

GP Insight

# Climate Change and Migration in Africa

A Call for Action

April 2021

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Global Perspectives Initiative

We thank our partners and supporters: Robert Bosch Stiftung, Stiftung Mercator, Open Society Foundations and Mo Ibrahim Foundation



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**Climate Change and Migration in Africa**  
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Our world is becoming increasingly fragile, the Covid pandemic has the globe on the edge of its seat, multiple crises interact with one another and lead to further crises such as hunger and poverty. The climate crisis also continues to escalate. Every day millions of people experience the destruction of their surroundings; for them, the climate crisis means desertification, crop failures, increased soil salinity; it means that already-scarce resources become even scarcer, and already-violent conflicts intensify. However, the climate crisis also means the immeasurable loss of secure places to call home – it means the creation of refugees, migration, displacement.

The climate crisis brings dramatic changes around the world, including on our own doorstep. Above all, however, the climate crisis is a crisis of global injustice, namely in that it primarily affects the Global South, and especially Africa – the very regions that, from a historical perspective, have contributed least to global warming. Here, it affects in particular those whose existence is based on natural resources and who have the fewest options to protect themselves and to adjust – women, children, the elderly and minorities.

The statistics are alarming: the number of people displaced by climate change has quadrupled since the 1970s. Today, already, more people are internally displaced by environmental disasters than by violence and conflict.

Our number-one priority must therefore be to keep the climate crisis at bay and to help ensure that people are not forced to leave their homes in the first place. Yet even if we still manage to achieve the goals of the *Paris Climate Agreement*, people will be confronted with the effects of climate change – along the coasts, on the fields, in the forests. That is why a massive ramping up of international climate financing and compensation for loss and damages is necessary. Those who are unable to stay where they are, must have a safe means of early migration made possible that is self-determined, safe and dignified. When people are forced to flee suddenly because of a natural disaster, in the majority of cases they are not covered by the *Geneva Convention* on refugees, but instead fall into a protection gap in international law – one that we urgently need to close.

This represents a historic responsibility for Germany and Europe and a moral obligation as well as imperative under international law. How we deal with the topics of migration and refugees, particularly during the climate crisis, will be an ethical touchstone for us all. The policies to date, especially in Europe, have thus far failed in this regard. Policy, however – like the climate crisis – is man-made, and is therefore able to be changed.

*Claudia Roth*, Vice President of the German Bundestag,  
Parliamentary group Bündnis 90/The Greens

Every year, people are forced to leave their homes. Where war and terror were the main reason for displacement a few decades ago, more and more people in the Global South are forced to move today because of the consequences of climate change. Africa is particularly affected by the consequences of the climate crisis, even though the continent only accounts for just under four percent of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

In December 2020, for the fourth time since its inception, the Global Perspectives Initiative hosted a high-level conference on migration with the aim of promoting both African perspectives and more realistic, fact-based narratives within the political debate in Germany.

This time, experts and policy makers from Africa and Europe gathered digitally to shed light on the relationship between climate change and migration. In addition to the presentation of facts and figures on the consequences of climate change in, and for, Africa, adaptation strategies and solutions for those affected were discussed.

Migration is often the last resort. It drives people first to the cities and then to more distant regions. However, migration can also offer great development potential, especially for host communities and countries. In an interview in this publication, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, the mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone, impressively describes the consequences of rapid urbanisation and the important role of local actors. While migration continues to drive the transformation of the African continent, enabling safe, legal and self-determined migration, in combination with the promotion of economic development, is essential. In times of climate change, traditional industrialisation is no longer an unconditional option for many African countries, and investment in sustainable energy is considered to be a top priority.

For industrialised countries, climate change and migration pose a number of interconnected challenges. These countries, and their continents, are the main contributors to global warming. If CO<sub>2</sub> reduction is to succeed globally and the 1.5-degree target is to be achieved, Europe must act now and work intensively with its neighbouring continent – Africa. In this regard, the conference in December also generated recommendations.

We hope that the documented results of the conference will be informative for the readers of this publication and would like to thank Angela Köckritz for her insightful report on this complex topic. We would also like to thank our partners – the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Stiftung Mercator, the Open Society Foundations, the Mo Ibrahim Stiftung and Deutsche Welle – as well as all speakers and participants who made this conference a highly informative, lively and productive demonstration of African-European dialogue.

*Dr. Ingrid Hamm*, Co-founder and CEO of the  
Global Perspectives Initiative (GPI)

In December 2020, the conference *Climate Change and Migration: Point of No Return?! – An African Perspective*, brought together high-level experts from Africa and Europe to highlight the relationship between climate change and migration. The resulting recommendations are addressed to German policy makers.

### **Promote data bases and research on climate-induced migration**

Climate change is difficult to predict. Migration decisions are complex. The link between climate change and migration needs to be researched far more extensively. In particular, there is a lack of data on complex migration movements, such as those resulting from gradual climate change.

In order to be able to respond appropriately to climate-induced mobility, Germany should invest in new research, support existing research projects (in the affected regions) and ensure that sufficient funds are also made available at the EU level to close data gaps. In particular, interdisciplinary projects must be supported and carried out with the involvement of local scientists and stakeholders.

### **Implementing the Paris Climate Agreement and global justice**

The continent of Africa is disproportionately affected by the consequences of climate change, despite being one of the lowest contributors to global emissions, in the past and still today. The main contributors to climate change are the industrialised nations.

Germany must fulfill its responsibility to address climate change in a just manner and in the spirit of solidarity, and also act ambitiously with all the means at its disposal to realise the 1.5-degree target by 2100, as set in the Paris Climate Agreement.

### **Promoting adaptation measures and strengthening resilience**

Climate change is causing lasting damage. The consequences of climate change particularly affect those whose livelihoods are based on natural resources and who have few opportunities to protect themselves. Cities also face major challenges, as migration hotspots, especially if they are located in regions at risk from climate change.

Germany must demonstrate global responsibility and promote measures and innovative investments that support populations in affected regions to both adapt their livelihoods to climate change and build resilience. To meet the challenges of rapid urbanisation and the consequences of climate change in cities, efficient and climate-friendly urban planning, involving the local population, is highly needed.

### **Harnessing the potential of sustainable energy as key to economic development**

Generating jobs and economic prosperity in a country is one of the most effective tools to increase the capacity of that country to adapt to climate change and finance climate-related investments and actions. Investment in affordable, reliable and sustainable energy services can meet the growing demand for energy on the African continent.

Energy partnerships between Africa and Europe must be further advanced and pursue a zero-emissions goal. Investments in the African energy sector should promote a Green Transition that facilitates economic development and that is tailored to the needs of individual countries.

### **Recognise climate change as a driver of migration**

Adapting to changing living conditions and protecting against climate impacts is not always possible. Migration is often the last option. It must, therefore, be made possible to migrate in a dignified, self-determined, legal and safe manner. The *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)* now recognises climate change as a cause of migration for the first time.

However, the GCM commitments are not binding under international law. Germany should, therefore, advance the agreements of the GCM at the national and international level, and provide adequate support for its implementation.

### **Facilitate equal participation of the affected population**

Appropriate and demand-driven solutions to climate change require the equal participation of affected communities in all climate and migration policy bodies and processes.

Germany should work to ensure this participation at the bilateral and multilateral levels, as well as to further advance a partnership at eye level between the EU and Africa.

*Editor's note: this general overview offers a brief summary of the key talking points within the extended German article written by journalist and author Angela Köckritz. The German version is accessible on the GPI website.*

### **Climate Change and Migration in Africa: A General Overview**

In 2019, more Africans than ever before had to flee their homes due to natural disasters. Due to its geography, climate and the nature of its agriculture, the African continent is particularly affected by the consequences of climate change, even though its personal contribution to climate change is relatively small. According to the World Bank, by 2050 up to 86 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa could be forced to move internally due to gradual climatic changes<sup>1</sup>. The following summary briefly addresses the following questions: How is climate change affecting Africa, and how does it work as a driver of human displacement and migration?

### **Coastal erosion and rising sea levels in West Africa**

Along the coast of West Africa, sea levels are rising particularly rapidly: average rates of coastal erosion are between one and two metres per year. In some especially exposed places, it can be up to one hundred metres per year<sup>2</sup>. The *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* has therefore declared West Africa a climate change hotspot<sup>3</sup>. Along with the shorelines, entire economies are shifting. The coast of West Africa is home to roughly one-third of the region's population, and generates 56 percent of the region's GNI<sup>4</sup>. "Even if we stopped emissions right now, sea levels would continue to rise because our [global] emissions in the past have already triggered these developments",<sup>5</sup> says climate researcher Jacob Schewe of the *Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research*.

### **Climate change leads to an increasing number of natural disasters**

Climate change is leading to more frequent and more severe natural disasters. Mozambique, for example, had just recovered from several years of drought, that had reduced agricultural production by half, when two cyclones swept across the region in March and April 2019, destroying the homes of a total of 617,000 people in the region<sup>6</sup>. In 2019, floods in South Sudan had left more than 600,000 people homeless, and many of them had already been living in displacement<sup>7</sup>. Floods pose enormous health risks, and facilitate, for example, the abrupt growth of mosquito populations which can transmit malaria, yellow or dengue fever<sup>8</sup>. Recently, the increasingly wet weather also brought with it the largest plague of locusts that Kenya had seen in 70 years and the largest plague of locusts that Somalia and Ethiopia had seen in 25 years<sup>9</sup>.

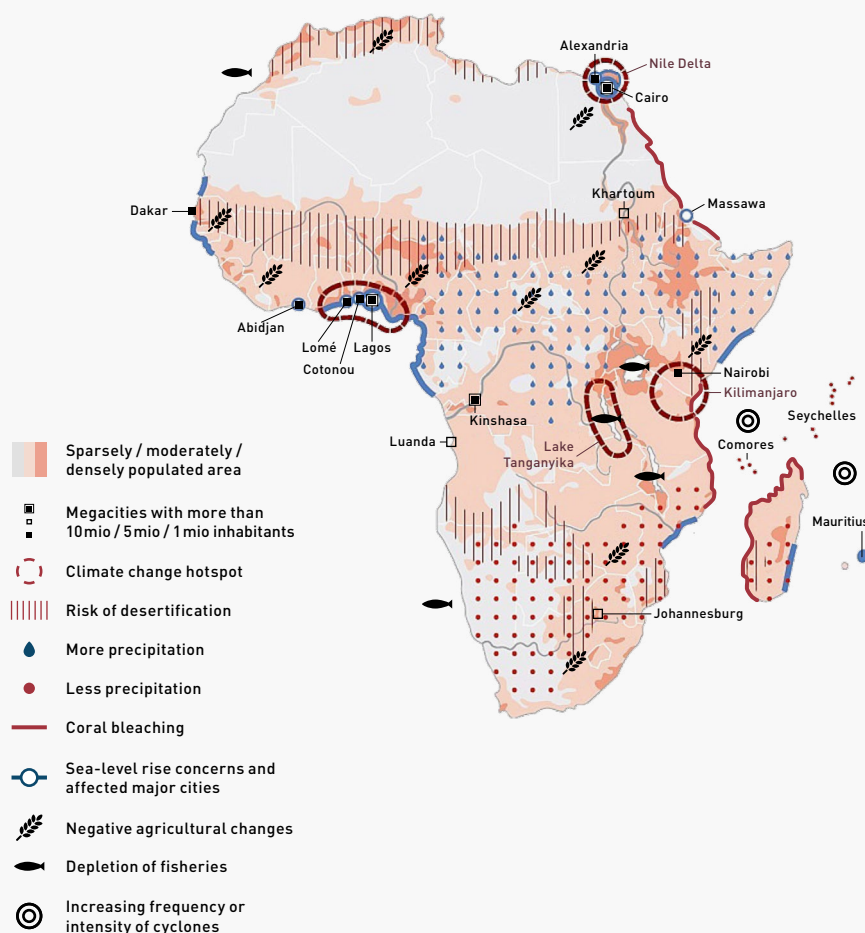
### **Fishing and agriculture are threatened in the long term**

Climate change threatens the African continent's food security in many ways (Figure 1). Coral death is driven by ocean acidification, and both pH changes and rising temperatures in the ocean result in the depletion of fish populations.

More than 12 million people depend on fishing for their livelihoods; it provides food security for more than 200 million people, or nearly one in seven Africans. By 2050 the amount of fish caught annually could fall by 21 percent <sup>10</sup>.

And the changes on land are also worrisome. Temperatures are expected to rise faster on the African continent than in the rest of the world; the worst-case temperature projections over West Africa for the end of the 21st century are up to six degrees higher than a century earlier <sup>11</sup>. Moreover, rainfall is becoming increasingly unpredictable. Many regions are plagued by heavy rain and flooding, while others experience shorter rainy seasons and drought. 46 countries in Africa are affected by desertification <sup>12</sup>.

Figure 1  
**Regional Consequences of Climate Change and  
 Climate Change Hotspots in Africa**



Source: Ionesco, D., Mokhnacheva, D., & Gemenne, F. 2016. The Atlas of Environmental Migration. Taylor & Francis, London.



These climate developments affect agricultural yield and in some places farming may even become impossible. According to a United Nations forecast, crop yields on the continent could decline by 15 to 20 percent by 2050, if temperatures rise sharply<sup>13</sup>. Most people involved in agriculture are smallholder farmers who work with simple equipment and without artificial irrigation systems. The agricultural sector employs 65 percent of the working population and generates 32 percent of GDP<sup>14</sup>.

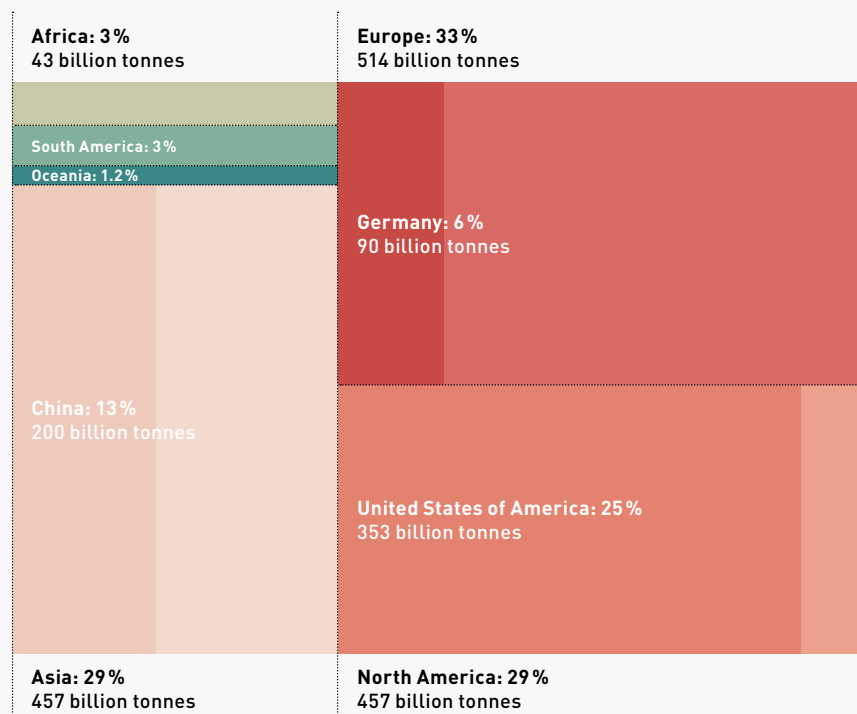
### Scarcity of resources fuels conflicts

In some areas, increasingly scarce resources may lead to more conflict and armed confrontations in the future. In the Lake Chad Region, “communities are starting to fight each other to obtain access to dwindling resources”, reports Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, President of the *Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT)*. The scarcity of resources is creating tensions in a region that is already destabilised by conflicts. 2.3 million people have already left the region, and 10.7 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, according to the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*<sup>15</sup>.

Figure 2

### Who has contributed most to global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?

Cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over the period from 1751 to 2017



Numbers based on production-related emissions. Due to the rounding of numbers, a deviation from a total of 100 percent is possible.

Source: Ritchie, H. & Roser, M. 2021. CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions. Our World in Data.

## Climate change is a matter of global justice

The main causes of climate change are the immense emissions generated by industrialised nations, in the past and at this present time. Historically, for example, Germany alone is responsible for just as many emissions as Africa and Latin America combined (Figure 2). Even today, Africa, with its 54 countries, contributes only 3.7 percent of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; the United States, Europe, and China, by contrast, contribute 59 percent<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, many countries in Africa suffer disproportionately from the effects of climate change. Furthermore, African communities and governments have fewer resources to adapt to the consequences of climate change.

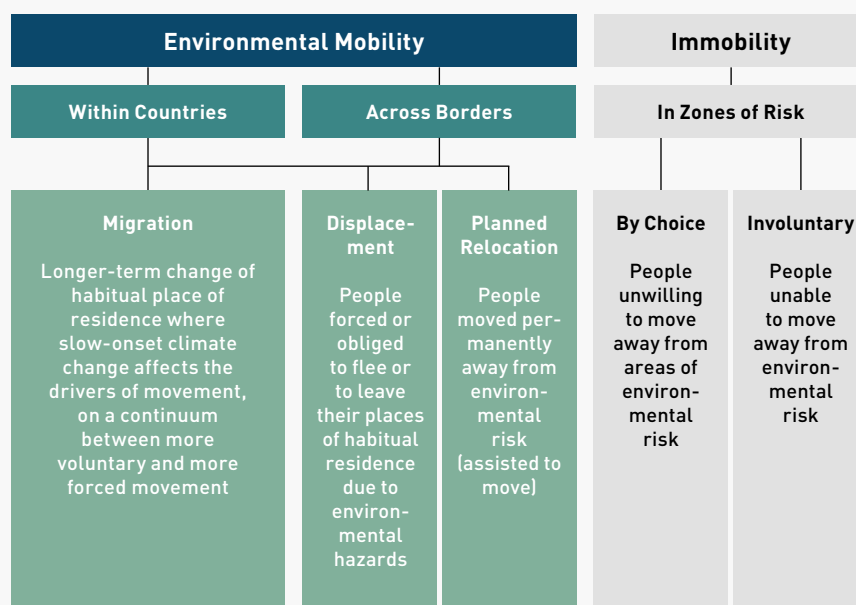
In light of the discrepancy between historical responsibility on the one hand and future impacts on the other hand, activists like South African Kumi Naidoo speak of “climate apartheid”. He says: “We Africans are on the front lines, along with the people of the Pacific, the small islands and coastal regions. The people who pay the first and most brutal price are of a certain skin color. We often wonder if there would be more urgency if climate change impacted Europe more directly.”<sup>17</sup>

## Climate migration takes many forms

The reasons why people decide to, or are forced to, leave their homes are both complex and very personal<sup>18</sup>. According to figures provided by the African Union, 80 percent of migrants move within the African continent<sup>19</sup>. Climate-induced mobility is a multifaceted issue, and can take many forms (Figure 3).

Figure 3

### Human mobility and immobility in the context of climate change



Source: Rigaud, K. K., et al. 2018. Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration. World Bank, Washington, DC.

It is, therefore, extremely difficult to determine exactly how many climate refugees or migrants there are at any given moment. This is especially the case when it comes to migration as a result of so-called “slow-onset” events that unfold over a period of many years, such as rising temperatures, unpredictable weather patterns, fish scarcity or rising sea levels.

It is much easier to track migration movements as a result of abrupt climate disasters, so-called “rapid-onset” events, such as droughts, cyclones, floods or landslides. *The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC)* distinguishes between displacement due to war and conflict and displacement due to natural disasters. In sub-Saharan Africa, 4.6 million displacements due to conflict, and 3.4 million displacements due to disasters, were recorded in 2019<sup>20</sup>. Floods accounted for over 70 percent of reported cases of disaster displacement<sup>21</sup>.

### **Creating legal and humane migration opportunities**

Climate change has now gained formal recognition as a driver of migration. The African Union has created opportunities and legal protection for those affected by climate migration. African countries repeatedly find themselves admitting refugees who flee natural disasters<sup>22</sup>. The *African Union Refugee Convention* grants protection to those who feel compelled to seek refuge in another country “as a result of events seriously disturbing public order”<sup>23</sup>. The *Kampala Convention*, which came into force in 2012, goes one step further. It explicitly addresses internally displaced persons due to natural disasters and climate change<sup>24</sup>, and is thus considered a milestone in international law<sup>25</sup>.

However, no binding frameworks protect climate refugees or climate migrants on the international level. The authors of a European Parliament paper state: “International law thus leaves a protection gap for people who are forced to leave their home (or place of residence) due to environmental reasons.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Migration to cities may offer opportunities**

The 15 fastest growing cities in the world are all in Africa. The number of Africans living in cities is expected to rise to 56 percent by 2050<sup>27</sup>. Rapid urbanisation poses enormous challenges to urban governments and already existing infrastructure shortages are being exacerbated. According to UN estimates, in sub-Saharan Africa 56 percent of the urban population live in informal settlements without regular access to electricity, water and sanitation<sup>28</sup>. Residents of informal settlements are at an above-average risk of disease, landslides and flooding<sup>29</sup>.

Yet, despite these many challenges, migration can also create opportunities. A World Bank study shows that when migrants move from low-income to higher-income countries, their incomes increase by a factor of fifteen, schooling rates double and child mortality drops by a factor of sixteen<sup>30</sup>. Through remittance payments to Africa – which in 2017 were even higher than official development assistance (ODA)<sup>31</sup> – migrants improve the health and education of those who stay at home<sup>32</sup>.

Similar favourable outcomes can apply for migration from rural to urban areas within Africa; cities can offer better health care, and more educational, income and career advancement opportunities. Cities are also becoming leaders in climate action. Some have joined together to form the *C40 Alliance* to implement the *Sustainable Development Goals*<sup>33</sup>. So-called *Sanctuary Cities* are welcoming refugees<sup>34</sup>, and initiatives like the *Mayors Migration Council* are enhancing the role of cities as actors in migration governance<sup>35</sup>.

Such initiatives encourage that besides providing infrastructural services, African cities and national governments can create jobs to benefit from the continent's greatest potential asset: its young population<sup>36</sup>. 60 percent of Africans are younger than 25<sup>37</sup>; and in the cities, as many as 60 percent of people are 15 years old or younger<sup>38</sup>.

### **Energy as a key to development**

Energy is needed for clean drinking water and sanitation, nutrition and health, education and research, technology, transportation and industry. Energy is needed in cities, villages and for each individual. But, "565 million people in Africa live without electricity", says Damilola Ogunbiyi, CEO and Special Representative of the *UN Secretary-General for Sustainable Energy for All* and Co-Chair of *UN-Energy*. "Other countries achieved their development at a high cost to the planet. Africa should do it differently and jump straight into green technological development", writes Carlos Lopes, University of Cape Town professor and African Union High Representative for Partnerships with the European Union. "Africa's top priority is energy."<sup>40</sup>

Extensive investments in renewable energies and in green technology could also create economic growth and jobs. This strategic approach plays a key role in African-European dialogue. A partnership between Africa and Europe that pursues a zero-emissions goal while at the same time enhancing economic prosperity would be a "win-win" for both continents, outlines Kandeh Yumkella, Member of Parliament in Sierra Leone, during the GPI Conference.

GPI in conversation with Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, Mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone, and board member of the *Mayors Migration Council*

**GPI:** In August 2017, after heavy rains, Freetown experienced massive landslides that killed 1,141 people and left 3,000 homeless. You were still working as a financial expert in business at the time. Did the disaster have anything to do with your decision to run for mayor?

**Aki-Sawyerr:** That day, I received a call early in the morning from an acquaintance. Six weeks before the disaster, I lived just two houses away from the last house that went down. I went to the owner of my previous house and said that we needed to set up a command center there. I helped out for a week or two. There were so many bodies, including the family of our former guard.

In May, a few months before the landslides, a woman had asked me: Don't you want to run for mayor? Several people had asked me that question. Events in August confirmed my decision.

What drove me was concern for the sewer system and the environment. Poor sewerage is also the biggest source of greenhouse gases in Africa – not large-scale industrialisation, as in other parts of the world. Sewer systems have a major impact on health and productivity, for example, on the spread of malaria.

**GPI:** To what extent was the disaster related to climate change and lack of urban planning?

**Aki-Sawyerr:** It's related to both. Before the landslide, we had three days of very heavy rain. It was far heavier than normal; a consequence of climate change. On top of that, there was uncontrolled settlement growth. This area was part of the forest reserve. There were informal settlements, and some people had been allotted the land. But, none of this was planned. We know from geological studies where the hazards are. Steep slopes, coastal and marsh areas, alluvial areas of rivers – places where landslides could occur. When building permits are issued, it's important to take that into account. The area where the landslide occurred was known to be a high-risk area. Even in previous years, flooding had cost the city up to \$2.5 million a year.

**GPI:** In the four years before the landslide, Freetown suffered from flooding.

**Aki-Sawyerr:** Exactly. But since 2018, since I took office and we started flood control, we haven't had any major floods. When people build their houses somewhere completely uncontrolled, it becomes very expensive to get infrastructure and services there.

What happened during the landslide is symptomatic of so much else. Just yesterday I was driving down the road and I got really sick. We are seeing desertification in an area that was rainforest just a few years ago. Freetown was famous for its green hills. Climate change concerns us all and we should all start getting involved everywhere. Whether it's the Amazon or the rainforest here, we need to protect it. Where governments or donors have influence, they should use it to tie money to reforestation.

**GPI:** You have one million trees planted as part of the *Freetown, the Treetown* project. Please tell us about your other projects.

**Aki-Sawyerr:** We care a lot about flood control and decent sewers, urban planning and building permits. It can't be that people are allowed to build their houses in waterways. We are working on a climate action plan. It's not just about saying, hey, let's plant trees. What are the alternatives? Why do people cut down trees? For houses, but also for firewood. We need to find alternatives, including alternative sources of income for the people who are cutting trees.

**GPI:** To what extent do you try to involve citizens in your initiatives? For example, you have so-called tree stewards for the trees that are being replanted.

**Aki-Sawyerr:** The city belongs to the citizens. We won't make the progress we need to make if people don't feel they are involved. The tree stewards are, on the one hand, individual property owners who plant trees on their properties, in the yards of churches and schools. But we also have community planters, many of whom are young people. Each tree is marked and uploaded to an app. The tree stewards are responsible for watering the trees and looking after them. They are paid depending on the growth of the tree. We have chosen twelve tree varieties, seven of which have economic importance. Fruit trees like mango, cashew, or the moringa tree.

**GPI:** Freetown has grown by a factor of 2.5 since the 1990s. According to the 2015 census, the city has more than one million inhabitants. What kind of growth do you expect in the future?

**Aki-Sawyerr:** There is a new census this year and I am very curious to see what will come out of it. But I don't believe the official numbers are accurate. I think there are twice as many people living here. In the last three years, so many people have come from the countryside. Mines and businesses outside Freetown have closed, people are coming to the city to start a new life. We feel the pressure.

**GPI:** Are those who have moved in also those who are fleeing the effects of climate change?

**Aki-Sawyerr:** Yes, there are many climate migrants among them. Just two days ago, it was in the newspaper that we had one-third less rain last year, also the temperatures were three degrees higher. People are having trouble farming and are now looking for jobs.

**GPI:** Thank you very much for the interview.

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