax evasion, trade mis-invoicing and unlawful transfer pricing; (ii) criminal activities; and (iii) corruption of government officials, with the latter accounting for only three per cent of total outflows, according to Open Society Initiative of West Africa (OSIWA) estimates.6

The case of Nigeria is powerful: the oil and gas sector of the Nigerian economy is responsible for 92.9 per cent of IFFs, with over US$217.7 billion said to have flowed out of the country between 1970 and 2008, according to research conducted by the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). They argue that the extractives sector leads in wealth outflows from the world's periphery to the wealthy centres, which in the Nigerian case are the US, Spain, France and Germany.7

The High-Level Panel only addressed illicit flows, thus neglecting significant corruption and revenue loss due to licit (or legal) financial outflows. To attract investment in the mining and other extractives sectors, governments 'bend' (with the pressure of corporations and often supported by corruption) the tax and revenue collection rules and systems, and waive duties required by law. Mining companies are thus able to negotiate tax rates favourable to themselves but inconsistent with the laid down laws of the country in question. By way of example, in Sierra Leone, the corporate income tax for mining companies is 37.5 per cent as set out in the Income Tax Act of 2002. However, in 2010/11 two iron ore mining companies,
African Minerals and London Mining, had individual agreements with the government to pay only 25 per cent. In London Mining's initial agreement, the company retained a six per cent income tax rate for three years (WoMin 2020).

Debt is weighing heavily on the national budgets of African countries and has been exacerbated, in recent years, by 'Eurobonds', a debt instrument that is denominated in a currency other than the home currency of the country. This leaves African countries extremely vulnerable to commonplace volatility in foreign exchange currency rates.

In the joint 2020 Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt/WoMin statement on the African debt crisis, sub-Saharan Africa’s outstanding public external debt doubled between 2010 and the end of December 2018, from US$160 billion to US$365.5 billion. At the time of writing, Africa’s public debt stands at more than US$500 billion (CADTM and WoMin 2020). In some countries, debt servicing represents more than 25 per cent of their revenues, and most countries spend more on debt than on health. For example, Cameroon spends 23.8 per cent of its revenue on debt servicing, compared to 6.9 per cent on health. This year, the continent will pay a total of US$44 billion in interest alone to its external creditors.

The CADTM/WoMin statement indicates that African governments are struggling to find the money to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and save lives, and to support the very necessary recovery plans – imperatives undermined by the demands of debt servicing. In contrast, rich countries are investing about eight per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP), on average, on economic interventions and stimulus measures, while African countries are spending an average of 0.8 per cent of their GDP, which measure hides significant differences across African countries (CADTM and WoMin 2020).

The extractives sector, and extractivism as a model of development, is inextricably linked to the debt crisis. WoMin and other allies project a greater demand for the extraction of Africa’s wealth in natural resources in the coming years, to settle existing debts and procure new loans for ‘reconstruction’. This will only fuel the unsustainable cycle of mega resource extraction, greater illicit and licit financial flows out of Africa, deepening climate and ecological crisis, expanding indebtedness and yet more extraction in a desperate quest to head off the growing interconnected crises.

The rise of pandemics
HIV/AIDS, avian flu, the swine flu pandemic, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the Ebola fever and now Covid-19 are the main infectious diseases, stemming from the spread of pathogens ordinarily found in animals, usually wildlife, to humans, which have afflicted Africa in the past 50 years. Vandana Shiva, the
esteemed scholar and activist, argues that ‘more than 300 new pathogens have emerged over the past 50 years as the habitat of species is destroyed and manipulated for profits’ (Shiva 2020).

The root of most new infectious diseases lies in the rapid expansion of the extractives sector, which includes logging and industrial plantation style mono-cropping (such as palm oil and cocoa), livestock production and, more recently, the mining sector’s violent encroachments on land and forests in contexts of deep structural poverty.

The Ebola crisis, which raged through West Africa during 2013–2016, killing more than 11 000 people, and mainly affecting Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, powerfully illustrates this relationship. Significant capital investment in the extractives sector (rubber tapping, cocoa and palm oil production specifically) had contributed to West Africa suffering the highest deforestation rate in the world at this time. Scientists studied 27 Ebola outbreak sites in sub-Saharan Africa and discovered that an outbreak is most likely to strike in or near areas that have experienced deforestation in the previous two years (McQue 2018).

In 2019, the Ebola virus reared its head again, this time in the war-torn eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where gold mining by large multinational companies is widespread. It is estimated that more than 2 000 people died in this year-long epidemic (Keneally 2014). In this instance, Ebola was directly linked to the mining industry, confirming the analysis of scientists that mining, the felling of trees to build roads, and the construction of settlements in previously pristine jungles bring humans into contact with animal species they may never have been near before (Keneally 2014).

Ebola has taken root in contexts characterised by deep structural poverty. At the time of the 2013–2016 crisis, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia were ranked 183, 175 and 179 in the UN Human Development Index, with the DRC (in 2019) sitting at 179 on the same index. This poverty in contexts that have withstood the ravages of resource grabs during the colonial, post-colonial and neocolonial periods, undermines the readiness of African states and African peoples to respond to pandemics and other crises of climate, ecology and war. By way of illustration, in 2018 the World Health Organization (WHO) outlined the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on human health as malnutrition, tropical and diarrhoeal diseases, malaria, dengue fever, as well as meningitis and cardio-respiratory diseases.10

Early projections concerning the impact of Covid-19 on African countries, which are characterised by weak health systems, and existent diseases of poverty (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria) were dire. However, the reported infection and death rate was low compared to most regions of the world, with 51 000 African
deaths confirmed at the time of writing. The head of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention indicated that the miscounting of deaths was minimal. In contrast, South African epidemiologists argued that the actual death rate there was 2.5 times greater than officially reported.\textsuperscript{11}

**War, displacement and violence against women**

Scientists have generally avoided making a direct link between climate change and conflict, but are more recently converging around the idea that climate change adds to already existing stresses in societies and can therefore be characterised as having a ‘threat multiplier’ effect. ‘Think of climate change as “loading the dice”, making conflict more likely to occur in subtle ways across a host of different country contexts’ (United Nations 2019; O’Loughlin and Hendrix 2019).

The Sahel is an important illustration. Dependent on rain-fed agriculture, the Sahel is frequently impacted by droughts and floods, with significant impacts on people’s food security.\textsuperscript{12} The combined contribution of violence, armed conflict and military operations has displaced more than 4.9 million people and left approximately 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. The UN concludes that climate change is partly to blame. Roughly 80 per cent of the Sahel’s farmland is degraded, and temperatures there are increasing at one and a half times the global average. The effect of this is that droughts and floods are growing longer and more frequent, which undermines food production. The land available to the more than 50 million pastoralists and their dependents is shrinking (Muggah and Cabrera 2019), a reality aggravated by rising population numbers pushing farmers northward in search of cultivable land. Add the shrinking of Lake Chad to the picture and these combined factors provide a verdant breeding ground for terrorist groups as social values and moral authority evaporate.

Large-scale extraction of natural resources often lies at the heart of wars and civil strife. Gargantuan mining and resource companies like ExxonMobil and BHP Billiton manoeuvre for control of enormously valuable oilfields and mineral lodes. Add to the mix other players, such as shadowy resource traders, smugglers, corrupt local officials, arms dealers, transport operators and mercenary companies, and the potential for conflict at scales ranging from local to national and well beyond, multiplies. Increasing scarcity of resources further sharpens such conflicts, in which powerful governments and their military/intelligence arms are usually implicated.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, decades of civil strife are linked to control over the diamond fields and involve corporations, illicit trading, elite grabs and the corruption of traditional leaders. The International Rescue Committee’s mortality studies on the humanitarian impact of civil conflict and inter state wars linked to control
over natural resource wealth, mainly on the eastern side of the DRC, estimate that 5.4 million people have died since 1998, making this the deadliest conflict since the Second World War, yet barely acknowledged internationally (Moszynski 2008). The same is true of Angola’s oil and diamond fields, and Nigeria’s Niger Delta, which has been characterised by decades of insurrections and local resistances, military occupation, and extreme violence perpetrated against women – all linked to oil company controls over the extremely profitable exploitation of reserves.

War and conflict, and the other crises cited here, elevate domestic and sexualised violence as families confront extreme social and economic stress (Gevers et al. 2020; Harvey 2020; UN Women n.d.). In Uganda, research undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) revealed that women and girls are that much more vulnerable to rape and harassment as they walk longer distances to access food and water in situations of climate-related drought. WoMin drew the same conclusions through feminist participatory research undertaken with women in northern KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, where the combined impacts of water grabbing by the Tendele coal mine and drought left women and girls walking round trips of two hours for 25 litres of water. Women reported experiences of sexual harassment and rape during these walks (WoMin 2017).

Ecological and climate crisis, arising from an extractivist logic, are concrete expressions of the eroded relationship between humanity and nature under Western industrialised capitalism. When nature’s territory is violently damaged and destroyed by the externalised impacts of industrialised extractivist processes (water, air and soil pollution, and biodiversity losses), the body territory is also polluted. People fall ill with cancers, respiratory diseases, reproductive health problems, eye diseases and substance addictions, which not only contribute to the increased labour of care carried by women in impacted communities but also contribute to a crisis in the ability of people to reproduce themselves daily (the crisis of social reproduction). The destruction of nature territory and body territory through pollution, ecological destruction and climate change, and the violence perpetrated against workers, communities and especially women are intertwined. Violence against women must, therefore, be addressed as intrinsically linked to the ecological and climate crisis (World Rainforest Movement 2016).

Conservative and liberal commentators from the territorial global North have projected Africa’s conflicts and wars as ‘domestic’ issues related to its underdeveloped status and corrupt leaders. However, the continent’s battles arise, in large part, from corrupt transnational corporations and their quest for control over and maximum profit from Africa’s wealth and the unsustainable energy systems, lifestyles
and consumption patterns of the middle classes and elites in the same dominant territories, which fuel climate and ecological crises.

**Concluding thoughts on the interconnected crises**
The mounting ecological and climate crises and rising consciousness of their roots meet the Covid-19 pandemic to lay bare the same systemic roots. The historical and structural realities described above, which afflict Africa and its poor and working populations in very particular ways, stem from the same root: extractivist neocolonial patriarchal capitalism. This system exploits the cheap labour of black working-class men in mines and plantations and rests on the unpaid labour of women as they work to house, provide water and food, care for and satisfy the needs of labour. The peasantry and the working classes are dispossessed of land, water, forests, fisheries and minerals to profit the system, which relies on nature as a free or cheap input to production and a ‘sink’ for the externalised environmental costs of production. Capital also depends on women’s unpaid labour to absorb the externalised social and economic costs of production and the rehabilitation of damaged nature (Hargreaves 2019).

Reputable scientists, academics, analysts and organisations are linking Covid-19 to the encroachments of extractivist capital upon forests and ecosystems as corporations pursue profit through ranching, logging and mining. The logic of reducing nature and its beings to assets to be exploited for profit therefore lies at the very heart of the Covid-19 pandemic, the very same logic that is causing the global climate crisis.

Working-class and peasant women in Africa carry the burden of all the crises listed above because of their designation as the primary household food producers, caregivers and harvesters of water, energy and other basic goods needed for the reproduction of life and the wellbeing of people. But these roles also place them at the frontlines of the battle to defend nature and its right to exist, without which the survival of all beings would not be possible.

Political analysis and perspectives which link ecology, feminism and socialism with critical analysis about who carries the cost of a violent extractivist development model – LGBTIQ, black and brown, working-class, peasant and female bodies – have been more evident during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic on the African continent. What has, however, been largely lacking in the Anglophone African literature on crises and frames for economic, political and societal responses has been a reclaiming and reconceptualisation of a radical pan-Africanism which can inspire movement, frame resistance and drive African development alternatives.
The following section addresses just three dimensions of a decolonising process of dreaming and imagining African alternatives – a process that WoMin has started exploring in its work with women. These include African commoning and the protection of land and nature through customary laws and practices; the philosophy and practice of ubuntu (I am because we are); and, embracing these two dimensions, the recovery of pan-Africanism in and through women’s resistances to extractivist capital.

‘BUILDING BACK’ WITH AFRICAN HISTORY, POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY AT THE CENTRE

There are powerful political ideas, theories and practices that have informed and continue to guide progressive social movements and formations as we make sense of the contexts we live in, dream of a different world and build strategies for reaching our destination within wider political movements. The WoMin African Alliance subscribes to the political ideas of extractivism (and its variants), eco-feminism, the commoning of resources, decolonisation, ecological socialism and post-development thinking.

Most importantly, WoMin has also been deeply shaped by the experiences of women in extractives-impacted communities; by the droughts, flooding, cyclones and hurricanes which characterise the climate crisis; by the violence and injustices the women we work with confront daily;14 and by the close political allies with whom we analyse, organise and campaign.

As we build an imagination of and pathway towards a post-Covid world that acknowledges the multiple crises which the peoples of Africa live with daily, progressive African feminists and anti-capitalist movements are charged with acknowledging the living African alternatives that exist in the everyday systems and practices of holding land, making decisions, keeping and sharing seed, producing food, sharing labour demands collectively, dealing with traumas, relating to ecologies and offering social support. At the same time, we must collaborate with communities – and women specifically – to recover historical practices which have been eroded by successive waves of colonisation and neocolonisation. While the recovery and deepening of these more micro-level alternatives will be critical to building resilience and adapting to a rapidly warming climate, these must be located within a wider political struggle against the deep roots of Africa’s historical oppression. This requires a recovery and embracing of radical pan-Africanism which is socialist, ecological and feminist and which can grapple with new configurations of imperialism.
The living, breathing African commons: Customary land tenure systems

Land on large swathes of the continent is held under common or communal property systems. Liz Wiley (2018), writing for the Forest Peoples Programme, estimates that 90 per cent of rural dwellers acquire, hold and transfer lands as members of communities, in accordance with agreed community norms. She estimates that between 800 and 880 million people on the continent were living under common property regimes at the time of writing, and that this number will increase to around one billion people in 2050. Only four (Mauritania, Eritrea, Senegal and Egypt) out of 54 countries had fully extinguished customary tenure, although communities continue to use land and resources in common. Despite the scale and extent of customary landholding, many African governments do not recognise or support it, with the result that these systems are under threat. Customary tenure systems are generally characterised by some of the following features:

- Those who dwell on the land are the keepers/carers/custodians for generations to come.
- Land may not be owned as private property and cannot be sold on the open market. Having said that, rights to communal land are strong; rights can be bequeathed within the family (variously to the oldest or youngest male child as a commonplace practice) and can only be alienated by collective decision upon serious violation of communal rules.
- Decisions about the use of land must be made collectively by the group/tribe/community.
- Representatives/leaders of the group are required to facilitate collective decisions of the group and represent these to ‘outsiders’.
- Land rights and the strength of tenure security determine membership of the group and rights to participate in and influence decision making at a collective level.
- There are strict rules for the entry of outsiders to the group in order to preserve the integrity and common rules of the collective.

This is a description of ‘ideal’ and generalised rules for common property systems at the local or micro scale, benefiting a clearly defined group, community, tribe or entity. There is, of course, variation from one context to the next. The practices and beliefs of these systems have been eroded and manipulated by states and the powerful during colonisation, apartheid (in South Africa), neoliberal capitalism and neocolonisation. Community and traditional leaders
often exercise too much power, fail to respect community decision-making processes, and may sometimes represent their own interests as representative of the group and its interests.

Common property systems have long come under attack by institutions such as the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation and other IFIs, and states have been pressurised to privatise these holdings. This thinking is largely based on the long-discredited ideas of Garrett Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the commons’ (1968), and a core neoliberal commitment to privatisation as the basis for ‘sound’ development (Harvey 2011).

Patriarchal and colonial thinking have worked together and separately to undermine women’s land rights and their ability to participate in community or group decision-making processes, with women navigating and exercising their creative agency to undermine or ‘work’ the system as their status permits. Uchendu Chigbu, Gaynor Paradza and Walter Dachaga (2019) note that women’s access to land and tenure security is highly differentiated according to class, age, health status, inheritance practices and migrant status.¹⁵

As Simon Fairlie (2009) notes, the enclosure of common fields, grazing lands and forests in the traditional global North started in Britain during the twelfth century, with full enclosure there more or less concluded by the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Giangiacomo Bravo and Tine De Moor (2008) point out that in Europe, the pace of privatisation was slower and greatly differentiated, but gained traction in the nineteenth century, though common rights remain intact over some areas of pasture and woodland – but under increasing pressure. Common property over land, water, forests and fish in the African context, as well as other parts of the traditional global South, are the living commons to be defended, protected and expanded in transformative ways that enable both the land rights and decision-making rights of women and young people. The commons are the first line of defence against the encroachments of capital upon people and nature, and represent the founding basis of the right of peoples and women to say an emphatic ‘no’ to extractives-driven development.

Ubuntu – I am because we are

Ubuntu, also referred to as Botho, Hunhu Munhu, Umuntu, Muthu, Bumuntu, Gimuntu, Vumuntu, Omundu and so on in other Bantu languages, is an African philosophy that rests on the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity, that is, a person is a person through other people. It derives from an Nguni word, ubuntu, meaning ‘the quality of being human’.

This philosophy holds that we owe our selfhood to others and calls on us to mirror our humanity for and to each other. It sits contrary to the Western
Emancipatory Feminism in the Time of Covid-19

emphasis on individualism and individual human rights, asking instead that we put the interests of the community ahead of the individual. Jacob Mugumbate and Andrew Nyanguru (2013) contend that through ubuntu we recognise the humanity of others and activate behaviour imbued with respect, tolerance, sharing, empathy and love.

Kai Horsthemke (2017) and Danford Chibvongodze (2017) both challenge critiques of ubuntu as being anthropocentric in nature and argue instead that this philosophy consolidates the human, natural and spiritual tripartite allowing Africans to extend the moral obligations they hold to humans to nature, including wildlife. In African religious and spiritual ontology, the humanity and existence of Africans is intertwined with that of plants, animals and rivers. By way of example, the Herero of Namibia regard cattle as sacred and believe that they originate from the same ‘tree of life’ as human beings. In some African cultures, snakes are believed to symbolise human spirits and may not be killed. Instead, they must be given food and drink when they visit people’s homes. In rural parts of Cameroon, the family will often worship at the site of a fig tree, which is a refuge for gods that protect local people from harm. The fig tree cannot be desecrated or felled. Clan names, which play an essential role in African religion, are often derived from the identities and mannerisms of wild animals. These religious beliefs ensure that humans coexist with the environment and animals in respectful and non-exploitative ways (Chibvongodze 2017).

Ubuntu presents us with the values of care, love, empathy, respect and common interest over individualism, which few in progressive social movements would argue does not represent, in part, the type of society, community, Africa and world we strive for. These values represent the prefigurative politics we should strive for in our social formations and movements. However, ubuntu may be critiqued as a philosophy that fails to grapple with power structures and the unequal relations of class, gender, ethnicity, age and so forth, which undermine the enjoyment of these very values. While this may be true, the philosophy and practice of ubuntu is complementary to the structural analysis and confrontations with capital and patriarchy which characterise the struggles of progressive movements.

From a perusal of the Anglophone African literature, ideas of ubuntu have been taken up in the rights of nature work, in the sphere of education, and on the more dubious grounds of environmental management and even tourism, which cynically present ubuntu in marketing materials as an opportunity for tourists to ‘enjoy’ African hospitality and culture. The extent to which this philosophy and its call to a transformed praxis of resistance has been taken up in African movements and political formations is unclear and a point for further exploration. WoMin, which
defines as African and, more recently, as an alliance pursuing pan-African politics, is only now, eight years after its formation, starting to explore ubuntu from an African eco-feminist vantage point. It seeks to understand whether and how this philosophy shapes the daily lives of rural African women and their coping strategies in the midst of multiple crises and integrate this into our political analysis and strategy for confronting patriarchal, extractivist capitalism.

Pan-African politics and movement
Pan-Africanism, an ideology and political movement, has its origins in the struggles of all African peoples against five centuries of enslavement and colonisation. It aims to unify Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, all bound by a common history and destiny, and reclaim African peoples from colonisation, neocolonisation and imperialism. More generally, the pan-African movement aims to ‘promote the political, socio-economic and cultural unity, emancipation and self-reliance of Africa and its diaspora’ (Adebajo 2020: 4).

Between 1884 and 1885, the infamous Berlin Conference agreed to the balkanisation of Africa into 50 nation-states, laying the basis for colonisation and neocolonisation for well over the next century. This gave greater impetus to the emerging pan-African movement, which met for the first time 15 years later in London, from 23 to 25 July 1900. This was followed by five successive conferences between 1919 and 1945.

According to Adekeye Adebajo (2020), pan-African civil society activism can be traced back to the 1770s in the United States diaspora when Phillis Wheatley, a woman, published a volume of poetry which put forward a positive and empowering image of the ‘black world’. Since then, the pan-African lineage of thinkers, philosophers and revolutionaries has embraced a wide range of political orientations and ideas. These include Africa for the Africans, with the learned playing a ‘civilising’ role towards the ‘backward tribes’; Ethiopianism, the spiritual strand of pan-Africanism, which was dominant during the ‘high’ imperial period; pan-African nationalism; and pan-African socialism, of particular interest to me, and largely advanced by Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and Burkina Faso’s Thomas Sankara.

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Charter was adopted in a meeting of 32 African states in Addis Ababa and represented a first effort to institutionalise pan-Africanism by fostering unity and solidarity between African countries. The OAU was weakened by the lack of implementation mechanisms and by the non-binding status of assembly resolutions. More profoundly, the OAU failed to bring down imposed national boundaries, deconstruct nationalities and create a unified African sovereignty. If these actions had been undertaken, they would have unmade the Berlin
Conference decisions, and unlocked a powerful process of continent-wide decolonisation as well as a reimagining and remaking of Africa and its peoples.

The more contemporary Pan-African Parliament and African Union have replicated the same disappointments, failing to offer a transformative vision of the continent. Instead, states continue to compete for elusive foreign investment, trade deals and loans, in this way facilitating the continued plunder of Africa’s resources on highly unjust terms, and perpetuating Africa’s marginalised geopolitical positioning.

While the formal institutionalisation of pan-Africanism has not yielded what the continent and its peoples need for genuine socio-economic, political and cultural liberation (the guiding elements of pan-Africanism), pan-African civil society activism and solidarity within and across the boundaries of the nation-state is vibrant. This organising has adopted divergent politics and taken different forms, including networking and activism targeting the subregional blocs, solidarity campaigns, alliance building within linguistic blocs, and genuine attempts at building pan-African organisation. This informs a new imagination about Africa that its peoples need, drawing from an abundant living praxis, and informed by a rich history of African philosophy, spirituality and movement. A revitalised pan-Africanism must be constructed from below by African citizens, wedded in demand and solidarity across nations, and rooted in their daily practices and relations with each other and with Mother Nature. African women across the continent are at the forefront of mobilisations to stop mega extractives and infrastructure projects, condemn repression and violence, and demand climate justice. These struggles represent a living pan-Africanism, rooted in a long tradition of women’s resistances against colonialism, against the privatisation of public services under neoliberalism and against the land and resource grabs of neocolonial capitalism.

Dialogues with women on a just pan-African future

WoMin is collaborating with its partners and allies to undertake dialogues with women resisting extractivism on their dreams and hopes for a different community, society and Africa. This process started in July 2019 at a continental convening of feminists, environmental justice activists and activist academics to explore the idea of eco-feminist just transitions in the African context. In this meeting a set of principles to guide just transitions on an eco-feminist basis were agreed, as was a proposal to collaborate with women impacted by extractivism to dream and imagine a different community, society and Africa. The dialogues were piloted in Madagascar, Guinea (Conakry) and South Africa, and have been rolled out in sites in another ten countries. In this process, women reflect on their familial and communal histories to identify ways of living and producing that have been lost
or distorted through colonial and neocolonial processes. They consider the present and what this has meant for women and their communities and, building on past and present, explore their hopes and dreams for radically transformed futures. These dialogues are unfolding, in different forms, at various levels (local, national and subregional) and in collaboration with diverse movements, culminating in a pan-African women’s assembly within a planned continental ‘Thematic Social Forum on Extractivism, African Sovereignty and Pan African Solutions’ in 2024. The dialogues are being systematised by women at the national and subregional levels, and their hopes and dreams are finding expression in writing, stories, as well as in maps, drawings, beadwork and tapestry. This unified solidarity and action of African women across nations dialoguing, imagining and organising, represents an important strand of a renewed living, breathing pan-Africanism.

NOTES

1 Extractivism describes economic activities that entail the removal of substantial amounts of a nation’s natural commons (in raw form) for sale on the world market. This includes minerals, gas and oil extraction, plantation forestry, industrial agriculture and fisheries. New forms of extractivism exist in emerging renewable energies. Extractivism also refers to the conditions under which these resources are extracted and whose interests they serve, speaking to a dominant and highly unequal model of development which deeply shapes the nature of the economy, class structures, gender relations, the functioning of the state and public discourse (Acosta n.d.; Aguilar 2012; Gudynas 2010).

2 Social reproduction refers to the activities involved in maintaining and reproducing current workers and their labour power, nurturing future workers, and maintaining members of families and communities who cannot work on a daily and generational basis. It involves ‘a range of different kinds of work – mental, manual and emotional’ and traverses the provision of food, clothing, shelter, basic safety and health care, alongside the transmission of knowledge, values and cultural practices (Laslett and Brenner 1989).

3 The global South has traditionally referred to nation-states that have been economically disadvantaged by colonisation and neoliberalism, and has replaced the political idea of the ‘Third World’. By the notion of a more expansive definition, I refer to territories and peoples negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalisation, such that we have the economic Souths in the geographic North and the privileged North in the traditional geography of the global South (Mahler 2017).

4 WoMin is an African eco-feminist alliance, working with partners and allies in 17 countries across sub-Saharan Africa to support women organising and movement building to challenge extractivist mega projects, to evidence their destructive effects and to force (where possible) corporations to internalise the social, environmental, economic and gendered costs. The alliance is accountable to its partners and allies in the 17 countries, but most importantly, places itself at the service of women directly impacted by
extractivism and its fallout, including the climate, ecological and reproductive crises. WoMin, which launched in October 2013, currently has 24 staff and associates (all women), operates a secretariat in Johannesburg and has an annual budget of close to R50 million granted by funders and foundations in Europe, the United Kingdom and North America.

5 In climate change terminology, a feedback loop is like a ‘vicious cycle’, where something, such as the peat fires in Siberia, triggers a warming trend that accelerates a rise in temperature, termed a positive feedback. A negative feedback, by contrast, would be a cooling trend. See ‘What are climate change feedback loops?’, The Guardian, 5 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/jan/05/climate-change-feedback-loops (accessed 9 June 2021).


9 See Saker et al. (2004); Ord (2020); Walsh (2020); WHO (2014).


12 The Sahel is a vast semi-arid region of Africa which separates the Sahara Desert to the north and tropical savannahs to the south.

13 See Zeilig and Cross (2020); Ian Angus interview by ROAPE (2020); Grain (2020); Shiva (2020).


15 See Chigbu et al. (2019) for a three-country (Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe) study exploring women’s land rights.


REFERENCES


