

Oil and gas production narratives in Colombia and Nigeria after the Paris Agreement

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Key messages

- The cases of Colombia and Nigeria show how oil and gas production narratives, including the roles that are assigned to them by governments for development, energy security, regional influence and energy transitions, contribute to entrenchment of high-carbon dependency.
- Many of the arguments and concepts on which these narratives have relied have been one-sided, inaccurate, outdated or oversimplified.
- Civil society organizations can challenge these narratives, by questioning the evidence base behind them, advocating for transparency in fossil fuel production and supporting the development of robust, evidence-based narratives of prosperous and equitable futures beyond fossil fuels.
- Civil society organizations and researchers can advocate for more ambitious climate policy by countries with lower dependence and higher capacity to transition away from fossil fuel production.

Introduction

Reaching global climate goals requires a fundamental transformation of energy systems that still rely heavily on burning fossil fuels. Scientists have calculated that to meet climate goals, fossil fuel production must decrease by roughly 6% each year from 2020 to 2030. However, the current plans and projections of governments do not match these climate targets: in aggregate, they still intend to extract more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030 than would be consistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C. Despite their support for the Paris Agreement, few governments have acknowledged the need to phase out fossil fuel production and taken policy steps to do so (SEI et al., 2023).

Such an endeavour is especially challenging for middle- and low-income countries with a high reliance on the oil and gas production sector. Indeed, moving away from fossil fuels poses



significant difficulties for economies and governments reliant on the sector's revenues to provide public services and retain political support. Equity principles thus require countries with greater capacity and less dependence on the sector to take the lead in efforts to phase out fossil fuel production (Muttitt & Kartha, 2020). So far, the reverse is happening: planned and projected coal, oil and gas production by 10 high-income countries alone would surpass the levels consistent with limiting global warming to 1.5°C for each of these fuels by 2040 (SEI et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, even in the absence of additional policies aimed at reducing fossil fuel use, the International Energy Agency estimates that demand for coal, oil and gas will peak by 2030. Therefore, failing to adapt to long-term changes in the fossil fuel market puts middle- and lower-income countries' economies and their citizens' wellbeing at risk.

Within this context, governments in fossil fuel producing countries employ a series of narratives to justify developing further oil and gas production against the backdrop of the climate crisis. Narratives are ways in which people and organizations construct and convey stories or accounts of events, experiences or situations to shape policy and reinforce or challenge prevailing ideologies and power structures. They seek to influence how an issue is interpreted and understood, framing both the problem and the potential solutions involved. These governmental narratives often contribute to slowing down the timely implementation of necessary measures to facilitate a well-managed and equitable energy transition. They also are used to support decisions and actions that can worsen carbon lock-in, where interlinked social, political and technical barriers interact in ways that entrench fossil fuels and prevent the growth of the new green economy.

Here we present a critical assessment of oil and gas production narratives in developing countries to highlight barriers to low-carbon transitions, challenge entrenched power dynamics, and create space for more sustainable and equitable alternatives. This brief, based on our recently published paper (Strambo et al., 2025), is mainly intended for academic researchers and civil society organizations working on climate policy, energy transitions and sustainable development, particularly those focused on the challenges and opportunities of phasing out fossil fuel production in low- and middle-income countries, as they are instrumental in generating evidence-based solutions, advocating for policy reforms, and holding decision-makers accountable.

First we summarize the narratives used by the national governments in Colombia and Nigeria to legitimize continuous support for expanding oil and gas production between December 2015 and May 2022. In doing so, this analysis sheds light on some of the barriers that middle- and low-income countries face in transitioning away from fossil fuel production.

We then reflect on how researchers and civil society organizations may challenge these narratives to open space for and draw attention to policy measures that may more fairly enable phasing out fossil fuel production. Determining what a fair phase-out entails is incredibly complex, given the challenges tied to historical responsibility for emissions, economic and fiscal dependencies, and transition capacities; some efforts have made

important suggestions that could guide how a fair phase-out might look (Muttitt & Kartha, 2020; Pellegrini et al., 2024).

Oil and gas production narratives in Colombia and Nigeria

During the period from December 2015 to May 2022, the Colombian and Nigerian governments used similar narratives to justify developing oil and gas production, despite their commitments to the Paris Agreement. Here we present three narratives that both countries used, on development, energy security and energy transitions, and a fourth narrative specific to Nigeria, on regional influence and international standing.

The narratives surrounding oil and gas production in Colombia have shifted somewhat since the end of our study period, following the inauguration of the current government. The current discourse emphasizes reducing economic dependence on fossil fuels, supported by policies such as halting new exploration approvals and joining the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance (Taylor, 2023). However, there is still a strong focus on gas as a transition fuel, despite associated economic and environmental risks (Monsalve, 2024).

The first narrative we identified focuses on the role of oil and gas in spurring development. In Colombia, this narrative emphasized the importance of oil and gas revenues to address changing policy priorities, for instance implementing the Final Peace Agreement signed in 2016 between the national government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), which aimed to put an end to more than 50 years of internal armed conflict; economic recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic; and regional development, as a solution to local resistance to extractive industries, which has become more effective in the past decade. In Nigeria, the development narrative centres on the role of gas production to accelerate the country's industrialization, which is a major strategic national goal.

The second narrative maintains that oil and gas production strengthens energy security because it ensures domestic energy supply and independence, helps tackle energy poverty, and is more stable than renewable energy sources. Both the development and energy security narratives have been present in companies' and governmental discourses for decades, although they are constantly adjusting to prevailing policy priorities and socioeconomic circumstances.

The third narrative attributes a central role in energy transitions to oil and, especially, gas production. In both countries, this narrative builds on two key ideas. The first is that oil and gas production can be decarbonized through a combination of technological substitutions, efficiency improvements, tackling fugitive emissions, carbon offsetting, and deploying carbon capture, use and storage technologies. The second part of this narrative focuses on the notion of gas as a "bridge" technology, which argues that because it is less carbon-intensive than other fossil fuels and more reliable than renewables, gas is a good transitional solution to scale up renewable energy. In Colombia, the revenues generated by the sector are also presented as essential for enabling green investments.

In Nigeria, a fourth narrative emphasizes the role of oil and gas production in increasing regional influence and improving the country's position on the international stage. This narrative differs from Colombia, where the government instead has been seeking to demonstrate international leadership through its sustainable development and climate agendas.

A closer look at oil and gas narratives

The case studies provide a valuable template for analysing other instances around the world, including in high-income economies, where governments employ similar narratives. They also offer a framework to examine how Colombia and Nigeria continue to deploy these narratives in evolving policy contexts. Now, many of the arguments and concepts on which these narratives rely are one-sided, inaccurate, outdated or oversimplified, and thus subject to significant debate among experts. This section discusses these narratives, drawing on existing research to critically evaluate the arguments and concepts on which they are based.

The narrative of national wealth holds partially true, in that oil and gas production may lead to economic and developmental benefits at a national level. However, historical evidence suggests its record in promoting inclusive development is mixed: local abundance of non-renewable resources often fails to deliver prosperity for a wider population, due to mismanagement and unequal distribution of revenues, socio-environmental impacts that weigh heaviest on weaker groups of society, the dynamics of local enclave economies, and economic volatility of international commodity markets (SEI et al., 2021).

Stability of oil and gas as a revenue source is another myth baked into these narratives: looking forward, the economic, social, environmental and political risks associated with continued fossil fuel expansion are significant (Bos & Gupta, 2018). As global demand is expected to peak and decrease, new oil and gas projects also incur risks of becoming stranded assets, and communities that rely on them, stranded communities (Manley & Heller, 2021; SEI et al., 2021).

The narratives leave out the fact that renewable energy production positively contributes to various aspects of energy security, for instance through reduced import dependence, reduced electricity prices and price volatility, more flexible and fast deployment, increased energy access in remote areas, and lesser environmental impacts (Global Commission on the Geopolitics of Energy Transformation, 2019; Nascimento et al., 2017; Picciariello et al., 2023). Typical methods for comparing energy resources, however, do not include security benefits (Colgan et al., 2023). Moreover, while technological, policy and financial obstacles hamper renewable and grid deployment, assumptions about the need for fossil fuels to balance renewable energies' intermittency tend to be outdated and often do not account for new technologies (Sayne, 2022). Future work is required to effectively assess different options to balance renewable energies' variability in middle- and low-income economies (Sterl et al., 2024). Addressing inaccurate assumptions is necessary to promote narratives that better align with current technological advancements, economic realities and environmental priorities.

The narrative of “low-carbon” oil and gas was and continues to be misleading. Reducing emissions from oil and gas production is urgent and can deliver some climate benefits – especially through reducing fugitive emissions and flaring. Even with these efforts, however, most greenhouse gas emissions happen at the combustion stage. Research indicates that when accounting for the limitations of carbon dioxide removal technologies, limiting warming to 1.5°C would require a reduction of coal, oil and gas supply by 99%, 70% and 84%, respectively, by 2050 (Achakulwisut et al., 2023).

As for the narrative of using gas as a bridge to a net-zero economy, it leaves out essential information, such as where the bridge actually leads and when the bridge should end (Calles Almeida et al., 2023; Delborne et al., 2020). This narrative contributes to resource diversion from renewables, risks of greenwashing, and continued dependence on fossil fuels (Kemfert et al., 2022; Kenner & Heede, 2021).

Moreover, these narratives contribute to carbon lock-in by calling for and legitimizing new oil and gas infrastructure investments, such as new pipelines or the construction of floating liquefied natural gas facilities and downstream processing plants in Nigeria. These narratives can also justify regulations and policies that uphold or worsen countries’ reliance on the oil and gas industry. For example, in response to local resistance to extractive projects, a revision to the Colombian royalty distribution system in 2020 altered the criteria governing revenue allocation with the aim of channelling a greater portion of these funds toward departments and municipalities that extract minerals, oil and gas, further incentivizing increased dependence on the sector.

Counteracting oil and gas narratives: the roles of civil society

Researchers and civil society organizations around the world have challenged and continue to counteract these narratives, to enable a well-managed and equitable transition away from oil and gas production. First and foremost, civil society organizations play an important role in demanding more ambitious supply-side climate policy from oil and gas producers in high-income economies. Calls for global equity considerations are central to the phasing out of fossil fuel production (Muttitt & Kartha, 2020). High-income economies, which are less dependent on income from fossil fuel production and have a higher capacity to transition away from it, must not only act more ambitiously but also provide financial and technical support to help low- and middle-income countries, such as Colombia and Nigeria, transition away from fossil fuels in equitable ways. However, the latest edition of the *Production Gap Report* indicates that projected and planned oil and gas production by 12 countries with relatively lower levels of economic reliance on their production would exceed the respective 1.5°C-consistent pathways by 2040 (SEI et al., 2023).

Second, the research community and civil society more broadly play an important role in continuously challenging the inaccurate or outdated premises behind these narratives. They can highlight contradictions and inconsistencies and keep providing accurate, up-to-date and detailed information and analysis.

Making sure that these findings are reflected in the public discourse and policymaking is key. At the same time, it is important to continue pushing for clarifications where the narratives are – often purposefully – obscure or ambiguous, not least in planning documents. This can imply unpacking baseline assumptions and excluded variables, such as the cost of externalities or equity considerations, in modelling exercises (e.g. in projecting future production and demand, technological choices and other variables), spelling out how domestic plans align with global transition processes, identifying which actor groups profit from oil and gas versus from renewables expansion, or when and how the supposed gas bridge is to end.

Third, civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for transparency and accountability in the oil and gas industry and for energy planning and regulatory institutions. Examples include regular and comprehensive disclosure by fossil fuel companies of their spending, project plans, emissions and climate-related financial risks and by governments of their national plans and policies for fossil fuel production, as well as their financial and policy support of fossil fuel production (SEI et al., 2021).

The oil and gas narratives described above have gained a lot of traction, not least because they align with a historically dominant development paradigm and ostensibly offer to avoid drastic change in local economic and political systems. Influential actors, such as fossil fuel companies and other entities with a vested interest in stalling an energy transition, actively shape and promote them.

Therefore, a fourth role that civil society organizations can play is to counteract such narratives by creating, amplifying and promoting robust, science-based narratives of prosperous and equitable futures beyond fossil fuels. These need to appeal to the public's main concerns and core beliefs and use socially and culturally grounded language to build societal support for a just transition. At the same time, civil society organizations can influence governments by advocating for policies that reflect these visions and by holding decision-makers accountable to their climate commitments. Building broad coalitions and leaning into participatory approaches to reimagine a fossil-free future, supported by alternative narratives that challenge fossil fuel dominance, can help counter efforts by powerful actors that seek to protect their fossil fuel interests.

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Cover photo

Oil storage tank with feed pipes leading to power station boilers, in Nigeria. Photo: Andrew Holt/The Image Bank/Getty Images

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