

The African Union Releases the Continent's First Collective Climate Response Framework

Gita Briel

In February 2022, the African Union endorsed the continent's first collective climate response framework. The AU's Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2032)¹, released at the end of June, comes at a time of growing evidence Africa is one of the most vulnerable regions to the impacts of climate change. This is due to high exposure to climate hazards, reliance on climate-sensitive sectors (such as agriculture) and low adaptive capacity. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report² finds several African countries at risk of experiencing the most widespread loss of lives, biodiversity, food and water security, and economic growth. Despite each region of Africa facing unique climate-related impacts and capacities to respond, the continent shares several core challenges and opportunities in curtailing the fragility of their development pathways. The AU's 10-year strategic planning document is an important first step for mapping out a harmonised, regional response to climate change to improve Africa's adaptive capacity and unlock long-term, transformative, low-emission, climate-resilient development. However, making the strategy a reality across the continent will require a wide range of stakeholders to overcome the resource, capacity and institutional barriers of moving from planning to implementation.

The strategy exists in a broad network of continental and global frameworks. Notably, Agenda 2063, the continent's development blueprint, highlights the importance of climate resilient economies and communities for achieving its development objectives

¹ [AU Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2032](#)

² IPCC. (2021). Sixth Assessment Report — IPCC. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>

and the need for Africa to play its part in global climate action. This vision and commitment form the basis of the AU's climate strategy and underpin one of the nine guiding principles: to promote an African-led and African-owned climate response. The principles are:

1. A people-centered approach
2. Conserving and restoring eco-systems/natural capital
3. Aligning plans and priorities
4. Leave no one behind/a just transition
5. Common but differentiated responsibility
6. Intersectionality
7. Evidence and Practice
8. African-led and African-owned
9. Whole of Economy Approach

These are in keeping with the global movement towards incorporating more social considerations into climate change policies. They also reflect the strategy's particular emphasis on equity at all levels. It considers equity between countries (common but differentiated responsibility), equity between socioeconomic groups (leave no one behind), and equity in terms of how the gains and losses of the green transition are distributed (a people-centred approach). Intersectionality brings in a particularly nuanced understanding of equity and has only emerged on the climate change agenda in recent years. Its incorporation into the climate change discussion has developed from the knowledge that climate change is a threat multiplier that exacerbates existing injustices and vulnerabilities. Individuals who are already socially or economically disempowered experience compounded vulnerability to climate-related risks. For this reason, vulnerability, and adaptation measures used to minimise it, need to be viewed beyond environmental factors. Interlinking social, economic, cultural, and institutional considerations have to be factored in, given that they impact what resources an individual has access to and how capable they are of adapting to changing conditions. This is a particularly relevant addition to the strategy in light of the challenges many African countries face with gender inequality.

The strategic plan identifies four strategic intervention axes for the strategy's objectives of strengthening the continent's adaptive capacity to manage climate-related risks, achieving an equitable, inclusive low-emissions development pathway, and expanding resource mobilisation and African-led technological development. These axes include:

1. **Strengthening Policy and Governance**, recognising the critical role that governance and institutions play in hindering or driving climate action. This axis focuses on enhanced institutional coordination, coordinated regional climate action, anticipatory governance, expanded climate information services, and climate literacy.
2. **Adopting Pathways towards Transformative Climate-Resilient Development** by identifying key sectors where adaptation and mitigation are critical and action areas for building resilience. The chosen sectors are critical given their sensitivity to climate change and their role in driving development; they include agriculture and land use, oceans, food systems, water systems, urban and transport systems, industry and energy.
3. **Enhancing the Means of Implementation towards Climate-Resilient, Low-Emission Development, Including through Climate Finance** and resource mobilisation, technology transfer and enhanced capacity building; and awareness creation and outreach.
4. **Leveraging regional flagship initiatives** by promoting coordinated regional action and effective collaboration between a variety of stakeholders, including, inter alia, the AU, regional economic communities, non-state actors, and national governments. This axis identifies key continent-wide initiatives that are driving change in many of the action areas identified by the strategy.

Axis 4 of the strategy includes a brief discussion of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) as an initiative that has the potential to contribute to Africa's climate response. The strategy lists a few ways that this could be achieved, including exempting environmental goods and technologies from sensitive and exclusion lists, prioritising the liberalisation of trade in environmentally related services, harmonising environmental standards and mainstreaming environmental considerations into negotiations on investment, intellectual property rights, competition policy and e-commerce.

With regards to the exemption of environmental goods and services from sensitive and exclusion lists, recent developments in the start of trading should be considered. Following a meeting of the Council of Trade Ministers (CoMs) of the AfCFTA (25-26 July), it was announced that seven State Parties would begin Facilitated and Guided Trade under the AfCFTA.³ This provides the opportunity to assess the extent to which the modality-compliant tariff offers reflect the environmental agenda relating to sensitive and exclusion lists.

In terms of liberalising environmental services, it should be noted that trade in services negotiations are still underway, and at present, environmental services are not one of the five priority service sectors. However, given that trade in services negotiations are based on a request-offer modality, State Parties can introduce requests for liberalisation of environmental services in their submissions. In this case, members should pay due attention to the classification of environmentally related service sectors. The AfCFTA specifies that, in scheduling specific commitments, member states should use the GATS W/120 list for the classification of services sectors and the latest UN Central Product Classification List (also known as the W/120 list) for the sub-sectors. The W/120 reflects an outdated and limited separation of environmental services, comprising sewage services, refuse disposal services, sanitation and similar services. As AfCFTA members are free to adapt their classification system, they could make it more specific and reflective of the modern environmental services industry. This could be achieved by adding subsectors in their service schedules, such as ‘recycling services’ and ‘eco-design’ services.

An additional option (not discussed in the strategy) for using the AfCFTA to enhance Africa’s climate response is the addition of a Protocol on the Environmental and Sustainable Development. As the AfCFTA currently includes minimal environmental references, such an addition offers the opportunity to incorporate substantive environmental provisions that align with the objectives of the AU strategy. While the AU Assembly highest decision-making body of the AfCFTA, it is the Council of Ministers of the AfCFTA that brings AfCFTA agenda items to the Assembly. The AfCFTA is member-driven; hence it will fall to the State Parties of the AfCFTA to bring the climate agenda.

A climate strategy's development stage is straightforward compared to its implementation. For the vision of the AU’s strategic framework to become a reality, it will need to gather impetus in member states and garner the support of regional organisations and non-state actors. The strategy’s identified

³ Andae, G. 2022. Kenya among 7 countries picked to pilot free continental trade. *Business Daily Africa*, 27 July. <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/economy/kenya-among-7-countries-picked-pilot-free-continental-trade-3894084>

interventions target the continent's key climate-related challenges but will only be possible with specific mechanisms for implementation and resource mobilisation. While the strategy breaks down what should happen to overcome the challenges related to each strategic intervention, it at times stops short of how this might be achieved. Moving from strategy to reality will require a strong focus on robust implementation – this will need to be a dynamic and iterative process that factors in the diverse work of complementary institutions, plans and actions from the international to local level.

The 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27), to be held in Egypt in November 2022, offers the opportunity for Africa to showcase its shared vision and present itself as a region with a clear climate agenda and priorities. This will help the continent achieve its key climate goals, including attracting the climate finance needed for adaptation.
