

Africa's just transition opportunity: decolonising economic transformation for climate resilience

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Introduction

Africa has contributed the least to global climate change, resource scarcity and biodiversity loss, yet it is the continent facing the brunt of the related economic and ecological impacts. These effects will only get worse, and they will continue to have negative implications for the rest of the world. This creates an imperative for commensurate climate finance to support the continent with its just transition ambitions. Unfortunately, the so-called “climate finance” that the international community has in mind is mostly loans acquired by African governments (mainly non-concessional loans) under strict conditionalities that undermine national socio-economic priorities, while promoting predatory foreign direct investment and invasive profit-driven green extractivism. As much as 51% of climate finance flows to Africa come in the form of debt, more than double that of other regions such as East Asia and the Pacific (18%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (Climate Policy Initiative, 2024).

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analytical framework for understanding the root causes of Africa’s economic challenges and to articulate an alternative pathway of strategic opportunities for the continent to unleash its full potential as a renewable energy economic powerhouse. The framework developed in this paper builds on three important pieces of literature: *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity* (Rockström et al., 2022), *Just Transition: A Climate, Energy and Development Vision for Africa* (Sokona et al., 2023) and *SDGs for All: Africa* (Earth4All, 2024). The ensuing analysis demonstrates that the strategic economic transformation needed for Africa’s just transition is consistent with the Earth4All policy turnarounds that are needed for humanity to survive and thrive.

While the formal colonial presence on the continent ended decades ago, the colonial legacy persists to this day, largely in the form of economic roles imposed on Africa (Amin, 1973). Africa was not colonised because it was poor, but rather precisely because it was (and continues to be) an extremely rich continent with tremendous economic potential. During colonial times, Africa was forced to play three key roles: 1) Africa as the source of cheap and abundant raw materials for the industrialised world; 2) Africa as the large consumer of goods and technology from the industrialised world; and 3) Africa as the place to which obsolete technologies and assembly line manufacturing are outsourced under the guise of trade, development, cooperation and job creation. Africa today continues to play the same colonial economic roles that were designed to produce and maintain a particular economic and geopolitical hierarchy in which Africa was to remain locked at the bottom. These colonial roles were not supposed to deliver economic development, prosperity or a just transition; they were designed for colonial extraction of wealth from the African continent. This analysis will demonstrate that it is not possible for Africa to decarbonise a system that has not yet been structurally and economically decolonised. In other words, Africa’s just transition framework must be accompanied by structural economic transformation to undo its colonial economic roles. Coincidentally, this structural economic transformation is completely in line with the Earth4All five turnarounds.

SECTION I: Africa's structural challenges

The world is experiencing significant transformation amid a climate crisis, economic instability, the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict and the rise in far-right governments across the world led by the Trump administration in the USA. These global shifts are reshaping the economic and geopolitical landscape, presenting both risks and opportunities for Africa. The continent cannot afford to be passive during these global changes.

Global restructuring positions Africa as a focal point of contention. Major power centres – North America (led by the USA), Western Europe (led by the EU) and Asia (led by China) – are intensifying efforts to strengthen their economic influence, secure supply chains, and invest in food and energy security. These regions rely on Africa and the broader low-income countries for raw materials, strategic minerals, affordable labour and consumer markets.

Africa faces diverse challenges, including high rates of undernutrition, ongoing conflicts and inadequate infrastructure. One in every four Africans lives in severe lived poverty (Mattes & Lekalake, 2025). Continent-wide, 567 million people cook with firewood; 510 million lack proper sanitation; 504 million live in poor-quality housing; 490 million cannot turn on a light bulb; 387 million drink water from unsafe sources; 343 million live in a household where at least one person

is malnourished (Oldiges & Jennings, 2020); and life expectancy remains below the global average. Rapid urbanisation and climate change exacerbate these issues, with millions facing displacement due to worsening climate conditions. This report stresses the need for urgent action to reduce fossil fuel use and invest in renewable energy to avoid further climate disruption.

Africa's sovereign debt distress jeopardises collective efforts to meet the climate challenge

Africa's sovereign debt distress jeopardises collective efforts to meet the climate challenge and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. This external debt crisis further reduces the fiscal policy space necessary to tackle national priorities such as

health, education, infrastructure and other public services in low-income countries. Unfortunately, the existing global financial architecture and a high-interest rate environment are forcing African countries to accept punitive loan conditionalities that weaken their state capacity, hurt their most vulnerable citizens and lock them into further dependence on external financing.¹ In 2024, African countries paid \$163 billion in debt service, a significant increase from the \$61 billion spent in 2010 (African Development Bank, 2024). Effectively, Africa is paying more in debt service in one single year than all the climate finance pledges *combined*, including the \$100 billion from Copenhagen, the Green Climate Fund and the Loss and Damage Fund. More than half of African countries spend more on debt service than they do on healthcare and/or education.

The structural root causes of Africa's external debt

While Africa's external debt remains a serious problem that requires the utmost attention, cooperation, coordination and solidarity, it is important to recognise that external debt cycles

¹ As of 2023, Africa's total external debt was approximately \$1.16 trillion, accounting for almost 60% of the region's total public debt stock. A significant portion of this external debt, over 70%, is denominated in US dollars, with the Euro also used but to a lesser extent.

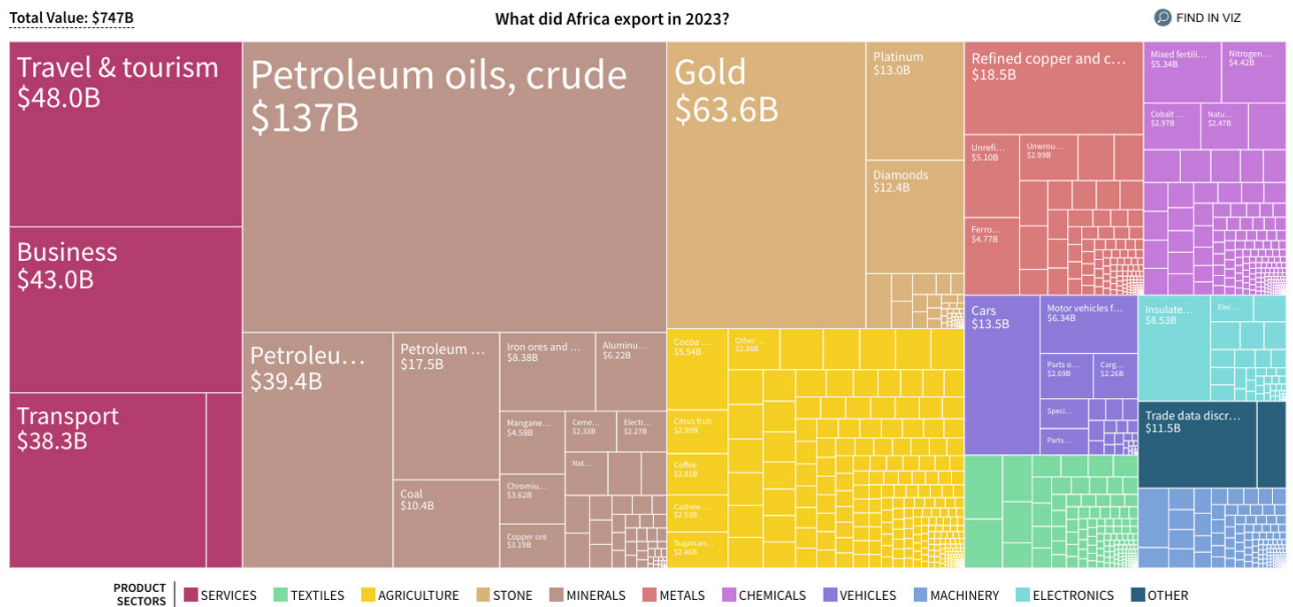


Figure 2: Africa's exports

Source: <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/>

First, when Africa speaks of energy deficits, that includes its biggest oil exporters such as Angola and Nigeria, who import more than 80% of their fuel from international markets (Ohalezim & Ngang, 2024). This is not by accident; it is by design, because Africa has always been denied access to technology for prospection, drilling and refining oil products. Not only is Africa denied technology access in the old fossil fuel energy system that it wants to transition away from, but it is also denied access to renewable energy technology of the future (UN Environment Programme, 2013).

Second, when it comes to food deficits, Africa today imports 85% of its food (Akiwumi, 2020), when less than a hundred years ago it was the breadbasket for colonial powers. Again, this is not by accident; it is by design – namely, the rules of international trade, which result in uneven policies such as agricultural subsidies in high-income countries.

As soon as countries across the African continent started to gain independence in the 1950s, European leaders met for the Treaty of Rome and acknowledged that Europe had a food security problem: it was too dependent on the colonies that were becoming independent. They decided Europe needed to introduce its own food sovereignty programme, which came into effect in 1962 with the launch of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Seidel, 2020). CAP remains a foundational block of the European Union to this day.

Europe was not alone in such efforts. Australia, Canada, the former Soviet Union and the USA also implemented protectionist agricultural policies (this is why, for example, Russia and Ukraine still dominate the grain industry). This protectionism forced the low-income countries, Africa in particular, to give up producing wheat, corn, barley and the core crops necessary for its food sovereignty. Instead, Africa was forced to play a new role in the global economy and the global food system, producing cash crops (Govereh & Jayne, 2003) and supplementary agricultural products for export.

One of the most important aspects of reforming the international financial architecture must be an intentional strategy to rebalance the global economy and to reposition African countries away from the bottom of the global value chain

When Africa began to increase its production of cash crops to satisfy the taste of high-income countries' markets, it had to use non-native seeds that are not acclimated to their environment. To farm them requires pumping with water, which many African regions do not have enough of, and it requires importing fertilisers and pesticides that are expensive and hard to source. These practices have made the soil less fertile, leading to African farmers doubling down on acquiring even more potent seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, which they must import on unfavourable terms. Ultimately, this has caused a debt trap, and one that is exacerbated by other climate change-induced changes in rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and pest and disease outbreaks that are affecting agricultural productivity (Apraku et al., 2021). The result is that Africa has very low food security.

And third, when it comes to the manufacturing value-added deficits, the global economy only allowed Africa to manufacture import goods for intermediary manufacturing – the kind where you have to import everything, including the machines, the fuel to power the factories, the components to assemble with low-cost labour, and even the packaging. Africa has ended up with a manufacturing base that exports low value-added content

and imports high value-added content. This is a trap; Africa can double, triple or quadruple its exports, but it will always be locked at the bottom of the global value chain. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of reforming the international financial architecture must be an intentional strategy to rebalance the global economy and to reposition African countries away from the bottom of the global value chain.

These three fundamental deficits – food, energy and manufacturing – add up to a structural trade deficit year after year, decade after decade. Any country with a trade deficit finds its currency becomes weaker relative to the dollar. With the weaker exchange rate, anything Africa needs to import – food, fuel, medicine – must be imported at a higher cost. Ultimately, Africa imports inflation in the most sensitive sectors, which creates the risk of social unrest, putting its governments immediately into a defensive position where they have to find a band-aid solution to this imported inflation in food, fuel and medical supplies. As a result, many governments subsidise food and fuel, and it is unsustainable to do that for decades.

In addition, African central bankers are asked to do their best to defend the value of the exchange rate, which they do by borrowing more dollars and accelerating the debt trap. When debt payments are due every month or quarter, policymakers are incentivised to completely rewire the economy to prioritise any economic activity that will allow the state to earn those dollars, culminating in Africa's current debt trap (Oluwashakin, 2020). That leads to an even more extractive, faster acceleration of the same colonial traps African countries are already in. These are the roots of the problem.

SECTION II: The imperative for structural transformation

The analysis provided by the Independent Expert Group on Just Transition and Development demonstrated that nothing short of a comprehensive multipronged approach to climate, energy, debt and development would be able to achieve a just transition in Africa (Sokona et al., 2023). In what follows, this paper outlines the three core strategic investments that would decolonise African economies and address the root causes of the external debt crisis while simultaneously addressing the climate adaptation needs of the continent. The three areas for strategic investment are 1) food sovereignty (La Via Campesina, 2019) and agroecology; 2) renewable energy sovereignty; and 3) pan-African joint industrial policies that prioritise manufacturing and deploying clean cooking, clean energy and clean transportation infrastructure.

1. Food sovereignty and agroecology

Africa must reject the so-called food security approach to deal with hunger, and instead adopt a more sustainable agroecology approach aimed at restoring food sovereignty at the national, regional and pan-African levels. The concept of food security in the colloquial sense of the term is, of course, a desirable outcome. However, the term “food security” has become a dangerous neo-colonial technical concept designed to force the low-income countries into debt traps, weaken its agriculture, destroy its ecology and increase its dependence on the high-income countries.

Food security has come to mean the securing of the nutrition of a country’s people either by producing food locally, importing it from abroad, borrowing money to buy it from abroad or receiving it as food aid. The last of these is the worst thing a country can do to its agriculture, because farmers cannot compete with free food. Furthermore, food subsidies that are designed

Africa’s food sovereignty strategy should prioritise supporting local producers so they can deliver affordable food items

to protect the most vulnerable consumers and to help manage the cost-of-living burden for the working class is a band-aid solution that is in essence a subsidy to foreign producers, which means it ends up hurting domestic farmers. Therefore, Africa’s food sovereignty strategy should prioritise supporting local producers so they can deliver affordable food items. Over time, this approach would require fewer subsidies to the consumers.

As an example, one of Ethiopia’s biggest export items (after coffee) is cut flowers (Belwal & Chala, 2008). Consider the massive logistical and energy-intensive infrastructure needed for flying fresh cut flowers daily to high-income countries’ markets, while the country has 20 million people who are dependent on food aid from abroad. Trade has not and will not improve Ethiopia’s food security. Ethiopia is blessed with fertile land

and abundant water, and yet it is allocating these resources towards producing coffee and flowers for international markets instead of prioritising its genuine food security. Of course, this problem is unfortunately not unique to Ethiopia.

The good news about a food sovereignty strategy is that it not only addresses one of the root causes of Africa’s external debt, but it also happens to be one of the most effective climate

adaptation solutions. It is a win-win strategy on both the climate and development fronts. Furthermore, strategic investments in food sovereignty and agroecology can deliver immediate results that can lead to long-term structural transformation. Every metric ton of wheat or corn Africa produces reduces the amount of money it needs to borrow and pay hefty interest and fees on for decades. And this process of structural transformation can start in one agricultural season (12 months), and can gradually be accelerated with strategic planning that shifts subsidies and other fiscal incentives from cash crop exporters to core crop producers.

2. Renewable energy sovereignty

Africa's energy crisis – marked by limited access to affordable and clean energy – underpins many of its development issues. Nearly 650 million Africans have no access to electricity (Foster et al., 2021) and nearly 1 billion (mostly women and children) are inhaling toxic fumes daily because of the lack of access to clean cooking infrastructure (Dagnachew et al., 2020). Energy access is a fundamental prerequisite for development, health, education, transportation, production, distribution, and the smooth functioning of a healthy and prosperous society. This extreme energy access deprivation is taking place in a continent that is blessed with massive renewable energy potential (see Figure 3).

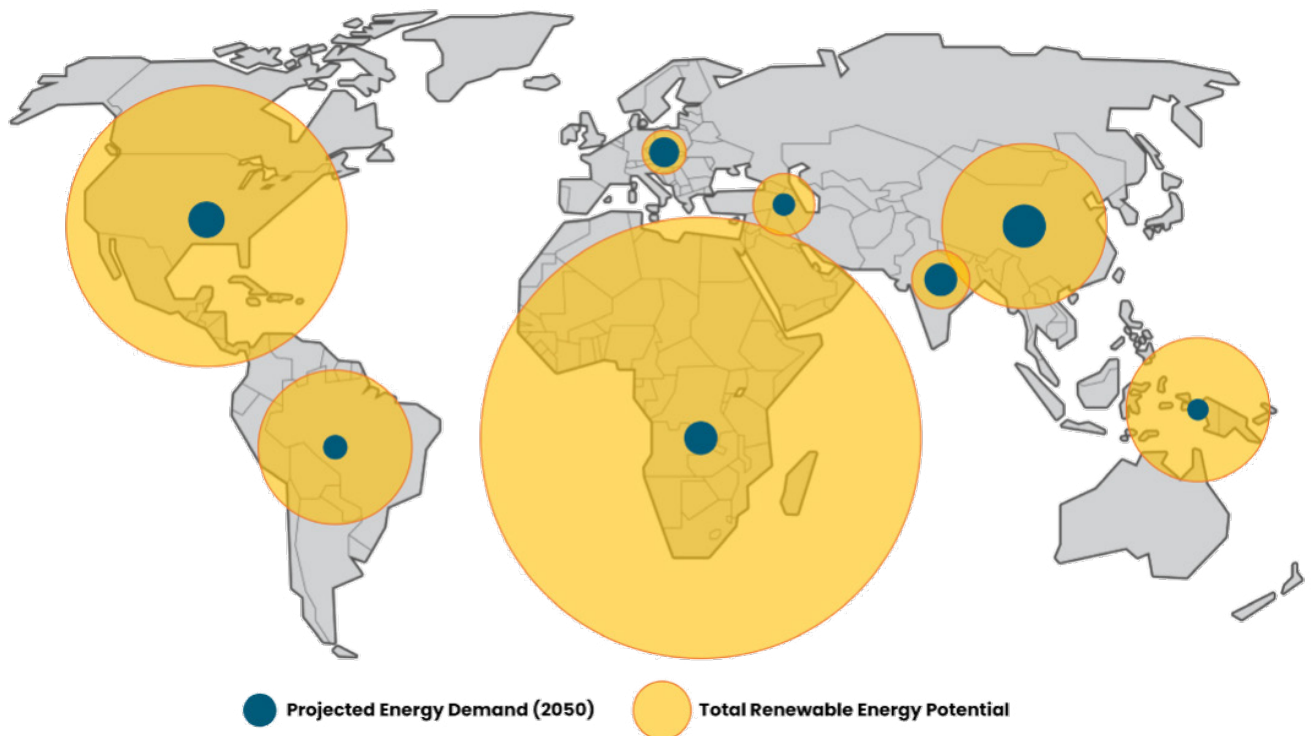


Figure 3: Africa's vast renewable energy potential

Source: <https://justtransitionafrica.org/>

According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA, 2023), Africa can produce 1,000 times its anticipated energy needs by 2040 with existing renewable energy technologies and can completely replace all of the continent's fossil fuel exports. Unfortunately, Africa attracts less than 2% of global renewable energy financing (Sankoh et al., 2021), and most of its

renewable energy infrastructure is destined either to be exported to Europe or to export-oriented industries rather than serving Africa's own development and energy needs.

Strategic pan-African investments can turn Africa into a global renewable energy superpower and unleash the continent's full potential as a global economic powerhouse.

Again, the good news about strategic investments in renewable energy sovereignty is that every green kilowatt-hour produced in Africa reduces the amount of money the continent needs to borrow to import fossil fuels for energy productions. In other words, long-term structural transformation can kick in almost immediately.

Strategic pan-African investments (with the cooperation of high-income countries) can turn Africa into a global renewable energy superpower and unleash the continent's full potential as a global economic powerhouse. Unfortunately, this potential is perceived by the leading economic blocs as a threat to be managed, since Africa's enhanced competitiveness could disrupt the current economic and geopolitical hierarchy that the blocs currently benefit from. In other words, the issue is not a lack of resources, financing or technology, but rather the lack of an honest geopolitical settlement that can produce a win-win scenario for Africa and its economic partners in high-income countries.

3. Pan-African industrial policies

One of the most important things to recognise about industrial policy in Africa is that real transformative industrialisation cannot happen at the national level because most countries in the continent lack the requisite economies of scale. When a small country attempts to industrialise, it needs access to a large consumer market so that it can achieve the economies of scale needed to reduce the cost of production per unit, improve quality of production, enhance efficiency and allow research and development to maintain its competitiveness. Without a large internal market, African countries end up manufacturing small components for someone else's industrial policy. In other words, pan-African industrial policies are an economic necessity – not just an empty diplomatic phrase to use during pan-African gatherings.

Pan-African industrial policies can be implemented at the continental level, or at the regional level in the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (Manjonjo et al., 2025) or any other regional configuration. It can even include other Global South partners from Latin America and the Asia-Pacific. Global North partners are also welcome to join a pan-African industrial policy framework, but on African terms that deliver the structural transformation outlined in this paper.

The advantage that African countries have is that *collectively* they do enjoy the complementarity of resources and capabilities, as well as the economies of scale, needed for real transformative industrialisation. In addition, Africa enjoys significant reserves of all the strategic minerals and metals needed for high-tech products, green technologies and for the green industrialisation that will power the economies of the 21st century (African Minerals Development Centre, 2024) (see Figure 4 below). Approximately 30% of the proven strategic mineral reserves, by volume, are found in sub-Saharan Africa (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). The Democratic Republic of the Congo alone supplies 70% of the world's cobalt (Pelon et al., 2023), while Gabon, Ghana

and South Africa produce 60% of the global manganese supply (African Green Minerals Observatory, 2025).

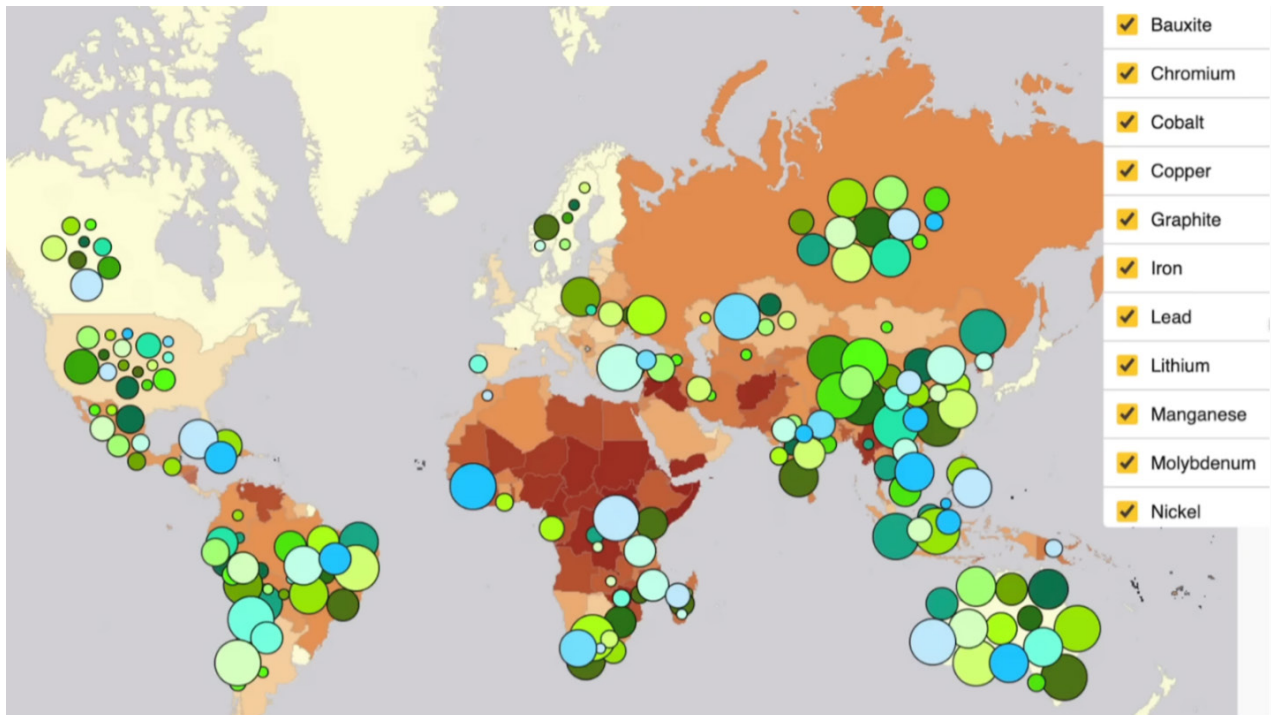


Figure 4: Africa’s substantial strategic minerals reserves

Source: <https://www.iisd.org/story/green-conflict-minerals/#group-Interactive-Map-y7ktykHmKL>

In addition to these vast strategic resources, Africa also has the youngest labour force in the world (Olasupo, 2025) and can create hundreds of millions of well-paid jobs for its youth over the next three decades. What is lacking for a successful implementation of pan-African industrial policies is surprisingly not financing, but rather two things: the political willingness to engage in long-term strategic cooperation, and access to the manufacturing technology.

The political will requires leaders to not only have the courage to think beyond their presidential term and beyond the narrow discourse of national priorities, but it also requires them to understand more deeply that an African country’s national interest cannot be achieved without strategic pan-African cooperation. A good example of successful industrial policies is the case of Airbus (Simons, 2014). When Boeing used to dominate the aircraft manufacturing industry, there was no way for France alone or Germany alone to create a viable competitor to Boeing. Airbus had to be created as a pan-European industrial policy joint venture for it to compete with Boeing by leveraging the complementarity of resources and capabilities and the economies of scale needed for a successful venture. Similarly, Africa needs to recognise that pan-African industrial cooperation is an economic imperative for industrialisation.

The recently launched Africa Green Minerals Strategy (AGMS) combined with the Africa Green Industrialisation Initiative (Africa50, 2025) points to growing political will from African leaders on this issue. Moreover, by combining countries’ energy transition minerals and sharing

development plans and investments, it is easier to build out economic diversification to counter the dangerous effects of Dutch disease (Pegg, 2010) that may arise from over-relying on one commodity. The AGMS points to as many as 10 different value chains that can be built out from the minerals in Africa, in industries such as original equipment mining supply chains, renewable energy equipment manufacturing, green hydrogen, fuel cells, energy storage systems, advanced batteries, light electric vehicles (EVs) – focusing on two- to three-wheelers and public buses – grid infrastructure and transmission lines.

This development theory is also closely related to the economic development pathway of the Asian Tiger countries: Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan (Shirley, 2014). Industrialisation (Chang, 2006) is pivotal for Africa’s development and unlike the Asian Tigers

that used fossil fuel to power their industrialisation, green industrialisation (Lebdioui, 2024) (based on Africa’s huge renewable energy potential) is a viable economic strategy.

Finally, the last missing piece for pan-African industrial policies is access to the life-saving technology (Kaboub & Chiriboga, 2025) needed to manufacture and deploy the building blocks of development to create prosperity in Africa, starting with renewable energy, clean cooking and clean public transportation (Sokona et al., 2023). The transfer of technology needs to be a focal point in Africa’s climate, trade, debt and development negotiations in all multilateral spaces. It is one of the most important obstacles to

Africa’s economic transformation potential. This is where Africa’s development partners can show their commitment to fighting climate change and supporting a just and equitable transition in Africa.

**Green industrialisation
is a viable economic
strategy, and is pivotal for
Africa’s development.**

False solutions and dangerous distractions: pollution permits

The discourse surrounding just transition has brought to the fore a lot of hope for global cooperation, as it promotes the understanding that we are all in this together, trying to fight climate change and to save the planet for humanity. Unfortunately, it has also brought a lot of false solutions and dangerous distractions that are designed to preserve the economic and geopolitical hierarchies that benefit the most powerful economic blocs and try to shift the financial burden of the transition onto the most vulnerable countries – those who have not caused the climate crisis.

One of the most dangerous climate finance false solutions that is being promoted in Africa as the main source for climate finance today is carbon markets. Carbon credits are effectively “pollution permits” that allow high-income countries entities to continue polluting with the harmful emissions that are causing climate change while offering financial crumbs to the low-income countries. They displace vulnerable communities from their ancestral territory and pastoral land. They enrich middlemen and speculators who benefit from carbon markets. And through the dominant market power of the corporations that buy these pollution permits, they pass the cost of the carbon credits onto their customers, many of whom are in the low-income countries and end up paying for it indirectly.

Furthermore, because harmful emissions continue to fuel climate change, more forest fires will take place, thus releasing the same carbon that was supposed to be stored in these forests to offset the high-income countries' emissions.

About 65% of carbon credits issued in sub-Saharan Africa are in Voluntary Carbon Markets concentrated in five countries (African Carbon Markets Initiative, 2022): the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe. (South Africa is an exception since it operates under compliance markets, utilising a national carbon tax and a cap-and-trade system.)

An investigation by *The Guardian* (Harvey, 2021) found that most of the carbon offset projects essentially amount to greenwashing fraud, as they do nothing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This is one of the most disturbing climate finance false solutions, and it is a dangerous distraction. African countries who have not contributed to climate change, and who are in fact the victims of climate-induced shocks, are now being forced to give up territorial sovereignty

over large swaths of land to foreign corporations to issue pollution permits. This is, indeed, a new form of colonialism.

The eviction of the Indigenous Ogiek from their ancestral land in the Maasai Mau Forest in Kenya is a tragic form of enclosure and dispossession. The Ogiek people have the legal right to the land and the forest. If the Kenya Forest Service really wanted to protect the forest, they would have provided eco-housing units and a microgrid powered by renewable energy, along with the clean cooking infrastructure to support the real custodians of the land to live with dignity and in harmony with the ecosystem they have inherited from their ancestors.

Kenya has conceded millions of hectares of forest land to the United Arab Emirates-based company Blue Carbon (Hearst, 2023), which will collect hefty commissions and fees for selling pollution permits (aka carbon credits) to large industrial polluters in high-income countries, who will continue spewing CO₂ emissions and displacing Indigenous people such as the Ogiek from their ancestral land without fair compensation. The revenue from these

pollution permits go to the Kenyan government, which will promptly use these financial crumbs to service some of its external debt, therefore sending the money back to high-income countries' creditors. In the end, it is the communities that are on the frontlines of climate change who end up paying the price, while the historic polluters keep fuelling climate change with their emissions. And Kenya is not the only African country walking into this dangerous trap. Liberia has conceded 10% of its territory to Blue Carbon (African Sovereign Debt Justice Network, 2023), in addition to a similar deal with Zimbabwe totalling about \$1.5 billion (Carboncredits.com, 2023), among other African countries. This is the new scramble for Africa, and it is a blatant form of neo-colonial greenwashing that should not be allowed on this continent.

In the end, it is the communities that are on the frontlines of climate change who end up paying the price, while the historic polluters keep fuelling climate change with their emissions.

Africa needs a proactive approach to development, with a focus on integrating climate, energy and economic strategies to create a sustainable, equitable and prosperous future for all.

African countries must avoid falling into traps created by misguided climate and energy policies. These include continued fossil fuel extraction, reliance on carbon offset markets, and large-scale geoengineering projects that could harm human rights and the environment. Instead, Africa should build its own expertise and strengthen its capacity to address challenges and seize opportunities. Africa needs a proactive approach to development, with a focus on integrating climate, energy and economic strategies to create a sustainable, equitable and prosperous future for all.

Climate reparations or climate finance?

According to a recent study (Fanning & Hickel, 2023), climate debt is estimated at a staggering \$193 trillion. Yet, at COP28, only a mere \$700 million was pledged to address loss and damage (Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2023). Excluding China, India and the rest of the Global South countries, sub-Saharan Africa alone is owed \$45 trillion. Therefore, African negotiators should join ranks with negotiators from the Least-

Developed Countries (LDC) Group, the Vulnerable Twenty (V20) Group, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and other Global South regional groupings under the umbrella of the G77 to demand a climate finance payment of \$5 trillion annually until 2050 as a good faith down payment towards the high-income countries' climate debt. The \$5 trillion must be delivered in the form of debt cancellation, grants and transfer of life-saving technology for climate adaptation.

These high-income countries' climate debt payments will be made according to each country's capabilities. Some countries may focus solely on debt cancellation, others on both debt cancellation and grants, while others might concentrate on technology transfer; and of course, some of the wealthiest countries will be able to contribute in all three categories. In pursuit of this goal, at COP29, the low-income countries demanded \$1.3 trillion but only received a paltry sum of \$300 billion per year (Manjonjo, 2024). Furthermore, this amount is not guaranteed public finance; instead, it relies on the whims of private finance and is therefore not reliable. This situation has been made increasingly difficult by the Trump administration's withdrawal of the USA from the COP process. But at any rate, the USA's standing policy, regardless of the presidency or party in power, has always leaned towards paying as little as possible for the climate damage it has participated in since the 1860s (Meyer, 2003). Therefore, the message remains the same to all high countries with historical climate debt: it must be paid.

Illustrating the absurdity of current climate finance for Africa.

The high-income countries have exceeded their carbon budget and therefore owe a climate debt. And when someone owes debt, that debt needs to be paid sooner rather than later. As it stands, the high-income countries are essentially in debt default with total impunity. In the current climate finance paradigm, the dynamics are shockingly abusive. For instance, if a nation is owed \$100 in climate debt, instead of a simple \$100 payment from the high-income countries to that nation, the current practice is such that the country that is owed the \$100 receives only \$3, disbursed in 12 instalments over a four-year period, with stringent conditions attached. These conditions include requirements for key performance indicators, transparency, accountability and quarterly reporting, under threat of disbursement suspension. Then, a \$7 loan at concessional interest rates is offered, albeit with restrictive conditions on how funds can be utilised. An additional \$5 may be provided, but only in exchange for carbon credits (aka pollution permits) linked to forest preservation. Another \$10 investment in water-intensive green hydrogen projects and \$12 in low-cost assembly line manufacturing, primarily benefitting markets in the high-income countries via de-risking conditions, are also part of this framework. This process, veiled as “climate finance” and “development partnership”, amounts to nothing but greenwashed neo-colonial exploitation that is designed to keep Africa poor, energy and food insecure, locked at the bottom of the global value chain and in perpetual debt traps.

Additional forms of traditional development and climate finance such as debt restructuring; concessional finance; new Special Drawing Rights (SDR)³ allocations and Resilience and Sustainability Trust funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF); and debt-for-nature swaps can be helpful in some specific contexts, but they cannot in any way be considered a substitute for climate reparations. Furthermore, if climate finance is not directed towards strategic investment for structural transformation as outlined above, then it is likely to contribute to further economic entrapment. For instance, investments that increase cash crop exports, fossil fuel infrastructure and exports of low value-added manufacturing will continue to increase the external debt burden and reduce Africa’s resilience to climate change.

While under the current framework the logic is that private rather than public finance will play a much bigger role in climate finance, it is important to remember that UN climate change events such as the COPs are a space for sovereign governments to negotiate and agree on a way forward. There are no formal negotiations with the private sector during the COP process. Therefore, it is the responsibility of high-income countries’ governments to tax and regulate their own corporations and wealthy elite, ensuring they contribute to the climate debt owed to the low-income countries. The burden should not fall on small and vulnerable countries to enforce climate obligations on multinational corporations operating in their jurisdictions. Similarly, transfer of technology should be enforced by high-income countries working directly

³ Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocations are distributions of an international reserve asset by the IMF to supplement member countries’ official reserves, boosting global liquidity, supporting economies (especially during crises such as COVID-19) and reducing reliance on debt for reserves.

with patent holders, publicly traded companies and corporations registered in their jurisdictions. In short, Africa should reject the private finance framework that limits the realm of climate finance possibilities to only access costly and extractive private finance from the high-income countries. African governments should not be in the business of de-risking foreign investments (aka guaranteeing profit margins for foreign investors) that are extractive in nature, even if they involve renewable energy production.

SECTION III: A Giant Leap for Africa: five Earth4All turnarounds

The Earth4All model for a just transition

The Earth4All framework proposes a fundamental redesign of economic and social policies to enhance global wellbeing while adhering to planetary boundaries. The framework suggests five critical turnarounds necessary for achieving this objective and outlines 15 immediate policy actions with profound systemic and long-term impacts. Fundamentally, this is about redesigning economic and social policies for sustainable prosperity and a decent quality of life for all.

Key to this transformation is the recognition that economic system changes must be tailored to specific social and political contexts. Strategies for Canada and the USA, for instance, will differ significantly from those needed in Africa, Asia or Europe. Governments are urged to prioritise wellbeing in economic policies, utilising three additional system change levers to drive progress.

This proposal is not a comprehensive blueprint but rather a starting point for discussion. According to the Earth4All analysis, effective economic system change will necessitate widespread public support and overcoming societal divisions. Therefore, it is suggested that citizen assemblies, for instance, can be a platform to unite individuals around a shared agenda and avoid polarisation.

The Earth4All analysis uses a system dynamic modelling framework (see Figure 5) to lay out two scenarios that the global community and individual nations can opt for. The first scenario is Too Little Too Late, in which policymakers essentially continue with the business-as-usual approach without any fundamental policy change on climate, energy, food, inequality, poverty and gender. The second scenario is the Giant Leap, which as the name suggests involves a fundamental multipronged policy shift to structurally address the key challenges facing us economically, socially and ecologically. The Giant Leap scenario suggests five major policy turnarounds: eliminating poverty, reducing inequality, empowering women, transforming food systems and transforming energy systems. Each one of these major turnarounds is then coupled with three strategic policy levers that are designed to produce a total economic system upgrade to prioritise the wellbeing of people and planet (see Figure 6).

4. Transforming food systems: Current food systems, which significantly impact environmental sustainability, require redesigning. The goal is a regenerative food system (Borras, 2023) that operates within planetary limits. Proposed actions include: ensuring immediate food access and reducing waste; stopping agricultural expansion and promoting sustainable practices; and shifting to healthy diets and sustainable food production methods.

5. Transforming energy systems: The transition to a clean energy system is crucial for achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Key policies include: phasing out fossil fuels; enhancing energy efficiency; and tripling investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies (Mutezo & Mulopo, 2021).

The five extraordinary turnarounds

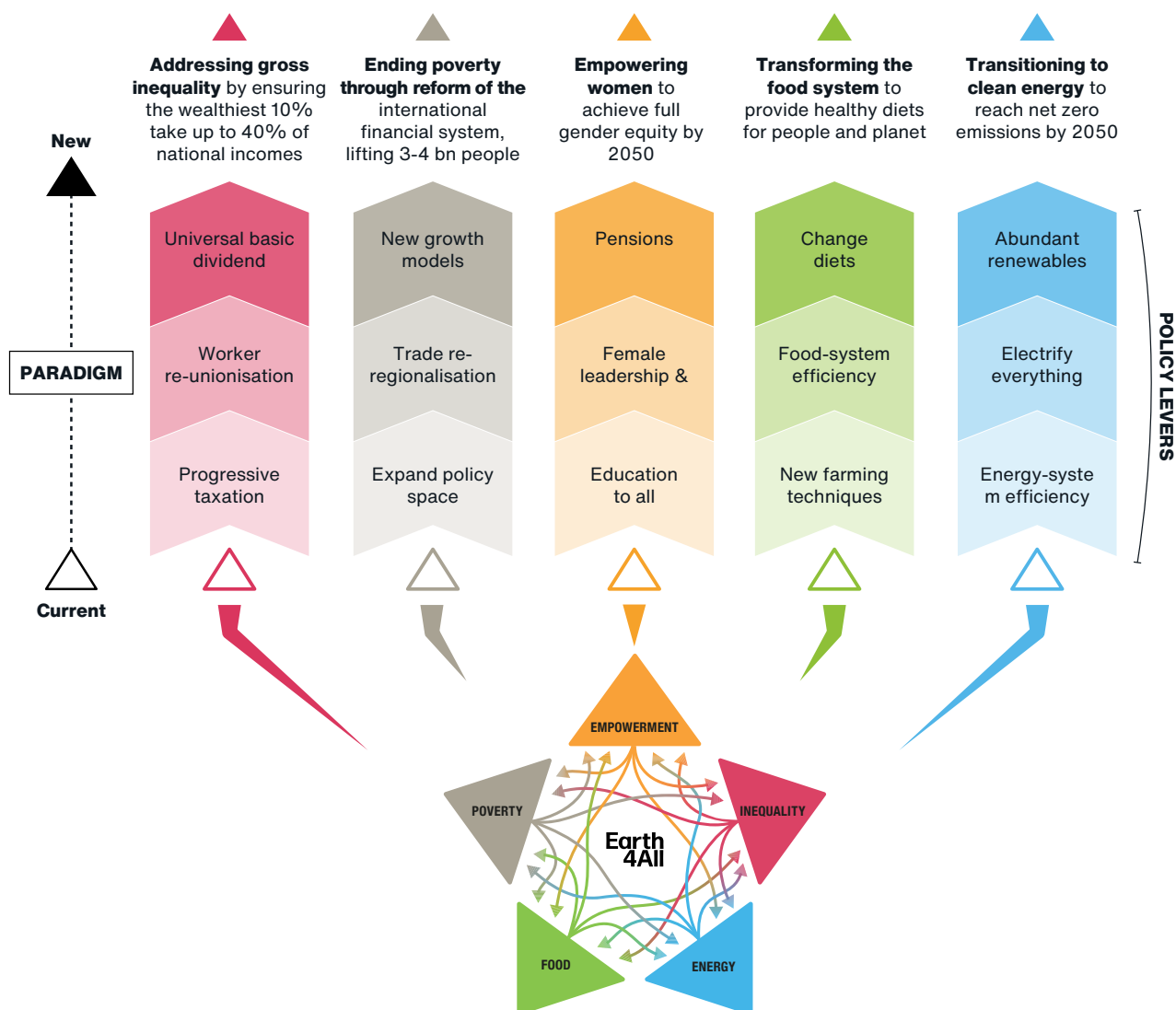


Figure 6: The Earth4All five turnarounds and policy levers
Source: *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity* (2022).

In summary, the Earth4All approach to upgrading the totality of the economic system is based on the idea that economic policies ought to emphasise resilience, fairness and planetary protection, rather than focusing solely on growth. The proposed strategies include: engaging citizens in discussions on desired economic system changes, implementing universal basic dividends and adopting new wellbeing indicators. In short, achieving global wellbeing within environmental limits is feasible through targeted systemic changes and widespread political and public support.

A Giant Leap forward for Africa

The *SDGs for All: Africa* report (Earth for All, 2024) utilises the innovative Earth4All system dynamics model, along with future scenarios and suggested pathways for change, as presented in the 2022 *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity* (Rockström et al., 2022). The findings for Africa highlight the necessity of simultaneously pursuing five transformative initiatives to eliminate poverty, bolster community resilience and foster a new economy that prioritises the wellbeing of both people and the planet. The study analyses two scenarios, the business-as-usual Too Little Too Late scenario and the Giant Leap scenario.

The status quo approach deepens wealth disparity and increases social unrest, ultimately allowing global temperatures to rise by 2.5°C by the century's end.

Under the Too Little Too Late scenario, Africa would be trapped in a cycle of unsustainable economic growth, leading to a century of lost opportunities and no meaningful development. Africa would continue to face severe crises in food, water and energy, rendering vast areas uninhabitable by 2100. This *status quo* approach deepens wealth disparity and increases social unrest, ultimately allowing global temperatures to rise by 2.5°C by the century's end. Extreme poverty would only be eradicated by 2100.

However, the Giant Leap scenario would result in achieving all SDGs and ensuring a sustainable future within planetary boundaries. It requires a modest investment of 2–4% of GDP annually, enabling society to implement the five turnarounds across poverty, inequality, empowerment, food and energy sectors (see Figure 7). This path would stabilise temperatures below 2°C, significantly reduce material consumption, eliminate extreme poverty by 2050, and greatly enhance social equity and wellbeing.

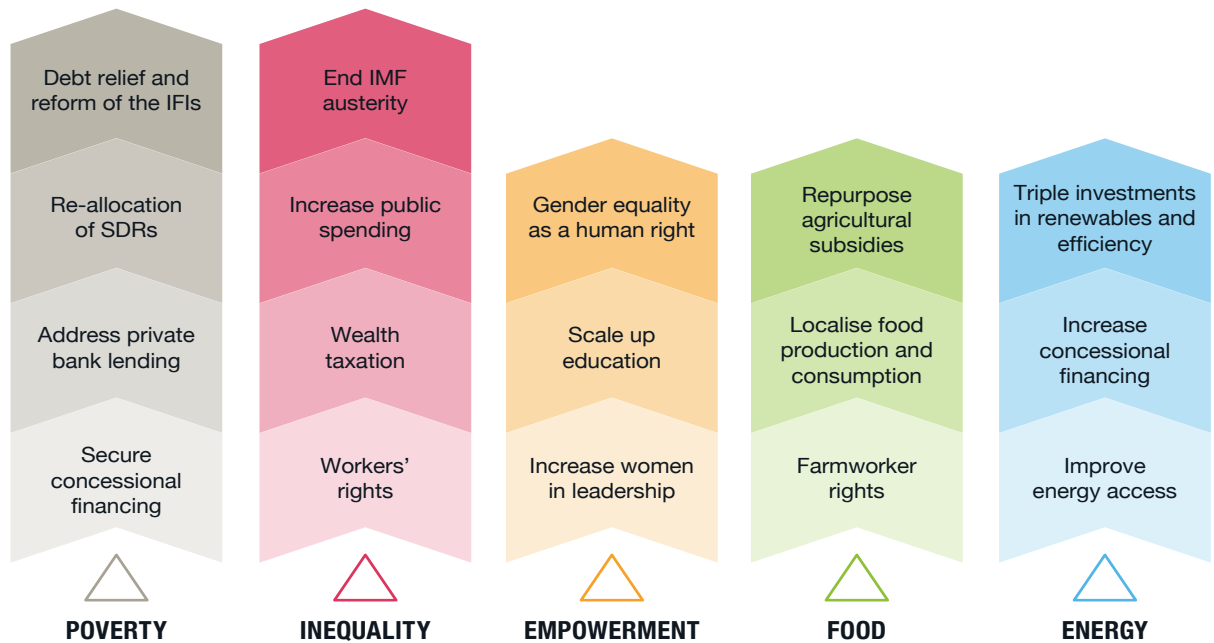


Figure 7: Africa's specific turnarounds and policy levers
 Source: *SDGs for All: Africa (2024)*

For each of the five turnarounds, the study outlines various policy measures tested through both the global and regional Earth4All models. These policy measures were adapted for Africa by referencing authoritative African sources and via consultations with African non-governmental organisations and SDG experts. The resulting policy recommendations reflect regional insights and represent the ambitious actions required for Africa's Giant Leap.

The Earth4All modelling shows that every missed opportunity for multilateral cooperation results in Africa facing increasingly complex challenges. To avoid a century of development stagnation, it is essential to tackle issues of structural inequality and poverty while keeping the economy growing within the planetary boundaries. Alarmingly, even with the ambitious Giant Leap scenario, most SDGs would only be fully achieved by 2100, with some showing significant progress by 2050. The analysis shows that addressing structural inequality is essential for Africa to effectively confront environmental threats that risk making large parts of the continent essentially unliveable. Therefore, doubling our efforts to alleviate poverty and inequality are critical for enhancing resilience against worsening environmental shocks. Furthermore, the study emphasises that achieving environmental SDGs is contingent upon addressing structural inequality and poverty. This reinforces the vital conclusion that the pace of action regarding planetary boundaries is directly linked to efforts aimed at reducing inequality and poverty.

In the Giant Leap scenario, the number of Africans living in poverty could decline from 500 million to just 25 million by 2100. Africa would eliminate hunger, with undernourishment dropping to 20 million, and access to education would increase from an average of 8 to 13 years of schooling. Universal access to water would be achieved by 2070, sustainable access to electricity could reach over 95% of Africans by 2050, and unemployment would be kept below 50 million people. Most importantly, inequality would be greatly reduced with labour's share of GDP reaching 60% by 2040, thus making Africa one of the most equal regions in the world. However, in the Too Little

Too Late scenario, poverty may rise to include 900 million Africans by 2100, 180 million would still suffer from undernourishment, over a billion would still lack access to water, 75% would still lack access to electricity, and 150 million would be unemployed.

On the financing front, the UNECA, 2020 report addresses the major shortfalls facing the African continent. According to the UN, achieving the SDGs in Africa requires \$1.3 trillion annually (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2020), potentially rising to \$19 trillion with population growth. Current financing falls far short of those requirements. Africa's external debt burden has escalated significantly, reaching \$1.8 trillion in 2022 (UNCTAD, 2025) and constraining public spending on vital sectors such as education and healthcare. In addition, official development assistance to Africa is at a two-decade low, thus limiting financial resources for transformative initiatives. Finally, on the climate finance front, the gap between needed and received climate funding is stark, with a significant portion of existing funds being loans (mostly at non-concessional rates) rather than grants.

Finally, the Earth4All analysis highlights the need for urgent interventions to address inequality; the importance of simultaneous implementation of policy levers; the necessity of policy levers for empowerment; the need for sustainable, regenerative and robust food systems in Africa; and the significance of achieving sustainable energy for all in Africa and transitioning to a renewable energy future.

Conclusion

There is a stark coherence and complementarity between the three pieces of literature discussed in this paper: *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity* (2022), *Just Transition: A Climate, Energy and Development Vision for Africa* (2023) and *SDGs for All: Africa* (2024). Using two different analytical methods, both the Earth4All team and the Independent Expert Group on Just Transition and Development team have demonstrated that Africa's just transition requires a coherent and comprehensive *radical* approach to climate, energy and development policies that radically transforms the economic structures of the African continent. The use of the term "radical" here is literal, and it means *going to the roots* of the problems. Solutions that do not address the roots of the problem are surface-level solutions that reproduce the *status quo*. That is what will occur in the Too Little Too Late scenario. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "I have no time for the tranquilising drug of gradualism and incrementalism"; these words apply to all the false solutions and dangerous distractions that are designed to delay and avoid structural transformation of the economic system today. In this spirit, the analysis in this paper urges us to tackle the deep-seated structural issues causing economic and environmental injustices in Africa.

The research that has been analysed here highlights the profound changes Africa faces amid global shifts influenced by climate crises, financial instability, the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war. It argues that

Africa must actively navigate these changes rather than remaining passive. The continent's economic and geopolitical landscape is evolving, with North America, Western Europe and Asia vying for African resources and markets.

Africa's challenges include high external debt, poverty and inadequate infrastructure, but without a unified strategic vision, Africa will remain under the influence of external powers, exacerbating its struggles with debt and development. However, the changing global environment also presents opportunities for Africa to assert control over its future by leveraging its vast resources, its young labour force, the complementarity of resources and capabilities, and the industrial economies of scale that the continent could leverage for a Giant Leap forward.

The literature reviewed here advocates for a reimagined African development framework that integrates climate, energy and development strategies, urging African leaders and stakeholders to foster resilience and prosperity. It stresses the importance of renewable energy and cautions against harmful climate and energy policies. The goal is to inspire new strategies for African self-determination and address the structural deficiencies that have long impeded the continent's progress.

The Earth4All *SDGs for All: Africa* report outlines essential policy measures for achieving the SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa by 2100. It offers actionable solutions aimed at addressing the planetary crisis and advancing sustainable development. By implementing five extraordinary turnarounds that diverge from current trends, policymakers can significantly enhance SDG progress. However, the structural transformation that Africa needs cannot be achieved without South-South and South-North cooperation and transformation of the global economic architecture.

To create fiscal space for African nations, the international community must prioritise debt cancellation, reform the debt architecture, enhance SDR allocation, curb predatory lending and boost long-term patient concessional financing. Increased fiscal capacity will empower African governments to elevate public spending and effectively address climate challenges. Most importantly, all development and climate finance must be channelled towards strategic investments that enhance food sovereignty, renewable energy sovereignty, pan-African industrial policies and all the major policy turnarounds outlined in the Earth4All Giant Leap scenario. Anything short of that would guarantee that none of the SDGs would be achieved until perhaps the next century, and by then much of the continent would be uninhabitable.

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Earth4All is an international initiative to accelerate the systems changes we need for an equitable future on a finite planet. Combining the best available science with new economic thinking, Earth4All was designed to identify the transformations we need to create prosperity for all. Earth4All was initiated by The Club of Rome, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Norwegian Business School. It builds on the legacies of *The Limits to Growth* and the planetary boundaries frameworks.

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