POLICY BRIEF

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Africa and the Politics of Energy Transition: Phase Out, Phase Down, or Transition Away?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the evolving debate within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on reducing fossil fuel dependence and its implications for African countries. It analyses the three dominant transition visions currently shaping global climate negotiations: *phase out, phase down,* and *transition away from fossil fuels;* and argues that these are not solely technical climate pathways but competing political and economic visions of the future energy system. While momentum to reduce fossil fuels is growing globally, the brief highlights that the transition debate remains deeply contested over issues of equity, development, energy security, finance, and industrial transformation.

The brief argues that Africa should avoid aligning rigidly with any single transition narrative. Instead, African negotiators should strategically embrace the "transition away from fossil fuels" framework while shaping its meaning to reflect African development priorities, including energy access, industrialisation, resilience, and policy sovereignty. It warns that without deliberate positioning, Africa risks becoming a rule-taker in a transition designed by major emitters and technology holders. To address this, the brief proposes a negotiation strategy centred on differentiated responsibilities, concessional finance, technology transfer, energy access, and development-centred transition pathways. Ultimately, it concludes that Africa's strongest position within the UNFCCC process lies in combining climate ambition with a clear strategy for inclusive economic transformation and sustainable development.

1 What is being debated?

Research consistently supports reducing fossil fuels as a necessary, evidence-based policy intervention to mitigate climate change. The literature emphasises three core rationales: (1) the combustion of fossil fuel is the largest contributor to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions; (2) achieving internationally agreed climate targets under the UNFCCC requires rapid and sustained reduction of emissions; and (3) policy measures targeting fossil fuel supply and demand (such as subsidy reform, production limits, and clean energy transitions) are effective strategies for reducing emissions. Additionally, studies highlight co-benefits relevant to policymakers, including improved development outcomes such as in public health, economic efficiency, and reduced fiscal burdens (Haines et al., 2009; Erickson et al., 2018; Burniaux & Chateau, 2014). In addition to the benefits of reducing fossil fuels, continued reliance on these energy sources would worsen environmental and economic risks (Achakulwisut et al., 2023; Johnsson et al., 2019).

Yet for decades, UNFCCC agreements, notably the Paris Agreement, largely avoided directly addressing fossil fuels, focusing instead on emission reduction outcomes rather than their sources (Paterson, 2021). This began to shift at COP26, where coal was explicitly referenced, and more

decisively at COP28, which marked the first formal acknowledgement of the need to "transition away from fossil fuels" in UNFCCC outcomes (Huffman & Reynolds, 2024; Maslin et al, 2023). This shift reflects growing pressure from vulnerable countries and civil society to align climate policy with the root cause of emissions.

The debate is, therefore, no longer about whether fossil fuels should be reduced at all. Instead, it is characterised by deep divisions among country groups, disagreements over wording and tensions over equity, development, and energy security. Another key debate concerns whether the UNFCCC should address fossil fuel production alongside consumption and emissions, an approach that continues to elude negotiations. Traditionally, negotiations have focused on emission reduction, leaving fossil fuel extraction largely unregulated (Piggot et al., 2018; Erickson et al., 2022).

In essence, while momentum for reducing fossil fuel dependence is increasing, consensus remains fragile and politically constrained (van Asselt & Green, 2023; Piggot et al., 2018; Saha, 2024). At the heart of these divisions and disagreements are the scope and pace of the transition: "phase out", "phase down" or "transition away". These visions reflect competing political and economic models for achieving energy transition.

- Many developed countries, small island states, and least developed countries advocate for a full phase-out of fossil fuels.
- Major fossil fuel producers and some emerging economies prefer "phase-down" language or emphasise "abated" fossil fuels (i.e., continued use with carbon capture technologies) (Hansen, 2023).
- Compromise language, such as **"**transitioning away", reflects attempts to bridge these positions but often lacks specificity (Huffman & Reynolds, 2024).

PHASE-OUT
A time-bound elimination of fossil fuels aligned with 1.5°C pathways

Fossil fuel phase-out reflects a model driven primarily by climate science and global carbon budgeting. It assumes that the overriding objective is to rapidly eliminate fossil fuels in line with 1.5°C pathways, with all countries converging toward net-zero systems[1]. This model is championed by high-ambition coalitions, particularly in Europe, and closely aligns with scenarios produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the International Energy Agency (IPCC, 2023; IEA, 2025a). However, in practice, it reflects an economic logic shaped by countries with strong energy systems, established infrastructure, and access to capital and technology.

Implications for Africa

If applied without strong recognition of different contexts and without support, this vision risks squelching Africa's development timeline into an externally defined decarbonisation schedule. In countries where energy systems remain underdeveloped, this could create a situation whereby the need to expand energy access[2], industrial capacity, and infrastructure is overshadowed by pressure to eliminate fossil fuels that have historically underpinned such transformations (Piggot et al., 2028; van Asselt & Green, 2023). In practice, this could translate into higher energy costs, constrained industrialisation pathways, and increased reliance on imported technologies, unless offset by large-scale concessional finance and technology transfer. At the same time, phase-out could offer leverage if strategically negotiated, particularly to secure predictable public finance, grid-scale renewable investment, and clean industrial partnerships. Moreso, an early shift

[1] The IPCC states that limiting warming to 1.5°C requires global greenhouse gas emissions to fall by 43% by 2030 and 60% by 2035 relative to 2019, with net zero CO_2 around mid-century; the IEA's net-zero scenario similarly requires steep declines in fossil fuel demand alongside rapid growth in renewables, efficiency, methane abatement, and low-emissions fuels.

[2] Africa contributes only 2–3% of global greenhouse gas emissions, according to UNEP, while nearly 600 million people on the continent still lack access to electricity.

towards renewable energy could help African economies avoid long-term dependence on volatile fossil fuel markets and support more sustainable development pathways.

PHASE-DOWN

A gradual or managed reduction of fossil fuels with flexible and differentiated pathways

The fossil fuels phase-down vision reflects a more incremental, politically negotiated model, in which the scope and pace of the transition are adjusted to national circumstances. This vision emerged clearly in the Glasgow Climate Pact, which called for the phase-down of unabated coal rather than a full phase-out (UNFCCC, 2021). It is often viewed as a political compromise between ambitious mitigation goals and the economic realities of fossil-dependent economies and is thus supported by countries concerned with energy security, economic stability, and domestic political constraints. Economically, it allows continued, though declining, use of fossil fuels, providing space for managing employment, fiscal revenues, and infrastructure transitions. But it also reflects the interests of major fossil fuel producers, who stand to benefit from a slower transition trajectory. The result is a model that is flexible but often lacks a clear destination, thereby creating a risk of prolonged fossil dependence without structural transformation.

Implications for Africa

A phase-down model offers Africa short-term policy flexibility, allowing governments to pace their transitions in line with domestic realities such as energy deficits, fiscal constraints, and employment considerations. This can be particularly relevant for managing existing resources and avoiding abrupt disruptions in energy supply or public revenues. However, the strategic limitation is that phase-down does not inherently drive structural transformation. It risks locking African economies into a state in which they are neither fully transitioning to modern, resilient energy systems nor fully leveraging fossil fuels for industrialisation. Moreover, because phase-down is often shaped by the interests of major producers, it can reduce pressure on them to decarbonise and thereby weaken climate ambition (Hanen, 2023; Paterson, 2021), while offering Africa limited access to the finance, technology, and industrial opportunities required for a meaningful transition. Furthermore, prolonged fossil investment could delay renewable energy deployment and expose African economies to future carbon-related trade and fiscal risks (Newell & Simms, 2020; UNECA, 2024).

TRANSITION AWAY

A systemwide transformation framework linking emissions reduction with development and equity

The “transition away from fossil fuels” formulation, formalised in the outcome of COP28, reflects a more systemic, albeit politically contested, model. It moves beyond fuels alone to encompass entire economic systems, linking mitigation to development, resilience, and equity. This vision allows for diverse pathways, including the use of “transitional” or “bridge” fuels, the deployment of emerging technologies, and the integration of energy access priorities. It is, therefore, attractive to a broader coalition of countries, including many in the Global South. However, its breadth also makes it problematic. For instance, it can accommodate both African arguments for energy access and industrialisation, and advanced economy strategies to maintain leadership in clean technology value chains and climate finance systems. It can be used to justify continued fossil expansion, overreliance on unproven technologies, and risks reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Huffman & Reynolds, 2024; Maslin et al., 2023).

Implications for Africa

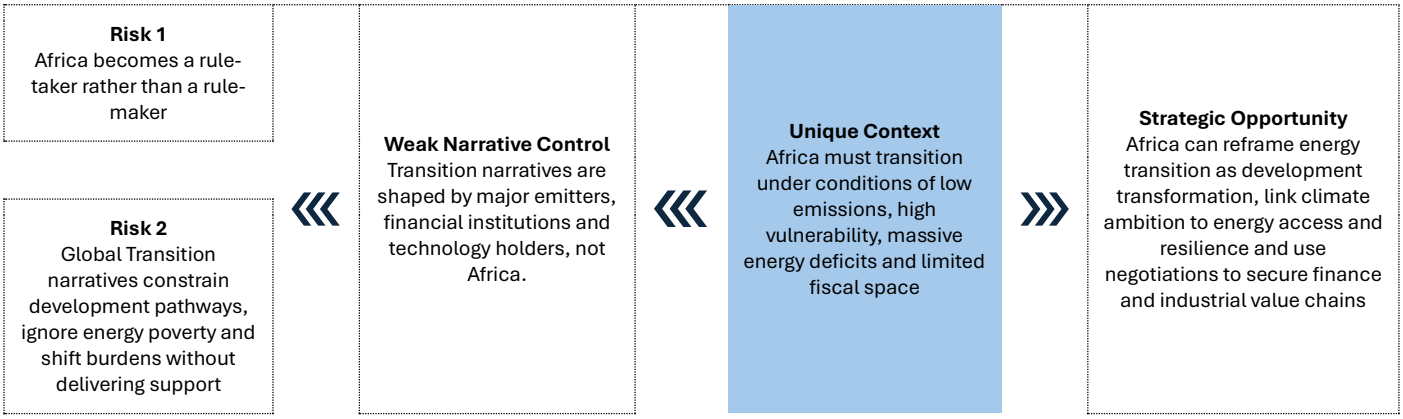
A "transition away" model offers the most strategically adaptable framework for Africa, as it embeds the transition within broader goals of energy access, resilience, and economic transformation. Properly defined, it enables African countries to argue for pathways that prioritise expanding electricity access, building local industries, and strengthening climate resilience, rather than focusing narrowly on emissions reduction. This creates space to align climate action with initiatives such as energy-for-development programmes and value addition in critical minerals.[3] However, this flexibility is double-edged. Without clear parameters, the model can be shaped by more powerful actors to favour technology lock-ins, market dominance, or selective decarbonisation strategies that perpetuate dependency.

2 The Power Question

These competing visions illustrate that energy transition concerns extend beyond the goal of reducing emissions. Policymakers must also address questions about whose development model shapes the transition, whose constraints are recognised, who controls resources, who determines which technologies are desirable or adopted and, ultimately, who benefits from the new energy order.

In this contested landscape, Africa occupies a structurally central yet politically vulnerable position (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: *Where Africa sits in the current global energy transition debate*



[3] Paragraph 28(d) of Decision 1/CMA.5 calls on Parties, in a nationally determined manner and taking account of different national circumstances, pathways, and approaches, to contribute to global efforts by "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner". The same paragraph also links this to tripling renewables, doubling efficiency, methane reductions, and subsidy reform. But the decision also recognises that "transitional fuels can play a role" and includes zero- and low-emission technologies such as carbon capture and low-carbon hydrogen. The COP30 Presidency announced a roadmap for transitioning away from fossil fuels; more than 80 countries supported a fossil fuel roadmap initiative; and the COP30 just transition decision underscored that just transition pathways are relevant across mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage, that there is no one-size-fits-all model, that universal affordable energy access can be central to national pathways, and that grant-based and highly concessional finance remains critical. It also launched work toward a just transition mechanism to enhance cooperation, technical assistance, capacity-building, and knowledge-sharing.

On the one hand, the continent is central to the material foundations of the transition: it holds a significant share of the world's critical minerals, possesses vast renewable energy potential, and represents the largest frontier market for future energy demand (World Bank et al., 2025). On the other hand, Africa enters the transition from a position of low industrialisation, high climate vulnerability, and constrained fiscal space, which limits its ability to shape outcomes on equal terms (AfDB, 2023; IPCC, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

The strategic risk is that, without deliberate positioning, Africa could be integrated into the emerging energy system on terms subordinate to those of the rest of the world. This could take several forms: (1) a continuation of the extractive model, where African countries supply raw materials for clean technologies without capturing value through local processing, manufacturing, or technology development; (2) a technology dependency trap, in which energy systems are built around imported solutions, financed at high cost, and governed by external standards, limiting domestic control and long-term affordability; (3) a constrained policy space, where global mitigation expectations narrow the range of viable development pathways before alternative industrial structures are in place; and (4) a finance asymmetry, where the cost of capital remains prohibitively high, forcing countries into debt-heavy transitions that undermine fiscal stability.

At a deeper level, the risk is one of being positioned as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker in the governance of the transition. The terms of transition, such as what counts as "clean," which technologies are prioritised, how carbon is accounted for, and how finance is allocated, are increasingly being set through institutions, markets, and standards dominated by advanced economies. If Africa does not actively shape these rules, it risks locking into an externally defined and unevenly financed transition that is only partially aligned with its development priorities.

The strategic imperative, therefore, is to shift from passive compliance to active agenda-setting. This means leveraging Africa's assets, notably its resource base, demographic weight, and moral authority in the climate debate, to negotiate for influence over the structure of the transition itself. In practical terms, this requires linking fossil fuel debates to broader questions of industrial policy, value addition, energy access, and resilience, while building coalitions that can rebalance the asymmetries embedded in the current system.

3 Best African Position

The literature on climate diplomacy and African energy transitions suggests that African negotiators should adopt positions that balance three interconnected priorities: (1) protecting development and energy access objectives, (2) advancing climate resilience and low-carbon transformation, and (3) securing international finance, technology transfer, and policy flexibility under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR-RC). Africa's relatively low historical emissions, high climate vulnerability, and significant energy access gaps justify differentiated transition pathways rather than uniform fossil-fuel reduction obligations (AUC, 2022; UNECA, 2023). At the same time, negotiators are increasingly encouraged to avoid long-term fossil fuel lock-in and strategically leverage global climate negotiations to accelerate investment in renewable energy, industrialisation, and adaptation.

Against this backdrop, Africa's strategic interest does not lie in aligning with any single transition narrative or treating the transition agenda as a choice between climate ambition and development. The more strategic and effective position is to embrace "transition away from fossil fuels" as a multilateral framework and then vigorously work to shape its meaning and application. The continent can then strategically employ phase-out and phase-down language to advance its interests. The result is a negotiation doctrine that reconciles the continent's interests and global commitments:

Africa will support a just, orderly, and equitable transition away from fossil fuels, but will resist any interpretation that imposes de facto uniform phase-out obligations on low-emitting, energy-poor economies without corresponding guarantees on differentiated timelines, public finance, technology transfer, and the policy space for industrialisation and resilience.

To operationalise this position, African negotiators should advance the following five negotiating pillars.

Pillar 1	*Differentiation as a Non-Negotiable Condition*	Insist that transition timelines and pathways must reflect the uneven distribution of responsibilities and impacts of climate change and the capabilities to act. This means resisting uniform transition timelines and expectations of action.
Pillar 2	*Finance as the Precondition for Accelerated Transition*	Position means of implementation (not ambition) as the central negotiation variable. This involves scaling Article 9 commitments and prioritising grants and concessional finance.
Pillar 3	*Energy Access as a Test of Transition Credibility*	Redefine success in the transition debate by embedding energy access as a core metric of legitimacy. In other words, framing energy access as a climate goal and rejecting pathways that ignore it.
Pillar 4	*Targeted Use of Phase-Down as a Technical Instrument*	Use phase-down language selectively and strategically (e.g. for coal and harmful subsidies), rather than as a default framework. This means avoiding and rejecting blanket applications.
Pillar 5	*Defining "Transition Away" as Structural Transformation*	Actively shape the meaning of "transition away" to reflect a development-centred transition model. This means focusing on industry, jobs, value addition, and resilience systems.

4 Conclusion

The evolving UNFCCC debate on reducing fossil fuels highlights the growing international recognition that achieving global climate goals will require a significant transformation of energy systems. However, disagreements over whether to "phase out," "phase down," or "transition away" from fossil fuels demonstrate the continued tension between climate ambition and national development priorities. For African countries, these negotiations present both risks and opportunities. While rapid fossil fuel restrictions could constrain economic growth and energy access in some contexts, the transition also offers opportunities to accelerate renewable energy deployment, strengthen climate resilience, and promote sustainable industrialisation. African negotiators are therefore likely to benefit from advocating for a just and equitable transition framework that recognises the continent's development needs, low historical emissions, and right to policy flexibility, while simultaneously securing greater international support for finance, technology, adaptation, and clean energy investment. Ultimately, Africa's position within the UNFCCC process will be strongest when it combines climate ambition with a clear development-centred strategy for inclusive and sustainable growth.

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Disclaimer
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