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African States, Climate Change and the COP21

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African States, Climate Change and the COP21

Interview with Dr. Wilfran Moufouma-Okia

David Ambrosetti

Translation : Chloé Darmon

- 1 Dr. Wilfran Moufouma-Okia is a climate science expert at the African Climate Policy Centre (ACPC), an integral part of the Climate for Development in Africa (ClimDev-Africa) programme – which is a joint initiative of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the African Union Commission (AUC), and the African Development Bank (AfDB). ClimDev-Africa aims at addressing the need for greatly improved climate information for Africa and strengthening the use of such information for decision making, by improving analytical capacity, knowledge management and dissemination activities. It has been mandated at regional meetings of African Heads of State and Government, as well as by Africa's Ministers of Finance, Ministers of Planning and Ministers of Environment. The ACPC serves Regional Economic Communities, governments and communities across Africa and takes guidance from a number of ongoing processes and activities including the African Union Conference of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change (CAHOSCC) and climate change negotiators, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and related instruments, African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN), African Development Forum, Global Climate Observation System (GCOS), High level Advisory Group on Climate Change financing (AGF), and African Ministerial Conference on Water (AMCOW).
- 2 Wilfran Moufouma-Okia completed his PhD at the Grenoble Institute of Technology (*Laboratoire d'étude des Transferts en Hydrologie et Environnement*) and then became a senior regional climate modelling scientist at the U.K. Met Office Hadley Centre in Exeter. From the Ethiopian capital city of Addis Ababa, he actively contributed to the preparation of the COP21 with African governments, led number of debates which took place within the Africa Pavilion, and worked towards raising awareness of the African authorities invited in Paris about the issues at stake during this meeting.

- 3 This interview was conducted on the 12th of March 2016 in Addis Ababa, as Wilfran Moufouma-Okia is about to leave the ACPC to join the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as the director of sciences of IPCC Working Group I (within the Technical Support Unit based in Saclay) in charge of the analysis of the causes of climate change¹. He reviews the lessons learned from the most important meeting on climate since Kyoto (1992) concerning the current role of the African continent in diplomatic and scientific discussions related to climate challenges.

What were the most important scientific issues at stake for African governments during the COP21?

The main issue is the threshold at which current global warming, which is undoubtedly partly caused by human activity, puts humans and societies at risk in different parts of the globe. Limiting warming to no more than two degrees has become the de facto target for global climate policy. This is in broad alignment with Article 2 of the objectives of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 1992), i.e. 'stabilization of greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system'. But there are serious questions about whether policymakers can keep temperature rise below the two-degree limit, and what happens if they don't, particularly for Africa?

The need to limit global surface temperature rise below two degree above pre-industrial levels was first brought in by the European council of environment minister in 1996 with little scientific basis. But, it offered a simple focal point for discussions. Since then, three political challenges have emerged. First, the goal is effectively unachievable; owing to continued failures to mitigate emissions globally. Second, the 2 °C goal is impractical since it is only related probabilistically to emissions and policies, so it does not tell particular governments and people what to do. Third, more than half of the world's nations represented under the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change are in favor of a tougher 1.5° C target. These include the least developed and most vulnerable countries, such as the small island states that are already losing farmland to rising sea levels. One of the major talking points during the negotiations at COP21 in Paris has been whether the international community should aim to limit global temperature rise to the internationally accepted 2° C above pre-industrial levels, or a more stringent target of 1.5° C.

The French Presidency of the COP21 first wanted States Parties to be able to assess whether they would collectively exceed the(se) dangerous threshold(s) by 2030. Each government was thus requested to voluntarily present how it would contribute to limit global warming by evaluating its amount of greenhouse gas emission in the coming fifteen years. Given the voluntary nature of these contributions (amounting a total of 55 gigatons of greenhouse gas emissions), participants acknowledged that the expected warming would considerably exceed 2 °C (which roughly corresponds to 40 gigatons of greenhouse gas emissions). In this respect, the emissions from African States are marginal, compared to those from big industrialized polluters.

In light with the above mentioned, a key science-policy challenge is the ability to assess the regional scale impact of a 1.5 °C global warming, particularly in countries 'of the South'. Consequently, the COP21 invited the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to provide a detailed and science-based report in 2018 on the impacts of global

warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathway. We will see whether this request will be echoed positively during the IPCC 43rd session scheduled to take place in Nairobi from the 11th to the 13th of April 2016². In order to conduct such a spatially detailed assessment, it is however necessary to improve our understanding of the potential effects of climate warming, which cannot all be documented thoroughly. Each government around the globe will thus independently suggest its priority for a detailed report to be conducted by the IPCC. For instance, the effect of warming on coastal cities or melting of ice could be among subjects to be discussed. I will be directly involved in these discussions as part of my new position within the IPCC Working Group I.

When it comes to the African continent, the conclusion is straightforward: the available monitoring tools for basic research generally remain insufficient to meet the above-mentioned need for evaluation. For many, the reports of the IPCC are the only available source of information that can be used in debates. During discussions while preparing for the COP21, I have myself taught representatives of African governments that the scientific data currently employed did not take African specificities into account in any way, and that the role of the African continent in terms of greenhouse gases emission as well as climate change-related consequences was not clearly established.

Yet, these are the evidences all the following debates will be based on when we will have to make negotiated decisions to collectively deal with the challenges related to climate change and global warming, or when we will elaborate detailed financial demands on the major polluters of our Planet...

Why does Africa lack visibility?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the leading international body for the assessment of climate change. It was established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1988 to provide the world with a clear scientific view on the current state of knowledge in climate change and its potential environmental and socio-economic impacts. In the same year, the UN General Assembly endorsed the action by WMO and UNEP in jointly establishing the IPCC.

The IPCC reviews and assesses the most recent scientific, technical and socio-economic information produced worldwide relevant to the understanding of climate change. It does not conduct any research nor does it monitor climate related data or parameters. As an intergovernmental body, membership of the IPCC is open to all member countries of the United Nations (UN) and WMO. Currently 195 countries are members of the IPCC. Governments participate in the review process and the plenary Sessions, where main decisions about the IPCC work programme are taken and reports are accepted, adopted and approved. However, the IPCC recent review cycles have suffered from limited contribution of African scientists and research institutions.

But despite the fact that scientific capacities need to be reinforced, African political authorities did submit voluntary contributions.

Yes, the majority of African States submitted their contribution.

But each government followed its own method, including or excluding key economic sectors depending on the priorities it has set in order to promote the country's economic development. These voluntary contributions thus do not result from the use

of a predetermined standardized methodology, or from a centralized auditing procedure systematically applied to each State Party.

Did African States Parties have the necessary knowledge to provide such data?

They benefited from outside support for this purpose, but once again, in an isolated fashion, depending on the existing relationships with given industrialized country or a given international development partner.

It always brings us back to the issue of the existence of scientific infrastructures specialized in this field in Africa. For now, there is real scope for improvement. The available scientific capacities are not sufficient for this. But, for the first time, these scientific shortcomings as well as the necessity of further data for future negotiations have at least been acknowledged by governments of the continent.

Within the IPCC, the need to establish a survey of the various methods employed by African States to assess their national contribution is becoming evident.

And, generally speaking, the scientific community is thinking of providing requesting States with 'climate services' in order to standardize and accelerate the available measures to deal with the challenges of climate change in business sectors that are widespread in several countries (such as fishing, for example), in partnership with universities, meteorological services, and so on. One should understand that major infrastructure projects, such as the PIDA program of the African Development Bank, do not have access to any systematic study regarding the effects of climate change yet. And you can imagine what may happen to a dam, on which a lot of money was spent, if important hydrometric variations are not taken into account! The need for basic research in this field is critical. In Europe, research dug deep into this issue. It has to be done for Africa.

Will States be able to modify the national contributions submitted on a voluntary basis in 2015 in the future?

Yes indeed. It gives us a chance to make data production more systematic. But the business sectors that each State chose to list in its contribution is also at stake. From this viewpoint, once a specific business sector has been submitted to the COP21, it is no longer possible to withdraw it from the list which will be considered in discussions to come. The only option is to keep (or update) the figures of greenhouse gas emission of this sector.

Did these contributions go hand in hand with binding commitments regarding the actual carbon emission rates reached by 2030? If so, the importance of the accuracy of the data submitted during the COP21 (and consequently the methods employed to establish them) would be even greater...

This issue has been debated and finally rejected. It was too difficult to apply from a technical viewpoint and it could have jeopardized the chances of reaching an agreement.

We have presented the main scientific stakes of the COP21, but who were the institutional representatives chosen by Africans to present and discuss these scientific arguments?

First of all, there is the African Group of Negotiators on climate change. It is made of personalities renowned for their knowledge of this topic, due to previous experience in other COPs for instance.

Initially close to the G77 at the UN, this Group is however not directly endorsed by all the African States. Nevertheless, it is recognized by the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCE), an internal body of the AU. The African Negotiators thus convey the decisions made at the COP to African governments through this AU internal body.

Each African State Party then has one vote within the COP. States Parties may have the feeling that they are not well represented by the stances of the African Group of Negotiators. This can of course generate difficulties and inconsistencies in announced stances.

It is important to keep in mind that this Group of Negotiators lacks resources. They are only five (as against the twenty members of the United Kingdom delegation, for example), and must deal with very different technical issues related to science, law, etc. Fortunately, the Group has received external assistance, notably from the African Union and thus from us, the IPCC, for the past five or six years. In line with this, I have been put in charge of assisting African States in elaborating the main scientific issues at stake to prepare for the COP21.

It is hence possible to say that the Group was far better prepared for this meeting than for previous ones. Its interventions were more precise and sharper. Members were clearly speaking with confidence rather than only listening and standing by.

But this did not prevent African States from presenting divergent opinions. Some, for instance, did not integrate issues related to the forest and deforestation, even though deforestation is an important factor in climate warming (given the role forests play in storing carbon gas). This was against the stances of the African Group of Negotiators, who very much counted on the positive role played by forests in this respect. Now, we thus need to concentrate our efforts on the representativeness and legitimacy of the Negotiators' stances to the eyes of all the African governments. Behind this lies a grievance regularly mentioned by African States: the feeling that the willingness of the international community to reduce the carbon gas produced by others (the most industrialized States) may, all things being equal, prevent them from reaching an identical level of industrialization and economic development.

More precisely, to which extent would African States agree to modify their current strategies for economic development in order to minimize their carbon gas emission?

This debate ultimately leads us to the demand for financial and technical means of supporting the efforts made to adapt to the situation and minimize carbon gas emissions. We are talking about money, but also about technology transfers. Countries who have been asked to contribute keep on mentioning the current economic conditions, which are tough for public finances, as well as the tremendous amount of resources that needs to be mobilized. Let us not forget the Global Climate Fund, which had launched the challenge of raising 100 billion dollars per year after the Copenhagen Conference.

Now, this is not only about money strictly speaking. Technical skills are a very important issue as well. Let us consider the market for the right to pollute adopted during the Kyoto Conference. Who is capable of building the highly technical cases required to have a chance at accessing the funds transfers organized by this market?

Not all African States for sure. This market is not trivial for them; it remains addressed to industrialized countries because it is too expensive to access.

In efforts to address these weaknesses, the director of the IPCC, Ms. Fatima Denton, is insisting on the necessity to take into account the new opportunities opening up to adapt quickly to current changes, rather than only considering the negative effects that should be financially compensated. This is the case of renewable energies, for instance. There are economic opportunities that could be of interest to specialized companies in industrialized countries in the long run. But, before getting there, we need to believe in a number of promising sectors for the future and give them priorities in terms of scientific investment.

What about the role played by Ethiopia during the COP21?

Ethiopia has been held up as an example among African States. First of all, Ethiopian authorities quickly saw that Africa as such, with its needs, its opportunities, and its specific challenges, did not appear in the reports of the IPCC. A couple of years ago, the country thus decided to create an entirely Ethiopian micro-IPCC relying on the national scientific community, the Ethiopian Panel on Climate Change (EPCC). In each Ministry concerned, experts have been identified in order to collectively gather information useful to the country's authorities about the detailed consequences of climate changes. In the last two reports of the IPCC, a part is hence entirely dedicated to Ethiopia. Thanks to this, Ethiopia went to the COP21 with a truly national perspective. It no longer needed to constantly refer to the reports of the IPCC. The EPCC published its own report a few months before the Paris Conference. The scientific positions advocated were, of course, very much in line with the country's political vision, and especially with its five-year plans for economic development (the Growth and Transformation Plans). The fact that, in the margins of the Conference, the IPCC poached Ethiopian meteorological experts who got noticed in the course of the last months while preparing for the meeting is also quite revealing. Besides being a mark of recognition of the Ethiopian scientific and political voluntariness, it may indicate that the IPCC is not willing to let this kind of totally independent initiative spread. Indeed, such an example could be replicated and affect the principles of consensus and scientific unity of the IPCC. Ethiopia is actually the only country who dared to do this! If we take a look at other African powers, we see that they use a quite different strategy. Southern Africa is trying to ensure the presence of its scientists and elites in bodies of the IPCC (Working Group II on the effects of climate change is thus directed by a South African). Consequently, the African response has consisted in applauding Ethiopia, not –only– for its good results, but in support of its willpower for creating its own institution to specifically deal with national matters regarding climate change. Elsewhere, the scientific quality of the Ethiopian work has been questioned with more or less good faith. If this kind of initiative was replicated, in the island States for instance, it is the legitimacy of the IPCC that could be damaged.

Generally speaking, given the various tensions and disagreements mentioned above, it is hard to understand what kind of diplomatic alliances led African States to finally accept the agreement prepared during the COP21...

Globally, African States did come individually to the COP21, without proper coordination, despite the fact that there is an African Group of Negotiators. And even regions who share very strong common issues, such as the IGAD regarding droughts for instance, did not manage to turn these common issues into common stances during

negotiations –at least I did not perceive them as such. No, if an agreement was reached, it is largely thanks to the substantive work carried out by French Negotiators to rally their diplomatic partners (including their African friends) in order to overcome the risks of blockage. I think that it is possible to say that the COP negotiations would have been very different if they had taken place in another country. Peru or Denmark clearly did not have the same diplomatic network as France did, especially on the African continent.

Yet, on the African continent, we hear that some are unhappy with this agreement, saying that it did not go far enough, etc.

Yes, the fact that the agreement does not include any binding commitment disappointed some countries. What will happen when we will realize that there are gaps between the numbers announced in 2015 and the actual amounts of gas emitted by 2030 (which is likely)? At this point it is important to consider where we started from: it was a very long shot.

NOTES

1. Working Group II and III are in charge, respectively, of the effects of climate change, and of the available means of minimizing the negative effects of global warming.
2. During this 43rd session held in Nairobi, IPCC has finally accepted the request to deliver a special report on the effect of a global warming of 1.5 °C.

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