

Opening remarks by Dr. Mithika Mwenda, Executive Director, PACJA

Opening Plenary: Global Peoples' Assembly - 22 September 2024 – New York City

Good morning colleagues and friends!

Let me first start by applauding the GPA Secretariat, and the organizing committee for pulling this together, a process that has taken around 3 months since some of us met here during the HLPF.

The Global Peoples' Assembly is a powerful platform, as it creates a crucial space where voices from the Global South, frontline communities, and marginalized groups can not only be heard but amplified.

Today, we are converging here for broad conversations around the pressing issues dominating global geopolitical interactions, and which cannot be resolved by individuals or individual countries, but through a multilateral process – climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss and potential planetary collapse, widening inequality, pandemics, cost-of-living crisis – which we need to tackle, but that have been overshadowed by Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Hamas Wars.

A very difficult period to meet, indeed, and I hope to offer some reflections from the heart of the struggle.

We meet here at the sidelines of the **Summit of the Future** as world leaders gather to reflect on the progress we have made in SDGs implementation while spreading the purview on the future of our planet. However, we, the people—especially those of us in the Global South—already know the future we want. We know the future we deserve: a future where justice – may it be social, economic or climate - is not a demand, but a reality.

Let's start with a simple truth: the climate crisis, for instance, is a result of an unsustainable model of development, created not by those bearing the brunt of its impacts. Yet, communities across Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America are paying with their lives, their livelihoods, and their environments. It is no news that the historical responsibility for this crisis lies with the industrialized nations—the fossil fuel corporations, the big polluters—who for decades have put profit before people.

So, the question is not just *who* needs to pay to address the climate crisis and resultant consequences across sectors and regions, but how they can be made to pay. As we continue to stress, this is not charity.

Paying for the damage of climate change and the actions needed to address it is reparation—a moral and legal obligation, an imperative of climate justice. The polluters must pay for the loss and damage they have caused, for the extreme weather events, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels that are wreaking havoc across the Global South.

The mechanisms to make polluters pay already exist. International legal frameworks, such as the UNFCCC, hold these corporations accountable. However, too often, the measures collectively agreed upon or proposed by science are blocked or watered down by the same interests that caused this crisis in the first place. This must change.

We need a global accountability framework, one that ensures that the most polluting countries and corporations meet their obligations under the Paris Agreement and beyond. We need to ensure that finance for climate action is not just pledged but delivered—delivered to the countries and communities that need it most. The billions of dollars needed to adapt, mitigate, and repair should not be held hostage by bureaucratic delays or empty promises.

But climate justice is not just a financial issue. It is also an equity issue; we must approach it from a feminist perspective. Women, particularly in the Global South, are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. They are more vulnerable to displacement, food insecurity, and health risks. Yet, they are also the driving force behind the solutions—leading grassroots movements, innovating at the community level, and fighting daily to protect their families and environments.

Climate justice cannot be achieved without gender justice. We must ensure that women’s voices are at the forefront of decision-making processes and that resources are directed towards empowering women and girls in the fight for climate solutions.

Another core principle of justice is securing the rights of future generations. Our choices today will determine the world that our children inherit tomorrow. Our actions—or inactions—will decide whether they live in a world ravaged by climate chaos or one where nature is preserved, the air is clean, and the climate crisis has been addressed.

The Global South has been clear: We are fighting not just for our present but for our future. And that future includes legally enshrined rights—the right to a safe and healthy environment for future generations. This should be a universal human right protected by international law.

The conversation around climate reparations has been framed as exceptional and optional for too long. But reparations are a matter of human rights. When frontline communities lose their homes, when their crops fail, and when their lives are uprooted by climate disasters, they are not just victims of bad luck. They are victims of injustice.

Delivering reparations is about more than providing financial compensation—it’s about restoring dignity, autonomy, and justice to communities that have been historically oppressed and ignored. Reparations must come in the form of both financial support and systemic change that ensures this cycle of exploitation and degradation never repeats.

Against this backdrop, what must happen as we head to Baku, Azerbaijan, and beyond?

1. **Real Climate Finance:** We must push for bold commitments and immediate action on climate finance. Developed countries must fulfil their \$100 billion climate finance pledge, but that’s the beginning. We need new, more predictable finance mechanisms to address adaptation and loss and damage.
2. **Equitable Global Governance:** We need reform in global governance institutions. Decision-making processes, whether at the UN, in climate negotiations, or within financial institutions,

must reflect the realities of the Global South. The voices of Indigenous peoples, women, youth, and marginalised communities need to be at the centre of these discussions.

3. **A New Economic Paradigm:** We need to move away from destructive economic models that prioritise profit over people and the planet. We need a just transition to renewable energy, and we must reject false solutions like fossil fuel expansion or profit-driven carbon markets. This is not about maintaining the status quo. It's about transformation—building a new, inclusive, and sustainable global economy.
4. **Solidarity Across Borders:** Finally, we must strengthen global solidarity. The crises we are facing, do not respect national borders, nor should our solutions. We must build alliances between the Global South and the North, strengthen North-South collaborations, partnerships between people, governments, civil society, and grassroots movements, between the present and future generations.

As we leave this Assembly and move towards Baku, Belem and beyond, let us remember that justice is not a gift we ask for. It is a right we are demanding. We are not passive recipients of charity; we are the custodians of the future, fighting for our planet and for the generations that will come after us. The time for empty promises is over. The time for action is now.

Let's, therefore, ensure that when the Summit of the Future convenes, it is a summit not of mere discussion but of decisive action, of justice realized, and of accountability enforced.

Thank you.