



Opinion

Adaptation to climate change in Africa

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Whether we like it or not, ours will be a century where the governance and economic agenda will be dominated by the task of adapting to climate change. With the early effects of climate change already starkly visible, and their escalations over the coming decades already locked in, adaptation is no longer a choice but an imperative. And nowhere in the world is there a greater urgency to set out a coherent and comprehensive agenda for adaptation, we believe, than in Africa.

Of all the major world regions, Africa bears the least responsibility, historically, for generating greenhouse gas emissions through the intensive burning of fossil fuels that have tipped our planet over into a cycle of warming at unprecedented rates. Even today, Africa's carbon footprint, when measured per capita, is a fraction of that of the developed world.

But the effects of climate change are, unfortunately, much more evenly distributed than its causes. The African continent is especially vulnerable to the fallouts of climate change for several reasons. A substantial proportion of its people depend on agriculture for their livelihood [1]– in Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 60 percent of smallholder farmers. About 23 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP comes from agriculture [2]. Some of Africa's distinctive geographical features (three-fifths of its land area consists of drylands, where rainfed agriculture and livestock husbandry support over 500 million people) and climatic characteristics, such as its dependence on monsoonal weather systems, also increase its vulnerability to changing weather patterns and more extreme weather events.

The continent is also experiencing a wave of rapid urbanization, leading to severe pressure on its urban infrastructure and risk management systems [3]. Finally, the

countries of Africa find themselves with a greatly reduced fiscal space for investment in adaptation and mitigation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. All these factors, when added to the existing developmental challenges of poverty, food insecurity, and conflict, mean that Africa will likely experience higher impacts from climate change, as a percentage of GDP, than most other world regions. Projections estimate that climate change will lead to an equivalent of 2 percent to 4 percent annual loss in Africa's GDP by 2040 [4].

But these projections are not set in stone. They might be better seen as a red alert, requiring the design of a coping mechanism that can shield physical assets and human capital from the debilitations of climate change and, better still, chart out alternative pathways to grow and prosper.

What would such a plan look like? It would have to be multisectoral, encompassing agriculture and land use, trade and water resources, energy, and infrastructure. It would be comprehensive, linking citizens and communities, national and regional governments, and multilateral institutions like banks and NGOs. And it would be evidence-based and credible, synthesizing the latest scholarship of field experts and showcasing and scaling up a portfolio of case studies and best practices.

The time to adapt is now. The world, we now know, came too late to summon the political will for the mitigation of climate change. It would not do to repeat the same mistake for adaptation. Given the potentially large macroeconomic implications of climate change, there will need to be a rapid scale-up of adaptation in the next 20 years in Africa. Doing so could have many positive knock-on effects in the decades to come. To date, much of the focus on adaptation has been



downstream and piecemeal. The Global Centre on Adaptation report calls for the immediate “mainstreaming” of adaptation into national plans and budgets, and a stepping up of adaptive efforts and knowledge sharing across the continent as a whole [5].

There also needs to be a dramatic scaling up of funding for adaptation. Adaptation is rising very fast on the policy agenda. But adaptation finance is growing too slowly to keep pace with the rising costs of climate change. In their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, 40 African nations have estimated their investment needs for adaptation at roughly \$331 billion (or about \$33 billion a year) through 2030.

The actual amount of adaptation finance currently available, however, is only \$ 6.6 billion a year, leaving an enormous \$265 billion shortfall [6]. There is an urgent need, therefore, to mobilize funds from developed nations, sovereign wealth funds, pension funds, development banks, philanthropies, foundations, non-profits, and other sources. There is also the need to allocate existing climate finance more equitably between mitigation and adaptation.

Again, the situation on the ground is changing rapidly. Much is being done in Africa itself to mobilize funds for adaptation. For example, the AfDB now devotes 63 percent of its climate finance to adaptation – the highest share of any multilateral financial institution – and has committed to doubling its funding to \$25 billion by 2025 [7].

Adaptation in Africa should leverage the continent's unique strengths and potentialities

Given the African continent's enormous human and natural resources, adaptation in Africa should focus on labor-intensive modern industries such as climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, green building and infrastructure, and ecotourism. Nature-based interventions – the restoration of habitats, agricultural interventions that sustainably boost productivity and protect livelihoods, and urban greening – can boost resilience across the board.

To sum up, the effects of climate change in the coming decades are locked in (even if their precise location and intensity are unpredictable). But adaptation on the necessary scale and with cooperation among all stakeholders can provide the people of Africa a measure of control over, and resilience to, climate change.

Africa's rapidly burgeoning population is now the most youthful in the world. The median age in Africa is just over 19 [8]. That is to say, half of the continent's population will come into its prime after 2030 and live and work through decades when climate change will exert much more intense pressure than it does today. How, and how soon, the continent adapts could be the difference between a future Africa that is endlessly hostage to the social and economic shocks caused by intensifying climate change and an Africa that demonstrates resilience by proactively preparing the built environment, the natural world, and economic life for the realities of a warming planet.

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