



## **Beyond Regional Solidarity and Collective Responsibility: Reflections on Formations of Regional Coalitions in the Struggle Against Climate Change in Africa**

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### **Introduction**

In Africa today, there is a growing obsession with formation of regional initiatives as modalities for “collective responsibility” to address the climate crisis. These formations are sprouting all over the continent i.e., the Africa Climate Change Strategy 2020-2030, the EAC Climate Change Policy 2011 and recently in 2022, the ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy (RCS). These are established as a solidarity and collective move to reduce vulnerability to risks of climate change. These strategies are argued to be anchored in and guided by the Pan African spirit and vision. This paper offers a critical reflection on these Regional Climate Strategies (RCS’), with a focus on ECOWAS RCS, to interrogate the politics of climate change in Africa and the spirit within which they are formed. It investigates the underlying assumptions, techniques, interests and modes of engagement in RCS’ to understand whether they have any possibilities to liberate and emancipate the African continent from the imperial, neocolonial and neoliberal logics, institutions, initiatives and structures which condition societies’ subjectivity to the climate crisis.

This paper draws on primary and secondary sources to argue that RCS fall short of addressing the climate crisis given their preoccupation with technical-financial capacity issues, ignoring fundamental historical and structural political and agrarian issues that condition and exacerbate the climate. Such include capitalist primitive accumulation through large-scale land acquisition and market-oriented manufacturing, the nature and character of the states (modern nation states) implementing the strategy and perpetuating imperial and capitalist accumulation, ill-defined development initiatives conditioning destruction of ecosystems, and the neocolonial tendencies of IFI and climate related institutions/programs. Many of these are questions that anti-colonial and early post-colonial visionaries of Pan-Africanism, African nationalism and integration put at the fore of the anti-colonial struggles. In fact, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Pan African articulation of the colonial and postcolonial condition was anchored on liberating the African continent and the rest of the colonized world from colonial and neocolonial domination, and imperial exploitation and subjectification. Thus, ECOWAS RCS (and Africa’s Regional Climate Strategies in general) take for granted the colonial, neoliberal, imperial and capitalist logics embedded in structures and institutions that condition climate crises.

Despite the temptation and necessity to deeply engage core debates on climate change in Africa and globally, existing wide-ranging scholarship has done justice to most of these debates. Some of the debates which have been explored in existing bodies of knowledge include: the link between land grabbing/land dispossession and climate change (Borras et al., 2020; Borras et al. 2016;



Borras and Franco 2018; Franco and Borras 2019; Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; and Moore 2017), climate change responses especially on mitigation and adaptation and the attendant problems these engender (Borras et al. 2016; Cobera et al. 2017; Duchelle et al. 2014; Borras et al. 2020; Wolford et al. 2013; Parola 2020, Alkhalili et al. 2023a, 2023b), political ecology debates on environmental destruction, conservation and development and their connection to climate change—especially the ecocentric and anthropocentric discussions (Thompson et al. 1994; Foster 1999; Harvey 1996; Nakangu 2020; Cavanagh and Himmelfarb 2015; Nel 2018; Marsh 1869), and knowledge production about/around climate change (Hountondji 1990; Osseo-Asare 2019; Seth 2017; Subramanian 2023). Critically interesting as these debates are, there has been little if any attention paid to discussions around the growing obsession with the formation of regional coalitions in the struggle against climate change.

The African experience makes it even more stimulating given that coalition strategies are framed in the ‘language and spirit of Pan Africanism’. Emerging from this African experience to reflect on a global phenomenon, the paper sets out to contribute to the existing bodies of knowledge by engaging this very important aspect of the question of climate change by interrogating the politics around the formation of Regional Climate Change Strategies. To do so, the paper begins by engaging the discussions around Pan Africanism and its link to climate change politics, including highlighting the history, ideology and vision of Pan Africanism. It then examines the ECOWAS Regional Climate Change Strategy to tease out the assumptions, inspirations and limitations of the coalition initiatives. To put the formations to task, the paper proceeds to interrogate the dynamics of the SOCFIN Palm Oil Projects in Sierra Leone as a case study to highlight how larger structural imperial, capitalist and neocolonial practices, which are undergirded by the nativist and crude nationalist modern nation states, exacerbate the climate crisis than resolving it. This in turn undermines any collective efforts framed in the name of regional solidarity and Pan Africanism. The paper ends by drawing some preliminary conclusions.

### **Pan Africanism, African Nationalism and Regional Integration in Climate Change Politics**

The formation of regional initiatives in the climate change fight is argued to be anchored in the spirit of Pan Africanism. Most of the regional initiatives including the ECOWAS RCS and the East African Climate Change Policy draw inspiration from and contribute to the Africa Climate Change Strategy.<sup>1</sup> The Africa Climate Change Strategy (ACCS) is argued to be anchored in the spirit of Pan Africanism. This spirit is claimed to be reflected in the African Union (AU) agenda 2063 which supposedly reflects and embodies “the Pan African Vision” articulated as “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in international fora”.<sup>2</sup> The ACCS framers summoned some of the commitments made by African

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<sup>1</sup> Africa Climate Change Strategy 2020-2030.

<sup>2</sup> Africa Climate Change Strategy 2020-2030, 6.

leaders during the signing of agenda 2063 to emphasize the fact that the strategy is guided by the Pan African spirit. Thus

African leaders declared their commitment to carrying forward the foundation which was laid by all generations of Pan-Africanists... We, the people of Africa and her Diaspora, united in diversity, young and old, men and women from all walks of life, deeply conscious of history, express our deep appreciation to all generations of Pan-Africanists and in particular, the founders of the Organization of African Unity for having bequeathed us an Africa with exemplary successes in the fight against slavery, colonialism and apartheid.<sup>3</sup>

In a bid to bolster the aspiration, these leaders went ahead to “echo the Pan-African call that *Africa must unite* in order to realize its Renaissance.”<sup>4</sup> The attainment of this vision is argued to be partly endangered by the “impacts of climate change”. Despite being subject to political, and by extension discursive, controversy, the ACCS framers argue that there is overwhelming scientific consensus that “climate change is the defining issue of our time and we are at a defining moment”.<sup>5</sup> In effect, this defining moment has rendered the continent the most commiserated for being the “most vulnerable” to climate change and “the least prepared”. As some African anticolonial and postcolonial scholars have argued, the continuous negotiations at the international level to deal with the climate change crisis concerns Africa perhaps more critically than other continents (Soyinka et al. 2015: 145-146). Such vulnerability and fragility necessitated an “effective climate change strategy” given that it had become a threat to not only “developmental progress” but also the “advent of the African Renaissance; the hope of Africa”.<sup>6</sup> As such, the ACCS is argued to have been rooted in the idea of ‘Pan Africanism’ and ‘African Renaissance’ as a way of providing a “robust framework for ensuring climate justice for Africa and Africans through effective participation as an equal at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other international fora”, and for realizing the Africa vision as articulated in agenda 2063.<sup>7</sup> In fact the fact that the African Union has considered climate change as one of its core values that has to be “considered as a factor in the struggle for greater unity and integration” is considered commendable (Soyinka et al. 2015: 146).

Inspired by such visions and articulation, the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) designed the ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy guided by the idea of coalition

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12. On the increasing vulnerability, see also Expertise France, “Our Ambition is to Make All our Policies Climate-Compatible to Ensure that Climate is Truly Mainstreamed in the Region”, November 8, 2022. Available at <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/actualite?id=878109>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13.

building anchored in the principle of *regional solidarity* and *collective responsibility*. The idea and context of regional solidarity as a necessity for reducing vulnerability and addressing the raising risks from impacts of climate change is argued to be imagined in the spirit of “Acting Together”. The ECOWAS RCS visionaries argued that “the impacts of climate change are cross-border and it is together that ECOWAS member states can address this challenge”.<sup>8</sup> Despite the beautiful articulation of the climate crisis being borderless, the framers of the ECOWAS RCS imagined a coalition to fight it while maintaining their national borders which they guard jealously in the name of maintaining national sovereignty. One critic of the ECOWAS RCS, Nfamara K. Dampha, a former director in the Gambia’s National Disaster Management Agency, argued that the strategy came when “countries within the bloc *had* already developed their national climate strategies and policies” and these would not twist to fit into the strategy (Kebba 2022). And yet, one of the things it would have done was to inspire them than being inspired by nationalistic and nativist strategies and policies. One would imagine that the regional climate strategies would be true to the ideological foundations, intellectual and political inspirations/spirit, and political commitments around which Pan Africanism was build and has been carried forward—of course its limitations notwithstanding. And being true to such was to dismantle crude nationalism and nativism that informs the national policies and priorities, and frustrates the articulation of the actual problem (as structural, that is, colonialism, imperialism, neoliberal capitalism and neocolonialism). As such, Nfamara argued that the larger regional strategy failed at the level of defining the actual problem (Kebba 2022). The enemy for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century climate change Pan Africanists (the new breed of Pan Africanists) is *Climate Change effects*. This definition of the problem not only narrows but also vulgarizes the Pan African Spirit as envisioned by 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation anticolonial nationalists and Pan Africanists.

### *Pan Africanism in a Historical Context: Ideology, Vision and Politics*

In order to put the contemporary climate change Pan Africanist articulations into context, let me begin by highlighting the historical articulation of the Pan African vision. This will allow an engagement with not only the ideological articulation but also the practical framings, commitments and implementation of the visions framed in the name of Pan Africanism. The Pan African vision has been evolving over time “from one focus to another and broadening in definition and practice” (Kah 2016: 141). Despite these changes, the consideration of structural problems has always been at the heart of the articulations. Historically, Pan Africanism was an “ideology of resistance which was borne in the throes of imperialism” and domination (Shivji 2011, 9; Shivji, Othman and Kamata 2020). Pan Africanist and African nationalist intellectuals have argued that the origin of the idea is in itself rooted in crisis, i.e., in the “tragic history of suffering African people worldwide” spanning “the plight of Africans under the oppressive European colonial rule, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Expertize France, “Our Ambition is to Make All our Policies Climate-Compatible to Ensure that Climate is Truly Mainstreamed in the Region”, November 8, 2022

historic crime of the transatlantic slave trade with its consequent treatment of African people as chattel in the Americas and the Caribbean region” (Soyinka et al. 2015: 120-122).

In its prehistory, Pan Africanism can be traced to the centuries of slave trade as a mode of resistance to the “dominant racist constructs”. For instance, the slaves in Haiti sang freedom songs for two centuries (Shivji 2011: 9; see also Addi and Marika 2003). Meanwhile the language of Pan Africanism was unheard of but the practices which embody the Pan African spirit were present epitomized in the form of “racial nationalism”. These are argued to have later been mirrored in the form of territorial nationalism especially in the Haitian 1791 revolution. As Shivji tells us, “the Haitian revolution was in advance of its times. It was the forerunner of both the logical conclusion of territorial nationalism and citizenship, and their crisis under imperialism, all of which we see in post-independence African states.” (Shivji 2011: 9). At the turn of the century, Pan Africanism was born as an anti-racist ideology and it defined the African problem as a problem of race (the color-line). It is to be traced to the *New World* where “white supremacist ideologies found expression in its most brutal and dehumanizing forms” (ibid., 9-10).

Two theorists were at the forefront of its theorization at the time: W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Despite both having an eye on the target, which is the structures of domination/discrimination and capitalist exploitation, these differed in conception and method, since they each represented a different kind of nationalism within Pan Africanism (Shivji 2011; Soyinka et al. 2015: 120-122; Afari-Gyan 2018). If the former defined Pan Africanism as a question of race and culture, the latter defined it in terms of geography. In effect, the former advocated for “equal racial treatment within the US while the latter was against the accommodation of ‘othered’ races within the white structures” thereby calling for a territorial home for the racialized minorities. Whether one coined the problem as one of white supremacy and the other as one of colonial boundaries/borders, the most important aspect of their conception of the problem was that it was occasioned by structural political, social and *by extension economic* constructs which symbolized imperial oppression and exploitation (Shivji 2011: 9-10; Also Addi and Marika 2003; Afari-Gyan 2018). As such, the demand by both were anti-imperialist and this articulation of Pan Africanism should preoccupy our minds all the time given that the “genesis and evolution of the ideology and movement was primarily political and essentially anti-imperialist” (Shivji 2011: 10).

Anti-colonial nationalism gave birth to the discourse and grammar of Pan Africanism and reinvigorated its rearticulation and practice. The “discourse, contention and aspiration of the nationalist and revolutionary waves of integration” are argued to have been “rooted in pan Africanism” (Shivji 2009, 3). Just like the earlier versions, Pan Africanism of the anti-colonial period “as the bedrock of integration was borne of five centuries of oppression, exploitation, domination, humiliation and indignity by European imperialists”. As such, Pan Africanism was a response to colonialism and imperialism (ibid., 3). Most if not all first generation African nationalists were Pan Africanists but the epitomes were Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. African nationalists and Pan Africanists agreed to the problematic nature of

the imperial and colonial structures and shared the larger aspiration for liberation from colonial and neocolonial domination and continued capitalist accumulation (ibid., 4). They had three broad objectives: nation building, unity and African liberation (Shivji, et al. 2020: 2). However, Nkrumah and Nyerere, just like their predecessor ideologues, Du Bois and Garvey, differed on the right approach to Pan Africanism. If Nkrumah advocated for a United States of Africa, Nyerere rooted for the East African Federation (which failed due to nationalistic and nativist character of leaders and governments). Interestingly, both aspired for these to be anchored on the Pan African vision (Shivji 2009: 4; Shivji et al., 2020). The watershed moment for the rebirth of Pan Africanism was the 1945 5<sup>th</sup> congress of Manchester spearheaded by George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah in which they demanded to have Africa for Africans and liberation from colonialism. This moment laid ground for the national liberation movements. At this moment, race, citizenship and territorial nationalism defined the contours of the Pan African debate (Shivji 2011, 10-11).

The history and ideological foundation of Pan Africanism and African nationalism have been widely explored and in the interest of space, I will not delve deeper into that. So, what is the Pan African vision and spirit that guided its foundation and articulation at least in the first and second generations of Pan Africanism on the African continent, to which the 21<sup>st</sup> breed of climate change Pan Africanists claims to draw inspiration from? The Pan African spirit can be summarized as that of liberation from the colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism, and the promotion of African unity. That means, the vision was to deal with the structures and institutions which conditioned the subordination and polarization of the African people. In fact, the most important inspiration for Nkrumah over integration and Pan Africanism was national liberation and unity of the continent, for liberation would be incomplete without the unity of the continent (Shivji 2011, 11). But unite to do what? It is from this question that we can draw distinctions between the anticolonial/early postcolonial and the contemporary Climate Change Pan Africanists and their articulation of the Pan African vision. Shivji has shown that the “vision of Pan-Africanism was buried in the statist discourse of African unity and regional integration/disintegration” the moment Pan Africanism was bifurcated into statist and people centered, and the modern nation state chose the route of statist Pan Africanism only to result into the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), with unity now focusing on uniting states and for states than uniting people and for a people’s cause. Does the idea of coalition building today focus on liberation from the fangs of imperialism, neoliberal capitalism and neocolonialism that conditions climate change? I explore this in the subsequent sections.

### **Making Sense of the ECOWAS RCS: In Search of the Pan African Spirit Today**

In 2022, 15 member states of the Economic Commission of West African States came together to formulate an ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy in order to address an overarching problem of climate change. These states justified their coming together within a framework of regional solidarity by claiming that they wanted to reduce the region’s vulnerability by collectively facing the risks induced by the impacts of climate change (ECOWAS Press Kit, 2022: 4). It was argued that by “adopting this strategy, ECOWAS is committing itself alongside and in support of its 15

Member States to make climate a priority for political action in the region” (ECOWAS Press Kit, 2022: 15). It should be noted that the ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy (here after ECOWAS RCS) emerges as a response to the limitations of the ECOWAS environmental policy (ECOWEP) which was adopted by member states in 2008 with an objective (which was global) of “reversing the far-reaching tendencies of degradation and reduction of natural resources, life environments, in order to ensure the establishment in the region of a healthy environment that is easy to live in and productive, thus improving the living conditions of the populations of the regional areas” (ECOWAS, 2022: 25). The limitation of ECOWEP was that the question of climate change was not expressly considered and it was limited to only issues to do with the environment (ibid.). The realization of that problem forced the member states to come up with a particular strategic program to deal with climate change and by 2010, it had been adopted. Its aim was on “reducing vulnerability and adapting to climate change” with a goal of ensuring that by 2030, “all West African countries have the human, technical and financial resources to protect their human and natural systems from the adverse effects of climate change” (ibid.). Many other programs were designed following that, including “Renewable energy policy (2015), Intervention framework for climate-smart agriculture in the Sahel and West Africa (2015), Strategic framework for the 2025 horizon of the ECOWAS Agricultural Policy (2017), ECOWAS Strategy and Action Plan for Gender-Based Disaster Risk Reduction (2020), etc.” (ibid.). It was this earlier realization that informed the need for a comprehensive framework which would deal with the question of climate change thus the ECOWAS RCS (ibid.: 26).

The ECOWAS RCS feeds into the ECOWAS vision of 2050 and a continental climate strategy of the African Union (AU) 2020-2030 all of which are in line with the Paris Agreement (ibid.: 8). It also was formulated with the aim of contributing to the UN Global Sustainable Development Goals (we should note that sustainable development goals are not meant to sustain anything for the global south especially the poor sections of those communities). At continental level, the strategy feeds into the African Unions climate change and resilient development strategy and action plan (2022-2032) which derives its mandate from the AU’s agenda 2063 which states: “the Africa we want, resilient to climate change” with an objective of ensuring “the achievement of the Agenda 2063 Vision by building the resilience of the African continent to the impacts of climate change” (ECOWAS, 2022: 56). ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy (RCS) document shows that it is not only important but also urgent for such efforts to contribute to the “global response initiated with the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate at the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP21) in the UNFCCC” (ECOWAS, 2022: 20). Hence the strategy aims to contribute to a global strategy but we should note that these global initiatives are not aimed at dealing with the climate crisis for the sake of Africa or the global south but for the sake of ensuring the capitalist accumulation at a global scale, either through transferring the burden of dealing with climate challenges through what has been termed as ‘emission trading’ (UN EPA, 2023; Reichle, 2023) and what other climate advocates are calling climate reparations (Taiwo, 2022) but without stopping the emission and destruction by most so called developed countries. The fact that the strategy has to fulfill the internationally designed strategies whose formulation is dominated by the global north can constitute what Walter Mignolo (2012) called ‘global designs’ which are imposed on the different

historical experiences of the ‘global south’, and for this case African experiences. Such ‘global designs’ homogenize the ways in which different countries and communities are conditioned to and experience the climate crisis despite the disparities. This does not only result into ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano, 2000), but also ‘coloniality of climate’ (Sultana 2022) both of which are very hegemonic relations which often seek to promote “conformity, compliance and are resistant to refusal” to international frameworks (Sultana, 2022: 9).

ECOWAS RCS was established with a vision of ensuring a community that “is resilient to the effects and impacts of climate change and that has managed to seize the associated economic opportunities in favor of long-term, low-carbon, sustainable development” (ECOWAS 2022: 55). To deeply understand the ECOWAS strategy and the potential it provides in terms of dealing with climate change, we need to critically engage with its objectives and the strategies it put in place to achieve those objectives. Its general objective was “to support the Member States in overcoming the challenge of the fight *against* climate change, in particular for the achievement of their commitments under the Paris Agreement”. Achieving this objective would require breaking it down into smaller actionable objectives which were termed as strategic objectives. The ECOWAS RCS was thus founded on six strategic objectives:

- 1) Ensure that the regional policy framework is compatible and consistent with the global objectives of the Paris Agreement. By means of systematic evaluation of its compatibility with these objectives;
- 2) Develop the ability to anticipate and to take informed decisions to manage current and future climate risks. In particular, biophysical, socio-economic and macro-economic risks and gender-related differential vulnerabilities;
- 3) Encourage an institutional and organizational paradigm shift regarding climate change. In particular, by means of the holistic integration of the fight against climate change into ECOWAS’ *modi operandi*, including by allowing its institutional arrangements to evolve;
- 4) Build the capacities of ECOWAS and its Member States for the implementation of policies and actions to combat climate change. In particular, through education, gender mainstreaming, entrepreneurship, innovation, support for research and technological development, so as to seize economic opportunities and develop sectors of the future, the blue and green economy;
- 5) Strengthen cooperation and solidarity among Member States vis-à-vis climate change. Particularly in the development of urgent response coordination mechanisms, the rebalancing of climate financing flows, the promotion of concerted and collaborative actions tackling cross-border issues and cohesion of national positions in international negotiations on climate;
- 6) Promote new approaches to mobilizing internal and external financial resources (ECOWAS, 2022: 57; also Kebba, 2022).

Now these objectives were to be achieved through three fields, i.e., in terms of the organization, the areas of competence and lastly the political dialogue with the Member States. The most important of these three is the last field especially because it’s partly being hinged on the idea that it “involves making arrangements to enable ECOWAS and its Member States to speak with one voice” (ECOWAS 2022: 58). I want to suggest that the coming together was not necessarily about





having a collective voice but what I call “The Voice”. Here when states come together, the (States’) Voice becomes a core fundamental voice whose violation may lead to retaliations from other member states. Here, the states indeed acted like the state, the violent hegemonic state which assumes that what the state says has to be the most legitimate mode of mitigation and adaptation. Other unique alternative voices would least matter when ‘The Voce’ is fronted. Other voices especially voices from the ordinary people who are affected are less reflected in the midst of the dominant voice. As such, the strategy does not in any way think of rethinking the nature and character of the states (which form the voice) themselves in postcolonial Africa. As earlier noted, this emerged from the bifurcation of Pan Africanism (statist and people centered Pan Africanism). The logic that guides modern state operations dictates that the state has to front the state over the people thus justifying the creation of The Voice and not the people and the articulations that emerge from their experiences.

The strategy touches the question of land in its approaches to dealing with the climate crisis and it comes in its mitigation measures which number up to 280. The strategy under its Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Uses (AFOLU) framework shows that it intends to “reabsorb the loss of forest cover”, to sustainably manage forest resources and to “fight against land degradation in the ECOWAS countries” (ECOWAS 2022: 96-97). The last point on the fight against land grabbing is intriguing because the actions proposed to ensure this is achieved beg questions. The actions include: “encourage and support Member States in the implementation of plans and programmes to combat land degradation; Define a regulatory framework for the fight against land degradation at regional level; and Encourage the development of a region-wide innovative financing mechanism for sustainable land management” (ECOWAS 2022: 142). The bigger question as to why climate crisis is happening is partly due to the unending desire by capital to accumulate which forces capitalists (that come in the name of investors) to emit a lot of Green House Gasses (GHG), to grab people’s land (thereby forcing them into encroaching on other ecosystem land like forests and wetlands) and the green and blue grabbing by these very companies and factories. It is interesting to note that the ECOWAS RCS does not put the question of dealing with these accumulation initiatives by capitalists as core and instead is focused on dealing with the effects of such. But this is not surprising because the strategy is just building on and promoting the globally designed frameworks like the UNFCCC and the Kyoto protocol which are designed and funded by the very institutions which support primitive capital accumulation like the World Bank. This puts to question the potential this strategy offers in emancipating the people from climate change colonialism which is perpetuated by capitalist individuals, institutions and companies. The idea that we can deal with climate change when we do not reduce the rate at which capitalists emit, destroy green cover and water puts to question the very logic of this strategy. This is not because the global capitalist framers of the climate fight frameworks are ignorant about its limitations but because they have decided to commit a “climate apartheid” through a “socio-spatial differentiation in who pays the disproportionate price” (Sultana, 2022: 5). They do not only extend the colonial and imperial logics but also continue to put the climate burden on the poor sections of the global south in new and multiple ways. This is done in a way that they continue to shield “luxury emission” from the global north and condemn “survival emission” (ibid.) from the global south

and yet those who are condemned and asked to stop emitting are burdened with dealing with the crisis through initiatives like the ECOWAS CRS and ACCS. They have done this through establishing what Sultana has called “sacrifice zones” and “international climate change negotiations and targets” (ibid.).

Second, much as the strategy speaks about supporting partner states to fight the crisis of climate change especially by availing them with funds (they designed strategies for raising funds for implementing the strategy as delineated in the Climate Finance Access and Mobilization Strategy for ECOWAS countries 2022-2030)<sup>9</sup> and other technical support, it does not put to question the very states that it seeks to support. Most postcolonial neoliberal states have historically been behind promoting any attempts which contribute to climate change and land grabbing. So coming up with a strategy to be implemented by these very states in their current form is to throw the people in these countries from a flying pan direct into fire, and this time round fire which is continuously fueled by financial support from the strategy and partner International Financial Institution (IFI). How sure can we be that the climate strategy of the region will not in the end facilitate land grabbing through its mitigation strategies like climate smart agriculture and clean energy initiatives which require acquisition of land from people for their establishment, given the history of the state allocating land to the so-called investors? In Sierra Leone for instance, the President, Julius Maada Bio, opened the extension of the SOCFIN company mill on 22 February 2021 (SOCFIN, 2021). The head of state encourages activities that contribute to emissions and yet he is among those endorsing the regional strategy for climate change. The belief that the ECOWAS CRS will abet the climate crisis perhaps was hinged on the assumption that West African nation states have the same stake and play equal roles on the international scene when it comes to designing the frameworks whose propositions they followed to design the ECOWAS CRS but this obviously is not the case. Sultana has shown us that the international field where these treaties, frameworks, agreements, development interventions, climate finance negotiations and protocols are made is full of unequal negotiating power (Sultana, 2022). The colonial logic of hierarchization, domination and control play way too much in such fields to a point that they influence what you do and the result your interventions can make (ibid.: 5). Similarly, we learn from the mistakes made by African nationalists and Pan Africanists of trying to forge movements to liberate the African continent but without attempting to do away with the structures and organizing logics of the nation state—and to be specific the modern nation states whose foundation lays in European history. In fact Nyerere was quoted saying that “I have questioned many, many things from Europe but I’ve not questioned the nation-state. I cannot think, how do I think in terms of *not* the nation state. It’s for only African disintegration” (Shivji et al. 2020, 3). Here, Nyerere took for granted two things: first, he forgot that the nation was not what he imagined, this was a modern nation whose foundational logic was disintegration and polarization more than integration. Second, the nation was coupled with the state and the two became one—the nation state. The nation state will go against all odds and agreements to protect its national sovereignty and

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<sup>9</sup> See the Climate Finance Access and Mobilization Strategy for ECOWAS countries (2022-2030).

accumulation initiatives which can sustain its existence as seen in the next section. This is why the Sierra Leone state will not stop capitalist accumulation by multinational capital like SOCFIN but will join the coalition of ECOWAS RCS to fight the effects of climate change since that accumulation sustains the modern nation state through maintaining strict class divisions, patronage and generation of taxes to fund its operations. In effect, each independent state is busy building its own nation while hoodwinking people that they are collectively (and in solidarity) consolidating to fight climate change (see also Shivji 2009).

Third, we can note that the response to the climate crisis was couched in the language of development without even for a minute questioning what development means. This very notion of development has been historically used to further colonial, neocolonial and imperial interests for instance through exploiting and grabbing peoples land but most importantly it is the major reason why the climate crisis continues because it is embodied with interests of primitive accumulation. In other words, the question of development has always been problematic for the African continent and has been used to achieve particular aims of power and capital and the lack of concern about what development has done to the communities gives reasons to worry and question the strategy (Lunyago 2023). As Lunyago notes, the language of development especially in a postcolonial context “is used as a recolonizing tool couched in the language of progress and civilization”. And if civilization was the colonial language, ‘development’ is the neocolonial language. (Lunyago 2024: 42). Questions of “green capitalism, capitalism and market-based technocratic interventions, ideologies of net-zero carbon instead of real/negative zero carbon, and continued capitalist solutions” have no potential let alone the intention of solving “structural and systemic problems” (Sultana, 2022: 5).

We ought to note however that there have been internal critiques within West Africa about the strategy but their focus has often been on the question of the capacity of the west African states or the coalition to implement and fund its implementation. For instance, Kebba (2022) has shown that the critiques have been on the lack of detail “on critical issues for achieving the progress, including finance and leadership”. As such, those who attempt a critique of the strategy focus on capacity and ability to fund and manage ignoring the very important and critical structural questions: the question of the increasing desire by capital to accumulate, the question of the nature of the states which are charged with the mandate to implement it and to ensure its supervision, the question of ill-defined development, and the neocolonial tendencies by the IFIs. In other words, if we place this strategy in the larger debates on land grabbing, climate change politics and development, we realize that it has less potential in terms of redeeming the ordinary people and their communities from the climate crisis.

### **Imperialism, Capitalism and Neocolonialism in the Age of Neoliberalism: Critical Engagement with the Dynamics of the SOCFIN Palm Oil Projects in Sierra Leone**

This section draws on a case from a West African country, Sierra Leone, to illustrate the structural dilemma of the climate crisis and highlight the limits of coalition building against climate change.

In a bid to promote what has been termed as global development, largescale development initiatives have intensified land grabbing both at global and local levels. I highlight a case of SOCFIN company in Sierra Leone and show that it has been so detrimental to the lives of the people in Sierra Leone and their environment. Starting in the year 2011, Sierra Leone has witnessed the dilemma of large scale acquisition through an agricultural company called SOCFIN. This was not the first of its kind but at least it has so far emerged as one of the biggest and most dangerous largescale plantation company that has changed the social, economic and ecological life of people in the country (Frederic et al., 2022). SOCFIN runs numerous palm oil plantations not only in Sierra Leone but also in many other West African countries like Nigeria, Ecuador etc. The report of Human Rights Defender in Sierra Leone shows that SOCFIN in 2011 May leased 6500 hectares of land in Malen chiefdom for 50 years and this had the option to renew for additional 25 years (Human Rights Defenders in Sierra Leone 2019: 4). The land was leased by the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) on behalf of the state and signed by the Paramount Chief BVS Kebbie with a few land owners about 28 (ibid.: 4).<sup>10</sup> Existing research shows that by 2022, the oil palm plantation occupies up to 12000 hectares of land in the Sahn Malen Chiefdom in the Southern Province of Sierra Leon (Frederic et al., 2022: 27). Another report by the Oakland Institute (2019) revealed that in fact the amount of land that SOCFIN plantation has acquired is more than 18000 hectares on which its palm oil industry is seated. There is no way such huge chunks of land would have been unoccupied and out of use by community members. Its occupation consequently displaced and evicted landed communities.

The establishment of the plantation and industry was premised on the idea that it would generate employment opportunities (at least 10,000 people were promised jobs) for the people and generate revenue for the state and consequently promote *development*. For instance, Federici et al. have shown that SOCFIN promised to give the about 30 villages and over 120 land owning families' compensation to redevelop themselves, giving them annual lease rents (which are agreed not to be paid)<sup>11</sup>, construct a hospital, a road network, schools, housing facilities and offer 75,000 USD per year for social development (Federici et al., 2022: 4). This promise of development was meant to convince the people that the project was novel and aimed at helping them but also lure them into surrendering their land in the name of development. Development for this company and the state, so to say, is material, infrastructural and economic. Other society's conceptions of what might

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<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Defenders in Sierra Leone, "Report of the fact finding mission on the human rights situation in Malen Chiefdom after the violent incidents in January 2019", January 29, 2019, [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/report\\_on\\_malen\\_incident\\_final\\_version.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/report_on_malen_incident_final_version.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> SOCFIN itself boasts of having spent "a whopping US\$1 Million on Corporate Social Responsibility in Malen Chiefdom and has paid US\$260,000 lease money for 12,000 planted hectares of land" and employing 1,554 permanent staff and up to 2,600 seasonal staff and security contractors of about 940 workers" with a view that it pays way more than the government minimum wage by 24% (SOCFIN, 2021).

constitute development (beyond the economic) would not matter [I have discussed these other modes and conceptions of development, land and land use elsewhere], (see Lunyago, 2023).

When starting its operations, the company signed a memorandum<sup>12</sup> of understanding with the Sierra Leone government and the state gave the company freedom to do whatever it wished with not only the land and other natural resources but also with the people. Federici et al. (2022) have shown that the company would for instance not be restricted on the “volume of water extracted by [SAC] from rivers, other watercourses, wells and boreholes” (ibid., 2022: 27). The resources on which the state was giving a private company a blank cheque (to access and utilize) were being utilized by the local communities before the establishment of the plantation and industry. For instance, it has been shown that the three major rivers in the Sahn Malen Chiefdom (i.e., the Malen, the Sewa, and the Waanje as well as many small streams, lakes, and swamps) “were used by local communities for fishing, bathing, washing, and drinking” (ibid.). Giving such a blank cheque did not only deprive the communities of their land use rights but also constituted what Bassan et al. (2020) have called land use displacement and what Banjwa (2024) has called epistemic displacement, in which discourses of land use that emerge from the affected communities are displaced and new and hegemonic ones deployed and emphasized.

The acquisition of such land by these private multinational companies is done with the support of both the state, local and national elites and the International Financial Institutions (IFI) like the World Bank (which promotes largescale land acquisition not only in Africa but across the globe), justified using (as always) the language of ‘development’. The IFIs also prescribe policies which are then actualized by nation states in Africa. As Shivji notes, “policies are thrust down the throats of politicians and parliamentarians using the carrot of loans, aid and budget support whose withdrawal acts as the veritable stick. Meanwhile, voracious imperialist capitals backed by their states and the so-called ‘donor-community’ is grabbing land, minerals, water, flora and fauna” (Shivji 2011: 15). The local elites help in either persuading the people (we should bear in mind the logic of coercive persuasion) to leave the land for the investor or deploy all forceful avenues to evict people off the land. These in return are given the money which would allegedly be used to compensate the communities as a reward (Oakland, 2019). It has been noted that “huge amounts of money, which should be allocated to the land owners as rent payments, were instead provided by SOCFIN to local elites without any transparency on how those funds were used” (ibid.). This means that often, the land is taken without due compensation or payment of rental fees, but even if these were paid, the question of the intension for which the land is taken and the fact that people are left landless renders such compensation and payment meaningless.

The Sierra Leone government supports such acts through licensing the firm and offering it protection. Even the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) which was established in 2004

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<sup>12</sup><https://www.openlandcontracts.org/contract/ocds-591adf-9481967561/view#/https://www.openlandcontracts.org/contract/ocds-591adf-9401554361/view#/pdf>

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to ensure that palm oil projects are sustainably implemented is accused of having certified SICFIN despite knowing that there are community grievances about the use of land and other resources by the company. In a letter written to the Minister of political and public affairs by the Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association, a number of issues were raised which prompted them to call for a private investigation. These included the imposition of a one-off payment for an acre of land as plant compensation (1,000,000 Leones) without negotiations with the land owners, pollution of Malen river, cultivation of all land without leaving some for farmers cultivation as promised by the Environmental Impact Assessment Report, non-payment of compensation, payment of ghost land owners huge amounts of money, improper documentation of land deals, mass sacking of workers (who work under slave-like conditions coupled with poor salaries) and the removal of village chiefs who identified and sided with land owners.<sup>13</sup> In 2022, Oakland produced a report titled *Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil: 19 Years is Enough*, in which it shows that the RSPO has been used “by the palm oil industry to greenwash environmental destruction, labor and human rights abuses and land grabbing” (Oakland, 2022). This claim was based on the fact that RSPO had failed to “address the numerous grievances of communities whose lands were taken by palm oil companies”. Thus it concluded that “while the area of land under RSPO-certified oil palm plantations has continued to grow, the RSPO has continued to be a great deception”. (Oakland Institute 2022). In 2022, Green Scenery wrote a press release asking the RSPO to engage the MALOA and other members of the affected communities after failing to engage them earlier.<sup>14</sup>

What we can see perhaps is that this very scheme of certifying was possibly established for the purposes of ensuring that they legitimate the acquisition of land but not necessarily help in ensuring good and sustainable use of the resources. This scheme was not only in Sierra Leone but across West African countries and since 2020, it is argued to have certified “several industrial oil palm concessions in Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Sao Tome, Ghana, DRC, Nigeria and Ivory Coast” all of which belong to the same Luxembourg-based oil company, SOCFIN. (ibid.). When the affected communities complained, it is argued that the RSPO secretariat sent a “verification mission to assess the allegations” but even then, those who were sent (the RSPO assessment team) are argued to have “avoided talking with people critical of the company, and ignored evidence provided by community leaders” (ibid.). The state (often misconstrued as the government) has supported this whole process through not only licensing these investors but also through seriously criminalizing any peasant attempts at resisting the investments. For example, those that attempted to resist the investment were brutally beaten and arrested by the state police, tried in court and criminalized. The Oakland 2019 report has shown that “one month after violent incidents in the SOCFIN plantations in Sierra Leone leading to brutal repression by security forces, *there was*

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association to The Minister of Political and Public Affairs, July 22, 2016, Available at [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/independent\\_investigation.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/independent_investigation.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Green Scenery, MALOA’s petition to the RSPO Certificaton of SOCFIN is not Unfounded, May 24, 2022, [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/green\\_scenery\\_pr\\_maloe\\_petition\\_not\\_unfounded\\_2022\\_05\\_24.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/green_scenery_pr_maloe_petition_not_unfounded_2022_05_24.pdf)

death of two people and 15 people *were* arrested” (ibid., 2019). The report of Human rights defenders in Sierra Leone noted that the Paramount Chief Hon. P.C BVS Kebbie, “instructed the chiefs and land owners to thumbprint documents and repeatedly told them that they will lose their land even if they didn’t sign or accept the compensation”. The report further noted that this whole process was done in “the presence of armed police in a public meeting in Sahn where the community members were intimidated by chiefs to thumbprint a document and accept the ‘shake hand’ and compensation”.<sup>15</sup> The report’s findings indicated that following the 2019 protests, there was continued “arbitrary arrest and detention of particularly the members of MALOA, beating of MALOA members resulting to wounding and bodily pains, intimidation of MALOA members, harassment and violence by either government security personnel or loyalists of the Paramount Chief of Malen Chiefdom, use of excessive force by the Military and the Police against civilian protesters and other villagers during raids, extra-judicial killing of two civilians during the standoff between the members of the ‘Poro society’ and the government security personnel, and *high securitization to a point of* one military officer and one police officer secretly following the (research) team during the visit to communities to identify victims who testified”.<sup>16</sup> But all these should not be surprising because the postcolonial neoliberal modern nation state with all its colonial legacies has always done one thing: serve the interests of capital with the violence of the law and the deployment of force.

The World Bank, as it has always done, has intentionally and successfully done so well in ensuring that it provided ill advice based on purely economic consideration to the states of the global south and in this case Sierra Leone since 2004. Based on such advice, there was creation of the Sierra Leone Business Forum established as part of the World Bank neoliberal attempt at Removing Administrative Barriers to Investment (RABI) (Oakland 2014). Besides, through its Enabling the Business of Agriculture program, the World Bank has ensured that it supports large-scale agriculture but also large-scale land acquisition (what I call land grabbing and what Borras et al call land rush). The Enabling the Business of Agriculture program in 2017 introduced “a set of indicators on land that measured laws and regulations that impact access to land markets for producers and agribusinesses” (Federici et al., 2022: 39). These indicators had one interest behind them: privatization of land. Federici et al. note: the “introduction of the land indicator represented an unprecedented push to privatize and facilitate private interests’ access to public land” (ibid.).<sup>17</sup> The World Bank equally influenced the giving of tax holidays to investment companies. Besides, the World Bank also funded the “Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency

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<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Defenders in Sierra Leone, “Report of the fact finding mission on the human rights situation in Malen Chiefdom after the violent incidents in January 2019”, January 29, 2019, [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/report\\_on\\_malen\\_incident\\_final\\_version.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/report_on_malen_incident_final_version.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Defenders in Sierra Leone, “Report of the fact finding mission on the human rights situation in Malen Chiefdom after the violent incidents in January 2019”, January 29, 2019, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> “Although the indicator was removed in 2019, following civil society backlash,<sup>254</sup> the damage was already done given the Bank spent years and millions of dollars creating the enabling environment favorable to the privatization of land. As the case studies demonstrate, once investors access land for large-scale projects, favorable water access is often included in the deals at little or no cost” (Federici et al., 2022: 39)

(SLIEPA) with the mandate of generating investment in key sectors, including agribusiness” (ibid.). SLIEPA was created for one sole purpose: to do research and provide documentation and statistics on available land and opportunities for investment to capitalist companies.

Soon after the creation of SLIEPA in 2007 with help from the World Bank, the agency’s investment leads grew from 4 in 2009 to more than 100 as of June 2010. SLIEPA regularly produces documents about opportunities for investors in oil palm, cocoa, and agribusiness activities in general, and facilitates the process of land acquisitions by negotiating directly with “local level stakeholders.”<sup>6</sup> However, negotiations often only take place with local chiefs or illegitimate intermediaries, and have failed to involve local communities (ibid.)

This shows that the World Bank does not only support investment but also land grabs.

Now one would ask, to whose benefit is the SOCFIN investment scheme and how does it in turn affect the communities in which it is established? It should be noted that these large-scale land deals and their investments only serve the interests of capital and power (by power I mean the state or ruling government and the IMF and World Bank as a global imperial state). It should be noted that the more the plantations expand the more profits they make. In 2022, it was reported that “SOCFIN’s profits exploded in 2021 to reach 80.4 million euros, its highest figure since at least 2014 due to increasing prices for palm oil and rubber” (Mittal 2022). Now with the Russia-Ukraine war, there has been an increasing global demand for palm oil which in turn has resulted into high prices and thus high profits and this is due to a reduction in the supply of sunflower oil from Ukraine. In 2021, the Bolloré Group, “which owns nearly 40% of SOCFIN, also booked a staggering profit of 6 billion euros”. The profits are not only due to increase in the amount of land exploited but also labor from the dispossessed and proletarianized communities. This is because, when the people were dispossessed of the land, they were left with no option than offer labor in the plantation and industry, which Marx has called proletarianization. These profits are argued to “come at a high cost for communities living near the plantations. In particular, the company’s rush to get its plantations certified as “sustainable” is leading to a lot of trouble on the ground” (ibid.). It is such profits that motivate such investors to continue their attempts of searching for land wherever it is to meet their unending desire to accumulate. And for that reason, the company takes up land beyond even that which was granted on the lease by government. The report of the technical committee on the Malen chiefdom land dispute in Pujehun District of 2019 found that much as SOCFIN was leased a quantum of 18,473.03 hectares (45,647.29 acres), the company was actually occupying on ground 19,123.9879 hectares (47,256.403252 acres), illegally grabbing 1,609.113252 acres of land. This was gross appropriation (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019: 3).

This unending desire to accumulate has not only affected people through loss of land and labor but also the environment in which they live. When Oakland Institute organized a conference on Development and Transformation in order to give peasant farmers and community members a platform to voice out their grievances to the concerned authorities in 2012, many issues (over 100) were raised concerning the problems caused by the SOCFIN plantation and its industries. These argued that their poverty conditions had increased from the time the project was established.



People stated that they could hardly afford taking their children to school despite promises of a school by the company, and this was attributed to their inability to afford school fees since their only source of income, land, had been taken away from them. They also expressed high levels of hunger, “rising food prices and despoiled water supplies”. Their social and cultural values had started disappearing due to the activities of investors (Baxter, 2012: 2). Communities decried the overwhelming “environmental effects of the investors’ operations” (ibid.). Federici et al. (2022) have shown that dangers emerging from the companies and factories due to investments include pollution of water sources and air, due to the extensive use of fertilizers and pesticides in agricultural plantations, and emissions from the oil industry.

The intensive use of chemicals and pesticides in industrial agriculture resulted in significant pollution in all cases reviewed. Pollution comes from runoff of fertilizers and pesticides used in industrial plantations, from the residues of processing plants, as well as from the biological effluents from workers. The consequence of pollution by hazardous chemicals has multiple impacts—on food security through the loss of important livelihood sources such as fish, on crops and drinking water for livestock; on health of the locals with a rise of illnesses; as well as the loss of biodiversity and other negative environmental impacts... The plantation’s extensive usage of chemicals and fertilizers has drastically worsened the water quality for local communities (ibid.)

The report of the technical committee of 2019 showed that people complained about emissions, noise, water from oil mills etc. affecting not only the land but also their life. The committee asked Sierra Leone Agricultural Research Institute to conduct a laboratory test on the soil and water samples. The tests were conducted but they were not helpful since, according to the committee, the report was evasive, i.e. it was neither here nor there. This perhaps may speak to the power the company has to a point of affording to influence the decision of the tests (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019: 7). The emissions that come from the industry end up increasing the climatic conditions. Besides, River Malen, found in the Chiefdom of Malen was in 2015 named as the Worst river bodies in Sierra Leone and this was attributed to its “proximity to oil palm plantations” (Federici, ibid.). Other water logged areas like swamps in the plantation area are no longer suitable for subsistence farming.

The contamination of water bodies through the use of nitrogen or phosphorus substances brightens the crops, directly threatening the livelihoods of local communities. Furthermore, locals point to poor water quality, with severe impacts on their food supply—particularly fishing, a primary protein source, which has become impossible (Mittal, 2022)

Sources indicate that forest cover in itself has started reducing in Sierra Leone and in West Africa in general and this is attributed to high rate of deforestation (Johnson et al., 2013). This can perhaps today be attributed to one fundamental logic: the logic of what Shivji has called *neoliberal primitive accumulation* (Shivji 2011). It can be thought of as both the expansion of the large-investment initiative like the SOCFIN palm oil plantation and oil industry or the fact that when

people have no alternative means of survival after being dispossessed of their land (given the agrarian nature of the African societies), they resort to engaging in forest supported activities like “logging, slash-and-burn agriculture, and the cutting of trees for use as fuelwood” (Johnson et al., 2013: 329). Thus, the increase in population when land is finite (and yet one entity, a palm oil company, wants to own almost everything at the expense of all members of the community) coupled with the other activities undertaken as alternatives have seen an increase in the rate of exploitation of the forest resources and their nutrients with a result that it has “outstripped the rate of regeneration by natural means” (ibid.).

In the case of Sierra Leone, the climate crisis can not only be attributed to land and water grabbing by SOCFIN company. The report of the technical committee on the Malen chiefdom land dispute in Pujehun District has established that despite the Environmental Impact Assessment report recommending having green belts or buffers of 500 meters around the villages and 50 meters along the land valley swamps and river banks, the company violated these provisions which it accented to (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019: 6). In fact, the logic of green and water grabbing is exemplified in the company’s inclusion of swamps in its concessions despite the fact that swamps, forests and rivers are not supposed to be disposed or occupied by the company or any other person seeking economic/financial benefit out of it (ibid.: 6-7). Thus it did not only take the land from people but also other ecosystem land like swamps and forests. Even when the state attempts climate change mitigation and conservation measures (despite being minimal), these are argued to have met with weak enforcement thus worsening the situation. In fact, places which are designated as conservation areas are also serving capitalist interests either as tourist parks or land directly given to those who want to set up investment ventures (Johnson et al., 2013: 330).

The communities have not just sat on in these precarious conditions, they tried reporting to the agency in charge of environmental protection about for instance the “large amounts of dead fish in the waters” and the reduction in sources of drinking water (which were later confirmed by an investigation as being caused by chemical pollution of the Malen). In 2016, Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association wrote a letter to the Minister of Political and Public Affairs asking for an independent investigation for peaceful resolution of land crisis in Malen following “the large-scale land acquisition by SOCFIN Agricultural Company and the Maltreatment of land owners and land users by the company the chiefdom authorities.”<sup>18</sup> The letter pointed to the arrests, beatings, detainments, trials and imprisonment of land owners and users for speaking and peacefully protesting against the “forceful acquisition of their land”.<sup>19</sup> The investigation report is argued to have initially been withheld. This happens partly because as mentioned earlier, the state gave the company a blank cheque to do whatever it wanted with resources including water. Besides, being at the center of supporting land grabbing, reporting the investor to a state agency

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association to the Minister of Political and Public Affairs, July 22, 2016, Available at [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/independent\\_investigation.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/independent_investigation.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association to The Minister of Political and Public Affairs, July 22, 2016.

would be reporting a land grabber to a supervisor and/or guarantor of land grabbers. As Sultana would tell us, the postcolonial *neoliberal* nation state has been and continues to be very complicit in involving itself in the “continuing colonial patterns in order to economically develop more as they work with the corporations and global institutions” even when this comes at “the expense of futures of their marginalized populations instead of increasing wellbeing and redefining the ‘good life’ beyond only economic growth”. They are often conditioned by the most fundamental tools the neocolonial masters know how to use best, coercion and violence through loan/aid conditionalities and/or *threats of embargos/restrictions/bans and sanctions* [emphasis mine] (Sultana, 2022: 8). Shivji has argued that neoliberalism was an ‘ideological attack on radical nationalism’ destroying the nationalist project and its building blocks (Shivji 2011: 14).

### *Farmers fight on*

Farmers have not just look on as their land is being grabbed by the capitalists. Right from the start, they put up a spirited resistance as a way of not only protecting a source of their livelihood, land, but also as a way of protecting themselves and their culture from extinction. Research by the Oakland institute has shown that on January 2019, people protested against the SOCFIN investment scheme (The Oakland Institute 2019). Federici et al. have shown that earlier in the process of establishing the palm oil industry in Sierra Leone in 2011, people held a peaceful protest against the investment scheme. It is stated that over “a hundred landowners started a blockade in SOCFIN’s area in Malen chiefdom. The peaceful protest came about after several attempts by land owners to renegotiate the lease agreement signed by the government”.<sup>20</sup> This protest was not only about the investor but also against the state which had signed an agreement with the investor and their Paramount chief B.V.S. Kebbie who allowed such an investment. On May 21, 2017, the Malen Youth Development Union (MaYoDU) held a meeting in the community of Sahn that brought together hundreds of disaffected chiefdom residents in which all SOCFIN workers were instructed “to stay away from work indefinitely from May 22, until the company reviewed their work conditions. This was coupled with other demands”.<sup>21</sup> The sub-chiefs gave SOCFIN 21 days ultimatum to fulfill the demands. On June 2, 2017, Another group called the Youths Affected by SOCFIN Agricultural Company (YASAC) wrote a petition to president Ernest Bai Koroma supporting the 21 days’ ultimatum but also calling for the review of the land lease agreement. In here, this group demanded that the company should leave their chiefdom if their demands were not met. On June 4, 2017, YASAC is argued to have convened another meeting at Gondama villages in which they re-strategized to demand for the departure of SOCFIN if their demands were

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<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.openlandcontracts.org/contract/ocds-591adf-1054510190/view#/pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Action for Large Scale Acquisitoon Transparency, Press Statement, June 7, 2017, [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/20170607\\_allat\\_press\\_release\\_on\\_socfin\\_and\\_malen\\_chiefdom.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/20170607_allat_press_release_on_socfin_and_malen_chiefdom.pdf)

not met. This is argued to have caused “a lot of tension in the chiefdom”.<sup>22</sup> But as is the nature and character of the modern state, violence was often the response to the protests both peaceful and violent.

The state decided to protect the investor than listen to the cries of the local communities. It is argued that by mid-October of 2011, about 40 people had been arrested and taken to prison. But these people had a few allies who offered to help them and one of them was an organization called Green Scenery<sup>23</sup> and this “engaged a lawyer to ensure that the rights of land owners were respected. After three days, 25 people were released but 15 were charged on counts of riotous conduct, conspiracy, and threatening language and were kept behind bars in Pujehun, the district’s capital” (Federici et al., 2022: 4). The detained were denied bail but their lawyer insisted and later they appealed in the high court which “ruled in favor of the accused and guaranteed *them* bail. Since the release of the “15” (as they are now regarded) on October 18, 2011, several court hearings have been set up by the Magistrate court, but only two were held”. The cases against them are allegedly forged cases to a point that the Local Unit Commander of the Pujehun District who was the key witness failed to give testimony when a hearing was slated in 2012 on March 3 (Federici et al., 2022: 4). The arrest of these did not scare away the people completely and perhaps since they had nothing left, they continued with the protests.

The farmers’ cries attracted more allies to the struggle against the investment company. In March 2012, it is argued that an organization called Leonean organization MALOA “issued a petition objecting to the certification of SOCFIN’s SAC plantation by RSPO”. The petition was signed by a multitude of 1,475 community members (The Oakland Institute, 2022).<sup>24</sup> The RSPO which is ideally meant to protect the people is argued to be disinterested in listening to their cries. As noted earlier, even those who resist are criminalized including human rights defenders in various non-government organizations. Such kind of resistance against SOCFIN is not only happening in Sierra Leone, they are also happening in other countries in affected communities like in the Community of Marioba near the Okumu oil company in Nigeria in March 2022 (see Mittal 2022) and the Community of Barranquilla de San Javier in Ecuador in 2019 (see Oakland Institute 2022). The likelihood that the farmers can be successful is possible but very hard. This is because, they are not only fighting the investor and the investment but also other bigger forces like the state and IFIs that seek to see that primitive accumulation does not stop. When we draw on Bassan et al.’s concept of *Land Use Displacement* (the idea that countries in the global North and of recent middle East increase their land use areas and forest land at the expense of those countries where they import food from like Sierra Leone), we see that the food needs, land reduction and climate crisis in the global north has to be transferred to the global south at any cost—including grabbing land

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<sup>22</sup> Action for Large Scale Acquisitoon Transparency, Press Statement, June 7, 2017, [https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/20170607\\_allat\\_press\\_release\\_on\\_socfin\\_and\\_malen\\_chiefdom.pdf](https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/20170607_allat_press_release_on_socfin_and_malen_chiefdom.pdf)

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<sup>24</sup> See also Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association (MALOA), Petition Objecting the RSPO certification of SOCFIN Sierra Leon, October 3, 2022, <https://www.fian.be/IMG/pdf/220321-maloe-rspo-petition.pdf>.

and violence (Bassan et al., 2020: 84). Whether the farmers in the communities were successful in their fight against dispossession, oppression and exploitation or not, the most fundamental thing that we can take from their struggle is that it sends a message out to the world that they are not passive and just looking on when their land is being taken, when the environment is getting destroyed, when they are suffering the effects of climate change and when under oppression, they are fighting through the means available to them. It shows that the farmers understand the actual problem with the climate crisis and cannot be hoodwinked into believing the *impacts* story. This challenge to the imperial, colonial, neocolonial and capitalist tendencies speak to how historically marginalized farmers and other oppressed and marginalized people have been fighting (see for instance Fanon, 1963) and continue to put up a spirited fight against imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism.

Pan Africanism of the people would allow framing the problem as imperial and neocolonial. But because they went by the state pan Africanism, these were non-issues and the implications of climate change were the core concerns. The framers of whether the ACCS or the ECOWAS RCS do not explicitly tell us how they intend to deal with these imperial, capitalist and neocolonial tendencies in their strategies for which they formed coalitions in the name of regional solidarity and collective responsibility. It is after mooted such a plan that the framers can lay claim to the Pan African spirit and vision. Otherwise, integration which is ongoing has nothing to do with liberation of societies but integration into circuits of domination and accumulation, and not liberation from climate change crises but subordination to climate capitalism and neoliberal globalities. Afterall, the acts and programs easily allow for cleaning the spoils of imperialism and allowing more time and space to continue destroying the world while throwing the burden at the *climatic others*.

## Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to engage the ongoing tendency across the African continent to form regional coalitions and initiatives as a response to the climate change crisis. Taking the ECOWAS CRS and the SOCFIN Palm Oil Projects in Sierra Leone as entry points, the paper has interrogated the politics of climate change and the spirit within which coalition are formed, deploying a historical language of Pan Africanism. It has investigated the underlying assumptions, techniques, interests and modes of engagement in RCS' to understand whether they offer any possibilities to liberate and emancipate the African continent from the imperial, neocolonial and neoliberal logics, institutions, initiatives and structures which condition societies' subjectivity to the climate crisis. In effect, it has argued that regional climate change strategies and other coalitions fall short of addressing the climate crisis given their preoccupation with technical-financial capacity issues, ignoring fundamental structural and historical political and agrarian issues that exacerbate the climate crisis such as capitalist primitive accumulation through large-scale land acquisition and market-oriented manufacturing, imperialism and neocolonialism, the nature and character of the states (modern nation states) implementing the strategy and perpetuating imperial and capitalist accumulation, ill-defined development initiatives conditioning



destruction of ecosystems, and the neocolonial tendencies of IFI and climate related institutions/programs. Similarly, the chapter questions the strategy for its embracement of the international one size fit all alternatives to land grabbing and climate change because such obscure the unique ways in which communities, countries and people experience climate change. In the end, the solutions offered may end up serving particular interests. In other words, the ECOWAS RCS, the governments and other institutions involved may pretend to want to fight climate change but they forget one thing: they have to begin by fighting ‘climate coloniality’ and rethinking themselves. This is partly because “climate coloniality is perpetuated through global land and water grabs, REDD+ programs, neoliberal conservation projects, rare earth mineral mining, deforestation for growth, fossil fuel warfare, and new green revolutions for agriculture – which benefit a few while dispossessing larger numbers of historically-impooverished communities, often elsewhere” (Sultana, 2022: 4). In the end, interventions like ECOWAS CRS which are informed by global capitalist institutions and sanctioned largely by modern nation states end up promoting land grabbing, and “geopolitical climate necropolitics”.

The idea of international frameworks, discourses and development initiatives having to inform national discussions about the same does one thing: they not only marginalize and devalue context-specific modes of being and knowing but also promote universal hegemonic knowledge and epistemology on climate, land, development and land use thereby sustaining a longstanding colonial matrix of power. If we are to imagine possibilities of dealing with the climate crisis, I suggest that we need to think broadly about a decolonial approach that takes seriously not only the structural and epistemological questions but also the larger “material outcomes and lived experiences *engendered* by fossil fuel capitalism, neoliberal development paradigms, endless growth ideologies, misdistribution of material wellbeing” (Sultana 2022: 6). It means dealing with and questioning the intricacies and complexities of colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism while at the same time questioning the nature and character of the state that we have.

Based on such limitations, the attempt at fighting climate change has to begin by questioning structures which have conditioned endless cycles of accumulation, exploitation and domination of the African continent. For this to be possible, as Shivji notes, we need to reconstruct a new Pan Africanism, one that questions larger structures of accumulation and domination. Such calls have been present in Africa with eminent agrarian scholar Mafeje calling on us (scholars, intellectuals, activists and politicians) to revisit and reconstruct the Pan African project that can deal with the unfinished task of national liberation from imperialism “and take us beyond to the emancipation of the working people to Africa from the hegemony of capitalism” (Shivji 2011, 16). Despite such calls, the neoliberal political elites have done today is to imagine a Pan Africanism which is blind to the throngs of imperialism and neoliberal capitalism by focusing on effects of climate change. In effect, they have graduated from borrowing from the West (as was the case with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation pan Africanists) to just implementing prescriptions from the West (Shivji 2011, 16).

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