

The UN COP26 and '30 by 30': Turning Points or More Business-As-Usual?

Written by Mariko Frame

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MARIKO FRAME, MAR 4 2022

Climate change and alarming levels of biodiversity loss due to human activities are driving life on planet Earth to a dangerous precipice, a potentially dystopian future marked by massive extinction rates and global socioecological crises. With denialism no longer a realistic possibility, governments, NGOs, and corporations are keen to demonstrate their commitment to 'sustainability.' Yet wealth and power- the very structures of the global economy- are deeply entangled with the exploitation of resources and rampant levels of waste and pollution. Since its inception, capitalism itself has been rooted in the ceaseless expansion of economic growth, and truly 'green growth' remains a mirage (Parique et al., 2019). Given these realities, we can expect a flurry of highly publicized sustainability solutions that, in seeking to avoid any substantial changes to current structures of global wealth and power, perpetuate superficial and socio-ecologically unjust responses. Business-as-usual solutions, greenwashing, policies and regulations that lack appropriate mechanisms of implementation and enforcement, all threaten to set humanity on a path of response inadequate to the scale and urgency of crises both ecological and social in nature. Equally threatening- given historical trends- is the likelihood that some solutions may continue to shift ecological burdens onto the most vulnerable in order to enable the continuation of the very actions that are behind the global socio-ecological crises we are witnessing today.

The year 2021 has seen high-stakes international negotiations addressing biodiversity loss and climate change through the platform of the United Nations. In response to the biodiversity crises, in July, 2021, the U.N. released a draft of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, which called for 30 percent of Earth's land and sea areas to be conserved, known as '30 by 30.' In Fall of 2021, representatives from countries around the globe gathered at the most recent United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26 at Glasgow, marking the latest international negotiations for addressing climate change. As major sustainability blueprints, both of these initiatives hold the potential to strongly influence the actions of NGOs, corporations and government. While laudable that climate change and biodiversity loss are finally receiving significant international attention, we must critically assess to what extent the key features of such negotiations will realistically address the scale, urgency, and environmental injustice of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Ecological Imperialism and Global Ecological Crises

In my forthcoming book, *Ecological Imperialism, Development, and the Capitalist World-System: Cases from Africa and Asia*, I explore how ecological imperialism- the capacity of wealthier countries and classes to shift socio-ecological burdens onto the poor and marginalized in the Global South while capturing most of the profits from the exploitation of Global South natures- directly contributes to ecological crises globally and their corresponding socioecological injustices. Some of the most salient features of ecological imperialism investigated in my book include the following:

- a. A global economy characterized by laissez faire economics and profit as the dominant logic of production
- b. Deep inequalities of wealth, power, technology, and military might between countries that allow wealthier countries and classes to shift socio-ecological burdens onto the poor and marginalized
- c. Economies that have been structurally dependent upon resource extractivism (monocrop agriculture,

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- mining, timber, etc.) in the Global South since colonialism
- d. Neoliberal development strategies concerning trade and foreign investment that encourage extractivism in the Global South
 - e. Entrenched and corrupt political structures within the Global South that foster a comprador elite whose interests overlap with resource extractivism and foreign investment
 - f. Dynamics of debt that foster extractivism, vulnerability, and dependency on resource exports in Global South
 - g. An international trade system (and global supply chains) that enable ecologically unequal exchange and other forms of ecological debt, allowing for the unsustainable consumption of global resources by the Global North
 - h. Multilateral rules and regulations (through the World Trade Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund, and free trade agreements) that favor the corporate property rights of foreign investors and local elites. Such rules and regulation have allowed investors to crack open the resources of the Global South to unfettered foreign investment
 - i. The activities of transnational corporation (TNCs) that result in processes of accumulation by dispossession (such as land grabbing) that arise from investment regimes that favor corporate property rights over the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples
 - j. International investment regimes that funnel the vast majority of profits from the capitalization of the 'free gifts' of Global South natures to TNCs, and their shareholders largely in the Global North
 - k. Liberalized international finance that falls drastically short of adequate environmental and social governance (ESG) regulations
 - l. Relatedly, the lack of an international ESG standard for financial sectors globally, meaning that environmentally degrading economic activities can always find funding from somewhere
 - m. Relatedly, the entanglement of financial profits globally with extractive industries responsible for climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, among others
 - n. The expansion of manufacturing into areas of the Global South (emerging economies) and the consequent pollution and degradation of their environments and sink capacity
 - o. Broadly, the growth of emerging economies and their ecological expansion into the periphery as they mimic the industrial capitalist path taken by the Global North

All of the features are deeply entrenched, systemic facets of global capitalism and industrial development that are unlikely to be addressed by top-down solutions such as those put forward through the UN platforms. However, at the least we must ask, will the key solutions put forth in these platforms mitigate or exacerbate the problems of ecological imperialism described above?

The United Nations Conference on Climate Change: COP26 at Glasgow

The most recent United Nations Climate Change Conference, otherwise known as COP26, occurred in Glasgow in the late Fall of 2021. Prior to COP26, the Paris Agreement of 2015 marked the most significant international agreement on climate change with nearly every country in the world agreeing to limit global warming to below 2 degrees (while aiming for 1.5 degrees) (United Nations Climate Change, n.d.).

While such international diplomatic success is necessary, there are good reasons to question whether or not it is sufficient. Significantly, the Paris Agreement is voluntary. There are repercussions neither for leaving the accord nor for missing one's targets. Tellingly, in the years since the Paris agreement, the emissions that trap heat in Earth's atmosphere have continued to rise (Irfan, 2021a). By the end of COP26, 151 countries had submitted new climate plans (NDCs) to slash their emissions by 2030. To keep the goal of limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach, global emissions must be cut in half by 2030. However, according to the World Resources Institute (Mountford et al, 2021), the actual commitments to deep cuts in GHG emissions necessary by 2030 are lacking.

Countries in the Global South, island nations, and grassroots activists have pushed for years to make climate justice a central issue addressed in the conferences. Climate debt, like any other form of ecological debt, is a central component of ecological imperialism, and one with perhaps the most alarming repercussions. Climate debt

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essentially refers to climate injustice, arising from the fact that wealthy countries benefit from the production and consumption of fossil fuels while the poorest countries, who are the least responsible, are disproportionately likely to suffer the severest costs. The United States is by far the largest cumulative emitter of greenhouse gases since the Industrial Revolution, followed by China, the former Soviet Union, Germany, and the UK. Consequently, most of the warming that is witnessed today is due to wealthier countries (Irfan, 2019).

However, it is unlikely that climate injustices will be adequately addressed through UN Conferences on Climate Change. For one, despite promises, they have already accrued a poor record of being addressed. For example, in terms of climate finance, in 2009, rich nations committed to mobilize \$100 billion a year by 2020 to support climate efforts in developing countries. However, developed countries failed to meet that goal in 2020; recent estimates showed total climate finance reached only \$79.6 billion in 2019. Developed countries did agree to double funding for adaptation by 2025, which would amount to at least \$40 billion. However, adaptation to climate is only part of the picture of climate injustice. The other issue is the loss and damage already done to lives, livelihoods, and environments caused by climate change. While a number of countries advocated for COP26 to create a new finance facility dedicated to the loss and damage, they faced pushback by developed nations (Mountford et al, 2021). Ultimately, due to resistance of the United States, European Union, and other rich countries, COP26 failed to establish dedicated new funds for loss and damage (Rowling, 2021).

In addition, in COP26, other issues plaguing the goal of climate justice emerged. To meet the goal of keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2050, global emissions must be brought to zero by 2050. However, more than 130 countries will likely rely on *net-zero* emissions goals by 2050, including the United States, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Japan, the EU, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Argentina (Irfan, 2021b). Central to meeting such goals, countries are pricing carbon dioxide emissions and creating accounting mechanisms for reducing them, such as through credits or offsets that are traded with other countries. Under Article 6 of the Paris agreement, wealthier countries can compensate for their higher emissions by activities such as financing clean energy in developing countries or restoring carbon-absorbing ecosystems (Irfan, 2021a). COP26 created a regulated and expanded global carbon trading market that allows countries to partially meet their climate targets by buying credits representing emission cuts by others (Lakhani, 2021).

However, these developments continue historical patterns of shifting environmental burdens onto the poorest and most marginalized. For one, critics have noted that carbon trading was heavily promoted by big polluters at COP26, with more than 500 fossil fuel lobbyists, affiliated with some of the world's biggest oil and gas companies, granted access to COP26. By allowing corporations and countries to commit to net-zero emissions instead of zero emissions, polluters can essentially buy their way out of reducing greenhouse gases. Meanwhile, indigenous people and their traditional knowledge on sustainability practices were mostly excluded or sidelined (Lakhani, 2021). The central issue, according to critics, is that carbon markets incentivize countries and corporations to offset rather than actually cut emissions through investing in ‘green energy’ projects. However, green energy projects, like biofuel monocrops and hydroelectric dams, are often linked to environmental destruction and accumulation by dispossession. Further, critics argue that carbon credit schemes threaten to appropriate the land, forests, and rivers relied upon by indigenous and local communities. An expanded carbon market, with more countries and industries participating, could further endanger indigenous lands and livelihoods (Lakhani, 2021). According to the Declaration of Members of the Indigenous Peoples’ Biocultural Climate Change Assessment (IPCCA), such climate policies are *false solutions*, reflecting neoliberal mainstream policies pushed by a wealthy elite to allow extractive industries and agroindustrial activities to continue business-as-usual (IPCCA, n.d.). In other words, such solutions threaten to exacerbate the key components of ecological imperialism; land grabbing, accumulation by dispossession, and the continued extractivist economies of the Global South.

UN Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, or ‘30 by 30’

The threat of dispossession of indigenous and local communities’ lands are not exclusive to expanded international carbon markets- the UN ‘30 by 30’ has also garnered substantial criticism on this account. In July 2021, the UN released a draft of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, which called for 30 percent of Earth’s land and sea areas to be conserved. Indigenous rights activists fear the ‘30 by 30’ conservation scheme could prompt mass

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evictions and human rights abuses across the globe. Critics argue that this plan, dominated, created, and funded by large conservation organizations in the Global North, could result in 'fortress conservation,' an approach to conservation predicated on the removal of all peoples from a protected area. As some 300 million people live in unprotected key biodiversity areas, massive eviction of indigenous and local communities from their ancestral lands could occur (Mukpo, 2021).

The fears of indigenous and other local communities are not unfounded- previous schemes for conservation and carbon sequestration have led to forms of land grabbing. This is not surprising- in my book, I detail how decades of neoliberal development policies in trade and foreign investment have resulted in a wholesale reconfiguration of rules and regulations in mining and land sectors to favor foreign investors. Land grabbing globally is directly linked to such policy overhauls which place power squarely in the hands of investors. Land grabbing can also occur as 'green grabbing.' Green grabbing is defined as the appropriation of land and nature for environmental ends (Vigil, 2018). For example, indigenous groups have strongly criticized REDD+, which stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in developing countries (REDD) and includes conservation, sustainable forest management and the enhancement of carbon stocks (the +). An international initiative negotiated under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), REDD+ has been proposed as a central strategy for mitigating climate change in forests (Cabello & Gilbertson, n.d.).

However, as many remaining forests are found on indigenous lands (due to their stewardship), indigenous groups such as the IPCC argue that REDD+ projects directly target indigenous peoples and their territories, violate indigenous governance systems, further concentrate control over forests into the hands of State institutions, block indigenous peoples' and local communities' customary use of their forests, and negatively impact traditional forest-related knowledge, food sovereignty and food security, and traditional health care systems. Further, the IPCC argues that the drivers of forest loss and forestland grabbing are not addressed by REDD+, noting that governments that are elaborating REDD+ policies are also promoting economic sectors such as cattle ranching, bio-energy, mining, oil exploration and agro-industrial monocultures. In other words, extractivism, the main driver of forest loss in the Global South, continues unchecked (IPCCA, n.d.).

Chomba et al. (2015) found that, due to land tenure established by colonial and post-colonial land policies that left the majority of local people with little or no land entitlement, REDD+ initiatives concentrated benefits in the hands of elites and reinforced inequality. For instance, Kijazi (2015) found that climate initiatives for carbon capture in the Mount Kilimanjaro area were top-down, exclusionary and resulted in the centralization of forests and a renewed form of 'fortress conservation.' Another study found that out of 100 REDD pilot projects – almost all of them connected with carbon trading – many involved land grabs, evictions, human rights violations, fraud and militarisation (Cabello and Gilbertson, n.d.). Green grabs in general result in the eviction of peasant and indigenous communities while facilitating the entry of extractive industries, plantations, and industrial ecotourism in places like Chiapas, Mexico (Rocheleau, 2015).

Conclusion

Any comprehensive, systemic, and critical investigation will reveal the alarming extent to which economic growth and the most fundamental structures of our global economy are deeply interwoven with the continued exploitation of the Earth's resources and the capacity of the more powerful to shift the socioecological fall-outs to the vulnerable and marginalized. Blanket conservation schemes that do not challenge the far-reaching power of TNCs to exploit the Earth's ecological commons, reduce the dependency of the Global South on extractivism, or seek to regulate on ESG grounds the trillions of dollars of financial capital circling the globe (amongst many other structurally necessary reforms) will fail both in terms of environmental sustainability and environmental justice. It is time, instead, to listen directly to those who are facing dispossession, loss of livelihoods, and homes, and to seek grassroots solutions, such as delegating power to local and indigenous communities, helping them secure formal land tenure, and prioritizing community-management of the Earth's ecological commons.

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