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African Sustainability Advocacy Against Extractivism

Abstract | The challenge of interdisciplinary intellectual and strategic work in the extractive industries is particularly acute at the interface of research and social activism. Numerous social movements which are dedicated to sustainability fail to 'connect the dots' between their campaigns and broader political-economic and political-ecological visions. This is becoming a critical challenge in Africa, where the extreme damage done by mining and fossil fuels has generated impressive resistance. However, the one obvious place to link these critiques from African activists was the Alternative Mining Indaba in Cape Town in February 2015, and a survey of narratives at that event leads to pessimism about interdisciplinary politics. The potential for much greater impact and deeper critiques of unsustainable extractivism lies in greater attention to combining social reproduction and production (as do eco-feminists), and to tackling social, economic, political and ecological factors with a more explicit structuralist critique and practical toolkit. Areas such as energy, economics and climate are ripe for linkages. One reason for optimism is a climate justice declaration made by leading civil society activists in Maputo in April 2015.

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Introduction

IN MID-2015, less than a year after documenting the spirit of anti-extractivist "Blockadia" with great enthusiasm, Naomi Klein offered this reality check: "I'm continually amazed by the extent to which we fail to make connections between, for instance, a fight for affordable public transport and climate change" (Klein 2015). Such connections can sometimes be achieved through networking, and in April 2015, a Maputo conference showed the capacity of climate justice activists to do just that. Their manifesto is worth considering in more detail, and contrasting it with one generated earlier in 2015 by the Alternative Mining Indaba.

Indeed in February 2015, the failure of anti-extractivism activists to connect the dots (and thereby build bigger political coalitions) was evident regarding

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three simple phenomena: the predatory extractive industries now looting Africa; the Continent's energy access crises (especially in South Africa); and climate change. There is always a possibility for progressive civil society allies to assemble their strengths in class, gender, race, generational and environmental consciousness; to fuse activist passion and NGO technical sophistication; and to draw upon lessons from Africa's many great anti-extraction struggles. But even with the best will, and amongst exceptional activists and strategists at the Cape Town Alternative Mining Indaba (AMI) (Sixth Alternative Mining Indaba 2015) from February 9-12, the typical civil society failure to think in "intersectional" ways was glaringly evident. The study of intersections between forms or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination, or "intersectionality", is increasingly understood to be the appropriate response to silo-isation: being stuck in specialisations with historic prejudices intact, unable to use the full range of human capacities to find unity. The AMI brought together more than 150 activists from vibrant African community organisations, another hundred or more NGO workers stretching from local to international, the leading advocacy networks, a phalanx of public interest lawyers, a few trade unionists and even some academics. It should have offered the best conditions possible for intersectional work, in part because it addressed grievances that stretch across many traditional boundaries.¹

The opening AMI plenary included Zimbabwean democracy advocate Brian Kagoro, who warned the participants: "We risk here, as the elite of civil society —civilocracy — becoming irrelevant. If you want mining to carry on, in just a bit more humane way, there will be another Alternative Mining Indaba happening in the streets." The more humane and economically rational strategies deployed by NGOs against the extractive industries were the main focus of discussion. To slow destruction caused by senseless mining, UN "Free Prior and Informed Consent" language is one approach for communities to deflect prospecting. Techniques to delay Environmental Impact Assessments were shared, although South Africa's new 'fast track' regulatory strategy weakens these. Tax justice narratives are used, thanks to the mining houses' prolific capital flight and illicit financial flows. Other progressive lawyers suggested routes into the jurisdiction of legal reparations.

However, there is a broader complaint that requires political revolution: multinational mining capitalists are corrupting African politics, economics, environments and societies. From this meeting, it was clear that no one believed minor Corporate Social Responsibility reforms will ever treat, much less cure,

¹ A good overview is provided in Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2015).

the so-called Resource Curse. The Kimberley Process (KP) is one example. In June 2011, its leaders' endorsement of Zimbabwe's Marange blood diamonds rendered it 'ridiculous' — to quote *The Guardian* — because “tyrants are allowed to reinforce oppressive regimes through selling the precious stones simply because they run the state.” (Matthews 2015). In rendering the KP useless as a pressure tool, South Africa's representatives (allied with Robert Mugabe) were most responsible, but the US also was implicated. Likewise, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative had sufficient holes that in mid-2015, the European Union adopted stronger 'conflict minerals' regulations. But even these were anticipated to be sufficiently porous that a spokesperson for AngloGold Ashanti — notorious in the field of human rights abuses — blithely claimed that the firm “could prove chain of custody from its gold mining sites to the Rand Refinery, where its gold was refined.” A prior arrangement in the London Bullion Market Association (the Responsible Gold Guidance Framework) is intended to assure investors and consumers that all London gold stocks are conflict-free due to compliance with an audited, conflict-free process.” (*The Guardian* 2013). From South Africa to the DRC to Tanzania to Colombia, the conflicts surrounding the firm appeared intractable. (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2015).

Instead, the most effective reforms discussed at the AMI were those that served as practical handles for raising grassroots or labour concerns, getting publicity, adding pressure, and giving mining-affected communities—especially women—a sense of hope and solidarity. Yet a sobering and somewhat depressing mood was also appropriate, for much more work is needed to generate intersectionality: connecting the dots to other issues, political scales and constituencies. The disconnects were obvious regarding three issues that might become vital elements in campaigning against extractive industries, in both the short and long term: electricity access, climate change and mineral economics. Consider each in turn.

Short-term empowerment crisis

Just outside the AMI but, nevertheless apparently *unnoticed*, South African society was seething with hatred against state electricity supplier Eskom. The increasingly incompetent agency has threatened near-daily 'load-shedding <http://links.org.au/node/4281>' (electricity black-outs for two hours at a time) for

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years to come, due to insufficient working power capacity (only 30 000 megawatts when 43 000 are technically available) to meet industrial and household demand most days. The lowest-income half of the population only use 2% of the grid, but are last to receive it. In contrast, mining corporations have extraordinary access to power, symbolized in 2014 when a former executive of the world's largest commodity firm, GlencoreXstrata, was seconded into Eskom to represent mining interests: Mike Rossouw. For many years, Rossouw served as chair of the 31-member Energy Intensive Users' Group (EIUG), the largest corporate energy consumers, which together consume 44% of the country's supply. The nickname Minerals-Energy Complex emerged 20 years ago thanks to very sweet Eskom deals that have persisted for most of the company's 85 year history with EIUG members (Fine and Rustomjee 1996). For example, two of the world's biggest mining houses, BHP Billiton and Anglo American Corporation, signed decades-long agreements supplying them at US\$0.01/kWh, a tenth as much as what low-income South Africans pay (Bond 2012a).

South Africa's load-shedding phenomenon should be blamed on both the multinational mining corporations and the local energy industry, and their allies in Pretoria and Eskom's MegaWatt Park headquarters. This is not an unusual configuration in Resource-Cursed Africa, where vast amounts of electricity are delivered via high-tension cables to multinational corporate mining houses for the sake of extraction and capital-intensive smelting. Meanwhile, most African women use fires to cook and heat households. Their main energy source is a fragile woodlot. Their transmission system is their back. And their energy consumption is often done while coughing, thanks to dense particulates in the air. Though the HIV virus is passed through sexual or blood contact, full-blown AIDS is usually catalysed by opportunistic infections such as respiratory diseases, and these too are gendered in the context of dirty energy, added to which is women's dominant role in care-giving.

Given these intense contradictions, the tragedy is that AMI anti-mining activists, strategists, funders and intellectuals *do not connect the dots*. They fail to address load-shedding due to mining overconsumption by contrasting it to most Africans' lack of basic electricity access. They fail to place these at or near the fore of their grievances so as to harvest so-far-untapped popular support for their programme of rolling back mining and rolling forward clean household electricity. In contrast, a Cape Town-based "Million Climate Jobs" campaign at the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC 2015) already suggests how turning off the vast flow of electricity to South Africa's smelters and mines would, in turn, help redirect employment there to more constructive, post-carbon activities: jobs in renewable energy, public transport, insulation

retrofitting, digging biogas digesters and many others.² As for communities, their class/race analysis of electricity access is expressed readily when they show visitors their own dirty household energy, often in the immediate vicinity of a massive mine, smelter or power plant (Big debate on Energy 2014). So why can't those dots —the environment-labour-community-feminist sites of struggle— be connected at the NGO-dominated AMI? Why do the words energy and electricity not even appear in the final AMI declaration, in spite of their extreme abuse by multinational mining capital?

Long-term climate crisis not on SA civil society short-term agenda?

As I mulled over this paradox in the unlikely (luxury Hilton Hotel) AMI venue, my eye was caught by a flashy red-and-white document about South African coal, containing explosive information and some of the most vivid photos I've ever seen of ecological destruction and human suffering. It is full of horrifying facts about the coal industry's wreckage: of public and household health, local environments, and the lives of workers, women, the elderly and children. (Regrettably, there's no web link and I won't name the agency responsible in order to make a more general point and avoid singling out a particular example by name.) This particular booklet doesn't hesitate to explain mining industry abuse via co-option of African National Congress ruling-party elites via Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). Cyril Ramaphosa-style BEE translates into worse misery for the many, and enrichment for a very few such as South Africa's deputy president. His billion-dollar net worth comes not only from that notorious 9% share of Lonmin entailed, but also from his Shanduka company's filthy coal operations. With men like him at the helm, South Africa certainly isn't going to kick the life-threatening Minerals-Energy Complex habit (Bond 2014).

It's a good critique that connects many dots, and certainly the particular agency that published it is one I consider amongst the half-dozen better international NGOs. Their grantees do amazing things in many South African, other African and global contexts. Yet the coal booklet offered only a token mention

² See Million Climate Jobs (2011). The document explains how to create more than a million climate jobs:

- Produce our electricity from wind and solar power: 150,000.
- Reduce energy use through energy efficiency in industries: 27,000.
- Construct new buildings to be energy efficient and retrofit existing buildings: 120,000.
- Expand public transport: 460,000.
- Produce our food through organic small-scale agro ecology: 500,000.
- Protect our water, soil and biodiversity resources: 400,000.
- Move to zero waste: 400,000.

—a few words buried deep in the text— about climate change. Though coal is the major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and although there's a vibrant world campaign against coal mining in favour of renewable energy, the climate crisis was completely lost amidst scores of other eloquently-described grievances.

Drawing this to the agency's attention, I received this explanation from one staffer: "While climate change is a great middle class rallying point, it has no relevance to people living in poverty beyond their empty stomachs, dirty water and polluted air." As we learned the hard way at the civil society counter-summit during the United Nations COP17 here in Durban, this may be a brutally frank but nevertheless a true estimation of the hard work required to mobilise for climate justice. In the last comparative poll I've seen (done by Pew in 2013), only 48% of South Africans considered climate change to be a 'top global threat', compared to 54% of the rest of the world (Pew Research Center 2013).

Fortunately though, the terrain is fertile, especially in the South African provinces —Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal— attracting the most militant and sophisticated attacks on Big Coal anywhere in Africa. They are carried out by a myriad of militant community and environmental groups, including Mining Affected Communities United in Action, the Green Revolutionary Council, Bench Marks Foundation (a progressive church-based research/advocacy network), periodic critiques by radical NGOs GroundWork and Earthlife (the latter hosts a branch of the International Coal Campaign), legal filings by the Centre for Environmental Rights and Legal Resources Centre, supportive funders like ActionAid, and women's resistance organisations (supported by Women in Mining, Womin). Still, aside from communiqués by Womin (Benchmarks Foundation 2014) (mostly in passing), it is extremely rare that they connect the dots to climate change.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions are pollutants, too

A good example of disconnecting-the-dots emerged in late February when South African Environment Minister Edna Molewa infuriated grassroots communities, NGO activists and progressive lawyers who fight prolific pollution by mining houses, petro-chemical plants and smelters. Molewa's job includes applying new Minimal Emissions Standards to 119 firms—including the toxic operations of Eskom, Sasol, AngloPlats, PPC cement, Shell, Chevron and Engen oil refinery—whose more than 1000 pollution point sources are subject to the Air Quality Act. Ten years ago when the law was mooted, these firms should have begun the process of lowering emissions. They didn't, and so Molewa just let 37 of them (mostly the largest) off the hook for another five years by granting exemptions that make a mockery of the Act.

Yet notwithstanding justifiably vociferous complaints, South Africa's environmental NGOs (ENGOs) simply forgot to mention climate change. There was just one exception, Samson Mokoena, who coordinates the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance: "Not only has Eskom been granted postponements, but so has the largest emitter of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the country, Sasol." (At its Secunda plant, Sasol squeezes coal and gas to make liquid petroleum, in the process creating the single greatest site of CO₂ emissions on earth, and Eskom is Africa's largest CO₂ emitter by far when adding up all its plants together) (Moneyweb 2015).

In contrast to Mokoena, one of the world's top campaigning ENGOs ignored CO₂ in predicting Molewa's decision will "result in about 20,000 premature deaths over the remaining life of the [Eskom] power plants—including approximately 1,600 deaths of young children. The economic cost associated with the premature deaths, and the neurotoxic effects of mercury exposure, was estimated at \$20 billion." (Centre for Environmental Rights 2015). Add climate change and these figures COULD rise far higher. The excuse for giving Molewa a pass on the climate implications of her latest polluter-massage is that the Air Quality Act was badly drafted, omitting CO₂ and methane. That omission allowed one of the country's leading journalists to report, "The three pollution baddies that can cause serious health issues, are particulate matter (soot), sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides." But, surely in such a list, Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions qualify as a baddy? More than 182 million Africans are expected to die prematurely by 2100 thanks to GHGs, according to Christian Aid (2006).

Instead, Molewa "seemed to have developed a 'massive blind spot', ignoring how air pollution was transported over very long distances to damage human health in places far removed from the source of emissions," alleged another international ENGO (Carnie 2015). But just as big a blind spot exists when that very ENGO simply forgot about climate change, even though GHGs are co-pollutants with all the other air-borne toxins, transported over very long distances, wreaking enormous damage.

There is, however, one thing worse than neglecting climate change when you have an excellent chance to raise consciousness: assimilation into the enemy camp. In some cases, civil society degenerates from watchdog to lapdog. The most notorious case must be the multinational corporate ally, WorldWide Fund for Nature (WWF), whose SA chairperson Valli Moosa also chairs AngloPlats. Moosa was responsible for what, five years ago, "the SA Public Protector termed 'improper'" when approving the world's largest coal-fired power plant now under construction, Eskom's Medupi (Mail & Guardian 2009). At the time, Moosa was serving as both Eskom chair and a member of the ruling party's finance committee, and signed a dubious boiler-supply deal worth more than \$4 billion with a company, Hitachi, whose local affiliate was 25% owned by Moosa's party.

The Medupi boilers needed to have 7000 of the welds redone. The ruling party led the liberation struggle and regularly wins elections, but isn't too experienced at making coal boilers.

A few days after Molewa's announcement and a day after the South African finance minister yet again postponed introducing a carbon tax law, WWF's Fakir "welcomed the government's commitment to the mitigation of climate change and support which showed that South Africa was leading the way among developing countries in terms of policy measures towards easing the burden on the environment" (Pillay 2015).

Behind the disconnections lies capitalism

In Naomi Klein's brilliant new book and her husband Avi Lewis' film, *This Changes Everything*, we find crystal-clear linkages between climate (*This*) and practically all other areas of social struggle (Klein 2014). For Klein, it is the profit motive that, universally, prevents a reasonable solution to our emissions of greenhouse gases: from energy, transport, agriculture, urbanisation, production, distribution, consumption, disposal and financing. In other words, the intersectionality possibilities and requirements of a serious climate change campaign span nearly all human activity. Through all these aspects of the world's value chains, we are carbon addicted. In each sector, vested corporate interests prevent the necessary change for species survival. It is only by linking together our single issues and tackling climate as the kind of all-embracing problem it is, that we can soar out of our silos and generate the critical mass needed to make a difference.

But in turn, that means that any sort of systemic analysis to save us from climate catastrophe not only permits but *requires* us to demand a restructured *economic system* in which instead of the profit motive as the driving incentive, large-scale ecologically-sound *planning* becomes the fundamental requirement for organising life. In much of Africa, grievances against colonialism were so fierce that when neo-colonialism replaced it over fifty years ago, many progressive activists found courage to talk about capitalism as the overarching, durable problem (worse even than the remaining white settlers). In South Africa, anti-capitalist rhetoric can regularly be heard in every township, blue-collar (and red-collar) workplace, and university. Here, Moscow-trained presidents and even communists who were once trade union leaders have quite comfortably populated the highest levels of the neoliberal state since 1994.

Talking about capitalism is now more crucial than ever. If we don't make this leap to address the profit motive underlying so much eco-social chaos, then our economic future is also doomed, especially in Africa. One reason for that is

what is sometimes called “natural capital” depletion: the minerals, gas and oil being torn out of the earth *don't grow back*. The next logical question is whether, given the diminishing natural wealth that results, the economic activity associated with extractive industries is a net positive or net negative. In resource-rich Norway, Australia, Canada and the US, where the headquarters of mining and petroleum companies are located, the profits recirculate. According to natural capital accounts compiled in the World Bank's book *The Changing Wealth of Nations* this plus educational investment gives these countries much higher net positive returns (World Bank 2011).

Environmental damage is another matter—but on economic grounds, again, the critical question is whether the profits are being reinvested. Answer: in the Global North, yes; but in Africa, no (Bond 2014). They're being looted by multinational corporates and local comprador allies. That means that one of the AMI's other dot-disconnections was any talk of the capitalist economy, or even mention of the way mineral resources are being stripped away so fast and with so little reinvestment that the net economic effect of mining is profoundly negative for the continent's wealth. The *Changing Wealth of Nations* estimates Africa suffers a -6% annual wealth effect from natural capital outflows.

What is the solution? Can Africans with intersectionality dot-connecting talents now more forcefully consider an eco-socialist model? If we do not recover the socialist traditions of Frantz Fanon, Patrice Lumumba, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Ruth First, Thomas Sankara and Chris Hani, and to these add environmentalist, feminist and other intersectional arguments, the generations living now will have quite literally kindled next-generation Africans' scorched-earth future. Large-scale planning may sound terrifying, given how badly earlier attempts turned out, such as the Soviet Union's. On the other hand, Cuba has made the jump out of carbon addiction faster than any other society thanks to planning. Or just compare the well-planned and executed evacuation of Havana during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, to utter chaos in capitalist New Orleans. State-led innovations ranging from municipal water systems to the internet (a product of Pentagon R&D) are so vital to daily life that, unless denied them, we don't think twice about their public sector origins and status as public goods.

And after all, is there any other way to achieve the power shift required to overcome a climate disaster, than to build a movement for democratic state decision-making? To do so, though, requires a somewhat longer-term perspective than the average activist and NGO strategist has scope for, in sites like the AMI. If we do not make that leap out of the silos into which all of us have sunk, we will perish. We are so overly specialised and often so isolated in small ghettos of researchers and advocacy networks, that the AMI's conceptual impotence comes as no surprise. Even the finest extractives-sector activists and strategists

are not being given sufficient scope to think about the full implications of, for example, where our electricity supply comes from, and why mining-smelting corporates get the lion's share; how climate change threatens us all; and how the capitalist economy makes these crises inevitable.

The solution? A critical part of it will be to think in ways that *intersect*, with as much commitment as we can muster, to linking our class, race, gender, generational, environmental and other analyses of the oppressed. Action then follows logically. One example of this process that provides far more optimism than did the AMI, was the April 2015 Maputo Declaration of African Civil Society on Climate Justice. More than 150 activists and strategists made the links between socio-economic oppression and climate change.³ It is, indeed, because *this changes everything*, that in the period ahead, activists will necessarily become much more conscious of interdisciplinary strategies against extractivism, including energy, economics and climate.

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³ The one missing link between the activists and the societies they represent is the phenomenon known as 'climate refugees'. At a time more than two million refugees from Southern Africa have come to South Africa for political and economic survival, and as xenophobia burst out in the Durban and Johannesburg low-income residential areas, the prospect of many more refugees coming to South Africa also loomed, as a result of the worsening weather conditions in parts of the region. This was one link not made by the Maputo activists.

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