

Est.  
1841

YORK  
ST JOHN  
UNIVERSITY

Gardner, Peter, Adekola, Olalekan, Carvalho, Tiago and O'Brien, Tom (2023) Confronting the Climate Crisis in Africa: The Just Transition Movement and Extinction Rebellion in Nigeria and South Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 50 (177-17). pp. 475-490.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/8696/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03056244.2023.2283988>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at  
[ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

# **Confronting the climate crisis in Africa: just transitions and Extinction Rebellion in Nigeria and South Africa**

Peter Gardner, Olalekan Adekola, Tiago Carvalho, and Thomas O'Brien

<<Affiliations>>

[Peter Gardner] Department of Sociology, University of York, York, UK

[Olalekan Adekola] School of Humanities, York St John University, York, UK

[Tiago Carvalho] Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia (CIES-ISCTE), ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

[Thomas O'Brien] Department of Sociology, University of York, York, UK

CONTACT Peter Gardner [peter.gardner@york.ac.uk](mailto:peter.gardner@york.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

Climate change is having increasing impacts on the social, economic and political space across the African continent. The compounding character of such impacts reinforces existing inequalities, raising important considerations around climate justice. Growing awareness has seen the emergence of activists working for solutions and promoting alternative futures, working across scales and sectors to address the complexity of the threats. This article examines environmental activism in Nigeria and South Africa, exploring strategies and claims, and how these are rooted in questions of justice. While environmental movements in Nigeria have generally worked to encourage reform and adaptation within the existing political economic system, a more systemic critique and need for fundamental change is observable in South Africa. Drawing on a comparison of Extinction Rebellion in both countries, we argue that understandings of just transitions should take into consideration the unequal abilities of social movements to call for radically transformative and just decarbonisation.

**Keywords:** Just transition; climate justice; transnational movements; Extinction Rebellion; Nigeria; South Africa

<French-language title and abstract – please keep space before colon in title as per journal style:>

## **Faire face à la crise climatique en Afrique : transition juste et Extinction Rebellion au Nigeria et en Afrique du Sud**

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Le changement climatique a un impact croissant sur l'espace social, économique et politique du continent africain. Le caractère cumulatif de ces impacts renforce les inégalités existantes, soulevant ainsi d'importantes questions sur la justice climatique. La prise de conscience croissante a vu l'émergence d'activistes qui cherchent des solutions et promeuvent des avenir alternatifs, en travaillant à tous les niveaux et dans tous les secteurs pour faire face à la complexité des menaces. Nous examinons l'activisme

environnemental au Nigeria et en Afrique du Sud, en explorant les stratégies, les revendications et la manière dont elles sont ancrées dans les questions de justice. Alors que les mouvements environnementaux au Nigeria ont généralement œuvré pour encourager la réforme et l'adaptation au sein du système politico-économique existant, une critique plus systémique et un besoin de changement fondamental sont observables en Afrique du Sud. En nous appuyant sur une comparaison d'Extinction Rebellion dans les deux pays, nous soutenons que la compréhension de la transition juste devrait prendre en compte les capacités inégales des mouvements sociaux à appeler à une décarbonisation radicalement transformatrice et juste.

<French-language keywords – please keep spaces before semicolons as per journal style:>

### **MOTS-CLÉS**

Transition juste ; justice climatique ; mouvements transnationaux ; Extinction Rebellion ; Nigeria ; Afrique du Sud

<Portuguese-language title, abstract and keywords:>

### **Confrontando a crise climática em África: A transição justa e a Extinction Rebellion na Nigéria e na África do Sul**

#### **RESUMO**

As alterações climáticas estão a afetar cada vez mais o espaço social, económico e político por todo o continente africano. O carácter agravado de tais impactos reforça as desigualdades existentes, e suscita considerações importantes em torno da justiça climática. A crescente consciencialização implicou a emergência de ativistas que trabalham em busca de soluções e promovem futuros alternativos, operando em várias escalas e setores para lidar com a complexidade das ameaças. Neste artigo analisamos o ativismo ambiental na Nigéria e na África do Sul, explorando estratégias, reivindicações e como estas estão enraizadas em questões de justiça. Embora os movimentos ambientalistas na Nigéria tenham geralmente trabalhado para incentivar a reforma e a adaptação dentro do sistema político económico existente, na África do Sul observa-se uma crítica mais sistémica e a proclamação da necessidade de mudanças fundamentais. A partir de uma comparação da Extinction Rebellion em ambos os países, argumentamos que os entendimentos de transição justa devem levar em consideração capacidades desiguais nos movimentos sociais para pedir uma descarbonização radicalmente transformadora e justa.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Transição justa; justiça climática; movimentos transnacionais; Extinction Rebellion; Nigéria; África do Sul

<<Main article text starts here>>

#### **Introduction**

Rapid decarbonisation of economies worldwide is necessary to avert the worst excesses of climate and ecological breakdown. However, there are multiple, competing visions of how decarbonisation ought to be achieved, including its speed, scale and approach to the distribution of costs and benefits, to say nothing of

injustices in historical culpability and uneven patterns of economic development (see Rizzoli, Norton, and Sarrica 2021). In contexts characterised by a lack of concerted collective or governmental intervention to build a just transition, the nature of the transition is left up to the market: a situation that is unlikely to lead to climate justice (Cock 2019). Communities across the world thus face the challenge not only of convincing governments to decarbonise more rapidly and comprehensively than at present, but to do so equitably. In this space, climate justice provides a mechanism to challenge top-down efforts to address environmental threats by emphasising the voices of those previously excluded or marginalised (see Newell 2022; Sultana 2022). Social movements offer a crucial outlet through which citizens and those on the margins can call for socially just forms of decarbonisation by amplifying concerns through the presentation of claims to those in power.

Climate change is already having stark impacts on both case study countries. In Nigeria, this is evident in heatwaves, variations in rainfall, flooding, drought and desertification. For example, flooding in 2022 affected over 2.5 million people, killing 600, injuring 2000, and displacing over 1.3 million, as well as destroying over 121,000 houses and 108,000 farms (Chan et al. 2023, 1773, 1782). South Africa is similarly susceptible to extreme weather events, sea-level rises and changing rainfall patterns, with 'nearly every aspect of human well-being, from agricultural productivity and energy use to flood control, municipal and industrial water supply to wildlife management' at risk (Kusangaya et al. 2014, 47). In both countries, the situation necessitates wide-ranging changes to the economic system, from rapid decarbonisation to climate change adaptation.

The global character of the climate threat means that it has the potential to reinforce inequalities at multiple scales. It also provides opportunities for networking and learning beyond national and regional boundaries. The transnational activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) is an important illustration of this phenomenon, with branches established in 79 countries within three years of its first actions (Gardner et al. 2022). However, the XR brand risks obscuring the particular social and historical contexts that branches face. To consider how the principles of Extinction Rebellion and those of climate justice more broadly manifest, this article examines XR Nigeria and XR South Africa. Nigeria and South Africa both have significant resource extraction industries, in oil and coal respectively, meaning efforts to decarbonise will have considerable social and economic impacts. At the same time, as regionally-dominant states in West and Southern Africa, changes are likely to ripple outwards. Examining how social movement actors draw on and operationalise their claims of the existential nature posed by the climate crisis in these settings can further our understanding of the possibility of embedding climate justice considerations.

The article focuses on the actions of Extinction Rebellion in Nigeria and South Africa in the context of wider calls for climate justice. It aims to identify the opportunities and threats faced by the two social movement actors; and determine the effect of just transition considerations in shaping movement strategies and actions. We begin by examining the concept of just transitions and social movement actors and outlining our methodology. We follow with a discussion of XR Nigeria and

XR South Africa, their differing strategies and outlooks, and compare the two cases. Overall, we contend that these contexts give rise to uneven capacities for environmental social movements to demand socially just and transformational approaches to decarbonisation.

### **Social movements and just transitions**

Pressures associated with climate change are increasingly recognised as requiring considerable social, economic and political readjustment. Reviewing the concept of 'just transition', Wang and Lo (2021) note that there are multiple conflicting interpretations of what it constitutes. While all involve moving from carbon-intensive to low-carbon societies, there is a spectrum, from minimalist visions that simply provide job redeployment for affected workers to more radical and revolutionary societal transformations (Cock 2019). Rooted in labour organising, interpretations of just transitions across this spectrum foreground economic considerations as much as environmental ones (Wang and Lo 2021). Differences also exist in the recognition and mitigation of existing inequalities. Crucially, the concept critiques the assumption that 'the low-carbon transition' represents 'a magic elixir for a more "just" world' (*ibid.*, 2).

Placing climate justice at the core enables recognition of the broad range of actors involved and affected. Sultana (2022, 118) argues that climate justice 'is about paying attention to how climate impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately ... reduc[ing] marginalization, exploitation, and oppression, and enhanc[ing] equity and justice'. This far-reaching view of justice places a heavy burden on societies, given the way climate change 'magnifies and deepens existing patterns of injustice' (Newell et al. 2021, 3). These patterns rest on deep-rooted, historical developments and structures. Failure to interrogate these roots means 'organised capital... [can] invoke justice issues to dampen calls for ambitious action until all potential negative social and economic impacts have been adequately attended to' (Newell 2022, 918). Integrating climate justice in a meaningful way seeks to overcome these stalling tactics by ensuring all stakeholders (labour, environmental, and others) are involved in co-producing solutions.

Mobilisations from below for just transitions and climate justice play an important role in pressing for change. Collective agency and civil society are, thus, at the core of political economy transformation (Pearse 2021). Social movements present claims to bring about change by drawing on collective identities to challenge opponents and policies as well as assert rights. In doing so, they construct alternative visions of the future. The drive for change is particularly prominent in climate movements, given the urgency and extent of the change needed. The ability of movements to induce change is rooted in the social, economic and political reality (Tilly 2008), meaning analysis of climate movements must also consider how the context shapes repertoires, strategies and alliances.

Constructing a truly just transition requires consideration of existing power relations and the distribution of harms and benefits. Cipler (2022, 316) echoes this point in the case of transition coalitions, arguing that greater 'attention is needed to

understand how relationships of power constrain and enable transformative policy change'. Social movements have the potential to contribute to addressing these imbalances but must be conscious of the needs of 'frontline' communities to avoid falling into the trap of unbalanced change. Without such consciousness, it is not possible 'to address the conflicts that do or could arise between sustainability and justice goals or among justice goals themselves in planning and activism' (Ciplet and Harrison 2020, 439). As Newell et al. (2021, 2) point out, it is important to 'recognize and value multiple cultures, subjective representations and practices of well-being, justice, and sustainability across the globe'. Implementing these ideals requires climate justice that fairly distributes costs and benefits, while also recognising subaltern groups and future generations (Newell et al. 2021).

Climate justice and just transitions, especially from grassroots actors, often involve critiques of capitalist political economy. Ecosocialism encompasses a broad sweep of alternatives to capitalism that recognise overlaps and resonances between socialist and ecological perspectives, such as 'a questioning of ... economic automatism, of the reign of quantification, of production as a goal in itself' (Löwy 2005, 15). Continuous economic growth represents both an anti-ecological force and a necessary condition for the functioning of capitalism. Greenhouse gas reduction on the scale and speed necessary requires a decoupling of economic growth from carbon emissions; yet to date 'no historical evidence of absolute decoupling on this scale' exists (Green 2023, 334). Concomitantly, market forces not only result in the forms of economic injustices pointed out by socialist critiques of capitalism, but also in various environmental injustices and unjust transitions. According to Brownhill et al. (2022, 2–3), ecosocialism is inherently a bottom-up perspective, involving:

convergence of resistance and anti-capitalist movements from below, and their practices and critiques, that together articulate opposition to relations of exploitation and dispossession and the defence, establishment, and elaboration of praxes of an alternative political economy and way of being, rooted in social and ecological justice.

<<no indent para continues>>Ecosocialism is an important element of debates among grassroots movements, namely, whether the environmental crisis can be addressed within existing capitalist social relations, or if wider, systemic change is necessary to achieve a truly just transition.

Understanding just transitions is necessary to identify the actors that might play a role in transitioning to a low-carbon economy. This paper seeks to complement existing work on the interaction between just transitions and climate justice by considering examples of movements and coalitions from the global South, valuing their practice and mobilisations as sources of change and builders of knowledge.

## **Methodology**

Extinction Rebellion was formed in the UK in 2018, bursting onto the scene in October of that year with their 'Declaration of Rebellion' protest in London. The movement was transnational from the start: 'as early as December 2018, chapters had formed in 26 countries across all continents bar Antarctica' (Gardner et al. 2022, 7). The lower density and comparatively smaller number of activists outside of Europe, North America and Oceania belies the fact that more than half of all countries in which the movement is active are in the global South. The first chapter on the African continent was in South Africa, with XR Cape Town formed as early as November 2018.<sup>1</sup> By 2021, 44 local groups across 19 countries had emerged in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Yet, especially in comparison to the movement in Europe, North America and Oceania, few scholars have analysed the trajectories and practices of the movement across Africa.<sup>3</sup> This paper addresses this gap, providing insights into the differences within this transnational movement across Africa.<sup>4</sup> Nigeria and South Africa were selected for analysis as they exemplify two broad tendencies observed in the data: one more ecosocialist and politically confrontational, the other more moderate and politically constrained.

The data for this paper was drawn from a larger study of Extinction Rebellion worldwide, in which semi-structured interviews were conducted by Gardner and Carvalho with 101 activists in 17 countries between December 2020 and July 2023. Each interview lasted 45 to 90 minutes and discussed how each activist came to be involved in Extinction Rebellion, the formation of the local and national groups, their development over time, key activities undertaken, and ways in which the movement localised. All interviews took place online, and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Three interviews were undertaken across three local groups in Extinction Rebellion Nigeria (XR Nigeria), providing an insight into the movement at both local and national levels. Invitations were also sent to all publicly available emails and social media accounts of Extinction Rebellion South Africa (XRSA), but we were unable to secure an interview with a member of the group. To assess XRSA's general approach and outlook, development over time, and key activities, all press releases publicly available via the group's website were collected (a total of 20 documents). We were unable to find equivalent documents for XR Nigeria. Both the XR Nigeria interview transcripts and XRSA press releases were analysed using close textual analysis and each group's political outlook, strategies and activities were subsequently compared.

## **Nigeria**

The Nigerian social and political context has proven challenging for social movements. While a variety of social movements have emerged in post-independence Nigeria, these have been constrained by government crackdowns, repression by the police and army, and long periods of military rule (Dambo et al. 2022). Nigeria became an independent nation on 1 October 1960 and a republic with an indigenous president exactly three years later. However, the coup of January 1966 and subsequent counter-coup in July of that year ended the short-lived First Republic, resulting in a series of coups and military dictatorships that lasted until the

return to democracy in 1999 (Osaghae 2018). During the period of military dictatorship, the country's most prominent social movements organised around opposition to military rule, mainly led by students, lawyers and human rights activists (such as human rights lawyer Chief Gani Fawehinmi) (Ihonvbere 1996; Olukotun 2004).

The origins of Nigeria's modern environmental movement can be traced to the early 1980s with the discovery of shiploads of toxic waste linked to Italy in the port town of Koko in the Niger Delta (Ihonvbere 1994). Public consternation was widespread, leading to increased interest in environmental issues among urban elites, civil society groups, and within the government. Two broad movements emerged out of the toxic waste crisis: one more conservative and elite-led, the other more radical and grassroots. First, a coalition of urban elites and the private sector established Nigeria's foremost conservationist organisation – the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) – in 1980. Many of the pioneers of the NCF, such as the movement's founder Chief S. L. Edu, are widely understood to have close links with both the oil multinationals and the government. It has been suggested that 'Without Chevron, NCF [would] not be here today' (Shosanya 2023).

At roughly the same time, more critical currents were developing among local communities in the Niger Delta. Contrary to popular conceptions of these movements, in which anti-extractivism actions in the region are viewed as recent and reactive, these communities have a long history of opposition to regional neglect, deprivation and injustice (Preboye 2005). Growing resentment toward the fossil fuel industry's actions in the Niger Delta and rising grassroots organising led to the formation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1980s, an organisation dedicated to nonviolent agitation in opposition to the environmental damage that resulted from decades of indiscriminate petroleum waste dumping in the region (Obi 1999; Demirel-Pegg and Pegg 2015). Despite being moderate in both their demands and forms of protest, MOSOP activists were routinely met with brutal and repressive force by the state. In 1994, 10 of MOSOP's leaders were arrested, including the movement's president, Ken Saro-Wiwa. After a trial that many 'considered to fall short of the conditions of judicial fairness', nine were sentenced to death by hanging (Obi 2005, 10). In the wake of the trial, the military moved beyond MOSOP's rank and file, brutalising the broader Ogoni community through an onslaught of arrest, murder, rape and destruction, forcing members of the movement to disband or go underground (Obi 2005, 10). In the years since, the Niger Delta has remained the hotbed of environmental activism in Nigeria.

Although the return to democratic rule in May 1999 brought about a more favourable environment for organising than was the case under military rule, civil society remains constrained. The 1999 constitution repealed many of the most draconian military-imposed decrees, such as the prior ability of the state to administer indefinite, incommunicado detention of Nigerian citizens (Decree No. 2 of 1984). Following the return to democracy, a resurgent youth-led movement in the Niger Delta began to express frustration over continued environmental degradation,

utilising political violence in doing so. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta's (MEND) membership was spurred on to more militant tactics by the Nigerian government's apparent lack of concern for the plight of local communities directly affected by oil company activities in the region, and the military attack on a Niger Delta community in 1999, known as the 'Odi massacre' (Ikelegbe 2005). This gave way to a further spiral of violence and contention in the region.

As a result of these dynamics, radical environmental perspectives and calls for ecological justice have remained marginalised within Nigeria, largely restricted geographically to the Niger Delta. Such critiques of the country's extractivist industries have not received the support among political elites or conservationist organisations like the NCF. Unlike in South Africa, support for environmental justice and a just transition in response to climate change have not been forthcoming from Nigeria's unions. The labour movement has been historically strong in Nigeria, able to periodically confront the government on a variety of issues (Akinwale 2014). However, rather than supporting the environmental movement, protests organised by the Nigeria Labour Conference (NLC) have fought for a reduction in petroleum prices. With internal support weak at best, solidarity with Niger Delta activists has been mainly limited to international organisations such as Human Rights Watch (Demirel-Pegg and Pegg 2015). In recent years, and following the amnesty programme introduced to provide social and economic incentives to youths in the region, MEND has retreated and given way to nonviolent calls for environmental justice (Ajodo-Adebanjoko 2017). In more recent years, as concern about the climate and ecological crisis have gained momentum globally, questions over decarbonisation and just transitions have begun to gain a foothold among NGOs. Nevertheless, the Nigerian state remains opposed to calls to end – or even reduce – current rates of oil and gas extraction (see, for example, Addeh 2023).

Although having transited from military to democratic rule, Nigeria retains many of the trappings of a quasi-military state (Adebomi 2020). The military continues to have a strong influence on politics. Two of Nigeria's civilian presidents – Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari – are ex-military dictators who returned to rule as democratically elected presidents. This quasi-military structure and authoritarian tendencies at the elite level has created a broadly unfavourable context for social movements. Protests since the return of democracy have continued to be met with crackdowns, police brutality, and repressive force (Osisanwo and Iyoha 2020; Iwuoha and Aniche 2022).

Extinction Rebellion Nigeria (XR Nigeria) emerged in late 2019 to early 2020, with local groups formed in Abuja, Benue State, Imo State, Kaduna State, Lagos, Rivers State, and at the national level (Gardner, Carvalho, and Valenstain 2022). Since 2019, the movement has undertaken a range of activities to advocate for environmental action. Although demonstrations have played a role, larger protests have been constrained by limited financial resources:

We wanted to organise a 1,000 [participant] march peaceful protest. We had the manpower. We had people to march. But we could not afford some

logistics ... We needed an ambulance that would go with us, for security reasons. We also needed ... first aid items. We could not afford all those things. (XR Nigeria, interviewee #2)

<<no indent para continues>> Alongside smaller-scale demonstrations, XR Nigeria's primary focus has been on educating the public, developing community projects and advocating for better – or better enforced – environmental policy at national and state levels. In response to a lack of societal awareness of the climate emergency, the movement has engaged in educational campaigns, distributing fliers and delivering public talks. It has also developed various community projects, such as the collection and monetisation of 'used plastic and polythenes': a programme that reduces plastic pollution while bringing financial benefits to local communities (XR Nigeria, interviewee #1). When it comes to the government, their approach has been distinctly collaborative rather than combative, framed in terms of advising, making proposals and information-sharing. As one interviewee put it, 'what we're doing at the moment is collaborating with [local and national] governments ... trying to guide them, trying to put soft pressure on them' (XR Nigeria, interviewee #3). Overall, XR Nigeria's approach has been to work within the current economic and political system, encouraging reform, adaptation and the enforcement of existing legislation, rather than systemic transformation.

### **South Africa**

South Africa represents a broadly favourable environment for social movements. The country has a long and vibrant history in this regard, from early anti-colonial resistance and civil disobedience campaigns led by Mohandas Gandhi to the anti-apartheid liberation struggle and popular opposition to neoliberalisation. The anti-apartheid movement represents 'one of the quintessential social movements of the twentieth century' (Ballard et al. 2005, 622), built by a broad coalition of social movements, civil society organisations and labour unions that sought to 'make apartheid ungovernable' (Mottiar 2013, 604). With the fall of apartheid in 1994, a feeling that revolutionary change had been achieved led to a brief hiatus in activism, with many movements, activists and associated networks being absorbed into the state. However, this 'political honeymoon' was short-lived, as opposition formed around the African National Congress's (ANC) adoption of neoliberalism (*ibid.*, 616). South Africa has both a range of resources available and a broadly receptive political opportunity structure (Ballard et al. 2005; Death 2014). Despite being one of the world's most unequal societies, it is rich in cultural and social resources for activists. The anti-apartheid struggle produced a variety of highly effective protest repertoires, including blockades and barricades, toyi-toyi dancing, and vibrant protest songs (Mottiar 2013). This history of struggle has also bequeathed a public view of protest as broadly legitimate and interwoven into the fabric of democracy. Although the post-apartheid state has taken some repressive actions in response to more radically critical movements, the context remains relatively conducive for activism (Ballard et al. 2005; Death 2014).

Environmentalism in South Africa has tended to be split between broadly conservationist greens, a red labour movement advocating just transition, and an emerging yet disunified red–green coalition. Historically, green movements have been associated with racial injustice, with conservative conservationism ‘dominated by white liberals and conservatives who obviously put the interests of charismatic mega-fauna, hunting and white agriculture ahead of black populations’ (Death 2014, 1226). Under the apartheid regime, large-scale conservation projects often entailed the expulsion of black populations from their land for the purpose of protecting nature (Cock 2021). With environmentalism tainted by such connotations, some of the most powerful movements in the post-apartheid era with a clear ecological component, such as Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and the Anti Eviction Campaign (AEC), have avoided associating with explicitly ecological demands (Death 2014). Nevertheless, more radical environmental movements have emerged in recent years, explicitly challenging South Africa’s extractivist economy (Satgar and Cock 2022). Despite positive developments across ‘multiple, diverse initiatives’, a unified and popular environmental movement remains elusive (Death 2014; Cock 2019, 871).

From 2010, the labour movement became a source of more radical systemic critiques (Satgar 2015; Cock 2021; Satgar and Cock 2022). In general, the ANC has responded to the climate emergency in line with ‘green neoliberalism’ (Satgar 2015, 271), emphasising narrow decarbonisation, market-based solutions, and so-called ‘green growth’, while otherwise maintaining the political-economic status quo. In response, several unions began to advocate for a just transition, calling for ‘socially owned renewable energy’, radical transformations to the political economic system, and a worker-led transition (Satgar 2015, 280). Yet, recent years have witnessed a retreat of the labour movement from its prior call for climate justice, withdrawing into defensive positions that seek merely to maintain jobs due to economic instability, sharply rising unemployment rates and mining industry job losses (Satgar and Cock 2022, 184). Although ‘green–red’ ecosocialist coalitions that connect labour struggles to climate policymaking have begun to emerge to occupy this space, these remain at a relatively early stage.

It is in this context that XRSA emerged in late 2018. By April 2019, local chapters of the movement in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria were taking part in coordinated protest events with Extinction Rebellion groups across the world (McDonald et al. 2019). Alongside the worldwide movement’s core demands that governments and the media tell the truth about the scale of the crisis, adopt immediate action for dramatic reductions to carbon emissions, and create a citizens’ assembly on climate and ecological justice, XRSA has called for system change. Although they direct part of their critique toward corporations, their primary focus has been on national and provincial governments. While exposures of the fossil fuel industry and those who support it financially are denounced for having ‘blood on their hands’ (XRSA 2022a), the most direct criticism is levied at the government, variously described as ‘criminally negligent’ (XRSA 2022b) and pushing ‘our world over the edge of collapse’ (XRSA 2019a). The group’s rhetoric is grounded in a call for a

systemic transformation of society, expressing opposition to ‘infinite growth on a finite planet’ (XRSA 2022c) and ‘business-as-usual’ models of green growth, and describing the present economic system as ‘ecocidal’ (XRSA 2020). A climate justice agenda is observable, including a recognition of inequalities in causation and impacts of climate change in relation to economic, racial, gender-based and geopolitical inequalities (XRSA 2019b; 2022c). Demands are made for a ‘people-centred’ transformation that secures ‘access to energy, create jobs and distribute wealth without intensifying climate change and destroying life on earth’ (XRSA 2022a). Overall, their discourses are clearly grounded in the ecosocialist tradition, perceiving climate change, histories of marginalisation and ‘the ills of unemployment, inequality, economic decay and social crumbling’ to be all products of the same ecocidal economic system (XRSA 2020).

### Comparing the cases

As this paper has illustrated, Extinction Rebellion is far from a homogenous social movement across Africa. In Nigeria, the movement has been notably moderate in its discourses and has focused on a mixture of public education and putting soft pressure on the government. By contrast, the movement in South Africa has employed much more acerbic rhetoric, emerging as a confrontational political force that directly challenges elite groups. Concomitantly, the two national groups differ in terms of their position on political economy: where XRSA’s critiques of the government and business elites represent an ecosocialist outlook, XR Nigeria has wavered little from the status quo, preferring to call for ecological adaption than system change. This section compares the two cases, contextualising the differences in social movement outlook and practices in their respective political and economic opportunity structures (Tilly 2008) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Social movements and opportunity structures in Nigeria and South Africa.

	<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>South Africa</b>
Economic context	<p>Centralised state-led modernisation, 1960s to 1980s</p> <p>Neoliberalisation through structural adjustment programmes (mid 1980s to early 1990s)</p> <p>Continued neoliberalisation under democracy, 1999 to present</p>	<p>Apartheid capitalist development, 1948–1994</p> <p>Neoliberalism under ANC, 1990s to present; political economic continuities</p>

Political context		Quasi-military regime; broadly unfavourable	Broadly favourable
Environmental social movement history		Conservative conservationism (elite-led)  Radical activism in Niger Delta	Conservative conservationism (racially inflected)  Gradual rise in ecosocialism, led by labour unions
Extinction Rebellion	<i>Protest approach</i>	Soft pressure and public education	Nonviolent direct action
	<i>Discourses</i>	Conciliatory	Confrontational
	<i>Political- economic position</i>	Moderate	Ecosocialist

Nigeria and South Africa embraced neoliberalism at roughly the same time, but under notably different circumstances, resulting in contrasting contexts for social movement opposition to free-market economics. In Nigeria, the two decades following independence saw a relatively centralised state-based approach to development. The discovery of oil reserves and the subsequent decision to join OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) brought considerable new capital into the country during the 1960s and 1970s and, as a result, this period saw a ‘huge growth in Nigeria’s government, physical infrastructure, and commercial, service and industrial bourgeoisie’ (Kraus 2002, 399). Federal constitutional arrangements established at independence were short-lived, soon undermined by successive military regimes’ preference for centralisation (Ekeh 1999). The petrodollars that flowed into the country were largely directed toward modernising infrastructure, housing, and agricultural and industrial production, as well as the construction of a national programme of subsidising and distributing various essential commodities (Akhremenko and Shulika 2019; Ekanade 2014). However, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw Nigeria’s economic system transformed into a ‘full blown free market economy’ as a result of a series of structural adjustment programmes (Ekanade 2014, 1). In 1986, General Babangida’s government accepted a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to ameliorate the sharp rise in the national debt that resulted from declining oil revenues. As prescribed by the IMF but sold to the Nigerian public as a ‘homegrown’ programme of development and growth, wide-ranging neoliberal reforms reduced government spending, privatised national industries, prioritised the free market economy and devalued the naira (Ekanade 2014, 10). By the transition to democracy in 1999, neoliberalism had

become hegemonic. Since then, restrictions placed on civil society by quasi-military regimes and the ideological power of successive structural adjustment programmes have narrowed the space for grassroots opposition to the neoliberal order.

South Africa's path to neoliberalism has been rather different. The political economy of apartheid was relatively free market in orientation, with capitalist exploitation, and sharp class divisions augmented by the super-exploitation of its explicit racial hierarchy (Lotta 1985). At the same time, in its final decade of rule, the National Party had built a sizeable budget deficit through extensive spending on the maintenance of the regime, imperilled by anti-apartheid movements within and outside of the state (Williams and Taylor 2000). The coalition of anti-apartheid groups, that included the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the Indian National Congress (INC) and the South African Communist Party, among others, had long been steeped in the language of liberation, both political and economic. Yet, as the transition to democracy developed, the ANC came under intense pressure to abandon socialist tendencies in favour of a market-centred approach (Williams and Taylor 2000). By the mid 1990s, the ANC was already indicating its collaboration with the interests of capital, both domestic and international, and it had become clear that a neoliberal agenda dominated the ANC's political programme. With the arena of legitimate political economic opinion narrowed, those opposed to this new neoliberal order quickly engaged in organising social movements to advocate alternative approaches to political economy (Ballard et al. 2005; Death 2014).

These historical trajectories create notable differences in opportunity structures between Nigeria and South Africa, with the former much more constrained than the latter in relation to the capacity for social movements to proffer radical alternatives to the neoliberal order. This may go some way to explain the divergence in the discourses and strategies of the Extinction Rebellion groups in the two countries. However, these activist positionalities may also be influenced by local histories of environmentalism. In both Nigeria and South Africa, a relatively conservative conservationist movement emerged in alignment with elite interests. However, whereas conservationism in Nigeria has long been connected to class and political elites, South Africa's conservationist movements have been associated with white domination and racial discrimination. As a result, ecological issues have engendered more positive connotations among the general population in the former than the latter. While environmental social movements in South Africa have been slow to develop, a wave of radical environmental contention took place in the Niger Delta in the 1990s (Death 2014; Obi 1999). For South Africa, the gradual rise in ecosocialist thought through the twenty-first century (led by labour unions), in conjunction with the space for radical political-economic critique among South African social movements and the wide array of protest movements in the country, may have allowed for the development of a more radical and ecosocialist Extinction Rebellion. In contrast, the brutal repression of nonviolent protesters in the Niger Delta during the 1990s that led to armed conflict in the region looms large in the history of Nigerian environmental activism (Demirel-Pegg and Pegg 2015). In

addition to the broader sense that engaging in confrontational forms of protest involves a degree of risk, it would appear that the lessons of past activism have not been lost on activists within XR Nigeria.

Overall, Nigeria and South Africa offer contrasting contexts for environmental social movements. Despite being part of the same transnational organisation – Extinction Rebellion – the two national groups’ discourses, approaches to protest, and critique of political economy differ considerably. As these cases illustrate, the capacity for environmental movements to contend for climate justice and just transitions that genuinely challenge the status quo is unequally distributed, moulded by the political and economic opportunity structures they interact with.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have considered the role of societal context in environmental movement discourses, comparing Extinction Rebellion in Nigeria and South Africa. Where in the former the scope of critique is curtailed, limited to within the current system, a radically critical conception of just transitions is articulated in the latter. XR Nigeria has focused on working within the existing political-economic system, concentrating on public education, and encouraging local enforcement of current laws. XRSA’s approach has been to call for systemic transformation, critiquing both corporations and the government directly for their response to the climate emergency. Despite being part of the same transnational environmental movement, the two groups diverge considerably in terms of activities, discourses and goals. These cases exhibit the unequal abilities of social movements to radically transform society, contrasting the context and the opportunities to act towards that change. The divergence between the two groups results not only in different practices and repertoires, but also distinct political systems, histories of political contention and coalitions in civil society. In this sense, we argue that environmental movements in different country contexts have an unequal capacity to contend for a just transition.

Satgar and Cock (2022, 185) express concerns that, while XRSA has ‘unleashed a social media-driven crowd politics on the ground’, its importation from the global North has ‘created a mimetic dynamic which does not allow for convergence with rooted forces engaged in environmental justice struggles’. The same could perhaps be said of XR Nigeria. Nevertheless, XRSA has managed to produce a national-level environmental movement that moves beyond both the conservative conservationism of South Africa’s past ‘green’ movements and the parochialism of its more radical contingents, while XR Nigeria has been able to effectively build public and political support for ecological action and policymaking in Nigeria. The extent to which each can become truly ‘unified and broadly popular environmental movement[s]’ (Death 2014, 1216) is, however, yet to be seen.

## **Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> Geographical data and contact links for all Extinction Rebellion chapters were scraped from the movement's global website in 2021. Temporal data was then added to the dataset using publicly available creation dates from Facebook pages (see Gardner, Carvalho, and Valenstain 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The 19 African countries in which Extinction Rebellion chapters have been formed are: South Africa, Mauritius, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Sudan, Algeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ghana and Malawi.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on Extinction Rebellion in Gambia, see Gardner et al. (2023).

<sup>4</sup> Local Extinction Rebellion groups across the world are funded by a mixture of local supporters and activist donations from across the world. Donations given to XR Global Support are distributed worldwide. Africa receives over 50% of XR Global Support's grant funding. Although receiving more than any other region, these are small grants concentrated in a small number of countries. As such, most local funding is generated internally by local branches (XR 2022).

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the members of Extinction Rebellion Nigeria for participating in our research. Our thanks also to the editors of this special issue for their comments, suggestions and support throughout the process.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## **Funding**

## **Notes on contributors**

Peter Gardner is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of York. His research focuses on environmental social movements, transnational activism and climate politics. His most recent book, *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), explores the role of physical objects in collective action.

Olalekan Adekola is a senior lecturer in geography at York St John University, UK. His research interests centre around understanding the distributional aspects of environmental issues (how outcomes vary between and within groups, and the implications of these for questions of vulnerability, equity and sustainability). Olalekan is actively involved in using evidence from research to influence policy.

Tiago Carvalho is a researcher at the ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Cambridge, which won the prize for best dissertation from the Portuguese Political Science Association (2022). He is currently working on two main topics: social movements and social classes in Southern Europe, and global diffusion of climate movements. His recent book is *Contesting Austerity* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

Thomas O'Brien is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of York. His research concerns democratisation, environmental sociology, political leadership and

social movements. His recent work has appeared in *Identities, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, and *Social Movement Studies*.

## ORCID

Peter Gardner: 0000-0003-2402-7809

Olalekan Adekola: 0000-0001-9747-0583

Tiago Carvalho: 0000-0002-8189-9040

Thomas O'Brien: 0000-0002-5031-736X

## References

Addeh, E. 2023. "Osinbajo: It's Unreasonable to Jettison Nigeria's Fossil Fuels Now." *This Day*, April 30. [thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/04/30/osinbajo-its-unreasonable-to-jettison-nigerias-fossil-fuels-now](http://thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/04/30/osinbajo-its-unreasonable-to-jettison-nigerias-fossil-fuels-now).

Adebomi, O. O. 2020. "A Multimodal Analysis of Memetic Representation of Individuals and Institutions in Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari Administration." *Language. Text. Society* 7 (1): 3.

Ajodo-Adebanjoko, A. 2017. "Towards Ending Conflict and Insecurity in the Niger Delta Region: A Collective Non-violent Approach." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 17 (1): 9–27.

Akhremenko, A., and Y. Shulika. 2019. "Political Security in Authoritarian Systems with a Resource Rent Economy: A Result of the 'Social Contract' and High Resource Prices?" *Przełąd Strategiczny* 12: 299–318.

Akinwale, A. A. 2014. "Labour Unions' Struggle with Neo-liberal Policies in Nigeria." *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology* 11 (2): 89–104.

Ballard, R., A. Habib, I. Valodia, and E. Zuern. 2005. "Globalization, Marginalization and Contemporary Social Movements in South Africa." *African Affairs* 104 (417): 615–634.

Brownhill, L., S. Engel-Di Mauro, T. Giacomini, A. Isla, M. Löwy, and T. E. Turner. 2022. "An Introduction to Ecosocialism." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*, edited by N. Räthzel, D. Stevis, and D. Uzzell, 1–11. London: Routledge.

Chan, F. K. S., Z. Wang, J. Chen, X. Lu, T. Nafea, B. Montz, O. Adekola, A. Pezzoli, J. Griffiths, Y. Peng, and P. Li. 2023. "Selected Global Flood Preparation and Response Lessons: Implications for More Resilient Chinese Cities." *Natural Hazards* 118 (2023): 1767–1796.

Ciplet, D. 2022. "Transition Coalitions: Toward a Theory of Transformative Just Transitions." *Environmental Sociology* 8 (3): 315–330.

- Ciplet, D. and J. Harrison. 2020. "Transition Tensions: Mapping Conflicts in Movements for a Just and Sustainable Transition." *Environmental Politics* 29 (3): 435–456.
- Cock, J. 2019. "Resistance to Coal Inequalities and the Possibilities of a Just Transition in South Africa." *Development Southern Africa* 36 (6): 860–873.
- Cock, J. 2021. "'Beware of the Crocodile's Smile': Labour-Environmentalism in the Struggle to Achieve a Just Transition in South Africa." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*, edited by N. Räthzel, D. Stevis, and D. Uzzell, 177–197. London: Routledge.
- Dambo, T. H., M. Ersoy, A. M. Auwal, V. O. Olorunsola, A. Olonode, A. O. Arikewuyo, and A. Joseph. 2022. "Nigeria's #EndSARS Movement and its Implication on Online Protests in Africa's Most Populous Country." *Journal of Public Affairs* 22 (3): e2583.
- Death, C., 2014. "Environmental Movements, Climate Change, and Consumption in South Africa." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40 (6): 1215–1234.
- Demirel-Pegg, T., and S. Pegg. 2015. "Razed, Repressed and Bought Off: The Demobilization of the Ogoni Protest Campaign in the Niger Delta." *The Extractive Industries and Society* 2 (4): 654–663.
- Ekanade, O. V. 2014. "The Dynamics of Forced Neoliberalism in Nigeria Since the 1980s." *Journal of Retracing Africa* 1 (1): 1–24.
- Ekeh, P. P. 1999. "Obasanjo and the Burden of Civilianization." *African Issues* 27 (1): 73–76.
- Gardner, P., T. Carvalho, and M. Valenstain, 2022. "Spreading Rebellion? The Rise of Extinction Rebellion Chapters Across the World." *Environmental Sociology* 8 (4): 424–435.
- Gardner, P., T. O'Brien, T. Carvalho, and O. Adekola. 2023. "Profile: Extinction Rebellion in the Gambia." *Social Movement Studies*. doi:10.1080/14742837.2023.2204428.
- Green, J. 2023. "Comparative Capitalisms in the Anthropocene: A Research Agenda for Green Transition." *New Political Economy* 28 (3): 329–346.
- Ihonvbere, J. O. 1994. "The State and Environmental Degradation in Nigeria: A Study of the 1988 Toxic Waste Dump in Koko." *Journal of Environmental Systems* 23 (3): 207–227.
- Ihonvbere, J. O. 1996. "Are Things Falling Apart? The Military and the Crisis of Democratisation in Nigeria." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 34 (2): 193–225.
- Ikelegbe, A. 2005. "Encounters of Insurgent Youth Associations with the State in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria." *Journal of Third World Studies* 22 (1): 151–181.

- Iwuoha, V. C., and E. T. Aniche. 2022. "Protests and Blood on the Streets: Repressive State, Police Brutality and #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria." *Security Journal* 35: 1–23.
- Kraus, J. 2002. "Capital, Power and Business Associations in the African Political Economy: A Tale of Two Countries, Ghana and Nigeria." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 40 (3): 395–436.
- Kusangaya, S., M. L. Warburton, E. A. Van Garderen, and G. P. Jewitt. 2014. "Impacts of Climate Change on Water Resources in Southern Africa: A Review." *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth, Parts a/b/c* 67–69: 47–54.
- Lotta, R. 1985. "The Political Economy of Apartheid and the Strategic Stakes of Imperialism." *Race & Class* 27 (2): 17–34.
- Löwy, M. 2005. "What is Ecosocialism?" *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 16 (2): 5–24.
- McDonald, J. and Guardian readers. 2019. "From India to Ireland: A Week of Extinction Rebellion Actions." *The Guardian*, April 24.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/24/from-india-to-ireland-a-week-of-extinction-rebellion-actions>.
- Mottiar, S. 2013. "From 'Popcorn' to 'Occupy': Protest in Durban, South Africa." *Development and Change* 44 (3): 603–619.
- Newell, P. 2022. "Climate Justice." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 49 (5): 915–923.
- Newell, P., S. Srivastava, L. Naess, G. Torres Contreras, and R. Price. 2021. "Toward a Transformative Climate Justice: An Emerging Research Agenda." *WIREs Climate Change* 12 (3): 1–17.
- Obi, C. 2005. "Environmental Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa. A Political Ecology of Power and Conflict." UNRISD Civil Society and Social Movements Programme Paper no. 15. Geneva: UNRISD.
- Obi, C. I. 1999. "Globalization and Environmental Conflict in Africa." *African Journal of Political Science/Revue Africaine de Science Politique* 4 (1): 40–62.
- Olukotun, A. 2004. *Repressive State and Resurgent Media Under Nigeria's Military Dictatorship, 1988–98*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Osaghae, E. E. 2018. "The Long Shadow of Nigeria's Military Epochs, 1966–79 and 1983–99." In *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics*, edited by A. C. Levan and P. Ukata, 171–188. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Osisanwo, A., and O. Iyoha. 2020. "'We are not Terrorists, We are Freedom Fighters': Discourse Representation of the Pro-Biafra Protest in Selected Nigerian Newspapers." *Discourse & Society* 31 (6): 631–647.
- Pearse, R. 2021. "Theorising the Political Economy of Energy Transformations: Agency, Structure, Space, Process." *New Political Economy* 26 (6): 951–963.

- Preboye, I. C. 2005. *The core Niger Delta: Iduwini Clan Otounkuku: The lost tribe*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Rural Development Ltd.
- Rizzoli, V., L. Norton, and M. Sarrica. 2021. "Mapping the Meanings of Decarbonisation: A Systematic Review of Studies in the Social Sciences Using Lexicometric Analysis." *Cleaner Environmental Systems* 3 (December 2021): 1–10.
- Satgar, V. 2015. "A Trade Union Approach to Climate Justice: The Campaign Strategy of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa." *Global Labour Journal* 6 (3): 267–282.
- Satgar, V., and J. Cock. 2022. "Ecosocialist Activism and Movements in South Africa." In *The Routledge Handbook on Ecosocialism*, edited by L. Brownhill, S. Engel-Di Mauro, and T. Giacomini, 179–188. London: Routledge.
- Shosanya, M. 2023. "Why We're Committed To Environmental Sustainability – Chevron." *Independent*, Ikeja, May 23. [independent.ng/why-were-committed-to-environmental-sustainability-chevron](https://independent.ng/why-were-committed-to-environmental-sustainability-chevron).
- Sultana, F. 2022. "Critical Climate Justice." *The Geographical Journal* 188 (1): 118–124.
- Tilly, C. 2008. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, X., and K. Lo. 2021. "Just Transition: A Conceptual Review." *Energy Research and Social Science* 82 (December 2021): 1–11.
- Williams, P., and I. Taylor. 2000. "Neoliberalism and the Political Economy of the 'New' South Africa." *New Political Economy* 5 (1): 21–40.
- XR 2022. Annual Report, *Extinction Rebellion Global Support*. Available at: <https://media.organise.earth/s/bLQzePkjmxdeLeT/download>, accessed 8<sup>th</sup> November 2023.
- XRSA (Extinction Rebellion South Africa). 2019a. "Cape Town hosts Climate Criminals." Extinction Rebellion South Africa, December 12. <https://extinctionrebellion.org.za/24569/cape-town-hosts-climate-criminals>.
- XRSA. 2019b. "Open Letter / Press Release – Extinction Rebellion Cape Town." Extinction Rebellion South Africa, December 7. <https://extinctionrebellion.org.za/24489/open-letter-press-release-extinction-rebellion-cape-town>.
- XRSA. 2020. "Extinction Rebellion statement on 2020 SONA." Extinction Rebellion South Africa, February 16. <https://extinctionrebellion.org.za/24607/extinction-rebellion-statement-on-2020-sona>.
- XRSA. 2022a. "XR Press Release: Africa Oil Week 2022 Action." Extinction Rebellion South Africa, October 4. <https://extinctionrebellion.org.za/24902/xr-press-release-africa-oil-week-2022-action>.

XRSA. 2022b. "Press Release: Don't Gas Africa! Africa Energy Week 2022."  
Extinction Rebellion South Africa, October 19.  
<https://extinctionrebellion.org.za/24907/press-release-dont-gas-africa-africa-energy-week-2022>.

XRSA. 2022c. "COP 27: The End." Extinction Rebellion South Africa, November 20.  
<https://extinctionrebellion.org.za/24944/cop-27-the-end>.