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AFRICAN ENFRANCHISEMENT IN GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE NEGOTIATIONS

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SUMMARY

- African states are likely to be severely affected by climate change and have a major stake in the development of a fair, effective and accountable system of climate governance.
- Historically, delegations from Africa have faced challenges to participating effectively in global climate change negotiations as a result of their position in the international system and a lack of the capacities required for meaningful engagement.
- In recent years, African states have nevertheless managed to negotiate more effectively, both individually and as a group. Critical to this has been efforts to gain access to material resources and better information, as well as clearer mandates from African leaders.

BACKGROUND

Climate change presents a major challenge to Africa. Since the start of the 20th century, average temperatures across the continent have risen considerably and are projected to increase by three to four degrees Celsius by the end of this century, with substantial impacts to rainfall patterns, disease vectors and infrastructure (Besada & Sewankambo, 2009). These changes risk compromising hard-won economic gains among emerging African states, costing the continent around four percent of its GDP each year (World Bank, 2010), and multiplying threats in areas prone to persistent conflict (Stern, 2006). African states, therefore, have a significant stake in the development of a fair, effective and accountable system of global governance for ensuring climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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Making African voices heard, however, has been far from easy. Since the start of the global climate change negotiations — initiated with the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 — African delegates have faced major obstacles to participating effectively. They have been hindered by a combination of factors that include their relatively weaker position in the international system and individual domestic capacities. As a result, their impact on outcomes has been limited for the past 20 years. Many of the issues most important to Africa, such as adaptation, access to finance and technology and participation in the Clean Development Mechanism, have been relatively neglected.

More recently, though, priorities have been shifting in favour of addressing climate change in Africa. Since the 12th Conference of the Parties (COP) took place in Nairobi in 2006, African states have taken a proactive approach and become far more ambitious. The size of delegations has increased considerably, for instance, as has the number of submissions made by African states. Instead of passively resisting proposals made by others, they have more consistently tried to actively shape the course of the negotiations. Though this has not always translated into success, African states have had a more significant impact on the content of the negotiations than they did in the past.

What lies behind Africa's much greater level of engagement? This backgrounder investigates that question by looking at the ways in which African states have been able to overcome traditional barriers that have stood in the way of effective participation. It begins by first considering a number of the key obstacles that have held them back.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Multilateral negotiations typically operate on the basis of a “one member, one vote” principle and arrive at decisions on the basis of consensus or simple majority. All members have an equal right to have their voices heard, to table proposals and to bargain over outcomes. Yet, some members are first among equals. Successful participation in global negotiations requires that delegates possess a number of key capacities, which are not shared in equal measure.

Indeed, delegates from developing countries — African states, especially — have typically confronted a number of barriers which disenfranchise them in global governance processes, despite their formal rights to participate (Fisher and Green, 2004; Green and Chambers, 2006). First, they often have fewer material resources. Participating in global negotiations is expensive, and the costs of taking part in meetings have risen as negotiations become more frequent and fast-paced (Muñoz et al., 2009). For many African states the funds needed for travel, accommodations, additional staff and legal advice can be difficult to find given competing priorities and scarce resources.. Further, things like travel and accommodations must often be paid at market exchange rates, which can create an additional financial burden (Wade, 2007). Thus, simply raising the funds needed to send enough delegates to take part in meetings can be problematic. And, without enough delegates, those that do attend are often overwhelmed by the workload needed to ensure that their country's interests are adequately represented. Difficult trade-offs frequently need to be made.

Second, delegates from African states have often not had enough information, training, and expertise to participate in negotiations in a meaningful way. Over time, the climate change negotiations have become increasingly technical and complex (Gupta, 2006), and understanding the issues requires credible information about the likely consequences of alternative courses of action. Such information can be attained through high-quality research and analysis, but this too is costly and may be beyond the reach of many developing countries. Often, African states have sent climatologists who have expertise in their field, yet the small number of delegates that have been sent means that only a few issues can be mastered (Maya and Churie, 1997). Further, as scientists, they have often lacked the negotiating skills to effectively bargain with their better-trained counterparts.

Third, many African negotiators have been constrained by a lack of clear instructions from those at the highest levels of government, as Gray and Gupta (2003) have noted. This is largely because African leaders, preoccupied with reducing poverty and maintaining internal political stability, have regarded the UNFCCC negotiations as a low priority. Many climate change negotiators are also stationed in relatively low-ranking institutions, such as ministries for the environment or meteorology, and have been unable to relay important information and dialogue effectively

with other arms of the government. They have, therefore, frequently had to negotiate without a good understanding of what positions are acceptable to their counterparts, leading them to take a conservative or defensive stance and to forgo novel or bold proposals that might be problematic.

Finally, African states have also had difficulty making their voices heard because they have little economic power. In the climate change negotiations, power is often a function of the size of one's economy, international prestige or levels of emissions (see Weiler, 2012; DeSombre, 2000; Sell, 1996). On nearly all these measures, individual African states have lower levels of power relative to industrialized countries and other larger states in the developing world.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

These internal and external obstacles to effective participation in the global climate change negotiations have hindered African states for the past 20 years. But, more recently, they appear to have been able to overcome a number of these. How have they done so?

One of the most obvious ways that African states have been able to increase their bargaining power is by forming coalitions with their peers. By doing so, they are able to pool their resources to create a more formidable grouping. This has been a common practice in nearly all multilateral negotiations, from trade and finance to biodiversity and desertification, and it has been especially important in the UNFCCC (Williams, 2005). Since the Earth Summit in 1992, African states have participated in coalitions such as the G77, AOSIS, and OPEC, and they have also worked together as a regional group: the African Group of Negotiators (AGN). However, even when countries form bargaining coalitions, this does not automatically translate into greater power. The AGN has operated in the UNFCCC negotiations for more than 20 years now, for example, and it has only begun to play a more important role. Effective participation as a group can be stymied by internal barriers that make it difficult to convert the group's latent power into outcomes. As with individual states, groups need access to quality information, material resources and a clear mandate from political leaders.

On all these measures African states have been doing better. First, over the past five years, African negotiators have been able to considerably improve

their access to material resources, allowing them to increase the size and quality of their delegations. This has been done, first, by convincing their governments that the UNFCCC negotiations are important and should have a greater claim on scarce resources. They have educated their leaders about the threat of climate change (helped by the release of the Stern Review in 2006 and the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report in 2007) and greater opportunities for climate financing and technology transfer, attaining side-payments and improving reputations.

Second, African negotiators have sought resources from a variety of international donors and multilateral institutions. For example, at the request of the chair of the AGN, the African Development Bank (AfDB) started to provide funding in 2008 for African delegates to participate in the UNFCCC negotiations. These funds are allocated by the chair of the AGN to negotiators who, in the chair's view, are the most experienced and can contribute to achieving regional objectives. A final strategy that has been used by African states is to incorporate experts from civil society groups into their official delegations. This allows them to leverage their own abilities with expertise and resources from outside the government at very little cost.

Thirdly, African states have improved their access to information and expertise. The strategies for doing so are similar to those just mentioned: leveraging resources from outside government and negotiating access to information resources. African delegates, for instance, have been able to acquire funding for basic research from organizations like the AfDB and UNDP. The AfDB has hired external consulting firms (such as Vivid Economics) to analyze critical issues and provided funding for a permanent international legal advisor to the AGN.

Resources have also been provided for improving information through the Climate for Development in Africa Initiative (ClimDev-Africa), a joint initiative of the AfDB, the African Union Commission and the United Nations Economic Commission of Africa (UNECA). ClimDev-Africa was instrumental in establishing the African Climate Policy Centre in Addis Ababa, which now conducts policy-relevant research for African states. Finally, multilateral funding from the UNFCCC and other donors for undertaking National Adaptation Programs of Action (NAPAs) in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) has also helped generate information about the impacts of climate

change in African states, many of whom (as LDCs) have been able to attain such assistance.

Finally, African delegates have been able to negotiate with a much clearer mandate from African leaders in recent years. In recognition of the much greater need to act strategically in the lead-up to the Copenhagen negotiations, in May 2009 African Union leaders established the Conference of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change (CAHOSCC). CAHOSCC is comprised of the heads of state of eight countries (Algeria, the Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda) as well as the chairperson of the African Union. Together, they can negotiate on the behalf of all of Africa's leaders in the ministerial-level meetings of the UNFCCC, enormously improving dialogue on climate change issues by establishing a direct line of communication between leaders and negotiators. This has allowed the latter to be much more ambitious, knowing that they have the explicit backing of African heads of state.

CONCLUSIONS

Of course, it is important not to overestimate the impact of recent changes that have taken place. As the UNFCCC negotiations have become more complex and demanding on negotiators, the African states have to run faster just to keep up with developments. Further, within the African coalition, divergent interests, intra-regional tensions and rivalries, and poor coordination among negotiators are still problems. Access to quality information and material resources has increased, on average, but are still unevenly distributed among African states. Thus, while the changes described in this backgrounder undeniably represent a positive development, many challenges to African enfranchisement in global climate change negotiations remain.

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