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No more 'blah blah' at COP27

Enough with broken promises. COP27 must shake politicians into the reality that talks must be focused on protecting vulnerable lives

The supreme decision-making body working on our gravest existential threat yet is heading to one of the most vulnerable continents to the global environmental catastrophe. It is the fifth time that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) will come to Africa, bringing politicians from countries responsible for historic carbon emissions to Egypt. There is hope that the sobriety from being in Africa, currently burdened with climate change impacts, will break the delusional spell entrancing many into believing that climate change solutions can – or worse – must be monetised. It ought to be understood that Africa is in a dilemma between climate action and economic development and equity is not charity; it's a fundamental international law principle.

But Africans also have the responsibility to abandon rhetoric. And so Sameh Shoukry, the COP27 president-designate would do well to dispense with such 'blah, blah, blah', in the words credited to Greta Thunberg, such as his comment that the pre-COP27 negotiations allowed politicians to understand 'areas of convergence and also possible divergence.' It's a certain kind of global political culture that tires a teenager committed to a cause that threatens all of humanity. But as fate would have it was Boris Johnson, who smirkingly mocked that, 'all those promises will be nothing but Blah! Blah! Blah! to coin a phrase,' who will not again taunt at climate talks.

Africa hasn't had much more than 'blah' for decades prior to and including the Glasgow COP. Broken promises, denial through inaction and obfuscation, by those who unconscionably seem to have lost sight of the plight their historic carbon emissions is causing in the continent. As climate disasters in Africa, droughts, floods and heatwaves reveal, the global climate has changed and Africans are highly vulnerable to those impacts. And yet, failure by developed countries to act on the resulting loss and damage continues. It seems agreements, such as the 2003 Warsaw International Loss and Damage Mechanism, recognising that

developing countries 'are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change,' is just another 'blah.' And more, it is unfair for the US to lead other developed countries to remove the term 'emergency' from the Glasgow Climate Emergency Agreement proposal to fund climate disasters. Simply by ensuring such disgraceful obfuscation will not be repeated at Sharm el-Sheikh, Shoukry would save lives.

Development and climate protection

Apart from empty words, Africans also do not need more promises on climate change which are likely to remain exactly that – promises. And yet that is once more what they got in the so-called 'Finance Delivery Plan'– a failed 2009 pledge of 'USD 100 bn a year by 2020' which was sold as progress at the last COP. This is unfair to millions now suffering from famine in the Horn of Africa. As hunger uniquely undermines development of all forms because a mind that starves for food simply cannot function well. Developed countries' politicians now have a unique and symbolic chance to live up to their moral obligation by granting this money rather than loaning it to Africans. First and foremost because 'climate finance plays a critical role in supporting developing countries to address climate change,' which they did not cause but suffer most from.

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A global pandemic, spiralling inflation and war raging at the edge of western Europe have had an impact on climate actions globally. But the worst of these – from the Covid-19pandemic to inflation – are being experienced across Africa. Yet, just like a Christmas carol to which much attention isn't paid to pitch or lyric, COPs are increasingly a tradition for those with resources to save lives to wax on, even as drought reduce once lively communities into fields of carcases and corpses. If yet another pact comes out of Sharm el-Sheikh, it ought be an agreement that failure to 'limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees' combined with dire conditions in Africa, is certain to turn an environmental catastrophe into the gravest humanitarian crisis not seen since the Second World War.

Africa's twin-challenge to adapt to and mitigate climate change and concurrently foster economic and social-development must be emphasised in Sharm el-Sheikh. Currently with 1,152 billion in people and compared to all regions, Africa has the 'world's fastest-growing' population. Within a decade – until 2018 – people 'living in extreme

poverty – 109 per cent outpaced the growth of the total population – 44 per cent.' It is clear that Africa needs a green revolution!

The need for African solutions

Climate solutions imagined in the West must conform to this reality which would require African countries to explore their natural resources in ways that does not always compliment Western-tailored solutions. A state's right to development is guaranteed in UN international law and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights as 'an inalienable human right' to enjoy 'economic, social, cultural and political development.' Crucially, it includes the right to use natural resource wealth over which states retain sovereignty. So it makes sense that Africans now call for 'policy space for nationally tailored policies and programmes on the continent' and are asking the international community to respect Africa's vision and aspirations including the right to development and equity, in their 2063 development agenda. The UN estimates up to US$500 bn will be needed until 2050 to save lives from climate change across the continent. But if developed countries meet their moral and financial obligations on climate finance, this delicate balance between right and responsibility could be a reality.

Enough with broken promises, denials and obfuscation. Amidst much blah blah during COPs, a sense of Africa's grave plight to climate change is lost. Sharm el-Sheikh must shake politicians from indifference and into the reality that talks must be focused on saving and protecting vulnerable lives. They must be informed by principles of equity and fairness, not by ability to repay climate finance loans. Talks must be guided by the need to value human life, not by global political and economic power inequalities. Each year when the rain does not fall, millions perish from starvation. Sharm el-Sheikh should set a new standard: the recognition that human life in Africa is obliged the same value and virtues to lives elsewhere. Politicians who affirmed the 'fundamental dignity of the human person' in the Sustainable Development Goals, must now muster moral stamina and make decisions that will preserve and protect that dignity in recognition and respect for the universal value of human life.