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Africa should start preparing for the global climate emergency

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For Africa's voice to be heard in climate debates, it must take bold action in pursuit of green economic growth. Dr Uche Igwe, LSE Fellow at the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa, argues Africa's position should no longer be dictated by transatlantic stakeholders, overturning long-standing stereotypes of dependency.

Growing up in a rural village in southeast Nigeria, the challenges of climate change used to be a distant reality. We did not concern ourselves much with extreme weather or future predictions. Our preoccupation as poor rural dwellers was more about what to eat day by day. It was not until I visited Imiringi, near Yenagoa in Bayelsa state, that I witnessed first-hand the effect of 24-hour daylight, which elders informed us was due to gas flaring from a nearby crude oil field. My friends and I saw it as an opportunity to play soccer endlessly. The roofing sheets covering the house I visited, and many others in the community, were brown and rusty, while

rainwater was uniquely different and acidic. The air outside was filled with soot, which made the atmosphere hazy.

Those were the **footprints of the exploration and exploitation of crude oil** in Nigeria, carried out mainly by multinational corporations. It was like visiting another planet. Those pictures have stuck in my memory for more than twenty-five years. To date, very little has changed.

Many African countries are suffering from climate change

Recently, the effects of climate change appear to be getting closer to daily life, with **flooding causing extensive damage** and disruption around me regularly. Migration patterns are now altered with less rainfall and desert encroachment in arid parts of the Sahel region. There is evidence of diverse and wide-ranging consequences, including threats to health, food security, water availability and other sensitive sectors such as agriculture. According to the International Monetary Fund, adverse consequences of climate change are concentrated in **regions with relatively hotter climates**, where a disproportionately large number of low-income countries are located.

Indeed, climate change tends to affect developing countries with low carbon footprints more adversely. The recent experience in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe reinforces our understanding of many African cities' vulnerabilities. **According to the World Bank**, the average annual loss from floods induced by cyclones in Mozambique alone stands at \$440 million.

Reimagining farmers-herdsmen conflicts through a climate lens

The current conflict between farmers and pastoralists in Nigeria has origins that politicians have deliberately ignored – the result of the movement of people for survival as a consequence of climate change. The political conversation in the country is between those who favour as a solution either open grazing or ranching. But any solution can only be sustainable when the conversation becomes scientific and acknowledges the ecological dimension of the conflict; increasing studies are showing **linkages between civil war and increases in temperature** in Africa. Climate change alters competition for scarce natural resources, leading to desertification,

drought, land degradation and water scarcity. As these issues deepen, further inter-communal grievances and other vulnerabilities will be triggered. As in the Southern Darfur region in Western Sudan, where Arab nomads move to more fertile lands **inhabited by settled farmers from the Fur tribes**, Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria move southwards.

Framing partnership options on the road to COP26 in Glasgow

At the end of October, world leaders **will assemble in Glasgow** to review action and improve upon various commitments in the 2016 Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. There is some rational hope that a new framework will be proposed for a sustainable 'climate economy' that could deliver USD26 trillion worth of economic benefits through to 2030, according to a **report** of the Global Commission on Economy and Climate Change. This would require targeted sacrifices and ambitious action across critical economic systems to create energy transition conditions, reduce carbon emissions, scale up food production and reform land-use systems.

African policymakers must frame future partnerships between the continent and the rest of the world as one that delivers clear benefits at home while bestowing upon itself necessary responsibility. A new climate-focused economy is a potential source of opportunity, which will require openness to building strategic North-South relations. For this to happen, the continent must not remain on the fringes of the conversation.

African leaders can tag along or chart an alternative course

The transition to a low carbon world for governments and businesses will require bold choices and far-reaching sacrifices. Those who oppose outright divestment from fossil fuels propose the recognition of economic differences between countries, often without the suggestion of divergent pathways. Nigeria's erudite Vice President Yemi Osinbajo made such a point in a **recent article**, arguing that banning fossil fuel investments would crush Africa.

Osinbajo may be correct that fossil fuels have played a role in powering growth in Africa. However, arguments for continued dependence on fossil fuel exports are

pedestrian; the world's biggest consumers of fossil fuels are preparing to move into renewable energy generation, limiting the potential for producers.

That the continent itself does not yet generate a high carbon footprint is not a compliment. It simply exposes the continent's lagging economy – all the more reason Africa's voice must be reflected in the climate debate. Indeed, the moral position that developed countries should wait for Africa to catch up developmentally is a barrier towards a green energy transition. In a competitive, globalised world, you either fall in line or step aside.

He who pays the piper dictates the tone

Western governments' rhetoric on the environment does not often match reality. Controlling the majority of the world's state finances, the pursuit of their agenda limits choices for developing countries, which are less able to shape their own environmental programmes. Either African leaders negotiate in their interest or begin to chart a bold alternative course in the long-term by resolving the lingering energy imbalance between exports and domestic consumption. A continent that regularly genuflects before others to further their concern is no longer acceptable. It is time for an African continent willing to vigorously pursue sustainable green economic policies, like others, rather than painting a picture of itself that reinforces stereotypes of dependence. At the same time, the polluter-must-pay principle means that the pathway for one billion people in our continent who contribute **less than 2.3% of global greenhouse emissions** must be charted differently.

Time for tough choices towards decarbonised development

While admitting the wrongs of the past, Africa must face tough choices to pursue decarbonised development through adaptation and mitigation measures.

Partnerships that position the continent to benefit from green economic growth must be built, particularly as much of the continent **remains heavily polluted**. The vast environmental debt owed to African countries is an important starting point that should be fought for, a position undermined by the continent emitting more carbon. Countries on the frontline of climate change's effects, in particular, should be forthright in using the opportunity to leverage financing and sustainably unlock economic opportunities. In this regard, Africa's position should no longer be dictated

by the prescriptions of transatlantic stakeholders, however benevolent. Yet, the continent must listen and learn from others to bring forward feasible proposals on how to decarbonise.

To create a more sustainable and economically prosperous world for the collective good, Africa must now rise and take the initiative to participate meaningfully or continue to lag behind. Africa can improve its economy fourfold in the next twenty years by implementing policies that help **expand clean technologies and improve energy efficiency**. The continent can halt its current trajectory of poverty and vulnerability, transition away from high carbon dependent economic opportunities by investing in low carbon options like renewables to meet the expanding energy needs of its fast-growing population and create green jobs. Time has come to steer Africa away from **climate change-induced instability** and subsequent social unrest. These choices are available. So are the benefits as well as the consequences of inaction.

Photo: United Nations General Assembly. The South Africa Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Dr Naledi Pandor, delivering a statement at the Security Council Ministerial meeting on Peace and Security in Africa partnership. Credit: DIRCO. Licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0.

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