

# Why the Fires Raging Across Amazonia Ought to be a Burning Issue for Africa

By [Prof Gerard Boyce](#)

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*Of late, global news headlines have been dominated by reports of the fires raging across the Amazon Basin, mainly in Brazil but in other countries across the region such as Bolivia as well. Cognisant of the adverse consequences they portend for climate change, several governments and international agencies have condemned the Brazilian government's role in this crisis and mounted relief efforts in response to this emergency. Despite widespread media coverage, the conflagration raging across the Atlantic does not seem to have captured the Africans public's attention as much as it has that of other citizens globally.*

*Our oversight of the global catastrophe taking place half a world away is perhaps understandable plagued as the continent is with multiple immediate challenges that are closer to home. Foremost of these is the migrant crisis gripping North Africa and the Mediterranean region and the deadly eruption of anti-foreigner violence in South Africa. The profound political economy effects which events unfolding in the Amazon might have on African countries coupled with the planetary-wide effects it could have on global weather patterns and ecology, however, may make it worthwhile for Africans to pay greater attention to these developments, if not for altruistic then at least for selfish reasons.*

To see how the blaze raging in Amazonia has far-reaching implications for Africa, consider the following prevailing geopolitical trends. Consider firstly the growing tensions between the US and its rivals, chiefly China, with which it appears to be locked in fierce competition for global hegemony and pre-eminence. As evidence of this increased rivalry, witness the increasingly hostile trade war between China and the US. According to most accounts, the primary military and strategic objective of US policy towards China is to contain China.

Secondly, consider the deep inroads that Chinese companies have made into African markets and the massive loans which they have extended to African governments for investments in infrastructure projects. These investments have drawn heavy criticism from sundry observers and media commentators, many of whom have taken issue with their relatively unconditional nature and the threadbare economic justification for extending (allegedly) unsustainably large amounts of credit to already indebted countries where audit and oversight mechanisms of public expenditure are often lacking. According to one body of thought, these investments are viable only if viewed from the perspective that economic considerations are secondary rather than primary motivations for the Chinese. Specifically, if their primary objective was to advance Chinese national interests by using states' indebtedness to gain diplomatic leverage over African countries and thereby enlist African countries' support in their strategic rivalry with the West.

Thirdly, consider that, after the election of President Bolsanoro, Brazil's long-term

commitment to the BRICS alliance which was ostensibly created to challenge the global hegemony of the former colonial overlords of the West does not seem very secure. Under these changing circumstances, Brazilian support for erstwhile ally China is far from certain.

Now consider the nature of the world food market where the US is the world's largest food exporter and China the world's largest net food importer. In the event that trade-related tensions escalate further, Chinese policymakers may calculate that the US would choose to exploit its position as the world's largest food exporter to attempt to fulfil its containment strategy. If so, Chinese policymakers may fear that disruptions in food supply would render their administration vulnerable as they could lead to social instability and leave the country susceptible to social unrest. Compounding matters for Chinese leaders who may already harbour fears concerning stable food supply, climate change is increasing the pace of desertification in the Yangtze valley which has traditionally been the breadbasket of China, its population is ageing, urbanising and becoming more affluent leading to greater demand for more protein-rich foods, its rural labour force is shrinking while experts are divided on the ability of technological advances to increase domestic agricultural yields to keep pace with these environmental and demographic changes.

Under such circumstances, Chinese policymakers are likely to conclude that it is vital that China secure a stable source of food supply lest its global rivals decide to use control over access to food as a tactic to contain its influence and thwart its rise. Since Brazilian support now seems far from assured after the election of President Bolsonaro, there is no guarantee that additional agricultural output could be sourced from Brazil to replace imported agricultural produce from Western countries should rivals decide to employ food as a weapon and subsequently make it difficult for China to secure food on the international open market. In any event, even if Brazilians did wish to support their BRICS' ally, the ire that the use of slash and burn agricultural practices in the Amazon has evoked amongst civil society and political leaders globally, not to mention the heavy involvement of Western firms in agricultural holdings there, make it unlikely that Brazil would be able to clear land to increase agricultural exports to China without attracting global attention and possibly incurring sanctions. Given these factors, depending on increased agricultural output from Brazil to reduce China's dependency on American and/or Western agricultural exports might not be a viable option to secure a steady food supply.

Presumably, perceived Brazilian unreliability fuels Chinese anxieties to secure alternate reliable food sources. To do so, Chinese policymakers may surmise that it is vital to secure food supplies from places where their political influence is strong and where there exists scope to make investments which enable farmers to exploit the full advantages of mechanised or industrialised agricultural practices and realise the significant improvements in agricultural outputs that have been associated therewith. African countries; which are typically less densely populated than Asian countries, where agricultural yields are typically lower than global averages, where the full advantages of mechanisation have not been fully exploited and which have young rapidly urbanising populations; appear to be the perfect choice for the purpose of deciding where to make these investments. Furthermore, owing to the considerable leverage which China already has over these governments by virtue of their aforementioned debt holdings, Chinese policymakers may believe that it would be a lot easier to secure additional food supplies from Africa should it need to sustain a drawn-out standoff with its adversaries in the West.

Given this confluence of factors, it can be reasonably anticipated that China will start

showing greater interest in Africa's agricultural sector in the near to immediate future. Thus, African readers can expect to witness, *inter alia*, increased levels of Chinese investment in seed and other technological inputs as well as the port-side infrastructure required to handle the export of greater volumes of bulk agricultural cargo.

Many Africans would doubtlessly welcome these developments and see in these possibilities an opportunity to invest more heavily in agro-processing and capture a greater market share in the Chinese food market. Where opportunity exists there invariably exists threats. These threats are likely to be amplified in societies where the system of property rights is often informal and based on traditional forms of tenure and ownership that do not rely on legal recourse in the Western sense of the term and where regulatory oversight mechanisms of land usage by local bigshots and elites is weak or non-existent. To mitigate these threats, it is crucial that African politics and civil society organisations mobilise and lobby their governments to take steps to ensure that any gains from this potential agricultural bonanza are distributed fairly rather than just for the benefit of the coterie of state enterprises and well-connected individuals who routinely appear at the front of the queue when it comes to Chinese investments. Anything less promises nothing more than deepening inequality, a worsening of the subjugation of the African poor, especially rural dwellers, and greater social strife in future.

It is for these selfish reasons that one argues that the fires raging across Amazonia and the plight of its residents ought to be a burning issue for Africa.

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**Gerard Boyce** is an Economist and Senior Lecturer in the School of Built Environment and Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College) in Durban, South Africa. He writes in his personal capacity.

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