

## **AFRICA AND THE KYOTO PROTOCOL ON CLIMATE CHANGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Across the continent of Africa, the landscape is changing. The snowy caps of Mount Kilimanjaro, Kenya and Elgon are melting. The shorelines of Lakes Chad, Tanganyika and Victoria are receding while Lake Chad is one twentieth of the size it was 35 years ago. Droughts and floods, out-of-season rain and dry spells are affecting the welfare of millions of people. The suspected root of the problem, climate change, is a reality for the people of Africa. These and many other changes have led to unreliable farming seasons and low water supplies — a dire problem for a continent almost entirely dependent on rainfed agriculture.

Africa has no official mention in the Kyoto Protocol which is a document signed by about 180 countries at Kyoto, Japan, in December 1997. The protocol commits 38 industrialised countries to cut their emissions of greenhouse gasses between 2008 to 2012 to levels that are 5.2 per cent below 1990 levels. The assumption is that Africa's interests are covered as part of the wider group of developing countries. But this is misguided so long as Africa does not command any significant influence in the developing countries' negotiating bloc, often referred to as G77.

Africa's policymakers must accept that, far from being a long-distant threat, climate change is a phenomenon that is already affecting Africa and Africans. It is true that climate change is a creation of affluent western countries — and that Africa has contributed little to the build-up of greenhouse gases in the global atmosphere. As such, the West has a moral responsibility to Africa and other developing countries to make resources available to adapt to the predicted impacts of climate change. But African governments cannot afford simply to fold their arms. One of the biggest challenges African countries now face is building the capacity to generate a proper scientific understanding of these changes, particularly if countries are to take ownership of, and be fully effective, in their responses to these changes.

Some developed countries have shown a strong commitment to tackling the problem of climate change and development in Africa through the implementation of several adaptation programmes. But, while such efforts may contribute to reducing Africa's vulnerability to climate change, the best adaptation is still mitigation. Giving out aid to support Africa's adaptation to climate change does not remove developed countries' moral obligations to cut down greenhouse gas emissions. No amount of aid can shield Africa from the adverse impacts of climate change. While African governments can integrate climate concerns into development policies, the West must also curb greenhouse gas emissions or Africa may not be able to achieve sustainable development.