



The
Elders

Climate and Nature Crisis

Policy Position Paper





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Cover image: A damaged, submerged area is seen after flash floods in Sunamganj, Bangladesh.
Image: Muhammad Amdad Hossain / Climate Visuals



Elders together at their bi-annual board meeting in São Paulo, May 2024.
Photo: The Elders / Joel Rocha

About The Elders

In January 2023, The Elders launched a five-year strategy to address three of the existential threats facing humanity – the climate crisis, pandemics, nuclear weapons – as well as the persistent global challenge of conflict. Drawing on Nelson Mandela’s mandate, our approach also incorporates four cross-cutting commitments: to multilateralism, human rights, gender equality and women in leadership, and intergenerational dialogue.

The impact of these threats is already being seen on lives and livelihoods: a rapid rise in extreme weather events, a pandemic that killed millions and cost trillions, wars in which the use of nuclear weapons has been openly raised. But there could be worse to come – maybe much worse. Some of these threats jeopardise the very existence of human life on our planet. We have the power to destroy ourselves as well as the world we live in. Nations seem to lack the ability or will to manage these risks.

This paper sets out The Elders’ policy positions on the climate crisis – which Elders increasingly see also as a nature crisis – as of the second half of 2024. It also highlights the type of leadership needed to tackle this existential threat in the short, medium and long term.

The urgency of the interconnected existential threats we face requires a crisis mindset from world leaders – one that puts shared humanity centre stage, leaves no one behind, and recognises the rights of future generations. When nations work together, these threats can all be addressed for the good of the whole world. There is still hope.

As Elders, we use our experience and influence to work for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet. We engage with global leaders and civil society through private diplomacy and public advocacy to address existential threats, promote global solutions, and encourage ethical leadership that supports the dignity of all human beings.

The Elders and the climate and nature crisis

The threat posed by the climate and nature crisis has been a focus of The Elders' work since Nelson Mandela gave the group its mandate in 2007. In his founding speech, Mandela recognised climate change as one of the defining global challenges of our time. All Elders share a commitment to press for urgent action to tackle this existential threat.

Mary Robinson, Chair of The Elders since 2018, is known worldwide for her work on climate justice. She has served two mandates as UN Special Envoy on Climate. From 2010-2019 she led the Mary Robison Foundation – Climate Justice, and is a founding member of Project Dandelion, a new women-led global campaign for climate justice. She chaired the Climate Governance Commission in 2023, and is a Planetary Guardian.

As 8th Secretary-General of the United Nations, **Ban Ki-moon** made climate change a top priority, and supported the conclusion of the landmark Paris Climate Agreement at COP21 in 2015. He is Chair of the Global Center on Adaptation and the Global Green Growth Institute, and was a member of the High-Level Policy Commission on Getting Asia to Net Zero. Fellow Deputy Chair and founding member of The Elders **Graça Machel** is an ardent advocate for improved funding for climate adaptation and African women's climate leadership.

Gro Harlem Brundtland is known as the "Mother of Sustainable Development" because of her role as Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which published the ground-breaking report 'Our Common Future' in 1987 and led to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. She also served as a UN Special Envoy on Climate.

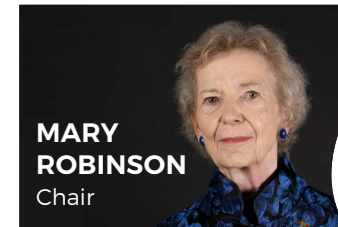
As President of Colombia, **Juan Manuel Santos** championed biodiversity protection and making peace with nature, tripling protected land. He is Vice Chair of the Planetary Guardians.

Helen Clark led the UN Development Programme as it expanded its support to countries to implement climate action. She chairs the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the Our Common Air Commission. **Ernesto Zedillo** has chaired various international commissions on the provision of global public goods, including climate change mitigation, and dedicated part of his academic work to the topic. They and other Elders who served as Heads of State or Government, including **Ellen Johnson Sirleaf** and **Elbegdorj Tsakhia**, made climate action a priority during their time in office.

Elders with backgrounds in civil society have raised awareness of the impact the climate and nature crisis is having on already vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, including **Hina Jilani** through her work on environmental defenders, **Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein** through his leadership of the International Peace Institute and support to small island COP delegations, and **Denis Mukwege** through his work on conflict and gender equality in Central Africa.

The Elders

Founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007, The Elders are a group of independent global leaders working together for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet.



Lakhdar Brahimi, **Fernando Henrique Cardoso**, **Jimmy Carter** and **Ricardo Lagos** are Elders Emeritus.

Kofi Annan (1938-2018) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2013-2018. **Desmond Tutu** (1931-2021) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2007-2013. **Ela Bhatt** (1933-2022) was a founding member of The Elders. **Martti Ahtisaari** (1937-2023) was a member of The Elders from 2009.

Executive summary

The rapidly worsening climate and nature crisis confronts leaders with an existential challenge.

The science is clear. Unless we reverse greenhouse gas emissions and restore nature, temperatures will rise and ecosystems degrade to a point where large parts of the planet will become unliveable. If we do not tackle this problem, much of civilisation as we know it will cease to exist in its current form.

Thanks to the extraordinary work of scientists and climate leaders, most of the world now recognises the problem. To a large extent, political leaders know what needs to be done. But our fractious patchwork of unequal nation states, with diverse and competing interests, has so far not been able to agree how to do it, in what order, and who should pay.

This is a collective action problem of the most intractable kind. We share one solitary, fragile planet. We will all suffer the consequences of inaction. Yet humanity is struggling to put aside individual interests and act in our common interest. Perversely, even as climate and nature impacts grow ever more apparent, some people are actively turning against the actions needed to reduce risks. How can we break through this impasse?

The Elders' work on climate and nature starts with a conviction: at the root of humanity's choice not to tackle this crisis fast enough is a question of justice.

Humans are a social species. The search for justice is fundamental to our condition. This includes justice in the distribution of wealth and opportunity, justice in access to decision-making, and justice in holding those who did most to cause this crisis accountable for their actions by pressing them to do the most to solve it and help those most affected by it.

And yet, what we see around us is not just. The countries who did least to cause the climate and nature crisis are suffering its most harmful impacts, even as they struggle to reduce poverty and achieve energy security. Within countries, the poorest segments of society are being asked to pay for the consequences of the wealthiest lifestyles. The richest 20% of people today consume over 80% of the world's resources; the top 1% emit twice as much carbon pollution as the bottom 50%. More climate finance needs to flow from high-income countries who have caused climate change to middle and low-income countries who are suffering from it.

Addressing injustice is not only an essential ethical concern. It is also a practical imperative.



In our 2023-27 strategy, the Elders set out an ambition to contain the planetary emergency and protect the most vulnerable through revitalised global cooperation. We identify four long-term outcomes necessary for success:

1. Big emitters are held to account for policies that align with the 1.5° C limit and the global nature goal, and accelerate just transitions
2. Global solidarity mechanisms strengthen the resilience of those most vulnerable
3. Public and private finance is aligned with global climate and nature goals
4. The voices of women and youth leaders are heard and create the political space for more ambitious action.

This paper outlines what that means in practice.

In the next section, we examine the challenge: both the grave risks we face and the opportunities on offer if we do the right thing.

In the following section, we explore nine themes that demand close attention:

- delivering climate justice
- protecting and restoring nature, both as an integral part of climate action and as a good in itself
- strengthening global cooperation and the multilateral response to the climate and nature crisis, at a time of growing international tensions
- championing science, in an era of rising disinformation
- phasing out fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions, in a just transition that recognises the legitimate needs of the poor and the vulnerable
- putting in place the economic incentives to accelerate the transition away from polluting activities into clean energy, particularly with the use of carbon pricing
- increasing climate finance substantially, including by moving resources from harmful to beneficial activities
- harnessing technology to ensure it benefits all communities
- taking a joined-up approach to policy making, recognising the impact of climate change on all areas of human life.



Delegates attend the UN Climate Ambition Summit, September 2023
Photo: Bryan R. Smith / Getty Images

We end with a set of recommendations that, if implemented, would go a long way to getting us through this critical moment in human history.

These are not easy asks. They demand nothing short of a quantum leap of ambition: making tough choices in difficult conditions.

Above all, the changes needed will require bold political leadership. Leaders need to follow the science, but also listen to their people, and help them through a complicated transition. Real leadership is a complex iteration of leading and following, requiring a deft political touch and the right policies as well as moral courage. We are well aware how difficult that can be.

But if we want a prosperous future for current and future generations, the hard truth is that we have no choice than to demand that our leaders confront this crisis with bolder and more urgent action than we have seen so far.

The urgency of the climate and nature crisis

The climate and nature crisis affects everything.

Floods, wildfires, storms, prolonged droughts and heatwaves are wreaking havoc on people's lives across the world, causing increasing death, illness, economic loss and migration. They are also damaging the natural environment upon which we rely for our wellbeing. The breakdown of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, coupled with rising food and water shortages, are devastating communities worldwide, along with people's dreams of a healthier, more prosperous life. Insecurity and inequality are pulling apart the very sinews of international cooperation, along with our hopes of living together in justice, dignity and peace.

2023 was the hottest year on record, breaching the 1.5°C warming limit for the first time. The trendline suggests a more sustained overshoot in the years ahead. This is because of human activity: the continued burning of fossil fuels and release of greenhouse gases.

Human activity has led to the breaching of six of nine planetary boundaries, beyond which scientists say the environment may no longer be able to self-regulate. The science tells us that the Earth is, in all likelihood, undergoing its sixth great mass extinction, with devastating impacts on flora, fauna and ecosystems. A quarter of animal and plant species are now threatened, with around a million species facing extinction. The Earth's natural systems may be approaching multiple tipping points beyond which there is no return, such as major ice sheets melting and a change in monsoon patterns.

All these trends exacerbate injustice. The climate and nature crisis is a human rights crisis, imposing a terrible toll on the world's most vulnerable people for problems they did not cause. It is a gender crisis, disproportionately harming women. It is an indigenous peoples' crisis, tearing apart traditional lifestyles. And it is an intergenerational crisis, in which the young (and those not yet born) will suffer in the future for the inaction of their parents now.

These crises are unfolding at a time of geopolitical shift. Conflict is on the rise, multilateral cooperation is under duress, and trust between countries is dangerously fragile. Low and middle-income countries are struggling with rising debt and insufficient investment, yet are being asked to undergo changes the wealthiest shy away from. Inequalities within countries are rising. Even in high-income countries, those less fortunate face prolonged economic headwinds. Disinformation is rife, trust in institutions is declining, and the science often struggles to be heard.



Record wildfires in Turkey as severe drought and extreme temperatures hit the country, 2021. Photo: AegeanBlue / Getty Images

A widespread sense of unfairness is fuelling apathy, and in some cases opposition to climate action. National action to tackle the climate and nature crisis remains incremental, slow and fractured. Multilateral processes are failing to achieve the necessary global ambition (backed up by accountability and enforcement) to deliver the basic global public good that we all need – a stable climate.

Governments have failed to agree an effective global framework that would guide them to adopt national policies consistent with the required reductions in carbon emissions. Without these policies, the incentives are less for other stakeholders to actively address their impact on climate and nature.

For example, investments in oil, gas and coal continue to grow, producing multi-billion dollar profits. Existing government policies allow fossil fuel producers to delay urgent action, positioning for a gradual phase down rather than an urgent phase out of the products that are the main cause of the crisis. Some major economies are rowing back on previous climate commitments and issuing new licences to extract even more fossil fuels, perceiving economic and political advantage in doing so.

Yet, despite these adverse conditions, we also see grounds for hope.

Past climate action, while insufficient, has bent the curve of expected temperature rise from nearly 5°C to under 3°C. Per capita CO2 emissions peaked in 2013. At COP28, countries agreed for the first time to transition away from fossil fuels, marking the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era. Governments need to put in place the policies to accelerate this transition. But the world is already on the cusp of a new green industrial energy revolution. A wealth of new technologies is decarbonising agriculture, industry, transport and heating, and accelerating the regenerative and cyclical use of resources. New forms of ecosystem restoration and nature-based solutions are being developed.

High-integrity carbon markets, while incomplete, are under construction. The international financial institutions are being reformed to put climate at the centre of sustainable development. A growing number of businesses now see decarbonisation as indispensable. Fossil fuel consumption is projected to peak before 2030 and fall into permanent decline as climate policies take effect. The change is coming – but not fast enough.

In short, there is still a lot to play for. A truly just transition offers the tantalising prospect of a new era of secure, equitable and clean energy access, sustainable agriculture and land use, breathable air, and access to clean water for everyone. This is a long-term vision that can unite us. And it is being driven by a growing global climate movement of people who want a better future – from rigorous scientists to pioneering entrepreneurs to inspiring activists.

But Elders have no illusions about the challenges in getting to that better future as urgently as we need to. Moving from an economy built on fossil fuels and pollution is fraught with difficult questions. Should people living in poverty forgo the standard of living enjoyed by those whose economies have been powered by hydrocarbons for centuries? How should a phase out of fossil fuels be timed in practice, given the critical need for energy security? Where should the money come from, at a time of tight public purse-strings? How can bold multilateral decisions be taken at a time of renewed big power rivalry? How can any international agreement on climate be enforced?

Answering these questions will require honesty, transparency and accountability. It also demands a deft political touch that is responsive to the needs of many different and sometimes competing national interest groups, as well as the complexities of international politics. But it can be done. It must be done.



Mary Robinson speaking at a Business Avengers event, featuring top companies committed to drive progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.
Photo: Joe Short

The challenges and our position

Climate justice

Justice lies at the heart of effective climate action. As long as the needs and concerns of vulnerable and marginalised groups are not taken into account, a sense of fairness not restored and historical injustices not redressed, climate action will struggle to attract the political support needed in individual countries – and globally – to be effective. Climate justice is thus both a moral imperative and a political responsibility. Justice can take multiple forms, including distributive justice (sharing benefits and burdens fairly between people), procedural justice (ensuring representative decision-making) and restorative justice (encouraging accountability and repairing harm). All are essential to a just transition.

Addressing historical responsibility is central to the Elders' approach. The poorest people, who have done the least to cause the climate and nature crisis over time, are bearing its worst impacts. Yet they have the least capacity to tackle it. The USA is responsible for the largest share of historical emissions, with some 20% of the global total since 1850. China is a relatively distant second, with 11%, though the biggest current emitter. Calculating emissions on a per capita basis tells a different story, with people in large countries such as China, India, Indonesia and Brazil contributing much less than a national picture suggests.

The richest countries and companies who have benefited most from fossil fuels have the highest responsibility to act, by shouldering the greatest costs of financing the energy transition. This includes action not only to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also to build resilience in marginalised communities, and to support compensation for loss and damage caused by climate change. G20 states have a particular responsibility to show global leadership.

Climate justice also exacerbates other forms of injustice in countries of all incomes, for example through its disproportionate impact on women, indigenous communities and the poor. A just transition must therefore put the needs of marginalised groups at the heart of national and international climate plans, as well as those involved in the fossil fuel industry (and benefiting from it) who stand to lose out most through an unmanaged energy transition. These groups are not passive victims: women and indigenous peoples can also be active climate leaders, playing an essential role in the formulation and implementation of policy. The Elders will continue to call for the better representation of marginalised groups in climate decision-making.



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the Africa Europe Women Leaders Network, discussing how to increase support for adaptation and loss and damage ahead of COP27, September 2022
Photo: Africa-Europe Foundation (AEF)

Climate change is above all an intergenerational issue. Responsibility for the wellbeing of current and future generations must lie at the heart of decision-making, in terms of both reducing harms and enhancing the opportunities that a just transition can bring. Achieving this requires the political involvement of young people.

Legislation and strategic litigation, which hold countries and companies to account, can play a critical role, both in addressing past harms and dissuading harmful action in the future. The Elders support the climate work of the International Court of Justice, as well as efforts by Pacific islanders and youth groups working to hold fossil fuel companies to account.



Restoring nature

Climate and nature are inextricably linked. Climate change is a driver of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, in turn compromising nature's role in mitigating climate change and adapting to its impacts. This vicious cycle can become a virtuous one. With the right policies to transition away from fossil fuels and improve global food systems, we can halt and reverse biodiversity loss, supporting nature as it supports us to limit the extent and effects of climate change.

Nature's healthy ecosystems underpin life as we know it. From the air we breathe, to the food we eat and the water we drink, to the ingredients for medicines, to the livelihoods of billions of people, humanity relies on nature to survive and thrive. Nature's health is fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Nature also provides profound religious and spiritual meaning to many people around the world. We have a moral as well as a practical imperative to protect nature.

Despite this symbiotic relationship, nature is under unprecedented threat from human activity, beyond the capacity of ecosystems alone to repair. This is particularly stark for the ocean, which has absorbed up to 30% of CO₂ emissions and over 90% of excess heat since the 1980s, driving increasing acidification and marine heatwaves and threatening countless species. This undermines the ocean's role as our largest carbon sink and greatest ally against climate change. Some scientists describe this epoch as the Anthropocene, in which humankind is the dominant influence on the climate and ecosystems, through the unsustainable use of land, water and energy.

The picture is alarming. Our planet is in all likelihood undergoing its sixth great mass extinction, marked by a rapid and widespread decrease in biodiversity and ecosystems health. Unlike previous extinctions, this one is primarily driven by humans.

Since 2009, scientists have been analysing nine planetary boundaries that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth. If humanity breaches these boundaries, the risks of large-scale abrupt or irreversible changes increase. By 2023, humanity had already crossed six¹ of the nine boundaries, with two² of the other three close to being breached. The one boundary where we are in better shape – stratospheric ozone levels – is managed through a successful multilateral process (the 1987 Montreal Protocol) that has reversed this particular human damage to our planet. Here is an example of effective global cooperation, which should inspire today's policymakers to show similar ambition on other planetary boundaries.

Food systems are the primary driver of biodiversity loss, and require urgent national and multilateral action from world leaders. The way we produce food is having cascading impacts on both nature and climate. Agriculture is a threat for thousands of species at risk of extinction, while fishing is the largest driver of biodiversity loss in marine ecosystems. How we produce, process and package food is responsible for over one third of global greenhouse gas emissions.

We must not continue to let food production come at the expense of nature and climate. Regenerative food production practices can both reduce harm to nature and actively restore it. A regenerative approach requires us to protect natural ecosystems from conversion or exploitation, produce food in a way that supports biodiversity (which will vary region by region) and restore ecosystem health. Importantly, the transition to regenerative food production must be equitable and actively support farmers, fishers and others whose livelihoods depend on these resources.

Including food systems in their national climate and nature plans and other policies is an important step for countries to address their impact on climate and nature.

¹ Climate change, biosphere integrity, land system change, freshwater change, biogeochemical flows and novel entities (e.g. plastic and chemical pollution)

² Ocean acidification and atmospheric aerosol loading



Nature-based solutions, while not sufficient to tackle the climate crisis, can be mutually beneficial for climate and nature. Reducing the destruction of forests, improving land management, and protecting and restoring coastal habitats – from mangroves and seagrass meadows to salt marshes and coastal dunes – can mitigate carbon emissions, increase resilience for ecosystems and communities and create habitats for countless species. Nature-based solutions must be used in addition to, rather than instead of, phasing out fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions.

Multilateral action

The climate and nature crisis is a crisis of governance at a global scale – a collective action problem that requires countries to act together. But we have no mechanism to enforce a reduction in carbon emissions, and to make those who pollute the most pay the most. Every serious attempt to adopt a global carbon price has stalled.

The annual meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP) and other international processes are failing to match the urgency of the challenge. The need for consensus from every single country on major decisions allows the slowest movers to block progress. The absence of any enforcement action or sanction against countries who do not meet their commitments, or whose commitments are not compatible with the scale of global action needed, leads to a continuing failure of collective action. There is a growing debate about how climate governance could be improved at COPs and elsewhere.



Ban Ki-moon at a meeting of civic society leaders to mark the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, November 2016. Photo: Albin Lohr-Jones/Pacific Press/LightRocket/Getty Images

As a minimum priority, leaders must maintain support for the UNFCCC and other existing processes until countries can agree on better options. This does not rule out emerging opportunities to generate and support new coalitions of the willing on specific actions, driving a race to the top rather than a lowest common denominator approach.

Although the UNFCCC remains the main multilateral forum on climate, the breadth of action needed requires climate to be better addressed in a range of fora. The UN Security Council needs to continue moving towards recognition of the growing impact of climate change on international peace and security. Reform of the international financial institutions is critical to scaling up the volume and quality of international climate financing, while G20 support will be needed to develop innovative forms of climate finance. The International Court of Justice, the UN Human Rights Council, the United Nations Environment Programme and specialised UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Maritime Organization all have roles to play.

The Climate Governance Commission and other bodies have set out an agenda for legal, institutional and financial reform of global climate governance. Implementing these ideas requires political will and a spirit of urgent collaboration which is currently lacking. But the alternative under the current arrangements is too little action, too late – a historical legacy which current leaders may not want to be personally associated with.

Collective climate action is ultimately a question of leadership, political will and political persuasion. It involves taking a long-term view that moves beyond short-term political cycles and recognises the interests of young people and future generations. Pressure on leaders to take this approach is gradually increasing in both multilateral discussions and at national level. This is partly due to climate activism by young people around the world, which the Elders strongly support.

Climate science

The Elders endorse urgent and ambitious climate action guided by the best climate science. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an extraordinary achievement of building global consensus around scientific research. But many scientists face significant constraints and pressures, especially in low and middle-income countries. Climate change affects countries and regions in different ways, and granular information that examines specific impacts in specific locations is critical to policy-making. Currently, researchers in many low and middle-income countries are under-resourced and underserved by scientific infrastructure. They need financial and political support.

Political support becomes increasingly important in polarised environments where disinformation is used to undermine scientific knowledge and best practices – often with the goal of slowing down climate action.

Taking climate science seriously requires policy-makers to recognise the IPCC's conclusions on the growing likelihood and severe impacts of a long-term breach of the 1.5°C warming limit, which could have existential consequences.

The science shows clear and rising risks with every extra fraction of a degree, as well as the increasing potential for irreversible changes. Policy decisions must maintain a focus on limiting warming to as close as possible to 1.5°C, and ideally below, with any time above 1.5°C as short as possible.

Predictions of a sustained overshoot beyond 1.5°C concern us deeply. They underscore the urgency of the action needed to reduce emissions. Leaders must not allow the prospect or fact of such a breach to become an excuse for further inaction. The world must limit the degree and duration of any overshoot as much as possible by accelerating decarbonisation, as well as preparing for it by investing more in resilience.



Gurugram, India, covered in a cloud of thick smog, as air pollution reaches unhealthy levels due to the burning of fossil fuels. Photo: Raunaq Chopra / Climate Visuals Countdown

Greenhouse gas emissions

The Elders urge leaders to increase their political ambition and financial commitments to curb global greenhouse gas emissions and phase out all fossil fuels. COP28 took a first step in calling for a “transition away” from fossil fuels, but did not go far enough. The world needs to transition away from fossil fuels much faster, in a way that is just and fair to all countries, communities and individuals. Having this wish will not make it happen. Governments must agree and implement the policies required to achieve this transition.

According to the IPCC, to limit warming to 1.5°C, the world must reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by at least 43% by 2030. This is already a massive task, and one that gets harder the longer decisive action is delayed. The Elders believe it is critical that those sectors and countries with the highest levels of emissions, and which bear the greatest historical responsibility, act most decisively. OECD countries and other G20 members (including the largest emerging economies) must show particular leadership on minimising emissions, as well as support for other countries to adapt.

This includes adopting policies that reduce the need for and economic attractiveness of new investments in the exploration and extraction of fossil fuels, and stopping any expansion of new upstream oil and gas development (including liquefied natural gas), as well as eliminating coal. OECD countries must take the lead by phasing out, through the appropriate policies, all coal from their electricity sectors by 2030 and all gas by 2035, with other countries rapidly following suit. IPCC and International Energy Agency modelling of a 1.5°C world allows for small amounts of continuing oil and gas use by 2050 (based on assumptions about substantial reductions before then and implementation of adaptation measures, which may be optimistic). UNFCCC COPs need to agree which countries and sectors should phase out production and consumption at what rate so the world can live within its rapidly diminishing safe carbon budget. Equally important is that countries agree on the policies conducive to such goals. Under any scenario, reductions need to be rapid and deep in all countries and sectors.



Mary Robinson at COP28 with Jim Skea, Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), December 2023. Photo: Melissa Walsh

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) is often proposed as a transition fossil fuel for low and middle-income countries, where it is predicted the majority of future fossil fuel emissions would come from without decisive action. In exceptional circumstances modest localised use of LNG (and Liquefied Petroleum Gas) is reasonable, for example in the transition to clean cooking in settings where electric options are not available (which modelling suggests will result in a net loss in emissions). However, the Elders do not support the use of gas for new large-scale electricity generation or other purposes. Cleaner, cheaper and more secure alternatives should be prioritised and advanced (with financial investment and technical support from high-income countries).

The Elders appreciate that some low and middle-income countries will ask why they should forgo the commercial or other opportunities of developing fossil fuel resources, especially as they face growing fiscal pressures at home and lack sufficient international support. As the cost of renewable energy generation continues to fall and the risks of stranded fossil fuel assets continue to rise, this traditional trade-off looks less and less of an issue. But to manage it, countries with large fossil fuel endowments (like all countries) need to start planning and implementing a just green transition.

A just green transition involves greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. The transition away from fossil fuels, to be successful, must benefit all people and communities, in a way that does not create or exacerbate inequalities, nor cause other unintended economic and social harms. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, the world must remain committed to ensure universal access to energy and clean cooking by 2030 – and committed to financing those goals.


Carbon pricing

Emitters of greenhouse gases currently impose an international cost on not only current but future generations. Polluters are not paying for the damage they cause. Holding big greenhouse gas emitting countries and fossil fuel companies accountable for their actions, particularly when they breach commitments they have made, remains central to the Elders' approach.

Pricing carbon emissions provides incentives to both reduce energy use and transition to cleaner sources of energy. When properly implemented, it is the most effective way to redirect investments from fossil fuels to clean technologies to achieve climate change mitigation.

Elders have long argued that carbon pricing can both generate additional finance and disincentivise carbon emissions, by passing the externality cost back to the polluter. This works well with the support of a reformed, accountable and equitable carbon market.

However, we acknowledge that introducing an adequate carbon price is complicated. Global cooperation is indispensable for its success. Despite multiple national and regional carbon pricing arrangements already in place, the average carbon price is not sufficient to mitigate carbon emissions significantly, and negotiation of a global carbon price is not high on the agenda. Consequently, while a serious agreement on carbon pricing should be pursued, other policies must be applied, including the phasing out of fossil fuel subsidies and then fossil fuels themselves.



Mary Robinson and Vanessa Nakate listen to farmer Alphonse describing the impact the climate crisis is already having on his family and on those in his community in Uganda, October 2022. Photo: The Elders

Ernesto Zedillo addresses the F20 Forum in Tokyo on securing a just transition to a low carbon economy, June 2019
Photo: F20



Climate finance

Financing a just transition requires not just billions but trillions of dollars of investment. The Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance estimates that by 2030 \$2.4 trillion will be needed every year in low and middle-income countries (not including China) to invest in a just energy transition, adaptation and resilience, loss and damage, and the conservation and restoration of nature. Nature campaigners are calling for \$20 billion of international biodiversity funding by 2025.

Increasing climate and nature finance, notably flows from high-income countries to low and middle-income countries, is also critical to addressing the trust deficit between countries (partly caused by high-income countries not honouring previous promises on climate finance).

Current flows, however, fall far short of these totals. The trust deficit is getting worse and hampering broader multilateral action. Without a step change in financial support for the climate, the world will not achieve its climate and sustainability goals, or climate justice.

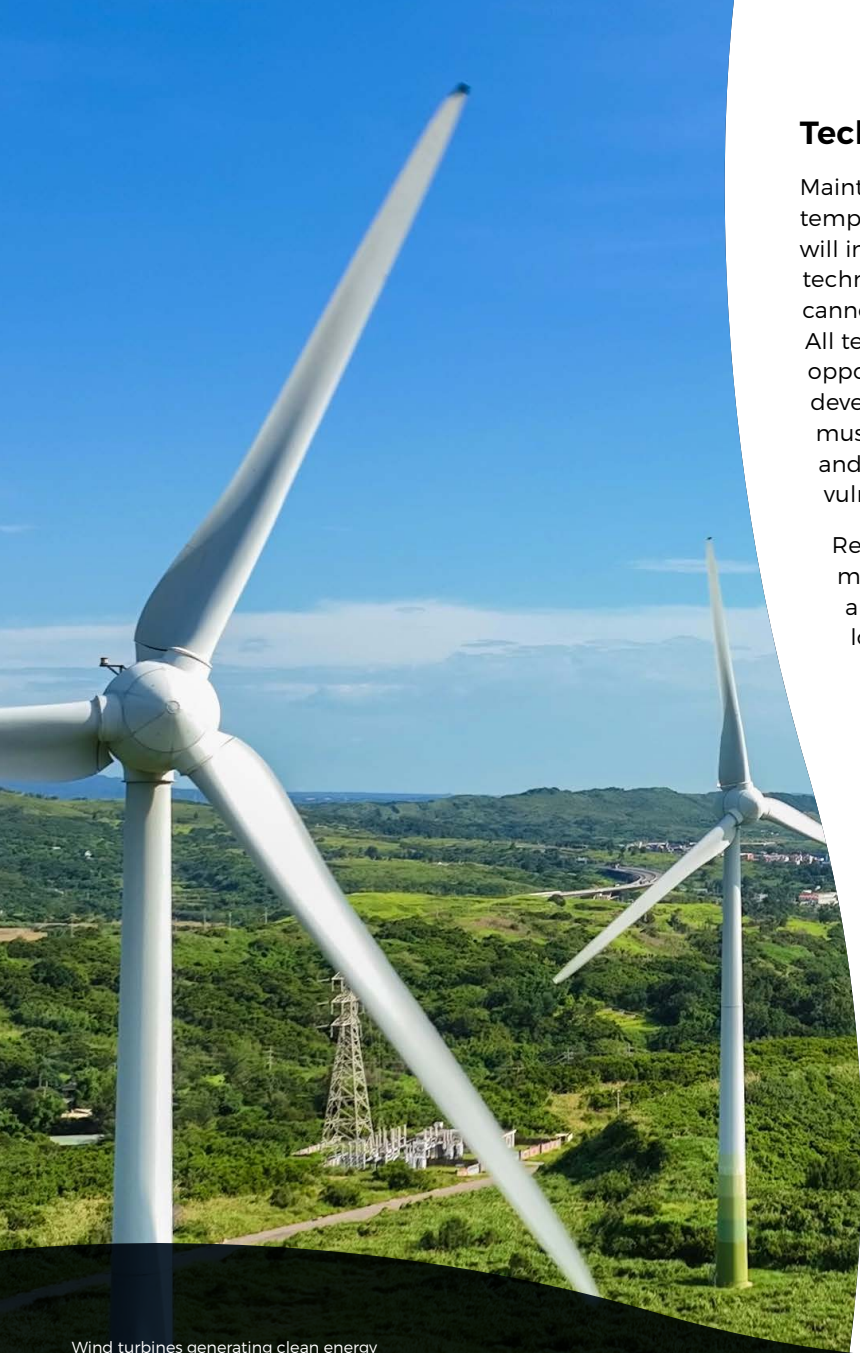
The Elders support efforts to set a New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance, taking into account the needs and priorities of all countries and with effective, accountable agreements that can be monitored to hold countries to their commitments. We believe that an increasing proportion of climate finance should go towards adaptation and loss and damage, which should be new and additional to existing Overseas Development Assistance. This is not a gift, but support and compensation for those least able to cope with the consequences of climate change, that should be paid by those who have most historic responsibility for causing it.

Achieving this scale-up is a difficult ask at a time of tight global economic conditions. But it can be done, by redirecting money currently subsidising activities that cause harm to activities that are beneficial, by mobilising more private capital, by exploring innovative sources of finance, by making polluters pay, and by making best use of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

The majority of the money to finance the green transition will need to be invested by the private sector. Public sector money is needed to help with that, but grant financing will also continue to be needed for adaptation and loss and damage funding where there is no commercial proposition, and some technology transfer. Additional financing from fossil fuel subsidy reform and innovative international taxes could help close both gaps.

The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other IFIs could play much more of a role supporting the climate transition, including mobilising more private capital. Although all are increasingly focused on climate, they are not operating at sufficient scale. Neither increased IFI support nor bilateral climate finance should be at the expense of achieving other Sustainable Development Goals, such as tackling hunger and girls' education. Elders continue to support the Bridgetown Initiative, which has helped bring much needed political attention to the opportunities and constraints to the IFIs increasing their lending and handling debt distress more sympathetically.

The Elders support countries leaving investment treaties (such as the Energy Charter Treaty) which stand in the way of implementing stronger climate and nature policies, and the renegotiation of other relevant investment treaties.



Technology

Maintaining or returning the global temperature rise to below 1.5°C will involve a wide range of new technologies. But technology alone cannot solve the climate crisis. All technologies bring a mix of opportunities, risks and costs. The development of new technologies must be well regulated, inclusive and take account of the needs of vulnerable people.

Renewable energy projects must be subject to free, prior and informed consent of local communities. New large-scale hydropower mega-dams should not be prioritised, given their social and environmental risks. Bioenergy should be subject to comprehensive environmental and social sustainability criteria. Governments should not incentivise or subsidise land-based biofuel crops that compete with food crops or undermine community resource rights.

Minerals play a critical part in the scaling up of renewable energy technologies. Their extraction must be conflict-free, and processing must not come at the cost of local communities' wellbeing, nor of the natural environment. This includes deep-sea mining, which could have grave, long-lasting unintended consequences on ocean health, undermining the ocean's vital role for climate regulation. The mineral mining sector should prioritise localised development and be guided by standards such as those of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the UN's International Seabed Authority. Countries should also formalise conservation measures in their national marine protected areas.

Nuclear energy plays a role in a decarbonised energy mix, and is likely to continue to do so for some time. It remains costly, with long timeframes to deliver at scale, and poses long-term risks. Renewable energy and efficiency investments will often be more cost-effective and environmentally safe, but to different degrees for different countries.

Other technologies are being explored, including for large-scale carbon capture or carbon dioxide removal. Carbon dioxide removal projects – both biological and technological – have received significant investment over recent years. It is essential that their development and deployment does not come at the expense of swift action to stop further emissions. Strict standards and oversight must be developed to avoid greenwashing and to minimise potential harms to affected communities.

Solar radiation modification (also known as solar geoengineering) has been suggested by some scientists as a means to reflect back some sunlight to reduce temperatures. This is controversial, uncertain and could bring about unintended consequences as well as benefits. It is essential that these technologies are properly governed, and that low and middle-income countries and vulnerable groups take centre stage in any discussions about their research and potential development.

Artificial intelligence (AI) could also offer opportunities for building resilience and developing new mitigation approaches. But it too poses multiple risks and requires careful governance, with particular attention to the needs of the vulnerable and the poor. The Elders have called on world leaders to work together on the design of strong international governance of AI, to allow all humanity to take advantage of the opportunities while limiting the risks.



Gro Harlem Brundtland speaking at a public event on 'Longview leadership & climate justice: how Brazil can lead the world' in São Paulo, May 2024. Photo: The Elders / Joel Rocha

The bigger picture

The climate and nature crisis affects all aspects of human wellbeing, and has critical implications for every one of the Sustainable Development Goals. It also sits alongside the risks from pandemics, nuclear weapons and ungoverned AI as one of several existential threats of the utmost seriousness, which the world is not addressing with the urgency required.

Addressing these crises effectively requires looking at economic policies, governance, accountability, human rights and gender equality across all sectors in a joined-up way, and recognising that action in any one area will have impacts on multiple others.

Successful action on food security and agriculture, land use, conflict, migration, humanitarian aid, and human health and wellbeing will not be achieved without taking account of the impacts of climate change and the nature crisis. But building connections across disciplines and breaking down silos between ministries, practitioners, businesses and civil society groups, is no easy task. It will require the creation of new political coalitions that cross traditional divides.

The Elders advise leaders to take a long view of these threats, recognising their severity and the breadth of their impacts, and moving beyond short-term political cycles to address them in a way that benefits both current and future generations. In so doing, we encourage commitment to a vision of hope in humanity's shared future, rather than playing to its divided past.



Graça Machel and Ban Ki-moon at the Africa Climate Summit, September 2023. Photo: Moustafa Cheaiteli

Our proposals for action

Individuals, civil society, businesses, subnational governments and international organisations all have roles in addressing the climate and nature crisis. But the primary responsibility lies with national governments. The crisis is one of collective action (across countries and generations), which requires national leadership and international coordination by governments. National government decision-makers will remain the focus of our proposals for action. We recognise the political constraints they operate under. We also urge them to rise above those constraints by leading public opinion as well as following it.

WHAT GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKERS SHOULD DO

Put justice at the heart of the climate and nature transition

Accept historical responsibility to support the climate transition. Enshrining the principles of climate justice in their decisions must be a priority for all leaders, in particular those from G20 countries. This requires a step change in the provision of financial, technological and capacity-building support by historic emitters to the countries and communities that have done the least to cause climate change, and yet suffer its greatest impacts. Increased support for adaptation and loss and damage is a moral and practical imperative.

Hold polluters to account. The polluter pays principle must be paramount. Consequently, the adoption of an adequately determined global carbon price should be put at the core of the international climate agenda. Holding big emitters to account should include the full extent of national and international law, progressive taxation, and policy and legislative reform.

Include vulnerable and marginalised communities in decision-making. Leaders should ensure fairer representation of vulnerable communities, youth, women and indigenous communities in national and international decision-making fora, and take genuine account of their positions in the formulation of policy.

Deliver access to affordable energy for all. A just transition cannot be achieved at the cost of universal access to energy. National planning for and provision of energy must meet the needs and rights of all marginalised groups, particularly women.

Integrate climate action and the protection of nature

Assert the relationship between climate and nature. Effective climate action and the protection and restoration of nature go hand in hand. Yet these challenges are too often addressed in separate silos. Leaders should recognise this intrinsic relationship in what they say and what they do.

Connect climate and nature decision-making processes. The Elders support bringing together workstreams and decisions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) to ensure greater coherence across these related multilateral agreements.

Enshrine laws to protect nature. National governments must commit to developing and enforcing robust laws which stop the degradation of nature. They should also commit to supporting indigenous peoples' rights over land and resources.

Increase financing for biodiversity. Leaders must deliver on their commitment to protect at least 30% of the planet by 2030, to ensure \$20 billion of international biodiversity funding is delivered by 2025, and to approach biodiversity and conservation in a way that integrates and respects the leadership and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities.

Hina Jilani at Sciences Po, discussing how can we ensure that the most vulnerable are heard and part of the solution to climate change. April 2014
Photo: Pascal Aimar



A sign reading 'No nature. No future' during a city rally
Photo: Shutterstock

Revitalise global cooperation

Commit to a strengthened multilateral approach to climate and nature. Meeting global climate and nature goals requires unprecedented cooperation between countries and across geographies and sectors, based on a reinvigorated commitment to multilateralism as the best way to address these common challenges facing us all. As a first step, leaders must stop any backsliding from previous climate and nature commitments and confirm their commitment to support and reform existing multilateral processes. They should also encourage other leaders to do the same.

Improve the UNFCCC COP process. Climate COPs should be streamlined to become more accountable and action-focused. This requires limiting attendees to those who have most to contribute and at stake, and introducing procedural changes common in other multilateral negotiations to make it easier for decisions to be taken, implemented and monitored. A consensus-based approach must be avoided. The COP should finally adopt the rule of procedure relating to majority voting after almost thirty years of neglect. Crucially, countries must find a pathway towards concluding a binding international agreement with enforceable commitments to both reduce emissions and make polluters pay.

Establish a “grand bargain” amongst leading emitters to support transformative action. The USA, the EU, China and India (representing more than half of global emissions) should join other high-emitting nations in a pact to accelerate greenhouse gas reduction and fossil fuel phase out, with concrete timelines and implementation plans – not replacing the COP process, but using their size and market power to drive faster change.

Mary Robinson and Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein
with members of the Africa Europe Women
Leaders Network, September 2022.
Photo: Africa-Europe Foundation (AEF)



Champion policy-making based on science

Put science at the centre of climate and nature policy. Government leaders must support and act on the best climate science with a sense of urgency, enhancing dialogue between scientists and policy-makers, and increasing support for scientific research at the international, regional and national levels. This includes ongoing support for the work of a revitalised Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, with shorter timeframes for reporting and a strengthened role in policy making.

Commit to a rapid and just phase out of greenhouse gas emissions

Phase out fossil fuels. Leaders must work towards a full phase out of fossil fuels, using legislation, public investment, tax policies and regulation of private sector activities. A detailed global plan for this phase out is needed, with a monitorable timetable, which should be a priority for future multilateral negotiations. This work should cover all greenhouse gases, including methane. With immediate effect, countries should commit to not commissioning any new upstream coal, oil or gas projects, and to end gas flaring. All countries must transition quickly to clean energy at scale, tripling global renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency improvements by 2030. There must be greater scrutiny of the fossil fuel lobby's resistance to climate action, including measures to stop the spreading of disinformation.

Implement pledges in full. Pledging to cut emissions through Nationally Determined Contribution targets is not enough. Every country must implement detailed climate action plans, with support from other countries and multilateral institutions where needed, for which they are held accountable through regular, transparent UNFCCC and IPCC reporting and stocktakes. National policies should drive clean energy investments and other transitions, engage businesses and citizens in climate action, and boost economic resilience. Comprehensive fiscal, market and regulatory measures are needed to support emissions reduction goals and measures to build resilience. The onus is on the biggest and historical emitters to do the most, and do it quickly. But all countries and businesses have a role to play.

Make polluters pay

Establish a robust and adequate price on carbon (and potentially other greenhouse gases). This can help mitigate emissions and drive further investment. International agreement that all the world's largest emitters should pay a floor price of between \$25 and \$75 per tonne, depending on their level of development, would be an important step towards recognising the real cost of emissions, while recognising differentiated responsibilities.



Graça Machel delivering a speech at an Africa Climate Summit side event, September 2023
Photo: Moustafa Cheaiteli

Increase financial flows to support a just transition

Incentivise private sector investment. Governments should provide public money (from international as well as domestic sources) to derisk private sector investment opportunities in a low-carbon future, particularly in some low and middle-income countries, and to support these countries to develop investable projects. It seems unlikely that enough public money will be available from domestic finance, Overseas Development Assistance and bilateral development finance institutions to derisk opportunities on the scale needed.

Switch financing from dirty to clean energy. All fossil fuel subsidies for both production and consumption should be eliminated, with adequate transitional support for the poorer people and communities who currently depend on them. Other subsidies for agriculture, transport and land use that damage the planet should be redesigned. This will free up huge sums in some countries – fossil fuel subsidies (direct and indirect) totalled \$7 trillion in 2023.

Explore new sources of climate finance. These could include taxing aviation, financial transactions, bunker fuels, shipping and excessive fossil fuel profits. This will require complicated international negotiations on both the source and the use of such funding, and bold political leadership from Heads of State and Government. There are many questions about the practical and political viability of these ideas. But the prize is large.

Reform IFIs to generate more finance. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other IFIs need to embed climate and nature action at the centre of their strategic goals, significantly increase their lending, help reduce the costs of capital, derisk investment opportunities for private investment, rethink debt distress and become more transparent and accountable.

Govern technology to benefit everyone

Establish international governance to oversee the research and development of new climate technologies. A comprehensive framework should be developed to address carbon dioxide removal, solar radiation modification, and other novel climate technologies that present a risk to planetary wellbeing. This work should include low and middle-income countries in research, development and decision-making, and take a precautionary approach. These emerging approaches should not be considered an alternative to the crucial task of making deep and urgent emissions reductions.

Ensure emerging technologies work for the benefit of all. Greater scrutiny and regulation are needed to ensure emerging technologies do not undermine the Sustainable Development Goals, but maximise their potential to increase global equity.

Take a multidimensional approach to policy-making

Integrate climate and nature into other policies. Leaders should not consider climate and nature as distinct policy areas, but actively look for the links between them and other challenges facing their countries. Reductions in carbon emissions and the protection of nature can support all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through the creation of jobs, the reduction of conflict and migration, the promotion of energy security, and the provision of healthy air, clean water and food systems that support health and wellbeing. Recognising these wider impacts can also help build broader political coalitions for more urgent climate action.



Juan Manuel Santos delivering a speech at the UNSC meeting on climate, peace and security, June 2023
Photo: UN

WHAT BUSINESSES SHOULD DO

Stop investing in unsustainable activities

Transition out of dirty energy. Fossil fuel companies need to support a managed reduction in fossil fuel use across economies, not argue against it. Investors who support fossil fuel companies (often using capital from citizens who increasingly want faster climate action) should use their influence to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuel use.

Stop degrading nature. Businesses involved in the over-exploitation and destruction of natural forests, farmlands and oceans, in ways which undermine planetary wellbeing, the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples and increase greenhouse gas emissions, need to align with the best sector-wide sustainability standards, and be held accountable if they don't.



Amazonian women
mobilising, March 2020.
Photo: Karen Toro /
Climate Visuals

Increase innovation and investment in sustainable development

Pioneer sustainable business solutions. Across a range of sectors – including power, transport, construction, agriculture and manufacturing – businesses are developing more sustainable solutions that reduce carbon emissions. Policy decisions by governments and research subsidies can accelerate these transitions. But it is individual business leaders, supported by progressive legislation and thoughtful public policies, who make the pioneering decisions which others eventually follow.

Invest in sustainable business solutions. Both developing new solutions to reduce emissions, and supporting uptake of existing solutions, require investment. The finance sector has taken important steps to mobilise more climate-friendly investment in recent years. But there is still much more to do, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

Be transparent about carbon footprints

Report climate impact and be accountable for it. Business leaders should work to ensure the alignment of corporate activities with emerging standards (such as those developed by the International Sustainability Standards Board), increase reporting on their climate and environmental impacts, and increase accountability to shareholders and boards for delivery of science-based targets to reduce emissions. They should also be transparent with consumers and the public, and avoid greenwashing.

Push governments to accelerate the climate and nature transition

Partner with governments to be more competitive. Businesses have a significant role to play in persuading governments to move faster on climate policies and laws, based on their need for clear market signals and a manageable regulatory environment, so they remain internationally competitive as the climate transition accelerates. They can also help governments see where to invest more in research and development, and adopt fiscal measures, to accelerate the transition and make climate action more popular.



Juan Manuel Santos with
Indigenous climate activist Txai
Suruí at the WWF State of the
Planet Address, October 2023
Photo: The Elders

WHAT CIVIL SOCIETY SHOULD DO

Support faster political action

Create the space for politicians to move faster on the climate transition. Civil society is under increasing pressure in some parts of the world from new regulations and crackdowns on voice and political campaigning, with many facing threats of violence and intimidation. This is detrimental to effective climate action. Civil society campaigns can highlight the needs and priorities of the wider population and play a vital role in creating the space for leaders to overcome vested interests. Building greater public awareness and support (rather than alienating it) is critical. The youth movement has already achieved much in many countries. There is scope for youth activism, the women's movement, faith communities, academia and many other parts of civil society to accelerate and amplify changes in public opinion, and to build coalitions of the willing. Project Dandelion is an interesting example of how to build connections between the women's and climate movements, identifying synergies and intersections and galvanising creative initiatives across its constituencies.

Support the participation of women, youth and other vulnerable groups

Facilitate inclusive policy-making. The inclusion of women, youth, indigenous peoples and vulnerable and marginalised groups is central to ensuring equitable and effective decision-making, as well as to holding leaders and businesses to account. Making this a reality requires enhanced access to decision-making fora, protection from the threat of harm and oppressive legal practices, and financial support. Civil society has an essential role in creating innovative spaces for engagement, upholding laws and developing accountability mechanisms, as well as securing resources to build community capacity. Climate networks can reach out to leaders in the women's and youth movements who may not yet have climate as a central concern, and support those who do.

Hold polluters to account

Help make polluters pay. Civil society groups also play a significant role in promoting effective measures to hold both governments and polluting companies to account. Support for strategic climate litigation, and for taxing fossil fuel profits and other high emissions activities, are a critical part of this.

WHAT THE ELDERS WILL DO

Review our operations against climate and nature goals

Practice what we preach. The biggest contribution we can make as Elders is to advocate for the actions above. The Elders Foundation also commits to review emissions from our own operations, and other choices we make, to better align with the climate science and industry standards. As a very small organisation, our capacity to implement best practice is constrained and the impact of our choices is relatively low. But we must do what we can. We will report on our progress in our published Annual Reviews.

Conclusion

Our world stands at a precipice. We can unite to address the climate and nature crisis before it is too late. Or we can continue on a reckless path towards runaway, catastrophic climate change and more irreversible destruction of nature.

The scientific and economic analysis is clear: the benefits of transitioning more quickly to a greener, cleaner future by far outweigh the costs. But the benefits and costs are not equally shared or fairly distributed, either within individual countries or around the world. And some of those who have most to lose are fighting hard to slow down the inevitable changes ahead. It is only through a just transition that we will be able to move fast enough.

Our leaders are faced with tough political choices. They need to be bold and principled to take the steps that can deliver a safer world for current and future generations. But they also need to manage the transition in ways that protect individuals, communities and countries who are most vulnerable to losing out, restoring a sense of hope, and fostering consensus on the way forward. Climate justice is a moral and political imperative that can only be delivered by holistic, long-view leadership.

The technology and finance are largely available. The multilateral institutions we have are not perfect. But it is not them that hold us back from cutting emissions faster. What we need to secure a healthy, harmonious and sustainable planet for generations to come is more political will to take difficult decisions. And we need it urgently.



Juan Manuel Santos speaking on a panel about climate justice in São Paulo, May 2024, with Mary Robinson, Anielle Franco, Paulo Galvão, Alice de Moraes Amorim Vogas and Feliciano de Sá Guimarães. Photo: The Elders / Joel Rocha



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Published in 2024 > Design by coastline.agency