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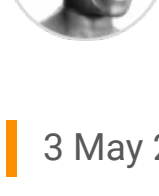


OPINION

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Africa should develop its own electric vehicle agenda

Without careful planning, electrification of transport can result in more, not less, pollution in Africa.



Edna Odhiambo
Climate change lawyer

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Heavy traffic passes through the Lagos-Abeokuta expressway in Ikeja district in Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos, April 12, 2016 (Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters)

The future of transportation appears to be electric. More and more people across the globe are opting for electric vehicles and the industry is undeniably on a positive trajectory. According to the International Energy Agency, the number of electric cars, trucks, vans and buses on the world's roads is on course to increase from 11 million vehicles to 145 million by the end of the decade.

This growth is being driven by the technological advancements in charging systems and battery ranges, as well as policies being adopted by governments to divest from fossil fuels and address the climate crisis. The substantial investments automobile giants are making to go electric are further signs that electric vehicles are the future.

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The African continent is also part of this growing electric-powered transport wave. Several African countries such as Kenya and Rwanda have adopted tax incentives to encourage electric vehicle imports and are working on developing their own electric two- and three-wheelers.

In many African cities, minibuses are the main mode of public transport, complemented by motorcycles. It is estimated that some 90 percent of urban air pollution in developing countries is attributable to vehicle emissions. Furthermore, emissions from transport-related sources are a major cause of chronic respiratory-related illnesses and premature deaths in Africa. Thus, the efforts to increase the use of electric vehicles are a welcome strategy to decarbonise transport and improve air quality in African urban centres. There are, however, several issues that African countries need to address to be able to reap the benefits of the electric vehicle movement.

Before taking further steps towards transitioning to electrical vehicles, African governments need to answer some important questions: Will they impose stricter regulations on the imports of secondhand internal combustion engines to prevent Western nations, who are phasing these vehicles out, from dumping them on their countries? Will they ensure that the secondhand electric vehicles they import have a long enough lifespan? Do they have the capacity to safely dispose of the lithium-ion batteries electric vehicles run on? Are there regulations in place to ensure the ethical mining of raw materials that are used in the production of electric vehicles?

Africa is the largest market for secondhand vehicles in the world. The United Nations Environment Program asserts that poor countries are being used as dumping grounds for used cars of low quality. But so far, only South Africa, Egypt and Sudan have banned used car imports.

As the West works to phase out internal combustion engines and replace them with electric vehicles, most of their old cars will find their way to Africa. If governments do not take immediate action, this will result in further pollution on the continent.

Moreover, several African countries are encouraging the importation of secondhand electric vehicles through tax incentives, without imposing any criteria as to what condition these vehicles should be at the time of import. As electric batteries degrade with use and gradually become obsolete, import of secondhand electric vehicles near the end of their lifespan could potentially invite a massive waste problem for Africa.

Even in developed countries, barely 5 percent of lithium-ion batteries are being recycled due to technical constraints, economic barriers, logistics, and regulatory gaps. If African governments do not start carefully regulating the import of second-hand vehicles and developing recycling infrastructure for lithium-ion batteries, the proliferation of electric vehicles on the continent will result in more pollution, not less. African governments can also mitigate this challenge and reduce their reliance on pollution-inducing imports by encouraging the establishment of local assembly and manufacturing facilities for vehicles, including electric vehicles.

African cities are in dire need of clean, efficient and affordable mass transit systems and in less want of personal motorisation, whether fossil powered or electrified. The kind of incentives that will empower Africans are those geared towards making public transport greener and more affordable for the masses.

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Electrifying mass transit demands a reliable energy supply. Toyota's President Akiyo Toyoda predicted that if electric vehicles are adopted hastily, even developed countries such as Japan may not have enough energy to support them. At slightly over 40 percent, Africa has the lowest electrification rate in the world. Some 640 million Africans lack access to energy. Many countries on the continent are still grappling with stabilising energy supply just for household use, let alone commercial and industrial consumption. In this context, transition to electric vehicles in Africa should be viewed as a medium to long-term goal, rather than a short-term strategy. Improving walking and cycling facilities can be leveraged as a quick win, which will increase the access masses have to public services and facilities, while improving air quality and decongesting cities.

As demand for electric vehicles grow, African countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and South Africa, will be supplying the raw materials used in their production such as lithium, copper and cobalt. These countries will need to safeguard ethical mining standards as they work to meet this growing demand. Countries such as the DRC are already facing scrutiny for human rights abuses, including child labour, in their mines. They should seek support from movements such as Mining With Principles and Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA), to put in the necessary regulations to enforce sustainable mining practices in the future.

To benefit from the global move towards electric-powered transport, Africa should ensure that it is in control of its own electric vehicle agenda. Commendably, there are already initiatives across Africa aiming to localise vehicle electrification. In Uganda, Kiira Motors has launched locally manufactured electric buses. In Kenya, the National Youth Service has supported the development of an electric three-wheeler prototype and there are ongoing electric bus pilot schemes in Cairo, Addis Ababa and Nairobi. Such initiatives should be encouraged as they will go a long way in helping Africa build an electric vehicle agenda that is considerate of local realities and challenges.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.



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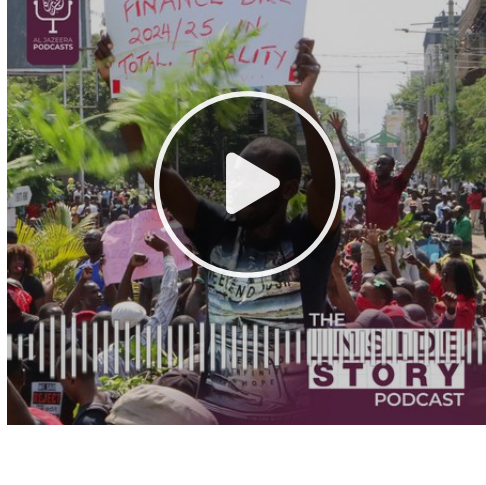
Edna Odhiambo is a climate change lawyer, communicating sustainability solutions through speaking and knowledge management. Her advisory work spans 33 countries across four continents in diverse sectors, including climate finance, clean energy, transport and natural climate solutions.

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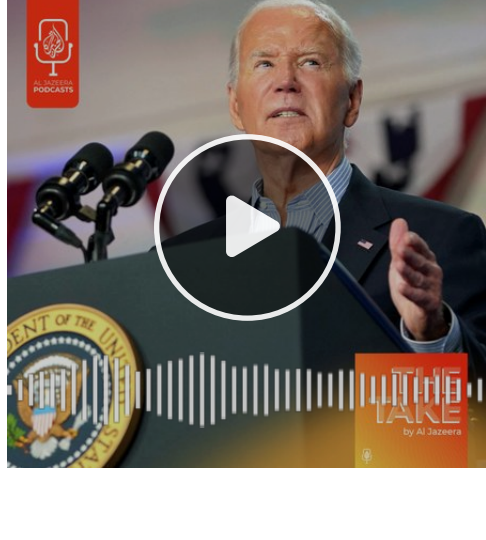
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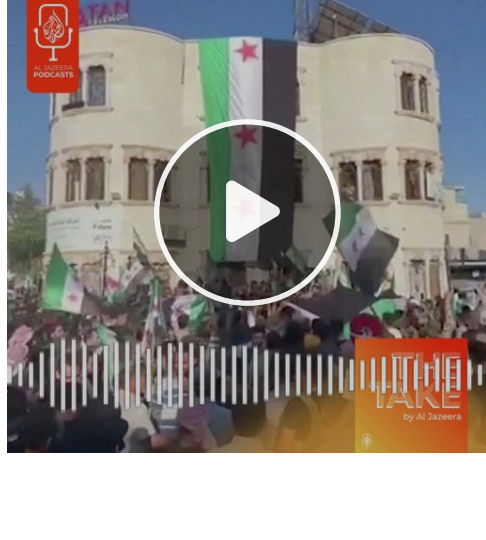
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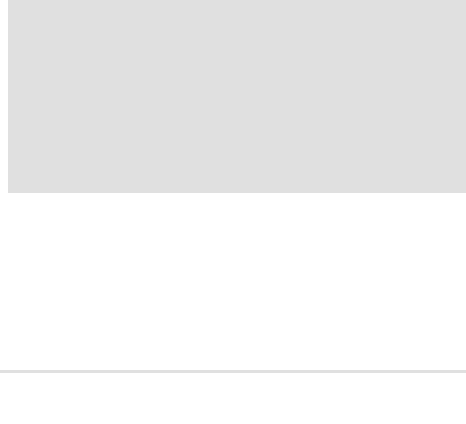
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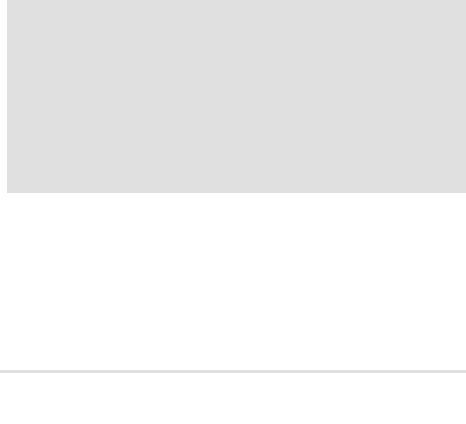
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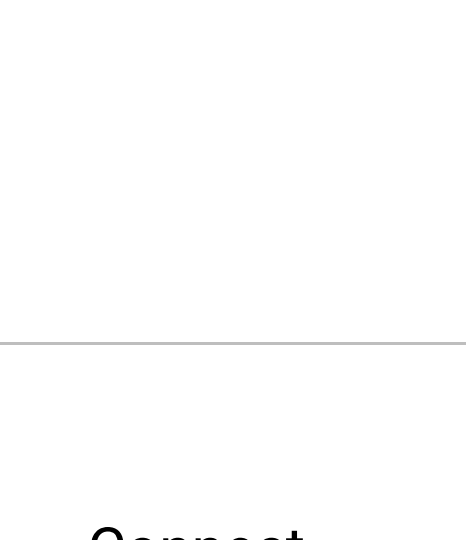
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