CLIMATE, CONFLICT AND DEMOGRAPHY IN AFRICA CONFERENCE

14 September 2021

Summary of co-Chairs' Conclusions

On 14 September 2021, Africa Confidential, International Crisis Group and the Royal African Society co-hosted a high-level conference on *Climate, Conflict and Demography in Africa*. An audience of over 1000 people from the UK, North America, Europe and Africa heard 25 speakers from all three continents, including the Vice-President of Nigeria, former Prime Minister of Ethiopia and former President of the African Development Bank, as well as ministers, envoys, ambassadors, economists, academics and representatives from business, civil society and the media.

From a lively debate, both at the conference and in the preparatory expert group meetings that discussed the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and southern Africa, there was much common ground in the analysis, and a number of clear messages emerged for African governments, the international community, and COP 26 itself, set out below.

It was agreed that Africa is one of the continents most drastically affected by climate change, despite having contributed least to the emission of greenhouse gasses. African voices have hitherto been neglected in the debate, and it is crucial that they are heard more clearly if COP 26 is to reach the necessary decisions.

Africa's resources are being put under increasing strain by both demographic and climatic change. The impact varies. Total precipitation has not necessarily diminished, but the distribution and timing has become more concentrated and erratic, leading to more frequent droughts, floods, cyclones with adverse impacts on the natural and human environment. More of Africa's arable land has been brought into cultivation, including marginal lands where risk is higher; forest zones are being cut back and biodiversity reduced by human expansion into previously wild areas.

At the same time, Africa's population is growing. Having doubled between 1900 to1960, it quadrupled again in the following 60 years, to 1.3 billion in 2020, and may double again by 2050. This is reflected in the youthfulness of its population, with a median age of 19, and in rapid urbanisation, with over 40% of Africans living in towns in 2020. Yet levels of poverty remain high at over 35%, recently exacerbated by the impact of the Covid pandemic.

African countries face a number of specific challenges. With many dependent on rain-fed agriculture or fishing, and others already suffering water scarcity, they are more vulnerable to the impact of climate change and will be disproportionately affected by it. Many also lack the physical and administrative infrastructure to manage its impact.

In particular, many Africans suffer 'energy starvation', a severe lack of accessible and affordable power, while many governments still rely on fossil fuel exports for revenue. There were appeals for investment in gas to continue, as a 'transition fuel' enabling Africa to accelerate its development and reduce poverty, without further destruction of woodlands for fuel; but also calls for a dramatic increase in funding for renewable energy.

Climate change does not itself cause conflict. But increased competition for resources can exacerbate political, economic and social factors that gave rise to conflicts. This is already apparent across parts of the Sahel, in the Horn of Africa and in parts of southern Africa, and constitutes a danger to international as well as local communities. Conflict itself both exacerbated the problems and obstructed solutions that could create sustainable livelihoods for the growing population and enable constructive responses to climate change. Without more rapid action, the result is likely to be greater poverty, greater inequality and intensifying local violence and wider conflicts, with the displacement of people and refugee flows that result.

Often, local mechanisms existed for managing access to increasingly scarce resources (land, woods and water) and preventing conflict, but were neglected or broke down under the strain, as illustrated by the worsening tension between farmer and herder communities in several countries. National mechanisms either did not exist or did not work effectively, especially in the absence of accountable political institutions, and national authorities often resisted regional or international involvement.

It was agreed that the speed of change in Africa and the implications for the whole world were being underestimated. More urgent action is needed by local communities, national authorities, and by the international community to reduce the impact of climate change in Africa and assist people to adapt, so that economic growth and poverty reduction can be sustained. A failure to act at all three levels would increase the risk of conflict.

It was also agreed that it was essential to mobilise and articulate African opinion more effectively by developing and advocating a convincing narrative that drew on people's local perspectives and realities.

As co-chairs, we identified **five core messages** to be communicated to African people and governments, the international community and the COP negotiators.

Firstly, **we need to measure and manage environmental and ecological change better**, if we are to help communities deal with the impact of climate and population changes. In particular we must improve prediction and planning: the prediction of climate events so that people can be prepared; and the planning of resilience measures. We therefore urge action to:

- Measure the human impact on biodiversity across the continent through the wider monitoring of national parks, reserves and conservation areas under threat;
- Put in place more effective natural disaster prediction mechanisms on a regional basis to reduce the damage from floods, droughts and locusts; and taking action to improve the resilience of local communities to cope with such threats.
- Work to communicate the importance of climate policies to the African public.

Secondly, **national governmental policies in Africa need to be more joined up to cope with the impacts of climate change**. Climate is not a matter for environment ministers alone, but for the whole of government as it impacts agriculture, trade, industry, finance and security throughout the country, in urban as much as rural areas. It has to be a top political and cross-government priority.

Thirdly, **a failure to act faster on climate change will exacerbate conflict on the continent**. **Nor can we fight climate change if we are fighting each other.** We therefore urge action to:

- Make the security implications a more central part of the climate debate, at COP 27 next year if not at COP 26 in November.
- Ensure African negotiators maintain unity and give priority to concrete steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not just securing additional finance for mitigation measures. Action on emissions is even more urgent than money, as without that, however much money is promised African governments will end up paying the price in social and political disorder.
- Address local resource issues in conflict resolution work, including through national authorities recognising its relevance and working more closely with local community leaders in designing solutions; and encourage international partners to make green investments part of peace agreements to incentivise respect for them.

Fourthly, **Africa needs more support and financing to become more resilient and adapt more effectively to climate change.** The commitment to provide $100 billion a year to developing countries has yet to be met, and even of the money available, Africa is getting disproportionately small share. We therefore urge action to:

- Re-direct a greater share of global climate finance to Africa (currently less than 3%), include additional incentives for conservation of forests and the wild environment, and encourage debt for social equity swops.
- Provide more generous support, especially from the private sector, for a just and fair energy transition in Africa. Investments in the energy sector should be prioritise renewables but not to the exclusion of other transition energy sources.

Fifthly, **a constructive response needs investment in the *right things*: a fair energy transition, education and upskilling, and sustaining the natural environment.** We therefore urge action to:

- Adopt green energy transition policies in African countries that will deliver increased power to communities, attract outside investment, and minimise increases in greenhouse gas emissions.
- Encourage African green technology solutions.
- Develop educational capabilities in African universities to build the human capacity necessary to address the challenges of climate change, both technically and politically.
- Work with local communities for the sustainable development of natural resources, preservation of biodiversity and forest habitats.

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