

What solutions to the failures of climate negotiations?

By Nnimmo Bassey -Director of Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) (Nigeria).



Photo: HOMEF

West Africa is seriously affected by global warming. Due to our very long coastline and its position on the globe, the entire African continent is crossed by the equator and surrounded by coasts is very exposed to it. West Africa is currently being affected by rising sea levels, warming ocean temperatures, acidification, and all related challenges.

We therefore see many impacts, including migration, displacement, and conflict, especially in the Sahelian strip. Some of the conflicts in Africa can readily be linked to global warming. Even the political instability we are currently seeing in West Africa could be attributed to the crises created by climate impact, loss of economic opportunities, population displacement and all kinds of frictions.

To fight against global warming, we must look at all sectors of social life. This is not a question reserved for specialists, environmentalists, activists, or children who demonstrate in the streets against lack of climate action. We must involve everyone: farmers, fishermen, pastoralists, teachers, doctors. Everyone's health is affected by climate change and this should be priority area for action and should encourage everyone to join the fight. It is a complex problem, a polycrisis, and not a one-sided problem, It affects all sectors and must be tackled from all angles.

One of the big problems in the fight against global warming in the world is that nations have come together in 26 conferences of the parties to find how to avoid action and not how to act! The global warming that we are experiencing today is the result of rampant capitalist production and irrational consumption. It is therefore a failure of the system, a failure of market mechanisms and yet climate

conferences present them as solutions to global warming. False solutions are false and are all doomed to fail.

Second, when we talk about action on climate change, we tend to talk about carbon molecules in the atmosphere. We only look at one end of the pipelines. We avoid the areas where the fossil fuels are extracted, which is the start of the pipeline. I have dedicated my entire adult life to campaigning against this. I campaign with communities living in the oil fields and experiencing massive pollution. Bodies of water covered in slicks of crude oil; noxious gas constantly released into the atmosphere through flares. Contaminated soil. Contaminated water. Contaminated air. And the most vulnerable people are even more deprived of any resilience.

I am particularly worried about Senegal. Because the country is now determined to invest in the extraction of fossil fuels: crude oil and gas. I have friends who have spoken to fishermen here. They told me that coastal communities had yet to see any oil spills, so they couldn't really complain. But I'm telling you: it's coming soon. Our friends from Ghana told us that they could do better than Nigeria and that there would be no oil spill. Now the fishermen are in serious trouble. Once the extraction at sea has begun, an impassable limit is imposed on the fishermen around oil platforms, and the whole area is cordoned off by security forces. Our governments devote more resources to the protection of fossil fuel resources than to the protection of citizens. In Nigeria, a huge explosion happened about two years ago, in May 2020 at Ororo-1 oilfield. The offshore well has been on fire offshore and you can see it from the coast. It has been burning and spilling crude oil and contaminating the ocean for more than two years now. So, we have a serious problem of destruction of the aquatic ecosystem. Fisheries were already under pressure; the extraction of fossil fuels compounds the problem.

For countries in Africa, depending on fossil fuels seems like an easy way to earn income. Probably because it's like a voodoo economy. You sit in your government office and the money goes to your bank, to your foreign accounts, and you don't really care what's happening on the ground. And that's a tragic error because the more carbon we release into the atmosphere, the more we pollute our communities and the more we put the world at risk. It is not just the countries that benefit from the revenue, but the people and the whole world that are in danger.

The type of agriculture we practice is another cause of global warming. Colonial agriculture or plantation agriculture led to heavy deforestation and caused the displacement of communities. It has weakened the resilience and ability of communities to defend themselves, reduced biodiversity and impacted our health as we consume unwholesome diets because of loss of varieties. The variety of crops is highly limited, the plantations specialize in certain species which are mainly for export, and not for local populations. Just as industrial fishing feeds fish and livestock, instead of feeding people.

I would now like to focus on how the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is failing in its commitments to the world, Africa, and West Africa in particular. Over the years, the negotiations have evolved, notably since Copenhagen in 2009. They have moved from a system of binding emission reductions by wealthy industrialized nations, with measurable reduction of emissions at source and greater support for vulnerable nations to build their resilience. But since Copenhagen, the binding emission reductions have been stopped. The Copenhagen Accord evolved into the Paris Agreement, celebrated around the world. The Paris agreement is a big threat to our security and safety. And I'll tell you why.

First, it is based on what is called *Nationally Determined Contributions*. Nations therefore decide how much emissions they promise to reduce. Before COP 26, the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, showed that if we adopt all the voluntary emission reductions of the different countries, the world should reach a temperature increase of 2.7 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels. At COP26, new pledges were made, and the probable outcome was reduced to 2.4 degrees. But if we go back to the Paris Agreement, the highest temperature target is "well below 2 degrees". The lowest and "most desirable" is 1.5°C. However, a global average of 1.5°C does not mean 1.5°C for Africa. Africa is experiencing a temperature increase 50% above the global average. So, when the world is aiming for 1.5°C, that means we should prepare in Africa for 2.2 degrees rise. This lower temperature target is above the upper limit set by the Paris Agreement. If we aim for 2 degrees, that means we will reach 3 degrees. And 3 degrees is nothing but setting West Africa on fire, setting Africa on fire.

If we understand these tendencies, we should see the emergency facing our region. This should compel us to mobilize across the African continent to demand a Conference of Peoples, not a Conference of Parties. The politicians, I apologize to those present at this colloquium, are not going to help us. People need to stand up, take matters into their own hands and tell politicians what to do rather than letting them decide without listening to us. This is our challenge.

If you read the document resulting from COP26, you will find that it says that climate justice is only important to *some people* in the world. This is absolute nonsense. Because the UNFCCC, the framework for the negotiations itself, takes climate justice as its starting point in its principle of *Common but Differentiated Responsibilities* (CBDR). It means we all need to do something, but those who created the problem need to do more. This is climate justice. And that's the basis of the negotiations, which has now been thrown out of the window. And yet, the negotiators come back congratulating themselves on having concluded a good agreement. An agreement that does not recognize that those who created the problem should do more to solve it is not a good agreement at all. Africa itself has contributed less than 3% to greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Europe contributes about 30%, North America also 30%, so who should reduce what amount of emissions? Africa emits *nothing* at all! But Africa must nevertheless do something because ultimately, we share some responsibility. However, big the industrialized nations must do their fair share.

Big polluters should do more and assume their historical responsibilities. This means that they owe a climate debt to the South. Those who have taken 80% of the carbon budget and are exposing the world to these risks today should recognize the fact that they are in debt. And if this debt is recognized and paid, there will be no need to debate and struggle over climate finance. In 2009, the climate conference in Copenhagen promised us 100,000 billion dollars per year from 2020 to deal with the consequences of climate change. While this sum is not forthcoming, trillions of dollars are spent on war, destroying nations, undermining the ability to resist global warming. Clearly it is not a question of lack of resources. It is a question of power, of geo-politics, of dominance and of exploitation. When Covid-19 hit, huge sums were quickly collected, and people got richer while the poor were more at risk. It's not a question of a lack of resources. It is a question of political will; it is a question of not realizing that we are all on this blue planet and that we have a common destiny. If no action is taken, it is not just West Africa that will be on fire, human beings, other mammals, and large animals will simply disappear from the planet. This planet can do without men.

What should we do? The number one solution, which I think we should do, is to stop extracting fossil fuels. It may not happen overnight. Either we decide to slow down and stop our dependence on oil, gas, coal, or we will have to make a spectacular crisis, when disaster strikes. As someone said before, *the*

Stone Age didn't end because there were no more stones. In the same way the oil age will not end because there is no more oil. There will be oil, but it will be abandoned, no one will need it. If in ten years all combustion engines are shipped to Africa, then Africa will be the cemetery for outdated technologies. Is this what we want? In West Africa? No. So we must start changing now.

Finally, from Dakar to Djibouti, in East Africa, there is a project to build a Great Green Wall. African countries should promote and build it. This does not require external technologies but requires the use of indigenous species and knowledge. We have seen it in Burkina Faso, where a man, Yacouba Sawadogo, and farmers in Burkina use the *zira* technology to regenerate soils, even rocky soils, to grow a forest in the Sahel. We absolutely must do this to reform our food system. Local ideas abound. We also have landraces that can be used to build green walls across Africa and make them centres of economic activity using local knowledge, local capacities, local species and changing climate dynamics. This is true climate smart living.

There are things we can do. We must reinvent solidarity, between Europe and Africa, between North and South. We need to understand what it means to work together for a common future that allows humans to continue to inhabit the planet. Mobilizing all our actions in favour of the climate is an urgent and inescapable task. Join the movement today.