

Santa Marta: Securing Justice in Transition *Confronting power, inequality, and the fossil fuel economy*

Briefing – April 2026

Executive Summary

The Santa Marta Conference on the Just Transition Away from Fossil Fuels takes place in the Colombian Caribbean, a region shaped by both fossil fuel extraction and frontline resistance. Santa Marta itself is a major coal-export hub and a gateway to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta — a sacred territory where Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have long defended land, culture, and ecological balance in the face of mining, dispossession, and violence.

This is not a neutral setting. It is a place where the contradictions of the fossil fuel economy are lived and where the stakes of transition are already being fought over. The conference takes place at a moment of profound global instability. Climate breakdown, deepening inequality, ecological collapse, and geopolitical conflict, are not separate crises; but are the outcome of a global economic model built on extraction, exploitation, and the concentration of wealth and power.

The transition away from fossil fuels is urgent. But without deliberate political choices, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities. A just transition must therefore be explicitly equitable and ecological, addressing both the climate emergency and the structural injustices embedded in the global economy. This includes recognising the historical responsibility of Global North countries, whose wealth was built through centuries of colonial extraction, and ensuring that those least responsible for climate change can fully participate in a transition based on 'justice'.

In Colombia — as in many parts of the Global South — this transition is not abstract. It is bound up with questions of sovereignty, livelihoods, and historical injustice. Santa Marta is a decisive moment to move from commitment to implementation. It must accelerate cooperation, address the links between fossil fuels and geopolitical instability, and support structural economic transformation. Without grant-based, non-debt-creating finance, this will not be possible.

The conference builds on the momentum, and limitations, of COP30, which failed to deliver a formal fossil fuel phase-out roadmap, largely due to insufficient climate finance and entrenched vested interests. In this context, "coalitions of the committed" grounded in political will rather than short-term national interests, could help break the current deadlock. By enabling countries with shared ambitions to coordinate action outside consensus-based UN processes, such coalitions can drive progress while reinforcing multilateral frameworks and build momentum for the global formal processes.

The stated outcome of the Santa Marta process is the development of a fossil fuel transition roadmap. To be credible, this must go beyond high-level commitments and be

more than a talking shop and define practical pathways for implementation, including the legal frameworks, regulatory tools, financing mechanisms, and just transition policies. Crucially, any road map emerging must be justice-centred, grounded in differentiated responsibilities, grant-based finance, protection for frontline communities, and fair distribution of costs and benefits.

A truly 'just' transition must also confront deeper structural challenges. If confined to a narrowly defined energy transition it risks reproducing extractivist dynamics and failing to learn the lessons from the past. Simply expanding critical mineral supply chains risks significant social and environmental costs. A just transition must be post-extractive, reducing overall energy and material demand, particularly in high-consuming economies, and ensuring resource sovereignty and value retention in producing countries and protecting workers' rights.

Financing remains a critical barrier. The resources required for a just transition already exist but are concentrated among fossil fuel corporations and wealthy elites, and richer countries. Mobilising these resources and sharing them equitably requires political action, including progressive taxation, strengthened climate finance mechanisms, debt relief and the application of the 'polluters pays' principle. International processes such as the UN Tax Convention and loss and damage financing must be aligned with transition goals, while legal barriers such as investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms must be dismantled.

Finally, the success of any transition depends on democratic legitimacy and transparency. Civil society was invited to input submissions to the conference; these grassroots contributions must be acknowledged in both the formal agenda and the outcomes of the conference. Civil society, trade unions, feminist movements, peasant farmers and fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, and frontline communities must play a central role and be enabled to meaningfully engage in shaping and implementing transition pathways. The coalition emerging from Santa Marta must be rooted not only in progressive governments willing to speak out and champion what is right even in the face of great opposition from powerful states; but in broad-based alliances capable of driving structural change from the bottom up as well as the top down.

Santa Marta offers a pivotal opportunity to build such a coalition; one capable of delivering a transition that is not only fossil-fuel free, but also just, redistributive, and grounded in global solidarity.

Recommendations

States attending Santa Marta should commit to

1. Establish a coalition committed to a just and equitable fossil fuel phase-out: Governments at Santa Marta should formalise a 'coalition of the committed' that goes beyond political declarations and focuses on coordinated implementation. This coalition must be explicitly grounded in justice, equity, and ecological sustainability, with a shared commitment to phasing out fossil fuels in line with climate science and historical responsibility.
2. Advance a time-bound and differentiated fossil fuel phase-out roadmap. Participating countries should endorse a clear binding roadmap for phasing out fossil fuels, with timelines reflecting Common but Differentiated

Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities. High-income countries must move first and fastest, while providing the support necessary for Global South countries to transition on just and equitable terms. States should also exit the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) system, which creates a barrier to fossil fuel phase-out.

3. Deliver scaled-up, grant-based climate finance. Countries in the Global North must meet and exceed existing climate finance commitments through predictable, grant-based, non-debt-creating finance. This must include dedicated support for just transition processes, economic diversification, and replacing fossil fuel revenues in affected countries.
4. Link fossil fuel phase-out to redistributive global economic reform: Transition strategies must be connected to wider efforts on tax justice, debt cancellation, and corporate accountability. Governments should support an ambitious UN Tax Convention including commitments on progressive taxation and mechanisms to ensure that fossil fuel corporations and major polluters contribute fairly to financing the transition.
5. Support structural economic transformation in the Global South: Beyond energy transitions, countries must be supported to move away from extractive development models. This includes investment in public services, care economies, food sovereignty, and other sectors that sustain life, alongside policies that build resilient and diversified local economies.
6. Reject extractivist models in the transitions: The coalition must commit to a post-extractive transition that reduces overall energy and material demand, particularly in high-consuming economies. Policies should prioritise circular economy approaches, including reuse and recycling, and place clear limits on harmful extraction linked to transition minerals.
7. Ensure resource sovereignty and equitable mineral governance. Any approach to critical minerals must be grounded in the rights and sovereignty of producing countries. Governments should support democratic control of natural resources, ensure free, prior and informed consent, and enable countries in the Global South to retain value through industrial policy, public ownership, and fair trade.

Any Road Map should:

8. Strengthen alignment with UN processes, including the Belem Anatalya Mechanism (BAM) for Global Just Transition of the UNFCCC. Outcomes from Santa Marta should reinforce and advance progress within the UNFCCC, particularly the development of the BAM. The coalition should advocate for an ambitious global just transition framework that centres workers, communities, and frontline groups.
9. Embed peace, security, and conflict prevention in transition planning. Fossil fuel phase-out strategies must explicitly address the links between energy systems, food systems, conflict, and geopolitical instability. Roadmaps should include mechanisms for peaceful cooperation, equitable burden sharing, and support for communities affected by fossil fuel-related conflicts.

Why Santa Marta?

Santa Marta is a key Colombian port involved in coal exports, hosting the Santa Marta Conference in a major coal-export hub sends a clear message: countries whose economies have historically depended on fossil fuel extraction recognise the need to move beyond oil, gas, and coal, and are seeking pathways to do so on fairer terms.

But beyond symbolism, Santa Marta reflects the lived reality of the transition — where extractive economies, frontline resistance, and alternative visions of development collide.

The global context is clear: climate breakdown, inequality, and ecological collapse are driven by a model of extraction and concentration of power. Santa Marta must respond to this reality — not reproduce it. Addressing this requires systemic transformation. Ending fossil fuel dependence must go hand in hand with building economies rooted in care, repair, and democratic control.¹

The climate crisis cannot be understood in isolation from its history. Modern fossil-fuelled economies were built through centuries of colonial extraction, concentrating wealth and power in the Global North while leaving the Global South to bear the costs. Those least responsible are already facing the most severe impacts. ²

Santa Marta is a decisive moment for fossil fuel phase-out and can bring much needed momentum to a process that has been mired in politics, vested interests and a failure to deliver much needed finance. Co-hosted by the governments of Colombia and the Netherlands, the conference must play a decisive role in shaping how the transition is defined, financed, and implemented.

The urgency of now

Santa Marta takes place in a context of growing geopolitical and economic instability linked to fossil fuel dependence. Recent attacks on energy infrastructure in West Asia and the Gulf Countries have demonstrated how oil and gas systems become direct targets in conflict, with severe consequences for civilian populations, ecosystems, food prices and global stability. Strikes on fuel depots and refineries have triggered massive fires, toxic pollution, and long-term health risks. Disruptions to supply chains have affected electricity, water systems, and food distribution globally, while driving price volatility and economic insecurity and enriching fossil fuel corporations and market speculators in the process.

Energy and food systems that heavily rely on oil, gas, and coal are embedded in global supply chains and often based in highly volatile regions still experiencing the legacy of colonialism. When destabilised, the impacts ripple across the global economy, threatening livelihoods, economic stability, and peace. Military activity linked to these conflicts is itself a major source of emissions, estimated at around 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions³, yet remains largely excluded from UNFCCC reporting. This is not an oversight. It is a blind spot that serves the interests of the most powerful states.

This compounds the United States attack on Venezuela in January 2026, resulting in the capture and removal of President Nicolas Maduro. This followed credible threats of the US seizing Greenland to secure its critical minerals. This crisis underscores how energy geopolitics continue to drive international conflict, neo-colonialism, and fossil fuel imperialism.

Fragmentation of multilateralism and the rise of coalitions of the committed

Santa Marta emerges at a moment when multilateral institutions are struggling to respond to interconnected crises. Climate diplomacy has become increasingly strained. The consensus-based model has failed to deliver the scale of finance required, while producing diluted language on fossil fuel phase-out. It is no surprise, in this context, that agreement on a clear fossil fuel phase-out has proved elusive.

Trust has been eroded. Global South countries do not have confidence that wealthy nations will deliver the finance needed, given their consistent failure to meet even existing commitments such as the \$100 billion target. The outcome of COP 30 has been critiqued as “a map with no street names and no vehicle”⁴.

In addition, as the Africa Group made clear at COP28, fossil fuels remain a vital source of revenue for many countries in the Global South. If those resources are to remain in the ground, meaningful international support must be provided to replace that income and enable a transition to sustainable pathways.

In response, governments and movements are exploring new forms of cooperation. Coalitions of the committed offer a way forward, enabling countries with shared objectives to coordinate action beyond the constraints of universal negotiations while reinforcing, not undermining, multilateral frameworks. Santa Marta provides an opportunity to build such a coalition.

Linking roadmaps to just transition implementation

At the heart of the Santa Marta process is the aim of developing a fossil fuel transition roadmap, a political and practical framework shaping both the means, and how quickly, the transition unfolds.

The 30th Conference of the Parties, held in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025, was expected to be a turning point in global climate diplomacy. However, the COP30 outcome text delivered inadequate climate finance and no formal roadmap to phase out fossil fuels, partly because wealthy countries have been rowing back on their commitments to pay their climate debts.

More than 80 countries had called for such a roadmap, building on the momentum from COP28. The absence of a commitment to phase out fossil fuels reflects the role of vested interests and fossil fuel lobbyists in blocking progress, particularly where that progress challenges fossil fuel dependence and corporate power.

The COP30 Presidency’s decision to pursue a transition roadmap outside the formal agreement reflects the frustration that fossil fuel phase out had once again been kicked into the long grass. Despite COP 30 not delivering a consensus text, the majority of countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and parts of Europe recognise that phasing out fossil fuels is essential to meeting climate goals, with those most responsible needing to move first and fastest. Santa Marta builds on this moment, offering a space to advance cooperation where formal processes have stalled. However, there is a risk that a ‘roadmap’ becomes a substitute for real commitments. Without binding timelines, accountability and funding, roadmap processes could delay rather than accelerate action.

Santa Marta at its best has the potential to act as both a technical and political incubator, advancing concrete strategies to connect these roadmaps. Any roadmap that emerges must be meaningful and rooted in justice. That means recognising differentiated responsibilities, ensuring grant based and non-debt creating finance, protecting frontline communities, and distributing costs and benefits fairly.

The role of the Belem Antalya Mechanism for Global Just Transition

Progress within the UNFCCC on just transition, particularly towards the development of the Belem Antalya Mechanism for Global Just Transition (BAM), shows that progress can be made. The BAM has the potential to support coordination, knowledge sharing, and funding across countries and stakeholders.

Outcomes from Santa Marta should build on this progress, strengthening alignment between the conference and UN processes to ensure mutually reinforcing efforts⁵.

The energy transition and critical minerals

The current transition model risks reproducing the very dynamics it seeks to replace. As demand for critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel accelerates, new extractive frontiers are expanding across the Global South, often linked to environmental harm, labour exploitation, and violations of Indigenous and community rights.⁶

Social movements, Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and feminist organisations are unequivocal: a transition based on expanded extraction is not a just transition. Without structural transformation, it will reproduce the same patterns of dispossession, environmental racism, and unequal exchange that have defined the fossil fuel economy.

A just transition must therefore go beyond energy substitution. It requires reducing material demand in high-consuming economies, ensuring resource sovereignty, enforcing Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and enabling producing countries to retain value through public and industrial policy⁷. Without this, the shift to renewables risks becoming a new form of green extractivism.

Transitioning away from a fossil-fuel based food system

The current crisis has demonstrated just how much Fossil fuels are deeply embedded in our global food system. Industrial agriculture depends on oil and gas, from synthetic fertilisers and pesticides to ultra-processed products, processing, transport, and distribution.⁸ This model has driven emissions, environmental degradation, and corporate control over food, while leaving smallholder farmers and food producers increasingly marginalised. Today, food systems use 40% of all petrochemicals and 15% of global fossil fuel supplies, making the sector an important new market for major oil companies - who are doubling down on fertilisers and plastics to secure future profits - as they shift away from other, more heavily scrutinised sectors. Moreover, when geopolitical tensions drive up oil prices, food prices rise as well, worsening hunger and limiting access to food.

A just transition must transform food systems alongside energy systems as well as ensuring the rights of peasants, food and agricultural workers. This means shifting away from industrial, export-driven agriculture towards agroecology, local food systems, and food sovereignty. It requires reducing dependence on fossil fuel inputs, strengthening

support for smallholders, and ensuring that land, water, and seeds are controlled by the communities who depend on them.

Financing the Transition

The Santa Marta Conference takes place at a pivotal moment and cannot be viewed in isolation from wider international efforts to mobilise the trillions required for a just transition away from fossil fuels and to address the damage already caused by the climate crisis. Ensuring that those most responsible contribute proportionately to its solutions must be central to any credible transition strategy.

The resources for a just transition already exist, but they are concentrated in the hands of fossil fuel corporations and the global elite. The central barrier is political will. Mobilising these resources requires progressive taxation, robust climate finance, and stronger corporate accountability, grounded in the polluter pays principle. Without redistribution, the transition will deepen inequality rather than dismantle it.

The next phase of replenishing the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage is an important step toward delivering long-overdue support to affected communities. To be effective, it must be backed by predictable, grant-based finance at the necessary scale⁹. Strengthening this financial architecture is essential not only for addressing climate impacts, but for rebuilding trust and enabling a just transition.

Parallel processes, such as negotiations toward a United Nations Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, also present opportunities to mobilise public finance. Aligning these efforts with fossil fuel phase-out and just transition goals will be critical to ensuring finance flows at the scale and fairness required.

Legal barriers to implementing a fossil fuel phase out

The phaseout of fossil fuels faces legal barriers which are extensively exploited by the industry. Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanisms in trade or investment details, which allow corporations to sue governments over policy decisions which could impact their profits are a particularly pernicious example. Fossil fuel companies are the main winners from this system, having been awarded \$80bn dollars through it since 1989. This has a chilling effect on climate action, by slowing down and raising the costs of environmental policy. States should immediately cease to include ISDS clauses in new trade and investment deals, renegotiate or terminate existing ones which include ISDS, and work internationally to provide legal remedies to this insidious system.

The role of civil society and people power

Santa Marta is not only a diplomatic process, it is unfolding in a living territory shaped by struggle, resistance, and care. The Colombian Caribbean, and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in particular, are both sites of extraction and sacred territories, where Indigenous and Afro-Descendant Peoples have long defended land, culture, and ecological balance in the face of mining, dispossession, and violence. This context makes the conference not just symbolic, but deeply political.

Across Colombia, the transition away from fossil fuels is not settled. It is contested, in communities, in territories, and in the national political arena. For frontline communities, this is not an abstract debate but a question of livelihoods, sovereignty, and survival.

In this context, civil society is not a peripheral actor but a central force shaping the direction of the transition. Colombian movements and organisations are already convening a dense ecosystem of political, cultural, and technical spaces around the conference, from community-led proposals emerging from regional processes to media and research workshops on fossil fuel infrastructure, to artistic and embodied practices that bring the transition into lived experience. These processes reflect years of organising and are rooted in territorial struggles across the country.

The People's Summit for a Fossil-Free Future, alongside assemblies, mobilisations, and territorial dialogues, represents an organised expression of people power, bringing together Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities, workers, feminist movements, and climate justice organisations to define their own visions of transition. These spaces build on the momentum of the Belém People's Summit and form part of a growing global convergence of movements.

As global mobilisations under initiatives such as Fossil Free Rising make clear, this is a coordinated effort to make fossil fuel phase-out politically unavoidable and to ensure that justice, equity, and frontline leadership shape its outcomes.

Santa Marta will therefore be shaped not only by negotiations between governments, but by the strength, clarity, and mobilisation of these movements. In a moment marked by crisis and fragmentation, these spaces also reflect something else: solidarity, resistance, and the possibility of a transition rooted in care, justice – what War on Want and our allies describe as a Global Green New Deal.

References

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