AFRICA 17.07.2017 | Robert Muthami

Infertile land

The US decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement will hit African countries the hardest

One of the major challenges facing the world today is climate change. The fifth assessment report of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC-AR5) underscored just how serious the issue is for Africa, Asia and Latin America – where most of the world's poor live. Africa is still deeply dependent on natural resources for its peoples' livelihoods. But climate change is making it difficult for the continent to feed its rising population. Numerous studies link global warming with Africa's rising food insecurity, water stress and the spread of new and re-emerging diseases, as well as with inter-communal conflicts, migration and the displacement of communities. This despite the fact Africa produces less than four percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The Paris effect

The Paris Agreement adopted by almost all nations in 2015 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is a compromise. To accommodate the US, it was framed as an "agreement" rather than a "protocol", enabling the president to ratify it by decree, unlike the Kyoto protocol which the US senate declined to endorse. Africa was instrumental in initiating the negotiation of the Paris Agreement, since discussions on a new accord began in Durban, South Africa during the seventeenth Conference of Parties (COP 17) of the UNFCCC in 2011.

The Paris Agreement commits countries to stick to their "nationally determined contributions" (NDCs) – a tailored climate action plan. The aim is to keep the increase in global average temperature to "well below" two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, with an ambition to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees. The NDCs include ambitious measures to adapt to, and mitigate climate change, and they are incumbent on both developed and developing countries. How each country achieve their NDCs is at its own discretion. This negates the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR–RC), which acknowledges that richer countries have tended to

contribute more to climate change than poorer ones, and that some countries have a greater capacity to implement measures to combat climate change. African countries know that only by adhering to this principle can we negotiate a fair and just climate deal.

Despite attempts by rich countries to dilute the principles of fairness and justice in addressing climate change, Africa has put a lot of hope in the Paris Agreement. As the continent bearing the brunt of climate change and its effects, African countries have committed to highly ambitious adaptation and mitigation measures under their NDCs. According to Climate Action Tracker, 161 out of 188 countries, accounting for around 90 percent of the world's emissions, have submitted their climate action plans, including most African countries. During May's G7 summit Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta stressed Africa's commitment to solving climate change. He said, *'A freer, more prosperous Africa is a more secure Africa. Africa is a vital partner in solving some of the world's most pressing problems: poverty, immigration, climate change, terrorism'*

The US bombshell

With the election of Donald Trump as US president, climate change deniers within his administration were emboldened. So Trump's announcement of an American withdrawal from the Paris climate deal came as no surprise.

African NGOs condemned the US decision, saying Trump would enter the annals of history as a president lacking morals and divorced from reality. According to Patrick Bond from the University of Kwazulu Natal, in South Africa, the US withdrawal proves that vulnerable communities will continue to bear the brunt of damage caused by global warming, for which industrialised countries are mostly to blame.

African countries were impressed by a joint statement by Germany, France and Italy condemning the US decision. The statement read, *"We deem the momentum generated in Paris in December 2015 irreversible and we firmly believe that the Paris Agreement cannot be renegotiated, since it is a vital instrument for our planet, societies and economies."*

The United States is the world's second biggest emitter of greenhouse gases after China. It now joins Nicaragua and Syria as the only countries yet to sign the Paris Agreement. Its withdrawal has implications for cooperation between developing and developed countries as well as sustainable economic growth.

A couple of scenarios

The US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will make it a lot harder to reach the two degree target. Before Trump came to power, the US's proposed NDCs aimed at cutting emissions by 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels. To achieve these targets it will need to implement both the Clean Power Plan and the Obama administration's full Climate Action Plan which President Trump is attempting to scrap, paving the way for more coal power.

The withdrawal may also discourage Chinese ambition when it comes to emissions and climate finance. This would again shift the burden of addressing climate change to developing countries, whose adaptive capacity is minimal, causing them further suffering.

A more positive scenario would see countries from North and South strengthen their own commitments to climate change, in an effort to challenge and shame the "bad guy" US. To an extent, this is already happening, after a raft of world leaders from countries as diverse as Japan, Brazil and the Marshall Islands condemned the US decision. Such a move may see African countries abandoning agreements with the US in favour of more economic cooperation with China.

In terms of procedure, the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement won't be concluded until November 2020, a time when US voters will be heading to the polls to elect either Trump or his successor. Climate justice activists in the US believe the decision will complicate Trump's re-election bid, as voters worry the US will be side-lined by other countries.

There's no doubt that big business influenced the US decision. It's also clear that multinationals have played a hand in climate change negotiations. Yet climate change is real and vulnerable countries live with its ramifications every day.

Africa should not lose hope but continue implementing the African Renewable Energy Initiative, Sustainable Development Goals and the African Agenda 2063 on structural economic transformation, all of which strive towards bringing Africa onto a path of low-carbon development. This means we need to strengthen pan-African institutions such as the African Union, African Group of Negotiators, the Conference of African Heads on Climate Change and the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment, which all engage in policy issues on environment and climate change.

The challenge that climate justice and civil society advocates face today is

how prevent big business determining governments' and negotiators' decisions on climate change.



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