

African Perspectives on Multilateral Climate Governance: Gaps in Effectiveness, Coordination, and Accountability

Setting the Context

In the early 1980s and 1990s, concerns over the potential impacts of climate change from human activities rose to prominence on the global stage. The international community responded with a series of initiatives, shaped in no small part by African leadership.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), led respectively by Dr. Mostafa Kamal Tolba of Egypt and Professor G.O.P. Obasi of Nigeria, played a pivotal role in catalyzing global cooperation. Together, they promoted the scientific assessment of climate change and laid the groundwork for a treaty to address it.

The momentum grew after the 1988 Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere, which called upon UNEP and WMO to establish the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This body was tasked with providing rigorous, coordinated assessments of climate science, impacts, and response strategies.

By 1989, UNEP's Governing Council had formally called for negotiations toward a climate treaty. Later that year, the UN General Assembly endorsed this effort, setting the stage for the international process that would culminate in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Birth of the Climate Convention

The IPCC's First Assessment Report in 1990 — to which over 1,000 scientists and experts from more than 70 countries contributed — provided the essential scientific and socio-economic foundation for negotiations. Following five negotiation sessions, the UNFCCC was opened for signature at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The Convention entered into force on 21 March 1994, and its first Conference of the Parties (COP1) took place in Berlin in 1995.

At the outset, climate change was often viewed narrowly as a meteorological or environmental matter. In Africa, many negotiators came from meteorological services or diplomatic missions, with limited recognition of the economic and developmental dimensions of climate change. Over time, however, the cross-cutting nature of climate change became clear, implicating energy, transport, finance, and broader development policy. Negotiation teams diversified to reflect this reality.

Negotiating Dynamics

The negotiations were intense, shaped by distinct groupings of countries:

- **Annex I Countries** (developed countries, including the EU, USA, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) accepted primary responsibility for historical emissions of greenhouse gases.
- **Economies in Transition** (Eastern European states) had distinct interests linked to restructuring their economies.
- **Non-Annex I Countries** (developing countries, including the Group of 77 and China) emphasized their minimal historical contribution to emissions, alongside their vulnerabilities.
- Within the G77, subgroups emerged: Africa, Asia, GRULAC (Latin America and the Caribbean), and AOSIS (small island states).

Decision-making under the UNFCCC has remained challenging due to the absence of agreement on Rule 42 of the Rules of Procedure (voting). As a result, decisions are made by consensus — a system that complicates progress, as even a small number of dissenting voices can delay outcomes.

The African Perspective and Institutional Evolution

At the start of negotiations in 1991, Africa did not act as a unified bloc. Coordination was weak, and African positions were often filtered through the broader G77 and China. That changed in 1995, when COP1 in Berlin adopted the “Berlin Mandate” to negotiate a protocol. Around the same time, the IPCC’s First Assessment Report highlighted Africa’s unique vulnerability: the continent had contributed least to climate change but would suffer most from its impacts.

Responding to these realities, African Heads of State, meeting in Addis Ababa, directed that Africa should “speak with one voice” in negotiations. This gave rise to the **African Group of Negotiators (AGN)**, supported by the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) and guided by the Committee of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change (CAHOSCC).

Since then, AMCEN has convened regularly to provide guidance to African negotiators, while CAHOSCC has elevated climate change to the highest political levels. The AGN, comprising negotiators from all 54 African countries, now operates under a rotating chairmanship and a structure of lead coordinators covering thematic areas such as adaptation, mitigation, finance, technology transfer, capacity building, and agriculture. At COP28 in Dubai, the AGN adopted a formal Governance Document to strengthen its operations going forward.

Progress and Strengths of the AGN

The AGN has emerged as a credible and influential actor in the UNFCCC process. Its key strengths include:

- **Unity of voice:** Backed by AU directives, Africa now negotiates with far greater cohesion than in the past.
 - **Regular coordination:** The AGN meets inter-sessionally and daily during COPs, ensuring timely exchange of information and alignment on strategy.
 - **Structured leadership:** Lead Coordinators for thematic areas ensure technical depth and continuity of positions.
 - **Political backing:** With reporting lines through AMCEN to CAHOSCC and the AU, the AGN's positions carry the weight of continental leadership.
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Gaps in Effectiveness

Despite this progress, significant challenges remain:

1. **National follow-through:** Reports from negotiations are often not disseminated across relevant ministries and agencies. This weakens the link between Africa's strong international positions and domestic implementation.
 2. **Capacity and continuity:** Many new negotiators lack sufficient training. Without systematic mentoring, institutional memory is lost, weakening Africa's negotiating hand.
 3. **Technical expertise:** While unity is a strength, Africa still faces gaps in specialized areas such as carbon markets, climate finance architecture, and emerging technologies. Stronger collaboration with African research institutions and think tanks could help close this gap.
 4. **Accountability:** While the AGN reports upwards to AMCEN and Heads of State, feedback mechanisms are weak. Political directives should be informed by technical realities, and negotiators should be accountable for translating continental positions into tangible outcomes.
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Looking Ahead

Africa has made great strides in building a unified, respected presence in global climate governance. But progress is not enough. To safeguard Africa's future, we must:

- Deepen the integration of international positions into national policies and development strategies.
- Invest in sustained training and knowledge management for negotiators.
- Strengthen partnerships with African research and technical institutions.
- Establish clearer accountability mechanisms between negotiators, ministers, and Heads of State.

Finally, there is the question of whether the African Union itself should become a Party to the UNFCCC. Article 23 of the Convention allows regional organizations to do so under certain conditions, provided responsibilities are clearly divided with member states. This debate deserves careful consideration, as it could further strengthen Africa's collective influence in climate negotiations.

Conclusion

Africa has contributed least to climate change, yet faces its harshest consequences. The continent has, however, shown leadership, unity, and resilience in global climate governance. The challenge before us now is not only to sustain that unity, but to deepen our effectiveness, close the gaps in capacity and accountability, and ensure that Africa's voice on the international stage translates into real action at home.

In honoring the legacy of visionaries like Professor Obasi and Dr. Tolba, let us continue to push for a climate governance system that is fair, inclusive, and effective — one that delivers for Africa, and for the world.