Making COP Work For Africa:

An Analysis of Agreements on Climate Finance, Adaptation and Negotiation Operations

African Climate Reality Project

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the central decision-making forum of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) bringing together Parties each year to negotiate collective responses to the climate crisis. Over more than three decades, the COP process has shaped the global climate agenda through agreements, decisions, and frameworks addressing mitigation, adaptation, climate finance, and other key areas of international climate action.

As the climate crisis intensifies, COPs' effectiveness as the primary forum for progressive climate discussions and solutions has increasingly been called into question, raising concerns about the efficiency and effectiveness of its processes and outcomes. Despite important progress, the pace and scale of commitments and their implementation continue to fall short of what is required to meet the 1.5°C Paris Agreement goal and, equally important, the Global Goal on Adaptation, and to respond adequately to the escalating impacts of climate change. The gap between negotiated commitments and meaningful delivery has become one of the defining challenges facing the COP process.

At the same time, questions about COP's effectiveness cannot be separated from questions about who can participate in, and influence, the process. Procedural injustice, including the exclusion of affected groups from decision-making spaces, remains one of the key challenges of the COP process. High travel and accommodation costs, restrictive visa processes, and visa rejections continue to limit participation by African and climate- vulnerable groups.

These barriers are compounded by the limited number of badges allocated to grassroots and civil society groups, leaving little space for affected communities to attend and engage meaningfully.

> ***"Procedural injustice at COP leaves climate-vulnerable African communities present, but largely powerless."***

While attendance by African actors has increased through scholarships and observer accreditation, greater presence has not necessarily translated into greater influence over final outcomes. Furthermore, many African countries and Global South stakeholders participate with relatively small delegations compared to developed countries, severely limiting their ability to engage effectively across multiple simultaneous negotiation tracks.

For years, governments, policymakers, and intergovernmental organisations have largely shaped global climate negotiations, while affected communities have had limited space to influence formal decision-making.

More recently, the continued use of process by petro-states to water down ambition and the growing presence of fossil fuel lobbyists within COP spaces have further raised concerns about whose interests the process ultimately serves. For Africa, this exclusion is particularly detrimental.

Although climate negotiations are inherently political, the influence of powerful political and economic interests can shape the ambition and substance of negotiated outcomes, while those with greater financial, institutional, and negotiating capacity are often better positioned to influence the process.

The substantial presence of fossil fuel interests, in particular, risks blurring the line between COP as a space for climate negotiations and a forum for business lobbying and misinformation, further limiting its effectiveness in advancing African priorities.

These disparities extend beyond participation and reflect broader power imbalances within the COP process.

Climate negotiations are inherently political, shaped by competing national interests, historical responsibility, and the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC).

While scientific evidence underpins the need for urgent climate action, decisions on ambition, finance and implementation are ultimately political. Too often, these decisions reflect wealthier countries' priorities, while African countries' needs remain secondary.

At the same time, increasingly technical negotiations, particularly on adaptation, risk obscuring the justice dimensions of climate action. The growing (and sometimes purposeful) complexity of these discussions can create additional barriers to meaningful participation and make it harder to address the underlying political questions of responsibility, finance and delivery.

These structural challenges are compounded by shifting geopolitical dynamics and changes in political commitment to international climate action. Climate agreements and financial commitments remain vulnerable to changes in national governments, domestic political priorities, and geopolitical tensions, particularly among major contributors to climate finance.

The 2025 rollback of US climate and international development commitments, and subsequent cuts from other wealthy Global North countries, for example, showed how quickly political shifts in a major contributor can threaten the broader predictability of climate finance and weaken international cooperation.

Such shifts can undermine trust in multilateral processes and leave developing countries, already facing escalating climate risks, with limited certainty about the resources available to implement climate action.

Together, these trends have eroded confidence in the COP process, and raised questions about its ability to secure durable commitments and translate them into sustained action.

These structural challenges have particularly significant implications for Africa, where the gap between climate commitments and meaningful delivery has direct and growing consequences.

The consequences of these structural failures are not procedural or abstract; they have real implications for countries and communities already experiencing climate change. As we enter the second half of this critical decade, Africa receives only 4% of global climate finance, despite facing some of the world's most severe climate vulnerabilities.

> ***"Africa receives only 4% of global climate finance despite facing some of the world's most severe climate vulnerabilities."***

At the same time, banks continue *sinking billions of dollars* into fossil fuel expansion, standing in stark contrast to the resources available for climate action. For Africa and the broader Global South, this imbalance has significant economic and social consequences.

These communities face disproportionate climate impacts, health risks, and significant economic losses; yet international climate processes have failed to deliver finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building support from developed to developing countries at the scale required to address these challenges, despite these commitments being central to the Paris Agreement.

COP negotiations must therefore not only recognise the priorities of African countries, including loss and damage, climate adaptation, climate finance, and a meaningful Just Transition, but also establish credible pathways for their implementation. This requires adequate, predictable finance; clear accountability for delivery; and effective mechanisms for technology transfer and capacity-building.

The question is therefore not simply whether these issues are recognised within the COP agenda, but whether negotiated outcomes are sufficiently ambitious, adequately financed, and supported by the implementation and accountability mechanisms needed to translate commitments into meaningful action. Civil society, faith leaders, and grassroots movements play a critical role in shaping political and social outcomes across the Global South, yet their representation and influence within COP spaces remains constrained.

Purpose and Scope

This position paper assesses the key decisions, agreements and commitments, and outcomes of the COP process over three critical negotiating cycles: COP28 (Dubai, 2023), COP29 (Baku, 2024), and COP30 (Belém, 2025).

It examines the gap between what was negotiated and promised and what has been delivered, with particular attention to the implications for Africa and the broader Global South.

For each pillar, the paper examines the commitments and institutional frameworks established through the COP process, assesses how far these have translated into implementation and meaningful outcomes, and identifies the structural and procedural barriers that continue to limit delivery.

Climate Finance considers whether resources are being provided at the scale, in the form and through the mechanisms required to support climate action in Africa. Climate Adaptation examines whether the growing adaptation architecture is translating into meaningful resilience, supported by adequate means of implementation.

The analysis of the Operation of COP considers whether the process itself enables equitable participation, effective decision-making, transparency and accountability.

Section 1 sets out the rationale for reform.

Section 2 provides the substantive assessment and analysis across the three pillars.

Section 3 translates the findings into concrete recommendations to strengthen climate finance, adaptation, and the inclusiveness, accountability, and effectiveness of COP processes.

These recommendations are intended to support civil society engagement in negotiations and discussions ahead of future COPs.

The analysis is organised around three interconnected pillars:

SECTION 2

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS

COP28 in 2023, closed the first Global Stocktake under the UAE Consensus, established the Loss and Damage fund, and adopted the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience to structure the Global Goal on Adaptation.

COP29 dubbed the "finance COP", adopted the New Collective Quantified Goal, operationalised the Loss and Damage fund, and finalised the Article 6 carbon-market rules, while progress on mitigation and just-transition agendas remained limited.

COP30 in Belém delivered the Global Mutirão decision, called for tripling adaptation finance, adopted the first set of adaptation indicators, and released the final Baku-to-Belém Roadmap report. In Belém, important matters within the COP's scope were notably left out of the agenda, and therefore the final negotiated outcome. These include a clear implementation roadmap to transition process.

away from fossil fuels, strengthened financial obligations for developed countries, and binding commitments on quantity and quality of finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building as implementation measures. While the final negotiated text did not include a commitment to build a plan to phase out fossil fuels, a voluntary, Presidency-led Transition Away from Fossil Fuels (TAFF) roadmap was launched outside the formal negotiation process.

These three COPs reveal a process that has become increasingly sophisticated in developing institutional frameworks, targets, and reporting mechanisms, yet remains structurally constrained in translating these developments into implementation, accountability, and equitable delivery.

The three subsections below examine this pattern through the lenses of climate finance, adaptation, and COP operations before considering its implications for the years ahead.

2.1 CLIMATE FINANCE

2.1.1 THE PLEDGES, AGREEMENTS & PROMISES

Climate finance, often also referred to as one of the three "means of implementation," has become the organising principle of the modern COP, and the last three cycles produced some of the most significant climate finance decisions since Copenhagen.

After three years of deliberation, COP29 adopted the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), which replaced the expiring USD 100 billion per year goal first set in 2009.

The NCQG has three core components:

- A headline goal for developed countries to take the lead in mobilising at least USD 300 billion per year for developing countries by 2035
- A broader call on all actors to scale climate finance from all public and private sources to at least USD 1.3 trillion per year by 2035
- And a commitment to at least triple the annual outflows of the operating entities of the Financial Mechanism from a 2022 baseline by 2030

To give the USD 1.3 trillion figure a pathway for delivery, Parties launched the "Baku to Belém Roadmap to 1.3T," a joint process of the Azerbaijani and Brazilian presidencies whose *final report* was delivered ahead of COP30 (UNFCCC Decision-/ CMA.6).

The same cycle delivered the long-awaited operationalisation of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD). Conceived at COP27 and established under the UAE Consensus at COP28, the Fund was fully operationalised at COP29.

The World Bank signed the host agreement in November 2024, the Philippines was confirmed as host of the Board, and a 2024–25 *work plan* set out the rapid approval of funding and a long-term resource-mobilisation strategy.

By COP30, the Fund had adopted the *Barbados Implementation Modalities*, recorded more than USD 815 million in pledges, and decided to launch its first replenishment in 2027 (UNFCCC Draft Decision-/CP30).

2022	2023	2024		2025	2027
Fund Conceived at COP27	Established Under UAE Consensus	World Bank Signs Host Agreements	Fund Fully Operationalised	Implementation Modalities & Funding	First Replenishment Launch

COP30 added two notable finance outcomes. The *Global Mutirão* decision called for at least tripling adaptation finance for developing countries by 2035. This followed repeated efforts by developing countries to open a formal conversation on developed country obligations and their role in funding loss and damage.

Parties agreed a new two-year work programme on climate finance, explicitly including Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement, under which developed countries "shall" provide financial resources to assist developing countries with mitigation and adaptation. A high-level ministerial round table on NCQG implementation was also convened to take stock of the quantitative and qualitative elements of finance provision (UNFCCC Decision -/CMA.7).

2.1.2 THE GAP BETWEEN THE AGREEMENTS & REALITY

On paper, the body of work produced by COPs is substantial and shows a strong understanding of the climate crisis. In substance, each headline rests on an unresolved tension between announcement and delivery, and within this gap lies the case for COP reform.

The Access and Procedure Gap

A persistent access and procedural gap continues to undermine the effectiveness of international climate finance.

First, the multi-year lag between funding approval and the first disbursement, often forces implementing entities to pre-finance activities despite lacking the financial capacity, delaying implementation and limiting delivery. While some explanations for delayed processes point to the need for donor countries to take time to align funding and budget streams, the lack of finance delivery demonstrates that this gap is more than just process driven.

Second, the mismatch between grants disbursed in United States dollars and project budgets managed in local currencies exposes recipients to exchange rate fluctuations, reducing the real value of funding over the lifetime of a project.

Third, existing funding mechanisms remain largely inaccessible to local actors, as they are primarily designed for national ministries and large accredited entities.

The absence of simplified, direct and sub-national access windows prevents grassroots organisations, local governments and frontline communities from accessing climate finance in a timely and meaningful way, despite being at the forefront of climate action and adaptation.

Inadequate Quantum

Developing countries and civil society groups widely deemed the USD 300 billion goal inadequate once it was announced. The figure falls well below the estimated USD 455–584 billion per year developing countries need to implement their existing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) through 2030, and it is dwarfed by the USD 1.3 trillion the same decision acknowledges is required.

The USD 300 billion counts “public and private, bilateral and multilateral” sources and now recognises all climate-related financing of multilateral development banks, including flows attributable to developing-country and even some non-Party contributions. This raises concerns about whether the headline figure accurately reflects the scale of finance being provided by developed countries, and potentially dilutes the principle that developed countries should lead the initiative (C2ES, 2025a).

The Debt Trap

The NCQG's reliance on mobilised private finance and concessional or non-concessional financing rather than grant-based public finance reproduces the very inequities it needs to address (Khan et al., 2026).

For African countries already managing large debt burdens, finance in the form of loans, which must be repaid with interest, deepens the structural problem by diverting scarce public resources away from pressing development priorities and climate action toward debt servicing. This fundamental contradiction turns a climate obligation owed by historical emitters into a liability carried by the most exposed and vulnerable.

Grant-based finance is therefore not only important for meeting climate goals, but is central to ensuring that climate finance does not deepen existing debt and development inequalities in Africa

No coordination for loss and damage

Despite its centrality to equitable action, the NCQG does not allocate funds for loss and damage, leaving the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) dependent on voluntary and largely ad hoc pledges. Furthermore, current pledges are roughly USD 815 million, while loss and damage needs already run into the hundreds of billions annually, demonstrating a clear gap between the fund and the scale of need.

Equally important, however, is the design of the Fund's disbursement mechanisms. The Fund still faces challenges in enabling rapid access to relief financing when disasters occur.

Without robust, pre-agreed systems and thresholds for triggering financing, disaster responses risk remaining slow and subject to lengthy approval processes.

Lack of accountability measures

The Baku-to-Belém Roadmap, while acknowledging the funding gap, was widely *criticised* for vague language and the absence of clear steps for implementation, and ambitious targets and timelines.

The long-awaited NCQG in its current form risks repeating the chronic under-delivery that characterised the USD 100 billion era.

While there are binding agreements that call for the provision of finance, the specific goals under these negotiation streams are not binding, along with any agreements on quality or quantity. Without accountability and specific binding commitments, deals remain words on paper, with limited mechanisms to ensure delivery of reform of the existing climate finance model.

When deals are left voluntary, climate action becomes vulnerable to political shifts, ideological battles, and national budgetary changes.

A structural challenge that continues to limit climate action is the lack of accountability mechanisms. While pledges are announced at COPs, systemic tracking of disbursement remains limited, resulting in a weak correlation between financial commitments and actual flows even at a five-year lag (Nurunnabi, 2026). of accountability measures

> ***"Without accountability and specific binding commitments, deals remain words on paper"***

The vulnerability paradox and Africa's share

Regression analysis across 89 countries finds that climate vulnerability negatively predicts finance allocation; the most vulnerable countries receive less support per capita, directly contradicting the mandate to prioritise least developed countries and small island developing states (Nurunnabi, 2026).

Africa receives only 4 percent of global climate finance, a visible symptom of this paradox. Without binding agreements and accountability measures from the UNFCCC on climate finance, the finance architecture remains vulnerable to political shifts that can undermine or reverse climate commitments.

One example is the shift in finance flows in 2025, driven by the Trump administration, and the resulting rollback of national and international climate agreements. Close to a tenth of global climate finance is threatened by *USAID* cuts, with climate funds identified as a prime target, exposing how fragile the architecture remains to the political priorities and agendas of major contributors (C2ES, 2025c).

In summary, the findings show that COP has built an increasingly elaborate finance architecture without building the pathways or accountability mechanisms needed to deliver equitable climate finance. Climate finance must be clearly defined, transparently structured, anchored in justice, and, critically, understood as an obligation rather than a business opportunity.

2.2 CLIMATE ADAPTATION

2.2.1 THE PLEDGES, AGREEMENTS & PROMISES

Adaptation has historically received less political and financial attention than mitigation in COP negotiations, and the last three COPs have tried to correct this by building a dedicated architecture around the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA), established under Article 7.1 of the Paris Agreement.

At COP28, Parties adopted the *UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience* as a guiding structure and review process toward the GGA, while also setting thematic targets to be achieved by 2030 across the adaptation policy cycle:

- Impact, vulnerability, and risk assessment
- Planning
- Implementation
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning

In addition to thematic targets, COP28 also launched a two-year UAE–Belém work programme to develop indicators for those targets (UNFCCC Decision 2/CMA.5).

COP29 further advanced the GGA process, making it a standing agenda item in negotiations from the *June 2026* Subsidiary Body sessions (SB64) onward. It also launched the Baku Adaptation Road Map and the Baku High-Level Dialogue on Adaptation to support implementation of the *UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience*. COP29 further provided guidance for the technical work on adaptation indicators, requesting the development of a set of no more than 100 indicators by mid-2025. Importantly, the guidance also requested that experts include indicators related to means of implementation, including finance, capacity-building, and technology transfer, recognising that adaptation progress cannot be assessed separately from the resources required for implementation.

The contentious question of transformational adaptation *(which points to system-wide change)*, as distinct from incremental adaptation (which points to smaller changes within a given system), was deferred. The Secretariat asked only to publish a more accessible technical paper, reflecting concerns among some Global South parties that recognising transformational adaptation as a distinct category could create additional conditionalities for accessing climate finance, particularly if transformational approaches became a prerequisite for support.

COP30 then adopted 59 Belém Adaptation Indicators; established the two-year Belém–Addis vision on adaptation to operationalise them; adopted modalities for the first phase (2026–28) of the Baku Adaptation Road Map; and scheduled a review of the UAE Framework for 2029. In parallel, the COP30 progress assessment of National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) noted that 86 NAPs had been submitted by the end of December 2025 and deferred the next assessment to COP35 in 2030 (UNFCCC Draft Decision-/CP.30).

Together, these developments demonstrate significant progress in establishing a common adaptation framework and measurement architecture. However, they leave unresolved the more fundamental question of whether these frameworks are accompanied by adequate finance and other means of implementation to translate commitments into meaningful and locally led adaptation.

2.2.2 THE GAP BETWEEN THE AGREEMENTS AND REALITY

Institutional progress has occurred and should be acknowledged. But the architecture has advanced faster than the means of implementation needed to translate it into change on the ground: adequate finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building.

The quantification problem is being solved on paper, not in practice.

Unlike mitigation, where progress can be measured in tonnes of carbon dioxide, adaptation is inherently difficult to quantify because needs vary across regions.

The Belém Adaptation Indicators are an attempt to make progress globally comparable, but their adoption was openly *contested*. After experts spent two years drafting around 100 candidate indicators, only *59* were adopted, leading several Parties in the final plenary to note that the adopted set had not been adequately considered.

More fundamentally, the indicators are explicitly voluntary, non-prescriptive, non-punitive, and country-driven (C2ES, 2025b).

This approach also reflects concerns raised by Global South Parties, including the African Group of Negotiators, that linking indicators too closely to implementation targets could create another form of conditionality for accessing climate finance. However, this creates tension: while avoiding conditionality matters, the voluntary nature of means-of-implementation indicators may weaken accountability and slow the provision of finance, capacity-building, and technology transfer needed to implement adaptation actions. The indicators can measure effort where Parties choose to report it, but they cannot compel action on finance, resources, technology, or transboundary risk (Khan et al., 2026).

The gender gap in adaptation indicators and reporting.

Despite growing recognition that adaptation impacts and capacities are not experienced equally, the current adaptation indicator framework does not adequately capture gender-differentiated vulnerabilities and contributions.

None of the 59 Belém Adaptation Indicators explicitly disaggregate adaptive capacity by gender, creating a significant gap in measuring how adaptation progress is distributed across different groups. Women, youth, and persons with disabilities often play critical roles in community-level adaptation while facing disproportionate barriers to decision-making, resources, and access to support.

The current set of adaptation indicators lacks a robust understanding of how adaptation efforts and outcomes are distributed across groups and does not go

beyond national progress to reflect the differentiated experiences, responsibilities, and constraints shaping adaptation outcomes.

The absence of gender-responsive indicators and gender-disaggregated data requirements in adaptation reporting risks recreating existing inequalities and limits the ability to assess whether adaptation efforts are reaching those most affected.

The transparency and land tenure gap in adaptation indicators

Land rights and tenure security are central to adaptation outcomes, particularly for communities whose livelihoods and resilience depend on secure access to land and natural resources.

However, the current indicator set risks overlooking these structural factors and, in some cases, appears more focused on identifying risks of maladaptation than on measuring progress toward effective adaptation.

Without indicators that adequately capture underlying social, institutional, and land-related vulnerabilities, assessments of adaptation progress may fail to reflect the conditions that determine whether communities can adapt successfully.

Accountability gap

The Glasgow commitment to double adaptation finance from a 2019 baseline by 2025 has not been fully met, and even if it were, it would have closed the adaptation finance gap by only about 5 percent (UNEP 2025). Against this backdrop, the COP30 call to triple adaptation finance by 2035 represents a significant shortfall relative to the scale of developing countries' adaptation needs.

While COP30 refined adaptation indicators, it did not secure additional finance for implementation, establish a clear baseline or reference year for measuring progress, or identify which countries are financially responsible for delivering this increase.

This lack of clarity weakens accountability under Article 9.1 and risks diluting developed countries' responsibility to provide climate finance. In addition, the absence of commitments prioritising grant-based finance raises concerns that increased adaptation finance will continue to rely on loans and private-sector mobilisation, potentially increasing debt pressures in African countries.

By extending the delivery timeline to 2035 without stronger accountability mechanisms, the outcome risks further weakening developed countries' obligations and failing to respond at the scale and speed developing countries require.

The demand also sits awkwardly between the GGA agenda and the NCQG, neither of which currently provides a firm anchor for a dedicated adaptation finance target.

The lack of finance from developed countries to developing countries threatens global cooperation and, in turn, undermines the opportunity to collectively reduce vulnerabilities, build resilience, and enhance adaptive capacity.

Unequal contribution and access

Africa accounts for less than 5% of global fossil fuel emissions, yet it faces a disproportionate adaptation burden relative to its capacity, developmental context, and structural vulnerabilities, including those shaped by colonial legacies. However, the finance architecture has not adequately responded to this disparity.

Developed countries have consistently delayed or resisted binding commitments to fund the NAP priorities and adaptation components of developing countries' NDCs.

The reluctance has a structural logic: mitigation produces globally shared and countable returns, while adaptation produces localised public goods that generate no offset and may offer less direct financial return to the funders.

TThis is why the first Global Stocktake found adaptation finance falling far behind mitigation investment and falling short of escalating needs (UNFCCC 2023). Countries that have contributed least to the climate crisis therefore continue to face some of its most devastating consequences while receiving a disproportionately small share of climate finance.

Africa also receives roughly 4 percent of global climate finance, much of it as loans, in a system where over 70 percent of climate finance is loan-based. This same system can treat vulnerability as investment risk rather than as a basis for concessional support (Nurunnabi 2026).

The result is a trap that hits hardest after disaster: an African economy struck by drought or flood must divert already scarce national funds to reconstruction, so each shock consumes the resources that would have funded resilience against the next, and deferred adaptation becomes loss and damage incurred at a far greater cost.

The effect is circular at the political level too, because adaptation is treated internationally as discretionary; it is under-prioritised domestically, and in turn commands less political weight internationally.

> ***"Procedural injustice at COP leaves climate-vulnerable African communities present, but largely powerless."***

Breaking this cycle requires moving adaptation to political parity with mitigation, especially in terms of support. Adequate support would entail dedicated, predictable, grant-based funding for NAPs; recognition of vulnerability as grounds for concessional rather than penalised access; and stronger integration of means-of-implementation indicators.

The current indicators, however, are not yet sufficiently robust to provide a consistently applicable framework for assessing whether these forms of support are reaching those most in need (Nurunnabi 2026; UNFCCC 2023).

2.3 THE COP PROCESS

The third pillar concerns the COP process itself:

Who gets to participate?

Are commitments binding?

Who hosts?

How are decisions made?

In this regard, the evidence points to a forum whose growth in size and complexity has coincided with increasing challenges to its ability to produce ambitious, enforceable outcomes.

There are a number of challenges experienced related to the hosting, participation and outcomes of COP meetings, which all contribute to a lack of accountability. This in turn, results in a weaker process.

Scale & exclusion

Participation has expanded from roughly 4 000 delegates at COP1 in Berlin to a peak of 83 884 at COP28 in Dubai, with 54 148 at COP29 in Baku (Nurunnabi 2026).

As headcounts and costs have risen, affected communities, civil society organisations, Indigenous peoples, and grassroots movements have found it increasingly difficult to participate meaningfully, with high travel, accommodation, and visa costs reinforcing structural exclusion. Without intentional efforts for representational justice pathways, a bigger COP does not automatically translate into an inclusive one.

Without efforts to match scale with capacity, and inclusion, ambition will not grow with the number of attendees.

Petrostate hosts

Two of the last three COPs were hosted by major fossil fuel economies, the United Arab Emirates (COP28) and Azerbaijan (COP29). Moreover, the substantial presence of fossil fuel interests at the negotiations is widely seen as diluting outcomes, visibly seen in COP29's failure to build on COP28's landmark language on transitioning away from fossil fuels (Khan et al., 2026).

Research linking host-country fossil fuel dependence to the strength of negotiated outcomes further raises concerns about host-country interests' influence on the process.

The COP Presidency holds a great deal of power in directing negotiation priorities and outcomes, and when the convenor Presidency's economic interests run counter to the convention's purpose, the line between a negotiating space and a lobbying forum can become blurred. This creates a structural concern that decisions on transitioning away from fossil fuels may be harder to advance where the host economy remains heavily dependent on fossil fuel production.

This dynamic also creates opportunities for greenwashing, whereby governments or corporations project an image of environmental responsibility while continuing to support fossil fuel expansion.

Furthermore, since the UNFCCC defaults to using its draft rules of procedure, all COP decisions are required to be adopted by consensus; countries with significant fossil fuel interests can therefore constrain or block ambitious climate measures where consensus cannot be reached.

This is reflected in delayed commitments and diluted language on fossil fuel phase-out, as well as the continued absence of strong accountability mechanisms for implementation, further undermining confidence in the ambition and credibility of the COP process.

Power imbalances

COP negotiations do not exist in isolation, but are spaces where existing inequalities and power imbalances are reproduced. As in other areas of global economic and political governance, developed countries exercise structural leverage over the process itself.

From agenda-setting and procedural control to control of expertise, they operate with greater institutional and negotiating capacity than Global South Parties. Climate justice scholarship has long documented asymmetries in negotiations, showing how seemingly neutral processes can reproduce existing power imbalances between developed and developing countries (Nurunnabi 2026).

As a result, weaker outcomes are often blamed on Global South negotiating blocs as obstacles to progress, rather than on the broader political and procedural trade-offs that shape negotiations.

Often, because of power imbalances, African countries, along with other developing nations, are forced to accept mediocre deals for fear that the deal will break down completely.

The USD 100 billion climate finance goal, for example, was established through processes that many Global South countries argued lacked meaningful participation and transparency. Another example is how at COP29, developed countries pushed a finance framework centred on private capital against the grant-based public finance Global South countries were calling for (Khan et al., 2026).

Understanding these overlapping forms of power is essential: ambition in climate negotiations is shaped not only by those openly resisting fossil fuel transition, but also by deeper institutional and procedural dynamics that determine whose priorities are elevated and whose demands are constrained. But this power is not immovable, and naming it is the first step to shifting it.

The final-plenary objections in Belém show that developing countries are increasingly unwilling to let contested outcomes pass unchallenged. More significantly, sustained pressure from developing country Parties at COP30 secured a two-year work programme on climate finance grounded in Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement, placing developed countries' obligation to provide finance back on the formal agenda (C2ES, 2026).

"Structural power dynamics determine whose priorities are elevated and whose demands are constrained at COP."

Non-binding nature of COP Agreements

The shift from the Kyoto Protocol's legally binding targets to the Paris Agreement's nationally determined contributions, which are not themselves legally binding, traded accountability for universality.

Critics argue this has, at times, created an illusion of progress while weakening commitments (Dimitrov, in Nurunnabi 2026). For African countries, this represents a significant departure from the principles embedded in the UNFCCC, which many continue to view as a stronger framework because it explicitly differentiated responsibilities between developed countries (Annex I) and wealthier developed countries with obligations to provide climate finance and support (Annex II).

These distinctions recognised differences in historical responsibility for emissions and established clearer obligations for developed countries to provide finance, technology transfer and capacity-building as means of implementation.

Under the Paris Agreement, however, these distinctions have become less central to the operationalisation of climate commitments, creating greater ambiguity around who is responsible for delivering support and at what scale.

No international enforcement mechanism requires countries to meet the ambition levels in their pledges, deliver their fair-share finance obligations, or fulfill means-of-implementation commitments at a level commensurate with assessed needs; although the Paris Agreement does establish obligations for transparency, reporting and review mechanisms intended to promote accountability.

For countries already experiencing severe climate impacts, this weakens trust in the COP process and reinforces perceptions that negotiations prioritise pledges over delivery. Accountability, rather than ambition alone, is the connective tissue the current climate governance architecture most notably lacks.

The maze of institutions

Institutional sophistication and negotiation effectiveness have moved in opposite directions. Across the COP1–COP29 record, negotiation complexity is negatively correlated with outcome ambition. Parties that want to remain fossil-fuel dependent have exploited this tactic; procedural complexity and negotiation hurdles to delay or weaken progressive outcomes (Nurunnabi, 2026).

The increase in mechanisms, tracks, funds, and bodies has fragmented the climate finance architecture and further complicated reporting streams. As a result, it has produced coordination failures and an "illusion of activity" that substitutes for the difficult decisions effective action requires.

COP needs to evolve from a negotiation-centric model to an implementation-and-accountability-focused model. Increased complexity has ultimately made it harder for Parties to secure concrete commitments, creating an expanding array of processes and dialogues without corresponding guarantees of delivery.

The price of participation

Access to COP is increasingly shaped by wealth and affordability. At COP30 in Belém, rooms were priced up to USD 700 while UN subsistence allowance fell to around USD 140. These prices were reported to be nearly ten times higher than normal accommodation costs, as COP30's president claimed, prompting some governments to formally request that the conference be moved elsewhere.

Amnesty International warned that costs remained unaffordable for many civil society organisations and Indigenous peoples' representatives despite an affordability clause in the host country agreement.

Indigenous coordinators reported that leaders from Tanzania and across Africa simply could not attend.

Over 3,000 Indigenous representatives attended, *yet many remained at the Aldeia COP because only a small fraction had credentials to enter the venue*, with negotiations conducted in English without translation.

At the same time, more than *1,600 fossil fuel lobbyists* were accredited to COP30, meaning roughly one in every twenty-five participants, the largest share ever recorded.

Fossil fuel lobbyists were holding more badges than all delegates from the ten most climate-vulnerable nations combined.

Cost is not a neutral filter. It shapes who can participate and whose interests are more readily represented in the process.

The result is a participation model in which those most affected by climate change can face greater barriers to access than actors with significant financial and institutional resources.

2.4 LOOKING FORWARD

The decisions of COP28–COP30 were not meant to resolve the issues they addressed in the year they were taken. They set the terms for the following years and create several trajectories to follow, as directly outlined in the assessment above.

A delivery and accountability test

The last three COPs delivered some important building blocks. The challenge now is no longer simply making promises; it is ensuring that commitments translate into delivery.

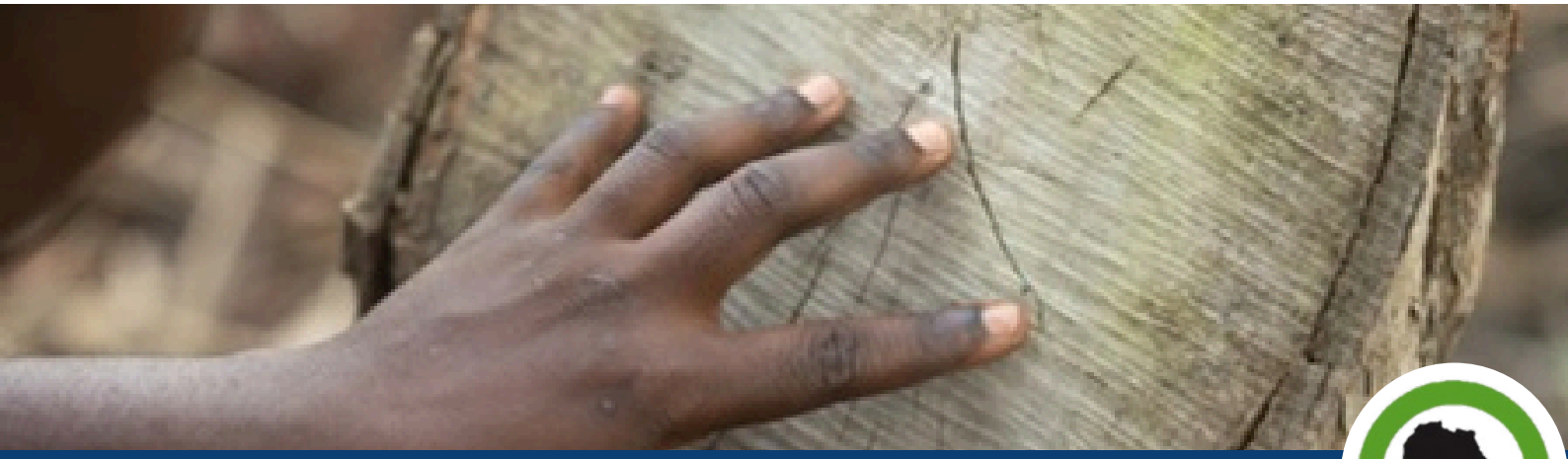
By 2030, success will be judged by whether NDCs and global stocktake commitments are fulfilled and overachieved, which requires climate finance to reach the countries and communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis as predictable, grant-based support rather than debt-creating loans.

It will also depend on whether the Baku-to-Belém Roadmap and the new climate finance programme translate commitments into clear accountability mechanisms for the delivery of climate finance by developed countries, and whether the loss and damage Fund is replenished at the scale needed to respond to growing climate impacts.

The credibility of the COP process now depends on closing the gap between commitments and pledges and the support delivered to those most affected.

A dense sequence of checkpoints

The next several years include a series of important accountability checkpoints across the Paris Agreement. Beginning in 2028, the Standing Committee on Finance will report every two years on progress towards the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), while the second Global Stocktake will assess collective progress on mitigation, adaptation, and means of implementation and support. Further reviews will follow, including the review of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience and the Belém Adaptation



Indicators in 2029, the review of the NCQG decision, the assessment of progress on National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) at COP35, and a dedicated assessment of developing countries' access to climate finance in 2030. Taken together, these milestones establish a recurring cycle of review and assessment.

While the decisions do not automatically close implementation gaps, they provide regular opportunities for Parties and observers to assess progress, identify shortcomings, and advocate for clearer baselines, stronger timelines, and more meaningful accountability.

Persistent risks to delivery

Despite these accountability opportunities, several risks could undermine their impact as we approach 2030.

First, the climate finance architecture remains vulnerable to the politics of major contributors, a risk already visible in 2025, which threatens the predictability and reliability of support at the moment developing countries need it most.

Second, the unresolved question of fossil fuel phase-out remains a major gap. By shifting this issue outside formal negotiations into presidency-led roadmaps and voluntary coalitions, the main driver of the climate crisis is addressed through smaller, weaker, and largely non-binding mechanisms.

Third, and particularly concerning for Africa, is the growing adaptation finance gap, documented by UNEP.

Without scaling up adaptation finance, clear implementation pathways, and adequate resources, unmet resilience needs and escalating loss and damage across the Global South will continue to grow.

These risks are interconnected: weak finance constrains adaptation and loss-and-damage responses; weak accountability makes commitments vulnerable to political shifts; and the continued absence of stronger action on fossil fuels increases the scale of the adaptation and loss-and-damage challenge. Each falls hardest on those least responsible.

SECTION 3

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to ensure that COP processes speak to the needs and expectations of African countries, reform is required in a number of sectors:

FINANCE:

Polluter Pays Principle and Fair Share

Climate finance at the global level should follow the polluter pays principle of fair share, where developed countries and the fossil fuel industry who are responsible for the crisis, are financing the solutions. This means that major polluting industries and Parties should bear their fair share of climate finance. This principle should apply to countries and private companies who emit large amounts of greenhouse gases globally

This approach shifts the financial burden of the climate crisis away from countries and communities that have contributed least to the climate crisis but are experiencing its most severe consequences.

Strengthen Direct Access Mechanisms

Increase finance commitments alongside measures that enable direct access to resources. The quantum of finance and the ability to access finance are two distinct challenges that are often conflated.

Even where allocations exist on paper, African entities continue to face accreditation, approval, and disbursement barriers. Any increase in finance should therefore be accompanied by practical steps to simplify access, establish and expand direct-access windows for national, local, and sub-national institutions, streamline approval requirements, and accelerate the disbursement of funds.

These measures should reduce administrative bottlenecks and ensure resources reach African institutions more directly, efficiently, and equitably.

Accountability for Climate Finance Delivery

Climate finance deals and agreements at global policy negotiations must include mandatory accountability mechanisms. The persistent gap between climate finance commitments and actual delivery demonstrates the need for stronger mechanisms to track and address non-delivery.

While many agreements since the Paris Agreement have been non-binding and have let historical emitters off the hook, finance deals should include clear, enforceable accountability mechanisms for failing to deliver climate finance to developing countries. This must include standardised, mandatory reporting of climate finance to governing bodies and more accessible grievance mechanisms.

FINANCE

Loss and Damage

Financing for loss and damage must be new, additional, and context-specific. Adequate recovery requires appropriate funding in form and scale, including grant-based support that does not deepen debt burdens or place further financial pressure on those affected.

Pledges to the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage must materialise into tangible support for affected communities, in a timely manner.

Finance for Adaptation

Developed countries should provide adequate, predictable, grant-based public finance for adaptation in line with their obligations under the UNFCCC and Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement.

Finance should be needs-based, directly accessible, and channelled to local and sub-national actors where possible, supporting locally led adaptation and long-term resilience without increasing debt or reliance on profit-seeking financing mechanisms.

Aligning climate plans with climate finance

COP processes must enable clear and transparent pathways for climate finance. Countries should be supported to ensure that their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and other climate commitments clearly identify and cost their mitigation, adaptation, and means of implementation needs.

These plans should be submitted alongside relevant technical documentation to provide a clear basis for provision of finance. Global climate commitments and finance arrangements must ensure that identified needs are matched with adequate support, including direct financing and other means of implementation required for delivery.

Breaking the Debt Cycle

The COP processes must ensure that climate finance is provided in a way that supports climate action without deepening debt vulnerabilities. This requires prioritising grant-based and highly concessional finance, increasing the availability of new and additional resources, and improving accessibility for countries and communities that need support.

Finance pathways should be designed to avoid reproducing debt burdens and enable countries to invest in essential sectors, including housing, food security, and education, while building climate resilience and delivering on their climate commitments.

FINANCE

More Ambitious Commitments:

COP negotiations should take stock of challenges and opportunities to deliver on the NCQG, and ensure the delivery of the $300bn goal and the enabling conditions required to mobilise the $1.3 trillion.

Human Rights-Based Approach

Even beyond the NCQG, any climate finance deal should use a human rights-based approach as a legal framework.

This approach would call for social and environmental safeguards, informed by global standards, to guide financing discussions.

We need an approach that considers principles of gender responsiveness, equity and justice, and Free, Prior and Informed Consent processes.

ADAPTATION

Strengthening Means of Implementation

Effective adaptation requires strengthened means of implementation through adequate, predictable and needs-based public finance, technology transfer and capacity-building, consistent with developed countries' obligations under the UNFCCC and Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement.

Adaptation finance should be grant-based, directly accessible, and locally led, while all means of implementation should be accompanied by clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure commitments are delivered and to support the effective implementation, monitoring, and reporting of adaptation actions.

Recognition of Indigenous and Local Knowledge Systems

Indigenous and local knowledge systems should be formally recognised as valid and valuable sources of adaptation evidence, alongside scientific and technical data, rather than an alternative or additional source of information. There should also be more global support (as per Article 11 of the Paris Agreement) for locally owned, locally driven capacity building at the national/local level.

National adaptation monitoring systems should integrate community-generated data and align with existing sub-national monitoring frameworks used by local governments, Indigenous Peoples and community institutions, reducing duplication while strengthening the legitimacy, relevance and local ownership of adaptation assessment.

Inclusion

At the global, national, and local level, climate adaptation processes must ensure the meaningful participation of communities most affected by climate impacts and those implementing adaptation projects on the ground, in decision-making, planning, and implementation. This includes the meaningful transfer and adoption of technologies that can improve resilience-building and respond to local needs. In addition, deeper stakeholder engagement at the COP level can enable a more embedded adaptation response. Collaboration between financial institutions, communities, and governing bodies must be prioritised.

Gender-Responsive Indicators

The Belém Adaptation Indicators and future iterations and implementation of the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) framework should require gender-disaggregated reporting as a mandatory component, not an optional consideration. This would improve adaptation monitoring's ability to identify differential vulnerabilities, track equitable outcomes, and inform gender-responsive policy and investment decisions.

ADAPTATION

Structured Pathways for Success:

Adaptation finance should be grant-based, directly accessible, and locally led, while all means of implementation should be accompanied by clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure commitments are delivered and to support the effective implementation, monitoring, and reporting of adaptation actions.

Policy Alignment

COP negotiations must ensure that climate adaptation frameworks are replicable at the national level and that policies are aligned. This enables more accurate reporting and improvement of implementation. In addition, metrics of success, reporting structures, and processes should be consistent in order to align with the Paris Agreement and create a more robust Global Stocktake process.

OPERATIONS

Representational Justice

COP structures should make use of a diversity of tactics to include more stakeholder engagement and further representation from non-Party actors, including community organisations, civil society and Indigenous groups. This involvement should be institutionalised through new communication structures and inclusion strategies.

Affected groups should be adequately represented and meaningfully included in negotiations. This should extend beyond national government representatives and accredited advocacy organisations to include community-based organisations, youth-led groups, Indigenous Peoples, local practitioners and other actors with direct experience of climate impacts and implementation realities.

Representational justice requires ensuring that those most affected by climate change have a meaningful role in shaping decisions, not only those with institutional access or established international representation.

Balancing Participation

COP presidents must ensure a balance of participation and influence. The fossil fuel industry should be required to present transition plans before being accredited by a party or observer and allowed to participate at COP negotiations. Meaningful participation requires addressing practical and structural barriers that prevent equitable representation.

COP presidencies should work to reduce barriers such as high visa costs and rejection rates faced by delegates from Africa, while ensuring fair and transparent badge allocation processes that provide adequate access for climate-vulnerable groups and regions. Each host country should adopt a single, unified, and electronic visa system for COP that is both accessible and affordable.

Accessibility

Inclusive participation also depends on effective operational planning. COP presidencies should prioritise accessible venue locations, affordable accommodation options and reliable local transport systems to ensure that participation is not determined by financial capacity or logistical privilege.

Integrating Non-Party Contributions

Side events provide valuable platforms for civil society, Indigenous Peoples, youth, researchers and practitioners to exchange knowledge and showcase innovative climate solutions. However, these contributions rarely influence formal negotiations.

COP processes should establish formal pathways to incorporate evidence and recommendations from non-Party stakeholders into negotiation agendas and decision-making through a dedicated and substantive consultation process with non-parties, strengthening the link between participatory engagement and negotiated outcomes.

OPERATIONS

Monitoring and Evaluation

COP negotiations must build in time and resources to monitor and evaluate agreements and negotiation outcomes. To ensure agreements make meaningful change, they need detailed analysis of methodologies, challenges, and the scale of action required. This can also include oversight from civil society and community representatives.

Updated Governance Structures

COP negotiations are increasingly becoming exclusionary due to outdated structures. Governance structures need a major update, and the non-binding nature of some agreements must be re-evaluated. There is a need for a system that prioritises implementation, transparency and accountability.

This includes strengthening mechanisms to monitor delivery of climate finance and adaptation commitments, institutionalising stakeholder participation, improving transparency in negotiations, and exploring procedural reforms such as adopting the UNFCCC Rules of Procedure with a voting option when consensus cannot be found, to reduce decision-making deadlock while preserving legitimacy.

More especially, governance structures at COP should include more stringent consequences for non compliance of binding agreements, under the UNFCCC treaty and Paris Agreement.

Communications

COP presidencies should put greater effort into sharing up-to-date science and implementation strategies with Parties and stakeholders ahead of negotiations. Sharing key information is crucial for real-time planning and solutions.

CONCLUSION

For COP to deliver meaningful outcomes for Africa and the broader Global South, structural, financial and operational reforms are needed. This includes:

- Enabling conditions for fair and equitable financial deals
- Operationalisation of funds such as Loss & Damage
- Significant progress on adaptation finance
- COP process that is more representative, accessible, transparent, and accountable.

Unlocking financing for Africa's just transition requires urgent action on debt relief and suspension, providing grants rather than loans for climate projects (including adaptation projects), and innovative finance mechanisms such as debt-for-climate swaps.

Ultimately, the credibility of the COP process will depend not only on the commitments it produces, but on whether those commitments translate into meaningful outcomes for the people and communities most affected by climate change.

African countries and communities continue to face significant economic and non-economic losses and damages despite having contributed disproportionately little to cumulative global emissions.

Reforming COP is therefore not simply a question of improving its efficiency; it is a question of strengthening its legitimacy, equity and capacity to deliver climate action.

A more inclusive and accountable COP, grounded in the needs and experiences of affected communities, is essential to closing the persistent gap between commitments, finance and implementation.

ENDORSEMENTS

- Africa Inclusion, Work and Innovation Network
- The Green Belt Movement
- Support Humanity Cameroon
- Youth Bridge Foundation
- Youth Climate Council Ghana
- Voices for Forests Alliance
- Rwenzori Trust for Community Development (RWETCODE)
- The National Youth Council
- Global Forum 4 Literacy
- Youth Climate Collective
- Quest for Growth and Development Foundation
- Domens Roofing and Solar
- Ubuntu SDG Collective-NPC
- Green Systems innovation Hub
- The National Youth Council
- Global Forum 4 Literacy
- Youth Climate Collective
- Quest For Growth and Development Foundation
- Domens Roofing And Solar
- Ubuntu SDG Collective-NPC
- Green Systems Innovation Hub

ENDORSEMENTS

- Agriculture
- Réseau pour l'Engagement et l'Action Climatique au Tchad
- SK Agricare
- Disability Peoples Forum Uganda
- Working For Climate
- Women Reign
- GDMR
- YIM Foundation
- Ngila Foundation
- Jamaa Resource Initiatives
- Cederberg Rastafari Movement (231-408-NPO)
- Mental Health Advocacy Student Alliance
- African Foundation for Environment and Climate Change (AFECC)
- ASSODEF
- Hotlane
- Section 24
- Alliance of Global Volunteer Organizations (AGVO)
- Reformed African Congregational Church
- Lesedi la lethabo Npo
- African Centre for Applied Forestry Research and Development (CARFAD)
- Sustainable Development Goals Radio

ENDORSEMENTS

- Neferok Development Initiative
- Evergreen Valley Tree Nursery Charity Foundation Uganda
- Union des jeunes d'Afrique et de Madagascar
- Earth Regenerative Project Sierra Leone
- Association of Scrap and Waste pickers of Lagos (Youth Forum)
- Global Awareness for Development Initiatives
- Creative Initiative for Enterprise Development
- Community Watchtower (COWAT)
- COLLECTIVE PATHWAYS
- AYICC
- Association GOCEAN - Centre de Gorée sur le Climat, l'Environnement, le Patrimoine eg les Droits Humains
- Aid Life Learn Environment (ALLEN)
- Movimentu Rosas Mean
- Earthlife Africa
- Enfluencers
- CARE group in Lockport
- DBDS
- Syndev
- Nature Horizons Foundation
- Keystone Mercantile

ENDORSEMENTS

- Cercle des Grands Pionniers CGP
- Indigenous Peoples' for Peace and Climate Justice
- Nile Women in Development Initiatives (NWIDI)
- Laudato Si' Movement Africa
- Jamaa Resource Initiatives
- Kaduna Global Shapers Hub
- Engarch Consultants Limited
- Actions Féministes pour le Développement Durable en Guinée
- African Foundation for Environment and Climate Change
- The Climate Reality Project Australia and Pacific
- The Climate Reality Brasil
- The Climate Reality Project India and South Asia
- Climate Reality United States
- The Climate Climate Reality Project Latin America/The Climate Reality Project América Latina
- The Climate Reality Project Canada
- Climate Reality Europe

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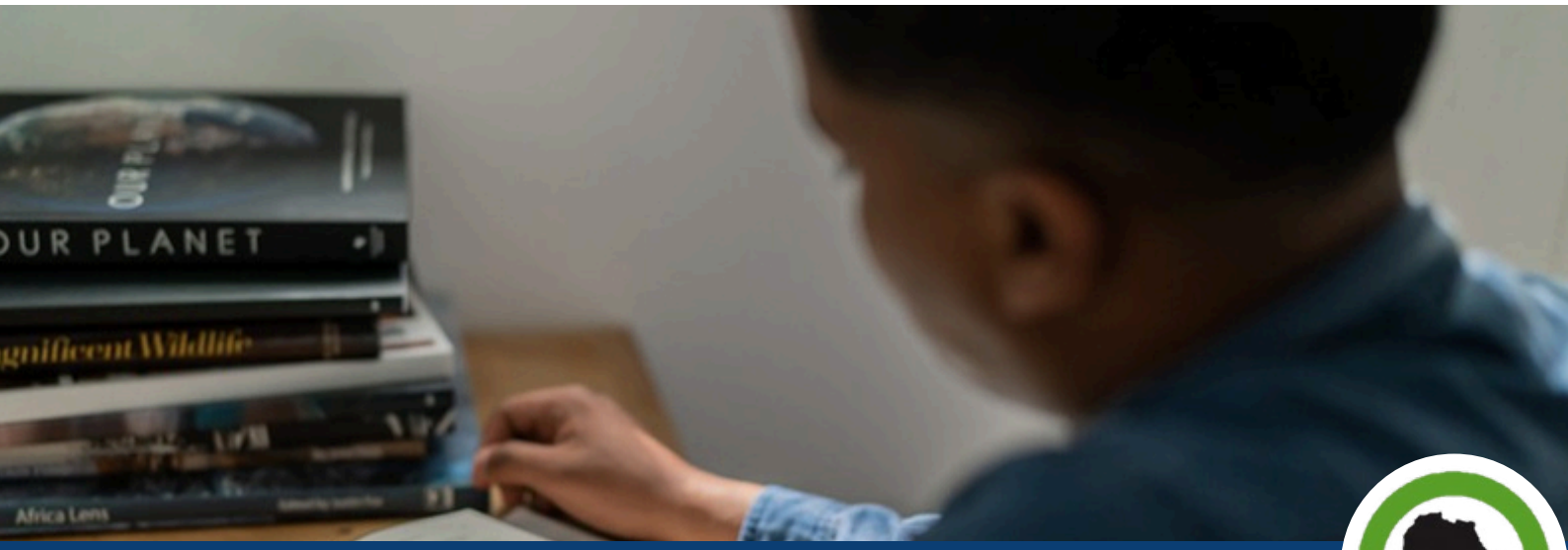

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