



# Africa's Approach to Climate Change Negotiation

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**Leaders across Africa have recognised the need to develop policies that will mitigate climate change and allow the continent to adapt to effects which are already being felt.**

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Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi are currently dealing with Cyclone Idai's aftermath. This cyclone appears to be part of a newer [pattern](#) of "much higher frequency of high intensity storms", which researchers connect to climate change. [The World Food Program](#) estimates that close to 2 million people were affected by the hurricane and declared the situation to be at its highest level of emergency. Such extreme weather-related challenges are unfortunately increasingly common on the continent. One recent report by the [Brooking Institution](#) noted that between 1980 and 2018, more people died in Africa's droughts than in all other climatological disasters around the world, concluding that Africa will continue to be disproportionately affected by climate change.

Leaders across the continent have recognised a common set of interests in promoting global policies that will mitigate the human behaviours contributing to climate change and allow Africa to adapt to the effects which are already being felt. Two pillars underpin this approach: a common set of policy goals and a set of continental institutions that support lobbying for those goals.

Over the last decade, African states have consolidated their positions on climate change, continued to build their institutional capacities, and are more

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active than ever in global discussions on climate change. The next Conference of Parties for members of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is scheduled to take place this December in Santiago, Chile. We can expect African states to express concern about the global momentum on addressing climate change, to struggle with deciding how hard to push for stronger mitigation efforts, and to display disillusionment over global financial support for adaptation that has failed to keep up with Africa's needs.

### **Africa's Cooperation on Negotiations**

Formal African cooperation on environmental issues goes back to at least 1985, with the creation of the [African Ministerial Conference on the Environment](#) (AMCEN). AMCEN has been active in helping the continent formulate common positions on climate change. Much of the work of negotiating is carried out by the [African Group of Negotiators](#) (AGN). They operate under a clear structure which is currently led by Egypt's Head of Environmental Affairs at its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Mohamed Nasr. There has been a marked increase in their activities over the last two decades, and the AGN has become active contributors and influencers in global negotiations. But the key turning point in unifying the continental approach likely occurred in 2009 when African leaders came together and endorsed the creation of a Committee of African Heads of State on Climate Change (CAHOSCC).

This high-level group greatly raised the political profile of climate change on the continent. It was initially led by former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and is currently led by Gabon's President Ali Bongo Ondimba. Politically, leadership on these issues has also been beneficial to African leaders and their countries. Both Kenya and South Africa received some prestige through hosting

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the major Conference of Parties meetings. Even while under official suspension from the African Union (AU), Egypt was praised by the AU Assembly for its role as part of the AGN in climate change negotiations. This past January, Egypt was able to receive support from CAHOSCC in its bid to be on the AU's Permanent Representatives Committee, a relatively powerful institution that manages the day-to-day activities of the AU.

### **An African Common Position on Climate Change**

The biggest challenge for the above institutions has been to create a common African position on climate change. The challenges of unifying the interests of more than 50 African countries, populated by over a billion people on the second largest continent of the world are daunting. So it is unsurprising that at least some interests and priorities in climate change negotiations vary across the continent. Consider, for instance, that South Africa ranked 14th in CO2 emissions in 2017 (especially due to coal), setting it apart from the rest of the continent. It also is considered far more prepared for adapting to climate change given both its relative wealth and predicted impacts of climate change.

It is thus notable that in climate change negotiations, South Africa frequently appears linked to both Africa and the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) group of countries. Also consider that more than 20 African countries have proven oil reserves. Some of these, such as Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria have economies that are fairly dependent on the resource. Movement away from an oil-based economy could be problematic for them. But many African countries are finding themselves to be very vulnerable to climate change.

Without effective efforts at mitigation, sea level rise will have major effects on island nations such as Cabo Verde and the Seychelles, not to mention all of Africa's coastal states. A recent World Bank report estimated that Togo experienced a 4.4% loss in GDP in a single year due to coastal erosion linked to sea level rise. Basic differences in priorities may have contributed to several moments of division in the run-up to the 2015 Paris Agreement. African countries often differed on whether developing countries should be required to play any role in mitigation, and on the level of resources they should demand from developed countries to aid them in addressing climate change.

In many ways, it seems that the Paris Agreement may have been an important tipping point for continental cooperation on climate change. With some of the major decisions about mitigation agreed to by the global community in general, African leaders were able to begin turning their attention to an issue-area where agreement has been easier: securing funds from the international community to aid with their adaptation to climate change. This is a winning issue for governments. Most obviously, any potential revenue stream is welcome to cash-strapped governments coping with the very real and current costs of adapting to climate change. But this issue also is a good way to demonstrate their ability to deliver public goods to their own citizens.

While some research has questioned whether climate change actually helps African leaders win elections, quite a few Africans seem to be concerned about climate change. A survey of South Africans recently found they thought climate change was roughly as much a threat or more so than anything else to their security. And in Kenya, despite a number of major terrorist attacks in years, people rated climate change as the most major threat (71%; Pew Global 2019).

According to the most recent [Afrobarometer](#) surveys, half of Africans have stated that climate conditions for agricultural production are worse today than they were 10 years ago. Most Africans have “heard about climate change” and approximately 2/3 of those believe it is making life in their country worse. These responses just mirror what the scientific data tells us. The last [IPCC Assessment Report](#) was able to state with “high confidence” that “African ecosystems are already being affected by climate change, and future impacts are expected to be substantial”. The first sentence of their chapter on Africa highlights the main concerns: “Africa as a whole is one of the most vulnerable continents due to its high exposure and low adaptive capacity” .

### **Looking forward: From Africa to Santiago**

As they prepare for the next major Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in Santiago, Chile this December, what can we expect from African cooperation? What will be the key issues and future challenges for African states?

#### **1. Maintaining Momentum for Climate Change Action**

The significance of this meeting might have less to do with its agenda, and more to do with its role in attempting to simply maintain the Paris Agreement’s momentum. US President Donald Trump’s announcement to withdraw from the Paris Agreement (which cannot happen until November 2020 at the earliest) arguably made it easier for other countries to halt their ratification processes or even consider withdrawal. The recently elected President of Brazil and admirer of President Trump, Jar Bolsonaro, has suggested Brazil might leave the Paris Agreement and cancelled an earlier plan to play host to the 2019 meeting. His [recent gag order](#) on Brazil’s Ministry of the Environment is also reminiscent of one of the American President’s policies.

## 2. Search for Unity on Mitigation Efforts

Overall, African countries have been supportive of increasing the pace of mitigation. However, as noted above, diverse interests across the continent can create challenges for drafting a specific commitment. The African countries most likely to be affected by sea level rise, and by failure to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 or 2 degrees celsius, are those who are also members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) groups. In the 2018 COP, these groups were lobbying for more extreme mitigation measures and quicker timetables for such commitments than what the rest of Africa wanted ([Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#)). As recent estimates continue to show that the world is far from reaching its mitigation goals, and given it seems unlikely there will be new progress this year on accelerating commitments to mitigation, Africa's coalitional unity might come under greater stress.

## 3. Potential for Disillusionment over Global Support for Adaptation.

Overall, it seems the biggest priority in Africa's efforts has become the securing of funding for climate-related projects. CAHOSCC has been very keen to promote its African Adaptation Initiative and other international efforts at adaptation. As a region, African countries have been the prime beneficiaries of the Green Climate Fund, which was part of an earlier Copenhagen Agreement's plan to facilitate adaptation to climate change by developing nations. [However, US President Trump's decision](#) to halt US participation in that fund has upset many and called into doubt the potential efficacy of the fund.

## 4. Proposals for Financing Mitigation and Adaptation Efforts



Africa's strength right now is in providing clearly articulated, and well-researched proposals for improved financial support of mitigation and adaptation efforts on the continent. It is not unusual to see other regions and groupings of countries attempt to copy their approach. Africa's success at carving out a special space on the most recent COP agenda for the region's "special needs and special circumstances" led to quick calls from the regional groupings for Latin America, Asia and Arab countries to call for similar treatment ([Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#)). African countries clearly have the research and expertise to support their positions, the big question will be whether developed countries will pay attention and respond accordingly.

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