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Op-ed

Climate change adaptation and resilience: An analysis of some Global and National Measures By Nolubabalo Lulu Magam

Climate change can no longer be ignored or reduced to just another day of bad weather. In fact, it has become a “climate crisis”, by far the most serious threat facing the world. Rising sea levels, global warming, widespread flooding, droughts, and the spread of tropical diseases, continue to devastate many communities around the world, and South Africa is no exception.

In the early days of political action on climate change, mitigation was the focus, whereas adaptation was seen as, at best, a poor relation to cutting greenhouse-gas emissions – at worst, as a distraction. But the world saw a steep rise in emissions post the 2008 financial crisis, and this brought adaptation to the fore, as an inevitable point of international concern.

Of course, as the two pivotal responses to climate change, mitigation and adaptation are simply two sides of the same coin. While the aim of mitigation is to deal with the *causes* of climate change, by preventing the environment, the biosphere, from drastically changing, the goal of adaptation is to address the *impacts* of climate change, by providing people with the tools they need to live with the ever-changing environment, due to human activity.

There is no doubt that the climate emergency poses an extinctive threat to the world as we know it. It is no longer just a case of stopping it in its tracks; adaptation to climate change has become a matter of survival. As a global problem, adaptation has become morally, economically and environmentally obligatory.

The critical issue, however, is that despite the West’s culpability for the current climate crisis through contributing the most in global emissions of greenhouse gases, Sub-Saharan Africa – which has a predominance of the world’s poor – continues to suffer from the most severe consequences of climate change.

It is also important to highlight that in high-income countries, adaptation has formed a critical part of all policy measures and has been described as yielding positive results. In low-income countries, however, there is often a lack of resources to build lifesaving “green” infrastructure. This disparity both reflects and exacerbates the unjust way climate change is unfolding. The United Nations (UN) estimates that developing countries currently need \$70 billion annually to adapt to climate change and could need as much as \$300 billion by 2030.

As climate change starts to impact wealthier nations as well as developing countries, COP26 takes centre stage as the most comprehensive measure towards adaptation. The recent UN Climate Conference (COP26), like previous such gatherings, sought to find resolutions on the reduction of CO2 emissions to stop global temperatures from rising 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and to limit and adapt to the harms of global warming.

Several pledges were made during the conference: provision of adaptation finance by 2025, \$356 million was raised for the Adaptation Fund and \$413 million for the Least Developed Countries Fund. Parties also agreed to set up a two-year work programme to operationalise and implement the Paris Agreement's "global goal on adaptation", the aim of which is to drive collective action. This is important, as it has been unclear how the global goal is to be implemented and progress against it, assessed.

In South Africa, the impacts of the climate catastrophe are rapidly increasing. Extreme weather events like the drought in the Western Cape, floods in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, and wildfires, are some of the overt effects of this crisis.

Some studies have documented the deleterious effects of a warming temperature in South Africa to further include a threat to food security. The world's population is projected to grow to about 9.7 billion, however, agricultural yields are said to likely decrease by 30%, which will effectively leave about five million of the world's people hungry and in need of water. The same is true for South Africa – it is reported that crop yields are likely to decline in several provinces, with a consequent loss of livestock.

The risks that weather and climate pose to human life are in most cases specific to the particular circumstances of time and place. They are also a complex function of an array of interwoven factors and on-the-ground realities. Accordingly, several identifiable important gaps in adaptation practices as recommended by global policy include a failure to prioritise local or indigenous knowledge in the building of such mitigation and adaptation measures.

It would be wise to allow local communities to play a central role in these measures. By giving priority to the context, concerns, and climate-specific challenges of a local population, we can easily evaluate the effectiveness of such measures based on the outcomes and finetune policies and strategies as required.

The solution then within the South African context is that, rather than adopting a procrustean approach, adaptation and resilience strategies must be province specific. After all, provincial government, through the devolution of power, enjoy a considerable amount of autonomy, which allows them to promulgate policies that target their unique development and improvement of livelihoods.

Interestingly, among developing and emerging economies, South Africa has one of the most elaborate and consultative climate governance systems in place, and yet its adaptation policies are fraught with endless headaches. Some are a direct consequence of an overstretched, depleted, and eroded human and technical capacity. Others are a consequence of institutional or structural variables such as historical tensions, confusion about mandates, responsibilities and ownership of implementation agendas, multiple ministries dealing with issues without sufficient coordination, and cumbersome and ineffective communication practices.

These challenges have been exacerbated by a wider political context of several years of political crisis and state capture, which resulted in uncertainty over the direction of climate change and energy policy, distracted leadership, and low political will to act further. So, while the country has led the way globally in promulgating impressive and elaborate green policies, it has failed at implementation and in assuming a hegemonic leadership role.

But it's time to shape up. An Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report reiterates what we already experience, which is that things are getting worse. With temperatures currently 1.1-1.3°C

above pre-industrial levels, some natural systems are approaching, or surpassing, their capacity to adapt.

It has become necessary for climate adaptation policies and measures to be more proactive and be guided by local and context specific challenges posed and, in some cases, exacerbated by the climate crisis. The bone of contention is not an absence of policies – there is a veritable smorgasbord of existing programmes and policies – but rather, how to further explicitly frame them to significantly contribute to the success of climate change adaptation.

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