"Africa needs to define its own path. It can simultaneously deal with the dual crises of poverty and climate change by building a low emission, climate resilient society and economy.

Climate change is a poverty issue. It is the poorest of the world who are the most vulnerable to its impacts and who will be hardest hit — and yet they did not cause it. Global solutions must therefore be pro-poor.

Up to 2 billion people live in extreme poverty worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa alone about 314 million people — one in every two — live on less than a dollar a day: a third of Africa's people suffer from malnutrition, less than half have access to health care and over 300 million cannot get safe water. Fewer than a quarter of African households have access to electricity. Climate change will worsen existing poverty and vulnerabilities, particularly in countries heavily dependent on natural resources.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shows that the threats to Africa are severe. It is expected that agricultural yields will decrease by 50 per cent by 2050, 75–250 million people will be exposed to increased water stress, about 70 million people will face the risk of coastal flooding because of sea level rise by 2080 and there will be a significant increase in health impacts. The most vulnerable — the poor and, especially, women — will bear the brunt .

Rural and coastal African communities largely depend on natural resources for their livelihood, and these will be threatened by climate change. Agriculture and fisheries — which are already on the edge of survival in many parts of Africa — will become even less viable. Even minor changes to rainfall patterns and increased severity of droughts and floods threaten food security and livelihoods.

African cities are growing rapidly. The urban population grew tenfold from 30.7 million to 309.6 million between 1950 and 2000: by 2025 more than half of the continent's population will be living in towns and cities.

Migration to cities is largely driven by the hope of survival, and the growing effects of climate change being experienced in rural areas will certainly increase it. The urban poor generally live in informal settlements — with limited access to clean water, decent housing and electricity — often in the most environmentally degraded and unsafe areas, particularly vulnerable to frequent flooding, spreading of diseases and, in some regions, fires.

Climate change is thus an economic and humanitarian, as well as an environmental, crisis. So African countries are justified in calling on developed nations to take the lead by drastically reducing their domestic emissions and by providing funding, technology and capacity-building support to developing countries to build climate resilience and take actions to reduce emissions. They argue that developed countries should bear the historical responsibility for the global warming problems we face today, that developing countries have the right to develop and that sharing the remaining atmospheric space should provide for this.

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Yet while developed nations must take the lead in the transition to a low emission future, it is critical for developing ones — especially in Africa — not to be left behind. African leaders and decisionmakers should not believe that they need the current dominant economic growth model of the developed world to deal with their countries' development challenges. We should learn from the failures of the existing economic system which has increased the gap between rich and poor worldwide and placed the planet and its people at risk through unsustainable consumption and production; the solution is not to be found in using the same model as caused these problems or by taking a business-as-usual approach. It is a false notion that climate protection is an economic disincentive. In reality there can be no trade-off between the environment and the economy.

Africa needs to define its own path. It can simultaneously deal with the dual crises of poverty and climate change by building a low-emission, climate-resilient society and economy. This would put people and the planet first, promote sustainable growth and development and aim at eradicating poverty and ending inequality. Investing in renewable energy, for example, would not only provide access to clean electricity, but create jobs, provide business opportunities and improve everyone's quality of life. Empowering local communities and building local economies would be key features, while drawing on indigenous knowledge, especially rich in Africa, would be a good basis for promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

All developing countries, including the least developed, must plan for this transition. We need to ensure that they all participate in and benefit from a future green economy. It is vital that least developed countries "leapfrog" to such a transition and not remain in their present poverty trap.

African countries have rightly made adaptation to climate change a priority, but we also have an important opportunity to set a new agenda, provide leadership, demonstrate a different approach to growth and development and value and measure progress differently, rather than by GDP alone. A just transition to a low-emission economy would lay the basis for this. We all have to take responsibility for the future. even if developed countries have the historical responsibility to provide leadership. This generation has the moral and ethical responsibility to make decisions to secure the survival of future generations. Africa must be part of this: if we can't be a voice for the poor and vulnerable, and act on their behalf, who else will be?

If a fair, ambitious and binding new climate deal is not reached, the world's poorest, especially in Africa, stand to suffer the most.
The powerful must keep this uppermost in their minds when reaching agreements. There is an African proverb: "when the elephants fight it is the grass that suffers". Recently a Zambian diplomat made an interesting observation: "the same is true for when elephants make love — the grass still suffers". When leaders reach agreement they should remember the grass.