

Environmental protection, waste and a circular economy in Africa

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According to the UN's predictions,¹ by 2050 we will be using the equivalent of three planets' natural resources, while the global population could well have reached 9.6 billion. While on the one hand we are faced with an **increase in the demand for raw materials** necessary for economic development, on the other hand, we are experiencing a shortage in resources. This leads to a disruption of an economic model promoting unlimited growth.

In 1992, during the UN Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, member states expressed their common agreement for the need to cooperate in the fight against the deterioration of the environment. They appreciated the need for common but different responsibilities. The most developed countries recognised their responsibility to move towards sustainable development, in the light of their larger carbon footprint and their greater technological and financial resources. Over recent years this topic has become increasingly pressing, notably with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the UN in 2015 as part of the "2030 Agenda".

In African countries, **activists and civil society organisations** have been highlighting this issue for a long time (Ken Saro-Wiwa's example, as well as Wangari Maathai's, are paradigmatic). There have also been initiatives on a continental level, such as the creation, in 2008, of the platform Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, which brings together more than 1,000 organisations and communities.

Aware of the factors contributing to the deterioration of the environment, starting from the dominance of the "energy-consuming" development model, Africa has had to manage different interplaying factors. Its role as a **global actor**, engaging in dialogue, trading and building alliances with partners, according to its interests (EU, USA, China, India, Turkey, Arab world, etc.). Its desire to grow and create conditions for the **internal market** (the African Continental Free Trade Area-AfCFTA has been recently created) and for foreign investments, valorising its **resources** (both natural and human). Its need to dramatically expand its **infrastructures**, both material (streets, railways, ports, airports, energy infrastructures) and immaterial, and the sustainable use of energy sources.

Despite the fact that the Bamako Convention, which has been in force since 1998, forbids African countries from importing hazardous waste, including radioactive waste, **waste** disposal in Africa is a crucial issue. In addition to the global circulation of these materials, and their reintroduction into value chains, attention should be paid both to the condition of waste collectors – who as well as being extremely marginalised, carry out their work in dangerous conditions and are underpaid² – and, further upstream, to the problem of the growth of consumption. All this creates opportunities and contradictions that must lead to a sustainable growth path conceived and desired by Africans.

From an institutional perspective, the green relaunch of Africa is inspired by the vision of *Agenda 2063, the Africa we want*,³ a common strategic plan for the socio-economic transformation of the continent, launched in 2013 by the African Union for "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, guided by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena". In parallel, the *UN Global Compact's* strategy for Africa, which recalls the role of the private sector and of corporate responsibility, aims "to build more integrated markets, more resilient societies and achieve lasting and sustainable growth".⁴ At the same time, in 2020 the European Union launched the *Green New Deal*,⁵ which also foresees a partnership strategy with Africa, based on a new mix of support packages and private investments, to create alliances and foster sustainable growth. The economic and social devastation to the continent brought by the **Covid-19 pandemic** appears to have fostered an

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/>

² C. Alexander, J. Reno, *Global Entanglements of Recycling Policy and Practice*, in «Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology», 28 Sept. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.18>

³ <https://www.nepad.org/agenda-2063>

⁴ <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/engage-locally/africa/africa-strategy>

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

acceleration of action by the different stakeholders. During the seventh Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development held from the 1st to the 4th March 2021, the speeches focused on the idea that the reconstruction post-Covid-19 will need to follow green pathways, aimed at lowering carbon emissions.

One possible answer to these challenges is the **transition towards circular economy**, which can give rise to new realities. These include energy safety, lesser dependency on other countries, and environmental and biodiversity safeguards. There are multiple sectors in which this may be implemented. For example, the fashion sector produces interesting projects applying these principles,⁶ while the food and agricultural sector has been experimenting new technical solutions for some time. From an expressive point of view, if recycling has been interpreted technically and thematically by African artists for some time now, the world of communication is becoming increasingly more active in this regard. Furthermore, the African academic world is questioning the persistence of Western scientific approaches in the continent's universities, while including indigenous knowledge in the study curricula would lead to more suitable results.⁷

Moreover, many African cultures are traditionally sustainable and recycling practices are becoming more popular among the young people. In this way, the recycling/upcycling process takes on a different value. Characterised not only by innovation, but also by social and cultural businesses.

In the light of these considerations, the new *Africa e Mediterraneo* dossier seeks to explore in-depth the concept of **circular economy in Africa**, investigating its different facets, with its usual multidisciplinary approach. Among others, this dossier aims to address the following questions and issues:

- What are the connections between circular economy policies and *practices*, from an African perspective? How are long-term policies intertwined with the micro-practices of recycling urban, industrial and agricultural waste? What role can civil society and scientific research play in fostering a large-scale paradigm shift? What roles does the private sector play?
- How do both the category of consumption and the status of an object change when that object undergoes a transformation from waste material to valuable object? Is a new aesthetic shaping up in the continent with regards to objects derived from production models based on upcycling?
- If we tend to think about sustainability at the intersection of environmental, economic and socio-political factors, what happens if we try to shift the attention to think of sustainability from a cultural perspective?
- In Africa, sustainability explicitly means rethinking the global power relations and taking on a leadership role for the South of the world. It is a deep reconsideration, an epistemological project which fits well in the decolonialism paradigm. What role can be played in this process by communication, philosophy and artistic expression?
- Literary perspectives, from the present and from the past (e.g. Ayi Kwei Armah in Ghana, Ken Bugul in Senegal and Benin, Bessie Head in Botswana, etc.)

Deadlines

The proposals (title, abstract of max. 400 words, author and a short biography) must be submitted no later than ****April 30th 2021**** to the following email addresses s.federici@africaemediterraneo.it and s.saleri@laimomo.it

The proposals will be judged by the editorial committee. If the proposal is accepted, the full article (including abstract and biography) must be submitted by ****June 30th 2021****.

The articles and the proposals can be submitted in the following languages: Italian, English and French. *Africa e Mediterraneo* is a peer reviewed journal.

⁶ <https://www.afrosartorialism.net/>, Afrosartorialism. A research project on African fashion digitalities, curated by Enrica Picarelli.

⁷ An example regarding Forest Science is proposed in this article:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21681392.2020.1788961>