FROM RED TO GREEN
AFRICA'S STRUGGLE FOR A FAIR ENERGY TRANSITION

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African political independence in the 1950s and 1960s was celebrated as the final blow to slavery, colonization, and exploitation by European powers. After centuries of resource extraction and subjugation, the continent was finally free to make its own decisions. Yet sovereignty has often remained elusive, as Ivorian author Mamadou Kourouma vividly illustrates in his novel *Les soleils des indépendances*. Guinea's rejection of Charles de Gaulle's 1958 referendum, which would have tied the country to France like the rest of French West and Equatorial Africa, provides a stark example. The country paid a heavy price for this sovereign choice: France immediately halted all financial aid and sought to isolate Guinea. Two years later, the rest of French West and Equatorial Africa gained independence, but decades later, the consequences of asserting sovereignty continue to reverberate. The formal end of colonialism did not automatically translate into true self-determination.

Today, sovereignty remains a central concern across West Africa. It is debated in parliaments, classrooms, and markets alike, reflecting an intergenerational question: after more than sixty years of independence, how is it that Africa remains at the margins of the global economy? This question is particularly urgent in discussions of the global energy transition, as highlighted at COP in Belém. Industrialized countries seek to shift their energy systems from fossil fuels to renewable sources, yet they often do so without radically transforming their consumption models. Instead, they outsource environmental costs to the Global South. Carbon offset schemes, forest conservation mechanisms, and the extraction of minerals such as cobalt, lithium, nickel, and graphite for renewable energy technologies all concentrate benefits in the Global North while imposing social and environmental costs on African communities. In practice, decades of resource exploitation have rarely benefited African economies, reinforcing economic dependency and perpetuating environmental and social harm.

This dynamic has been described as "**green colonialism**" by Nnimmo Bassey, founder of the Health of Mother Earth Foundation. Hamza Hamouchene similarly acknowledges the urgent need for a transition to renewable energy but criticizes current practices that perpetuate dispossession, exploitation, and socioeconomic exclusion. If the energy transition serves only the interests of industrial countries, it raises fundamental questions about justice. The Global South increasingly demands not just reparations but a genuinely equitable transition that allows African countries to participate meaningfully in addressing the climate crisis. African nations that choose to forego fossil fuels should not emerge as the losers in a system designed to maintain Northern consumption and profit.

Africa's paradoxical resource wealth underscores this challenge. The continent contains 24% of the world's arable land and some of the richest subsoils, with over sixty different minerals, including cobalt, lithium, platinum, tantalum, and gold. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) produces two-thirds of global cobalt; South Africa holds the largest reserves of platinum and manganese; Zambia and the DRC dominate copper production. Despite this potential, African economies remain crisis-ridden. Official Development Assistance reached $73.6 billion in 2024, yet debt stands at approximately $700 billion, forcing governments to allocate substantial revenues to servicing loans and undermining economic sovereignty. Countries reliant on resource exports often face unfair contracts and limited industrialization, while imports replace domestic production. Nigeria, for example, imports over $10 billion in food annually even as its agriculture sector declines. True political sovereignty cannot exist without economic sovereignty, yet Africa continues to operate within a system that limits both.

Climate vulnerability further compounds Africa's dependency. The World Meteorological Organization reported that 2024 was the warmest year on record, 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels, while 2025 ranked as the third warmest, at 1.47°C. The continent suffers disproportionately from climate impacts, including coastal erosion, desertification, flooding, soil salinization, biodiversity loss, and social disruption, despite contributing only 4% of global emissions. Adaptation requires resources that African countries cannot mobilize independently. Mechanisms designed to support sustainable development, such as climate finance, loans, and carbon markets, have instead deepened debt, exacerbated vulnerability, and reinforced marginalization. Only five percent of global climate finance reaches Africa, and most of this comes as loans, leaving the continent to shoulder the costs of a crisis it did little to create.

The challenge of Africa's energy transition can be illustrated through three country examples. In Nigeria, oil production has fueled economic growth while simultaneously harming communities and ecosystems. The Niger Delta has experienced over 13 million barrels of oil spills since 1958, contributing to environmental degradation, social conflict, and entrenched inequality. Despite its oil wealth, Nigeria struggles to industrialize, and resource dependence has reinforced social and economic disparities rather than enabling broad development.

Senegal faces a different but related dilemma. Offshore oil and gas exploration threatens traditional fisheries along the coastline, raising protests from local communities. An association of traditional fishers filed a complaint against British Petroleum with the OECD, which condemned the company's practices—a small but

significant success in accountability. Yet ongoing offshore projects, including the Saint Louis platform and developments in Kayar and the Saloum Delta, restrict access to fishing waters and risk pollution of critical coastal ecosystems. The government has expressed intentions to manage oil development responsibly, but tensions between industrialization, environmental protection, and livelihoods remain unresolved.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the extraction of cobalt and other minerals for renewable energy technologies exemplifies the new forms of dependency in the so-called green transition. While DRC supplies two-thirds of global cobalt, much of this mineral is exported to industrialized countries for the production of batteries and solar technologies. Local communities often face displacement, environmental damage, and limited economic benefits, highlighting a continuity of extractive patterns that echo colonial legacies. In this context, Africa supplies the raw materials for the energy transition while receiving little in return for domestic development or social protection.

African voices on energy and climate policy highlight divergent approaches to these challenges. Nnimmo Bassey advocates for leaving fossil fuels in the ground to prevent further environmental and social harm. Mbaye Hadj emphasizes using natural gas to drive industrialization while deploying solar energy for residential and agricultural needs, warning that exclusive reliance on solar could slow development. Dr. Mamadou Touré supports a phased green transition that balances environmental ethics, economic realism, and financial sustainability, signaling climate commitment without sacrificing growth. These perspectives illustrate the deep interconnection between energy policy, finance, sovereignty, and development strategy, while raising the broader question of what kind of progress Africa truly wants. Should the continent replicate the industrialization path of Europe, the United States, or Asia, or chart an alternative route that respects both people and nature?

A fair and just energy transition requires recognition of historical and contemporary debts owed by industrialized countries. African nations must retain control over their resources, industrial strategy, and energy systems to benefit directly from global investments in the green transition. COP processes must address climate finance alongside debt relief to ensure that African countries do not emerge as net losers. The continent should be empowered to participate actively in global solutions, rather than being reduced to a supplier of resources and absorber of risk.

Decades after independence, Africa's sovereignty - political, economic, and environmental - remains constrained by historical legacies and current dependencies.

The global energy transition offers an opportunity to rectify this imbalance, but only if it is guided by justice, fairness, and African agency. A genuine transition must allow Africa to exercise true self-determination, leveraging its resources and strategic choices to build a sustainable, equitable, and resilient future.