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Season 2. Episode 15: Beyond the Flames and the Heatwaves: Robin Degron on Europe and the Mediterranean Basin's Climate Crisis

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone. Welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. Before we start, I'm happy to share a little something with you. This is episode 15 of season two, the last episode of the season. Thank you so much for being with us. We are grateful for your support and excited for what's to come.

Today while shining a light on the Mediterranean, this region faces serious climate challenges. Wildfires and heatwaves are getting worse every year. These problems are not only here we see them in Indonesia's burning jungles in Canada's dry forest and the Latin America as well. And of course, they are happening along Europe's Mediterranean coast. No matter where we live, the climate crisis affects us all.

Our guest today is Robin Degron, the Director of Plan Bleu (UN Environment). He's a leading expert in climate adaptation environmental policy, and Mediterranean sustainability. Robin, we are fortunate to have you joining us today for this timely and important conversation.

Robin Degron: Good afternoon, Hisham. The pleasure is shared.

Hisham Allam: Robin, as we witness another summer of devastating wildfire and record breaking heat in Europe, what stands out to you the most urgent new realities facing the Mediterranean this year?

Robin Degron: I think this year and maybe every year we have to face and we will have to face many realities, which are linked to the same problem - Climate Change. Climate change is polymorph. It has many effects. Wildfires, drought are effect of climate change during spring and summer. But during fall and winter: flooding, torrential rain episodes are other consequences of climate change. And more and more we're going to face these realities every season from draught to flooding. And this year will be maybe less affected than in 2050 or at the end of the century.

While on the curve on a measure trend of climate change, with clearly and it's maybe impossible to change this trend by the end of the century, in average on the Mediterranean basin - five more degree if you compare by the end of the 19th century.

So, we are on the trend. With many effects, and sometime very dramatic effects.



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Hisham Allam: Like what? Can you explain this more?

Robin Degron: It's like the Four seasons of Vivaldi: during spring, we will have more frequent draught; of course, more draught and more high temperature during the summer. And so, more important sensitivity to wildfire, but also to draught in terms of agricultural production. And during the fall: because you have many streams in the atmosphere due to the high temperature in the summer, we have a huge quantity of streams, and so a huge quantity of water. They are going to fall during autumn with some torrential episode and some catastrophic event as we have seen, for example, in the autumn of 2023 in Libya or in autumn of 2024 in Spain, in Valencia.

And in winter maybe it's the period which will be the safest. So, drought in spring and summer, wildfire more, and torrential episode and over flooding during fall.

Hisham Allam: In regions now facing earlier and longer wildfire seasons, how have these evolving patterns transformed preparedness and response efforts compared to just a few years ago?

Robin Degron: It's a tricky issue because I think the risk of wildfire is increasing - it's clear. And to anticipate that and to adapt to this trend, we have to be very serious in terms of forest exploitation and forest management by preparing forests during the fall or during the winter. To limit the risk of wildfire during the spring and the summer.

We have to change species of trees in forest to choose some species that are less sensitive to drought and to wildfire. We have maybe to prepare some in French, we speak about pare-feu or coupe-feu – a firewall or firewall between forest and zone, with houses. For example two weeks ago in Marceille we had to face a big red fire at the gate of Marceille, because this city is very near a forest area, and now we have to prepare a firewall of about maybe 200 meters to separate clearly forest and the town, because there is a risk of fire in the town due to the wildfire in the forest. So, we have to prepare and to prevent this event. We will be more and more frequently by adapted forest management.

Hisham Allam: But do you think that the idea of the firewalls are feasible and the costs?

Robin Degron: I think it's not feasible. I think it's absolutely necessary. It's not a question of feasibility. The other choice is to forbid all construction, all buildings which are near the forest. So, the preparation of firewall is the less expensive way to preserve and to prevent population from fire.

And so, from civil security, it's not a problem of cost, it's a problem of life.



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Hisham Allam: But is it applied anywhere?

Robin Degron: Yes. And maybe there may be differences around the basin in term of states and in term of forest policy, but especially in France. But I see in Greece there are already many wildfires. The regulations concerning building and construction are more and more sensitive and very hard. And in France especially, we have many dispositive, which are about this local structure to prevent NCD with people on the ground to prevent and to see very rapidly the start of a wild forest with a firewall, with important means of prevention.

Because the most important thing is to prevent. When the fire is sparked, it's too late because due to the wind, especially the mistrial, the midterm or in the basin, fire is progressing very rapidly. So, the key point is to prevent and to see rapidly the seedbed, the beginning of that fire to treat rapidly the source.

Hisham Allam: This is impressive. Moving forward to tourism, which is vital for many economists. How are frequent heat waves and wildfires reshaping travel patterns, local businesses and visitor perceptions across affected regions?

Robin Degron: I think, you know, Hisham, I think's a key point, and it's a key point, but economic development of the Mediterranean basin.

My point is that we manage, we have a whole representation of Mediterranean life. And we consider that Mediterranean life is a very peaceful life with very sweet weather with pleasant place to take a drink. We have a representation of the Mediterranean Sea, which is dated from the middle of the 20th century.

At the beginning of the 21st century the temperature is unbearable around the basin during summer. The risk of wildfire, and not only wildfire is increasing. Think about Rhode Island two years ago with a very great wildfire with many tourists and an emergency situation.

And progressively I think, representation of the Mediterranean basin is going to move, is going to change. And from the paradise we are going to go to hell representation of Mediterranean Sea during the summer. And so, I think there is a great risk that tourists will change their pattern, the way they see the Mediterranean basin in the future. But I think we have a problem, especially in summer, but maybe we will have a chance to promote another tourism during a longer period of time and by promoting the basin during spring and during fall. But during summer, I think we're going to go to a barbecue tourism.

Hisham Allam: With the hospitality sector and fire, brown areas increasingly vulnerable, what long-term changes do you foresee for both tourism and local employment?

Robin Degron: In the wake of my previous answer. I think tourism in the Mediterranean basin has to change by a larger approach of tourism experience, a longer approach of tourism experience and the wider approach, broader approach of the tourism experience. About time. I think we have to enlarge the tourism period coming from spring to fall by avoiding to concentrate on summer, because summer is really a risky



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period now. So, we have to enlarge the tourism experience. In term of place, in terms of space, I think we have to propose and to promote another tourism that, the tourism on the beach for tourism, because on the beach this is a barbecue and because of the beach will be less and less important because of the sea level rise. So, I think we have to deconcentrate tourism activity from the coastal sea and the beach to the end land and to promote the new experience of patrimony from a natural and cultural point of view in the inland of Sardinia, of Libya.

To avoid, to be presenter of the beach. And the third point is to maybe enlarge tourism experience by promoting not only beach swimming, et cetera, but also discover of the patrimony in the inland and discovery of people of Mediterranean peoples. To have an experience sociologic, geographic and historical of the Mediterranean Sea, but not only a beach experience because the beach experience will become a barbecue.

Hisham Allam: This is a fascinating perception. I hope that people working in the tourism sector will rethink and consider it.

Robin Degron: I think it's really a necessity because the more you built on the coast with big hotels the more you expose your assets from an economical point of view, the risk is higher and higher.

Hisham Allam: But what about the employment or people are working in the sectors. They should be treating them during the summer.

Robin Degron: I think we have to enlarge the period of activity. And so, to maintain local employment, we have to open tourism activity to the period from the spring to the fall. So maybe you can compensate the fact that we are going to face less and less tourism during the summer in the Mediterranean basin by welcoming more and more people during spring where and when the weather is sweet in general and in the fall.

And so, you can compensate for the period of activity, but I think we have to enlarge this period to maintain an economic and socioeconomic activity. And maybe to enrich and to enlarge people who work for tourism in term of cultural discover of the country in Libya, in Morocco, for example. Not only some player of beach volley, but to promote a tourism richer. Denser from a cultural and natural point of view. So, I think we need a rethinking of local employment and local competencies. We need to promote this new Mediterranean tourism.

Hisham Allam: Some communities have experienced evacuation or direct losses due to fire. How are these climate extremes affecting the mental and physical health of people on the ground?

Robin Degron: I think we have to consider two periods of time to answer your question. On the short time, just after white fire for example, in Rhode Iceland two years ago it's an accident.



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It's just an accident. So, after this accident, we forgot that, and the next vacation will be better. But no, more and more each summer will look like the previous and more and more this accident won't be accident. They will be a trend. And more and more I think, at the local scale and for tourism behavior are going to change and the mentalities are going to change and progressively we're going to affect and to give a representation to the summer on the Mediterranean basin as a hell. And more and more tourism, and especially tourism coming from France, European Union in general will consider that the best place for vacation during the summer will become Belgium, will become Netherlands, will become Sweden. I think we're on this trend. We have some weak signal of that. For my part, for example, during my summer on my vacation. I won't go to Cecilia or to Morocco.

I will go to Bruges. I will go to Amsterdam to have a nice place with correct weather and the capacity to sleep correctly in my bed, because I'm living in Marseille. In Marseille the temperature during the night is about 28, 30 degrees. It's really tricky to sleep. To take a rest. I think there is a risk that representation of the paradise of the Mediterranean Sea will become a hell and the new paradise in the summer will be located in the north of Europe.

Hisham Allam: Robin could you highlight concrete examples of economic impact such as agricultural or businesses loss that revealed the cascading cost of heat waves and wildfires?

Robin Degron: I think it's the project and the key problem, because we consider of course, tourism because it's a very economic important activity on the basin, but first, we consider the problem of climate change in relationship with water with raw and unsafety from agricultural point of view.

In Morocco for about eight years, we have faced a severe drought and agriculture really is no really a challenge in Morocco or Tunisia. And it raised some very concrete problems of the government for power because more and more farmers can't live, can't work of their work, a farmer. And so, they move to the coast, for example, Casablanca or Tangier. And so we have no problem of safety in terms of food safety on the basin, especially on the South of the basin in terms of yield, in terms of production of food. Maybe you know that we speak very often in Europe of the Mediterranean diet, American regime with a vegetable, with olive oil, et cetera.

But the reality is different in the basin, there are tacos, pizza and burgers, and there is no wine to drink, it's Fanta and Coca-Cola and these products are not produced on the basin. They come from the USA and in Europe, for example. So, the basin cannot feed itself now. And so, it's dependent, it's really dependent on importation. It's a concrete consequence of the climate change and the drought on the agricultural yield. So, it's a problem in terms of dependence of sovereignty. It's a problem in term of health because more and more people consume foods, fast food and Malbouffe as we say in French, very bad food.

And it's a problem in term of obesity. In terms of habits. So, we're faced, and it says the core of my last book about climate, environment and health in Mediterranean Sea. Red alerts in the big blue. Clearly there is a link between climate change and whole health. It's a very concrete environment. It's not little birds, no, environments and climate issue on the basin it's a problem of life or death.



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Hisham Allam: This is very clear. Turning to nature, what are the most alarming consequences of these events on Mediterranean plants, animal life and biodiversity. Are we seeing groups of animals or habitats struggling that were previously resilient?

Robin Degron: It's complex and we have to consider the ground and the sea. On the ground if you consider forest, for example, as we spoke about forest wildfire. We see that species were adapted to the Mediterranean climate are suffering. If you consider Pine Maritime, if you consider even Oak – Quercus, now these species are suffering from drought and we have to promote and to plant new species like Aleppo pine - Pinus halepensis.

New pine trees are more adapted to the drought and the evolution of climate change. So yes, we see some mortality of some natural historical species on the Mediterranean basin. It's very clear, and the forester has to manage this change, this mutation in the Mediterranean forest.

In the sea, it's difficult. It's more difficult to see in the sea. But for example, Posidonia oceanica, which is the sea grass and an endemic species of the sea in Mediterranean Sea. With 27, 29 degrees Celsius we have some problems of mortality with Posidonia oceanica. So we can see now some problems and some mortality of these species.

We can see some mortality of Pinna nobilis, which is a shell, a very big shell, very impressive. We're going to the parish and to dead in the Mediterranean Sea because of pollution, because of fishing, but because of climate change, because the sea water is more and more warm. And this provokes mortality of this very emblematic, endemic species of Mediterranean Sea. And we can see also invasive species. I speak about the Lionfish coming from the Red Sea which is now clearly established in the Mediterranean Sea, especially around Cyprus.

So clearly flora and fauna of the Mediterranean Sea is becoming more and more tropical. We're faced with the tropical Mediterranean Sea. So, this affects the seeds, it affects the ground. Yes. We have to consider, we are going, we are pledged in like mutation of the Mediterranean biome. And the biome will be more and more desertic or tropical.

Due to the channel of Suez, we have a corridor for species coming from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. And by this channel we have a change of the fauna and the flora. And we have another movement coming from fauna only, species from Mediterranean Sea were going from the strait of Gibraltar to go in the Atlantic. So there is a mutation, a dynamic evolution of the flora and the fauna of the Mediterranean Sea, especially of the fauna because the fauna can't move, but the flora can. So, for the flora, we have a deplishment, we have deplishment of some forestry spoke about like Pinus Maritime and Quercus.

So, it's very concrete and no very visible on the ground. And especially for those we swim in the Mediterranean Sea. It's tricky to perceive deplishment of Posidonia, the deplishment of some coral species because it's not visible, it's under the sea, but the researcher has clear view of this evolution.



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Hisham Allam: This is clear now. Robin is there any evidence of forests or ecosystems that despite intense damage, shows surprising signs of recovery or adaptation, what might these cases teach us?

Robin Degron: It is difficult to speak about surprising signs of recovery because you know, after a wildfire on the forest, for example, in France privacy, you add a forest, a real forest, and no, you have very degraded ecosystem with very small trees. It's a way of adaptation, but it's an empowerment in fact, and you know, that the next forest will be maybe in 3, 4, 5 years. So, we are on the train of impoverishment. There is no really surprising signs of recovery because the train of global warning and these consequences are more and more important and more and more freak. So, natural species have no time to adapt themselves. It's for this reason we have to plan and to establish and to put on the ground new species coming from elsewhere. Elsewhere, where climate change temperature at higher to anticipate on the increase of the air atmospheric temperature.

It's not natural the adaptation of the species because the speed of climate change, it's too important, too huge, so the natural life has no time to adapt itself. Non-humankind have to help nature to adapt itself faster because climate change is faster than previous. In the Mediterranean Sea, global warning is about 20% faster than on average.

And on average on the Earth, we're already on the worst trend of the jet. We're now on the scenario RCP 8.4. So, by the end of the century, we know, and it's not a fact, it's a fatality by the end of the century, in average, on the earth, temperature of air will be three degrees more than at the end of the 19th century.

And on the Mediterranean Basin, it'll be plus five degrees more. It's no known reality, but this projection will be reality because there is a strong inertia in the climate system. And emission of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, CO₂ are very long in term of lifespan, in the atmosphere.

So, we are embarking on the very fast and dramatic climate change. The question is how to adapt ourselves to this situation. It's not to change the situation, to change the trend, it's to adapt to the trend.

Hisham Allam: You made the scene very dark, and I feel lost. So, you try to say that all the efforts, summits, conferences are presenting nothing to the environment.

Robin Degron: It's a question of time. I think for example, the UN Convention on Climate Change is very important in the long term. On the long run.

Hisham Allam: How long? Because I think we need a century.

Robin Degron: A century my dear Hisham. To modify the trend in term of emission. It's a hundred years war.



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But we have to enter this war. Not for my son, not for your son, but for the son of your son of your son. On the long run, we have to fight and we have to win the hundred years war of the climate change. But on the short terms, for the next year, for the next two years, in concrete terms, we have to face and to enter the Blitzkrieg of adaptation. Rapidly to avoid some dramatic consequences of climate change. So, we have two periods of time to consider. The very long term, it is the long term of mitigation and the short term, it's the short term. The Blitzkrieg.

Hisham Allam: Speaking about plan Blue that has a unique mandate to anticipate and inspire climate action, which recent strategies or projects stand out as especially promising in helping the region cope with these escalating risks?

Robin Degron: It's a good news, my dear Hisham. Finally, it's a moment of hope because in plan Blue and the Mediterranean action plan of (UNEP) United Nation Environmental Program we work hard on the new strategy, which is called the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development, MSSD for the period 2026 - 2035. And we have reached an agreement in Corinth at the beginning of June on a new strategy for sustainable development on the Mediterranean basin and the key objectives of the strategy, is to adapt and to consider adaptation to climate change as a priority of priorities.

And so we have no a global framework to adapt the basin and states in this basin. In concurrent terms, we push, we promote the fact that in every countries around the basin will be established national action plan of adaptation to climate change. This is the case, for example, in France.

This is the case, for example, in Italy, but it's not the case, for example, in Spain. It's not the case in Tunisia. It's not the case, I think in Egypt. So to push states, to anticipate and to adapt themselves and their population with their particularities to this trend. So, it's a good point because now there is a clear consciousness of the priority and the emergency of adaptation, but we have to keep and to maintain the pressure on the mitigation, but on the very long terms.

But now, we have to face clearly and rapidly the adaptation. We have to go into face both, but not only mitigation on the very long term because we're pressed by the short term of adaptation.

Hisham Allam: That's exciting. Forest management is often cited in discussions on prevention. Based on plan Blue's research, what specific changes could make our landscape less vulnerable to catastrophic fires?

Robin Degron: It's tricky because in forest, in general you have to consider the long term. And it's tricky for us to change very rapidly, in fact. So it's really a long-term affair and, hundred years war of good management or good forest management. But progressively, I think we have to plant, to establish new species around the basin. More resilience, more adapted to high temperature. I spoke about *Pinus canariensis*, Canary Pine. These pieces are really very interesting in terms of resistance to high temperature and resistance to fire in terms of recovery. So, we have to engage the sort of mutation of the Mediterranean forest. In terms of qualitative way, in terms of natural species you are going to plant. But in terms of surface, in term



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of quantitative way, I think we have to promote and to implement and to develop more and more forest for two reasons. Because with forest, we still, in general, even in the town, in the city, we, we built shadow. We build shade. It's very important in terms of resilience of population resilience because of the shadow, and maybe you know that in the turn you are in the street under the sun and you have a have a tree, and under the tree temperature is about three or five. Lower than the sun. So it, it's in term of comfort in term of quality of life to plant tree it's very important in term of adaptation for population. And the other aspect which is very positive with forest is that forest is the carbon sink. So it's a way also to limit, to mitigate emission of greenhouse effect. So for us, it's interesting for humankind because of shadow and because of carbon sink.

Hisham Allam: I would like to say that we agree that financial resource are always a challenge. Yes. Do you see sufficient investment and funding frameworks in the Mediterranean to support larger scale climate adaptation, or are critical gaps persisting?

Robin Degron: My response will be absolutely clear. Absolutely no, there is a huge gap and really the mean are not dimension to the challenge clearly, no.

So in plan Blue, we push to promote green finance for the big blue. It is the name of our program. But we need to mobilize more funding coming from the public and private sector to challenge the situation. Clearly there is a huge gap between our vision and the necessities.

Hisham Allam: When it comes to fire response, voluntarily firefighting teams play a big role in many Mediterranean countries. From your perspective, are these teams effective and can they become a major integral part of a rapid wildfire response to strategies?

Robin Degron: You know firefighter. It is a very hard job. It's not a job for voluntary, I'm sorry. I think voluntary, these firefighter teams could be very useful in terms of prevention to observe the ground, to detect the beginning of wildfire. I think it's useful in this case, but on the ground where you fight the fire, you need professional.

It's, it's too tricky. It's too dangerous. Yes. So, prevention for voluntaries is great. They give time for this very important action of prevention, of observation, but we need professional with technical means in term of Canada, in term of means in general of water.

We need professional means and professional fighters, but we need also volunteers to prevent.

Hisham Allam: In this topic international and local partnerships are crucial. Could you describe a recent cooperative effort that succeeded in uniting stakeholders around prevention, preparedness, or recovery efforts?



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Robin Degron: Yes. And maybe it's a new note point of hope, my dear Hisham. I was at the UN Ocean Conference in Nice at the beginning of June. And it was, I think, globally a success with quasi ratification of the VBNG treaty, bio national jurisdiction, and great mobilization of civil society. But there is something new. And the new is the new Coalition of the Coastal Cities, which is led by Christian Estrosi, the mayor of Nice. And now with a consciousness not from the states, not from the population and the society, but the middle level of governance of the local representative and now they know that around the Mediterranean basin, they have to mobilize themselves to financial means and to provoke and to push a national reaction face to the climate change. So it's great news, this coalition of the coastal cities, I think it's something very new and very important for an effective adaptation on the ground.

Hisham Allam: Robin, despite the grim headlines, what actions or developments give you hope for a more resilient future?

Robin Degron: Oh, my dear Hisham, I think that the first thing is to stop war and the genocide in Palestine, to stop civil war in Syria, to stop civil war in India, to make peace, to make peace between mans to make peace with our environment. It is the first action. After that it will be easier to find solutions.

There is a case, especially in Tunisia or in Morocco. Morocco is very, very interesting country with a clear political willingness to adapt society, Moroccan society to climate change. So, I think first, peace, peace, peace. And after we have to be confident in the human intelligence to find a solution.

The first is peace, and especially in the western part of the basin.

Hisham Allam: Robin insights today made it clear. While fires and heat waves are reshaping lives and environments on every continent, these are urgent wake up calls Robin reminds us that action cannot wait. Across the globe, our communities, economies, and the natural world depend on smarter adaptation, stronger policies, and real collective efforts.

Thank you for joining us and inspiring a push for solutions and for peace that could reach for beyond any border. If you found this conversation valuable, please share it with others. Follow the podcast for more important discussions and let us know your thoughts, your engagement. Help us bring these critical stories to a wider audience.

Let's keep the dialogue going. I'm Hisham Allam. Signing off. Thank you for listening to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. Stay ready, stay informed, and let's move forward together.