

# Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

## BACKGROUND PAPER 2

by

Kiama Kaara

### ECOLOGICAL COUNTERPLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES IN THE AGE OF NEO-LIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

6 August 2008

#### **Abstract**

We are witnessing a political-economic passage: from global stagnation to amplified uneven development to worsening primitive accumulation ('looting') to socio-economic conflict. This trajectory highlights Africa's problems in particular, and in turn also suggests ways forward for durable peace building and development for sustainable futures. After three decades of neoliberalism, a policy approach meant in theory to establish market relations above all else, authorities on global political economy have returned to themes of imperialism grounded in extra-market power relations. For Africa's popular struggles, the objective of transforming power relations as the basis for ending conflict and underdevelopment requires engaging this theoretical approach to the critique of capitalism and reinvigorating a new approach to the dynamic of emergent capital intensification related maladies like climate change and the net negative effects of a fossil based economic model, which though finite, continues to wreck havoc on the environment. Ecological degradation, as a central failure of the contemporary development paradigm, necessitates the need for new thinking and approaches that make the linkage between the ecology, earth and economy as a fundamental site of alternative thinking. This should inform the critic of the contemporary failures of global capitalism and infuse the fabric on which movements for a sustainable future cut their foundation, theory and action from.

#### **Introduction**

Recent developments across the world have exposed a Global crisis as exemplified by but not limited to the food crisis, riots; housing crisis, rise in oil prices, the housing crisis and

the attendant sub prime debacle in the US have brought to fore the nature of the boom bust cycle of today's capitalist edifice and the attendant challenges of over accumulation. Whereas a Marxist analysis of the contending issues points to a typical unsustainability of the global capital machine, it's Rosa Luxemburg who best captured the inherent nature and crisis of global capitalism. That for its own survival and motive for profit maximization, of essence the purveyors of this system will involve both force and hegemonic pursuits (extra market power relations) to maximize that capacity and ability to multiply the profits. Immanuel Wallerstein has best espoused this, articulating that the Global capital system is under an intense crises and across the world, the notion, drive and struggle for positive change and social transformation is overbearing. That the peoples of the world are seeking a new and better alternative world. As the captains and mandarins of capital make the annual pilgrimage to Davos to moderate and enforce cosmetic reorganizing and alignment of the fast decomposing system, the peoples of the world are rallying a counterplanning agenda best espoused by the World Social Forum processes. An agenda that espouses that another world is not only possible, but is already in the making. Whereas the jury is out on the contending forces and the nature, character and pursuits of this divide; ideological, theory and practice, it at least offers a glimpses on the emergent challenges to the dominant theme of a perverse logic of a dominant neo-liberal agenda.

This paper, while drawing on the experiences and available critic and literature on the contemporary global political economy, seeks to interrogate the essential perspectives of the effect this has on the environment as conceived within the context of sustainable futures. This informs specifically the scope of linkages that the peoples of the world are continuously seeking and making and the aspirations to break from the tentacles of the super exploitative nature of the capital juggernaut.

## **Ecological Footprints**

Mainstream university political discourse in most African universities, teaches an elective course on the Politics of Modernization. The gem of this course is a unit on W.W. Rostow's well choreographed model on the path to modernization. In a rudiment categorization of nations and peoples of the worlds into five broad categories, it starts with the very low (The South) characterized to be at a base level or "Pre-Conditions to Take Off", to the much idealized "Age of High Mass Consumption" (The North). Whereas Rostow is writing for another age, it begs that his brief continues to be found relevant to inform the development appendage to a neo-classical economic model. By infusing Friedman economic models of trickle down, this has continued to hold sway in the development discourse across the board – only gaining a critical mass of a vibrant critique in these latter days.

But of note has been the continued disregard for environmental consideration within the development discourse itself. By removing environmental considerations from the planning and modeling process, this sets pace for the ravage of global capital on natural resource. At the anvil of profit maximization, we sacrifice posterity for progress. But what does this essentially mean? Plainly put, the challenge to the dominant enclosures of capital is the capacity to draw the linkages that structure social relations and how this is compounded as a variable to economic dictates. Capitalism thrives in Luxemburg terms through its ability to re-organize and reinvent itself at every critical juncture of a massive challenge like it faces

today. In a shape shifting orientation that masks the dominant logic of the market and how it controls both the politics and structural realm, capital will of necessity result to the use of force (Iraq) to control and command new markets through a hegemonic imperial drive (Middle East, AFRICOM). Hence the refrain that, “behind the invisible hand of the market is the military industrial complex.”

The ecology, earth and economy have a concerted linkage in terms of how we relate in our contemporary society. The market commodifies all as actors in the process of the entrenching of capitalism. But again, beyond the market paradigm, it's the people who offer the resounding resistance and struggle against the debilitating effects of the market led ideology and in the process deepen the contradictions of the same.

In our pursuit for global Justice and creating a better world that will uphold our heritage, we have come a long way. We experience on a daily basis the pain and indignity of hunger, disease, illiteracy and asymmetries of both power and information. We work at the trenches and terrains of people's movements and alternative paradigm sites that seek to harness our commonwealth and underpin our dignity. With unfazed clarity, undulated conviction and an uncensored mind, we must of essence broaden the opportunities that allow us to speak true to our beliefs and principles. Though pragmatic in reality, we must endeavour to walk our talk. In slain South African hero, Steve Biko's words, we must be inspired that “.....the essence of any politics, is to speak to those with power!” and we must of essence reiterate this as a political discourse.

Deciphering economy, earth and ecology linkages, as constructed by a grand narrative that posits their mutual exclusivity in the backdrop of globalization is a central discourse on analysis of power and the ability to make the necessary linkages. Ecology, loosely defined as how organisms relate to their environment is fundamentally mutually reinforcing to the construct of the economy. In this it locates you in the community and how this power impacts on you; local, regional and global interfaces. My thesis postulates that, the economy as a construct of social organization cannot supersede the ecological consideration on the basis that, the economy obtains within the dictates and realities of an existent environmental framework.

Plainly put, at the anvil of a highly efficient capitalist society as the dominant economic model, a deliberate effort has been made by the purveyors of the market paradigm to beat the environment, nay, ecology to a retreat, to submit to its whims. Of essence we must beat such rhetoric a hasty retreat. In the ascendancy of profit as the end desire of all our interactions and engagements, we must reaffirm that it's not profit that makes life, but its life that creates and sustains profit. We cannot trample the sanctity of life to the forces of profit. The invisible hand of the market must be visualized and defined in terms of how it democratizes access, addresses inequality and eschews notions of sustainability for the future. We must seek redress of the core values that defile and degrade the value systems that guide our planetary commonwealth. Not just treat the symptoms; war, disease, hunger, inequality; but of need interrogate the very foundations that are tearing the fabric of our social cohesion. In the words of acclaimed Canadian philosopher, John Mcmurtry, “the cancer stage of capitalism... and its carcinogenic causing mutatioous compounds.”

Without wandering from the tenets of my presentation, the unfolding debate around Climate Change needs to be looked at from the lenses of this order. It logic perversely embedded on the violent conflict emanating from the economy, earth and ecology linkages.

Critical commentators of the unfolding debate especially in Africa; Patrick Bond, Bobby Peek, Reshnan Dada, Achille Mbembe, Boyce Ndikumana; institutions and think tanks; Center of Civil Society, the Durban Group, groundWork, Trans National Institute, WISER, et al, have done ground breaking working on this niche especially as it confounds Africa.

To comprehend the essence of how these power relations are constructed within the context of these linkages, where a nominal thirty per cent of the world continues to pollute, over consume and appropriate the share of the other world's seventy per cent, thus in reality marginalizing the majority is a supposedly democratic milieu, it becomes imperative to foster notions of accessing power to expedient transformation. People excluded have a capacity to add the exclusion and turn it into a massive power base. Consider the story of Sajida Khan.

.....On the day that Russia ratified the Kyoto Protocol, February 16, 2005, in effect entrenching the nascent global emissions market into international law, Washington Post coverage that day led from Durban:

Sajida Khan, who has fought for years to close an apartheid-era dumpsite that she says, has sickened many people in her predominantly brown and black community outside Durban, South Africa, was dismayed to learn recently that she faces a surprising new obstacle: the Kyoto global warming treaty. Under the protocol's highly touted plan to encourage rich countries to invest in eco-friendly projects in poor nations, the site now stands to become a cash cow that generates income for South Africa while helping a wealthy European nation meet its obligations under the pact. The project's sponsors at the World Bank call it a win-win situation; Khan calls it a disaster. She said her community's suffering is being prolonged so that a rich country will not have to make difficult cuts in greenhouse gas emissions at home. 'It is another form of colonialism,' she said.<sup>1</sup>

Fast forward to slightly more than two years later on 15 July 2007, Durban: Sajida Khan, aged 55, dies after chemotherapy fails to arrest her cancer.

#### Sajida Khan

Sajida Khan, aged 55, died at home of cancer caused – she was convinced – by Durban's largest dump. A large number of her neighbours also succumbed to cancers, she documented. As the research director of the Cancer Association of SA once remarked, 'Clare Estate residents are like animals involved in a biological experiment.'

Passionate to a fault, Khan was self-taught and supremely confident when testifying about chemical pollution and the economics of solid waste. She earned a bachelors degree in microbiology at the former University of Durban-Westville,

<sup>1</sup>. Shankar Vedantam, "Kyoto Credits System Aids the Rich, Some Say," *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2005. Quoted extensively from Patrick Bond, "Privatization of the Air turns Lethal: 'Pay to Pollute' Principle Kills South African Activist Sajida Khan. Paper for *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

began work at Unilever, and soon invented a freeze-dried food formula that was patented. But she deregistered the patent so as to make it more accessible for low-income people across the world.

Khan became an activist in the early 1990s, because, as she observed, 'As early as 1987 the city promised to close this dump site and in its place give us all these sports fields. And they broke that promise to us. And again, for the 1994 election, the political parties also promised to close the dump, decommission it, and relocate the Clare Estate dump site. Again they broke that promise to us. Before the permit was granted, they should have created a buffer zone of 800 meters minimum to protect the people and that wasn't done.'

Khan was renowned for her hospitality, and visiting environmentalists made a pilgrimage to Bisasar Road, ranking it high amongst Durban's numerous 'toxic tour' sites. Inside were her generosity, fine refreshments and doctoral-level lectures in plant ecology and public health. Outside, a few dozen meters away, was Africa's first pilot project in carbon trading, in which methane from rotting trash will be extracted and the greenhouse gas reduction credits sold to Northern investors, in a plan initially endorsed by the World Bank. It is an innovation that municipal officials brag about - but that also stalled the dump's closure.

After Khan filed an Environmental Impact Assessment challenge, the Bank backed off, a victory that helped raised the profile of numerous other carbon offset problems (although the Bank funded two similar but much smaller landfill projects in Durban in mid 2007).

An international network against carbon trading, the Durban Group for Climate Justice, was founded in 2004 in part because of her charisma. According to Javier Baltodano and Isaac Rojas of Friends of the Earth-Costa Rico, 'Sajida introduced us to how carbon credits were used to justify the dump in the middle of a neighbourhood. She showed us her strong willingness to resist over the sickness, the dump and the racism.'

Says Durban environmentalist Muna Lakhani, 'We have lost a sister, a stalwart, a spirit that I have known well for over 30 years. I miss her, but am glad that her suffering is over. Please can we choose to live our lives just a little bit in her memory, so that our consumption of our planet's resources does not lead to more Sajidas?'

Khan is survived by her mother Kathija and siblings Hanifa, Zainuladevien, Rafique and Akram.

A sad but familiar story across Africa and the developing world, but rarely reported. In defiance, Sajida lived and in dignity she died. A testimony to the spirit and resolve of a human being. A shield for the sanctity and splendor of what our lives are, nay, ought to be.

Sajida could have been here telling her story, maybe not me. Hence the reason why we must never let her valiant story fade, die, cremated with her! But when our tears are dry and handkerchiefs rolled back, we who continue with the struggle must of necessity move on to interrogate the conditions that obtain such grim eventualities and hopefully heed Muna Lakhani's wake plea.

While Sajida called it another form of colonialism, its blueprint had been shaped way back in time. Just to have a glimpse into its operationalization, we must look at how this grand narrative has developed.

Today, at the crossroads of the exigencies of the onslaught of capital intense, corporate led globalization, I pay homage to our rich heritage of struggle. It is this rich history that illuminates my presence and articulation in this conference.

Colonialism, a shared blight in the construct of the contemporary African society is a historical crime that continues to influence the discourse of our progress.

Whereas the Thatcherite dictum of, “There is No Alternative or TINA,” continues to hold sway in the seemingly triumph of neo-liberalism today, we must of essence look back to our history to inform our struggles today. We certainly will not come to grips with the debilitating effects of the contemporary global architecture if we do not look at its historical underpinnings. Especially with the supremacy of neo-conservative ideological truisms, best posited by the Fukuyaman “End of History” or Huntington’s bankrupt “Clash of Civilizations” war cry.

When Kwame Nkrumah, independent Ghana’s first President and African visionary extraordinaire penned his seminal work; “Neo- Colonialism: The last Stage of Imperialism,” the West never forgave him. Culminating with a CIA orchestrated coup that deposed him. But what the imperial agency did not obliterate was the powerful articulation that Neo – Colonialism was the new face of the imperial conquest, not only in Africa but in the broad of the Global South.

It remains true from Kenya to Benin, Nigeria to Uganda, Mozambique to Tanzania and inclusive of the whole breadth from Egypt to Bolivia or the Congo to Brazil, Indonesia, Ecuador, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, India, Nepal and effectively in Cambodia and Myanmar.

If Neo-Colonialism is the imperial drive to subvert the nationalist liberation movements in our countries at independence, Globalization today is the face of subversion of our whole societies to the whims of the market. As the driving motif of the dominant neo-liberal orthodoxy in the past two decades or so, it has been grounded on the mantra of open/”free markets”, deregulation, macro-economic stability, fiscal and monetary deregulation, capital markets liberalization, privatization, end to subsidies and a cut in state investments in social infrastructure.

The roll back of the state in the South, best epitomized by the policies of the International Financial Institutions; Structural Adjustment Programmes, their enhanced versions, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) or their generic versions and other multiple instruments eschewing but not limited to the above mentioned conditionalities have been visited on our states with reckless abandon.

The result has been the negation of the state to maintain its policy autonomy, to pursue independent development agendas and to meet the needs of its citizens. The founding rationale of any state worth its name!

While recognizing the culpability of the dominant political and economic elite in Africa (the Mobutus, Amins, Mois, Bokassas, Mengistus, Barre, etc) in acting as the transmission line

for Western Capital for their own comprador gains; best articulated by Guyanan scholar Walter Rodney in his ground breaking book; “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,” we must hasten to add that the template of this subversion has been well crafted and is “cut and pasted” to all our countries with little or no considerations for diversity, indigenous thought and sovereign alternative development paradigm. The Debt Crises in Africa, the muted efforts of progressive African leaders like Sankara and Nyerere to found home grown solutions, the rigged global trade system policed by WTO and the ever mutating Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) across our regions attest to this. The latest kid on the block in this global tyranny is the much celebrated clean development mechanism that underpins carbon trading as the logical answer to the world’s destiny with pollution and overconsumption.

Africa continues to be the play ground of the competing interests of western capital and lately the eastern interest in Africa’s resources is setting the state for an inter-imperial hegemonic rivalry as amplified by the construct of both neo-colonialism and latter day globalization. The reasons are varied but the most glaring is the rabid competition for Africa’s natural resources.

Ever since European masters met in Berlin in 1885 to carve out their spheres of national influence and conquest in Africa; scholars, commentators and activists in solidarity with the people’s struggles have over time done numerous works in drawing the linkage between natural resource extraction and appropriation and the continued subjugation of Africa by the North. Herein lays the most vivid presentation of the earth, ecology and economy linkages that we are addressing today.

In this much heralded globalization era and with specific focus on Africa, this malfeasance has moved to obscene proportions. Whereas overt control of whole societies is no longer tenable, the new brazen use of war, proxy wars, conditionalities, and in extreme cases corruption and outright bribery as the entry point to open up new frontiers for resource exploitation is unacceptable. From oil in the Sudan and Congo, to timber and gas in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon, not speaking of the human rights violations in Chad, the dislocation of whole societies to open up mining in Kenya and Tanzania and the brazen destruction of fragile ecosystems to fuel World Bank thirst for mega projects in the case of dam construction in Uganda.

The new capitulation of the “War on Terror” as the working rationale and the push to force our governments to become complicit agents in this dispossession while trampling and reversing political, economic, social, cultural and human rights of their citizens, won over long periods of contestation must be resisted.

We must not only re-think, but resist the veneer of a racialized pedagogy that we the peoples of Africa suffer a “Resource Curse!” That we cannot turn the wealth of our natural resources to a wealth of our nations. Our people. Our civilizations. That all we have to show for all our endowment is BLOOD! The blood diamonds of Congo and Sierra Leone, the blood of oil in Nigeria, Sudan and Equatorial Guinea, the blood of gold in South Africa and Ghana. And all the rivulets of blood from our timber, tin, copper, etc that has bled us from slavery to date. The rivulets of blood that continue to bleed us today in the era of globalization, as the citadels of our exploitation; DeBeers, Chevron, Shell, Chiquita, Nestle, Monsanto, continue to marvel the stock markets in New York, Zurich and London! With their new found financial wizardly.

## Moving Forward.....

With both the theoretical and practical underpinnings, it is of great import that we the exploited peoples of Africa stand to challenge the grand narrative. In an article I co – authored with Wahu Kaara, for the premier African electronic social justice journal, Pambazuka News, in the run up to the World Social Forum in Nairobi at the beginning of this year, we concluded by saying; “We must all embrace the paradigm shift that we are no longer talking about charity but justice. That Africa is alive and the African peoples have refused to die but in the converse live for Africa. Those monumental and transformative actions are changing the terrain for the good. And this must be supported from all the relevant quarters with the interest of Africa at heart. We must shame the Economist notions of, “Africa: A Hopeless Continent.” Tony Blair says that we are a “scar on the conscience of the world.” But that needs to be qualified. Their world. That of excesses, exploitation, control and domination. We are a scar because we refuse to die and to refuse carrots to sell our souls. Our political leadership may jump in bed with those who perpetuate our misery and penury, but for how long! Even at that level it’s all crumbling like the walls of the biblical Jericho. The Africa Union has unequivocally stated that debt cancellation is a must, that investment in public services is of critical need and that there is need to develop a social policy on Africa based on rights and entitlements. A policy that puts Africans in the leadership of control, utilization and benefit from their multiple and varied ever occurring natural resources. We must not fuel the appetites of those who gobble our natural wealth with reckless abandon through pillage. For their benefit and wealth and for our poverty and death!”

To assert our People’s sovereignty over their destinies we must be able to have new dreams. To envision new futures. To develop new cosmologies, new metaphors that are devoid of violence and exploitation. We must be able to embrace marginalized groups. To found non-violence and peace building. To assert the democratization of peoples access to their natural resources for their own maximization.

To reconstruct ethics and spirituality. To promote gender equality, economic and social rights. We must of essence rehabilitate and reconstruct politics. We must liberate the world from the domination of multi-national and financial institutions. Of essence we must ensure universal and sustainable access to the common goods of humanity and nature. We have to ensure dignity, defend diversity and guarantee expression eliminating all forms of discrimination. By guaranteeing the rights to food, healthcare, education, housing and work we will be building a world order based on sovereignty, self-determination and rights of peoples. The tapestry of our diversity is our strength.

It is of great importance that in our pursuit to reclaim our spirituality in the face of such momentous adversities, that we draw from the strength of our religious traditions. All great religious traditions in their special ways insist that personal wealth is not to be seen in terms of reducing the world to what the individual can control and manipulate for whatever exclusively human purposes may be most pressing. Judaism’s teachings about the “Jubilee Principle” stress that land is lent not given to human cultivators. It requires “sabbatical” years, and its value is not to be seen in terms of absolute possession but as a source of limited number of harvests between the sabbatical years (Lev.25). The



assumption is that the environment and ecology that is given the land bestowed by God, has to be set free regularly from the assumption that it belongs to us; it has to be left to be itself, to be in relation simply to the God who has given it. A year of uncultivation, wilderness, is not a lot, but it speaks eloquently of our willingness to organize economy around ecology, to 'keep house' within the limits of a world where we are guests more than owners.

Similarly, Christianity not only has its challenges in the sermon on the Mount to anxiety about controlling the environment prohibiting us from identifying wealth with possession; it also has its sacramental tradition which presents the material order as raw material for the communication of God's love – the Eucharist as the symbol of God's action in creating a radically different society, not characterized by rivalry and struggle for resources. At the centre of Christian practice is a rite in which all are equally fed by one gift, and in which material things are identified symbolically with the self-offering of Christ.

Writing slightly some thirty years ago Mwalimu Nyerere, talking about changing another "realistic world" of his time that of apartheid South Africa, said:

"Humanity has already passed through many phases since man began his evolutionary journey. And nature shows us that not all life evolves in the same way. The chimpanzees - to whom once we were very near - got on to the wrong evolutionary path and they got stuck. And there were other species which became extinct; their teeth were so big, or their bodies so heavy, that they could not adapt to changing circumstances and they died out. I am convinced that, in the history of the human race, imperialists and racialists will also become extinct. They are now very powerful. But they are a very primitive animal. The only difference between them and these other extinct creatures is that their teeth and claws are more elaborate and cause much greater harm - we can see this even now in the terrible use of napalm in Vietnam. But failure to co-operate together is a mark of bestiality; it is not a characteristic of humanity. Imperialists and racialists will go. Vorster (Apartheid South Africa President in the 1960s), and all like him, will come to an end. Every racialist in the world is an animal of some kind or the other, and all are kinds that have no future. Eventually they will become extinct. Africa must refuse to be humiliated, exploited, and pushed around. And with the same determination we must refuse to humiliate, exploit, or push others around. We must act, not just say words."

If there is one thing common among all pundits of the status quo, and all dominating classes and hegemonic powers, it is that their existing world is the only realistic world and no alternative world is possible. Yet, it is struggling for an alternative world, a better world, which has changed the past and will continue to change the present for a better future. We, the scholars, commentators, researchers and activists, together with the working people, must continue to fight for a better world. For another world. In the clarion call of the World Social Forum process, that, "Another World is Possible." This world is not only possible, but is already in the making. Our meeting, sharing and communion here, is not only a testimony to the fact that we are in the trenches and terrains of modeling this world, but it

---

Nyerere, J., 1973, *Freedom and Development: A Selection from Writings and Speeches*, London: Oxford, p. 371..

also reinforces our connectivity across cultures, boundaries and territories. That we are not only globalizing hope, but working for the integration, inter connection and linkages of the peoples of the world.

Comrades, Friends and Colleagues, I look forward to not only a most exhaustive, inspiring and ground breaking deliberations, but the development and emergence of concrete proposals, common grounds and agreed outcomes for future engagement.

**Kiama Kaara** is the coordinator of IBON Africa, the regional office of the Manila based socio-economic research and policy analysis think tank IBON Foundation Inc. He also works as a Researcher and Analyst for Kenya Debt Relief Network (KENDREN). His main areas of interest are Debt, Aid, Privatization, Political Economy, Energy and China in Africa. A postgraduate student at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal, Durban, based Center of Civil Society (CCS), he is a Visiting scholar in the same institution. He can be reached at [kiamakaara@gmail.com](mailto:kiamakaara@gmail.com), [kkaara@ibon.org](mailto:kkaara@ibon.org), + 254 723 762 824.

---

Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability is a study conducted by the Coalition for Environment and Development, Finland and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. For more information see [http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable\\_societies.html](http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable_societies.html)