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The Gabonese Republic Contribution
to the Ministerial Declaration of the UNEA-5

"Strengthening actions for nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals"

*(*As Africa Group Chair on the Climate Change Negotiation under the UNFCCC)*

Introduction *(Gabon Key Message)*

The **year 2020** will be remembered for the global crisis and the rapid spread of **the Covid-19**. This pandemic that has caused a **profound and extreme damage to global human health**, societies and substantial economic instability across the world.

As of **August 2020**, the data from the World Health Organisation indicates that there have been **18,142,718 confirmed cases of COVID-19** globally, including **69, 1013 deaths**. We are facing a global crisis, which requires immediate and decisive action, to save lives and overcome the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

While we are still in the midst of COVID-19, even though some countries have seen the number decreasing or being stable, it continues to disrupt the daily lives of billions of people, and **Africa will suffer the most if actions are not taken**.

In Africa, the spread has been less significant than in developed countries. However, it has exacerbated the development challenges that the continent is already facing; so far **968,582 confirmed coronavirus cases in Africa** had been identified with **629,800 recovered** and **20,623 deaths**.

According to recent reports of the **United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs**, COVID-19 pandemic arrived at a moment when African countries had a promising forecast to economic growth. At the beginning of 2020, Africa's estimated **growth was projected** to rise from **2.9 % in 2019 to 3.2 % in 2020, and 3.5 % in 2021**.

However, **the COVID-19 pandemic** is expected to hit African economies extremely hard. According to the **World Bank report**, economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa will decline from **2.4% in 2019 to between -2.1% and -5.1% in 2020**, depending on the success of measures taken to **mitigate the pandemic's effects**. This means that the region will experience a **devastating recession**.

Consequently, most African leaders, including **His Excellency Ali BONGO ONDIMBA** have made it a priority in their agenda by closely monitoring the situation and coordinating the actions of health personnel across the country and the continent.

In the case of Gabon, the recorded cases are **7,646 infections, 51 deaths and 5,408 recovered**. Even though the number is small compared to other countries, let us note that for a country with a low population of **fewer than 2 million inhabitants** and with more than **54%** living in the cities than in rural areas, the health of its citizen is seriously threatened.

In search of finding a cure or vaccination to the disease, early scientific researches indicate that **COVID-19 could be a zoonotic disease** and that it is, a disease transmitted from animals to human.

Therefore, one can argue there are clear **links between health, the environment and COVID 19, and that it is all connected to the unsustainable use of nature and the environment**.

Consequently, there is a need to recognize the connection between health and the environment. Biodiversity loss and proximity to wildlife can **create the conditions for the illnesses** to spread.

It is also to be noted that climate change and biodiversity loss are deeply interlinked, and similar factors contribute to their loss. However, they have tended to be treated differently and separately.

In addition to the challenges of COVID 19, science has informed us we have reached **the tipping point**; but unfortunately, as contrary to COVID-19, there is no prospect for a singular cure for climate change. We need to rethink the way we live and take severe measures to address climate change.

It is evident that **we cannot separate our response to COVID-19 and our fight against climate change**.

For example, in Gabon, the President has provided his guidance to the government to channel a similar focus and **replicate the level of resources devoted to COVID-19 to address the threats of climate change**.

He highlighted that there are two global challenges; **the COVID-19 and climate crisis**; and for the past few months, **the climate emergency** has been put on hold whereas we have scientific proof that there is a clear connection between health and the environment.

We, as human beings, should come to realize that **our health depends on the health of the planet and the health of other species**.

The lessons of the current pandemic are that **emerging zoonotic infections** are unexpected and unpredictable. As we have seen from the COVID-19 pandemic, any disease outbreak anywhere today **could be a problem for the world tomorrow** as it cross-national borders and it threatens everyone.

We need to identify ways to **prevent future outbreaks of zoonotic diseases, to build healthy ecosystems** while also meeting **the world's Sustainable Development Goals**, with historic and **Global solutions; and no one can be left behind**. We need to improve our **global preparedness** to deal with similar pandemics.

Thus, The Gabonese Government, as the Chair of the African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change looks forward to the 2021 UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5).

The UNEA high-level global environmental gathering next year will be critical. Consequently, we are **pleased to contribute towards** the development the draft outline document for the Ministerial Outcome Document of the 2021 UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) on the theme "**Strengthening actions for nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals**".

Gabon looks forward to contributing more in enhancing Nature-based solutions (NBS) in resolving environmental issues.

Nature contributes to all **dimensions of sustainable development**, among them, **combating climate change and its effects**, the **loss of biological diversity**, reducing **pollution** and contributing to **ending poverty** in all its forms to achieve the **Sustainable Development Goals**.

1. **Green Recovery**

As mention above, in addition to **the global economic recession**, the world is facing two emergencies simultaneously: **the Climate emergency and Covid-19** and we need to address all the crises at the same time.

Since the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change in Rio de Janeiro in **1992**, science has shown us that we have reached **a tipping point and there is a climate emergency**. However, the world has not done much to eradicate it.

On the other hand, **the COVID-19 emergency** was declared **as a global emergency in mid-January 2020**. In a matter of weeks, the response to the pandemic has changed the world, as we knew it.

There **has** been an unprecedented mobilization of society, business, and state resources, etc. Lockdown, closure of borders, quarantine and isolating populations indoors has been employed to find immediate solutions.

Similarly, to COVID-19, climate change has and will have **an extreme and worse impact on our health, economies, society and environment unless we** take immediate actions. Many lessons can be learned from the world Covid-19 response.

The **United Nations Economic Commission for Africa** estimates that COVID-19 could cause Africa's economies to **contract by between 1.8 – 2.6%** potentially pushing **27 million people into extreme poverty**.

On another hand, the World Health Organization estimates that **climate change-related disasters are responsible for 150,000 deaths/year**, and this is projected to rise to **250,000/year by 2030**.

It is also estimated that COVID-19 will cost the **world economy up to 5% of GDP**. However, **Climate impacts in Africa** already cost most of the continent's economies between **3% and 5% of GDP annually**, with some **incurring losses of up to 10% of GDP**.

It is clear that climate change poses an even higher risk to **lives, livelihoods and ecosystems than the COVID – 19** pandemic's impact thus far, but the response to climate change has been insignificant.

In April 2019, **cyclone Idai** struck **three southern African countries** (Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe) resulting in over a thousand deaths; **2,486 persons injured; 196,255 households displaced, and 968,895 persons affected**.

In addition to this, more than **800,000 hectares of crops were destroyed** before harvest, over **3000 classrooms, 45 health facilities destroyed, food and water scarcity, the spread of mosquito-borne and water-borne disease, displacement, migration and much more.** This single event alone also caused more than **\$3 billion in damage to the economies of the three countries.**

Accordingly, the **green recovery process from the COVID** needs to analyse the past event, take into consideration the special needs, and circumstance of Africa and less developed countries.

The recovery process needs to be aligned to the **IPCC's 1.5°C Report** that projects those global model pathways **for limiting global warming to 1.5°C.**

Developing countries are much more vulnerable to the impact of climate change, and the impact of it will be drastic. They will be faced with more robust costs of climate-related events such as **droughts, floods and heatwaves if nothing is done, they need to** adapt their economies to operate efficiently and sustainably in a changing climate.

Unfortunately, they also have less capacity to take advantage of the opportunities of responding to climate change such as **investment in clean, renewable energy, climate-proofing infrastructure, or adopting smart agriculture** options without external assistance. There is an urgent effort to **mobilise resources to assist the more vulnerable developing countries.**

The climate response and green recovery process must, therefore, be organised **internationally and collaboratively** if it is to be effective. Global problems require global solutions.

GHG emissions have been increasing every year, despite commitments to mitigate by every signatory to the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement, concluded in 2015, is the principal treaty, which defines how parties will fight global warming.

For African countries, Parties need to consider these three main points:

1. Holding the increase in the global average temperature to **well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels** and pursuing efforts to **limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.**
2. Increasing the **ability to adapt** to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster **climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development,** and
3. Making **finance flows consistent** with a pathway towards **low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development.**

As mentioned by **His Excellency Ali BONGO ONDIMBA,** champion of the adaptation initiative since 2015:

*"The real impact of the coronavirus crisis on climate will **ultimately depend on the choices we make in how we recover.** Meeting the Paris Agreement's goals for **mitigation and adaptation** must be central to this effort to ensure we **reduce the likelihood of future pandemics.**"*

It is, therefore, evident that **we cannot separate our economic response from COVID-19** to our fight against **climate change.**

Developing countries and African countries are the least contributors to climate change. However, they are most **vulnerable to its effect and pandemic like the COVID-19.**

In response to the immediate financial impacts of the pandemic, developed economies have focused on **mobilising new financing in order to mitigate the financial** and economic impacts of Covid-19.

The response to Covid-19 has been based on unprecedented and immediate government intervention and global social acceptance of the radical measures adopted by all governments. **Climate finance has been dismally low**, but the response to Covid-19 shows that parties can **mobilise the necessary resources** at short notice and in adequate amounts.

However, developing countries **have not demonstrated the same level of urgency in mobilising climate finance**, despite having committed to do so **through the Paris Agreement**.

It therefore also evident that what is required for the **full capitalisation of existing climate funds** is **political will**.

For instance, **the Green Climate Fund** has a target of **\$100 bn annually** by 2020 to **support low carbon development**. While recognising **\$100bn is essentially less than they need finance for mitigation and adaptation** actions. The GCF capitalization has reached nowhere near **10% of this projection**.

The African Group reiterate the urgency on the need to tackle both crises together and promote **sustainable development for Africa**. The need to **strengthen our climate action for the post-COVID -19** and strengthen our climate adaptation efforts.

Consequently, what is required to **enable drastic climate actions** is a **new political green economy** based on **cohesion, equality and environmental sustainability** funding and **suspended debt repayments for many developing countries**.

In that perspective, **54 African leaders endorse a policy to build climate resilience into recovery from COVID-19**.

The African Adaptation Initiative, championed by **President Ali BONGO ONDIMBA** and the Global Centre on Adaptation, outlines the need for **"Integrated Responses to Building Climate and Pandemic Resilience in Africa"**.

The policy summarised a **plan of action for African countries to ensure stimulus spending is used to build back better from the COVID-19 crisis**.

The policy brief recommends:

- Adaptation actions for three major systems affected by the pandemic and climate change in Africa;
- Adaptation actions to **secure the food supply for vulnerable populations** and strengthen **the agricultural value chain**;
- **Increase access to water and sanitation** in parallel with efforts to improve water governance;
- **Investment in resilient infrastructure to create jobs**.

These recommendations result in a triple dividend for African countries: **reduced pandemic risk increased climate resilience and strengthened the economic recovery**.

2. Healthy ecosystems, healthy people, holistic approaches to protect and restore nature and ecosystem services including nature-based solutions.

For most African countries that were already facing significant social, health and economic challenges, **COVID-19 is severely testing their resilience.**

The greener recovery in the environmental context means that all programs should be examined for unintentional negative impacts on the environment and the beneficiaries.

Consequently, we need to **place people and nature at the hearty of decision-making** and, the ecosystem as the foundation to insure healthy people.

We need to **build back better to address the vulnerability of our society and economy**, in the post COVID-19 recovery by putting society on track for the **2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development** through strengthening action for nature.

We need to ensure the **recovery will "do-no-harm"** and allow us **to build back better.**

As national and local governments focused on **controlling the spread of the coronavirus** and providing **immediate medical and income support to those affected**, many plans have been put on **hold such as the COP26, biodiversity summits etc.**

Understandably, **the priority is on public health challenges**, but it is crucial to consider the **impacts of climate change**. The threat of climate change on human health and economies are increasing.

On the other hand, **the scientific reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)** are stressing the **need for bigger ambition of countries' climate and biodiversity plans.**

We are still facing a **climate emergency**, and leaders must make important choices to achieve better health, **a safer society and more sustainable growth.** We should **keep the momentum for climate action going as we battle the current coronavirus.**

The first aim of sustainable recovery must be to **ensure that efforts do not worsen the environment or equality of life.** People around the world are experiencing increasingly frequent and **severe climate change impacts, from hurricanes and floods to droughts, heatwaves and much more.**

People in the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries are enduring these escalating risks and disasters. Despite this, **development cooperation is not yet systematically** addressing the global climate crisis.

We need to **build back better and most importantly, together for a more sustainable world.**

It is time to **reinvent and re-energise the way we cooperate and reach decisions**, with a renewed sense of solidarity, urgency **and find a common nature-based pathway** to recover fairer and better.

3. Sustainable food systems – a part of the solution

To feed the rapid increasing populations, sub-Saharan African countries already have to rely on massive food imports. Even before the pandemic, these were projected to grow from **\$35bn in 2017 to \$110 billion by 2030.**

Covid-19 would create a severe food security crisis in Africa. Currently, 74% of Africa's population is considered food insecure, and COVID-19 has made matters worse.

Consequently, sustainable food systems are part of the solution but as well as that, access to clean water is also critical as well as sanitation and investment in resilient infrastructure.

More than **320 million people** are without access to **safely managed drinking water** in Africa, and **over half the population is without access to any sanitation** and in time when we are all being encouraged to **wash our hands frequently to prevent the spread of Covid-19**.

A priority, therefore, is to **boost access to water and sanitation** in parallel with efforts to improve **water governance across the continent**.

This requires measures to promote investment that encompasses management of **'natural infrastructure'** and support the **effective distribution of scarce water resources for multiple uses**.

To sustain Africa's growth, and **speed up efforts to end extreme poverty, investment** in resilient infrastructure is fundamental.

According to the **World Bank**, Africa needs about **\$100 billion a year** for the next decade to fill its **infrastructure gap**.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified calls for infrastructures to be resilient and adaptable so that it can effectively operate during moments of crisis.

A **distinctive and global action plan** is critical to **achieving the 2030 Agenda** and the **sustainable development goals**, which consider challenges that everyone is facing and finding a concrete solution.

The **COVID-19 is a global emergency** that is teaching us that this fight against the virus cannot be won without us joining forces. We have witnessed the need for preparedness, cooperation and working together.

We should plan for **long-term recovery** from this crisis that accounts the **climate challenges, and this requires a paradigm shift**.

We need to make our societies and economies **more climate-resilient and climate-friendly** in the process.

Moreover, developing countries the **most vulnerable to long-term climate** impacts should not be left behind.

Conclusion

The year **2021** will be the year when the **UNEA-5 will be held**, and the **post-2020 global biodiversity framework** is expected to be adopted. We need to **jointly strengthen actions for nature** as we **develop a focused and impactful ministerial declaration** for the **next environmental assembly**.

There is an **opportunity to recover our global economies** in a manner that **builds more sustainable, inclusive and resilient societies**, in line with **the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the UNFCCC, and the Paris Agreement**.

The environmental assembly has a more prominent role now in terms of strengthening actions for nature to contribute to a global green recovery.

There is a **global recognition of the importance of nature-based solutions** to the impacts of climate change.

Ecosystems across the globe are vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as are the communities that depend on them. However, **ecosystems can also protect people from climate change impacts.**

As the evidence base strengthens, nature-based solutions (NBs) are increasingly prominent in climate change policy. **NBs is key to meeting global goals** for climate and biodiversity, and we **urge researchers to work more closely with policy-makers to identify targets that benefit both people and ecosystems.** (Seddon et al., 2020)

A **socially fair and just transition to a sustainable, green economy** should be prioritised. We should **not seek to restore the pre-pandemic status quo** simply. What is required is a **paradigm shift.**

On another note, **Strengthening multilateral cooperation and a strong commitment in a post-pandemic world** is need more than ever to **achieve the 2030 Agenda and sustainable development goals**, concerted global efforts are needed to **ensure that no region or country is left behind** especially the **most vulnerable to long-term climate impacts.**