

Towards a Joint African Position on the Road to Copenhagen

By Benson Owuor Ochieng

The 3rd Special Session of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) on climate change was held in Nairobi on the 29 May 2009. The AMCEN gathering brought together ministers and other government representatives, negotiators, high-level experts and civil society organizations, working towards a shared vision on climate change, to develop a single African voice in Copenhagen and to advance the continent's interests in negotiations for the climate change regime beyond 2012, the expiry date of the Kyoto Protocol. The AMCEN session marked a critical event in the continent's efforts to respond to the challenge of global warming, as it demonstrated Africa's desire to be part of the solution to the climate change challenge as a unit, while taking its diverse economies into account.

The final declaration of the AMCEN meeting – endorsed in the meantime by the African Union Summit held in Libya on 1-3 July, 2009 – underscores the need for a coherent financial mechanism to battle climate change, with equitable governance and simplified access procedures. The African ministers call for the improvement and modification of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) in order to ensure equitable geographical distribution of projects that contribute to sustainable development efforts on the continent. They are also calling for the expansion of eligible categories to benefit from carbon credits and other international incentives to include sustainable land use, agriculture and forest management, in order to promote agricultural productivity in a way that improves resilience and adaptation to climate change.

1. Background

The AMCEN session in Nairobi in May 2009 was a follow-up to the 12th session of AMCEN, held in Johannesburg in June 2008, which had also focused its attention on climate change. Noting that the UN Climate Change Conference held in Bali in December 2007 set the year 2009 as the end date for negotiations on strengthening the climate regime beyond 2012 under the Bali Action Plan, the Johannesburg session underscored the need for Africa to speak with one voice in advancing its interests, and to have a shared vision on adaptation and mitigation, using a sustainable development policies and measures approach, supported and enabled by finance, technology and capacity-building.

In particular, decision 2 of 12th session in Johannesburg had called on AMCEN to work towards:

- (i) developing a common negotiating position on a comprehensive international climate change regime beyond 2012; and
- (ii) preparing a comprehensive framework of climate change programmes.

These recommendations were endorsed by the 12th African Union Summit held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in February 2009. Consequently, a series of activities were initiated under the auspices of the *AMCEN's Work on Climate Change/ Africa's Process on Combating Climate Change*. The 3rd Special Session of AMCEN on climate change was primarily intended to review and consider for adoption the outcomes of the initiative.

In keeping with the tradition of such important occasions, several other events were organized alongside the 3rd Special Session of AMCEN. These included: a meeting of African High Level Experts Panel on Climate Change (25-26 May 2009); a special technical briefing of the African Ministers of Environment and experts on some topical issues germane to Africa's preparation towards the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC and the fifth Conference of the Parties serving as a Meeting of the Parties (COP15/MOP5) to the Kyoto Protocol in Copenhagen in December 2009 (28 May 2009); and a mini-exhibition on climate-related matters affecting Africa (25-29 May 2009). Several side events like workshops and seminars were also organized by civil society (youth, NGOs and scientists, in particular) and international organizations in the eve of and during the official AMCEN meeting, with the aim of feeding into the outcomes of the special session.

2. Objectives

According to official documents, the objective of the session was to provide a forum for African Ministers of the Environment to deliberate and achieve the following:

- a common African negotiating position on a comprehensive international climate change regime beyond 2012;
- a draft concept for a comprehensive framework of African climate change programmes;
- a shared vision for Africa to combat climate change with a view to achieving sustainable development in the continent;
- a common approach to engaging with the international community in developing solutions to tackle the challenges posed by climate change; and
- an agreement on the modalities for submitting the outcomes of the special session to the African Union at its summit to be held in July 2009 and thereafter to the COP15/MOP5 in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Accordingly, the key expected outcomes of the session were:

- a single African voice to advance the continent's interests in negotiations for climate regime beyond 2012;
- a common African position on climate change negotiations;

- strong political support from African heads of state and government for a shared vision on efforts to combat climate change in Africa and Africa's common negotiating position;
- enhanced capacity of the African group of negotiators in selected thematic areas;
- harmonized climate change programmes in the continent to ensure coherence and building of synergies;
- effective engagement with the international community in developing solutions to tackle the challenges posed by climate change; and
- initiation of a consultative and participatory process for the development of Africa's policy on climate change.

3. The Issues

3.1. Single African Voice and Common Position on Climate Change

The AMCEN gathering brought together around 300 African ministers, negotiators, high-level experts and civil society organizations, to work towards a shared vision on climate change and to develop a single African voice in Copenhagen, as well as to advance the continent's interests in negotiations for the climate change regime beyond 2012. Although the resolutions were clear on this score, how it will be achieved in reality remains unclear. Without a doubt, participation of African countries in the climate change negotiations is a matter of great individual and collective interest. Securing positive outcomes from the negotiations requires strength and knowledge of the different interests involved.

Traditionally, climate change negotiations have acquired an arbitrary North-South dichotomy, roughly along the dividing line between the rich developed countries of the North versus the poor countries of the South, represented by the Group of 77 (G-77). But there are many rich southern countries (like Singapore, Israel, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) that easily compare with the richest of the North, just as much as there are many less affluent northern countries (like Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia) that compare well with those of the South. The net result is that the South does not necessarily represent the views of poor countries. Neither does the North necessarily represent the view of the rich countries. Consequently, there are countries within the South who would rather take a less polar stand because of their own fear of being subject to obligations if they were to be pushed out of the G-77 and pulled into the group of developed countries. Similarly, there are countries in the North that compete with the developing countries in seeking for financial assistance and technology transfer.

Similar posturing is a real possibility for African countries participating in the post-Kyoto regime negotiations. Some of the key issues of negotiation do not easily lend themselves for Africa's one-voice one-vision approach. Key among

these are proposals for all countries (both developed and developing) except the least developed ones to undertake quantifiable emission reduction targets in the post-Kyoto dispensation. Others critical issues revolve around differentials in incentives and support measures to be given to special categories like the least developed countries and the small island states. Yet other challenges to the envisaged cohesion arise from the fact that even African countries are not homogenous in their development paths and endowments. Some of them (like Uganda and Ghana) are fast joining the “blessed” lot of oil producing states, while others (like South Africa) have much more developed industrial and mining sectors, in contrast to many of their counterparts whose economies depend on agriculture. These realities, coupled with the lack of a single well-established supra-national continental platform, could dictate the approaches adopted by many African countries, and make nonsense of the aspiration to speak with one voice on a common position.

3.2. The Fallacy of the Adaptation-Mitigation Divide

Although the final documents appropriately emphasized adaptation even as Africa ensures that it captures the benefits and development dividends in mitigation options, contributions from many delegates indicated inadequate appreciation of these critical issues in global climate change negotiations. Many a delegate vaguely and sentimentally expressed the need to maintain a strong firewall between adaptation and mitigation, implying that mitigation is a worry for the North with little, if anything, to do with Africa. This is not quite right. While it is perfectly in order for Africa to aggressively pursue special adaptation funding, even as compensation for harm caused by the effects of unchecked development by North, it is an untenable argument to harp on its poverty and vulnerability as a licence to pursue unsustainable development paths.

It is worth noting that a large proportion of the mitigation discourse revolves around reinforcing sustainable development pathways, such as cleaner production technologies in industry and investments in renewable energy options. Furthermore, mitigation measures built into the flexible mechanisms and such issues as Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD), if properly captured, could provide development dividends and additional resources to support adaptation to climate change. What is needed is to ensure a close evaluation and monitoring of proposed and existing systems to ensure they deliver on their expected promises.

3.3. Capacities of African Negotiators

As noted above, there were many instances where contributors demonstrated a sub-optimal appreciation of the negotiation procedures and issues. It could also not escape the keen observer that the trend to rely on experts and institutions from outside Africa to render technical scientific analyses and models at such forums continued. Many delegations were quite thin – just one or 2 delegates

per country. And this was in Africa. It is a clear indication that the trend, as usual, could easily be carried forward to Copenhagen.

Furthermore, the foregoing could be an indication of a well-known fact that many developing countries too often arrive at the negotiation table unprepared. This situation allows the stronger members to lead and dominate the process of formulating the group positions. The result of this unsatisfactory situation is that the group positions which are subsequently defined are reflections of the interests of the strong, dominant countries. Clearly, Kenya and South Africa had a disproportionate share of the contributions during the discussions.

3.4. Political Goodwill for Climate Change Action in Africa

Climate change is fast moving to the forefront of the socio-economic and political agenda in Africa – if not in reality, then, at least, in rhetoric. As Mr. Achim Steiner, the Executive Director of UNEP said (quoting Mr. Paul Kagame's address to a previous meeting in Rwanda), African environment ministers are now talking to their finance counterparts. Whether that development translates into tangible benefits for sustainable development in terms of additional financing is another matter.

But, clearly, the special session and the processes surrounding it demonstrated increasing political goodwill on the part of African governments to face up to the challenge of climate change. The Nairobi Declaration adopted at the Special Session of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) underscored an agreement on the part of over 30 African ministers to mainstream climate change adaptation measures into national and regional development plans, policies and strategies. The aim is to ensure adequate adaptation to climate change in the areas of water resources, agriculture, health, infrastructure, biodiversity and ecosystems, forest, urban management, tourism, food and energy security and management of coastal and marine resources. The Nairobi Declaration also calls on the international community to support the continent in implementing climate change programmes while at the same time achieving sustainable development, with an emphasis on the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children who bear the brunt of the impact of global warming.

What remains is to translate these commitments into action. Indeed, some African Governments are already doing this. South Africa has long since developed a climate change response strategy. A similar process is underway in Kenya. And the Nigeria Senate just passed the Bill seeking to establish a National Climate Change Commission. Similar efforts have been seen in Uganda recently, as well as in a number of other African countries.

3.5. Stakeholder Consultations and Participation

The AMCEN session brought together a mix of different interest groups, and it had both open and closed sessions. As is becoming the tradition within the

United Nations, CSO representatives were given an opportunity to make statements during the official sessions of the meeting. They also clearly interacted with the delegates and presented memoranda for consideration to the various expert group meetings of the AMCEN. There is a positive trend to widen consultations and participation of CSOs in UNEP's activities, supported by its Major Groups and Stakeholders Unit.

However, this involvement and participation is yet to acquire a guaranteed status in terms of support structures needed to sustain it. While the Global Ministerial Conference on the Environment has made a specific resolution and requirement for CSOs to meet prior to all its meeting and input into its agenda, this is not the case with AMCEN. The consequence is that CSOs consultations and participation in AMCEN is still largely on an ad-hoc basis and dependent on public spiritedness of CSO leaders, institutions and donor-supported programmes. In Nairobi, a pre-conference civil society meeting as well as the interaction with official representatives during the conference were organized by the newly-formed Pan-African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA), made possible through the support of COMESA, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, and a number of other international and national NGOs. The need to institutionalize CSOs involvement into AMCEN's processes and activities cannot be overstated.

4. Conclusion

The 3rd Special Session of AMCEN marked a critical step in the continent's efforts to respond to the challenge of global warming. It demonstrated Africa's desire to be part of the solution to the climate change challenge as a unit, even with its diverse economies. The continent has the lowest per capita greenhouse gas emissions rate, but it is likely to bear the most serious impact of climate change. It is expected that some African countries will suffer reduced harvests of up to 50 per cent from rain-fed agriculture by 2020. During the same timeframe, between 75 million and 250 million people are expected to be exposed to increased water stress due to changes in the continent's environment.

The strong recommendations of the Nairobi Declaration, a major outcome of the special session, should be understood in this light. The Declaration rightly underscores the need for a coherent financial mechanism to battle climate change, with equitable governance and simplified access procedures. No wonder then that in the declaration, the African ministers call for the improvement and modification of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) in order to ensure equitable geographical distribution of projects that contribute to sustainable development efforts on the continent. They are also calling for the expansion of eligible categories to benefit from carbon credits and other international incentives to include sustainable land use, agriculture and forest management, in order to promote agricultural productivity in a way that improves resilience and adaptation to climate change. As we observe above,

however, there is still considerable ground to be covered before the “one voice, one vision” resolve of the AMCEN for the post-Kyoto regime can be achieved. The AMCEN meeting of Africa’s high-level expert panel on climate change and the African group of negotiators, scheduled for 19-21 October, 2009, in Addis Abeba – just a few weeks before the UNFCCC Copenhagen conference – will provide the next opportunity to drive this process forward.

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