

BLOG POST April 16th 2026

Transitioning away from fossil fuels: How can the Santa Marta conference create a snowball effect?

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🕒 Reading time: 8 min



The Santa Marta First Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels will take place at the end of the month (24-29 April) in Colombia. Mobilizing government and non-state stakeholders, it aims to create a space to discuss implementation challenges and opportunities of equitable fossil fuel transitions in the economy and to connect with international commitments and processes to accelerate the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. This blog post sets out expectations for the conference and considerations to take this momentum forward.

Hosted by Colombia and The Netherlands and convened outside the formal UN process, [the Santa Marta Conference](#) reflects efforts to accelerate progress on transitioning away from fossil fuels by identifying concrete levers for domestic and international action among interested actors and to help overcome persistent political deadlocks. Santa Marta is expected to bring together around 50 countries across regions and income levels, with strong European representation and some fossil fuel producers (such as Canada, Australia, Angola, Mexico).¹

Beyond the event itself, the real opportunity lies in triggering a “snowball effect”: building a shared understanding of priorities, lessons learned, and catalyzing partnerships that can progressively expand support for equitable fossil fuel transitions, including as a signal to financial markets. Indeed, Colombia, who has been championing this agenda, has been downgraded by financial rating agencies after announcing it will stop exploration for fossil fuel. If momentum takes hold among this initial group, it can increase support for the transition and show that phasing out fossil fuels is about future-proofing and diversifying the economy in the medium term—shifting the centre of gravity of today’s global conversation and seeding practical ideas to move further and faster. Based on our analysis, four key levers could set this dynamic in motion.

1. A crisis that exposes fossil fuel vulnerabilities

The Conference—formally announced by Colombia at COP30 in November 2025—takes place against the backdrop of a major energy crisis triggered by the military attack launched on 28 February 2026 by the United States and Israel against Iran. Described by Fatih Birol, Executive Director of the International Energy Agency, as a crisis “more serious than the ones in 1973, 1979 and 2022 together”,² it has once again exposed the structural risks of fossil fuel dependence for importing countries.

For Europe and many import-dependent economies, this moment underscores continued exposure to geopolitical shocks and reinforces the urgency of accelerating the low-carbon transition.³ While Santa Marta was not conceived as a response to this crisis, the context sharpens its relevance. The crisis is a reminder of systemic vulnerabilities and of the need to put socio-economic considerations at the centre of transitioning away from fossil fuels. It may also be interpreted as a signal of the transition from a global economic system based on fossil fuels to a new one based on renewable energy—a shift with potentially significant geopolitical and social consequences, but also major opportunities for transformation.

Neither the Santa Marta conference nor the Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels (TAFF) process can address all the issues linked to this transformation, but the crisis context creates conditions for a snowball effect: anchoring discussions in shared, immediate challenges can help align priorities, ground debates in real-world constraints, and strengthen cooperation among countries facing similar risks.

2. Recognizing efforts and engaging major emerging economies

Santa Marta is often framed as a “coalition of the willing”,⁴ i.e. a group of countries seeking to accelerate progress outside the constraints of the UNFCCC, including by triggering a conversation on binding commitments. While this reflects real frustrations with multilateral processes ([IDDRI, 2025a](#)), the framing can be misleading.

Countries participating in Santa Marta have not all taken the full set of steps required to phase out fossil fuels, just as those not participating are not necessarily inactive in advancing their own transitions. Yet the narrative tends to draw a sharp divide between those “willing to act” and those “holding back,” often reinforcing outdated North-South binaries of high-ambition developed countries versus lower-ambition developing ones. Such framings risk obscuring complex political economy realities and, importantly, undermining trust and cooperation across countries.

Santa Marta offers an opportunity to shift this narrative, by recognizing efforts by countries outside of the “coalition of the willing”. Most countries are committed, with national net-zero plans already in place, and are engaged in the transition, albeit in different ways and at different speeds. In practice, many countries prioritize the rapid scale-up of clean energy alongside, rather than immediately replacing, fossil fuels. This means that countries like China and, to a different extent, India, are leading globally in clean energy deployment while only recently beginning to see a decline in coal power generation.⁵ For other developing, exporting countries, oil revenues are paramount to their economy, and economic diversification strategies will need time and international support to be implemented (IDDRI, 2025b).

Recognizing both progress and constraints is essential. It allows key emerging economies, such as China and India, to be seen as central partners in shaping technological and market shifts, rather than as outliers. This more inclusive framing is critical to building trust and expanding enabling cooperation within sectors, value chains or regions—core ingredients of a snowball effect.

3. Anchoring the fossil fuel transition as a socio-economic development opportunity

A critical condition for success is to avoid treating the fossil fuel transition as a narrow mitigation objective, as it is fundamentally a development challenge, intertwined with energy access, industrialization, economic diversification, and resilience. Santa Marta is well positioned in this regard. The Conference is organized around a two-day high-level segment and will be preceded by an academic and scientific conference, a civil society conference and a moment for subnational governments and private sector mobilization. Its focus on economic dependence, energy systems transformation, and international cooperation reflects the breadth of the challenge, including underexplored barriers such as international legal constraints. For example, on foreign direct investments agreements, investor state dispute settlement mechanisms might restrict the capacity of a national government to decide on a transition out of fossil fuels.

This framing creates an opportunity to ground the transition debate in real-world dynamics. Across contexts, the transition unfolds within specific national realities. Developing countries, in particular, must balance rising energy demand, limited fiscal space, and structural constraints. By recognizing these dynamics, Santa Marta can help foster more credible and context-sensitive knowledge and narratives, aligned with national priorities. This strengthens political buy-in and broadens participation—another key condition for scaling momentum.

4. Catalyzing national action and linking to the multilateral process

A fourth lever lies in strengthening national action while connecting it to the climate multilateral process. Encouraging more systematic and long-term national planning is essential to unlock national action and can help build a clearer picture of global progress and needs, including by triggering a conversation at the domestic level with all the key stakeholders involved in the transition.

Santa Marta can play a role in showcasing national roadmaps to inspire peers and highlight current gaps—both in domestic strategies, such as development plans and country platforms, and in internationally-mandated instruments such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDS). This can support peer learning and help prioritize areas for cooperation.

To sustain momentum and engage with key countries—in particular large emerging economies—these insights must feed into multilateral processes. The COP30 Presidency-led [Global Roadmap on The Transition Away from Fossil](#)

[Fuels](#) and the [Second Global Stocktake](#) (GST2) provide key hooks. Both rely on stronger national inputs to assess progress, guide cooperation, and strengthen implementation. The Roadmap led by Brazil is currently gathering inputs from governments and observer organizations⁶ to the UNFCCC and will be further discussed at the Subsidiary Bodies sessions in Bonn in June; it provides an opportunity to reflect emerging practices and identify practical guidance to strengthen national transition planning. The GST2 is set to start with an information collection phase that requires more structured and granular national inputs to inform fossil fuel consumption and production and guide international cooperation.

Conclusion

The Santa Marta Conference creates a timely space to advance the global conversation on transitioning away from fossil fuels. Its value, however, will not be measured by its final statements, but rather by its ability to catalyze broader momentum.

At a time of heightened geopolitical tension and energy insecurity, the conference offers an opportunity to anchor the transition as a shared response to systemic vulnerabilities—one that places socio-economic development at its core and moves beyond divisive narratives.

On its own, Santa Marta cannot resolve the structural complexity of global fossil fuel dependence. But it can act as a catalyst and generate opportunities for diplomacy, business, advocacy and practitioners alike. By grounding discussions in real-world progress and constraints, and linking national efforts with international processes, it can help generate the conditions for a snowball effect—expanding support, consensus and cooperation, deepening partnerships, and unlocking practical solutions across regions and sectors.

The challenge will be to ensure continuity: feeding insights into different forms of climate cooperation—including into the multilateral process—and broadening participation and partnerships, for instance between fossil fuel producers and consumers. If successful, Santa Marta can generate concrete solutions and actions that can be taken up by countries in national roadmaps, in energy and climate diplomatic action and in structuring next steps in the context of the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

This blog post builds on analysis done by IDDRI for two contributions to the COP30 Presidency Roadmap for Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels in a Just, Orderly and Equitable Manner :

- [IDDRI submission on behalf of the JUSTPATH project](#)
- [Advancing an Equitable Fossil Fuel Transition: A New Narrative](#)

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Countries joining the Conference include: Angola, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Guatemala, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Luxembourg, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Mexico, Netherlands, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Portugal, Palau, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Tuvalu, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Vanuatu, Vietnam.

²

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/iea-chief-current-oil-gas-crisis-worse-than-1973-1979-2002-together-2026-04-07/>

3

<https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/iran-war-turning-point-european-energy-transition-policies>

4

By host countries as well as civil society participating in the conference.

5

<https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coal-power-drops-in-china-and-india-for-first-time-in-52-years-after-clean-energy-records/>

6

<https://cop30.br/en/unfccc-announces-cop30-presidency-consultations-on-roadmaps>

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