

# Decolonizing our mindset, rebuilding our trust

## A matter of political will

Opinion piece

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WECF International is a civil society, feminist and not for profit organization working to advance the rights and leadership of women and girls in all their diversity. We co-facilitate the engagement of feminist organizations through the “Women’s Major Group” in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Women and Gender Constituency at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Aluna Minga is a collective that focuses on social and cultural action in Latin America and its connection to Germany. Together we generate spaces to inform and discuss challenges as migrants, especially for those who come from countries in conflict. We support and empower the Latin American migrant community in Germany with the development of education, cultural and psychosocial activities, as well as promote the positive values of our countries with an emphasis on diversity, peace, respect for life and nature.

Given the alarming climate crisis, factors such as the degradation of ecosystems, increasing inequality, and the lack of coherence between the discourse and timely implementation of actions by governments have fuelled a sense of distrust and discontent among citizens of all ages. In the words of the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg: “*The empty promises are the same, the lies are the same and the inaction is the same*” (BBC News, 2019). New generations are growing up with psychological distress as they live in permanent fear of an expected threat in the future. This anxiety emerges as an emotional response to the increasing threats associated with the effects of climate change (Hickman et al., 2021). Growing up in a state of anxiety linked with the perception that there is no future, and that humanity is doomed because of state neglect, is cruel and dangerous.

In the last years, marches led by youth, women, Indigenous and BIPOC communities around the world have united citizens to demand ambitious commitments and solutions for a more sustainable and just future. As an example, since 2019 – even amid the pandemic – Latin America has been the epicentre of massive protests and social outbursts, with participants claiming the right to a life of dignity and a safe, healthy and clean environment for all (BBC, 2019; CNN, 2021). In these marches, people show their dissatisfaction with governments and reclaim issues of climate, gender and social justice, while rejecting development models based on the destruction of natural resources, corruption and the exacerbation of violence (Cárdenas & Cortés, 2021). It is through a decolonial, intersectional and feminist approach that

we can transform such structures and find an inclusive way to fight climate change and restore society’s trust in political leadership and institutions.

### FROM WORDS TO ACTIONS, QUITE A LONG WAY TO GO

Throughout modern history, colonialism has been a form of domination based on a monocultural understanding of the world that has altered previous social and cultural structures (Hernández, 2020). The occupation of land and the exploitation of resources characterized the beginning of a way of perceiving, understanding and implementing strategies of progress. Since colonization, the displacement of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, as well as the imposition of norms underpinned by a hegemonic discourse that emphasized gender inequalities has curtailed fundamental rights and placed women in an inferior status to men (Alvarado, 2019; OAS, 1987). Since then, militarism, understood as a country’s desire to strengthen its armed forces to make itself more powerful (Collins, 2021), has been used to preserve arbitrary boundaries disrespecting the ethnic, cultural, natural and religious diversity of a given place. Militarism is still deployed as an important state institution with a very strong political, social and economic influence, putting at risk the livelihoods of local communities (Salihu, 2017; Woodward, 2009).

War economy profits from natural resource devastation. It is a problem that exists around the world: from the Democratic Republic of Congo, to Yemen, Syria or Colombia. Despite the severe limitations that militarism imposes on achieving peace, governments continue to include

war within their national spending (Lopes et al., 2021). World military expenditure in 2020 is estimated to have been USD 1,981 billion – the highest level since 1988. Military expenditure by the top 15 countries reached USD 1,603 billion in 2020 and accounted for 81 percent of global military spending (Lopes et al., 2021). In this list of countries, 14 out of 15 are part of the G20. It is worth mentioning that these expenses do not consider the life environmental cost of military technology, activities and risks. Such entails the emission of GHG by aircrafts flying at high altitudes, military training exercises, waste, among others (Cottrell, 2021).

## »Lack of coherence between the discourse and a timely implementation of actions by governments have fuelled a sense of distrust.«

As previously mentioned, the extraction of resources, particularly fossil fuels, has been the driving force behind the concept of development (Ritchie & Roser, 2020). However, those countries now assumed to be developed, mainly from the Global North, made indiscriminate use of these resources, causing not only the deterioration of the social and cultural fabric of communities that previously inhabited those territories but also the beginning

of an environmental crisis (Ghosh, 2021; Turner, 2021). The updated synthesis report of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)<sup>1</sup> from 2021 confirms that the total global greenhouse gas (GHG) emission level in 2030 is expected to be 16% above the level in 2010 – if all the latest NDCs are implemented. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), this could lead to a temperature increase of about 2.7°C by the end of the century. The IPCC has stressed that we require a reduction of 45% in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2030 to limit the global average temperature increase to 1.5°C (UNFCCC, 2021). However, this does not seem urgent enough for many countries.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in 2020, global fossil fuel subsidies were USD 5.9 trillion or about 6.8 percent of GDP and are expected to rise to 7.4 percent of GDP in 2025 (Parry et al., 2021). Recent reports expose that G20 countries and the multilateral development banks (MDBs) they govern provided at least USD 63 billion per year between 2018–2020 in international public finance for oil, gas and coal projects. This fossil fuel finance was 2.5 times more than their support for renewable energy, which averaged only USD 26 billion per year (Tucker & DeAngelis, 2021).

As developed countries direct resources towards fossil fuel proliferation and war, they have failed to deliver on their collective commitment promised back in 2009 in Copenhagen: to mobilize USD 100 billion per year by 2020 in climate finance to support developing countries. At the last Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs) and the African Group put



The demand from the youth: It's now or never! Take action!

Photo credit: Annabelle Avril / WECF

forward a submission outlining the need for a commitment from developed countries to mobilize jointly at least USD 1.3 trillion per year by 2030, based on the principles of climate justice. However, this ambitious finance goal was quickly removed in subsequent drafts – mainly by developed countries (Schalatek, 2021b). During the same climate summit, rich countries blocked the proposal for the creation of a Glasgow Loss and Damage Finance Facility. This facility aimed to support countries that have experienced permanent and irreversible losses to lives, livelihoods, homes and territory, as well as non-economic impacts, such as the loss of culture, identity, ecosystem services and biodiversity (Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, 2021).

The above invites us to reflect on political priorities and realities. This manifests an imbalance between what is expected in a democratic system that aims to defend collective rights, and what happens on the ground. The continued proliferation of war

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and resource exploitation threatens the full enjoyment of human rights. As during colonialism, this is forcing communities to adopt different strategies of resistance and adaptation to survive in a context of chaos that was not propitiated by the local communities themselves (Alvarado, 2019). The waste and deterioration of valuable and irreplaceable natural resources increase social tensions in which conflicts are occurring more and more frequently (Alvarado, 2019; Cárdenas & Cortés, 2021). This is what fuels mistrust of governments and institutions. This illogical, incoherent narrative is a source of fear and anxiety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how quickly huge sums of money can be mobilized when developed countries have the political will to do so (Schalatek, 2021). It is time for countries to direct their political will towards the well-being of the people and the planet.

### **GENDER-JUST CLIMATE ACTION: A DECOLONIAL AND INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE**

The IPCC has been clear: Human influence on climate change is unequivocal. Immediate, rapid, deep and large-scale GHG reductions involving societal and systems transition are required. As the G20 countries represents two-thirds of the world population and generates almost 90% of global GDP and approximately 80% of the world's annual GHG emissions, their role is crucial for limiting global warming to below 1.5°C (G20 Engagement Groups, 2021; Tucker & DeAngelis, 2021). Wealthy and industrialized high-emission countries have a historic contribution to climate change that must be addressed under the

principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), formalized in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Lindvall, 2021).

The transformation needed requires collective action from the local to the global scale, recognizing that not only geographical location, but gender, race and class determine the impacts of climate change (Goreki, 2021). This climate crisis is not an equal crisis.

A decolonial, intersectional, and feminist approach to addressing climate change allows us to propose alternatives that direct efforts towards a care economy – not a war economy. It proposes and demonstrates with successful experiences from around the world alternative models that respond to local and community needs, with a focus on human rights and gender equality. It is through a decolonial approach that we can address the root causes of poverty and marginalization that results in exclusion and multi-layered vulnerabilities (Nera-Lauron, 2021). It is through an intersectional perspective, understood as a prism for seeing how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other, that we can better generate solutions for a more equitable and just system for all.

As an exemplary case, the Coalition of Women Leaders for the Environment and Sustainable Development (CFLEDD, its French initials), based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, has reached a milestone in granting women access to land through the adoption of ground-breaking new land and forest legislation in eight provinces of the country. Engaging 480 trained women advocates in participato-



**Gender justice is climate justice**

Photo credit: Annabelle Avril / WECF

ry mapping and dialogues with customary chiefs, community members and local authorities, they overthrew one of the biggest barriers to women's participation in climate action. This supported women farmers to develop agroforestry activities and in identifying illegal industrial activities to be replaced by forest conservation solutions, demonstrating their ability to implement climate mitigation and adaptation activities and to guide the revision of the national climate roadmap (Women and Gender Constituency, 2020a).

Real solutions and responses to the climate crisis already exist on the ground. Women in all their diversity have proven they can develop climate adaptation and mitigation strategies that respond to the specific needs of their communities.

They have promoted the use of traditional knowledge for resilient agriculture, water source protection, energy production and economic diversification. This has enhanced access and control over resources, decent employment and equal participation of men and women in all their diversity in decision-making processes (Women and Gender Constituency, 2020b). Gender-just climate solutions are bottom-up initiatives that are decentralized, safe, context-base, affordable, sustainable, replicable, promote equal access to benefits, do not burden women, entail multiple benefits and center local decision-making and women's role within it (WEDO, 2016).

The G20 countries and beyond have the opportunity to take action and leadership against climate change by supporting,



**No more false solutions, we need real zero now!**

Photo credit: Annabelle Avril / WECF

financing, promoting and strengthening such initiatives in their national planning and rebuilding of more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable societies (G20 Engagement Groups, 2021). To scale up and replicate gender-just climate solutions we must talk about concrete actions.

Nationally Determined Contributions must ensure that economic policy measures for post-COVID response are just, climate-compatible and prioritize support for the well-being of all people. And for accomplishing such national plans, increased and balanced climate finance for adaptation and mitigation is key. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the growing debt, particularly in developing countries. Public climate finance is currently being mainly provided as loans, instead of grants, imposing an unfair cost for those countries that have contributed the least to global warming and are fac-

ing the major costs (Schalatek, 2021). To address this, G20 countries, especially the high-income members, should ensure they are not acting as a barrier to a rapid and globally just climate action. This means providing debt relief, including timely, transparent and comprehensive mechanisms and methodologies that ensure adequate access to resources for Global South countries to local low-carbon development pathways (Tucker & DeAngelis, 2021).

Narratives promoting false solutions, such as developed countries claiming to reach Net Zero by offsetting their emissions with questionable projects in the Global South, without cutting their emissions and polluting industries at home, impose a threat that allows the continuation of colonial and extractivist models (ActionAid et al., 2020). Unproven techno-fixes, risky technologies, and offsetting mechanisms have been promoted as a facade to evade responsibility and disguise inaction or harmful action on climate change, instead of aiming for real zero commitments (ActionAid et al., 2020; Women and Gender Constituency, 2021). Therefore, the conversation should centre on comprehensive models already showcasing cross-cutting benefits and the long-overdue transformation of our exploitative and destructive

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economic systems (Schneider & Santos, 2021). Specifically, on those practices that protect ecosystems and biodiversity, and secure the rights, lives, and livelihoods of local communities.

#### **A CALL TO REGAIN OUR TRUST**

This is a call to rebuild trust in governments and institutions by demonstrating coherence between state priorities and the well-being of those communities they serve. It is a call to pick up the rubble of democracy and multilateralism to pave a new transformation based on solidarity actions that recognize common but differentiated responsibilities in this climate crisis. It is time to be bold. To build a society that is not afraid to challenge corrupt systems and narratives rooted in colonialism and patriarchy.

Restoring trust breaks down imaginary boundaries to make way for collaboration to fight hand in hand against challenges such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, and to achieve common well-being. A reality in which the pillars of development are based on the principles of trust, solidarity and dignity. One in which the constant struggle of egos is not the

cause of warlike conflicts, exploitation of natural resources and the end of the dreams of future generations.

It is time to come together across borders and uphold intergenerational, gender, and climate justice.

It is time to decolonize our mindset, take responsibility for our history and act in solidarity.

Now!

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<sup>1</sup> Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) refers to national plans highlighting climate actions, targets and strategies.