

Climate Science and Policy for Nonscientists

One picture is worth a thousand words.

SPEECH BY ALEX EPSTEIN AT AFRICA ENERGY WEEK IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, OCTOBER 23, 2023, ADDRESSING THE ENERGY FUTURE OF AFRICA

All right, can you guys hear me? All right, so this is mainly going to be a one-on-one interview, but I wanted to say about 10 minutes of thoughts first. And so just to give you a little bit of background on me, I've been at this issue for 16 years now, and the beginning of it was I never expected to be interested in this industry. I grew up in an anti-fossil fuel political environment in the Washington DC area. I had no family in the industry, no industry connections, nothing like that. I was actually a philosopher who was just really interested in good thinking.

And once I started to understand how important fossil fuels were, I quickly determined that the thinking about fossil fuels made no sense. And in particular, it made least sense of all for the poorest regions of the world, including Africa. So what I observed is that when we're thinking about most products and technologies, we do something which seems very simple, which is you carefully weigh both the benefits and the negative side-effects.



So if you're considering taking an antibiotic, you weigh the benefits, you weigh the side-effects, and then you compare them to the alternatives. Does anyone disagree with this? So this is what you normally do. And yet I started learning about the benefits of fossil fuels. For example, fossil fuels provide the natural gas that are the basis of the fertilizer that allows us to feed 8 million people, and we have no near-term replacement for that.

And so getting rid of fossil fuels means starving the world. It also means starving the world because we need diesel fuel that's uniquely good for agricultural machines that allow us to be 1000 times more productive than we would be without them. Like a modern combine harvester. And yet people talk about getting rid of fossil fuels and they don't talk about the benefits. So this would be exactly like if somebody said, hey, let's get rid of antibiotics in the next few years, and they just look at the negative side-effects and not the benefits. That would be a terrible decision, right?

Because you might avoid certain side-effects, but you would kill probably billions of people. And I concluded that this was true of fossil fuels, and I thought this was bad for everyone. I thought it was bad for me as an American. And so far as we pursue these kinds of net-zero policies, I thought it was bad for the developing world, but in particular, it was obviously worse for the least developed parts of the world, particularly in Africa. And so I started talking about this and really the key to what I'm doing is I'm just being even-handed, which everyone agrees that you should be, but almost is for fossil fuels, just being even-handed, looking at both benefits and side-effects, not just one or the other, not exaggerating one, not underestimating one.



And just by being even-handed, I was able to get a pretty big following and had two major bestselling books, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* and *Fossil Future*, and people really started to react well and to the point where in the past few years, I've gotten a lot of interest from political officials and I now advise 200 major political offices in the United States, this is US senators, US congressmen, governors, and now four or five presidential candidates as well. So what I'm going to share with you today is something that's been really taking off and I think is really, really important. And I'm particularly excited to bring these ideas to Africa because I do think you're the biggest victim of the anti-fossil fuel movement. So I'm excited.

I'll also say, I'm probably going to say some things that make some of you uncomfortable. One of the gifts that I have in life is that I don't work for any government, I don't work for any company. I have my life set up so I can say exactly what I think is true, and that's what I'm about to do. So what I think is true is that... Let's put it this way, everyone is advocating here for a just energy transition, right? This is what I'm saying is a just energy transition. So let me be clear. I am not in favor of a just energy transition. I don't believe there is such a thing. There's no such thing as a just, rapid energy transition to net-zero. What I'm in favor of is a just energy expansion. That is what is actually justified.

And so I want to make two points. One is Africa needs rapid fossil fuel growth, which is totally incompatible with the net-zero agendas. It needs rapid fossil fuel growth, which is totally incompatible with the net-zero agenda if Africa is to develop and prosper. And then number two is that the net-zero leadership is actually very weak, and you can be very effective at challenging that. So the thing I want you to take overall is Africans tend and should challenge this global net-zero agenda, not just modify it a little bit by saying, hey, we want to transition, but a just transition. We're going to do everything you want, but just let us use a little fossil fuel or give us some money.

No, no, no. You want to be saying: We are proud. We want an energy expansion and we're going to use as much fossil fuel, as much cost-effective energy as we possibly need to, to develop and profit just like Japan has, just like Singapore has, just like South Korea has, et cetera. So in case it's not obvious, which it should be obvious I think, but Africa absolutely needs as much fossil fuel as it can get and it can use to develop. So we know for a fact... These are three facts. Fact one, so every prosperous country has developed using fossil fuels. Anyone knows an exception, you can let me know, but you don't because there is no exception to that. So every prosperous country has developed using fossil fuels including... And it doesn't even matter whether you have domestic fossil fuels or not. There's a lot of talk about using your domestic fossil fuel resources, but many countries have become very wealthy, even not having domestic fossil fuels but by using fossil fuels.



Singapore is probably the greatest economic story of the last 50 years going from almost total poverty to the richest per capita nation in the world in the last 50 years. Does anyone know what percent fossil fuels they still use? 99%. So Singapore is using cost-effective energy to develop and prosper. I mentioned Japan, I mentioned South Korea. And the reason is because nothing can match fossil fuels in terms of providing energy that's affordable, that's reliable, that's versatile, so it can power every type of machine, and that's scalable. So they can do it for billions of people in thousands of places. So that's fact one. Every nation that has developed and prospered has done so using fossil fuels.

Fact two is that even prosperous countries can't replace fossil fuels with solar and wind. So you're being told, "hey, don't use too much fossil fuels, just go straight to whatever, solar, wind, green, hydrogen and all this stuff." But nobody can even do that if they're rich, they're running into huge problems. I live in the United States and particularly in California, and we try to do just a fraction of this green energy agenda and it drives up our prices and it lowers our reliability.

And the reason is because solar and wind are unreliable forms of energy, and we don't have incredibly cheap storage. So what that means is you always need to build both an unreliable grid with solar and wind and then a reliable grid to support it. And that's really, really expensive. And if you shut down reliable power plants too early, you get reliability problems. So it's just absolutely insane that Africa is being encouraged to do something that's failing for rich countries. How are you going to get out of poverty by doing something that rich countries can't afford? It makes no sense whatsoever.



Now, let's talk about the third fact, because what people say is, "Well, but you can't afford, the world can't afford to do it because of climate change." The idea is, well, fossil fuels are causing climate catastrophe, but this is just false. Fossil fuels impact the climate, but they're not causing a catastrophe. The fact is that fossil fuel development isn't causing a climate crisis. It's actually making humanity far safer from climate. And one fact that I've been stressing for years, which we're finally hearing now in the US and around the world and from our presidential candidates is actually if you look at what's happening, don't just look at rhetoric or anecdotes about, "Hey, this flood killed this many people." But if you look at how many people are dying overall from climate-related disasters like floods and storms and heat and cold, that's not something that's getting worse. That's something that's getting much better.

The rate of climate disaster death has gone down by a factor of 50. So it's gone down 98% in the last 100 years. Why? Because whatever warming impact we've had on climate is trivial compared to our ability to neutralize climate danger to what I call master climate. If you have a lot of energy to power irrigation systems and to power crop transport and to heat and to cool, and to build sturdy infrastructure and to have storm warning systems to tap evacuation, you're going to be incredibly safe from climate.

So climate change doesn't matter compared to climate mastery. And the way you get climate mastery is having cheap energy. And the only way you can get cheap energy on a large scale right now and for the foreseeable future is fossil fuels. So undoubtedly, Africa needs far more fossil fuels to develop and prosper, and that's not going to cause a crisis.

It's going to make you far safer from climate. You're already safer from climate than it used to be, but it's going to make you far safer because you'll have the energy to deal with climate and with every other problem. So that's my first point, is that Africa absolutely needs to massively increase the use of fossil fuels to develop and prosper. And that totally contradicts "net zero by 2050." Net-zero is basically saying commit suicide and Africa go first. And I don't think anyone should do that. And in fact, China and India obviously aren't doing that. The US and Europe are starting to do it, and it's ruining our economies, and you guys should absolutely not play along at all.



So my second big point is that the net-zero leadership is morally weak and it cannot withstand a confident African challenge. So what I'm seeing is Africa has definitely improved in the past 10 years or so in terms of fighting back against this agenda, but it's still 10 times too weak. And this is something I can say again because I don't work for government, I don't work for a company, but just as somebody who likes energy and wants to see people succeed, just calling for a just transition, just saying, "Hey, let us use a little bit more fossil fuel and we promise to do all these other things," that's not going to cut it. That's not good enough to develop and prosper. If Singapore had done that, they would not be Singapore today. You need to be really uncompromising. Now, the fear I think is, well, the net-zero movement is such a powerful movement.

It's all these countries and they're going to cut off aid or they're going to punish us in various ways, and it's kind of scary, and I don't think that's true. I think that if Africans stand up confidently and say, "Hey, we have the right to develop, we have the right to prosper. It's good for us to use fossil fuels, we're proud of that. We're not going to apologize."

I think the prosperous world will just back off because Joe Biden, António Guterres, all of these people, these are not courageous people. These are just people who follow the trends and who just say net-zero because nobody is opposing them. But if you just point out, look, this is incredibly unfair for you to do this, for you to hold us back, we have every right to do this and you are wrong for stopping us. I believe that these guys are going to back down.

And if they start to threaten you behind the scenes, I would say publicize it. If you're getting threatened behind the scenes and people are saying, "Hey, we're going to cut off this." Tell the world, bring in a tape recorder, I always record anything I'm having with somebody who's possibly going to threaten me. Really, if the world learns that the West is telling Africa not to use fossil fuels and holding back Africa's aspirations that will look terrible.



One thing I can say for sure as somebody who's been a lifelong resident in the US who knows US and European culture really well is the number one thing that Western officials are afraid of is looking bad in two ways. There are two aspects of this. They're afraid of being anti-poor and they're afraid of being seen as in any way anti-people who are non-white. These are the two things.

If you look in the US, we will get destroyed. If your views are anti-poor or anti-black, you'll absolutely get wrecked. And yet, what is the net-zero policy? It's the most anti-poor, anti-non-white policy that has ever been conceived in history. And I do believe you can, and you should call it racist, and I do not use that term lightly, but I believe that what's happening is people don't really believe and it's really disgusting, but they don't really believe that Africans want progress.

A lot of the West doesn't believe... they think Africans, they don't really care about having a lot of energy. They don't want progress. They don't want modern life. They just want to stay the same way that they've always lived. I know for a fact this isn't true. It's demeaning. But this is... How else could you justify these policies of saying... I mean, 3 billion people use less electricity than a typical American refrigerator. Vast majority of those people are in Africa. How can you justify keeping people in poverty?

The only way they justify it is they think people in poverty don't really want prosperity. That's disgusting and that's racist, and you can call that out. So my belief is if you can really just be confident and say, "Hey, we have a right to develop. We have a right to prosper." Don't do compromises, don't agree with this idea of energy transition. No, it's about energy expansion. That's the number 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 priority. Then I think you can make a big difference. And what I'll say just before to the discussion is just as I help for free 200 major offices in America, anyone in Africa who wants to do the right thing and fight, I offer my services free of charge. I'll help you with the right messaging. I'll give you the points you need.



I think this is good for two reasons. One is it'll be really good for Africa, and that's just a really good thing. And I love Africa and I just love to see people succeed. But I have a really selfish reason as well, which is I think Africa has by far the best chance of standing up to this net-zero movement that threatens everyone. I think the net-zero movement threatens the rich world, the poor world, everyone, everything I care about, and I believe that Africans standing up to it is not only an Africa's interest, is going to help save the world from this mass destructive movement that everyone is following like lemmings. So I want to do whatever I can to help with that. And I hope some of you join me. So thank you very much.

