Climate Action in Africa in 2024: Lessons to Draw from the Outcomes of the 28th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 28)

By:

The African Sovereign Debt Justice Network

African Sovereign Debt Justice Network (AfSDJN) Climate Action in Africa in 2024: Lessons to Draw from the Outcomes of the 28th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 28)

January 19, 2024

The 2023 Africa Climate Summit was criticized for its focus on creating investment opportunities from the climate crisis rather than addressing the devastating impacts of climate change on Africa. Unfortunately, this is a hallmark of climate gatherings. It is not unusual that the outcomes of such conferences are deemed to have missed the mark. COP 28 was not so different. On several fronts, COP 28 was expected to address pertinent issues, including the unjust financial architecture underpinning climate finance, attaining a just transition away from fossil fuels, and the operationalization of the loss and damage fund. Like most other COPs, COP 28 had its 'wins', including pledges regarding the loss and damage fund (L&D Fund) and the first express mention of transitioning from fossil fuels. Serious questions, however, remain on whether the seemingly incremental achievements are at the scale and pace compelled by climate change and the inequality it fuels.

A key concern for Africa going into COP 28 was the inadequacy of climate finance flows to Africa. Studies have revealed that out of an annual need of $277 billion between 2020 and 2030, the continent receives only $29.5 billion. COP 28 saw 'additional' financial commitments made with respect to the Green Climate Fund, Least Developed Countries Fund, and Special Climate Change Fund. The commitments, however, pale in comparison to the climate finance needs of the continent. A few countries endorsed the Declaration on a Global Climate Finance Framework, which renews the $100 billion annual pledge from developing countries and urges debt-free financing for adaptation efforts. These pledges are not only grossly insufficient, but they also promote initiatives like debt swaps and sustainability linked bonds which risk keeping climate vulnerable countries in a cycle of indebtedness. Its call for the continued implementation of the Common Framework, without addressing the existing shortfalls, including inadequate debt relief and its disregard of climate considerations in debt restructuring processes, is also quite problematic.

The final outcome of COP 28 (the UAE Consensus) was silent on the nexus between climate finance and debt. This is a reversal from the moderate engagement with the issue at COP 27. The 2022 Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan shone the light on loss and damage and the growing debt burden in developing States and invited international financial institutions and multilateral development banks to reform practices and priorities 'taking into account debt burdens.' Despite failing to reference the climate finance–debt nexus, development banks and financial institutions announced plans to expand climate-resilient debt clauses in their lending. The benefits of such clauses will be dependent on their terms, and while commendable, the ultimate relief from the debt crisis worsened by climate change remains the cancellation of debt.

In light of the scale and impact of climate disasters on the continent, the operationalization of the loss and damage fund (L&D Fund) was a key highlight of COP 28. However, in addition to the selection of the World Bank as an interim host, which was initially resisted by several developing countries under G77, the issue of adequate and sustained contributions still needs to be addressed. The effectiveness and transformative potential of the L&D Fund for people and communities affected by extreme climate impacts is ultimately hinged on the modalities of its financing. Currently, pledges to the Fund stand at approximately $700 million and contribution is on a voluntary basis. The voluntariness of the L&D Fund is a nod to the departure from obligatory climate finance and the entrenchment of *ex gratia* funding. The failed pledge to mobilize $100 billion in climate finance made in 2009 adopted a similar model. There is little confidence that the L&D Fund will do better. Worse still, there is no consensus target and timeline that could serve as a north star for the L&D fund.

Another key milestone of COP 28 for Africa was the recognition of the linkages between climate change, health, and agriculture. Specifically, the adoption of the UAE Declaration on Climate and Health and the UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action in recognition of the adverse impact of extreme weather events on food security as well as health systems in Africa. To yield results, much more will be required in terms of scaling financing to adapt health and agriculture to climate change.

The question of fossil fuels was contentious, following a back and forth on the language until it settled at a ‘transition away’ from fossil fuels by 2050 rather than a ‘phase out.’ This issue is key, especially with respect to a just transition for countries whose economies are heavily dependent on fossil fuels for their revenues as well as energy needs. The UAE Consensus retains the Paris Agreement’s narrow framing of ‘just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs.’ This barebone engagement fails to, in any meaningful way, address the unique impacts of the transition on vulnerable communities, groups, and countries, nor does it contain concrete measures to address adverse impacts. It also fails to address the increasing trend of 'green protectionism' and climate hegemony, and the adverse transboundary impacts of the climate initiatives of developed States.

The first Global Stocktake took place at COP 28. The findings were concerning but not surprising. The Paris Agreement's goal of keeping global average temperature well below 2oC above pre-industrial levels and aiming for 1.5oC remains out of reach. 2023 is set to be the warmest year on record. Only about one fifth of the total carbon budget for a 50% probability of limiting global warming to 1.5oC remains. Adaptation responses remain fragmented, inadequate, and unequally distributed.

But there are also reasons to hope. For one, there is progress towards the temperature goal from an expected temperature increase of 4oC in 2015 to the current range of 2.1 - 2.8oC. So, while so much remains to be done, it is possible to transition to a just climate healthy world. Finance is a big part of that conversation. As noted in the UAE Consensus, 'there is sufficient global capital to close the global investment gap.' It is simply a question of responsive and just allocations. COP 29, scheduled for November 2024 in Azerbaijan, will be crucial in this regard since countries are expected to submit their new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) detailing their climate action efforts and required financing. Developed countries will need to actually deliver on climate finance in line with the legal commitments under the UNFCCC for climate action to be achieved. This should be at the centre of climate action discussions at the upcoming US Climate Action Summit as well as the World Bank and IMF Spring Meetings.

View online: Climate Action in Africa in 2024: Lessons to Draw from the Outcomes of the 28th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 28)