



AGRICULTURE REFORM HUB UGANDA (AGROREF)

BRIEF ON THE HISTORY OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES (COP) AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

11TH NOVEMBER, 2024

Introduction

Battered by the scourge of endless droughts, flooded plains and disrupted livelihoods of hundreds of millions back home, the African delegation to the United Nations climate change conference, the COP29, arrived in Baku, Azerbaijan, with a powerful message, calling for nothing less than climate justice and financial accountability from the world's wealthiest nations. The African Group of Negotiators (AGN) proposed a New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) of \$1.3 trillion per year by 2030. Led by AGN chairperson Ali Mohamed, who is also Kenya's Special Envoy for Climate Change, Africa's demands have in the last four days underscored the inequity of a crisis its people largely did not create, but one they are severely bearing the brunt of (Mutiga, M. 2023, November 17). But what is the Conference of Parties (CoP) that the African Group of Negotiators direct this strong call for action?

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the primary decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Since its inauguration, COP has been central to global climate governance, providing a forum for international negotiations and policy agreements aimed at combating climate change. The COP process is not only relevant to the global community but particularly to the Global South, where the impacts of climate change are disproportionately felt despite minimal contributions to the problem. This brief explores the history of COP, its significance to the Global South, the role of wealthier nations, and Africa's contributions and potential to further inspire global climate action.

History of the Conference of the Parties (COP)

The COP process began with the adoption of the UNFCCC at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Convention set the foundation for global climate negotiations, establishing the COP as the supreme body overseeing its implementation. The first COP took place in Berlin in 1995, and it was here that the Berlin Mandate was agreed, marking a shift towards more ambitious commitments by developed countries to

reduce greenhouse gas emissions (UNFCCC, 1995). Since then, the COP meetings have convened annually, attracting governments, civil society groups, and business representatives. The COP process gained significant momentum with the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol at COP3 in 1997, which legally bound developed countries to reduce emissions (UNFCCC, 1997). However, the US's withdrawal from the protocol in 2001 and the challenge of engaging developing countries in binding agreements highlighted the difficulties of reaching global consensus. The Paris Agreement, adopted at COP21 in 2015, marked a pivotal moment in climate diplomacy by bringing together both developed and developing nations under a common framework for limiting global temperature rise to below 2°C, with efforts to limit it to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC, 2015).

Relevance to the Global South

The Global South, comprising developing and least-developed countries, is at the forefront of climate vulnerability, yet it has contributed least to the problem of climate change. Climate impacts such as extreme weather events, droughts, and rising sea levels disproportionately affect these regions (Chhetri et al., 2020). The COP process has therefore been crucial for the Global South, as it provides a platform for these nations to advocate for climate justice, financing, and technology transfer.

The Global South has consistently argued for the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR-RC), enshrined in the UNFCCC. This principle acknowledges that while all countries are responsible for addressing climate change, developed nations have a greater historical responsibility for emissions and greater capacity to mitigate and adapt (Rajamani, 2017). This principle has been critical in negotiations, ensuring that the Global South is not burdened by commitments it cannot afford.

The Role of wealthy countries: support and hindrance

Wealthy nations have played a dual role in the COP process. On the one hand, they have provided critical support in the form of financing and technology transfer. At COP15 in 2009, developed nations committed to mobilizing \$100 billion annually by 2020 to support climate action in developing countries (UNFCCC, 2009). This funding is intended to help the Global South mitigate emissions and adapt to climate impacts, particularly in vulnerable regions like Africa and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The Green Climate Fund (GCF), established during COP16 in 2010, is one such mechanism through which these funds are disbursed (GCF, 2020).

On the other hand, wealthy countries have often been accused of undermining the COP process by failing to meet financial commitments, setting insufficient emission reduction targets, and resisting stronger international agreements. The failure to meet

the \$100 billion financing target by 2020 and the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under President Donald Trump exemplify the challenges in global climate negotiations (Falkner, 2016). These actions reflect the tensions between economic interests in wealthy nations and the urgent need for climate action.

Africa's contributions to COP

Africa, a continent that faces immense challenges from climate change, has been an active participant in the COP process. With its vast vulnerability to climate impacts, Africa has consistently pushed for ambitious climate commitments. The African Group of Negotiators (AGN) has been influential in advocating for the recognition of the continent's specific needs, particularly regarding adaptation financing, technology transfer, and capacity-building.

At COP17 in 2011, held in Durban, South Africa, Africa played a pivotal role in the negotiation of the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, which laid the groundwork for the Paris Agreement (Baker, 2012). The continent's influence was also evident in the inclusion of adaptation as a central pillar in the Paris Agreement, reflecting the high priority that African countries place on addressing the impacts of climate change.

However, Africa's voice remains underrepresented in decision-making processes, and it often faces challenges in accessing climate finance. While African countries have made progress in advocating for adaptation and resilience-building, they are often overshadowed by wealthier nations, which are the largest emitters and primary decision-makers in the COP process (Seymour, 2018).

How Africa can gain more from COP

To gain more from the COP process, Africa must continue to strengthen its collective bargaining power, both in terms of representation and negotiating capacity. The establishment of a unified African position through the African Group of Negotiators has been crucial, but greater political will and coordinated action at the continental level will be necessary to amplify its voice (Mulugetta et al., 2021). Africa must also focus on securing long-term, predictable climate finance that is accessible and aligns with its development priorities. This includes demanding clearer and more enforceable commitments from developed nations to meet their financial pledges.

Additionally, Africa must push for stronger mechanisms for technology transfer and capacity-building. In particular, African countries should advocate for the development and scaling of technologies that are suitable for local conditions, such as renewable energy and climate-resilient agriculture (Sovacool et al., 2020). By aligning climate action with broader development goals, Africa can ensure that climate change mitigation and adaptation contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction.

Conclusion

The COP process has been a crucial forum for international climate negotiations and policy formation. For the Global South, particularly Africa, it provides an essential platform to secure climate finance, advocate for adaptation measures, and hold developed nations accountable. However, the richest countries have often both supported and hindered the process, offering financial aid while failing to meet their pledges and resisting stronger commitments. Moving forward, Africa can leverage the COP process to secure more climate finance, technology transfer, and policy influence, ensuring that the continent's vulnerabilities are addressed in global climate action.

References

- Baker, S. (2012). The Durban Platform: A new agreement on climate change. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 22(5), 317-328.
- Chhetri, N., Sharma, E., & Thakur, M. (2020). Climate change and its implications for South Asia. *Regional Environmental Change*, 20(3), 73-85.
- Falkner, R. (2016). The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. *International Affairs*, 92(5), 1107-1125.
- Mwaniki, M. (2024, November 17). At COP29, Africa bets on \$1.3trn in demand for climate justice. The East African.
<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/sustainability/climate/at-cop29-africa-bets-on-1-3trn-in-demand-for-climate-justice-4825500>
- GCF. (2020). Green Climate Fund Annual Report. Green Climate Fund.
<https://www.greenclimate.fund>
- Mulugetta, Y., Korgaard, N. H., & Mundaca, L. (2021). Climate policy and development in Africa: Context, challenges, and opportunities. *Development Policy Review*, 39(6), 973-989.
- Rajamani, L. (2017). Common but differentiated responsibilities: The logic of fairness in climate law and policy. *Review of European, Comparative & International Environmental Law*, 26(1), 10-22.
- Seymour, F. (2018). The politics of climate finance in the Global South. *Climate Policy*, 18(4), 497-512.
- Sovacool, B. K., Horn, S., & Hielscher, S. (2020). The politics of technology transfer in developing countries: Opportunities, challenges, and best practices. *Global Environmental Politics*, 20(4), 1-17.
- UNFCCC. (1995). The Berlin Mandate. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <https://unfccc.int>
- UNFCCC. (1997). The Kyoto Protocol. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <https://unfccc.int>
- UNFCCC. (2009). Copenhagen Accord. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <https://unfccc.int>
- UNFCCC. (2015). The Paris Agreement. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <https://unfccc.int>