

# A United Call For Action On Climate Change

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Kofi Annan is chair of The Elders, a group of independent leaders who work for peace, justice and human rights worldwide.

When Nelson Mandela formed [the Elders](#) in 2007 to promote peace and human rights across the world, he challenged us to be bold and to give a voice to those who have none. No issue demands these qualities more than our collective failure to tackle climate change.

Climate change is the biggest challenge of our time. It threatens the well-being of hundreds of millions of people today and many billions more in the future. It undermines the human rights to food, water, health and shelter — causes for which we, as Elders, have fought all our lives.

No one and no country will escape the impact of climate change. But those with no voice — because they are already marginalized or are not yet born — are at greatest risk. The Elders have an urgent moral duty to speak out on their behalf.

Given the compelling weight of evidence, it can be hard to understand why anyone is still dragging his or her feet on the coordinated action needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. [The latest report](#) from the expert [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) states clearly that the “[warming of the climate system is unequivocal](#)” and that human behavior is extremely likely the dominant cause.

Recent months have also brought examples — from [typhoons](#) in the [Philippines](#) to the [polar vortex](#) in North America and widespread [floods in Europe](#) — of the increase in extreme weather events that experts warn is the inevitable outcome of climate change. The costs are already enormous, which is why the [World Bank](#), the [International Monetary Fund](#) and the

[International Energy Agency](#) have joined the scientific community in warning about the risks. It is no longer only environmentalists who are ringing alarm bells.

Every year the world fails to act brings us closer to the tipping point when scientists fear that climate change may become irreversible. This is a terrible gamble with the future of the planet and with life itself.

What is needed to prevent this catastrophe has been established. Global temperature rises [must be limited to less than 2 degrees Celsius](#) above pre-industrial levels. This means turning away from fossil fuels and accelerating the deployment of affordable renewable energies, for instance by setting an internationally agreed price for carbon. The way forward must be to meet the timetable for a robust, universal and legally binding agreement on climate change next year, under which every country commits to phasing down greenhouse gas emissions.

This is a decisive year. The United Nations secretary general has called for a [climate summit](#) in New York in September. It is imperative that governments and corporate leaders come to this summit committed to ambitious actions on the climate if we are to stand a chance to reach an agreement in 2015 commensurate with the challenge.

Many of the Elders have shouldered the burden of government. We do not make the mistake of believing that addressing climate change is easy. But we know that there are times when, no matter how difficult the immediate landscape, leaders must show courage and boldness. This is such a time.

Our experience has also taught us that if leaders make the right decisions for the right reasons, their voters will support them. By raising their sights — and shrugging off the restraints imposed by vested interests and short-term political considerations — they can also inspire hope, rebuild trust and mobilize action across society.

Solutions to climate change do not come only from research centers and laboratories but also through innovation by the people most affected. Many communities, businesses and local and national governments, including in developing countries, are already showing the way to a carbon-neutral world. These efforts have to be scaled up.

Climate justice also demands that those richer countries that have done the most to cause the buildup of greenhouse gas emissions in our atmosphere — and reaped the benefits — help poorer nations adapt to the climate change already underway.

The international community has reached a fork in the road. In one direction, a terrible legacy could be handed to our grandchildren and their children. In the other is the opportunity to set our world on the first steps toward a fairer and sustainable future. No one wants the generations to come to say that we failed them.

Over the coming months, the Elders will appeal for bold leadership from governments, businesses and citizens to achieve a carbon-neutral world by 2050. If ever there were a cause which should unite us all, old or young, rich or poor, climate change must be it.

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