

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING LOCAL VOICES AT THE GLOBAL DECISION-MAKING LEVEL TOWARDS COP29

VCA POSITION PAPER

As we head to COP 30 and 10 years since the Paris Agreement, as civil society in the Global South, we should use COP 29 as an opportunity to review whether the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process is fit for purpose to facilitate the delivery of the Paris Agreement. The world faces weakened multilateralism and a loss of trust in international institutions and mechanisms. These systems and processes must be reconfigured to create a balanced platform to mobilise collective action towards a just climate response. One consideration in this process is to ensure the adequate representation of Global South voices and Southern Leadership in global decision-making processes.

The mean global temperature has increased by +1.1 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial baseline with increasingly frequent and extreme climatic events, threatening to drive another 100 million people into poverty by 2030. COVID-19 has greatly exacerbated these impacts, resulting in significant backsliding against the Sustainable Development Goals. Climate change affects the enjoyment of indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated human rights, hitting the most vulnerable and the hardest and threatening to increase existing inequalities.

We are at a critical juncture, not only in our fight against the climate crisis but also in addressing the economic and social challenges to transform our societies in a sustainable, just and inclusive manner. Civil society needs to engage and have a voice to influence climate change policies. Business as usual will no longer suffice and is no longer appropriate.

According to IPCC estimates, approximately 3.3–3.6 billion people live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change. The vast majority of these people live in Global South countries. The participation of Global South representatives in the decision-making process at the UNFCCC is, therefore, more urgent than ever. Currently, actors from the Global South face significant challenges participating in UNFCCC negotiations and decisions, contrasting sharply with the substantial representation from organisations and countries in the Global North. Although the vast majority of the world's population lives in the Global South, they still represent [the minority of voices](#) within the negotiations.

The [Voices for Just Climate Action \(VCA\)](#) alliance creates an environment in which organisational development and new collaborations can take place to co-create alternative solutions. We are convinced that strong civil society organisations and actors united behind a common agenda can improve strategic lobbying, advocacy capacities and a supportive public debate. VCA's strategic focus is on solutions that are locally co-developed, shaped or supported by citizens and civil society.

The inclusion of local voices and solutions at national and international levels ensures that climate policy, practice, action and financing reflect the demands of diverse civil society. Local ownership must be guaranteed from the start and made visible in clear decision-making responsibilities regarding goals, roles, implementation, funding, and distribution of resources. It requires visible and changed power relations and strengthened capacity.

The VCA Programme is led from the bottom up, with strong, legitimate local CSOs representing their constituents' experiences, voices and needs. We developed this position paper to capture the voices and experiences of this southern alliance on the importance of amplifying local voices at the global level towards COP29.

AMPLIFYING GLOBAL SOUTH VOICES WITHIN THE UNFCCC

There are two main avenues for including local voices within the UNFCCC. At local and national levels, it is crucial to have a permanent mechanism for multi-stakeholder dialogue to ensure Parties arrive at the UNFCCC negotiation table with strong positions reflecting the realities, proposals and needs of their countries and people.

The participation of Global South observer organisations at COPs is also a key avenue for local voices to be heard. Despite the fact that Global South observers represent groups that are highly vulnerable to the climate emergency, they only represent [32 - 45%](#) of the total participation of observers in recent important international events like the Conference of Parties (COPs) that take place every year. Furthermore, compliance with diversity and gender commitments is crucial for effective and equitable participation in the international UNFCCC spaces. For example, in the last two COPs, there has been a decrease in gender balance. When women lead and influence the political arena, there is a high tendency for there to be more progressive policies and, thus, the process to advance.

A renegotiation of already unequal rights and a reimagining of the relationship between people and nature is urgent. Civil society, and especially marginalised groups (Indigenous groups, women, urban poor, youth, etc.), need to be more involved in international processes like the UNFCCC. For example, while the UNFCCC provides for a farmers' constituency, the constituency's space is taken up/ dominated by large-scale commercial farmers.

We strongly believe that the participation of Indigenous People and local communities strengthens climate negotiations in the favour of the majority of those affected. They have been ancestral protectors of Nature, they are proactive in the current context of the climate crisis, and they hold valuable ancestral knowledge from and within their territories. Any local, national, regional and international policies on climate justice should value their wisdom and listen to their voices, reinforcing their role in national and international processes. They are the people who know what pollution in their lands means and what it means in terms of their existence, but they also know how to live in harmony with Nature, recognising the enormous interdependence that exists between it and humanity.

Indigenous People and local communities, as well as women, youth, and the elderly, among other important stakeholders from the Global South, urgently need access to finance. It's time for those financial resources to be delivered directly to Indigenous People and local communities so that they can implement climate actions. A just climate transition demands an inclusive, locally shaped and (human) rights-based approach, as well as societal and government support. It won't be possible without accessible, predictable and flexible debt-free financial resources that respond to the current needs of Global South countries, estimated at around [5.8-5.9 trillion dollars until 2030](#), only to fulfil their climate commitments expressed in their National Determined Contributions (NDCs). Access to information and capacity-building are also crucial to ensuring the participation of civil society.



VOICES FROM VCA PARTNERS AND ALLIES



"I needed to learn a lot to understand what the negotiations are about, and it is still difficult. What does Loss & Damage or Just Transition mean? The terms are complex and not easy to understand... The cost of attending these global forums has been increasing in such a way that it has become unattainable and exclusive for CSOs."

*Eulis Utami
Hutan itu Indonesia - KOPI Coalition, Indonesia:*

"Having the voice of youth in decision-making, articulating their points of view in the negotiation process is critical as youth bring in fresh perspectives and their lived experiences... In 2018, the Parties committed to having 50% representation of women in their delegations. At COP27 in Egypt, women made up 37% of delegates, with only 29% of senior negotiators being women. For COP28, there was a drop in representation. The [Gender Climate Tracker app and website by WEDO](#) show that 34% of Party delegates at COP28 were women, and less than one in five Heads of Delegation (19%) was a woman... Governments must be intentional when they talk about including other voices, especially youth, women and other marginalised groups."

*Sharon Mutende
Policy Coordination Focal Point at the Children
and Youth Major Group to UNEP, Kenya*



VOICES FROM VCA PARTNERS AND ALLIES



“To effectively tackle the climate crisis, we must shift the balance of power in favour of Global South communities, who bear the brunt of climate impacts. A systemic approach is essential, placing these actors at the heart of decision-making. Only through genuine collaboration and equitable resource distribution can we achieve a just transition, where local solutions drive resilient and equitable futures.”

Paz González, Fundación Avina

“The Global South represents the vast majority of the world’s people, and it is where the majority of climate impacts will be felt. Yet Global South communities are still a minority of the voices heard within the UNFCCC system. Access to the COPs and other spaces is only one part of the solution; we need decision-making that is driven by the Global South and finance that flows to the Global South and is accountable to local people.”

Charlotte Scott, SouthSouthNorth



FINANCE, GENDER AND ACTION FOR CLIMATE EMPOWERMENT: KEY AREAS FOR ADVANCING LOCALLY-LED AND JUST CLIMATE ACTION

Given the challenges posed by climate change, it's clear that in order to make substantial progress in climate action, climate finance needs to reach the territories. It is important to ensure gender balance in both international decision-making and the formulation of public policies to address climate emergencies at national and local levels. It is essential that civil society, Indigenous People, local communities, marginalised groups, elders, women, children, youth, and people with disabilities, among other stakeholders, have access to information and exercise their right to public participation in the climate agenda.

ABOUT FINANCE

The focus of climate finance should be on defining climate finance from the perspective of "climate finance needs" of the most vulnerable groups and countries and "climate justice" considering the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities, as well as Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement, which emphasise that the obligation to provide financial resources to assist developing countries in implementing mitigation and adaptation actions lies with developed countries. Article 9.3 also mandates developed countries to take the lead in mobilising climate finance from a wide variety of sources, instruments, and channels, but recognising the significant role that public funds will play in achieving these objectives.

This year, climate finance is a key topic for the negotiations that will take place in COP29, considering that a new climate finance goal will be determined to be operative from 2025 onwards, replacing the unfulfilled 100 billion dollar pledge that was supposed to be mobilised annually from developed countries to developing countries. This process called the "New Collective Quantified Goal" (NCQG), entails many opportunities to improve the goal regarding both quantitative and qualitative issues, but it also represents some risks related to the intention of Global North countries to dilute their historical responsibilities to reduce the recipients base and to broaden the contributors base, among other things.

VCA has identified three important topics on the agenda for COP 29 in Baku and on the road to COP 30 in Brazil. Below we feedback from our network on the key needs and demands on the road to the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance (NCQG), to the fulfilment and implementation of the Gender Action Plan, and to ensure public participation and access to information, as well as capacity-building.

We demand a new climate finance goal that responds to the needs of developing countries, estimated in trillions and not billions of dollars to be mobilised annually, and that considers all the funding needed until 2030 to implement their Nationally Determined Contributions or climate commitments, their National Adaptation Plans, their Climate Change Gender Action Plans, but also the money needed to fund a just energy transition and to cover all the losses and damages derived from climate events.

Therefore, we also demand that this new climate finance goal have subgoals for adaptation and mitigation, as well as for loss and damage.

Finally, we expect the NCQG process to result in a more ambitious goal that is adequate, predictable, additional and mostly grant-based finance that should be channelled through more direct access windows, with fast and easy processes for all those groups that are in the frontline of the climate emergency and its impacts. The intention of climate finance should not be to create additional fiscal burdens on developing countries that are historically not responsible for the climate crisis but are disproportionately being affected by its impacts.

ABOUT GENDER

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping the impacts of and responses to climate change, making it a key consideration for the discussions at COP29. Climate change affects everyone, but it does not do so equally. Women, especially those in marginalised and Indigenous communities, often face heightened vulnerabilities due to pre-existing social, economic, and cultural inequalities.

Despite some progress, gender balance remains a significant challenge within the UNFCCC. For instance, at COP28, women comprised only 34% of party delegates, and less than 20% of heads of delegation were women. The underrepresentation of women and other marginalised groups means that their lived experiences and priorities often remain under-addressed, leading to climate strategies that may not fully account for their specific needs.

To create a more inclusive process at COP29, it is vital to prioritise gender equity in all aspects of climate action, from policy formulation to financial access. This includes honouring commitments like the Gender Action Plan, which aims to ensure gender-responsive climate actions. Greater focus is needed on creating mechanisms that enable the full participation of women, Indigenous People, and other marginalised communities. This can be achieved through targeted capacity-building, access to simplified and grant-based financial resources, and efforts to create a negotiation environment that values diverse experiences. By addressing these gaps, the UNFCCC can help ensure that global climate actions are not only more just but also more effective in responding to the needs of those most affected by climate change.

ABOUT ACTION FOR CLIMATE EMPOWERMENT (ACE)

Since the inception of the UNFCCC, its [articles 4\(i\) and 6](#) address the need for the Parties to promote and support with their cooperation the education, training and awareness of the public regarding climate change and encourage the widest possible participation in this process, including that of non-governmental organisations. These commitments are reinforced in [Article 12 of the Paris Agreement](#), which emphasises that the Parties must cooperate in adopting appropriate measures to improve education, training, public awareness and participation, and public access to information on climate change.

We recognise the efforts that have been made over time to create and launch the [Action for Climate Empowerment programme](#). However, we believe that a sustained commitment is needed to implement the 6 elements of ACE holistically in the Global South and as part of the new NDCs.

We have identified that ACE is not currently part of the formulation of public policies on climate change, which are also mostly formulated without the participation of local communities. Furthermore, the language of these policies does not contain an accessible language, which makes it difficult to understand locally what is being addressed at the national level and in the climate negotiations. This limits public participation and access to information. In terms of education, training and public awareness, it is also important to look at the territory and consider the knowledge and experiences of communities to strengthen the educational curricula on climate change. ACE still needs specific sources of funding, so international cooperation will be essential to secure it in the lead-up to the NCQG.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO GLOBAL SOUTH OBSERVER PARTICIPATION

VCA advocates for greater inclusion of Global South voices within the UNFCCC, and NGO observers are one key avenue for this. However, Global South participants remain significantly underrepresented in this category.

Through our networks, we bring together local civil society actors across more than 7 Global South countries, many of whom experience significant barriers in attempting to engage as observers within the UNFCCC. These include access to financing to attend COP and other UNFCCC events, as well as obtaining accreditations, limited or no access to translation, difficulty navigating the technical language of the negotiations and resourcing the intensive time requirements to follow negotiations without dedicated funding.

The UNFCCC has proactively taken steps to allocate more Observer badges to Global South organisations in 2024, but this only addresses one of many barriers and is currently insufficient to ensure active and inclusive participation.

Evidence shows that inclusive decision-making, including women, youth, and Indigenous People, leads to better and more effective results. As VCA, we are calling for the genuine participation of local voices within the UNFCCC through greater support for language justice, including interpretation; accessible and inclusive language summaries of key negotiation topics to assist in tracking key discussions; greater access to funding and resources to support Global South civil society to engage, both for time and expenses; and for the prioritisation of the participation and capacity strengthening of Global South observers within the UNFCCC.

