

**TRADE UNION AFRICAN CONFERENCE  
ON LABOUR AND THE ENVIRONMENT  
Johannesburg, 28 – 29 July, 2006**

**Working Group II**

**VULNERABILITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE:  
CONSEQUENCES FOR LABOUR  
AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Africa's contribution to climate change through emissions is minimal. However, the impacts of climate change are expected to be severe. African continent is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with very difficult capacity to adapt, due to factors such as widespread poverty, recurrent droughts, inequitable land distribution, and overdependence on rain fed agriculture.

These five situations describe African vulnerability to climate change:

- (i) *water and biodiversity*: the combination of climate change impacts and escalating human demand will decrease water availability and biodiversity, and will intensify conflict between human and environmental demands on water resources;
- (ii) *human health*: droughts and flooding, where sanitary infrastructure is inadequate, will result in increased frequency of water-borne diseases, epidemics and enteric diseases;
- (iii) *food security*: the continent already experiences a major deficit in food production in many areas, and potential declines in soil moisture will be an added burden;
- (iv) *settlements and infrastructure*: increase in damaging floods, dust storms, and other extremes would result in damage to settlements and infrastructure and affect human health; and
- (v) *desertification*: potential increases in the frequency and severity of drought are likely to exacerbate desertification.

Adaptation to global climate change is essential. The participation of civil society and trade unions in particular in decision-making, as well. Consensus has to be built in order to advance sustainable development, and climate change adaptation measures cannot be considered as exceptions.

**Emerging issues to be addressed:**

- Climate change dynamics endangers **rural-urban settlements**, with important consequences to the environment, health and livelihood. Drought and floods, which victims live mainly in rural areas, could be at the origin of domestic migratory flows towards urban areas, with inappropriate water, sanitation and energy facilities. Here, climate change will aggravate the already critical sanitary situation, exacerbating the risks of water-borne diseases, epidemics and enteric diseases.
- It is projected **that climate-related mortality** will increase in the large cities of north Africa (IPCC, 1996), from direct effects as well as from indirect impacts of climate change. These impacts will include potential increases in the incidence of VBDs such as malaria, yellow fever, dengue fever, onchocerciasis, and trypanosomiasis arising from elevated temperatures and altered rainfall. High-elevation locations such as Nairobi or Harare may become vulnerable to malaria epidemics because the malaria parasite may be able to survive in the possibly warmer conditions (IPCC, 1996) at higher elevations than the current limits.
- Climate change will increase **food insecurity** in the continent. While in rural areas, families will lose their main source of revenues and living, in urban areas, emerging food-processing industries will face both the lack of commodities, and the competition with developed countries products (the end of the preferential regimes for Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) countries reinforcing this trend). Without an overall strategy towards sustainable development, managing

adaptation to climate change and the development for each country, it will be difficult to avoid job losses, food shortage and social disruptions.

- Climate change offers also opportunities: re-thinking African countries **development** under an environmental and socially sustainable framework, with clean technologies, and an educated and trained working class involved in its planning could be a way of ensuring poverty eradication and a just transition for workers and communities that otherwise will suffer from climate change consequences.

#### Fields where trade union action on climate change is needed

- At the **international level**, important negotiations take place at the moment. The United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol concentrate the efforts of the international community to fight climate change and avoid its consequences. The voice of civil society is rarely listened, but efforts should continue to be made to influence the international agenda from a trade union standpoint. The input from African trade unionists, which reflects the problems and needs of African workers and their families, could raise negotiators' awareness on the social consequences of their decisions.
- At the **regional level**, Climate Change decision making suffers from a relatively low profile. The linkages between climate change and other regional processes such as AMCEN (African Ministerial Conference on the Environment and NEPAD), or with the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals remain weak. Trade Unions could play an important role, giving a long run perspective to these processes by including the climate change dimension, where pertinent.
- **National level** decision making and action should be the priority field for trade unions. Is at this level that adaptation measures are taken and where social concerns should be included. Through dialogue rounds, negotiations, or other means, trade unions should make the government listen their views and inputs. Transition for workers who will be affected by the decisions should be decided as a part of an overall sustainable development strategy, which cannot ignore climate change effects.

At the **local level**, the close relationships between local governments with civil society create an interesting space for building alliances and sharing information and strategies, testing programmes for climate change adaptation capable to be reproduced at a bigger scale by trade unions or other actors.

#### Key points for trade union action

- **Education and Training** of trade union leaders seems essential to raise awareness within the trade union movement on the risks, needs and opportunities related to climate change adaptation policies.
- **Vulnerability and risk sectors** should be assessed and trade unions can organize their capacity in order to provide an accurate analysis of social impacts of inaction or/and official policies.
- **A Just Employment Transition** should be at the center of trade union position to address dislocation and insecurity and moderate the impact of climate change on workers and their communities.
- **Social dialogue** should be promoted as a means for building consensus around national policies for adapting to climate change and address vulnerability issues. Trade Unions should be ready to engage in a long-run process towards a sustainable development for their country. At the workplace, collective agreements should take into this issue, as well as others related to environmental protection and sustainability.