

The Unseen Cost of Exploitation

How Africa Bears the Burden of Global Inequity



As a child born and raised in Nimba, Liberia, I read books and watched documentaries about capitalism and imperialism. These topics fascinated me, but I never imagined that 92% of excess global emissions would also be part of their agenda. Since I was a little girl, I've witnessed the exploitation of my community, and I still see it today. ArcelorMittal, a multinational mining company, has been extracting iron ore from our land for years, leaving little behind except the scars of environmental damage and unkept promises.

The stories of workers, like my grandpa, who dedicated their lives to this company, is a painful reminder of how Africa continues to be robbed of its resources. Despite years of hard work, those who spent their lives in the mines were left with nothing; no pensions, no security, and recognition for their contribution. This is not just the story of my family or Nimba; it's a story that echoes across the continent, a constant reminder of the unequal relationship between Africa and the industrialized world.

Colonialism's Lasting Impact



The "Scramble for Africa," a period of intense colonial expansion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, saw European powers dividing Africa, extracting its resources, and exploiting its people. From the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, where millions of Congolese were subjected to forced labor and violence for rubber extraction, to the more subtle forms of exploitation seen under British, French, and Portuguese colonial rule, Africa's vast resources were drained to fuel European industrialization.

Colonialism left African nations with weakened infrastructures, economic dependency, and fractured societies, conditions that still hinder their development today. The exploitation of labor and resources from cocoa, timber, gold, diamonds, and platinum during this period ensured that the wealth generated from Africa's land benefited only foreign powers. The people, however, were left impoverished, a legacy that continues to haunt the continent.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, the consequences of Belgian colonialism persist. The extraction of rubber

under Leopold's reign caused the deaths of millions of Congolese people. Currently, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is grappling with ongoing political instability, armed conflict, and human rights abuses, particularly in the eastern regions. Rebel groups, including the M23, continue to fight for control of mineral-rich areas, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Despite its vast natural resources, the country struggles with poverty, corruption, and a lack of infrastructures, while the exploitation of its minerals by multinational corporations remains a major source of both economic opportunity and exploitation.

Environmental Devastation and the Niger Delta



The exploitation of African resources continues into the present day, particularly in regions like the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The area is rich in oil, and multinational corporations like Chevron, Shell, and ExxonMobil have been extracting the country's oil for decades. Yet, the local communities in the Niger Delta have borne the brunt of the environmental damage. Oil spills, gas flaring, and pollution have devastated the region, poisoning the land, water, and air.

One of the most pressing examples of this is the ongoing fires at Chevron's gas rigs. Even when these disasters occur, the company

often denies the environmental and health impacts, as seen recently when a fire broke out and continued to burn for weeks. Despite evidence of environmental harm, the Niger Delta communities receive little support. The local people, many of whom rely on farming and fishing for their livelihoods, are left to deal with the aftermath of corporate greed, while the oil companies profit from the resources beneath their land.

The Nigerian government, often complicit in this exploitation, has been slow to address the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta, further exacerbating the poverty and social inequality that the people face. The wealth generated from oil has not trickled down to local communities, and instead, the region continues to suffer from pollution and human rights violations.

Toxic Waste and E-Waste Dumping



Africa's exploitation extends beyond natural resources like oil and minerals. In an alarming trend, many industrialized countries have been sending their toxic waste, including electronic waste (e-waste), to

Africa under the guise of aid. Countries facing overwhelming debt crises, like Nigeria and Ghana, have reluctantly agreed to accept these hazardous materials in exchange for loans or foreign aid. As a result, parts of Africa have become dumping grounds for toxic and hazardous waste, which poses severe environmental and health risks to local populations.

One tragic example of this was the 2004 tsunami that struck Indonesia. The disaster caused some of the chemical containers dumped along the East African coast to rupture, releasing toxic substances into the environment and causing clusters of diseases, including cancer. Rather than receiving aid to help recover from the devastation, African nations often find themselves subjected to the consequences of foreign neglect, further deepening their vulnerability to environmental and health crises.

Climate Change and Africa's Vulnerability



While Africa has contributed little to the world's greenhouse gas emissions, it bears the brunt of the consequences of climate change. Nations like Somalia, Chad, Malawi, and Niger, which have some of the lowest carbon emissions per capita, are among the most vulnerable to climate-related disasters such as droughts, flooding, and extreme weather events.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has acknowledged that historical and ongoing patterns of inequity particularly colonialism have made African countries especially vulnerable to climate change. Colonial powers exploited Africa's resources, leaving the continent without the infrastructure or financial means to adapt to the climate crisis. Countries like the DRC, South Sudan, and Burundi, which are still dealing with the fallout from colonialism, are now facing the compounded effects of a changing climate, with fewer resources to respond to extreme weather events or recover from their impacts.

As the global temperature continues to rise, African nations, particularly those already burdened by poverty and environmental degradation, are at greater risk. While industrialized nations are responsible for the lion's share of global emissions, it is Africa that faces the worst consequences, yet it receives little support or compensation for the damage caused by foreign exploitation.

Gender and Age Inequities in the Face of Climate Disasters



The impacts of climate change do not affect everyone equally. Women and marginalized groups, including the elderly, children, and people with disabilities, are particularly vulnerable. Women, especially in rural areas, depend heavily on natural resources like water and firewood, and when these resources become scarce due to climate change, they face increased risks of gender-based violence and displacement. The strain of collecting water and firewood often falls on women, and in times of climate crisis, this burden intensifies, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

Older adults and people with disabilities are also disproportionately affected by climate change. The United Nations Human Rights Council has highlighted that people over 65 are at greater risk during natural disasters, often facing difficulty in reaching safety or receiving the necessary medical care. The elderly, along with disabled individuals,

are also more susceptible to climate-related diseases, such as heatstroke and respiratory problems.

A Call for Change



The exploitation of Africa’s resources — both past and present — has left deep scars on the continent. Yet, the resilience of African communities has been a defining feature throughout history. However, this resilience cannot be taken for granted. The international community must begin to recognize the full extent of the historical and ongoing exploitation that has shaped Africa’s current vulnerabilities.

It’s time for the global community to truly recognize the cost of exploitation, colonialism, and inhuman oppression. African leaders must prioritize the well-being of their people over personal interests, and the industrialized world must confront the environmental destruction, social inequalities, and economic challenges they’re doing that continue to hinder Africa's progress.

To build a more equitable world, developed nations responsible for the ongoing exploitation of Africa's land and resources must take accountability and commit to a fairer, more sustainable approach to global development. Africans, must unite and demand accountability from those who have perpetuated their exploitation and oppression.

While the harm of the past cannot be undone, we have the power to shape a future grounded in justice, dignity, and sustainability. The time for change is now. We must rise together, demand justice, and ensure that exploitation, colonialism, and oppression are never repeated. The world owes Africa a future free from the chains of its past.