

Follow Africa's Lead

How UK policies can support Africa's transition to a high-energy low-carbon future
Evidence for the UK Parliament's All-Party Parliamentary Group for Africa

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The Issue: The Risks of Punching Down. We know the world needs to move to net zero emissions and that countries will transition at different speeds depending on their resources, capabilities, and other immediate needs. In Africa, any policy that prioritises near-term emissions reductions over broader economic development will not only deliver few climate benefits but could severely hinder poverty alleviation, livelihoods, and climate resilience — the very opposite of the goals of climate justice.

Core Context: Low-emitting energy-poor countries in Africa face unique challenges.

- *Energy poverty is chronic.* Power, when available, is often too unreliable and expensive to enable job creation. Per capita consumption in many African countries is less than 200 kWh per year, versus more than 4,800 kWh in the UK and 12,000 kWh in the United States.¹
- *Africa hardly emits any CO₂.* Sub-Saharan countries have contributed very little to the cumulative emissions that cause climate change, just 0.6% of the global total (ex-South Africa).² Even today, because they are energy-poor, African countries emit extremely low levels of CO₂, about 1 tonne per person versus more than 5 tonnes in the UK or more than 14 tonnes in the US (see Figure 1).³
- *South Africa is a coal anomaly — and a poor proxy.* South Africa alone accounts for 94% of sub-Saharan coal-fired power capacity and more than two-thirds of the region's CO₂ emissions. Its unique transition challenges are a poor guide for the rest of the continent.
- *Africa's energy transition is principally about raising consumption.* In the rich world, the energy transition is about decarbonizing a high-energy, high-emissions economy while protecting high standards of living. In Africa, the energy transition is about expanding access, building energy systems for job creation and economic diversification, and enhancing climate resilience. Africa's transition must prioritise development while setting the stage for a prosperous low-carbon future.

¹Our World in Data, [Energy Production and Consumption](#).

²Hannah Ritchie, [Sub-Saharan Africa emits a tiny fraction of the world's CO₂](#), Energy for Growth Hub, 2023.

³Our World in Data, [CO₂ Emissions Per Capita](#)

The UK could follow six core principles to guide its support for inclusive and equitable energy transitions in Africa.⁴

1. **Agency: Follow Africa's own ambitions and priorities.** British support should flow from partner country goals and seek to contribute to these objectives.
2. **Diversity: Be flexible toward technology choices, just as the UK is for itself.** Low-carbon pathways will vary widely; Kenya's energy transition will not follow exactly like Nigeria's — or like Britain's. The UK should resist political pressures for outright bans on financing certain technologies and instead adopt flexible tools to support energy solutions that match local conditions and needs.⁵
3. **Ambition: Aim for far more than lights.** Small off-grid energy systems can provide very basic electricity and help to boost extremely poor people onto the first rung of the energy ladder. But this is not the same as energy for development. The UK should invest with the aim of elevating all people to at least the Modern Energy Minimum of 1,000 kWh per person per year, covering use at home and in the wider economy, as endorsed by African energy ministers in 2022.⁶
4. **Resilience: Get serious about financing adaptation, including investing far more in energy.** Even with accelerated global progress, African countries will be highly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Financing for adaptation must be increased. Importantly, many of the most vital adaptation technologies — such as air conditioning for rising temperatures, steel for resilient infrastructure, and desalination for clean water — are highly-energy intensive. Thus, investments in robust energy systems are also investments in climate adaptation.
5. **Innovation: Support market-building that can drive clean technology.** Selling western-designed gadgets or naive leapfrogging hopes are not answers to Africa's energy needs. Britain can instead help to catalyse and support homegrown industries that respond to local needs while also providing anchor energy customers. Britain's BII is already a global leader on creative models for investing in critical enabling transmission infrastructure. Britain could also help to promote more open competition and improved governance by championing contract transparency in the power sector, as it did for extractives.⁷
6. **Equity: Treat the remaining carbon budget as a development budget.** The UK should continue to encourage net zero planning but such plans must be based on Africa's own goals and realistic transition periods. A true commitment to equity will also entail occasional support for natural gas projects when they displace dirtier fuels like charcoal, catalyse industrial development, provide the best technical and financial option for balancing higher shares of intermittent renewable electricity, or support a country's long-term transition to a low-carbon high-energy future.

⁴ This draws heavily from [Reframing Climate Justice for Development: Six principles for supporting inclusive and equitable energy transitions in low-emitting energy-poor African countries](#), Energy for Growth Hub, 2021.

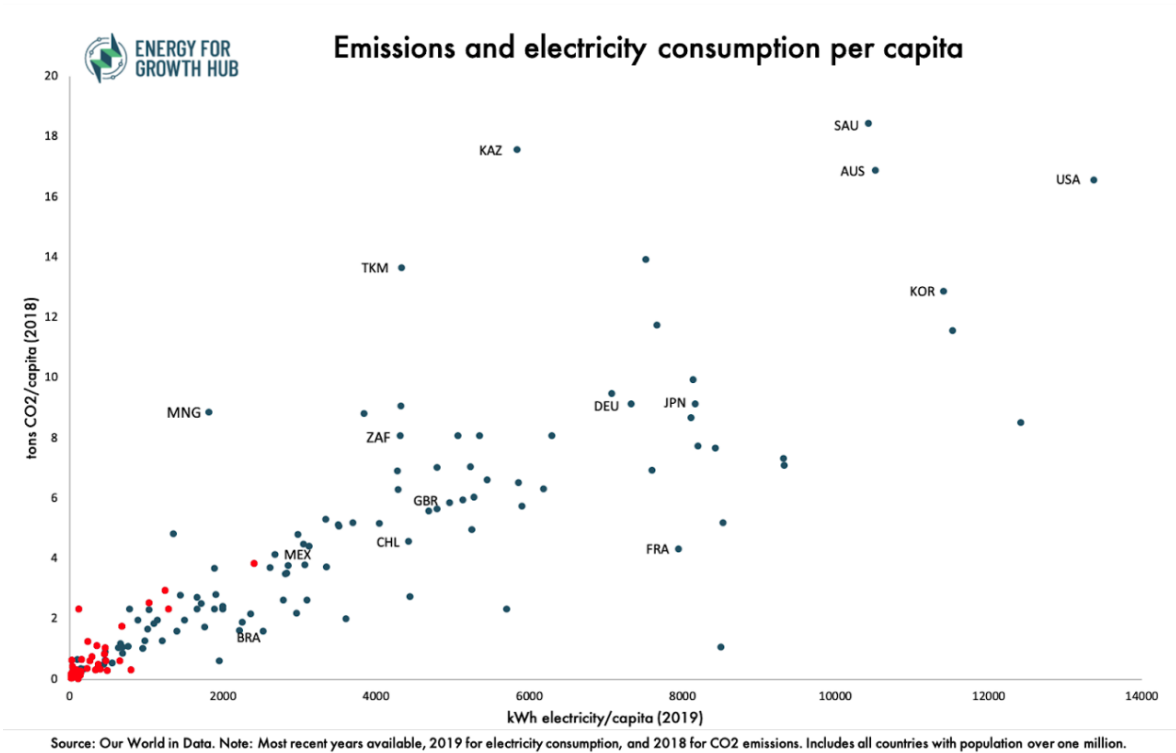
⁵ Vijaya Ramachandran, [Blanket bans on fossil-fuel funds will entrench poverty](#), *Nature*, 2021.

⁶ [Kigali Communiqué](#), "Ensuring a Just and Equitable Energy Transition In Africa: Seven Transformative Actions for SDG7," May 2022. For more, see on the [Modern Energy Minimum](#).

⁷ See, e.g., [PPAWatch.org](#).

Bottom line: Britain is aggressive on climate policy but prioritises its own energy security and economic prosperity. African partners — rightly — do the same. The UK can continue to be a global leader on development and climate, but only if it follows Africa’s lead. Policies must better reflect and respond to the needs and ambitions of those most impacted. These six principles can help guide development funders to better support low-emitting energy-poor countries — and help to secure the dignity and opportunity of millions currently shut out of the benefits of abundant reliable energy that many in the West take for granted.

Figure 1: The Continent is Not the Problem (African countries in red)



Source: [Reframing Climate Justice for Development](#), Energy for Growth Hub, 2021.

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