COP27 climate change conference: urgent action needed for Africa and the world

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Wealthy nations must step up support for Africa and vulnerable countries in addressing past, present and future impacts of climate change

The 2022 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change paints a dark picture of the future of life on earth, characterised by ecosystem collapse, species extinction and climate hazards such as heatwaves and floods. These are all linked to physical and mental health problems, with direct and indirect consequences of increased morbidity and mortality. To avoid these catastrophic health effects across all regions of the globe, there is broad agreement—31 health journals argued together in 2021—that the rise in global temperature must be limited to <1.5°C compared with pre-industrial levels.

While the Paris Agreement of 2015 outlines a global action framework that incorporates providing climate finance to low-income and middle-income countries, this support has yet to materialise. COP27 is the fifth Conference of the Parties (COP) to be organised in Africa since its inception in 1995. Ahead of this meeting, we—as health journal editors from across the continent—call for urgent action to ensure it is the COP that finally delivers climate justice for Africa and vulnerable countries. This is essential for the health of those countries, and for the health of the whole world.

AFRICA HAS SUFFERED DISPROPORTIONATELY, ALTHOUGH IT HAS DONE LITTLE TO CAUSE THE CRISIS

The climate crisis has had an impact on the environmental and social determinants of health across Africa, leading to devastating health effects. Impacts on health can result directly from environmental shocks and indirectly through socially mediated effects. Climate change-related risks in Africa include flooding, drought, heatwaves, reduced food production and reduced labour productivity.

Droughts in sub-Saharan Africa have tripped between 1970–1979 and 2010–2019. In 2018, devastating cyclones impacted 2.2 million people in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In west and central Africa, severe flooding resulted in mortality and forced migration from loss of shelter, cultivated land and livestock. Changes in vector ecology brought about by floods and damage to environmental hygiene has led to increases in diseases across sub-Saharan Africa, with rises in malaria, dengue fever, Lassa fever, Rift Valley fever, Lyme disease, Ebola virus, West Nile virus and other infections. Rising sea levels reduce water quality, leading to waterborne diseases, including diarrheal diseases, a leading cause of mortality in Africa. Extreme weather damages water and food supply, increasing food insecurity and malnutrition, which causes 1.7 million deaths annually in Africa. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, malnutrition has increased by almost 50% since 2012, owing to the central role agriculture plays in African economies. Environmental shocks and their knock-on effects also cause severe harm to mental health. In all, it is estimated that the climate crisis has destroyed a fifth of the gross domestic product of the countries most vulnerable to climate shocks.

The damage to Africa should be of supreme concern to all nations. This is partly for moral reasons. It is highly unjust that the most impacted nations have contributed the least to global cumulative emissions, which are driving the climate crisis and its increasingly severe effects. North America and Europe have contributed 62% of carbon dioxide emissions since the Industrial Revolution, whereas Africa has contributed only 3%.
pay for greater resilience or to reduce the root problem through emissions reduction. A financing facility for loss and damage must now be introduced, providing additional resources beyond those given for mitigation and adaptation. This must go beyond the failures of COP26, where the suggestion of such a facility was downgraded to ‘a dialogue’.

The climate crisis is a product of global inaction, and comes at great cost to disproportionately impacted African countries, and to the whole world. Africa is united with other frontline regions in urging wealthy nations to finally step up, if for no other reason than that the crises in Africa will sooner rather than later spread and engulf all corners of the globe, by which time it may be too late to effectively respond. If so far they have failed to be persuaded by moral arguments, then hopefully their self-interest will now prevail.

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