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“Special Circumstances” and the Politics of Climate Vulnerability: African Agency in the UN Climate Change Negotiations

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Abstract

African countries are well recognised as being among the worst affected by the impacts of climate change. However, efforts to secure recognition of these “special circumstances” of African countries within the UN climate negotiations have been unsuccessful, despite this being a continental priority prior to and following adoption of the Paris Agreement. Such status is linked to global priorities for funding adaptation to climate change. This article explores why some other groups of developing countries have been successful in securing such recognition when African countries have not. It provides a historical institutionalist explanation of the path-dependent politics of such institutional recognition, emphasising the timing of when different groups have advanced vulnerability claims, which shapes the opposition that African countries have encountered in their efforts, as relative late-movers, to exercise agency. It highlights contestation surrounding what “vulnerability” to climate impacts means, and how this contestation has divided Global South solidarity.

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Keywords

Africa, climate change, negotiations, climate vulnerability, United Nations, African agency, African Group

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Introduction

The opening day of the UN Climate Change Conference in December 2018 (“COP24”) saw a few thousand delegates gathered in the plenary hall of the conference centre in Katowice, Poland. The 10a.m. start time for the opening plenary came and went, with no sign of presiding officers taking their seats on the dais. Eventually, at noon, Fiji’s prime minister (the president of the 2017 conference) and Poland’s vice-minister (the incoming conference president) began proceedings. In his opening remarks, Prime Minister Bainimarama proceeded to explain the reason for the delay: the presidency had been holding backroom consultations over an item that had been submitted two days before by the African Group of Negotiators (AGN) to be included on the conference agenda: “the special needs and special circumstances of Africa under the Paris Agreement” (AGN, 2018; UNFCCC, 2018).

Prime Minister Bainimarama then reported that other groups had also submitted similar requests: the Asia-Pacific Group, Arab Group, and the Group of Latin American and Caribbean states. Rather than formally including these proposed items on the conference agenda and discussing them in the normal manner through spin-off groups, however, this would be taken up in a specific set of informal consultations that would report back to the President, without being included on the formal conference agenda. With this understanding, the conference agenda was formally adopted, allowing the rest of proceedings to begin (IISD, 2018: 1).

Twelve days later, as the conference closed (including running over time by thirty hours), Africa’s proposal was nowhere to be seen, with a brief oral report from the Polish conference president that “there had been no consensus on the matter” (UNFCCC, 2019a: para. 34). Why was the AGN demand for the recognition of Africa’s special circumstances unfruitful?

This article explores the AGN’s demands for the recognition of the special circumstances of Africa in the global response to climate change – a demand articulated constantly over the past decade, including the Paris Agreement negotiations. It draws on historical institutionalist (HI) approaches in International Relations theory to argue that the AGN has not been successful in realising this demand principally due to the path-dependent character of how “vulnerability” has been constructed in the UNFCCC process. Small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs) were the first-movers in securing explicit recognition of their special circumstances as being “particularly vulnerable” to climate impacts, and hence needing dedicated support for their adaptation efforts. African efforts to similarly claim such recognition, however, have been more recent, and have faced opposition from other developing countries, especially Latin American states, over such vulnerability status claims. The limited progress that the AGN has achieved is related to the timing and sequencing of the negotiating process, and where in the absence of consensus, outcomes revert to the initial equilibrium that limit recognition to SIDS and LDCs.

This argument addresses a number of different scholarly debates. The first surrounds this special issue’s theme, illustrating the challenges of exercising “African agency” in the context of multi-lateral negotiations. Such negotiations where “Africa” has

developed common positions have been one of the main arenas that have driven scholarly interest into the concept of African agency itself (Zondi, 2013), although there are of course other conceptualisations of African agency (see Fisher, 2018). These common positions – and their fate – provide one way of analysing African agency “in the singular” (Brown, 2012), although part of the story is also how different subgroups of African states, such as regional powers, compete to shape common positions and claim leadership roles (Nelson, 2016). The exercise of such agency is also highly institution- and context-specific, in shaping how much room for manoeuvre African states have, through elements such as discursive structures or rules over decision-making (see Lee, 2012). This article contributes to this debate by examining African agency in the UNFCCC context on a specific item on the negotiating agenda over categorisations of being “vulnerable.” It provides a single-case historical study that complements more general discussions of African contributions to the overall design of the international climate architecture (Vickers, 2013; Zondi, 2013) as well as those on specific issues such as deforestation (Atela et al., 2017). The type of agency explored in this case is also different to types often focused upon elsewhere in the literature, which has often been considered vis-à-vis former colonial powers or the Global South emerging powers, especially China (i.e. Shaw et al., 2009; Vickers, 2013). Instead, this article examines African agency in relation to other Global South countries within the Group of 77 (G77) and China negotiating coalition, where the AGN is just one among a number of developing country negotiating coalitions (see Klöck et al., 2021)

The second debate lies in the politics of the international climate negotiations. The issue of Africa’s special circumstances has only been briefly recognised in the academic literature (i.e. Chin-Yee, 2016: 9; Khan et al., 2020). Among the substantive issues of these negotiations, it has a low profile outside of the conference rooms. To the extent that it can hold up the entire conference agenda, as the opening anecdote illustrates, however, it signifies an issue of importance both to African countries as well as to the dynamics of the overall negotiating process that has been underexplored. More substantively, this article addresses a question that will take on greater importance in the future, surrounding the allocation of adaptation finance and who “gets” such finance (Khan et al., 2020). It provides clues about how this question, which poses ethical dimensions about distributive justice as well as ones of institutional design, might be addressed. It highlights how questions over the allocation of adaptation finance turn on the successful or contested “performance” of climate vulnerability to claim the status of being “particularly vulnerable” (as coined by Corbett et al., 2019).

Third, it illustrates the value and insights provided by historical institutionalism to the study of international negotiations, and the UNFCCC process in particular. It draws on the growing interest in HI to explore questions of institutional change and development in international relations (Fioretos, 2011), which is especially relevant to understanding the degree of agency that the AGN is able to exercise within the institutional structures of the climate negotiating process.

The first section of this article introduces the HI concepts through which this case of African agency will be examined, and its overall argument on the importance of the

sequencing of negotiations. The second then sets out the context to African agency in the climate negotiations, and the link between exercising agency and “performing” vulnerability in claiming a special institutional status as being “particularly vulnerable” to climate impacts. The third section then traces this vulnerability debate across the history of the climate negotiations: how the link between vulnerability and adaptation has been institutionally constructed in the climate negotiations; Africa’s demands and the self-reinforcing dynamics of SIDS and LDCs’ interests; and the counter-reaction of other countries, especially Latin American ones, to Africa’s demands. Ultimately, this process-tracing exercise shows how issues of timing and sequencing have limited the scope for the successful exercise of African agency.

Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependency in Vulnerability Claims

Historical institutionalism has grown in prominence in international relations over the past decade as a way of explaining institutional change and stability through an attention to timing and sequencing (Fioretos, 2011; Rixen and Viola, 2016). Among other elements, HI accounts of institutional development often emphasise the concept of path dependence in order to trace the effects of past institutional choices on subsequent change and non-change. Some elements of the climate negotiations have also been discussed in terms of path dependent dynamics, such as deforestation (Pistorius et al., 2017). What an HI perspective also emphasises is the need to be sensitive to the *process* of change and non-change – and in the case of the latter, that “resilience against pressures of change is different from no change” (Rixen and Viola, 2016). This “resilience” is what is of interest here. A static analysis of the outcomes of each UNFCCC conference would suggest that the subject of being “particularly vulnerable” is not especially contentious – because there has been no change in the formal specification of this. Yet this would belie the contentiousness of this subject during negotiations themselves, where active efforts to change the formal specification of “particularly vulnerable” have been made, but resulted in no change.

The insights that a temporal dimension provides are traced through three related HI concepts for understanding institutional resilience surrounding who is “particularly vulnerable.” The first is the critical juncture, which especially includes (but is not limited to) foundational moments of institutional development. The start-up moments of an institutional process are akin to “constitutional” moments – and in an HI account, are also seen as “moments of relative structural indeterminism in which agency matters and choices are possible” (Rixen and Viola, 2016: 13). In this phase, first-movers can have advantages in securing particular status that become less easy for latecomers to subsequently revise (Pierson, 2004: 72). Importantly, these choices also include the rules through which subsequent decisions are made, and thereby shaping just how easy or difficult it is to revise the initial understandings embedded in the institution’s “constitution.” In this case, the critical juncture encompasses the initial negotiations of the UNFCCC as well as its first discussions on adaptation that began to operationalise the link to climate vulnerability.

The second concept central to a HI approach is the establishment of *self-reinforcing* processes, or increasing returns, where “the returns to engaging in a certain behaviour or from adopting a certain rule increase over time and make the adoption of alternatives less attractive” (Rixen and Viola, 2016: 12). These are endogenous sources of stability and what are informally often called the “stickiness” of institutions; institutions “lock-in” particular balances of power that “give those in privileged positions [...] a take in protecting extant designs, especially nonmajoritarian ones” (Fioretos, 2011: 377). In this case, both SIDS and LDCs are the two groups of developing countries explicitly recognised as being “particularly vulnerable,” who thus also have an interest in preserving the status quo. Expanding the range of countries to which this status applied – the implication of the AGN position – would also be expected to put further pressures on already inadequate funding to support adaptation efforts.

The third concept is that of a *reactive* sequence, where the institution’s own features and practices themselves generate adverse reactions that challenge the institution itself (Hanreider and Zurn, 2017). This sheds light on how a particular distribution of power and status can serve as an endogenous source of instability, as negative feedback that encourages revisionist behaviour to alter particular status quo institutional practices – or even the institution entirely. In this case, it is the AGN itself that demonstrates the reactive sequence, through its demand to be included as among the “particularly vulnerable.” But as will also be shown, this in turn generates a counter-reaction, which comes from other developing country groups also not included as among the “particularly vulnerable, providing further resistance against changing the status quo.”

Through these dynamics, an HI account provides particular value against other potential explanations through its emphasis on timing and point-to-point comparisons, in opposition to examining snapshot accounts of institutional outcomes (Fioretos, 2011: 373). For instance, the difficulty that the AGN has encountered could be explained as the result of being in a weak bargaining position to press forward its negotiating demands. However, when examined over time, the AGN has been arguably more cohesive and active in the immediate past than it has been for longer stretches of the history of the climate negotiations (see Roger and Belliethathan, 2016). Indeed, even if the AGN could be considered a weak actor, one source of this weakness that an HI account highlights is the revisionist nature of its negotiating objective – that the inertia of the status quo serves as a form of power, and seeking to secure recognition of its special circumstances takes place in a context where the status quo recognised other groups, rather than a blank-sheet institutional design context.

Alternatively, a normative explanation could point to the social acceptance of others’ claims for special circumstances being more normatively compelling than that of African countries. However, this would miss the political debate surrounding the allocation of climate adaptation finance, which is far more than a principled debate around defining vulnerability (Ciplet et al., 2013). An HI perspective highlights how the institution shapes which ideas matter and that how they are embedded is related to their temporal sequence (Fioretos, 2011: 375). In this debate over vulnerability, the actual way in which the UNFCCC process has embedded ideas is not just about who is particularly vulnerable, but also about *when* such ideas have been articulated.

African Agency and Vulnerability Claims

This article analyses African agency through the AGN's efforts to successfully claim "particularly vulnerable" status. In doing so, it allows for a distinctly *African* concern to be the object of analysis. In other studies of African agency in the climate negotiations, claimed African successes are not significantly distinguishable from those shared by most, if not all, other developing country groups – such as on a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol (Vickers, 2013: 687–688) or on deforestation (Atela et al., 2017). From the AGN perspective, the basis of Africa's special circumstances that differentiates the continent from other negotiating groups or regions of the world is the combination of its climate vulnerability with its development progress and reliance on carbon-rich, natural resource extraction (Esipisu, 2019; personal interview with AGN negotiator, 2020).

Africa's climate vulnerability is illustrated by the projection that temperatures in Africa will rise faster than the global temperature increase, at both 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius of global warming (Hoegh-Gulbert et al., 2018). Through impacts such as changing precipitation patterns and increased extreme heat events, there will be negative consequences for agricultural production, water availability, and food security, ultimately impacting the ability of African countries to meet their Sustainable Development Goals. These impacts also compound limited adaptive capacity and resilience to both these slow-onset changes, as well as extreme weather events that are also more likely due to climate change – such as tropical cyclones, drought, and flooding. The costs of adapting to climate impacts for African states, in one much-cited estimate by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP, 2015), could be up to US\$50 billion/year by 2050 *if* global warming is kept to below 2 degrees Celsius (i.e. the formal goal of the Paris Agreement), highlighting that inadequate mitigation efforts further increase the costs of adaptation. The "adaptation gap" between these needs and actual flows has also been a major emphasis of African countries' Nationally Determined Contributions, underscoring that successful NDC implementation will be heavily dependent on closing this gap in financial support (African Development Bank, 2018: 34). As a result, securing international support for adaptation has been especially prioritised by African countries, individually as well as acting collectively through the AGN (Roger and Belliethathan, 2016; Vickers, 2013; Zondi, 2013). For instance, the issue of "loss and damage" has been as championed by African countries as by SIDS. The concept of a "global goal on adaptation" included in the Paris Agreement began as an AGN proposal, which has continued to press for its operationalisation since (Ngwadla and el-Bakri, 2016).

Specifically, amid a shrinking global carbon budget and increasing momentum behind global anti-fossil fuel norms (i.e. Green, 2018), the AGN has feared that carbon-rich natural resource extraction will be subject to these demands, limiting resources with which to fund development. A shift towards sustainable development and greater climate ambition, in other words, requires specialised support if the conventional development pathway is no longer socially possible (Esipisu, 2019; personal interview with AGN negotiator, 2020). While most LDCs are also African states, the graduation of LDCs from this category will, over time, reduce their access to the benefits that flow from

specialised recognition, raising a concern that without recognition for the African region, overall finance will decrease and that graduation penalises development efforts (personal interview with AGN negotiator, 2020). It is also the case, nonetheless, that recognition for the continent as a whole would also apply to its middle-income economies such as South Africa, Egypt, or Nigeria.

Agency in Vulnerability

African agency is demonstrated and performed through an emphasis on weakness and, specifically, vulnerability. Being vulnerable (in this climate context, “particularly vulnerable”) is not a status that is objectively given. Successful status claims are the result of the “competent performance” of vulnerability, able to successfully persuade others in order to secure differential treatment (Corbett et al., 2019). States seeking these vulnerability categorisations “*fought* for them by drawing attention to their unique condition” (Corbett et al., 2019: 88, emphasis original). The meaning of vulnerability, in essence, is the result of bargaining and construction and, while subject to contestation, also resistant to easy change. Indeed, this is true in international organisations more generally. An instructive example is provided by Corbett et al. (2019), in tracing the successful emergence of the “SIDS” and “Small and Vulnerable Economies” categories in the UN system and WTO, respectively; these are status claims that emphasise unique vulnerabilities in order to secure (beneficially) differential treatment within these international processes.

Performing this status claim is what underlies the broader vulnerability debate. There is an extensive academic debate around defining and measuring vulnerability, the concept of which has itself evolved over time (Betzold and Weiler, 2018: 40–41; Ciplet et al., 2013; Oculi and Stephenson, 2018). A range of different indices have been developed to produce climate vulnerability “rankings,” such as the Global Climate Risk Index by NGO Germanwatch, the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, or the Climate Change Vulnerability Index by advisory group Verisk Maplecroft. Depending on their purpose and definition of vulnerability, such indices weight indicators differently, producing different results (Füssel and Klein, 2006; Oculi and Stephenson, 2018). But in the UNFCCC negotiating process, the vulnerability debate is ultimately a political one due to the perception that it prioritises the allocation of adaptation finance. Unsurprisingly, despite calls for a formal, ostensibly scientific assessment to be undertaken, this has not been agreed. As Klein (2009: 291) observed:

it is also *politically* difficult to agree on a method that would allow for such comparisons [of vulnerability] and for the identification of countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change [...] any resulting ranking is likely to be contested by countries that, according to the ranking, are not particularly vulnerable and therefore not prioritised for adaptation funding. (emphasis original)

As a result, the institutional interpretation of who is “particularly vulnerable” to the impacts of climate change is a political definition – which is what the AGN has sought to change, thus far unsuccessfully.

Critical Junctures, Self-Reinforcing Processes, and Reactive Sequences: Negotiating Over the “Particularly Vulnerable”

The rest of this article now turns to explaining the outcomes of the AGN’s vulnerability claim through tracing the negotiating process by which this vulnerability debate has unfolded, drawing on the three HI concepts introduced earlier: critical junctures, self-reinforcing processes, and reactive sequences.

Critical Junctures and Founding Moments

The Framework Convention represents the founding, constitutional moment of the international climate change regime. Its adoption was the start of the critical juncture for the understanding of being “particularly vulnerable” to the adverse impacts of climate change, lasting until the negotiating process began to operationalise the link between adaptation and vulnerability in its initial COP meetings. While the issue of climate finance to support developing country responses to climate change is applicable to all developing countries, negotiated outcomes have also emphasised the link between vulnerability and adaptation finance. This idea that developing countries had “specific needs and special circumstances,” and that among these there were those who were “particularly vulnerable to the affects of climate change” was a key principle recognised from the very beginning of the climate negotiations (in Article 3.2). The Convention then also went to make the link between this vulnerability and international support, in Article 4.4:

The developed country Parties and other developed Parties included in Annex II shall also assist the developing country Parties that are *particularly vulnerable* to the adverse effects of climate change in meeting costs of adaptation to those adverse effects.

Article 4.8 goes on to indicate who would receive special consideration for funding, insurance, and technology transfer support. Nine groups of developing countries are listed, one of which are SIDS, while Article 4.9 provides explicit recognition of the LDCs. The inclusion of the former – a hitherto unrecognised category of countries in international processes – was indicative of the considerable diplomatic agency that island states had demonstrated in this initial phase of the climate negotiations, including their organisation into a distinct coalition, the Alliance of Small Island States (Corbett et al., 2019: 18–19). Vulnerability claims were central to their case to being considered a distinct category of countries, with some of the most prominent imagery of climate impacts being sea-level rise that would afflict “sinking” islands. Besides inclusion in Article 4.8, SIDS secured further special recognition through a dedicated seat on the COP Bureau (the small group of countries overseeing the organisation of the negotiating

process). This was an institutional feature without precedent in other UN settings, where membership is normally based on the five UN regions (Yamin and Depledge, 2006: 410), and which has also since been duplicated across other UNFCCC bodies. The inclusion of the LDCs, on the other hand, were more routine. LDCs were already an established category of countries within the UN system, with formal processes for defining membership (currently forty-seven countries) and were receiving varied forms of differential treatment in view of their low level of economic development (Fialho, 2012), illustrating the importance of timing and past precedent.

Negotiations on adaptation were slow to develop substance (Ciplet et al., 2013) – but as these gathered pace at the end of the 1990s to operationalise how adaptation efforts would be supported, SIDS and LDCs were explicitly identified in COP decisions as those who were “particularly vulnerable.” Highlighting these two groups provided a way to “signal some degree of sequential and institutional prioritisation” in adaptation support, even if it “does not imply that other developing countries are not particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts” (Yamin and Depledge, 2006: 233). But this recognition was the result of the active agency of these two groups to make and establish their vulnerability claims, to perform them, and to “fight” for them. The LDCs as a negotiating coalition itself did not become active until 2000, but the agency demonstrated in their emergence was itself triggered by the need to safeguard their special recognition that Article 4.9 provided for amid this growing adaptation debate. This successfully resulted in LDC-specific processes for planning and funding adaptation activities being agreed in 2001. But it was also arguably the beginning of the realisation, which would grow over time, that support from other developing countries for preserving references to the special circumstances of LDCs could not be counted upon (Bernardo, 2020: 65).

By contrast, over this time period of the critical juncture, African countries were far less engaged in the climate process, and did not begin to regularly co-ordinate as a formal negotiating group until 2005 (Roger and Belliethathan, 2016). “Africa” as a region was also not a category included in Article 4.8, meaning that as they sought to press their case for inclusion as being “particularly vulnerable” from the late 2000s onwards, they were effectively late-movers, seeking to revise the by-then common practice of explicit recognition for SIDS and LDCs.

A further illustration of the importance of the timing, and coming early or late, is in comparing the relative agency of African countries in the desertification negotiations, which ran near-parallel to these initial climate negotiations. Although African countries negotiated primarily through the G77, rather than independently, they were *the* key proponents of treating desertification in as serious terms as climate change, biodiversity, and forests, successfully securing a mandate for full treaty negotiations as an outcome of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (Najam, 2004). Indeed, the full title of the treaty itself, adopted in 1994 – the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa – illustrates the successful recognition of Africa’s special circumstances. At this moment in time, desertification was seen as a more pressing issue than climate change, and hence the focus of African diplomatic activism. By contrast, advancing Africa’s climate vulnerability claim well

over a decade later was essentially a late-mover effort, trying to fit into a space where SIDS and LDC claims had become well established.

Finally, an important feature of the negotiating process that would also shape subsequent possibilities was in the establishment of the UNFCCC's decision-making processes through consensus, which has provided a way for reluctant parties to block agreement to potential outcomes (Yamin and Depledge, 2006). When such consensus cannot be found, a reversion to past agreed language, and especially the Convention itself, serves as the default form of agreement. In the context of the vulnerability debate, in the absence of a consensus on a new formulation, past practice thereby represents an equilibrium in its treatment of the "particularly vulnerable, and the repeated recognition therein of the two groups already mentioned: SIDS and LDCs.

Reactive Sequences and Self-Reinforcing Processes in the Paris Agreement Negotiations

In the post-Kyoto negotiating phase leading up to Paris, pressing for recognition of their special circumstances was a key objective of African countries. Doing so undoubtedly reflects an objective concern about their vulnerability to climate impacts. Crucially, however, it also demonstrates the logic of a reactive sequence, where the special recognition accorded to SIDS and LDCs at least partially motivates the AGN's negotiating position. As Corbett et al. (2019: 18) observe, one implication of a successful performance of vulnerability is that the benefits that flow from such agency can then also sought by others who then seek to perform it in turn. In this case, the AGN's efforts follow the successful vulnerability claims by SIDS and LDCs – but which has been stymied by being in a position of latecomers seeking to revise the established practice.

In this situation, it is unsurprising that resistance would come, although implicitly rather than explicitly, from the existing groups prioritised as being "particularly vulnerable," demonstrating the logic of the self-reinforcing process. Those in privileged status positions have incentives to maintain the status quo institutional design, illustrating the importance emphasised by historical institutionalism about *relative* timing and first-movers using their position to "consolidate its hold on a particular 'political space'" (Pierson, 2004: 72). Both SIDS and LDCs have strategic reasons to oppose an expanded definition that would increase demands on finite adaptation funding, as well as maintain the institutional benefits from their own existing recognition. For SIDS in particular, retaining this categorisation as "particularly vulnerable" is instrumentally important because many are high-income or middle-income countries (Bruckner, 2013). With this income-based classification, they would find some sources of development finance inaccessible, or for which they would be prioritised behind poorer developing countries. SIDS have contended that the uniqueness of small economies (among other characteristics) means that income is an inappropriate indicator of climate vulnerability. Some of this defensive behaviour was even visible in reacting to the formal co-ordination of the LDCs as a group in 2000, which prompted concern from AOSIS members about potential competition for finance (Yamin and Depledge, 2006: 40).

The interplay of these different dynamics provides insight into the vulnerability debates in the negotiating history of the Paris Agreement. The AGN had pressed hard for their explicit mention throughout the process, and earlier negotiating drafts had included “African states” alongside references to LDCs and SIDS. For instance, the main draft text developed at the beginning of the final week in Paris contained six references that treated “LDCs, SIDS and African states” together (UNFCCC, 2015a), addressing financial resources (three times), adaptation (once), capacity-building needs (once), and flexibility in reporting procedures (once). Footnotes indicated the request of African states to be listed in the preamble as among those that are “particularly vulnerable to climate-related events” and that their “special needs and circumstances” should be taken into account. The AGN argument, then and since, has been that such references would be consistent with the recognition of Africa as a priority in some prior COP decisions, including in relation to the 2007 Bali Action Plan and Green Climate Fund (AGN, 2018).

In the adopted Paris Agreement, instead, “Africa” only features once, in the preamble, in a way unconnected to vulnerability claims: “Acknowledging the need to promote universal access to sustainable energy in developing countries, in particular in Africa, through the enhanced deployment of renewable energy” (UNFCCC, 2015b). By contrast, LDCs and SIDS were recognised alongside each other five times, with LDCs also being specifically recognised in the preamble (Fry and Dhakal, 2018: 17–18). Indeed, retaining a specific reference to LDCs in the preamble was seen as one of the “most important ‘wins’” for the group (Abeyasinghe et al., 2016: 10). LDCs and SIDS “teamed up,” in the words of one negotiator belonging to both groups (Fry, 2016: 107) to support each other’s claims in terms of previously agreed language, but not those of other regional groups, at COP21. Their claims also received further weight by being presented as the existing equilibrium in terms of agreed language, which should be reverted to in the absence of consensus on a new specification of the “particularly vulnerable.” This recognition included Article 9.4, seen as particularly important because of its direction to how financial resources should be provided – through taking into special account both these groups:

The provision of scaled-up financial resources should aim to achieve a balance between adaptation and mitigation, taking into account country-driven strategies, and the priorities and needs of developing country Parties, especially those that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and have significant capacity constraints, *such as the least developed countries and small island developing States*, considering the need for public and grant-based resources for adaptation. (UNFCCC, 2015b, emphases added)

One commentary noted that “the inclusion of the word ‘such’ [...] does not by any means exclude other developing country parties different to ‘least developed countries and the small island developing States’ from being considered for accessing increased adaptation funding” (Gastelumendi and Gnitke, 2017). This point, however, was nonetheless seen as politically important by those *not* identified, including the AGN. Their omission in the text presented by the French presidency on the final day of COP21 was accepted

as part of the compromises made in adopting the Paris Agreement package (AGN, 2018), also illustrating the power of the presidency to return to the equilibrium formulation. Nonetheless, there was an important qualifier made immediately after the Agreement's adoption, when Egyptian minister Khaled Fahmy, the then-chair of the AGN, intervened to express the expectation that Africa's special circumstances would be returned to through future consultations convened by the French presidency (IISD, 2016: 12). This request, echoed in interventions from other African states such as Sudan and Nigeria, was responded to affirmatively by COP21 President Laurent Fabius and reflected in the COP21 proceedings report (UNFCCC, 2016: paras. 72–73). Informal discussions at successive COP meetings in 2016 and 2017, however, did not reach any conclusion, and disappointment at this state of “no progress” by the AGN prompted its effort to secure a formal treatment of this issue on the COP24 agenda (AGN, 2018). The informal consultations that followed, as recounted in the Introduction, however, also failed to yield further concrete outcomes.

At the 2019 COP25 conference in Madrid, when the issue of others' special circumstances was raised again by both the AGN and Latin American countries, AOSIS pointedly expressed that they would not support negotiations that would “amount to a renegotiation of the Paris Agreement” (IISD, 2019b), presenting their existing position as the equilibrium in interpreting the “particularly vulnerable.”

Counter-Reactive Sequences: Reactions to the AGN's Vulnerability Claim

The AGN's vulnerability claim itself was, as suggested above, partly a reaction to the successful claims of SIDS and LDCs. But an important reason as to why it has not been successful, thus far, lies in the *counter*-reaction to the AGN. Opposition to the AGN also came from other developing countries *not* listed among the particularly vulnerable (i.e. apart from the SIDS and LDCs). For these groups, while not being listed as particularly vulnerable was suboptimal, including for the aforementioned reasons linked to adaptation finance, what would be relatively worse would be if they remained outside the listing *and* African countries were formally recognised as being among the “particularly vulnerable.” The fear here was that they would then fall behind African countries in any prioritisation of climate finance, a situation perceived as unfair, especially as some African countries (including those vocally supporting Africa's vulnerability claim) were also middle-income countries or oil-exporting economies. In this way, allocating adaptation finance has become a “wedge issue” among developing countries (Ciplet et al., 2013; Oculi and Stephenson, 2018).

This was particularly the case among Latin American states that did not belong to the SIDS or LDC groups and therefore characterised themselves as a “squeezed middle” of being “insufficiently poor” (Araya, 2011). This concern about not being among the “particularly vulnerable” and access to adaptation finance was shared, although less vocally, by Arab countries and mountainous countries (on the latter, see Bhandary, 2017: 174, 184–185). One initial attempt made by some Latin American countries to secure their own recognition as being “particularly vulnerable” came in 2010–2011 when Colombia

formed an informal “Highly Vulnerable Countries” group. While not a formal negotiating coalition, these countries focused on the adaptation debate (Valencia, 2011), through the expansion of support for “National Adaptation Plans” (NAP) to guide longer-term adaptation planning. The NAP process was being negotiated primarily with LDCs in mind, but which Colombia successfully sought to broaden to include other developing countries, including their access to financial support to prepare NAPs (IISD, 2011).

Colombia also took the lead in subsequently establishing the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC) as a formal negotiating coalition in 2012, together with seven other Latin American states (initially Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, and Peru; and in 2015, Honduras and Paraguay). While AILAC addressed issues spanning the entire Paris Agreement negotiating agenda, one uniting factor was articulating their shared vulnerability to climate impacts, even while all were middle-income countries – this being a basis for their positions that developing countries should also be taking on mitigation commitments as well as receiving support for adaptation (Edwards et al., 2017: 72; Oculi and Stephenson, 2018). For AILAC, avoiding any specification of priorities in adaptation support that excluded Latin American countries was a key goal in the Paris Agreement negotiations (Edwards et al., 2017: 78–79), and they thereby engaged in a “strategic campaign” to thwart the adaptation clause (Article 7) from including any specific group of developing countries (Fry, 2016: 107). In their formal request for a new agenda item at COP24 referenced in the Introduction to this article, they set out their position that “all developing country Parties in different regions of the world – most notably Latin America – are highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change” (AILAC, 2018). In this, AILAC was joined by other Latin American countries with which they disagreed on other issues, such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Mexico: at the 2019 COP25 conference, this broader group of Latin American countries also insisted on the “equal treatment” of Africa with Latin America and other highly vulnerable regions (UNFCCC, 2019b). Indeed, the African vulnerability claim has been characterised as an “external threat of significant dimensions” to Latin America as a whole (Bueno, 2020: 70).

Latin American countries therefore sought in both public and private efforts to block the African demand from being realised. During the informal consultations at COP24, a proposal by the AGN to deliver a presentation stating their case was rejected as an acceptable mode of work by Latin American countries (personal interviews with multiple negotiators, 2020). The result was that no substantive discussions actually took place at COP24, resulting in the report by the Polish presidency cited in the Introduction to this article that there was no consensus to be found – not just substantively, but even procedurally about how to conduct the discussions. This same dynamic – of other groups of developing countries responding negatively to the AGN demand – was guided by the position that if the African claim was to be heard, so too would theirs. At COP25, after pre-session consultations by the presidency, AILAC countries again raised the question during the opening plenary of holding informal consultations on the special circumstances of Latin American countries. This request was predictably met with reactions demanding similar consideration of the circumstances of Arab states and mountainous countries, resulting in no agreement to hold such consultations on Latin American circumstances (IISD, 2019b).

This sequence of events illustrates the self-reinforcing and reactive processes at work. The African claim was not supported by two sets of countries, for different reasons: those *already* recognised as being particularly vulnerable, and those who were *not*, resulting in the breakdown of Global South solidarity over this question of the allocation of climate finance. Both types of groups perceived (correctly or incorrectly) that they would be relatively worse-off if the African demand was successful, the source of strategic rivalry among developing countries on adaptation finance (Betzold and Weiler, 2018: 181–182; Oculi and Stephenson, 2018). Despite concerted efforts at COP21 within the G77 to find a new formulation of “vulnerability” among developing countries, no consensus was possible to propose a new equilibrium for inclusion in the Paris Agreement (personal communication with G77 negotiator, 2015). The result has been that in the absence of consensus over changes to be made from the status quo, the least-resistant path towards the final outcome, in the Paris Agreement and since, has been a reversion back to the existing understanding that only explicitly recognises LDCs and SIDS as being the only specified groups that are “particularly vulnerable” to climate change. In a similar manner to Lee’s (2012: 96) analysis of African activism in the Doha round of WTO negotiations, African countries have the ability to express objections to consensus and to even veto new changes – but it is more challenging to set the agenda and gain the consensus of others towards favourable policy shifts.

Finally, a notable implication of this dispute being centred among developing countries has also meant that developed countries have not had to intervene significantly during these consultations. Developed countries would be hesitant at widening the “particularly vulnerable” interpretation too far, if this effectively re-constructs a differentiation firewall between developed and developing countries (interview with developed country negotiator, 2020). In this view, the widening of “particularly vulnerable” to a region that was not originally included in Article 4.8 of the UNFCCC “would open the floodgates to special pleading by other groups” (Rajamani and Guérin, 2017: 87). Nonetheless, this donor concern has not had to be forcefully advanced thus far.

Conclusion

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* report from the first day of COP24 reflected on the delayed start to proceedings: “While a compromise was struck, some delegates intimated that these issues [of special circumstances] may again return in future years” (IISD, 2018: 4). Indeed, in view of a continuing and growing “adaptation finance gap” between needs and flows of adaptation finance (Ciplet et al., 2013; UNEP, 2016), this debate is likely to recur and intensify. This article has explored the politics surrounding the “special circumstances” of developing countries as it relates to their being “particular vulnerable” to the adverse effects of climate change, and how African efforts to exercise agency and “perform” special circumstances have been thus far unsuccessful.

An HI interpretation of this debate highlights important aspects of the resilience of this stalemate. Interpretations established during the critical juncture served as an equilibrium, and that these founding interpretations have created self-reinforcing constituencies that generate pressure in favour of the status quo. The efforts of the AGN over

the past decade have contested this initial interpretation – there is no normative convergence surrounding this idea of who is particularly vulnerable – but that agency in advancing this contestation has not been sufficient to revise the institutional understanding of being particularly vulnerable due to counter-reactions from other developing country groups.

The tragedy of this “vulnerability competition” is that its significance for the disbursement of adaptation finance may actually not be all that great. Definitional disagreements surrounding what “counts” as adaptation finance have made assessing allocation complicated, including the weight of vulnerability indicators. Indeed, vulnerability is just one of a range of criteria driving adaptation finance allocation patterns, which include good governance issues, absorptive capacity, donor interests, and existing aid relationships (Betzold and Weiler, 2018; Khan et al., 2020; Weiler and Sanubi, 2019). Indeed, the vulnerability debate may even be counterproductive. While developing countries have remained otherwise united in their call for the increased mobilisation of finance by developed countries, the time and effort that has gone into the vulnerability debate also has opportunity costs on the broader agency of developing countries in shaping other negotiating outcomes (Bernardo, 2020: 67; Edwards et al., 2017: 79).

This article points to the continued need to inquire more deeply into how differences within the Global South are managed. The discussion here has touched upon interactions between the AGN and the LDCs, where the fact that most LDCs are African states has not prevented the two groups from being at odds. Internal continental dynamics in shaping the African common position itself are linked to the coherence of African agency (Nelson, 2016; Zondi, 2013), and why African LDCs acquiesce to a continental position that misaligns with their LDC position remains a puzzle for further research.

More broadly, the vulnerability debate perhaps also mirrors the contentiousness among developing countries over differentiation of mitigation commitments: how does the international climate regime treat a diverse group of Southern countries? The answer found in the Paris Agreement negotiations (partly resulting from a divided Global South) was to move to a self-differentiated system for mitigation contributions, rather than one based on developed/developing country annexes. In this respect, differentiation of vulnerability is just one component of the broader treatment of differentiation in the climate regime (Pauw et al., 2019; Rajamani, 2006: 194–199). Until the same begins to apply for the differentiation of vulnerability, however, Africa is likely to continue to draw attention to its case for being counted among the “particularly vulnerable.”

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“Spezielle Umstände” und Vulnerabilität gegenüber dem Klimawandel: afrikanische Akteursqualität bei den UN-Klimaverhandlungen

Zusammenfassung

Die afrikanischen Länder sind von den Auswirkungen des Klimawandels mit am stärksten betroffen. Die Bemühungen um die Anerkennung dieser „speziellen Umstände“ afrikanischer Länder innerhalb der UN-Klimaverhandlungen waren jedoch erfolglos, obwohl dies eine Priorität des Kontinents vor und nach der Verabschiedung des Übereinkommens von Paris war. Ein solcher Status geht mit einem Vorrang bei finanziellen Mittel für die Anpassung an den Klimawandel einher. Dieser Artikel geht der Frage nach, warum einige andere Entwicklungsländer erfolgreich bei der Anerkennung ihrer Situation waren, während afrikanischen Ländern dies nicht gelang. Er liefert eine historisch-institutionalistische Erklärung für die Voraussetzungen einer solchen institutionellen Anerkennung und untersucht den Zeitpunkt, zu dem verschiedene Gruppen ihre Ansprüche hinsichtlich Ressourcen für die Anpassung an den Klimawandel geltend gemacht haben. Als Nachzügler sind afrikanische Länder auf Widerstände gestoßen, die ihnen erschwert haben, Einfluss auszuüben. Dieser Artikel stellt heraus, was Kontestation über die Bedeutung von „Vulnerabilität“ gegenüber Klimaveränderungen bedeutet und sie die Solidarität im Globalen Süden einschränkt.

Schlagwörter

Afrika, Klimawandel, Verhandlungen, Vulnerabilität, Vereinte Nationen, afrikanische Akteursqualitäten, Gruppe afrikanischer Staaten