

Editorial

We face neither North nor South: We face the future

During the height of the Cold War, many African countries were torn between the geopolitical ideologies immortalized by the terms “East” and “West” - with potentially dire socio-economic consequences for picking sides publically. The non-aligned movement represented a “haven” for those countries aiming to “play-it-safe” and thereby continue to do business with both sides, but these nations were often infiltrated by polarizing agencies and counter-agencies that turned local politicians into rumor mongers and bribe takers, fueling the orgy of military *coup d'état*, which plagued Africa for much of the second half of the twentieth century. Then, at the prime of his influential career, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, erstwhile Ghanaian Prime Minister turned dictator (Figure 1) who is credited with a version of the opening quote above (“*We face neither East nor West: We face forward*”) invigorated the Pan-African movement and agitated for the founding of the Organization for African Unity in 1963, the precursor of the current African Union {(Nkrumah, K. 1963. Africa Must Unite. London: Panaf.), (Poe, D. Zizwe. 2003. Kwame Nkrumah's Contribution to Pan-African Agency. New York: Routledge.) (<http://www.africa-union.org/>) }

Ghanaians will celebrate Nkrumah's birthday on 21st September 2009 as a statutory public holiday, and next year, on 25 May, 2010, the African Union has decided to sponsor a continent-wide celebration of Nkrumah's accomplishments. How far have we come since Nkrumah and his contemporaries who saw a cloudy vision of African Unity and worked hard to protect their pan-African message for future generations? Were he still alive, what will Nkrumah say about the threats facing the global environment, and the pressures to align countries according to a North-South divide, based on the participation in science and public perceptions of climate change, deforestation, biodiversity conservation, and environmental pollution? Africans remain one of the most vulnerable populations to the threats of global environmental changes that are unleashed by the same quests for natural resources and human power that fueled political colonization and the industrial revolution.

Africa must keep its engagement in and responsibility for the production of scientific knowledge of the environment, and in policy decisions regarding the best strategies for repairing damaged ecosystems and protection of vulnerable populations. As occurred with emergence from political and economic colonization by foreign entities, the future of environmental quality in Africa will not depend on whether we align with any particular group of countries, but on how we take measure of local conditions and emerging threats, and of indigenous resources to mitigate those threats. Moreover, no national “boundaries” can contain environmental threats of the proportion that the world faces today. But the convergence of socioeconomic and geographical situations across Africa calls for a Pan-African environmentalism that can learn from the successes and failures of the Pan-African initiatives associated with the struggle for political independence across the continent.

The institutional infrastructure to support Pan-African environmentalism is already in place, but it is not yet clear how effectively populated these institutions have been, or whether their procedures can deliver the necessary protection against emerging continental vulnerabilities. The most salient of these deliberative institutions are associated with the issue of climate change, where substantial financial and intellectual resources are focused at the global level. As nations prepare to participate in the fifteenth Conference of Parties (COP-15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen, Denmark {(7 – 18 December, 2009) (<http://unfccc.int/2860.php>) }, it is important for all vulnerable peoples to be present and vocal at the “Table.” It is therefore encouraging to hear Mr. Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, who will represent the African Union in Copenhagen say that(<http://en.cop15.dk/news/view+news?newsid=2022>):

"Africa will field a single negotiating team empowered to negotiate on behalf of all member states of the African Union."

and that:

"If needs be we are prepared to walk out of any negotiations that threaten to be another rape of our continent."

Whatever the African demands are (and I hope it is not just for money), the consolidation of voices will contribute to a strong negotiating hand. This environmental challenge could be the harbinger of a truly effective and sustainable Pan-Africanism.



Figure 1. September 21, the birthday of influential Pan-Africanism advocate Kwame Nkrumah is celebrated in Ghana as a public holiday. The lessons learned from 20th Century Pan-Africanism toward political independence from colonialism could aid current efforts by African leaders to speak with one voice at conferences aiming to reduce casualties from global environmental change. Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1989_CPA_6101.jpg.

Oladele A. Ogunseitan, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Program in Public Health & School of Social Ecology,
University of California, Irvine,
CA 92697, USA.
Editor-in-Chief.