

The background features a vertical gradient from dark blue on the left to light purple on the right. In the center, there are stylized silhouettes of industrial smokestacks and trees. One smokestack is tall and thin, while others are shorter and wider. Wavy lines represent smoke or steam rising from the stacks. The trees have rounded, bushy canopies. The overall aesthetic is modern and graphic.

A Series

Seeking Climate Justice in International Agreements

Part 1:

A Short Reflection on Egypt's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC)



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منصة العدالة الاجتماعية
Social Justice Platform



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Introduction: Climate Justice and the Paris Agreement

Egypt is considered one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. It is susceptible to an array of environmental disturbances, such as the decrease in precipitation, increase of droughts and heat waves, changes in the Nile flow, saltwater intrusion on farmlands, reduced crop yields, intensified flooding, decline in fisheries, and coral reef loss, among other losses. These disturbances will be further exacerbated by existing social and political inequalities that permeate the country. The violence of climate change has its roots in historical and geopolitical factors, which is why we cannot separate the analysis of contemporary environmental issues from discussions around political economy and social justice.

Generally, environmental activists have pressured policymakers and states to adopt a climate justice approach in their efforts to deal with climate change. A climate justice approach is one that focuses not only on “the urgency of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but also the need to transform the inherited systems of material extraction, transport and distribution, energy-generation, production of goods and services, consumption, disposal and financing.”¹ It is about scrutinizing how environmental goods and responsibilities are distributed at the global, national, and local levels under conditions of climate change — as well as the participation and recognition of communities most vulnerable to climate catastrophes.² Yet despite the continuing efforts of activists, the prevailing politics of the United Nations meetings and agreements on climate change still remain shortsighted and not adequately in line with the principles of climate justice.

On the 12th of December, 2015, Parties to the The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) convened at COP 21 Paris and reached what is considered a “landmark agreement” on climate change. What arguably differentiates the Paris Agreement the most is the unprecedented consensus it received from member states -- with 195

¹ Patrick Bond. *Politics of Climate Justice: Paralysis Above, Movement Below* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012).

² David Schlosberg, “Reconceiving Environmental Justice: Global Movements and Political Theories,” *Environmental Politics* 13, 3 (2004): 517-540.

countries signing the agreement and 181 becoming party to it.³ The main goal of the Paris Agreement is to limit the increase in average global temperature to 1.5 °C.⁴ To do so, each state member has to determine, plan, and report on its contribution to mitigate climate change. Individual countries are asked to submit their “Intended Nationally Determined Contribution” (INDC) to the Convention — a document that outlines the respective country’s targets and strategies for combating climate change.

There are no binding mechanisms nor any sanctions for countries that do not submit their INDCs or commit to their execution. This is the first crucial difference between the Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol. The second difference is that the Kyoto Protocol had adopted the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” which recognized 1. The historical differences in the contributions of states to environmental and climate catastrophes, 2. The differences in technical and political capacities to deal with these catastrophes, and 3. The differences in stated responsibilities of countries to tackle climate change. This meant that, at least theoretically, developed countries would bear the larger bulk of climate responsibility.

Conversely, the Paris Agreement does not espouse the concept of differentiated responsibility and instead allows member states to decide what *they want* their responsibilities to be. This marks a fundamental shift from the approach of the Kyoto Protocol. It is no wonder, then, that the Paris Agreement received such widespread acclamation, for no country would ever object to an agreement that protects its freedom to voluntarily contribute (or to not contribute) to combating climate change without facing any legal consequences. The agreement does reaffirm the responsibility of developed countries to provide developing countries with resources to build climate-resilient futures, but even this still remains non-legally binding.

³ Signing refers to national delegations reaching an agreement during the conference and signing a treaty. Becoming party to an agreement refers to the ratification of an agreement by the state using its own national procedures.

⁴ The Paris Agreement sets out an action plan to limit global warming to well below 2°C, with an aim of limiting the increase in global average temperature to 1.5°C by the year 2100.

The question then remains whether the historic aspects of the agreement lie in its prospect of challenging a prevailing political system that prioritizes economic growth at the expense of the climate *or* of just getting as many parties as possible to agree on something. The fact that in nowhere the agreement mentions a comprehensive shift toward structural decarbonization has been disappointing — yet far from unexpected. The structural transformation of global and national economic systems is still off the negotiation table, which means that issues of global inequality, environmental justice, and continuous capitalist exploitation remain fundamentally unaddressed.

We are then left with trusting the voluntary pledges of nations to plan and execute their strategies to deal with climate change. And here is where the INDCs come in. Ideally, countries should adhere to their national plans owing to pressure from member parties, local and international environmental NGOs, concerned communities, municipalities, politicians, and activists. But since the Paris Agreement is predicated on the freedom to choose commitment, there has been widespread skepticism as to whether the 1.5 °C limit proposed is even feasible.⁵ In the context of Egypt, matters become more complicated given that the country's contribution to global carbon emissions amounts to only 0.61%. Therefore, with regards to actions taken to mitigate climate change, Egypt's impact is quite limited. But Egypt's INDC is also meant to communicate the country's strategic plan to adapt to climate change and enact the structural changes necessary to prevent further damage of the environment, which is what we shall turn to in the following section.

⁵ See Harold Wilhite and Arve Hansen, "Will the Paris Agreement save the world? An analysis and critique of the governance roadmap set out in COP 21," *Oslo Academy of Global Governance Working Paper* (Oslo: University of Oslo, Centre for Development and the Environment, 2016).

Egypt's **INDC**

Egypt's INDC

1. National Objectives and Priorities

Egypt submitted its INDC in 2015. It is a twelve-page document divided into three main sections: national circumstances, national efforts in adaptation and mitigation, and required mechanisms for the implementation of the plan. The section on national circumstances is meant to be a summary of Egypt's then-current economic and political situation as well as the government's plans for further development. It now reads as an outdated account, however, because the INDC was written before the 2016 IMF loan agreement that Egypt signed on, which introduced a harsh economic reform program that included the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, the introduction of a 14% full-fledged value-added taxation, as well as reductions in fuel and electricity subsidies. National circumstances changed drastically after the IMF-backed reform program came into force.

The economic plans outlined in this section are quite telling, however, about Egypt's current commitment to combat climate change. It is important to analyze these plans vis-a-vis the subsequent mitigation and adaptation strategies, for they often contradict. The economic vision that the government is adopting is one that is primarily concerned with increasing private foreign investments, building infrastructure for business enterprises, limiting population growth, and executing national mega projects.⁶ Among those mega projects are the "development of Sinai and the Western North Coast" and the construction of the new administrative capital.⁷

Major governmental steps have been taken to ensure the advancement of such "economic growth." Little has been achieved, however, when it comes to the social protection of poor and low-income groups, provision of just and sustainable housing, ensuring food security, and promotion of decentralized development, all of which are part of the "national objectives and priorities" of Egypt's INDC.⁸ These are also issues that hit right in the core of climate justice concerns, which emphasize the necessity of ensuring social justice in light of climate

⁶ See Egypt INDC above, p.4

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 4-5

change-induced inequalities. Yet this section in the INDC does not even attempt to tie Egypt's national priorities with the priorities needed for protecting the environment, ensuring social justice in light of climate change, and redistributing wealth. Promises for social protection are vague and unachievable under the current economic system.

2. Adaptation

With regards to measures to adapt to climate change, the INDC has a long section of planned actions. They are distributed under two categories: (1) Egypt's intended actions to promote resilience and (2) Adaptation Action Packages, although there is no clear conceptual difference between both categories, as they both pertain to adaptation measures. The actions target water resources, agricultural security, coastal zones, the health sector, rural areas, tourism, and the energy sector.

While many environmental activists dismiss adaptation measures as a way to avoid addressing the bigger responsibility of reducing carbon emissions, referred to as 'mitigation', adaptation can be vital insofar it can reflect a country's commitment to social justice while living under the harms of climate change. And given that Egypt's contribution to global carbon emissions are significantly low, while the effects of climate change on Egypt are extremely high, Egypt's adaptation plans are much more important and urgent.

Perhaps the most urgent issue is water. The measures that the government is considering for adapting to decreasing water resources include: increasing water storage capacity, improving irrigation and drainage systems, changing cropping patterns, recycling treated wastewater, and harvesting rainwaters.⁹ At the outset, those mechanisms look promising. But when we take a closer look at the government's actual economic plans, the picture becomes more confusing. We do not get any details about how or when the government is exactly planning on increasing water storage capacity, for example. Moreover, there is no mention of the vastly existing water shortage problem and how the government plans to manage its scarce resources in a just way. The section on national objectives and priorities explicitly stresses that the government is pouring funds into national mega projects, like the new

⁹ Ibid., 7

administrative capital, which will inevitably consume a huge amount of water for its planned infrastructure and green spaces.

In other respects, some of the intended actions are written in such a broad and vague manner that they could mean anything and nothing at the same time. Under the coastal zone category section, for example, the action package includes “reducing climate change risks, capacity building for Egyptian society, and enhancing national and regional partnerships in managing crises related to climate change.”¹⁰ Under the agricultural sector, the intended actions may sound clearer, but they are also broad enough that it is unclear whether they are beneficial at all. For example, they include building an effective institutional system to manage climate change-induced disasters, developing new climate-resilient agro-economic systems to manage fisheries, animal production, and crops, and reviewing existing land use and agricultural expansion policies that take into account future possibilities of land degradation due to climate change.¹¹ The approach taken to achieve these plans can either be just or become catastrophic. For example, the new agro-economic systems can be set up in the interest of multinational agribusinesses. The change of land use policies can disadvantage small farmers to the benefit of a cash crop economy. And this has already started happening with the [2018 amendments to agricultural laws](#).

The more promising adaptation actions include: increasing the efficiency of the healthcare sector and enabling it to deal with climate change, capacity building for local communities in touristic areas that are vulnerable to climate change risks, and setting up periodical monitoring and reporting systems.¹² Without doubt, all of the proposed actions need to be integrated in the strategy plans of different sectors in Egypt, but given that each sector is itself divided between a myriad of different networks, interests, and authorities, actions are more difficult to implement. It thus becomes easier to write broad intentions without explaining how concrete and specific actions will be taken. [Adaptation measures should not be thought of as small, temporary fixes to the results of climate change. They demand inter-institutional collaboration and restructuring.](#) And, in order to be effective, they need to be

¹⁰ See Egypt INDC above, p.8

¹¹ Ibid., 9

¹² See Egypt INDC above, p.9

instituted within a climate justice paradigm, one that underscores changes in the political economy as much as technical adjustments.

3. Mitigation

As mentioned above, Egypt's contribution to global carbon emissions amounts to 0.61%, which means that on the global scale, Egypt's mitigation measures will never be as consequential as those of high-emitting countries. Nonetheless, local measures to mitigate climate change are vital, especially in light of Egypt's plans for economic growth. Revisiting the section on national priorities and objectives, there is a need to highlight the contradiction between the country's development strategy and its climate commitments. The economic growth and development model that the government currently follows does not align with the features needed for a low-carbon economy. And the latter is absolutely necessary for climate change mitigation. This comes as no surprise, however, as the Paris Agreement itself excluded any prospect for the structural de-carbonization of the economy. In what follows, we analyze Egypt's action plans for mitigation. They are divided into two categories: mitigation policies and mitigation actions.

The mitigation policies mainly focus on developing the foundations needed for low-carbon energy systems. It is stressed, however, that those foundations have to be "locally appropriate": i.e. locally appropriate low-carbon energy production technologies, locally appropriate technology transfer, and locally-appropriate efficient fossil fuel technologies.¹³ There is no explanation as to what the expression "locally appropriate" means, or who gets to define what counts as locally appropriate. This is a crucial issue because, more often than not, the interests of large industries supersede those of the environment and local communities during the drafting of mitigation policies. The fossil fuel industry, whose unquestioned growth keeps fueling carbon emissions, dictates what is locally appropriate for its own interests. This is why the Paris Agreement has been met with a lot of skepticism, for it does not explicitly criticize the fossil fuel industry nor does it highlight the political urgency to halt its growth.

¹³ Ibid., 10

The INDC highlights the need for “more efficient use of energy by end users,” “behavioral changes,” “rapid introduction of stringent efficiency regulations and technology standards,” and “environmental externality pricing.”¹⁴ While seemingly useful, all of these proposals do not introduce any novel solutions for mitigating climate change. They also suggest that the locus of action is to be pushed to the spheres of 1. technical management of businesses (whose growth remains out of the question) and 2. individualized human behavior. In other words, Egypt’s approach to mitigation shifts the burden onto individual people and businesses in a context of weak regulations. The only exception to this approach would be Egypt’s plans for using renewable energy on a country-wide scale.

Aside from the utilization of renewable energy, other mitigation actions include: improving road transport efficiency, switching from road transport to river and railway transport, and increasing the country’s absorptive capacity through plantation, maintaining trees on urban roads, and using treated wastewater for agricultural irrigation.¹⁵ These measures seem excellent in theory but with the lack of coordination amongst various state institutions, it is unclear whether these plans will ever be integrated into development and investment projects. For example, it is true that new underground metro lines are currently being developed, but the government has also spent enormous amounts of money building new high roads across the country. There is an exponential growth of road transport, not a shift away from it.

The two other major elephants in the room are the use of coal and the animal production industry in Egypt. It has been scientifically proven that the livestock production sector contributes to 18% of the world’s GHG emissions.¹⁶ Coal is also the highest carbon-intensive fossil fuel and directly contributes to global warming. These are two highly important factors in the discussion around mitigating climate change, yet they are completely absent from Egypt’s INDC. While Egypt needs to meet its rapidly growing energy demands, coal offers an

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Egypt INDC above, p.11

¹⁶ Koneswaran, Gowri and Danielle Nierenberg. “Global farm animal production and global warming: impacting and mitigating climate change” *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 116,5 (2008): 578-82.

unsustainable, quick-fix that has severe environmental and health consequences.¹⁷ Research also shows that only the affluent sectors of society are able to consume meat. Meanwhile, the livestock sector is maintained at the risk of health, the environment, biodiversity, and social justice.

¹⁷ Zayed, Dina, and Jeannie Sowers. "The Campaign Against Coal in Egypt," *Middle East Report*, vol. 271 (Summer 2014): 29-35.

Concluding Remarks

Taking all of the above into account, there's a lot of skepticism surrounding Egypt's intended contributions; it is unclear whether they will all be implemented and whether they will have any tangible effects. The structural reconfigurations needed for both adaptation and mitigation measures have not been adequately broached nor integrated within national development and investment plans. Moreover, the INDC proposes some outdated measures that have been heavily criticized by scientists and environmental justice activists alike, such as the establishment of carbon trading markets.¹⁸ Three years after the document has been submitted to the UNFCCC, there has been little achieved from the proposed plans, while some of the "national priorities" pertaining to mega projects have indeed come to fruition.

The last section in the INDC speculates that Egypt needs USD 73 billion from international donors in order to implement its proposed action plans.¹⁹ While it is true that dealing with climate change is costly, and that high-emitting countries should bear the larger burden of financing those efforts, climate change should not be dealt with as a mere isolated project that demands an isolated fund. If climate justice is about rethinking our ideas about environmental and political responsibilities, resources, and participation in decision-making, then we need to rethink the logic behind how local financial resources get managed in Egypt to begin with. And perhaps this is the reason why the Paris Agreement has been dismissed by many; for it failed to address the urgent need for structural change.

¹⁸ See Egypt INDC above, p.12

¹⁹ Ibid., 13

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