

West Africa is extremely vulnerable to climate change, in part because its agriculture is essentially rain-fed. Deeply disturbing alterations in the climate are already being noticed, and worse can be expected. If cataclysmic upheavals are to be avoided, the region needs urgently to find ways of conserving precious ecosystems and of supporting peasant farmers and other groups to use their traditional knowledge to adapt to far-reaching changes.

Climate change in West Africa

the risk to food security and biodiversity

OFEDI* and GRAIN

For some years now, there have been signs that the climate is changing significantly in West Africa. Almost every country in the region has experienced a year-by-year reduction in rainfall. In the northern part of the Sahel, rainfall in the 1970s and 1980s was half the rainfall of the 1950s and 1960s. The whole water cycle was affected, with serious consequences for agriculture and food security. There has been an alteration in the pattern of rainy seasons, and the number of natural disasters has been rising. In 2008 torrential rain led to the flooding of vast cultivated areas and the loss of life, especially in Togo and Ghana. The *harmattan*, the dry, cold, north-easterly trade wind that blows along the coast of West Africa has weakened, particularly in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. The increasing disruption of agricultural calendars is wreaking havoc on agricultural planning. Government help still goes no further than vague and incoherent statements, and farmers and extension workers are left to cope as best they can.

Prospects for West Africa are grim. At a world level, climate change could increase yields in temperate regions, perhaps compensating in part for declining yields in tropical regions. But this will be of little help to West Africa, which, along with many other low-income regions, has only a limited capacity

to increase exports and thus to earn the foreign currency needed to boost imports. It will remain highly dependent on domestic food production, and it will be difficult for the region to make up for the decline in local supplies. Unless the peasant class (farmers, fishers, livestock breeders, and so on) can find ways of adapting to the effects of climate change, West Africa's food security and well-being will be severely compromised.

Biodiversity is essential for humankind, for it supplies the raw materials and the genes that make possible the emergence of the new plant varieties and the new animal species on which farmers and others depend. Biodiversity at all levels (genetic, specific and ecosystemic) increases resilience to stresses and to changes in environmental conditions. This is why it is so important to have genetically varied populations and species-rich natural and agricultural ecosystems. Climate change threatens biodiversity and damages the normal functioning of the ecosystem. By the end of this century, huge losses in biodiversity can be expected. These losses and the associated disruption (droughts, fires, pests, the acidification of the oceans, and so on) will severely test the resilience of ecosystems, notably those that are important for food production. Genetic resources that do not adapt to the new constraints will perish.



* OFEDI is the Organisation des Femmes pour l'Environnement et le Développement Intégré / Women's Organisation for the Environment and Integrated Development

Confronting the climate crisis: preparing for Copenhagen and beyond

We, the leaders of various people's movements, Community Based Groups, Academia, NGOs and Civil Society Organisations meeting in Nairobi under the banner of People's Movement on Climate Change (PMCC) to discuss strategies to confront the climate change crisis for Copenhagen and beyond, 27-28 August 2009,

Do hereby affirm that:

Irresponsible and unaccountable consumption concentrated in the Industrialised North and some countries of the South has cost and continues to cost Africa by creating an ecological crisis;

The people of Africa, as well as other developing nations, are creditors of a massive ecological debt;

This ecological debt continues to accrue today through the continued plunder and exploitation of Africa's resources, its people, labour, and economies;

The groups most affected by climate change are indigenous peoples and women, especially poor women in the rural areas, noting that the phenomenon has a connection with resources such as land or water, and related farming and business activities that they are specifically engaged in;

The negative effects of climate change are sharply felt on agriculture and food sovereignty. This is manifested through soil degradation, deforestation, intensified food insecurity, super weeds, desertification, cultural shock, identity loss and forced consumption of unsafe, untraceable food;

Imposed false solutions (GMOs, agro-fuels, synthetic fertilisers, agrochemicals) deepen these effects and perpetuate food aid dependency;

The current unbalanced global trade relations and policies between the industrialised North and the global South contribute to the negative ecological effects of climate change.

Our Calls:

We reject the principle and application of carbon trading, which is a false solution based on inventing a perverse property right to pollute, a property right to air;

We demand that human rights and values be placed at the centre of all global, national and regional solutions to the problem of climate change;

We call on colleagues in the social and economic justice movement globally to rigorously campaign against the undemocratic corporate-led agendas which will dominate the deliberations and processes at COP 15;

We emphasise that ecological, small holder, agro-biodiversity based food production can ensure food and seed sovereignty and address climate change in Africa.

We support the call by African leaders for reparations on climate change and support the initiative of the upcoming African Union ministers of environment meeting and call for African governments to embrace more people-centred alternatives for the African peoples.

We urge African governments to engage civil society groups positively and to collaborate with them to build common national and international responses to the problems of climate change;

Our strategies:

To activate existing networks and resources within our ranks immediately, and to build each other's capacities to engage meaningfully on pro-people solutions to the crisis of climate change;

To launch a call to action for a coordinated global response to climate change, based on solidarity and practical collaboration between affected peoples of the industrialised North and the global South;

To create synergy of platforms, networks and initiatives amongst African communities most affected by climate change and henceforth to use any appropriate political space to articulate their concerns;

To ensure that such political spaces include the annual continental, regional and national social forum spaces, as well as the parallel People's Summit of the people of Southern Africa amongst others;

To facilitate dialogue of women directly affected by climate change to engage with policy-makers at local, national, regional and global levels;

To organise and to mobilise communities for action towards food sovereignty-based food self-sufficiency through research, articulation of issues and capacity building for informed engagement and alternatives;



To mobilise agricultural, pastoral, fisher folks and other affected communities to have a common face and voice in Copenhagen;

To reform unbalanced global trade relations and policies urgently, with specific focus on Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) and their ecological effects on Africa;

To continue our engagement on ecological debt, to call for reparations for the climate crisis and to seek alternative modes of channelling such resources to the people of Africa;

To support African governments' calls for reparations and increased space for negotiations for a progressive deal that does not impoverish Africa further;

To commit ourselves to a coordinated follow-up on any outputs from Copenhagen.

We the undersigned: Africa Peoples Movement on Climate Change (A-PMCC), Nairobi, Kenya, 30 August 2009

C/o IBON Africa, Kirichwa Road, Off Arwings Kodhek, P.O.Box 5252-00100, Nairobi, Kenya, Tel: 254 20 3861590
www.iboninternational.org

What can be done? Adapt sensibly or perish

Climate change is not new to West Africa, and human systems and ecosystems have in the past been resilient enough to adjust. Now, however, climate change is occurring with great intensity, and the socio-economic system, imposed on the region from outside, has accentuated the vulnerability of farmers, livestock rearers and others dependent on the climate and natural resources. If these vulnerable groups do not receive outside aid to help them to adapt, the socio-economic and cultural systems that underlie rural and even urban communities in West Africa could be eroded or completely destroyed. Initiatives are needed to help small farmers and other vulnerable groups to protect and promote agricultural production. Simple, inexpensive actions could be taken, such as setting up an effective system of meteorological alerts, improving agricultural extension services so as to increase yields, and establishing local, independent networks of information exchange between communities across the region.

Almost everywhere in West Africa, farmers have the ability, through careful observation, to predict the climate without the help of a weather station. In several countries in the region – Benin, Mali, Togo and Burkina Faso, for example, – farmers are able to pick up changes in the behaviour of plants and animals (changes in colour, shape, bearing, period of maturation, migration, reproduction, nesting places, and so on) that tell them whether the rainy season will be early, or short, or whether a drought will be severe or mild. Systems could be set up through which families, collectives and communities could share this information. They could then prepare by selecting short-cycle varieties, for example, or planting on low-lying land if a drought is predicted.

There are also pitfalls associated with climate change. Farming families must be wary of easy so-called “solutions” that come from outside. In particular, they must be suspicious of “improved” seeds of non-controlled origin that are allegedly “resistant” to drought, pests and other climatic stresses because they have been genetically modified. These “climate” or “survival” seeds are distributed, initially at a low cost, to peasant communities by companies or organisations with their own vested interests. Despite the environmentally friendly rhetoric, these crops are highly damaging: the way they are cultivated and their impact on the ecosystem means that they will have a very serious and possibly irreversible impact on biodiversity, which is already under enough threat.

Conclusion

Both technical and policy measures are urgently needed to combat climate change. At a technical level, priority must given to measures that promote the adaptation of cultural practices to the new climate, the prioritisation of traditional knowledge developed locally in each region, a reliable water supply, and the use of direct traditional sowing wherever possible. It is important, too, to be aware that traditional knowledge can have an exciting new role in helping to develop new techniques, such as rainwater collection in areas of low rainfall. With regard to policy measures, it is necessary to mainstream adaptation to climate change, making sure it is systematically integrated into new projects focusing on biological diversity and into local, national and regional agricultural policies. Farmers, scientists and policy makers, moreover, must work together in a climate of mutual trust to develop the sustainable use of the region's biological resources. 

