

Dismantling Green Colonialism

Towards a Just Transition in North Africa

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The reality of climate breakdown is already visible in North Africa and the Arab region, undermining the ecological and socio-economic basis of life. Countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt are experiencing recurrent severe heat waves and prolonged droughts, with catastrophic impacts on agriculture and small-scale farmers. In the summer of 2021, Algeria was struck by unprecedented and devastating wildfires; Tunisia experienced a suffocating heat wave, with temperatures soaring close to 50°C; southern Morocco struggled with terrible droughts for the third year in a row; and in south-east Egypt 1,100 people lost their homes to flooding and hundreds were injured by scorpions driven out of the ground by the severe weather conditions. In the years ahead, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projects¹ that the Mediterranean region will see an intensification of extreme weather events, such as wildfires and flooding, and further increases in aridity and droughts. Addressing this global climate crisis requires a rapid and drastic reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions, but if a transition towards renewable energies has become inevitable, justice has not. Such transitions can maintain the same practices of dispossession and exploitation, reproducing injustices and deepening socio-economic exclusion.

¹ IPCC (2021). *Sixth Assessment Report – Working Group 1: The Physical Science Basis*. Accessible at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>.

The Sahara in North Africa is usually described as a vast empty land, sparsely populated; representing an Eldorado of renewable energy, thus constituting a golden opportunity to provide Europe with energy so it can continue its extravagant consumerist lifestyle and excessive energy consumption. However, this deceptive narrative overlooks questions of ownership and sovereignty and masks ongoing global relations of hegemony and domination that facilitate the plunder of resources, the privatisation of commons and the dispossession of communities, thus consolidating undemocratic and exclusionary ways of governing the transition. Several examples from the North African region show how energy colonialism is reproduced even in transitions to renewable energy in the form of green colonialism or green grabbing.

Colonialism – even if it formally ended – still continues in other forms and at various levels including in the economic sphere. That's what some scholars and activists call neo-colonialism or re-colonisation. Most of the economies of the peripheries/the Global South are inserted in a subordinate position within a profoundly unjust global division of labour: on the one hand as providers of cheap natural resources and a reservoir of cheap labour and, on the other hand, as a market for industrialised economies. This situation has been imposed and shaped by colonialism and attempts to break away from it have so far been defeated by the new tools of imperial subjugation: crippling debts, the religion of 'free trade', Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed by international financial institutions, and others. To move beyond fossil fuels, we need to examine the linkages between fossil fuels and the economy, and address power imbalances of the international energy system. This means recognising that the Global South is still being systematically exploited by a colonial, imperialist economy built around the pillage of their resources and massive transfer of wealth from South to North.

So, What Do We Mean by Green Colonialism?

For me, it's the extension of the colonial relations of plunder and dispossession as well as the dehumanisation of the other and the displacement of socio-environmental costs to the peripheries in the name of the transition to a future green era, to the renewable period. The current uneven transition to renewable energies, happening mainly in the Global North, is predicated on the ongoing extraction of rare earth metals for manufacturing solar panels, wind turbines, blades and electrical batteries. Where would these resources come from? From countries like Congo, Bolivia, Chile and Morocco, where environmental destruction and workers' exploitation would continue and intensify. Basically, we are facing the same system but with a different source of energy: from fossil fuels to green energy while the same global energy-intensive production and consumption patterns are maintained and the same political, economic and social structures that generate inequality, impoverishment and dispossession remain untouched.

As for green grabbing,² it's a concept coined to refer to some of the dynamics of land grabs that take place within a supposedly green agenda. In other words, the appropriation of land and resources for supposedly environmental ends: from some conservation projects that dispossess indigenous communities of their land and territories, to confiscated communal land to produce biofuels, to installations of big solar plants/wind farms on agro-pastoralist land without their proper consent.

Let's talk about Morocco and its inequitable energy transition where people have no say in what is being done. The Ouarzazate Solar Plant, for

² Fairhead, James; Leach, Melissa & Scoones, Ian (2012). Green Grabbing: A New Appropriation of Nature?, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(2), 237–261.

example, launched in 2016, has failed to bring any semblance of justice³ to the Amazigh agro-pastoralist communities whose lands were used without their proper consent to install the 3,000-hectare facility. The \$US9 billion debt from institutions such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and others is backed by Moroccan government guarantees, which means potentially more public debts for a country already over-burdened with debts. It is worth mentioning here that since its launch in 2016, the project has been recording an annual deficit of around €80 million,⁴ which are covered by the public purse. Finally, the project is using concentrated thermal power (CSP) that necessitates extensive use of water in order to cool down the system and clean the panels. In a semi-arid region like Ouarzazate, diverting water use from drinking and agriculture is just outrageous.

The 'Noor Midelt' project⁵ constitutes Phase II of Morocco's solar power plan and aims to provide more energy capacity than the Ouarzazate plant. It will be one of the world's biggest solar projects to combine CSP and photovoltaic (PV) technologies. The facilities are operated by the French EDF Renewable, the Emirati Masdar and the Moroccan conglomerate Green of Africa, in partnership with the Moroccan Agency for Solar Energy (MASEN) for a period of 25 years. The project has contracted around \$US4 billion in debts so far from the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, and others. It will be also built on thousands of hectares of communal land that have been confiscated from its owners. The pastoralist tribe of Sidi Ayad,

- 3 Hamouchene, Hamza (2016). The Ouarzazate Solar Plant in Morocco: Triumphal 'Green' Capitalism and the Privatization of Nature. *Jadaliyya*. Accessible at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33115/The-Ouarzazate-Solar-Plant-in-Morocco-Triumphal-%60Green%60-Capitalism-and-the-Privatization-of-Nature>.
- 4 Moustakbal, Jawad (2021). The Moroccan Energy Sector: A Permanent Dependence. *Transnational Institute*. Accessible at: <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-moroccan-energy-sector>.
- 5 NS ENERGY (2019). *Noor Midelt Solar Power Project, Morocco*. Accessible at: <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/projects/noor-midelt-solar-power-project-morocco/>.

which has been using that land to graze its animals for centuries, has been protesting against this project,⁶ calling it an occupation. And we mustn't forget Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara. While some of the projects in Morocco, like the Ouarzazate and Midelt Solar Plant, can be described as green grabbing, similar renewable projects (solar and wind) that are taking place in the occupied territories of Western Sahara can be simply labelled 'green colonialism', as they are carried out in spite of the Saharawis and on their occupied land. These renewable projects are being used to entrench the occupation⁷ by deepening Morocco's ties to the occupied territories, with the obvious complicity of foreign capital and companies.

Let's move to Tunisia. Right now, there is a major push to privatise the renewable energy sector and give huge incentives to foreign investors to produce green energy in the country, including for export. The 2015–12 law (amended in 2019) even allows for the use of agricultural land for renewable projects⁸ in a country that suffers from acute food dependency (revealed once again during the pandemic and right now in the middle of the war in Ukraine). One would start to wonder, energy transition for whom? I would also like to mention a project that I have followed over the last few years: TuNur.⁹ It is a private venture between British, Maltese and Tunisian entrepreneurs aiming to develop a series of projects that will deliver low-cost dispatchable power to Europe. The same relations of extraction and the same practices of enclosure/grabbing are maintained while Tunisians are not even self-sufficient in energy. These

6 ATTAC Maroc & War On Want (2020). *Oh Earth [Documentary]*. Accessible at: فيلم أرض يا Oh earth (youtube.com).

7 WSRW (2024). *Dirty Green Energy on Occupied Land*. Accessible at: Western Sahara Resource Watch (wsrw.org).

8 Delpuech, Aïda & Poletti, Arianna (2022). "C'est notre soleil": à Segdoud, la lutte pour la souveraineté énergétique. *Inkyfada*. Accessible at: <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2022/04/22/segdoud-lutte-souverainete-energetique-tunisie/>.

9 Neslen, Arthur (2017). Huge Tunisian Solar Park Hopes to Provide Saharan Power to Europe. *The Guardian*. Accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sep/06/huge-tunisian-solar-park-hopes-to-provide-saharan-power-to-europe>.

big renewable projects, while proclaiming their good intentions, end up sugar-coating brutal exploitation and robbery. It seems that a familiar colonial scheme is being rolled out in front of our eyes: the unrestricted flow of cheap natural resources (including green energy) from the Global South to the rich North while fortress Europe builds walls and fences to prevent human beings from reaching its shores!

While certain Western governments portray themselves as pro-environment by banning fracking within their borders and setting carbon emissions-reduction targets, they offer diplomatic support to their multinationals to exploit shale resources in their former colonies, something that France did with Total in Algeria. If that's not energy colonialism and environmental racism, I don't know what it is! We are also seeing more fossil fuel projects being pushed in various regions of the world, including North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, which has led some analysts to argue that we are not seeing an energy transition but rather an energy expansion.¹⁰

And in the context of the war in Ukraine and the EU's attempts to cut reliance on Russian gas, that's exactly what happened as Italy and Algeria agreed to boost gas supply to Italy.¹¹ In fact, the national company Sonatrach and Italian ENI will pump an additional 9 billion cubic metres in 2023/2024. The EU will also get LNG shipments from Egypt, Israel and Qatar. EU energy security rates above everything else. So, we are seeing more gas lock-in, more extractivism, more path dependency and a halt to the green transition in those countries. In the case of fossil-fuel-rich countries such as Algeria and others in the region, some financial compensation must be on the table to keep the oil in the ground. We also need to consciously build alliances between labour movements and other social and environmental justice movements and organisations.

10 Sweeney, Sean; Treat, John & Chavez, Daniel (2021). Energy Transition or Energy Expansion?. *Transnational Institute*. Accessible at: Energy transition or energy expansion? | Transnational Institute (tni.org).

11 Al Arabiya (2022). *Eni-Sonatrach Sign Deal to Boost Algeria Gas Exports to Italy*. Accessible at: Eni-Sonatrach sign deal to boost Algeria gas exports to Italy (alarabiya.net).

We need to find a way of involving workers in the oil industry in discussions around the transition and green jobs. The transition won't take place without them. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to start engaging the trade unions around these issues.

Green Hydrogen: The New Frontier of Accumulation in North Africa

The recent green hydrogen hype¹² is another cover for the fossil fuel industry to continue its extractive operations. We cannot allow neo-colonial relations to be extended and consolidated in some projects being concocted by the European Union, which would like North Africa to produce and export green hydrogen to Europe. The EU's Hydrogen Strategy,¹³ in the framework of the European Green Deal (EGD), is an ambitious roadmap for shifting towards green hydrogen by 2050. It proposes that the EU could meet some of its future supply from Africa, in particular North Africa, which offers both huge renewable energy potential and geographic proximity. This has become even more important in the context of the war in Ukraine. Basically, replacing fossil gas with hydrogen from renewables is a key plank of REPowerEU,¹⁴ the European Commission's plan to end dependence on Russian gas. As well as shifting gas suppliers from Putin to other authoritarian regimes like Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt and Qatar, or the settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel, and building more ports and pipelines to import and transport gas, the EU Commission has quadrupled its hydrogen targets from 5 million

¹² Hamouchene, Hamza (2021). Green Hydrogen: The New Scramble for North Africa. *Al Jazeera*. Accessible at: Green Hydrogen: The new scramble for North Africa | Climate Crisis | Al Jazeera.

¹³ European Commission (2020). *A Hydrogen Strategy for a Climate-Neutral Europe*. Accessible at: Communication COM/2020/301: A hydrogen strategy for a climate-neutral Europe | Knowledge for policy (europa.eu).

¹⁴ European Commission (2022). *REPowerEU Plan*. Accessible at: EUR-Lex - 52022DC0230 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu).

tonnes by 2030 to 20 million tonnes, with half of that to be imported primarily from North Africa, but other countries are also on the target list: Namibia, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chile, Saudi Arabia, and others.

The Desertec project¹⁵ also goes in this direction and even pushes for the use of the current gas pipeline infrastructure to export the hydrogen from North Africa. Basically, it advocates for a mere switch of the energy source while maintaining the existing authoritarian political dynamics and leaving intact the hierarchies of the imperial international order. Moreover, the Desertec manifesto¹⁶ points out that 'in an initial phase, a substantial hydrogen volume can be produced by converting natural gas to hydrogen, and the CO₂ emissions generated can be stored in empty gas/oil fields in North Africa'. This, alongside the use of the rare water resources and potential pollution from desalination, can be considered as yet another example of dumping waste in the Global South and displacing environmental costs from North to South.

A green transition is not simply about energy; agriculture must also be transformed. Industrial agriculture/farming or agribusiness is another locus where imperialist domination and climate change intersect. Not only is it one of the major drivers of climate change; it also keeps many countries in the South prisoners of an unsustainable and destructive agrarian model – a model that is based on the export of a few cash crops and the exhaustion of land and the rare water resources in arid and semi-arid regions such as Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. In some instances, we even see the push for the production of agro-fuels (to export fuel to Europe), undermining thus the food sovereignty of local people.

15 Hamouchene, Hamza (2015). Desertec: The Renewable Energy Grab? *New Internationalist*. Accessible at: Desertec: the renewable energy grab? | New Internationalist.

16 van Wijk, Ad; Wouters, Frank; Rachidi, Samir & Ikken, Badr (2019). A North Africa–Europe Hydrogen Manifest. *Dii Desert Energy*. Accessible at: 2019-11-29 _Dii_Studie2019_v03a.indd (dii-desertenergy.org).

Alternatives – Just Transition

I believe that the framework of Just Transition¹⁷ can provide elements of reflection. The original concept of Just Transition was rooted in building alliances between workers in polluting industries and frontline communities. It gained popularity as a powerful framework, which could express workers' demands in relation to environmental conflicts and unite different forms of resistance against the political-economic model that has been trashing the planet, concentrating wealth and increasingly exploiting workers around the world, with impacts falling disproportionately on marginalised communities. We know that the current economic system is undermining the life support systems of the planet and will eventually collapse. So, Transition has become inevitable, but Justice has not.¹⁸

A Just Transition is a framework for a fair shift to an economy that is ecologically sustainable, equitable and just for all its members. A Just Transition means a transition from an economic system that is built around the extraction of resources and the exploitation of people, to one that is structured instead around the restoration and regeneration of territories and people's rights and dignity. A robust and radical vision of Just Transition sees environmental destruction, capitalist extraction, imperialist violence, inequality, exploitation and marginalisation along the axes of race, class and gender and as simultaneous effects of one global system which must be transformed. Basically, 'solutions' that try to address a single dimension, such as the environmental catastrophe, in isolation from the social, cultural and economic structures which give

17 Transnational Institute (2020). Just Transition: How Environmental Justice Organisations and Trade Unions Are Coming Together for Social and Environmental Transformation. *Workshop Report*. Accessible at: Just Transition | Transnational Institute (tni.org).

18 Movement Generation (2017). *From Banks and Tanks to Cooperation and Caring – A Strategic Framework for a Just Transition*. Accessible at: JT_booklet_English_SPR_EADs_web.pdf (movementgeneration.org).

rise to it, will inevitably remain 'false solutions'. Just Transition looks different in different places.

We must be sensitive to the fact that the massive global and historical inequalities, and their continuation in the present, are part of what must be transformed to bring about a just and sustainable society. This means that Just Transition may mean very different things in different places. What might work in Europe may not necessarily be applicable in Africa. What might work in Egypt might not work in South Africa. And what might work in urban areas in Morocco may not be good for rural areas there. So, we need to be imaginative and have a decentralised approach with guidance from local populations themselves. This green transition must be under the democratic control of workers and communities. It cannot be left to the private sector. This would need huge public investments in renewable energy, public transport, diversifying the economies away from fossil fuels, and others. It also necessitates cancellation of debts, tax justice and halt of capital flight from peripheral countries.

The Global North should pay ecological debts and climate reparations to countries in the Global South. Trade relations must also be transformed towards more fairness and equity, so centuries of unequal economic and ecological exchange are brought to an end. This would need to give space for sovereign decisions, something undermined by international disputes mechanisms and provisions in trade treaties allowing multinationals to sue governments that dare to touch their bottom line through new labour or environmental regulations for example.

There are recurrent discussions on the lack of technology expertise where these mega projects are installed in the Global South: But why is this so in the first place? Doesn't this have to do with relations of ongoing domination and appropriation of wealth? Isn't this attributable to monopolising technology and the intellectual property regime that showed its cruelty in the current pandemic? Isn't it because of all the imposed structural adjustment programmes that hollowed out public services and scientific research? For a rapid and just energetic transition globally, monopolies on green technology and knowledge must be ended and made available to countries and communities in the Global South.