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[Internally displaced people near Mopti, Mali](#)
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Did Paris Address the Climate Challenges Faced by African Communities?

Robert Muthami Kithuku

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Since its adoption after COP-21 in December 2015, the [Paris Agreement](#) has received mixed reviews. Some stakeholders, mostly industrialized countries, [see the climate deal as a success](#). Developing countries have generally been [more cautiously optimistic](#), welcoming the agreement as the best option under the circumstances.

It is remarkable that in an environment of mistrust and wide North-South divides, 195 countries managed to agree on a deal at all. That we have an agreement that is legally binding and globe-spanning is an achievement, especially for the people of Africa.

African countries, which are among the most affected by climate change, were disadvantaged from the start. Africa is the most vulnerable continent to the adverse impacts of climate change thanks to its warm climate, exposure to erratic rainfall, prevalence of poor soils and flood plains, and the fact that most African economies are dependent on agriculture.

The final agreement has some inclusions, which, by their mere mention in the text, create new possibilities for the continent. But there are also important omissions, which we will continue to fight for as we forge new paths ahead.

Continental Leadership

A major challenge for Africa in climate dialogues is the continued dominance of nation states as the primary political players. As a collection of more than 50 countries, the continent needs to find ways to speak as one voice to bring attention to our interests. In Paris, Africa managed to move away from the focus on individual governments, albeit slightly. The “African Pavilion” served as the rallying point for the continent’s unique outlook on the negotiations.

A solutions provider, not just a victim

The African Group of Negotiators, the African Ministerial Conference of the Environment, and the Committee of African Heads of State and Government managed to hold their own footing as they defended their positions from influence by developed countries. This stand enabled the realization of some key demands in the Paris Agreement, including the global goal on adaptation, a standalone goal on loss and damage, and the ambition of keeping temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius over the more conservative (though still not easy) 2.0 degree target.

Through its mitigation and adaptation commitments outlined in more than [47 Intended Nationally Determined Contributions](#), Africa also began to show it can be a solutions provider, as opposed to just a victim in need of salvation.

Small victories with regard to finance were also achieved. The deal commits financing to help developing countries address climate change and its impacts before 2025; however, it doesn’t quite make clear who will provide it.

Compensation and liability remain a bone of contention. Many African countries are already dealing with the negative effects of climate change. These will worsen, even if the world succeeds in keeping temperatures within the agreed upon 2.0 degree Celsius limit. The effected people deserve compensation and financial support to deal with the loss and damage caused by rich countries’ pollution. The Paris Agreement sidesteps this through a clause stating the deal has [“no basis for any liability or compensation.”](#)

The Gender Question

A pressing subset of climate challenges for Africa is related to [gender](#). Women are [disproportionately vulnerable](#) to the effects of climate change, especially in Africa, where the [majority of women](#) work in agriculture. Their exposure to climate change could, in turn, exacerbate existing gender disparities. Africa needs more national expertise on these issues.

The Paris Agreement acknowledges that “adaptation should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory, and fully transparent approach, taking into consideration vulnerable groups, communities, and ecosystems, and should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples, and local knowledge systems, with a view to integrating adaptation into relevant socioeconomic and environmental policies and actions, where appropriate.”

This language is very key, as African women often play an essential role in caring for the environment and must be empowered to protect their livelihoods, their communities, and the environment. Gender has been at the center of previous COP discussions, and we believe that the inclusion of this paragraph in the agreement is an opportunity to build on the implementation of the [Lima Work Program on Gender](#) and work by the [Global Environment Fund](#) to ensure that gender continues to be important in climate change policy and is mainstreamed into national programs and plans.

Disproportionate Impacts

A third area of special interest to Africa is [renewable energy technology and financing](#). How African governments bring electricity, health care, and development to all their citizens without increasing emissions is an enormous challenge. In the meantime, energy shortcuts taken by other countries threaten major impacts on the continent.

The agreement talks vaguely about renewable technologies and actions without defining what these are, leaving the door open to false solutions. Renewable energy is mentioned just once in relation to Africa. The newly launched [African Renewable Energy Initiative](#) (AREI) is an inspiring example of what needs to be done and could be a model for the rest of the world. Endorsed by African Union heads of state, AREI sets a course for ensuring access to sufficient energy for all Africans by 2030 through renewable, decentralized, and people-centered energy systems. This initiative will likely require significant public climate financing, however, to be successful.

As long as emissions are increasing, so is the effect on African countries

The deal also aims to “achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century.” This could mean anytime between 2050 and 2100, but a 1.5 degree target requires a [definitive end to fossil fuel use by 2050](#). The purposefully slippery language allows for the possibility of continued fossil-fuel burning to be offset by dubious carbon capture, geoengineering, or forestry schemes.

This is very detrimental to Africa, for as long as emissions are increasing, so is the effect on African countries. For the world to address climate change, there must be a fair and honest commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Unity and trust should be demonstrated by both developing and developed countries.

For Africa, the [common but differentiated responsibilities principle](#) remains paramount as the fact remains that developing and developed countries are affected by climate change disproportionately and have disproportionate capabilities to respond.

A Stepping Stone

Even if African governments are disappointed in some aspects of the Paris Agreement, we have reached a point of no return. Paris was not expected to solve the climate change crisis, per se, but serve as an important milestone in the long journey towards a more just, resilient, low-carbon future.

The agreement is binding, but participation by governments is voluntary. As such, there is no legal or monetary requirement for each nation to contribute. In this sense, it is open to interpretation, giving governments the opportunity to change goalposts based on their preferences.

“With all its shortcomings,” [wrote one analysis](#), “the Paris Agreement gives us some of the tools to help bounce off the great transition that is underway, and ensure it happens faster and fairer. But governments, the private sector, and citizens have no laurels to rest on. There is no time to waste. Rhetoric and legal language must be translated into action.”

This sentiment is perhaps no more poignant than in Africa, where every moment we delay brings pain or ruin to someone new.

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Sources: African Development Bank, Center for International Sustainable Development Law, Climate Action Tracker Partners, The Financial Express, Global Environment Facility, Global Gender and Climate Alliance, The New York Times, Oxfam, United Nations Development Program, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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