

POLICY BRIEF

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Accelerating Climate Action in Africa: Insights from the 2022 Voluntary National Reviews

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Highlights

African countries are progressing on SDG 13 (climate action) and strengthening their implementation, despite the insufficient delivery of climate finance. Recognising these countries' vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, accelerated efforts are necessary to build an enabling environment — political, legal, technical, financial, and programmatic — aligned with each country's needs and priorities.

Recommendations:

- Enhance monitoring, reporting, and evaluation for SDG 13 and associated indicators across all levels and sectoral scales.
- Take urgent action to increase financial flows and improve resource mobilisation.
- Accelerate the local adoption of disaster risk reduction strategies and climate action plans.
- Strengthen policy and legal frameworks and increase efforts to improve institutional capacity.

The Urgency of Climate Action in Africa

Global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are set to increase by almost 14% this decade (United Nations 2022a). By September 2022, 53 out of 54 countries in Africa had submitted nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement on climate change. Twenty-six countries had validated national disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies or were doing so, and six countries had developed national adaptation plans. Yet progress on climate action (SDG 13) remains slow and has regressed since 2000 (UNECA 2022).

Countries in all regions continued to report on SDG 13 progress despite the 2022 voluntary national review (VNR) focusing on other goals — SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 14 (life below water), SDG 15 (life on land) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). This highlights that climate change cuts across different sectors and SDGs. Some countries have linked SDG 13 efforts to their NDCs and examined the impacts on issues related to livelihoods, agriculture, health, education, and finance. Countries have also articulated links between adaptation, the SDGs, and other global frameworks, including the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. This recognises the potential for synergistic action and coordination between different levels of government. The mid-term review of the Sendai Framework indicates that DRR

progress in Sub-Saharan Africa has slowed due to challenges including COVID-19, the Ebola crisis, frequent natural disasters, high economic costs and low investment (UNDRR 2023) — and that it is unlikely the region will achieve its goals and outcomes by 2030. The report recommends enhancing understanding of tools and systemic risks, strengthening inclusion, implementing multi-stakeholder partnerships and proper fund management for DRR activities, and establishing adequate support structures for local implementation.

Africa is one of the lowest contributors to global GHG emissions, yet its ecosystems and human systems have experienced climate change impacts, including biodiversity loss, water shortages, and reduced food production and economic growth (IPCC 2022). Investment in national adaptation plans (NAPs) is crucial for the continent's resilience and adaptation efforts (ANDCH 2022), but it has received billions of US dollars less than the estimated cost, with most of the financing for mitigation (IPCC 2022). This highlights the global debate on climate justice and responsibility, which is of prime concern for the developing world, including Africa. Nevertheless, Africa has a vital role in restoring Earth and realising a climate-resilient future, with its high share of arable land, large restorative potential, rich biodiversity, and dynamic young population (United Nations 2022b). Africa requires a just transition pathway for energy, supported by innovative climate financing instruments (e.g., concessions and taxes; risk and debt management; green, blue, and sovereign bonds); increased private investment; and nature-based mitigation and adaptation solutions (ANDCH 2022). Green and blue bonds, and nature-based solutions have potential for DRR financing in Africa (UNDRR 2023), and can bridge the gap left by insufficient public funds (IPCC 2022).

This policy brief offers recommendations for national policymakers in Africa to strengthen climate strategies, based on analysis of the 21 VNRs presented by African countries in 2022 (see Notes). It provides insights to better synergise SDG 13 efforts (e.g., with NDCs), considering the state of data reporting and the critical role of finance, capacity-building, and partnerships for climate action.

Climate Action in the 2022 VNRs

In addition to extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, coastal corrosion, and forest fires, climate change threatens agricultural and water resources, as evident in increased poverty and hunger levels in Lesotho, Malawi, and Sao Tome and Principe, among others.

Data gaps are a key challenge for climate action implementation and monitoring. Until 2019, on average,

countries only reported on half of the SDG 13 indicators (Kitzmueller et al. 2021). In almost all cases, detailed descriptions of SDG 13 targets, indicators, or data gaps are absent from main VNR reports (see Notes). Despite guidelines issued by UN DESA (2022) on VNR preparation and reporting, including on the importance of up-to-date and high-quality disaggregated data, diverse reporting formats and cherry-picked content are evident among the 2022 reports of African countries. Most did not report their GHG emissions and the sectors responsible. Only a few, such as Eritrea, Malawi, and Somalia, reported the number of deaths or people affected by disasters. Such data gaps may result from data either being unavailable or not collected due to insufficient financial, institutional, and/or statistical capacity. Data gaps are also reflected in the Africa UN Data for Development platform — for example, there is no data on SDG indicators 13.2.1, 13.3.1, 13.A.1, and 13.B.1 (UNECA 2022).

While mitigation dominates SDG 13 reporting, discussion, and finance flows worldwide, several countries mentioned adaptation as their primary goal (Eswatini, Ghana, and Somalia). Efforts to synergise action on SDG 13 and the Paris Agreement are reported, such as mitigation and adaptation strategies contributing to both frameworks (Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau). Yet not all countries provided information on climate strategies relevant to achieving their NDCs and net zero targets. According to ANDCH (2022), more than 80% of African countries had revised or updated their NDCs, but the formulation of Long-term Low Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDS) remained slow — only a few countries had submitted strategies (Benin and South Africa) or were developing them (Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, the Gambia). Most countries have adopted and implemented national DRR strategies aligned with the Sendai Framework and several have made similar efforts at sub-national levels are evident in several cases (the Gambia and Malawi).

Climate financing in Africa remains inadequate, relying mostly on international aid and loans from developed countries. Some countries are calculating the costs of their emissions reduction targets and developing financing strategies to support NDC implementation, including enhancing access to innovative finance such as green bonds (Liberia). The private sector contribution is minimal due to the absence of business models that can generate adequate returns (ANDCH 2022). It is estimated that Africa will require USD 277 billion annually to realise its NDCs. However, in 2020, it received only approximately 11% of the requirement (ANDCH 2022). The diversion of domestic funds towards COVID-19 recovery and other priorities has also impacted climate change progress in countries such as Eswatini, Ethiopia, and Gabon. The VNRs show that Africa faces technical and statistical barriers

to implementing climate programmes and environmental assessments at the national and local levels (Gabon, Malawi, and Sudan) owing to limited financial and institutional capacity.

Recommendations

1. Enhance monitoring, reporting, and evaluation for SDG 13 and associated indicators across levels and scales.

Emission measurement across sectors is crucial for SDG 13. Yet several countries (Djibouti, Sao Tome and Principe, and Sudan) lack a system to monitor or record data on sectoral emissions. Policymakers must identify and measure emissions across key contributing sectors, e.g., energy, transport, and waste. Without accurate projections and estimates, a national GHG inventory may not be possible. This would also impact NDCs and net zero targets and monitoring of SDG 13.2.2 (see Notes). A robust system for monitoring data across all levels and sectors allows countries like Kenya and South Africa to present well-defined climate commitments in their VNRs.

The benefits of quality reporting include better designed policies, enhanced peer learning, and an improved data ecosystem. Policymakers must focus on providing disaggregated data, updating cumulative figures at least annually, following the SDG reporting protocol (e.g., Malawi has produced DRR statistics regularly since 2016), and developing databases for natural disaster losses (Botswana, Lesotho, and Malawi). Countries should avoid presenting incomplete data, inadequate sample sizes, or unclear information. For instance, Eswatini and Malawi reported on indicator 13.1.1 (see Notes) with the actual number and baseline data. When indicators are zero — such as when no disasters occur — they should be reported accordingly.

A first-hand data gap analysis of existing indicators and mapping of data sources at the national level can help countries to focus on critical gaps and devise holistic, well-targeted policies. Reliable data sources and comprehensive sector analysis to identify mitigation options and adaptation measures can establish an enabling environment for NDC implementation. This must be delegated to the sub-national and local levels. Non-state stakeholders should be engaged to fill data gaps and improve data coverage. For example, Côte d'Ivoire is applying lessons from its Gbêkê pilot project across the country through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

2. Take urgent action to increase financial flows and improve resource mobilisation.

African countries have utilised innovative finance instruments, such as green bonds (Egypt and South Africa) and blue bonds

(Cabo Verde and Seychelles) (ANDCH 2022). Policymakers must develop a holistic policy framework and investment environment to improve the fiscal space for investing in climate resilience and help leverage private sector finance. Successful efforts include establishing a financial framework for climate action (Gabon, Liberia, and Senegal), enacting climate-relevant legislation (Sao Tome and Principe), and developing national climate change plans (Lesotho and Somalia). They require developing SDG and NDC investment plans, climate-screening national budgets, and identifying concrete external funding proposals. Seeking technical support from multilateral institutions for financial review can effectively streamline national climate finance.

Another priority is initiating a national climate fund to which the government contributes a fixed share and further contributions from taxes on energy-intensive industries or fossil fuel-powered vehicles. As tourism is a key sector in many African countries, introducing a tourism fee (e.g., Khartoum, Sudan, charges USD 60 for each foreign tourist) and customising it (e.g., Tanzania has a reduced fee for citizens of the East African Community) may be effective in generating revenue. National governments should demarcate funding sources to support climate action by identifying co-benefits of progress on SDG 13 and NDCs. For example, some countries provide commercial (South Africa) or management (Ethiopia, Mali, and Rwanda) concessional tourism contracts for wildlife conservation efforts, contributing to the socio-economic development of local communities (CFA 2020).

3. Accelerate the local adoption of disaster risk reduction strategies and climate action plans.

Local DRR strategies and climate action must be responsive to local needs and aligned with the national climate plan and the Sendai Framework. The 2013 Disaster Risk Management Policy and Strategy of Ethiopia offers a holistic approach to managing disaster risks at national and local scales while advancing sustainable development. It has been mainstreamed across sectoral plans, aligned with the Sendai Framework, and addresses several SDGs directly (e.g., SDGs 1, 13, 14, and 15) and indirectly (e.g., SDGs 7, 8, 9, and 12).

A critical follow-up step to fast-track adoption is local or subnational reporting as part of the VNR process. This can inform SDG progress and encourage local governments to align their development plans with NDC implementation. Policymakers should seek support from UN agencies to apply DRR framework, and design and implement climate action programmes at sub-national and local levels. UNDRR (n.d.) supports several countries in this way, including Côte d'Ivoire and Sao Tome and Principe.

4. Strengthen policy and legal frameworks and increase efforts to improve institutional capacity.

Policymakers should establish frameworks to foster capacity building, transfer climate technologies, and mobilise domestic and private funds. Ghana, for instance, has improved tax compliance following its 2020 Revenue Administration Act, which enhanced domestic revenue mobilisation. When developing a climate change strategy, policymakers must include an assessment of capacity needs for SDG and NDC implementation to design appropriate training packages.

Capacity building and training will continue to be key areas. In 2021 Malawi updated its strategy on climate change learning to adopt a systematic approach across levels and earmarked budgets for capacity building until 2030. To raise awareness and implement long-term climate strategies, policymakers should use climate analysis tools and make information portals accessible to all stakeholders. Training centres must be available beyond the capital and major cities to improve rural capacity. Lesotho is implementing a Smallholder Agriculture Development Project to support rural youth and women, increasing access to climate-smart technologies. Zimbabwe offers onsite training for local farmers at the intersection of agriculture and information and communications technology.

Notes

SDG 13 indicator 13.1.1 requires reporting on the number of deaths, missing persons, and directly affected persons attributed to disasters per 100,000 population. Indicator 13.2.2 requires reporting on the total amount of GHG emissions per year.

VNRs were presented by 44 countries at the 2022 UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HPLF), including 21 African countries. This brief analysed all of these 21 VNRs. Eight VNRs could not be analysed in full as they were not available on the HLPF registry (e.g., Gambia and Tuvalu) or in English (e.g., the VNRs of Gabon and Mali were submitted in French). For these countries, the analysis referred to VNR key messages in English.

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