

Copenhagen: the issues facing Africa
Interview with Jean-Michel Severino, CEO of the AFD

The Copenhagen Summit is intended to lead to the development of a new international climate agreement to succeed the Kyoto Protocol, which finishes in 2012. Jean-Michel Severino, CEO of the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), talks about the issues facing the summit, in particular for Africa.

What new issues are lined up for the Copenhagen Summit?

The last few years have enabled us to get a good grasp of the issues facing the industrialised and emerging countries in terms of the climate. However, the situation facing Africa still has not been fully recognised, and in fact it has been neglected. This is certainly to do with the level of emissions from the continent, which represents only 3 to 4% of man-made emissions worldwide. Nonetheless, Africa occupies a central position in the global environmental crisis.

Why Africa right in the firing line of climate questions today?

First of all Africa is severely threatened by climate change. Experts are agreed that the continent will suffer some of the most significant changes, whilst the response capacities of African societies are among the lowest in the world. A great number of African countries are already facing the effects of this change: reduction in rainfall, soil deterioration or the depletion of precious natural resources, and with two out of three people in sub-Saharan Africa deriving their income from the environment. The impact of this vulnerability on the rest of the world could also be considerable, given that the continent's population will be at least two billion by 2050.

I should also add that Africa has seen 10% of its forest cover disappear between 1990 and 2005, which represents more than half the decline recorded worldwide. In addition, while the poorest African countries today are the ones whose energy has the highest carbon content, Africa will experience much of the greatest growth in energy demands over the next fifty years. This means that choices of the technologies to meet these requirements will be critical for the future of the planet, and that the battle against climate change will be played out in Africa too.

So in your view it would appear that climate change can only be analysed in terms of dangers...

Quite the opposite! I believe that Africa stands to gain a great deal from the immense ecological battle the international community is preparing to wage. Indeed, Africa has considerable natural assets and offers solutions that can help to counteract global climate disruption. The forests in the Congo basin (220 million hectares) make up the second largest block of tropical forest in the world after the Amazon forest, and together with the farmlands they offer real potential for regulating the climate.

So what place should Africa occupy in the negotiations?

It is essential for the agreement that will be reached during the Summit to recognise the contribution Africa can make to the global balance and allow this to be developed. There is a cost involved in the efforts to preserve the natural resources and manage the vast potential for renewable energies that the subcontinent has to offer. If humanity sees the capacity of the African biotopes to store carbon as a global public good, then it is only fair that everyone should contribute to protecting it. We should all implement mechanisms that will allow us to preserve it and move towards sustainable models of energy. But to do so will demand rapid deployment of large-scale actions.

In your view, what would be the priority actions in this context?

Firstly I believe that we need to make greater use of our existing tools, such as Clean Development Mechanisms (CDMs) – which enable the players in the North to add value to emission reduction projects in the countries of the South. Africa has not made sufficient use of this opportunity: fewer than 2% of projects labelled as CDMs up to now have involved Africa, compared with 73% for Asia.

We also need to work on enhancing “avoided deforestation” and the storage of carbon in African soils. At a time when humanity is coming to realise of the value of biodiversity and the significance of soils and forests for climate regulation, Africa stands to gain a great deal from becoming the guardian of an asset essential to human survival. The financial potential is considerable, and amounts to several billion euros. This could constitute one of the essential stimuli to economic growth for Africa in a post-oil era.

Finally we need to underline the “climate justice” plan being promoted by France and others at Copenhagen. This plan aims to help Africa increase its population’s access to clean energy. When you consider that three out of four people in sub-Saharan Africa have no access to electricity, you realise the extent of the issue not only in terms of justice, but also of climate regulation. Uniting public and private forces to equip 2 billion Africans with sustainable energy will be one of the major challenges of the coming decades.

Are you optimistic at the opening of this Summit?

We need to be aware that the countries involved are undertaking one of the most complex and most decisive exercises that they have ever had to manage in the history of international relations. In any event, I think it is essential for Africa to take its rightful place there.

In the past, the African countries have had trouble making their voice heard in major international negotiations. Their decision to stand together represents a substantial step forward. Nonetheless, Africa and its partners must in turn form an alliance in order to ensure for everyone’s sake that the sustainable use of Africa’s environmental potential also appears on the critical path towards a sustainable climate.



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Os países africanos no passado tiveram muitas dificuldades em se fazerem ouvir nas grandes negociações internacionais. A decisão de fazer bloco em Copenhaga representa um passo importante em frente. Todavia, a África e os seus parceiros deverão por sua vez aliar-se para fazer valer o facto que a exploração sustentável do potencial ambiental africano no interesse de todos conste, ele também, na rota crítica de um clima viável.

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