

Opinion – What Climate ‘Code Red’ Means for Africa

Written by Mukesh Kapila

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MUKESH KAPILA, SEP 28 2021

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) runs into 4000 pages of graphs, tables, and closely-argued technical analysis. But it is simply decrypted as signifying code red for humanity. That this is the independent, peer-reviewed consensus of 234 multi-disciplinary experts from every continent, gives it compelling significance. Our earth has heated-up by 1.2 degrees Celsius since pre-industrial times. This is due to human activity, especially greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels and deforestation. The critical 1.5°C threshold agreed in the 2015 Paris Agreement will be breached and the devastating 2°C level exceeded by mid-century if current trends are unchecked.

Africa is more vulnerable

What does progressive and significantly irreversible planetary transformation herald for Africa? The continent is warming at a slightly higher rate than the rest of the world and its surrounding sea is rising slightly more than the global mean. Africa's greater susceptibility comes from small changes accumulating to produce big effects over time.

That is heightened by the characteristic of climate change to skew the extremes of normal weather fluctuations i.e. as everywhere becomes hot, warmer places get hotter still. Temperatures in the 40s Celsius are not unusual across Africa while numbers of days at 50C+ have doubled, especially in North Africa. Dry areas are becoming drier and wet areas wetter. Overall, Southern, Western, and Central Africa are expected to get less rain while Eastern Africa would get more.

Disaster and development impacts

Climate variability manifests visibly through the increased frequency and severity of weather-related disasters. Since the Millennium, disasters have affected at least a third of Africa's 1.3 billion people. All 54 nations are impacted with Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Africa suffering most. Floods are the commonest catastrophe (64%) but droughts are deadliest (46% of deaths). Other disasters due to heat waves and bush fires are increasing. 38 coastal countries face rising sea levels, inundations of densely populated cities, and ferocious cyclones.

Impact on food security is critical. Land productivity is compromised by bio-diversity decline, soil degradation, and locust plagues. Cereal yields are projected to fall by 13% in West and Central Africa, 11% in North Africa, and 8% in East and Southern Africa. Hunger is on the rise; the 250 million under-nourished in Sub Saharan Africa, represent an increase of 45% since 2012.

Equally stark are health impacts. Biting insects love higher temperatures and rainfall, allowing vector-borne dengue fever, malaria and yellow fever to flourish. Also increased is epidemic risk from the viral successors to HIV/AIDS and Ebola, consequent to greater animal-human interactions due to ecological changes.

Most vulnerable are elders, children, and those with underlying conditions. Higher temperatures dehydrate and affect kidney function. Further effects from air pollution, worsen heart and lung conditions. There are other impacts on skin cancers and allergies, and increased mental illness. Greater pregnancy complications are expected – worrisome in a

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continent that still has high mother and child mortality. Currently 30% of healthy African life-years are lost from non-communicable diseases; this will inevitably rise.

With such profound climate impacts combining with COVID-19, Africa will miss the 2030 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recent stock-take indicates millions pushed further into poverty, hunger, and illness. While the continent will recover – belatedly – from the pandemic, the worst of climate change is yet to bite. Hard choices lie ahead as ambitions are deferred towards the distant Agenda 2063 of the African Union.

Security risks

But will Africa's young, growing, urbanizing and fast-educating population accept this calmly? This is unlikely in a continent that is home to around 20 armed conflicts in addition to the political and social violence prevalent almost everywhere. Climate change is a possible threat-multiplier: a heat-aggression relationship suggests a 10–20% increase in armed conflict risk for each 0.5°C temperature increase. Two mechanisms illustrate the concern.

First is competition over climate-affected scarce resources. Water sharing around Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam has raised tensions with Egypt and Sudan. The Lake Chad basin has lost 90% of its surface water putting 30 million people in Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon at loggerheads over what is left. Other continents struggling with their own climate impacts are eyeing African resources. China has acquired millions of hectares in DRC, Liberia, Guinea, and South Sudan for export-oriented agricultural, forestry, and mining operations. Oil-rich Gulf states are also big buyers. Disquiet over such “land grab” brews resentment against exploitative national elites and foreigners.

Second is climate-driven migration, a survival strategy already adopted by 2 million Africans. Impoverished by ecological shifts and environmental disasters, the rural poor rush to cities. Increased squabbling over already-stressed infrastructure and jobs is a generator of urban violence that blights Africa's mega cities. Africans are already big migrants but when accelerating climate change starts forcing trans-boundary movements, tensions between African neighbours are anticipated. Meanwhile, the migration of desperate Africans to Europe already dominates wary trans-continental relations.

Climate justice

The historic injustice is that Africans have contributed least to climate change. Sub-Saharan Africans constitute 14% of the world but contribute only 7% of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Should they be compensated for the rich world's past emissions? A parallel is with compensation for the past slavery of Africans. Climate justice also has an inter-generational aspect if the young of today and tomorrow must pay for the older generation's excesses. How fair is that – especially as Africa is demographically the ‘youngest’ continent?

A further ethical dimension complicates future choices for the world's most under-developed region. Sustainable development in the climate crisis era, means restrictions on what powers it. Should Africa hold itself back and fall further behind, while awaiting greater access to renewable energy and innovative technologies? The continent's experience of access to COVID-19 vaccines is not encouraging.

Developing countries demand climate justice through solidarity, fairness and prosperity. That means greater emission reduction to achieve the Paris Agreement temperature goals alongside stronger emphasis on helping the poor to adapt. It requires keeping earlier promises to provide at least US\$100 billion annually via a Green Climate Fund for developing nations to manage loss and damage from adverse effects of climate change as well as for technology transfer, and resilience and capacity building. Whether the forthcoming Glasgow Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) will deliver this is uncertain.

Climate calculation to save the world is a ‘net sum zero’ game in the sense that overall global greenhouse-gas emissions must be capped while funds for adaptation are limited. What will be Africa's share of both the carbon and fiscal budgets?

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Pan-African effort

Ironically, many African countries are actually doing well in developing policies to advance SDG 13 on climate action. But practical results are limited because, like with Covid-19, countries cannot go it alone on climate change. How well the continent does in the climate stakes depends on finding a compelling collective voice. That must also accommodate divergent national interests. These range from the mitigation imperative confronting coal-rich South Africa and petro-power Nigeria on one hand, to the energy-efficiencies needed by wasteful lower-middle income countries like Kenya and Zambia. Meanwhile, urgent investment in adaptation is simply a matter of survival for low-income nations such as Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

The relentless progression of climate change poses an existentialist threat to African peoples. It needs a massive Pan-African effort for which the African Union is the logical body to provide strategic vision and direction. Its strange reticence to proactively shoulder that responsibility is placing the continent at grave risk.

About the author:

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