

Project Syndicate

Realizing Africa's Sustainable Energy Future

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NEW YORK – Growing economies and growing populations mean growing energy needs. The international community must collaborate with developing countries to meet those needs through universal access to energy that is affordable, reliable, and clean. At the same time, we must enable a just and equitable transition away from coal and other fossil fuels, in accordance with the goals of the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

Nowhere is this truer than in Africa, which has rich solar- and wind-energy potential and has made great progress using other renewable sources, including hydro, geothermal, and biofuels. But without international support, including investment at scale, African countries will not be able to expand energy access to all and still reach their climate goals.

The alternative – increased reliance on coal – would have devastating consequences. Globally, coal is the single biggest contributor to climate change, and increasing coal use will make communities even more vulnerable to its effects. Burning coal and other fossil fuels also spews deadly chemicals into the air and water, contributing to the more than one million deaths globally from fossil-fuel combustion each year.

Choosing clean energy over coal will thus yield immediate health benefits. It will also create new jobs and spur economic growth. Coal is increasingly more expensive than solar and wind, even before its terrible and costly effects on public health are factored in. Because coal plants become even more expensive to operate as they age, the costs of investing in coal will only grow for many years to come. Meanwhile, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted countries' urgent need to reduce their reliance on imported fossil fuels.

Clean energy promises even greater opportunities in Africa, where many communities are removed from centralized grids and extending the grid to reach everyone may not be financially possible. Decentralized clean energy offers a faster and more affordable way to expand energy access, thereby spreading opportunity and further accelerating Africa's economic growth. Mini-grids using solar and wind can fuel not only homes but also local hospitals, schools, businesses, and other critical community resources.

Wealthy countries – including the United States – have a responsibility to help Africa seize those opportunities. They have benefited from more than a century of carbon-intensive development that now puts populations in Africa and throughout the developing world at great risk. African countries, which account for just 2-3% of current global carbon dioxide emissions, have contributed the least to the climate crisis but face the most devastating consequences.

In 2009, rich countries pledged to provide \$100 billion annually to help the developing world fight climate change and prepare for its effects, but that promise has never been fulfilled. That must change right away, but more must be done. Governments, multilateral banks, private investment firms, and philanthropists must increase their efforts to drive clean-energy financing to developing countries that may otherwise be forced to rely on carbon-intensive solutions.

At the ongoing 2022 Sustainable Energy for All Forum in Kigali, Rwanda, which brings together African and other global leaders, Bloomberg Philanthropies announced a new investment of \$242 million to speed up clean-energy progress in ten developing countries. Four are in Africa: Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, and South Africa. Each of these countries has enormous renewable-energy resources and can set an example for others around the world.

In partnership with Sustainable Energy for All, the International Solar Alliance, and other organizations, this funding will help those countries turbocharge clean-energy investment and avoid having to build new polluting coal plants. Together, we will help countries develop smart policies, attract new financing, establish clean-energy pilot projects, engage the public to encourage leaders to embrace clean energy, and provide the data and research those leaders will need to frame the most effective policies.

We have seen that it is possible to reduce CO₂ emissions and increase access to affordable, clean energy at the same time, and to do so quickly. Working with partners, Bloomberg Philanthropies' Beyond Coal campaign has helped to close more than two-thirds of US coal plants and more than half of Europe's. We must spread that success around the world.

There are promising clean-energy developments across Africa. For example, the presidency of last year's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) and the Energy Transition Council brought together governments, development institutions, and financiers to create a supportive investment framework for Nigeria's Energy Transition Plan. Kenya's electrification strategy has focused on a variety of renewable-energy sources, tapping into multiple public and private funding channels and strategies for industrial, rural, and on-grid and off-grid alternatives to coal.

But we urgently need more action and investment, and the Sustainable Energy for All Forum is a chance to accelerate it. The event is reinforcing the importance of supporting

Africa in its climate efforts and highlighting African leadership in the global Race to Zero emissions. All of this is happening in the lead-up to COP27 in Egypt this November – the first global climate summit in Africa since 2016.

African countries can show the way forward by powering their economies' growth with clean energy. But they should not have to act alone.

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