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Climate justice for Africa

Fighting climate change is not just about emissions but also justice. African countries shouldn't have to choose between development and the climate

Perhaps the most important outcome from the climate talks in Sharm el-Sheik is that COP27 has strengthened the narrative on climate change solutions in developing regions such as Africa. Following 20 years of talks to do something about climate change that culminated with the Paris Agreement, environmental justice issues now are just as central to COPs as are scientific assessments. For example, partly owing to justice campaigns, a new 'funding arrangements for responding to loss and damage' – short of an agreement – is a lauded outcome from Sharm el-Sheik. But justice must remain a focus for the fund to actually fund 'loss and damage' in developing countries and not end up being another 'blah'. Yet, this progress demands answers to the question 'justice by who and for whom?'

It is a bit of an irony that such a question implies global success at mitigating climate change may be determined by African politicians. Yet the difficult choices they face now could have been avoided, had politicians in developed countries mustered moral courage and honour pledges to Africa on climate finance. Today the world's fastest-growing continent is also the world's poorest. So that when rains fail to fall and when inflation delays or denies food charity, hundreds of millions stare at death from starvation.

More people in Africa will die from climate related catastrophes than in any other continent. Those responsible for climate change knew this long before predicted impacts started becoming a reality across the continent. And in the decades of the Industrial Revolution, during which developed countries generated immense wealth from emitting CO2 which caused climate change, Africa's historic emissions, says COP27 president Sameh Shoukry, was less than 4 per cent. And that is far less compared to the US for example, with 30.7 per cent.

Global and local responsibilities

Climate impacts are sordid social realities that politicians and people across 54 countries in the continent face. Solutions are seemingly simple yet they must contend with choices with often undesirable outcomes on how best to protect lives and implement climate agreements – such as the Paris accord – and exercise sovereign rights towards development. They could make the same unsustainable development choices of developed countries to mine, sell and use coal, oil and gas, using proceeds towards development. Or they could continue to play by UNFCCC rules and wait for developing countries to come around to delivering fair, just and adequate money they need to adapt to climate change and transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Finally, they could relent on development challenges and focus on environmental protection.

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That last option is certain to continue to turn once lively communities to fields of carcasses and corpses. The second may only painfully delay that reality. Yet, exercising the sovereign right to development compromises whatever progress has been made so far in reducing global emissions. But it would provide governments with money to ensure millions don't starve to death during droughts, for example. Africans are also aware that even if they reduce emissions, that will not protect them from climate impacts such as heatwaves and sea level rise.

Those in Europe who amplify arguments that Africans must forego exploring vast natural hydrocarbon resources could dispense with the scientific and socio-economic history of climate change and instead reflect on provisions in the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, which states that it is 'an inalienable human right' to everyone from Berlin to Bamako to 'enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development.' Nationally, the human right to development avails equal opportunity to food, among similar basic essentials and 'self-determination,' which includes the 'right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources,' based on human rights laws. Internationally, it obliges geopolitical cooperation 'based on sovereign equality, interdependence, mutual interest and co-operation.' It also obliges states to eliminate 'obstacles to development.' With the duty on states to protect and provide economic, social and cultural rights, when the Somalian government could not prevent hunger, it fell short of Salat's 'right to food.' The 10-year-old boy starved to death. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights takes sovereign rights a step

further. It provides for 'the unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination' which includes African's right to 'pursue their economic and social development according to the policy they have freely chosen.'

Africa's resource wealth and its opportunities

That about sets the proverbial stage between David and Goliath to which the existential threat of climate change provides a sobering background. At one end, the European Parliament – with nauseating hypocrisy and irony – 'expresses its grave concern about the human rights violations in Uganda and Tanzania,' claiming 'serious adverse impacts for communities within the oil extraction and pipeline areas' of the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline, being developed between those two. At the other end, small 'Davids' across the continent continue on with precisely what the African Union's pre-COP27 'common position' statement promised, that 'Africa will use all of its numerous energy resources, both renewable and non-renewable, to meet energy demand.' Surely far little mental energy is necessary to discern what could be more 'adverse' to a human than dying slowly from starvation.

Angolans know the answer and so they are building a plant with capacity to process up to '400 million cubic feet of natural gas per day.' Also since February, six platforms to extract oil and gas are being built in Angola's northern Cabinda province. With a reported '100 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves, the largest untapped coal reserves, globally and the largest hydroelectric power facility in Southern Africa,' .

Mozambique's energy mix prospects exemplify Africa's crossroads on natural energy resource wealth. And with socio-economic development and climate protection needs ever dire, a path needs be chosen and soon. Meanwhile, 'the first shipment of LNG from Coral South LNG facility' on its way to 'the international market' is among the 'greatest solution for our project to develop Mozambique,' says president Filipe Nyusi. The shipment is reportedly due in Europe. There are gas reserves in several countries across Sub Saharan Africa and until 2025, '70 natural gas projects are projected to come online' in that region, from the north in Algeria to the south in South Africa, east in Ethiopia to the west in Senegal. Nigeria's gas supplies Europe, and Mozambique's recent contribution are proof that the 359 trillion cubic feet of 'discovered natural gas resources' only in Sub Saharan Africa, provides a viable though undesirable option to address 'a severe constraint on its economic and human development' by delivering 160 gigawatts of power, doubling 'the total existing installed capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa.'

A green Africa

European politicians and their counter-parts in North America would have exhausted the ever-expanding human rights narrative should they continue the condemnation of developing these prospects. They would need to deploy other tactics that are empty of hypocrisy and with higher likelihood of truthfulness. Surely, there would be no shortage of local rights groups to benefit from foreign support against hydrocarbon development, however, that strategy as well is running its course. But the 'joint Africa-EU strategy', to which the EU's condemnation of the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline pays lip-service, could become an avenue to realise Africa's non-hydrocarbon path to development. That potential is remarkable, with profound renewable resource from the sun and with 180,000 Terawatt hours (TWh) per annum of wind energy potential, '27 countries on their own could satisfy the entire continental electricity demand.'

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European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans is absolutely right to say that 'the big opportunity for Africa will be to use this enormous potential of solar and wind,' as much as he is right that 'one of the perfidies of this man-made crisis is that those who had no role in making it are suffering most of the consequences of this climate crisis. Africa obviously, is a case in point.' But for the injustice he implies to be made right, Mr. Timmermans would be equally right and justified in assuming global political leadership on climate change and ensure developing countries convert Africa's potential into reality by providing fair, just, and adequate climate finance for the protection against climate impacts and transition economies to renewables.

In April, US president Biden released 30 million barrels of oil to allow Americans their consumption 'average of about 19.89 million barrels of petroleum per day.' In contrast, Africans consumed far less, historically and are now taking steps towards development to protect lives against climate change induced disasters. Even as some may now pretend to forget the history of climate change, there's a bit of dignity left to allow consensus that wanton waste of life now across the continent because of climate change denies developed countries moral authority to dictate the path to development in Africa.