

'False solutions' to climate crisis amplify eco-injustices

By Khadija Sharife and Patrick Bond

The idea that carbon trading will save the world from global warming is not only foolish but also deadly, as Durban activists who have been inspired by a feminist environmentalist learned.

The struggle of Sajida Khan (1952-2007), a self-taught ecologist based in Durban, South Africa, is instructive for any of us worried about the climate. Attempting to shut the dump that ultimately killed her, Khan dedicated half her life to a contest with international corporations, the World Bank and heartless municipal bureaucrats. She did so in a courageous manner that helped us localise ecofeminist theory and international feminist anti-capitalism, while remaining acutely aware of race, class and gender conflicts within oppressed communities.

Africa's biggest formal landfill, the Bisasar Road dump can be found in the Clare Estate community of Durban, the country's second largest city. Khan was raised in what was the traditionally Indian neighbourhood within Clare Estate, astride a nature reserve that spanned a small valley.

In 1980, when she was 28, her surroundings were suddenly destroyed by apartheid officials. The peaceful reserve became an unending, stinking heap of rubbish, that until the late 1990s also included a medical waste incinerator. Khan believed that the neighborhood's involuntary receipt of overwhelmingly wealthy white Durbanites'

droppings was the root cause of her two cancer cases, the latter of which was fatal.

Notwithstanding a very substantial pressure campaign by Khan and 6,000 residents, Bisasar Road dump was not closed in the early 2000s. Instead, local bureaucrats were enticed by the World Bank's commitment to invest a potential US\$14.4 million grant in a Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) project to convert the landfill methane emissions into electricity. With at least another 15 years of life left in the dump before it reached its maximum possible height, Durban officials (white men) celebrated the Bank's interest at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development by ignoring the clamour (mainly by black women) to close it.

The officials aimed to draw out the methane, burn and flare it through the turbines and link the resulting electricity back into the municipal grid. The "win-win" strategy to capture the dump's escaping methane – a greenhouse gas that is at least twenty times more potent than carbon dioxide – would require the CDM subsidy so as to compete with South Africa's cheap coal-fired national electricity grid.

Durban's harbour is Africa's largest. It is one of South Africa's emissions hotspots.

Photo by Esther Dyson
from Wikimedia
Commons

Conflict and contradiction

Community opposition to the Bank's CDM and demands for Bisasar Road's closure were not universal. Apartheid segregated South Africa's four main race groups into different areas. In addition to people of Indian origin like Khan, Clare Estate also hosts thousands of poor "African" and working-class "coloured" residents. The Khan family built their middle-class house in the 1950s on Clare Road. Some members of the family still reside in the house overlooking the dump, directly in the path of prevailing winds which continually coat the area with light landfill dust and disease-carrying flies.

As logical as the closure demand is, given the history of environmental racism, there are nevertheless conflicting opinions about how to handle this menacing neighbour. Starting in early 2005, the Abahlali base Mjondolo shackdwellers' movement of Kennedy Road – also directly adjoining the landfill– did an extraordinary job struggling against adverse conditions and police repression. But throughout the 2000s, the Kennedy Road shackdwellers welcomed the opportunity to have several dozen of their members pick rubbish and informally recycle it while on the dump. Later, the municipality's Durban Solid Waste limited access to the dump due to safety and health dangers.

There was no unity in this community, for Kennedy Road leaders accused Khan of threatening livelihoods and sabotaging the city's offer of a handful of jobs and bursaries in Uganda in the event the CDM project got off the ground. Khan had used the word "informals" to describe the shack settlement residents and once advocated that they be compensated and moved to areas nearby, sufficiently far from the dump. She recommended a buffer for all residents of 800 meters.

At the nearby clinic, health workers confirmed that Kennedy Road residents suffer severely from asthma, sinusitis,

pneumonia and even tuberculosis. The toxic body load is unknown, but the Cancer Society of South Africa deemed the area a "cancer hotspot" because of the heavy metals and other dangerous substances that penetrate the water, air and shifting soils.

Khan had a profound empathy for people in the same proximity as cancer-causing and respiratory disease particulates, as she noted in an interview: "Recently a woman was buried alive. She died on the site [picking rubbish, killed by an offloading dump truck]. I could have saved her life."¹

Ecofeminist anti-capitalism or Not-In-My-Back-Yard self-interest?

Khan epitomised the lifelong commitment so many extraordinary women leaders show in

Clean Development Mechanism

Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) is a form of carbon trading provided by the Kyoto Protocol. The scheme allows governments and corporations from Annex 1 countries - i.e. rich countries required to reduce emissions below 1990 levels - to reduce greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere if they can do so at a lower cost. The CDM generates financing for projects that are supposed to lower GHG emissions, such as conversion of landfill methane to electricity (such as Bisasar) or planting of timber to serve as a carbon sink.

However, evidence suggests that CDM projects have even caused greater pollution and risks to surrounding communities. Among the projects that have been proposed and constructed are coal power plants, nuclear power plants, landfills and plantations that in many cases displaced communities and caused environmental damage, as well as many proven to be scams.

Today, more than a thousand CDM projects are being implemented, half of them in India and China. Three thousand more are awaiting approval.

Sources: Carbon Watch (nd). "What is the Kyoto Protocol and the Clean Development Mechanism?" URL: <http://www.carbonwatch.com/Kyoto%20Protocol.htm>; Climate Greenwash Awards 2009. (2009). "The false solutions being promoted to tackle Climate Change." URL: <http://www.climategreenwash.org/false-solutions>; and Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) (nd). "What is Clean Development Mechanism?" URL: http://no-burn.org/downloads/GAIA_CDMFactsheet.pdf



To the Last Breath.
A Muslim woman of Indian descent, Sajida Khan rallied the community against the Bisasar Road dump site until her death in 2007.

Photo from
Clearerchannel.org

their eco-justice struggles. She fell into a coma on 12 July 2007 and died three days later. An ordinary middle-class victim of apartheid racism and patriarchy who equipped herself with detailed knowledge of chemistry, public health and landfill economics, Khan organised a landfill-closure petition campaign as well as a mass march during the mid-1990s. After the popular mobilising ended because the African National Congress-ruled Council enjoyed large voting majorities, Khan turned to the courts to harass the city.

As a Muslim woman, she waged her campaign at a time, “when religious gatekeepers were reasserting authority over the family. This involved the assertion of male dominance,” as Durban sociologist Ashwin Desai put it.²

Desai added: “Sajida Khan was breaking another mould of politics. During apartheid, opposition in her community was channeled through the male-dominated Natal Indian Congress and Durban Housing Action Committee. But these were bureaucratised struggles with the leaders at some distance from the rough-and-tumble of local politics. She eschewed that. Her politics were immediately on her doorstep. It was a politics that, gradually at first, made the links between the local and the global. It was a kind of trailblazing politics that later was manifested in what have become known as the ‘new social movements.’ In contrast, her political peers in the Congress tradition have built an impressive electoral machine but ended up merely with votes for party candidates rather than a movement to confront global apartheid and its local manifestations.”

Sometimes accused of waging her battle because of a selfish interest, her family’s declining property value, Khan rebutted, “No, no. It has to do with pollution, and it transcends race and colour.” Yet there were certainly class and, to some extent, race and gender power

relations at play – all of which were shaped by capital accumulation at municipal, national and global scales. For example, as Khan struggled for life, the toxic economy of Bisasar Road was being rebuilt by the Durban municipality with the global capitalist master’s CDM tool. The campaign to close apartheid’s dump may ultimately fail as a result of the various post-apartheid forces whose interaction now generates overlapping, interlocking, ecosocial and personal tragedies.

Still, if inhaling status quo pollution meant paying dearly with her health for so many years, Khan died knowing she had been partially successful: at least temporarily preventing a major World Bank investment and raising local/global consciousness. Most importantly, she left us with a drive to transcend the inherited conditions and mindsets into which apartheid categories have cemented infrastructures and people.

Without Khan’s energy and talent, it was infeasible for Clare Estate residents from different and sometimes opposed race/class backgrounds to forge more effective alliances against the municipality, at least not in the short-term. It was only a matter of time before global capitalist processes rolled over citizen opposition to Bisasar Road, facilitated by the money-hungry, neoliberal municipality, joined by Pretoria and Paris.

Bisasar brings in the bucks

For John Parkin, Deputy Head of Engineering at Durban Solid Waste, “What makes (the Bisasar Road CDM project) worthwhile is the revenue that can be earned from carbon credits,” estimated at 3.1 million certified emissions reduction credits, worth about US\$15 million, along with some six to eight megawatts of electricity over a 20 year lifespan.

In late 2006, the French Development Agency pledged long-term loans of US\$8 million to Durban’s landfill gas projects



Communities along Kennedy Road are among those that surround the Bisasar landfill, where some families initially found their livelihood through waste-picking. Aside from breathing the toxic air and hearing the boisterous noise from the landfill and the generator, these communities are also threatened by eviction. The last few months alone saw the bloody clashes between them and the police.

Photo from Sally Giles of Centre for Civil Society of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?10,24,10,2250>

(Bisasar is by far the largest of three), alongside the US\$1.3 million extended by South Africa's Department of Trade and Industry. According to Durban city manager Mike Sutcliffe, "Landfill gas offers a viable renewable energy source only when linked to Carbon Finance or CDM."

The World Bank had backed off in 2005 when Khan's fame was at her height but still billed itself as a potential financier for the project. The Bank needed such offsets because of its portfolio of obscene climate-destroying credits, such as 130 fossil-fuel projects during the mid-2000s, 82 per cent of which were designed to supply cheapened energy to the North. By way of counterweight, fewer than five per cent of the Bank's CDM projects constituted renewable energy projects.

In 2008, the Bank was replaced by an investment company, Tradings Emissions, which acquired the right to purchase one million emissions reduction credits. The firm's investment advisor Simon Shaw said that Bisasar and the other two landfills "an important project, it is operational, it has a long term future and we anticipate registration shortly. These credits will be a useful addition to our portfolio." By March 2009, the municipality registered it on the United Nations' list of CDM projects, as active through at least 2014.

The four million cubic meters of potential Bisasar Road rubbish that is today's remaining capacity – on top of 19 million cubic meters in the dump that are already exuding methane – will allow extraction of methane and damaging on-site conversion of electricity for many years to come. Khan believed that the gas should indeed be removed, but through nearby gas pipes, not burned and flared on site. Khan's goal of Bisasar Road's immediate closure with conversion of the gas for industrial use a long way from residential areas could have been achieved had there been better financing systems available than the unstable carbon market, which flitted from US\$40/tonne at peak eighteen months ago to US\$18/tonne today.

But Khan required something bigger than we find in Durban and South African politics at present: a united red and green civil society front that can defeat the local-global capitalist-patriarchal rubbish industry, using a "zero waste" philosophy that would create dozens - perhaps hundreds - of reliable jobs in recycling for Kennedy Road shackdwellers who could be suitably resettled with security of tenure, on stable land in the immediate vicinity.

With such a political front in place and the municipality in post-neoliberal hands, the simultaneous termination and rehabilitation of the Bisasar Road dump could then



proceed, as Khan had demanded, potentially with stable soil cover, vegetation and a new public space for the oppressed neighbours. The end of Thabo Mbeki's neoliberal reign over South Africa from 1999-2008 offered a hope that such a front might emerge, but sadly it did not.

Back to an eco-feminist future?

Why have we not found the red/green combination? Perhaps because long-standing principles of eco-feminism still elude Durban civil society. Ecofeminist theory sheds light on struggles that unite Khan's with the anonymous shackdwellers who died on the dumpsite scratching out a living.

In the words of Kathleen Manion, "Certain ecologically damaging issues have more of a detrimental effect on women than on men, particularly as women tend to be more involved in family provisions and household management. Such problems include sustainable food development, deforestation, desertification, access to safe water, flooding, climate change, access to fertile land, pollution, toxic waste disposal, responsible environmental management within companies and factories, land management issues, non-renewable energy resources, irresponsible mining and tree felling practices, loss of biodiversity (fuel, medicines, food)."

Manion continued, "As household managers, women are the first to suffer when access to sustainable livelihoods is unbalanced. When the water becomes unpotable, the food stores dry up, the trees disappear, the land becomes untenable and the climate changes, women are often the ones who need to walk further and work harder to ensure their families survival."³

For a middle-class woman like Khan, just as for the impoverished woman killed on the dump, the struggle for social reproduction was more costly than any of us can contemplate. High-profile heroines have led such struggles: Wangari Maathai fighting for Kenyan greenbelts; Erin Brockovich campaigning for clean water in Hinkley, California, United States (US); Medha Patkar opposing big dams in India and Lois Gibbs advocating against toxins at Love Canal, New York, US. Vandana Shiva has written eloquently of Chipko tree huggers while Terisa Turner on the Nigerian Niger Delta's women activists. In all these cases, including Bisasar Road, women's defence of immediate family and community is a compelling handle for a larger analysis of patriarchal power relations and anthropomorphism.

But though Khan did not find a way to work with all her neighbours as a result of huge political, class and race divides, her campaign against carbon trading using the Bisasar Road dump has at least brought this pilot project to the world's attention, as an example of how "low-hanging fruit rots first," to borrow the metaphor of Canadian CDM critic Graham Erion.⁴

Still, the attention she has gained for this cause only goes so far, as Desai observes: "Sajida's main strategic flaw was the belief that by meticulous scientific presentation of the facts based upon thorough research, she could persuade the ruling class. Facts became the main weapon of struggle. But without

Still Standing.
The local government took over the Bisasar Road dump site from the World Bank in 2006.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons



an ongoing critical mass of people, once the World Bank was convinced she was right and dropped out - apparently the case by 2006, just as happened with the Narmada dams in India - then the domestic government stepped in to take up the slack. So eThekweni Municipality is now taking over from the World Bank and looking for investors because the bigger cadreship is not there to stop it. Facing down the World Bank was impressive and deserved the claim to a victory. But its one thing to tell truth to power, and Sajida was absolutely brilliant in defeating the system's experts. [But one] needs a much bigger mass movement to do that."

Quoting Audre Lourde, the Australian ecofeminist-socialist Ariel Salleh might also find in Khan's story an inspiring, if as yet uncertain fight against capitalist patriarchy: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' For socialists, the capitalist class, its government cronies and lifestyle hangers-on are the masters and the global public sphere, their house. For ecofeminists, this is also true, but there is another master embodied in the private power relations that govern the everyday life for women at home, at work and in scholarship. This is why we use the double construct capitalist patriarchal societies – where capitalism denotes the very latest historical form of economic and social domination by men over women. This double term integrates the two dimensions

of power by recognising patriarchal energetics as a priori to capitalism. As reflexive ecosocialists know: the psychology of masculinity is actively rewarded by the capitalist system, thereby keeping that economy intact."⁵

Carbon trading is the new rage of the world's most maniacal financial capitalists, and it is no surprise that in their haste for fast profits, the bodies of women like Khan are violated so terribly. And it is no wonder that those who knew Khan – such as members of the Durban Group for Climate Justice which she hosted at her house for its launch in October 2004 – are that much more inspired to fight back, knowing how hard Sajida did. ■

Khadija Sharife is an investigative poli-econ journalist. She is a researcher in a tax justice network. Khadija is a visiting scholar at the Center for Civil Society of the University of KwaZulu-Natal School of Development Studies in Durban, South Africa.

Patrick Bond is senior professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal School of Development Studies in Durban, South Africa, where since 2004 he has directed the Centre for Civil Society. His work presently covers environment (energy, water and climate change), economic crisis, social mobilization, public policy and geopolitics. He was a founding member of the Durban Group for Climate Justice and is active in Climate Justice Now!'s South Africa branch.

Endnotes

¹ Interview, September 25 2005.

² Interview, July 30 2007.

³ Kathleen Manion, (2002), "Ecofeminism in Relation to Gender and Development," available at www.ecofem.org/journal, www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/twine/ecofem/manion.pdf

⁴ Graham Erion, (2006), "Low-hanging Fruit Always Rots First," available at www.natuurenmilieu.nl/pdf/0500_3.3_low_hanging_fruit_always_rotts_first.pdf

⁵ Ariel Salleh, (2005), "Moving to an Embodied Materialism," in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 16, 2, 11, p.11.