

Africa and the Energy Question: The Seventh Pan-Africa Newsletter (2024)



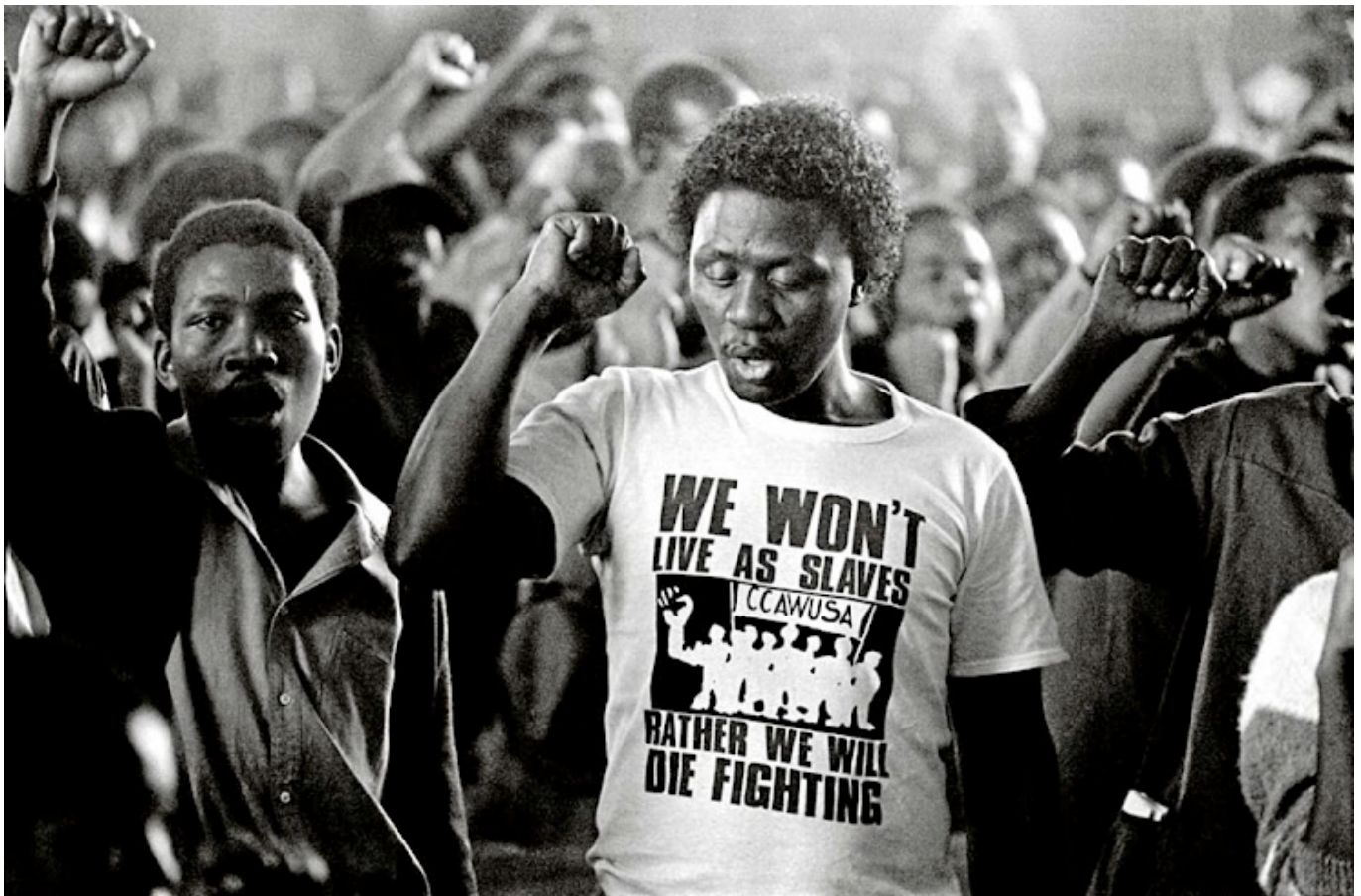
Rita Mawuena Benissan (Ghana), *Great Umbrellas at the Ahenfie Manyia Palace*, 2023.

Greetings from the desk of Tricontinental Pan-Africa,

There is now wide-scale acceptance, although begrudgingly by some, that the key to development in Africa lies in industrialisation. Even western-controlled international financial institutions (IFIs) have come round to this position after many decades of implementing comparative advantage designed to confine poorer countries to the historical yoke of unequal exchange. That is, perpetually exporting raw commodities in exchange for manufactured goods from the Global North. It is worth mentioning that even though most people agree on the necessity of industrialisation, it is still debated whether it ought to be led by the state or the ‘private sector’. Naturally, the IFIs make the latter argument.

The question of energy adds to the discussions about the correct path of industrialisation. Africa’s industrialisation, to take-off and succeed, will have to be undergirded by considerable amounts of cheap and reliable energy. However, many African governments have not started to seriously consider the energy question and what it means for national and continental development. Rather, they seem to have fallen prey to an energy discourse that has been crafted in, and serves the interests of, the Global North. This is the charge leveled by Brian Kamanzi in an excellent essay titled *Africa and the Global Energy Crisis* (May 2024)

published in our Tricontinental Pan-Africa Interventions series.



Santu Mofokeng (South Africa), *June 16 Commemoration, Regina Mundi*, 1986.

Kamanzi, an energy expert who studies the South African energy sector and the role that social movements can play in influencing energy dynamics, divides his essay into two substantive parts. The first part details the purposes that electric energy has served in three distinct periods of African history: the era of colonialism, the era of national liberation, and the era of neoliberalism. In the era of colonialism, electricity's main purpose was to facilitate the extraction of natural resources from the colonies to the mother countries. This, for example, was the *raison d'être* for the giant Kariba Dam built by the British colonial government in 1959 which still operates today. In the era of national liberation and nation building, electricity was seen as the vital vehicle towards total emancipation. Kamanzi writes:

Electricity... became a key strategic resource required to increase local resource beneficiation and develop local productive capacity across a range of sectors. Energy sovereignty emerged as a component of proposals for a developmental state and some notable public works projects related to energy were Nkrumah's Akosombo Dam in Ghana [and] Gamal Abdul Nasser's Aswan Dam in Egypt...

Further, rather than limiting access to electricity to a small elite linked to resource extraction as happened

under colonialism, the nationalists sought to expand access on their own terms:

Programmes to expand energy access included ambitious rural electrification schemes tied to a range of rural development strategies. Investments in energy distribution and transmission infrastructure rose, leading to the formation of larger national grids, and subsequently, regional grid networks. Rural electrification schemes typically consisted of plans to extend the national grid network and featured projects to utilise specific local resources to support small-scale electrification projects in mining, agriculture, and for the railways.

Unfortunately, the promise of that bygone era gave way to the era of neoliberalism under the aegis of IFIs. Today, electricity and energy considerations do not serve emancipatory objectives, but instead serve the parasitic interests of local and foreign capitalists. This class continues to benefit from the IFIs' insistence of 'private ownership [of electricity generation under] so-called Independent Power Producers'. National electricity utilities, which were once the pride of newly independent African countries, are now shadows of their former selves forever teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.



Timi Kakandar, (Nigeria), Entwined, 2023.

The second part of Kamanzi's essay confronts the contradictions and hypocrisy of the emergent paradigm of 'Green Structural Adjustment'. Under this paradigm, the laudable objective of 'greening the economy' has been captured and co-opted by global capitalists. Wall Street and IFIs want governments to 'de-risk public-private partnerships for green infrastructure through offering sovereign guarantees and public incentives, while the profits derived from [green energy] are privatised. Essentially, the result is a green structural adjustment programme'.

Green structural adjustment also requires that the hefty costs of the green transition be borne by the Global

South:

Constituents in the Global North have also been pressuring their governments to switch to sources of renewable energy to reduce reliance on polluting fossil fuels and slow down the climate collapse. While seeming noble on the surface, it is rarely acknowledged that poorer countries in the Global South, which are home to metals and minerals, such as lithium, copper, and other rare earths, needed in massive quantities for the energy transition will be expected to bear the brunt of extraction, and low commodity prices.

But what about economies in Africa which are dependent on fossil fuels? The discourse on the energy transition has not articulated a coherent and satisfactory framework of compensation for countries such as Angola and Gabon who, through a history of colonialism and neocolonialism, have developed an existential dependence on oil exports.



Mahjoub Ben Bella (Algeria), *Chorégraphie bleue* (*Blue Choreography*), 2024.>

Kamanzi ends his essay with a bold set of policy proposals that, if adopted, could set Africa on the course to full energy sovereignty while meeting the demands for a cleaner and greener future. He calls for national development planning to take the energy question seriously and for African countries to increase their bargaining power by negotiating climate finance agreements as a bloc rather than single entities.

We hope that Brian Kamanzi's thoughtful essay finds its way into your hands and onto the desks of policymakers who can power African energy futures that benefit all.

Warmly,

Grieve Chelwa



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Grieve Chelwa is a senior fellow at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and Associate Professor of Political Economy at The Africa Institute.