

Prospects

Aperiodic – no. 22/369 – 1st December 2022

The point of view

COP27: a first step towards climate justice

The 27th United Nations Conference of the Parties on Climate Change, held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, from 6 to 20 November, was an opportunity for African nations to warn the international community about the many climate challenges facing the continent and the growing need for funding to address them.

Sub-Saharan Africa generates less CO₂ emissions than any other region, accounting for a mere 4% of global emissions. The region generated only one metric ton of CO₂ per capita in 2021, well short of the global average of 4.7 metric tons per capita. Africa's low level of emissions is primarily a reflection of its lagging development and relative lack of industrialisation. Only two African countries are among the top 50 emitters in absolute terms: South Africa at 436 mtCO₂ and Nigeria at 137 mtCO₂. The region's most striking case is undoubtedly South Africa, the world's 14th-largest greenhouse gas emitter due to its heavy reliance on coal.

However, global warming is placing a heavy burden on the region, particularly on the poorest countries, whose low development and corresponding lack of resources to withstand the effects of climate change make them very vulnerable. The economic, human and public health consequences are catastrophic. Drought and flooding in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa this year have caused several hundred deaths and displaced more than 3.4 million people (according to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Moreover, they have exacerbated food insecurity by reducing the viability of arable land. According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), food insecurity increases by between 5 and 20 percentage points with each flood or drought. And the economic impact is just as severe, with these catastrophes destroying infrastructure that is essential to economic activity. Also according to the WMO, global warming could cause sub-Saharan Africa's GDP to shrink by at least 3% between now and 2050.

With climate catastrophes increasingly frequent in a region already weakened by political instability, conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa will have to rely on the help of the international community to help them mitigate the effects of global warming. According to its African Economic Outlook 2022 report presented at COP27, the African Development Bank estimates that the continent will need funding of between \$1.3 trillion and \$1.6 trillion over the next eight years to address its climate challenges. Of this total, \$715 billion would go towards mitigating the effects of climate change, while \$1.3 billion would be spent on meeting technical and technological needs, \$289-440 billion on loss and damage and \$259-407 billion on adapting to climate change (of which \$143 billion for East Africa).

The idea of "climate debt" has been at the heart of political discussions between developed and developing countries for many years now. Indeed, the least advanced countries are demanding that rich countries, which they accuse of being the main culprits of climate change, pay their "climate debt" to offset the loss and damage suffered by the poorest countries as a result of climate change. In practice, this would mean developed countries paying financial compensation to the least advanced countries to fund their efforts to combat climate change.

However, not everyone backs this idea; advanced countries have often been reluctant until the end of COP27, on 20 November, when the countries in attendance finally agreed to set up a loss and damage fund to help developing countries cope with the effects of climate change. While details of this fund are as yet unclear, for the least advanced countries this is an important step towards climate justice. ■

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