

An African Chorus On Climate Change

From activists to presidents, a call for urgent global action



Environmental and community groups marching in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 12 December, one of many demonstrations around the world demanding stronger global action.

Photograph: 350.org

Across the African continent scientists, public personalities, farmers, environmental activists and even presidents have become more vocal in urging global action to counter climate change and help poor countries cope with its varied impacts. An immediate focus was the 7–19 December UN international climate change conference in Copenhagen, which concluded a limited agreement to combat global warming. But much work lies ahead, and many Africans agree that their governments need to press harder, both internationally and at home.

We Are Not Here As Victims



Meles Zenawi, prime minister of Ethiopia and the African Union's chief negotiator for the Copenhagen talks, speaking at the Copenhagen summit on 16 December.

Photograph: UN / Joshua Kristal

Every one of us knows that Africa has contributed virtually nothing to global warming, but has been hit first and hardest. The fragility of our eco-system has meant that for Africans the damage of climate change is not something that could happen in the future. It is already here with us, sowing misery and death across the land. Africa is indeed paying with the misery and death of its people for the wealth and well-being that was created in the developed countries through

carbon-intensive development. That is fundamentally unjust.

But we are not here as victims nursing our wounds of injustice of the past. Africa is a continent of the future; it is destined to be a growth pole of the 21st century. We are therefore here not as victims of the past but as stakeholders of the future, reaching out across the continents, so that together we can build a better and fairer future for all of us.

Not only has Africa contributed virtually nothing to the current level of carbon emissions, but it is unlikely under any scenario to be a significant polluter in the future. Africa is a green field that can and wants to chart a different course of development, one that is not carbon-intensive....

We are not here to preach or to grandstand. We are here to negotiate, to give and take and seal a fair deal, however messy such a deal might be....

On start-up funding, I propose:

- *Support the establishment of a start-up fund of \$10 bn per annum for the three years of 2010–2012, to be used to address urgent adaptation and mitigation tasks, including forestry, and to prepare plans for more ambitious programs in the future....*
- *Demand that 40 per cent of the start-up fund be earmarked for Africa....*

On long-term finance, I propose:

- *That funding for adaptation and mitigation start by 2013 to reach up to \$50 bn per annum by 2015 and \$100 bn per annum by 2020.*
- *That no less than 50 per cent of the fund should be allocated for adaptation to vulnerable and poor countries and regions, such as Africa and the small island states....*

I know my proposal today will disappoint those Africans who from the point of justice have asked for full compensation of the damage done to our development prospects. My proposal dramatically scales back our expectations with regards to the level of funding, in return for more reliable funding and a seat at the

table in the management of such a fund.

I believe that there is an important underlying principle here. Africa loses more than most if there is no agreement on climate change. We lose more not only because our ecology is more fragile but also because our best days are ahead and lack of agreement here could

murder our future even before it is born.

Because we have more to lose than others, we have to be prepared to be flexible and be prepared to go the extra mile to accommodate others. That is exactly what my proposal is intended to achieve.

The African Leadership Must Be Responsible



Wangari Maathai, leader of Kenya's Green Belt Movement and 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, speaking at the African Development Bank in Tunis, Tunisia, on 27 October.

Photograph: UN/Mark Garten

Common natural resources like land, forests, rivers, wetlands, lakes and wildlife are essential for the survival of communities, but they cannot be protected unless the country has good governance: responsible, accountable and indeed visionary governance and leadership that manages the natural resources for the common good of all....

In many countries the greatest threat to the natural resources is the ruling elites, who use their political power and privileges to assign these resources to themselves, their friends, supporters and fellow tribesmen. They also facilitate the exploitation of the same resources by outsiders, so that resource-rich nations in Africa enrich outsiders rather than their own citizens....

With the threat of climate change, many of the developed countries will use their technology, creativity and awareness to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Many of them are already involved in political, economic, social and legislative changes to adapt and mitigate against the climate change.

In Africa, we are told that the region will be disproportionately adversely impacted since it accounts for meager greenhouse gases, but the negative impact will be huge.... While climate change will no doubt exacerbate the situation, we make ourselves very vulnerable by continuing to both neglect and mismanage our environment....

Whatever the outcome in Copenhagen, it is important for us Africans to be responsible for our destiny. The African leadership must be responsible for their people. So let us not wait for other regions to save us from the negative impact of climate change. We should not only focus on the money the developed world will provide and the technology they may be willing to transfer. We might fail to access those resources or purchase those technologies if we are not prepared....

Therefore, adequate preparation for implementation and adoption is paramount in Africa. The responsibility to save Africa for Africa must surely lie with the African leaderships and their citizens.

Reduce Emissions Without Retarding Development



Jacob Zuma, *president of South Africa, in an address to the Copenhagen summit on 18 December.*

Photograph: UN / Mark Garten

Climate change is a practical matter for the developing world, especially Africa. For countries such as South Africa, weather patterns in coastal provinces are already wreaking havoc on the lives of our people, which makes this challenge a reality that we are already confronting....

Some facts are already well known. Developed countries are historically responsible for 80 per

cent of the current emissions in the atmosphere. Developing countries are most affected by climate change. As they justifiably pursue their own development paths, it is expected that developing countries' emissions will increase.

In the long term, we need an agreement that recognizes the common responsibilities of all nations to reduce emissions, while

not retarding the development of developing countries. Our view remains that all developed countries must commit to ambitious, legally binding emission reduction targets.... Developing countries should commit to nationally appropriate mitigation action, to achieve a decline in emissions relative to business as usual. This would be conditional on finance, technology and

capacity-building support from developed countries.

Developing countries are ready to play their part in reducing global

emissions, but obviously rich countries have to take the lead. With financial and technical support from developed countries, South Africa for example will be

able to reduce emissions by 34 per cent below “business as usual” levels by 2020 and by 42 per cent by 2025.

Chart A New Course To Sustainable Development



John Atta Mills, *president of Ghana, speaking at the Copenhagen summit on 17 December.*

Photograph: UN / Marco Castro

Ghana will pursue a low-carbon development growth path, even though our emissions currently are very insignificant. My delegation is here to share ideas, exchange views, and to confront one of the greater political challenges of this century and to chart a new course to sustainable development....

It has been sufficiently reported that climate change has the potential to push many developing countries back into the poverty trap and [reverse] progress made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. With the need to adapt to a changing

climate, development will be much more costly and many populations will suffer further severe stress.

Africa’s weak ability to adapt to these additional stresses further increases its vulnerability and heightens the risk of agricultural decline, chronic hunger, water shortage, deteriorating health, biodiversity loss, among others. Hence, for Ghana, action on climate change and on development cannot be separated....

So far, the mid-term targets for emissions reductions announced, particularly by developed

countries, do not seem ambitious enough to help us achieve the long-term goal and save our planet.

Ghana is a net greenhouse [gas] remover as [its] forests store carbon: therefore, reducing forest degradation, as well as conserving and sustainably managing forests, can provide immediate and substantial mitigation benefits. However, a major concern of developing countries is that these mitigation actions should not divert much-needed resources from poverty reduction and economic growth.

Climate Change Threatens Human Dignity



James Alix Michel, *president of the Seychelles, in a message on 23 September.*

Photograph: UN / Joshua Kristal

For small islands, climate change is about our existence. It is about maintaining our human right to live and work in the land of our birth, the land of our parents. We must act now to ensure that our islands are also the land of our children.

Millions of people around the world are living on the edge of an abyss. Recent studies show that assuming current rates of warming, the sea will rise more than 1.4 m in less than 100 years. And emissions continue to grow. Warming continues to accelerate — and if

we do nothing that 100 years will very easily become 50. Islanders face forced displacement and destruction of our already fragile economies.

Climate change threatens the very concept of human dignity. For small islands and least developed countries, the road towards Copenhagen is about survival. The progress made so far is unacceptable. And proposed compromises are simply a means of shifting the debate to future generations....

I take the opportunity to call on the developed world to use the advanced technology at their disposal to take the lead in cutting emissions. Cutting emissions will cost. But let us ensure that it is a cost that is shared. If things remain the same, the biggest cost is borne by the poor farmer in Africa and the fishermen in our islands. The cost of acting to reduce climate change is far less than proceeding on the same route we are currently stuck in.

Climate Change Begins At Home

The East African, a daily newspaper published in Nairobi, Kenya, in an editorial entitled "Climate Change Begins at Home" on 19 October.

The flurries of meetings on climate change . . . in the run-up to the global summit in December in Copenhagen have illustrated just how contentious and divisive the subject is. The major cause of the polarization is the general feeling by developing countries that their developed counterparts have saddled them, through their egregious production of greenhouse gases, with the devastating effects of the phenomenon, including extreme weather and the spread of diseases into new locales.

It is this sense of victimhood that is driving these countries ... to

demand that the richer states pay what amounts to compensation.... While such demands are understandable there is a need, as Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga pointed out . . . for poor countries to adopt more comprehensive policies that go beyond donor support or compensation.

The adoption of such policies is particularly prudent because there is no evidence that richer countries, many of which are currently going through economic decline, will agree to pay compensation....

In the event, poor nations must make parallel efforts to develop

homegrown programs to mitigate the effects of global warming. Such programs should encompass innovations such as the trade in carbon credits by both the private and public sectors, as well as investments in renewable energy.

As they prepare for Copenhagen, poor countries must realize that developing locally sustainable programs to mitigate global warming will be a better bet than crying out for reparations, which will be akin to waiting for Godot.

We Have The Power To Turn Tides



Desmond Tutu, former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, and 1984 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, in an op-ed article published in major newspapers around the world in late October.

Photograph: UN/Jean-Marc Ferré

Even a few years ago most developing nations viewed climate change as one more trouble to which they could, with sufficient aid, adapt. But after Arctic sea ice melted so dramatically in the summer of 2007, climate scientists began re-evaluating their predictions — the earth was reacting more violently than expected to even small temperature increases.

It became clear that for many countries basic survival was at stake... Kenya's ongoing drought, with the deaths of thousands of cattle and devastating crop failures that have accompanied it, is giving

us a vivid picture of what uncontrolled climate change might bring to the African continent....

Normally, voices from places like Ethiopia, the Maldives and Kenya are sidelined in international forums. But this time it may be different, because a huge, positive and determined civil society movement is building around the world to support just, fair and scientific climate targets....

People in almost all the nations of the earth are involved — it's the same kind of coalition that helped make the word "apartheid" known around the world.

I ask all those around the world who care about Africa to support climate fairness ... by starting or joining an awareness-raising action where they live. It is a chance for us to act as global citizens, not as isolated individuals and lonely consumers. It is a chance for world leaders to listen to voices of conscience, not to those who speak only about financial markets. In South Africa we showed that if we act on the side of justice, we have the power to turn tides; tomorrow we have a chance to start turning the tide of climate change.

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