



ON THE ROAD TO THE COP26 IN GLASGOW: Climate Diplomacy in the Mediterranean

Hakima El Haité¹

Introduction

The Mediterranean, a rich and plural territory, has fascinated. In the North as in the South, it is along its shores that cultures and civilizations have flourished and given birth to the world we know today. It is around the Mediterranean where art and later the values of democracy that we defend have flourished, and that humans have invented breeding and agriculture. Today, the Mediterranean, one of the most populated and developed regions in the world, is a concentration of strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities.

Inequalities between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean are increasing, with per capita income levels 3 to 5 times higher in the North. Poverty and instability are undermining the countries of the South and fuelling intense migration flows that exceed the reception capacities of the countries of the North. The inequalities between the two regions are huge, and climate change may deepen them even more while leaving more and more people with no other choice than to migrate to regions with more favourable living conditions.

It is now obvious to all that the millions of people living in the Mediterranean influence the ecological balance of the region. Every day, the Mediterranean Basin lose habitats, forests are destroyed, rivers and streams are degraded, marine life is overexploited, the seas are increasingly polluted, and endemic species of the Mediterranean disappear. Every year, more than 220 million tourists flock to Mediterranean coasts and this number is expected to reach 630 million by 2025, thus stimulating the construction of new mass tourism infrastructures, contributing to the degradation of environment and increasing carbon emissions. 25% of the world's maritime traffic transits the Mediterranean and this has very significant consequences on its ecology, causing for instance significant damage for the populations of cetaceans in the Pelagos Sanctuary, especially in summer when the risks of collisions are important. With the coastal and marine tourism, the rapid increase of maritime traffic, offshore

¹ President of the Liberal International and Former Minister Delegate in charge of the Environment for the Kingdom of Morocco, High Level Climate Champion of the United Nations International Climate Conference (COP22)



oil and gas exploitation, aquaculture, trawling and overfishing, and the development of offshore wind farms, the Mediterranean Basin is currently facing an unprecedented development of the maritime economy sectors.

Yet, the Mediterranean remains one of the least protected regions in the world while its natural resources are under heavy pressure. Because these threats to the ecosystem impact the entire region, notwithstanding, Mediterranean countries must work together to find solutions and share best practices if the region is to overcome dangers to the natural environment.

Climate change effects in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean has been identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as a region particularly exposed to the effects of climate change. Droughts, acidification, food insecurity, and natural disasters such as raging wildfires are threatening the ecosystems and the 400 million people living in the region.

Warming, but especially acidification, will be particularly severe in the Maghreb and the Mashreq countries where populations are confronted with recurrent droughts, food insecurity due to erosion and soil degradation, and increasingly frequent natural disasters. But if the South is to be hit more intensely, the North will not be spared. During this summer 2021, Algeria, Turkey, Italy, Greece, and Spain have experienced devastating fires, resulting in the death of several dozen people, the evacuation of thousands of others and a massive destruction of local ecosystems. The direct causes of this phenomena are climate change, exploitation of natural resources and excessive urbanization.

In short, 400 million people are threatened by climate change, above all in coastal areas, which are home to 150 million people, and in hydrological areas, which are home to 250 million people. Thus, because it might seem too late to focus solely on mitigation, Mediterranean societies are now in front of a situation with only one choice: to adapt and innovate to fight against climate change.

Mediterranean cooperation to fight against climate change

Today there is not any other alternative than union, solidarity, and cooperation between the South and the North, so that this fight is embraced by the greatest number of countries and people as quickly as possible.

Adaptation and mitigation strategies must be addressed simultaneously. Adaptation policies can have many co-benefits in terms of mitigation, particularly in the fields of agriculture (development of a more resilient and low-carbon agriculture), energy (improving access to a



modern energy source by developing renewable energies) or in the field of building construction (bioclimatic design improving the comfort of occupants) and city planning (more resilient cities while the need for transport, infrastructure, resources, etc. is reduced).

To become resilient, the northern shore of the Mediterranean, which emits 90% of the emissions, must continue to take an interest in what is happening in the South. Although much remains to be done, innovative ideas are being developed to find solutions. And many of them could be replicated.

For instance, active collaboration between the different Mediterranean countries is necessary, and even unavoidable, in order to co-construct transversal solutions. Europe and the northern Mediterranean countries have an important role in climate diplomacy and negotiations. Whether through the channels of EU member countries like France, Italy, Spain or through the European Union as a whole.

The COP26 in Glasgow and the role of Mediterranean countries

The COP26 is taking place at a very special moment in the common history of humanity. Never before have human beings all over the world faced the same crisis at the same time and with the same economic, social and health consequences. It is equally important to acknowledge that the COP26 is also taking place at a time when the priorities of many countries are not to fight climate change, but to overcome the health and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The upcoming COP26 takes place under very exceptional circumstances due to the pandemic, and the world's focus has shifted from climate action to health and economic concerns. However, the pandemic also offers the opportunity to rebuild our societies in a more sustainable way. And recent events have recalled that the consequences of inaction regarding climate and environment may be at least as dramatic as the pandemic for our societies. Indeed, the recent tragedies of the floods in Belgium, Germany, and China, and the latest succession of forest fires in the Mediterranean have put the urgency back on the table. If the COVID-19 led to a temporary and slight reduction in carbon emissions, the latter are constantly increasing since the adoption of the Paris Agreement, with 2020 witnessing new records of greenhouse gases concentration in the atmosphere.

The world is currently lagging behind in the fight to prevent global warming from reaching 1.5 degrees. The targets announced in Paris in December 2015 are unlikely to be reached on time at the current pace, and studies show that under current conditions, global temperatures are expected to increase to 3 degrees Celsius by 2100 compared to pre-industrial levels. At status



quo, temperatures will continue to rise, leading to even more catastrophic floods, wildfires, extreme weather, and destruction of the planet's ecosystems and biodiversity.

The world must halve its emissions over the next decade and reach net zero carbon emissions by mid-century if governments want to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees. In this context, it is particularly important that the countries of the Northern rim of the Mediterranean take the lead to achieve a green transition. In this sense, what can Mediterranean countries do to accelerate the implementation of the Paris Agreement?

In this context, global leaders are urged to take the needed commitments at the climate conference in November. Among these, the need for governments to raise their ambitions through their NDCs, stop all subsidies to fossil fuels, support green investment and innovation, and define a clear carbon pricing mechanism in Glasgow. Keeping the status quo is by no means the answer, and joint action is needed to prevent the temperatures from continuing to rise and the disastrous impacts this would have for the Mediterranean and beyond.

Thus, their first responsibility is to increase their ambitions through the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), if the 1.5°C target is to be reached. The NDCs, which are the backbone of the Agreement, have shown their limits, as the level of political will and perseverance of the states is very low.

The second responsibility is to ensure that the promises made in Paris are fulfilled, particularly in terms of financing, capacity building and technology transfer. Working to ensure that Europe's New Green Deal includes a cooperation dimension oriented towards the countries of the South is crucial. Indeed, Europe is not an isolated village, and climate has no borders. The Paris Agreement has put an end to the North-South confrontation, while giving birth to North-South cooperation with a common and differentiated responsibility.

The countries of the South, whose emissions are essentially increasing, must also make their contribution. They represent the lifeline to achieve carbon neutrality. Unlike the countries of the North, the countries of the South can catch up by moving towards low-carbon technologies, transport, and infrastructure. However, most of their contributions are conditional and call for greater infra-regional solidarity as an inherent condition for an integrated Mediterranean strategy in the face of multiple challenges. This process must also be part of the global framework of climate negotiations under the guidance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Mediterranean countries must unify their positions and call for action during COP26 in different ways. Governments can do a lot simply by sending a clear and credible signal of their commitment to move firmly towards green economy and finance, which would be transformational. Moreover, governments should stimulate green investment and innovation, fuelling investor confidence towards tackling the climate crisis. Finally, governments should commit to more coherent policies, including on coal and fossil fuel subsidies.

Conclusion and call for action

A fundamental property of greenhouse gas emissions is that their location does not matter. Wherever it is emitted, a ton of CO₂ has, from the point of view of climate change, exactly the same impact everywhere in the world. A measure to avoid the emission of a ton of CO₂ therefore has the same impact on the climate, whether it is adopted by the EU, the Knesset or the US Congress. The political choices of a country located on the other side of the planet have no less impact on the increase in temperature or the frequency of natural disasters than domestic political choices. In this fight against global warming, borders do not exist; no country can protect by itself against climate change. No amount of deglobalisation can protect a country against the effects of climate change.

The indirect effects of climate change “constitute a multiplier risk that will exacerbate stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability and social tensions - conditions that can foster terrorist activities and other forms of violence”.

So, the issue of climate change is the first real issue with a strong international dimension, which needs a geopolitical approach to face the climate crisis all countries together. Climate justice is the responsibility of all of us.