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Thinking green.

What are the environmental challenges for today's Africa?

by Ilaria Sesana, journalist, Altreconomia

Although Africa is the continent that has contributed the least to the climate crisis under way – it has been responsible for only 3% of the greenhouse gas emissions from the pre-industrial era to the present day - it disproportionately suffers the consequences of the increase in global temperatures and is already paying a very high price, in terms of reduced production of food, scarcity of water, and the loss of biodiversity and human lives. Extreme events such as **floods and prolonged droughts** are already having an impact on the lives of millions of people: the seasonal rains have not arrived in the Horn of Africa for five years, or they have been insufficient to guarantee the survival of the population and livestock. Due to the very severe drought, in Somalia alone, over 1.3 million people have been forced to leave their villages and homes to feel the drought and seek shelter in refugee camps.

Another “hotspot” of the climate crisis in the continent is the Sahel (the semi-arid region which crosses the continent from East to West, going through Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan), where every year the **expanding Sahara desert** wipes out about 15,000 square kilometres of fertile land. “Without urgent investments in the mitigation and adaptation to climate changes, the countries in the region risk decades of armed conflicts and episodes exacerbated by the increase in temperature, the scarcity of resources and food insecurity,” the Special Coordinator of the United Nations for the development of the Sahel, [Abdoulaye Mar Dieye warned in November 2022.](#)

In addition to the climate crisis, there is the damage caused by **deforestation**: according to the estimates in the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020 of the FAO, Africa recorded the highest annual rate of net loss of forests in the period 2010-2020, with 3.9 million hectares. This surface area is even greater than that destroyed in Latin America, where on

Segreteria Festival - Festival Office - Bureau du Festival

Via G. Lazzaroni, 8 - 20124 Milano - T. +39.026696258

E. festival@coeweb.org // W. fescaal.org

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average 2.6 million hectares go up in smoke every year. As well as causing a dramatic and often irreversible loss of biodiversity, deforestation heightens the hydric crisis in countries such as Kenya and in the case of heavy rainfall the rainwater is no longer absorbed by the soil and “contained” by the trees: the result is terrible floods of water and mud that come down from the hills and mountains to submerge villages and towns. This was the case in 2017 in [Freetown](#), the capital of Sierra Leone, where after three days of torrential rain, a landslide of mud and debris killed over one thousand people.

The trees are cut down to leave room for intensive crops (such as cacao in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, rubber and palm oil), to dig mines (legal and otherwise) or to make space for oil prospecting while the most valuable plants - such as ebony and rosewood - are cut down and transformed into fine timber which is sold abroad for high prices.

Preserving and protecting this resource as best as possible ought to be a prime objective not only for Africa but for all the countries in the world with the aim of fighting the climate crisis. The only rainforest in the basin of the River Congo extends over a surface area of 170 million hectares – six and a half times the size of Italy- and is the second largest in the world after the Amazon. According to the estimates of the independent [think tank, the](#) Center for Global Development, each year it retains about 600 megatons of CO₂. These “trapped” emissions have a value: about \$50 a ton. “The forest provides a service to the world, removing carbon from the atmosphere. For a value of \$55 billion per year, equal to 36% of the Gross Domestic Product of the six countries it is in”, states a report by the think tank.

Despite the difficulties, there is no lack of experiences of those fighting to protect the forests. Like [Odigha Odigha](#), a Nigerian activist who has been committed since the 1990s to fighting illegal deforestation in the State of Cross River (in the south-east of the country) and in 2003 the recipient of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. With his commitment and that of hundreds of activists, Odigha has successfully conducted the fight for a moratorium on the clearance of woods in the whole state and has imposed the first assessment of the environmental impact on Nigeria. He has also contributed to the creation of the first Forest Commission of the state.

If, on the one hand, there are those who fight to avoid the forests being cut down, on the other there are those who are working to create new ones where the sand of the desert is inexorably advancing: the Burkinabé farmer Yacouba Sawadogo who has brought back to life and perfected some traditional agricultural techniques which have allowed him to recover soils, even when they were badly damaged by drought and abandoned. On that land he has given life to a forest area called “Bangr-Raaga” (Forest of wisdom) which with its 16 hectares of surface is clearly visible in satellite images.

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Protecting the forest also means **fighting the mining and extraction activities** which threaten them. The East African Crude Oil Pipeline (Eacop) is a heated oil pipeline already being constructed along more than 1,400 kilometres which starts from the north of Uganda (where the extracting capacity will be increased) to reach the port of Tanga, in Tanzania: if it were to be completed, it would produce every year more than 34 million tons of carbon dioxide. This would be a real “climate bomb”, the effects of which are already being felt by the local population (several communities have been forcefully evicted) and the environment. Ten of the 31 wells from which oil will be extracted are within the borders of the Murchison Falls National Park, the largest protected area in Uganda and a sanctuary for giraffes and elephants. The WWF warns that the project could also have “major impacts” on [Lake Albert](#), a basin of biodiversity on which over 30 million people depend for the production of water and food.

The “Stop Eacop” movement opposes this project. As well as mobilizing the international community to committing itself to protect the local populations who risk being chased off their lands, thanks to the collaboration with international NGOs, the activists have started legal actions against the companies that have encouraged the project (the French Total and the Chinese Cnooc) both in Uganda and in France.

Four guests at Africa Talks 2023 will discuss the environmental impacts of climate change in Africa and the strategies of protection. **Valerio Bini**, a researcher in Geography and Associate Professor with the Department for Culture and the Environment at the University of Milan, will take on the topic of the protection of the environment and the dynamics connected with the management of resources in Africa in its social components. **Patience Nabukalu**, climate activist and one of the founders of Fridays for Future Uganda, will offer a view on the youth activism in her country and elsewhere. **Noo Saro-Wiwa**, writer and daughter of the activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, will analyse the environmental and social context of the southern regions of Nigeria where the country’s oil production is concentrated. **Christina Hicks**, a social scientist and lecturer at the University of Lancaster, will look deeper into the environmental and social impacts of intensive fishing on the communities in different countries of east and west Africa.