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Neo-colonialism and leaving fossil fuels underground: a discourse analysis of the potential German-Senegalese gas partnership

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contested discourses surrounding a potential gas partnership between Germany and Senegal, highlighting the implications of neo-colonialism in energy politics. It addresses a gap in the LFFU literature: its limited engagement with critiques that call the Global North's discouragement of fossil fuel use a form of neo-colonialism. Conversely, another critique views developed nations' support for fossil fuel projects in the Global South as neo-colonial exploitation. This study analyses these conflicting views through a post-structural discourse analysis focused on how neo-colonialism is invoked in the case study. We identify four distinct discourses: Energy Security, Climate Protection, Right to Development, and Don't Gas Africa. We examine how these discourses employ neocolonialism to support their positions and address the geopolitical and justice complexities of equitably leaving fossil fuels underground. The findings suggest that a nuanced understanding of neo-colonialism can bolster LFFU arguments, advocating for transformative, equitable, and sustainable energy partnerships.

1. Introduction: neo-colonialism and the case for LFFU

The global urgency to mitigate climate change necessitates a rapid transition away from fossil fuel dependence [1]. Leaving fossil fuels underground (LFFU) is underscored by climate science as crucial for maintaining global temperature rise below 1.5 °C [2–4]. However, the geographical reality that most untapped fossil fuel reserves are in the Global South [5], coupled with historical and ongoing power asymmetries between the Global North and South, complicates this seemingly straightforward solution.

The literature on LFFU is robust in its critique of the global capitalist system that drives fossil fuel extraction and climate change [2,6,7]. Scholars argue that the path to sustainable development for the Global South should diverge from the fossil-fuelled trajectory of the Global North, supported by technology transfer and financial assistance from wealthier nations [8–10]. This approach aligns with principles of climate justice and reparations for historical emissions predominantly produced by industrialized countries. However, this perspective often encounters resistance rooted in the developmental aspirations of countries in the Global South, where fossil fuel resources are viewed as vital assets for economic growth and poverty alleviation.

In November 2021, 34 countries, including Germany, pledged to end international fossil fuel financing by 2022 at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow [11,12]. This commitment was met with criticism from Senegal's President Macky Sall, who called it a "fatal blow" to African economies [13]. Senegal, on the brink of becoming a gas exporter, viewed its reserves as essential for economic growth. The situation shifted dramatically with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, triggering a European energy crisis. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz subsequently announced plans to partner with Senegal on gas exports [14].

For activists and civil society organisations in both continents, Europe's interest in African gas was a euphemism for a resource grab that echoed the Age of Imperialism, as well as more recent extractivist catastrophes in Nigeria and Mozambique [15,16]. At the same time, other actors argued that denying Senegal the right to exploit its resources for development constituted another form of neo-colonialism [17]. This case highlights a critical gap in the existing LFFU literature in terms of its insufficient engagement with neo-colonial critiques from developing countries, which argue that discouraging fossil fuel

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exploitation while the Global North continues its own use constitutes a form of neo-colonialism. Conversely, the civil society response represents a burgeoning critique that frames the support of fossil fuel projects by developed nations in the Global South as another manifestation of neo-colonial exploitation.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between these positions by analysing how the concept of neo-colonialism is mobilised in the debate over the Germany-Senegal gas partnership. It examines the contested discourses surrounding the partnership, using it as a case study to explore the broader implications of neo-colonialism in contemporary energy politics. The article examines debates around LFFU in the context of neo-colonialism and environmental justice (see Section 2); introduces the theoretical framework and methodology used (see Section 3) before delineating four discourses (see Section 4) and critically discussing them (see Section 5). We conclude by calling for a reconceptualisation of neo-colonialism within the LFFU framework that emphasises decolonial and climate justice principles, advocating for a more equitable approach to global energy partnerships and challenging existing power dynamics between the Global North and South.

2. Examining debates on LFFU: insights from neo-colonialism and environmental justice scholarship

Drawing on insights from international development studies and political economy, LFFU scholarship examines the proposals, movements, and policies aimed at limiting fossil fuel extraction, as well as the barriers to ending the investment of capital into extraction. However, that most untapped fossil fuel reserves lie in the Global South raises questions over the power asymmetry between the North and South and the legacy of colonialism that are inadequately addressed by these arguments alone [9]. Hence, this section briefly reviews the literature on LFFU scholarship and neo-colonial critique to illustrate the debates and gaps the case study aims to address.

2.1. The case for LFFU

LFFU scholarship takes as its point of departure the limited space for exploiting fossil fuels within a carbon budget which keeps global average temperatures below 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. Since scientific evidence has established that using even a portion of known fossil fuel reserves will breach this limit and, given the uncertainties around negative emissions technologies and the dangers of 'overshoot' pathways [18], the majority of known reserves must remain unexploited [3,4,19]. Earlier LFFU literature focused largely on the issue of 'stranded assets,' examining the risks or lost opportunities associated with fossil fuel assets (real and financial) losing their value earlier than anticipated [8,20,21]. Since then, the literature has grown rapidly, addressing among a range of other themes, carbon lock-in—the ways that business and development practices (often with the aim of responding to climate concerns, such as through investment in hydrogen production) lock in future fossil fuel production and use (e.g., [22,23]); the ways that policy can address LFFU through supply-side interventions (e.g., [24–26]); and exploration of discourses, tactics, and mechanisms of delay which hinder LFFU (e.g., [27,28]). The anticipation of losses associated with LFFU has raised a range of debates over how to equitably LFFU, dovetailing with questions about the right of developing countries to use their resources and develop along the same pathway as the Global North [29,30]. The argument in LFFU scholarship here is twofold. Firstly, scholars point to adjacent literature that has long recognised the need for alternative development pathways for the Global South (e.g., [31]), which should be South-led [9] but financed by the North [32]. This latter point is both a matter of collective survival, as universalising Northern development pathways would spell climate catastrophe, necessitating alternatives [33,34], but also a matter of justice, as industrialized countries are responsible for the majority of global emissions, so alternatives are also justified [35–38]. Secondly, scholars have criticised the tendency to conflate development with fossil fuel exploitation [32,39–41]. The assumption that fossil fuel exploitation will contribute to a country's prosperity is not supported by empirical evidence. For example, the 'resource curse' or 'Dutch disease' holds that the rapid development of extractive sectors can precipitate a decline in other sectors of a national economy [32,39]. Further, fossil fuel rents are not a guaranteed means for a government to reduce poverty. Cases such as Nigeria's oil boom suggest that fossil-fuel resource booms can have extreme negative socio-environmental consequences, such as internal corruption, human rights abuses, and environmental damage [39,42–44]. Meanwhile, Mozambique's LNG projects failed to improve energy access for the 70 % of households that lack electricity in the country [45,46]. These cases are inevitable symptoms of a global capitalist system that by default, disadvantages poorer countries and their poorer populations by encouraging them to 'develop' as export-driven economies supplying an 'imperial core' of wealthy former colonisers [47]. Additionally, within global efforts at decarbonisation, investments into fossil fuel infrastructure and exploitation may not see the returns expected if demand rapidly diminishes [8,48–50].

2.2. The limitations of the LFFU argument

LFFU scholarship engages with the dilemma that developing countries find themselves in as they grapple with immediate development concerns and longer-term climate goals; yet this literature fails to provide a satisfying answer to the critique that developing countries should not be expected restrict their fossil fuel extraction while wealthy countries adopt no such restrictions. If arguments for LFFU cannot adequately address these concerns for developing countries, then they lose credibility since they do little to address entrenched geopolitical power asymmetries. Conversely, the concern voiced by activists and civil society in Senegal and Africa that new European partnerships on fossil fuels represent a neo-colonial plundering of former colonies is an underdeveloped insight in this literature that may strengthen the case for LFFU in developing countries. Taken together, current LFFU scholarship only superficially engages with colonialism (see [32,51]). This calls for an investigation into how individuals, groups, and institutions use '(neo)-colonialism' in the context of new fossil fuel extraction, and whether this is a useful discursive concept that can be more meaningfully incorporated into the supply-side argument against fossil fuel exploitation. This starts with a review of the literature on neo-colonialism.

2.3. Neo-colonialism

Neo- or 'new' colonialism is the continuation or re-emergence of colonial power dynamics between former colonies and colonial powers [52]. Scholars focus on the material, economic exploitation of formerly colonies by powerful countries [53,54]. They point to unequal trade relations, foreign direct investment, and multinational resource extraction as the modern manifestations of colonialism [55]. Such practices entrench the economic dependency of the formerly colonised in the Global South on northern markets [56], which Marxist, dependency, and degrowth scholars conceptualise in terms of an import-dependent 'imperial core' and 'global periphery' of raw material export-oriented markets [57]. Harvey's [58] concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' is also relevant here to account for the way the growth imperative of global capitalism compels investment and extraction in new 'frontiers', such as fossil resources – or even rare earth metals for green energy technologies [59–61] – in the Global South. In short, the relegation of the Global South to the role of supplier of raw materials and primary commodities, while developed nations maintain control over advanced industries and technologies, echoes earlier relationships of colonial exploitation.

2.4. Contesting and co-opting neo-colonialism

The concept of neo-colonialism to describe and critique the relationship between the Global North and South, particularly in the context of sustainability concerns, is not without criticism in the literature. We can broadly distinguish between 'progressive' and 'conservative' critiques of the concept that either argue neo-colonialism does not go far enough to recognise and represent power relations between (post-) colonial nations and peoples today, or that it has gone *too* far as a discursive tool of the West to prevent former colonies from 'developing'. Both critiques share a characterisation of the concept as a western imposition on the South. The progressive critique argues that there is also a neo-colonial aspect to global efforts at development, whereby Western-centric knowledge systems and narratives are mobilised to essentialise the Global South as an Oriental 'other' in a way that motivates modernist interventions [62–64]. The unequal power dynamic between the 'coloniser' and the 'colonised' endures in the static binary between the 'developed' and 'developing' world that legitimises integrating the latter into the 'advanced' civilisation's global neoliberal economy [65–67]. As such, interventions made in the name of development and addressing historical inequalities that manifest in modern 'underdeveloped' states can also embody neo-colonial power relations.

Meanwhile, the conservative critique contests the characterisation of extractivist and development relations between the North and South as neo-colonial [68,69]. Some simply paint it as an inaccurate or insufficiently nuanced critique since it does not account for positive examples of international cooperation between wealthier and poorer states [70,71]. China's initiatives in Rwanda, Senegal, and Mauritius are examples [70,72,73]; however, China as an exception to the neo-colonial critique is contested [74,75]. Other sceptics of neo-colonialism as a critical tool *against* establishing or maintaining North-South extractivist relations foreground the 'right to development' of poorer states. They assert that post-colonial states can reduce poverty and achieve basic necessities such as electricity access by engaging in the economic systems and practices of market-driven cooperation between states that the neo-colonial concept critiques. They bat away the climate implications of this position when such cooperation concerns fossil fuel exports by assuming an ecomodernist perspective that sees global development and climate mitigation as mutually compatible through technological advancements and entrepreneurship [76–79]. Notably for this paper, they 'flip' the neo-colonial critique to argue that the use of the concept to prevent fossil-fuelled development is itself a neo-colonial imposition to "keep the global south poor" [17].

2.5. Key debates and gaps

Evidently, we are dealing with a confusing array of concepts and positions in the debates around fossil fuels and (post)development, climate change and colonialism. The German government's potential gas partnership with Senegal, with its contradictory positions on the role of fossil fuels in North-South relations, stages these debates and reveals two research gaps that this paper will address. First, while there is a strong empirical case for LFFU, this literature unsatisfactorily deals with accusations of hypocrisy against the Global North from developing countries such as Senegal. This is problematic because actors opposed to the aims of LFFU have drawn on this sentiment to characterise opposition from wealthy countries to fossil fuel extraction in the Global South as neo-colonial. Since the LFFU argument relies on *all* countries not exploiting their untapped reserves, it will need to engage with this accusation and the valid concerns from developing countries. Second, there is an inverse accusation of neo-colonialism against the Global North for supporting fossil fuel projects that the paper's case study clearly raises. This represents a promising resolution to the first gap but lacks explicit theorisation in the LFFU literature. Thus, there is an opportunity to resolve the debates over neo-colonialism and fossil fuels by developing a refined concept of neo-colonialism as a powerful tool to bolster the LFFU supply-side argument.

3. Theory, data, and methodology

3.1. Theory: post-structuralism

The approach in this paper is theory-driven, based on the insights of post-structuralism that guide the research design. Post-structuralism problematises the idea of fixed categories that determine human experience [80]. As a theoretical perspective it therefore highlights the role of discourse, language, and representation in shaping the world, and its consequences. The advantage of this approach is that the mapping and subsequent critique of dominant (i.e., hegemonic) ideas/discourse opens them up for contestation and reimagination. This is the core idea within post-structuralism, that social conditions are contingent structures of meaning that, although powerful, are not pre-determined and could be different.

Hegemony is hence an important aspect of the research design; we are using a post-structuralist account of hegemony which allows for the conceptualisation of how different claims, such as the neo-colonial nature of the Germany-Senegalese gas partnership, are constructed, contested, and legitimised. The concept of hegemony has structuralist roots in Gramsci's [81] thinking about power. He argued that certain cultural, moral, and political values – in a word ideology – can become hegemonic in society with the effect of producing consent through the naturalisation of a certain social order. In the post-structuralist canon this was repurposed to emphasise the contingency of hegemony as an always incomplete *process* in the establishment of dominant values [82]. Different ideas and discourses, such as the neo-coloniality of a gas partnership, can be understood as competing or allying for dominance in a fraught and inherently political theatre. Hence, post-structuralism offers us the body of theory to map the different arguments at play from different actors supporting or opposing a German-Senegalese gas partnership, particularly regarding the different ways that neo-colonialism is used as a discursive tool to justify LFFU or digging up

Table 1
Operationalising key concepts.

Concept	Operationalisation
Neo-colonialism	• The **persistence of colonial power relations** today, where former imperial powers and international institutions maintain dominance over the Global South through economic, political, and ideological means. • **Economic dependency** highlights structural subordination. • **Resource nationalism** emphasises state sovereignty over natural resources. • Hence, neo-colonialism: o is both a **structural condition** and discursive **battleground;** o is **not merely an economic reality**, but a **category mobilised in struggles over legitimacy, sovereignty, and environmental governance;** o functions both as a **historical structure** that conditions North-South energy relations, and as a **strategic political tool** deployed to advance competing visions of development and climate action.
Hegemony	• We operationalise **hegemony as the process of contestation** through which certain meanings and discourses become dominant, not simply determined material conditions [82]. • Unlike Gramscian perspectives, which emphasise economic structures as mediating ideological dominance, the **post-structuralist** view highlights how **discursive struggles construct political and social reality**. • Despite its discursive focus, hegemony has **material implications** effecting policy frameworks, investment patterns, and institutional alignments that shape the fossil fuel landscape. • In this study, hegemony helps explain: o how actors attempt **to fix the meaning of neo-colonialism** to support their position in the gas debate; o and how these discourses may (not) translate into **material influence.**

fossil fuels. For clairty given the study's post-structuralist design, we operationalise neo-colonialism and hegemony in Table 1.

3.2. Research design and data

This paper investigates Germany's interest in pursuing a gas partnership with Senegal as a single case study in a broader geopolitical trend whereby European countries have turned to Africa for new fossil fuel supplies following the Russo-Ukrainian War [83]. The proposed partnership centres on the exploitation of Senegal's offshore gas reserves, primarily from the BP-operated Greater Tortue Ahmeyim (GTA) project, which straddles the maritime border between Senegal and Mauritania and contains an estimated 15 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas [84]. The time period of the case study starts on the date of Russia's invasion, 22 February 2022, and ends on 1 June 2023. This period covers Scholz's announcement to "intensively pursue" a gas partnership with Senegal while still allowing for data to be purposively sampled before the announcement to provide context [14].

The nature and extent of Germany's involvement in the project is ambiguous. While Scholz's government has publicly supported collaboration, no formal financial commitments were confirmed during this study's time period, and some German officials from the ruling coalition at the time, when confronted by activists, stated that Germany would not finance new fossil fuel projects with public funds [85,86]. It remained unclear whether Germany's role would involve direct financial backing, state-backed loans, or guarantees such as off-take agreements securing long-term purchases of Senegalese gas and LNG. This ambiguity is itself a key site of discursive contestation in this study. As we have established, hegemony is a process of fixing meaning within a political field. The lack of formalised agreement meant that the gas partnership became an open-ended political space in which different actors competed to define its significance. Each discourse sought to stabilise meaning around the project; however, the fact that no concrete deal was in place at the time of study underscores the contingency of these discourses and the ongoing struggle to consolidate hegemony over the potential project's meaning.

The data sampled within the case represent the positions of the different interlocutors in the 'debate' over the partnership and European-African (fossil) energy ties more broadly. The analysis revealed four distinct positions, corresponding to four interlocutory groups: German Government and European Union; Senegalese Government and African Union; German and European NGOs and activist groups; Senegalese and African NGOs and activist groups. We conducted eight online semi-structured interviews and analysed 93 supplementary texts such as policy documents and government press releases to create a dataset representing the views of these groups and their use of the concept of 'neo-colonialism'. Additionally, we sampled 60 media documents comprised of English-, German-, and French-language articles to provide further direct quotations of relevant interlocutors' positions (see Supplementary materials). While the interviewees and supplementary documentation were purposively sampled, the media reports involved a more systematic sampling strategy using Boolean search terms "Germany" AND "Senegal" AND "gas" in Google News search. We selected the first 20 results from each language search to reduce selection bias. We analysed all data using Atlas.ti software.

The rationale for this multi-source approach was to capture a diverse set of perspectives from actors engaged in the debate, and more practically, to (imperfectly) account for the lack of interviews with Senegalese officials and activists. Given the geographical constraints of the case study, eight interviews represented a feasible sample size while still capturing key viewpoints. The media sources were valuable in documenting public statements from government officials, activist groups, and industry representatives, as well as providing access to press conferences and political events that could not be directly observed. Recognising the potential for media framing bias, we only coded direct quotations from identified actors.

As a note on positionality, in this project, sensitivity to the concept of neo-colonialism is paramount, particularly given the researchers' substantial discretionary interpretative power [87]. This is especially the case for this project as the authors are white Northern researchers without direct ties to Senegal and Africa, which inevitably impacted the coding process. The ability and right of people in the global North to recognise and 'politicise' neo-colonialism came up frequently in interviews, which is why we underline that the purpose here is not to definitively classify the German-Senegalese gas partnership as a neo-colonial exercise. Instead, the aim is to amplify the voices of those who, through their experiences, are positioned to make that claim and to analyse, on a meta level, the political implications (for equitably LFFU) of asserting either that the partnership is neo-colonial or that the converse is true.

Finally, given the post-structuralist theoretical grounding of this research, the notion of methodological 'rigour' differs from positivist standards. Discourse theoretical approaches require recognising that validity rests in the reflexivity and coherence of the researchers' interpretation, rather than in external reproducibility. To this end, we note that although the dataset was purposively designed to capture actors' perspectives across linguistic, geographic, and institutional divides, there remain limitations in representativeness, particularly the underrepresentation of Senegalese activist and governmental voices. While multilingual media sampling partially mitigated this, interpretation was necessarily shaped by both the structure of media discourse and the positionality of the researchers. As such, the findings of this paper are not generalisable in the statistical sense. Rather they are analytically transferable to similar geopolitical and discursive contexts, particularly those involving North-South fossil fuel relations, such as (potential) gas partnerships and energy cooperations in Mozambique, Algeria, Nigeria, and Equatorial Guinea.

3.3. Methodology: post-structural discourse analysis

The method used in this study is a post-structural discourse analysis approach known as the Logics Method [88]. This follows from the post-structuralist theoretical framework, which, by emphasising that meanings are fluid and open to change and contestation [89], shifts the analytical focus towards understanding how discourses shape, stabilise, and challenge social realities, thereby revealing the power dynamics at play. By analysing how discourses are constructed, post-structural discourse analysis (PDA) uncovers underlying power structures and their implications, as well as facilitates reflection on how these might be reimagined or articulated in new ways.

Post-structural discourse theory (PDT), particularly as articulated by Laclau and Mouffe [82], provides the analytical tools for this study.[1] PDT examines the discursive construction of meaning and its implications, focusing on how certain discourses become hegemonic [90]. In this context, a discourse is seen as an arbitrary system of signification that constructs social reality through language, symbols, and practices [91,92]. Hegemony describes how diverse signs—demands, identities, and interests—are articulated into a coherent and inclusive discourse, assigning meaning to a particular project, policy, or problem, in a way that gains broad social support. This hegemonic process involves both the promotion of dominant discourses and the marginalisation of counter-hegemonic ones, with antagonism highlighting inherent conflicts and tensions within and between discourses.

To operationalise PDT, this study employs the Logics Method, developed by Howarth and Glynos [93]. The Logics Method involves an iterative, retroductive cycle of problematising phenomena, identifying logics, and evaluating them from a critical perspective [94]. This approach is particularly useful for uncovering the political, ideological,

[1] For clarity, PDT is a form of PDA, among other possible approaches such as Foucauldian discourse analysis.

and affective work of discourses [92]. The analytical process begins with *problematisation*: identifying and questioning a phenomenon. In this study, the proliferation of neo-colonialism accusations in the context of the German-Senegalese gas partnership is problematised. *Retroduction* follows, inferring possible explanations based on existing theories. This leads to the *identification of logics*—social, political, and fantasmatic—which explain the processes structuring the phenomenon. *Articulation* connects these logics to empirical data and theoretical concepts, culminating in *critique*, which evaluates and challenges the logics and their effects.

Social logics 'delineate' the discourse, showing the elements that make it meaningful by specifying identities, roles, norms, and values. Political logics describe the strategies used to establish, maintain, or challenge discursive orders, involving the articulation and disarticulation of elements to create alliances or oppositions. Fantasmatic logics address the affective dimensions of discourse, explaining why certain discourses are appealing or repelling by revealing the emotional motivations underpinning subject attachments (see Table 2).

4. Findings and analysis

This section presents the results of the PDT method, advancing two steps in the retroductive research cycle: the identification of the different discourses in the case study and their linking with empirical evidence. By analysing the German-Senegalese gas partnership through these logics, the Logics Method illuminates the social (what), political (how), and fantasmatic (why) dimensions of the discourses at play. It reveals how discourses of neo-colonialism are constructed, contested, and mobilised, shedding light on the power dynamics and ideological commitments involved. We identified four discourses in the case study, each with their own interlocutors who spoke for the discourse while defending it against others, and (often overlapping) primary audiences (see Table 3).

4.1. Energy security discourse

The German Government and the European Commission are the primary articulators of the Energy Security discourse. This first discourse claims that alternative sources of gas are critically necessary to Germany and Europe's energy security.

4.1.1. Social logics

The nodal point of this discourse is energy security, which anchors the German Government and European Union's rationale for sourcing gas from Africa. This social logic emphasises that securing alternative gas supplies is essential for maintaining stability and meeting energy demands, especially in the face of geopolitical upheavals such as the Russo-Ukrainian War. For instance:

- "African countries can also contribute to the EU's energy security, today with oil and LNG supplies and in future through green hydrogen and renewable fuels as well as raw materials critical to the green energy transition" [96].
- "In order to replace the missing Russian gas supplies, we must also work with countries where there is the possibility of developing new gas fields" [97].[2]

Table 2
Applying the logics to the case study.

Logics	Key explanatory function	General questions	Empirical questions
Social logics	Identifies the norms and accepted principles within the discourse	**What** norms, rules, or principles define the discourse?	What core assumptions or 'truths' does the discourse rely on? What values are reinforced?
Political logics	Explains how the discourse emerges and solidifies	**How** do these structures form?	How is the discourse constructed and maintained? What associations or links are (de)emphasised?
Fantasmatic logics	Examines what holds the discourse's appeal and motivates adherence	**Why** do these structures 'grip' subjects? What sustains the discourse's influence?	How does the discourse justify its viewpoint? What outcomes does it envision or caution against?

Source: Modified from van Vliet [95].

4.1.2. Political logics

The political logics defend the gas partnership as rational and mutually beneficial, countering accusations of climate damage and neo-colonialism. Scholz emphasises the partnership as a 'win-win' situation to dismiss conflicts that alternative discourses critical of the partnership articulate:

- "[W]ith regard to the LNG issue and gas production here in Senegal … we will continue this very intensively at the technical level, because this is simply something that makes sense to pursue intensively. That's why I simply want to say that it is our common concern to make progress in this area" [14].[2]

To address the climate-related criticisms, another political logic creates a chain of equivalence between the idea of 'climate protection' and 'energy security' by stressing the "transitional nature" [98][3] of gas as a "stopgap" [99][4] and a "bridge with an end" [98][5] to phasing out fossil fuels.

Furthermore, the discourse attempts to address neo-colonial concerns by emphasising partnership and mutual respect between Germany and Senegal in a non-exploitative partnership:

- "Partnership on an equal footing means that the concerns and needs of the [Senegalese] people are taken seriously in Germany. We cannot dictate to countries what they can and cannot do. … [A]ll people aspire to the standard of living that has long prevailed in industrialized countries. In addition, the prosperity of many Western countries is based on imperialism and the exploitation of the African continent. Can we seriously dictate to countries of the Global South that Western prosperity remains a beautiful but unattainable dream?" [85].[6]

This rearticulation attempts to legitimise the partnership by presenting it as a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship, countering accusations of neo-colonialism.

4.1.3. Fantasmatic logics

The primary fantasmatic logic driving the Energy Security discourse is the fear of a prolonged energy crisis exacerbated by the Russo-

[2] German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.
[3] German Government official.
[4] German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.
[5] State Secretary and Special Envoy for International Climate Action Jennifer Lee Morgan.
[6] Member of the Bundestag Karamba Diaby.Dr. Karamba Diaby was a member of the German Bundestag for the Social Democratic Party between 2013 and 2025. He is also a politician of Senegalese origin and a key figure in German development and foreign policy, having served on the Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development. He was also a substitute member of the Committee on International Climate and Energy Policy, and chaired the parliamentary group on West Africa in the 20th Bundestag.

Table 3
Summary of the four discursive arguments for/against a gas partnership between Germany and Senegal.

Deconstructed elements	1. Energy security discourse	2. Climate protection discourse	3. Right to development discourse	4. Don't gas Africa discourse
Core argument	The gas partnership is justified to shore up Europe's energy security.	The gas partnership is not justified as it contradicts Germany and Europe's climate mitigation goals.	The gas partnership is justified because Senegal and Africa have the right to use their natural resources for economic development.	The gas partnership is not justified as it continues exploitative practices rooted in colonial history.
Social logic	German-Senegalese gas cooperation is a rational choice in a competitive geopolitical context.	The partnership contradicts commitments to limit warming to 1.5 °C.	Participation in the global economy enables Senegal and Africa to develop and benefit the way the Global North has.	The partnership perpetuates historical exploitation, reinforcing Afro-European inequalities.
Political logic	The partnership is mutually advantageous, aligned with climate goals, and empowers Senegal.	The gas partnership is *neither* mutually advantageous, nor aligned with climate goals, nor empowers Senegal.	To deny Africa's participation in the fossil energy economy while benefitting from it is European hypocrisy.	The partnership privileges European interests over Senegalese citizens' long-term well-being.
Fantasmatic logic	Russia's invasion makes the partnership both urgent and timely.	The potential of climate breakdown and reversing the energy transition make the partnership undesirable.	The opportunity for energy access and economic growth to enhance well-being in Senegal and Africa makes the partnership appealing.	The partnership, which could instead inspire equitable transformative alternatives for Africa, symbolises a resurgence of exploitative colonial relations amid worsening climate change.
Key interlocutors	German Government; European Union and its associated bodies.	German and European civil society, including activists, NGOs, academics, and thinktanks.	Senegalese Government; African Union and its associated bodies; ideologically sympathetic thinktanks.	Senegalese and African civil society, including activists, NGOs, academics, and thinktanks.
Primary audience	German and European public and policy elite, with a secondary appeal to European energy partners and African elites to legitimise cooperation.	German and European public and policy elite.	Senegalese and African public and international partners, particularly Global North governments and potential funders.	African civil society and youth, with a strategic effort to influence international allies, especially Northern activists and donors, to pressure their own governments.

Source: Modified from van Vliet [95].

Ukrainian War. This fear is leveraged to justify urgent and exceptional measures, such as the gas partnership with Senegal:

- "Russia started the war against Ukraine and all of a sudden half of the black coal imports from Russia came to an end as well as oil and gas imports. So that's why the government decided to look more on a global level and explore new partnerships".[7]

This invocation of fear portrays the partnership as a necessary response to an extraordinary geopolitical situation. Scholz has reinforced this narrative by describing the war as a "turn of an era," justifying policies that diverge from Germany's previous commitments, such as ending foreign fossil fuel funding [100].[2] This logic constructs the partnership with Senegal as a crucial and sensible solution to an urgent and fear-inducing energy crisis.

4.2. Climate protection discourse

The second discourse is articulated by German and European civil society, including activist groups and NGOs, who argue against the potential gas partnership between Germany and Senegal. Their central claim is that the deal is incompatible with Germany and Europe's climate mitigation goals.

4.2.1. Social logics

The structuring principle of the Climate Protection discourse is the Paris Agreement commitment "to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels" [101]. In contrast to the Energy Security discourse, where 'climate protection' is flexible in relation to geopolitical needs, here it is an immutable principle fundamentally incompatible with new fossil fuel exploitation:

- "I think generally if we accept the Paris Agreement goals and the 1.5 degrees limit, and the impact that we're already seeing in Africa and other countries which will only become worse, that's where we refer to scenarios which say we need to leave fossil fuels underground. You probably know the studies, which already say it's not only about not exploring new sites, but even phasing out the sites that are already known. In principle, it doesn't matter where those sites are – whether they're in developing countries or not – from the climate perspective, the problem is the same".[8]

Hence, the discourse appeals to the principle of climate protection as a natural, external authority, making support for new gas exploitation nonsensical. Frequently cited studies, such as the IEA's [19] Special Report calling for "no new oil and gas fields" to be approved for development to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, form part of the social logic, uniting various actors in Europe criticising Germany's gas partnership into a collective discourse.

4.2.2. Political logics

The Climate Protection discourse is offensive, focused on challenging the Energy Security discourse's attempt to secure hegemony. The political logics aim to disarticulate the Energy Security claims by exposing the lack of connection between securing gas supplies and climate protection, generating divisions and ruptures that undermine the governmental narrative. This begins with challenging the necessity and timeliness of the gas partnership:

- "The federal government's plans in Senegal have nothing to do with energy security and sustainable development: a small amount of fossil liquified gas could be exported via the planned terminals from the end of 2023 at the earliest" [102].[9]

[7] Interviewee representing German NGO.

[8] Interviewee representing European NGO.

[9] Federal Managing Director of DUH Sascha Müller-Kraenner.

- "The development of new gas fields abroad cannot solve the short-term gas crisis in Germany" [100].[10]

The discourse also rejects the equivalence between climate protection and importing gas from Senegal, highlighting the contradiction with Germany's commitment to the Glasgow Statement at COP26:

- "A gas project in Senegal would be a clear violation of Glasgow" [103].[11]

These disarticulations aim to reveal the political, contingent nature of the Energy Security discourse, reflecting a governmental position that chooses to engage with Senegal on gas, rather than on rational necessity. The discourse further challenges the mutually beneficial nature of the partnership by engaging with the concept of neo-colonialism, emphasising potential exploitation and the responsibility Germans have for the sources of their energy:

- "[W]e cannot take for granted that this project in the offshore areas of Senegal and Mauritania will help to achieve SDG7[12] in Senegal. We have seen numerous projects all over the world that are made to benefit the big businesses and the big fossil fuel companies and not the poor people in these specific countries … in many countries fossil fuel extraction comes with corruption, bad governance, and other things like violent conflicts. There's so much evidence why it is not good to go into fossil fuel extraction".[7]

After undermining the benefits of importing gas from Senegal for the country's development, the discourse characterises the partnership as exploitative and one-sided, resembling a neo-colonial relationship:

- "This deal, which is intended to help Germany out of its self-inflicted energy crisis, is a sign of a colonial understanding of the world" [103].[11]
- "The EU should not achieve its emission reduction targets and energy security at the expense of outsourcing its energy transition to vulnerable countries, which face the biggest impacts of climate change and might not yet have achieved a switch to energy savings, efficiency and renewable energy for their own domestic needs" [104].[13]

4.2.3. Fantasmatic logics

The Climate Protection discourse is driven by two fantasmatic logics. The first is the fear of climate failure, with warming exceeding the 1.5 or 2 °C targets. The success of the partnership is viewed as antithetical to these goals due to direct emissions from gas production and combustion, and the risk of hindering renewable energy progress:

- "[W]e also for years have been trying to push the EU to focus on renewables, and there's, I think, a bit of concern still that this is now overwhelmed by the deals that are being made around gas imports".[8]

The discourse condemns the partnership, inviting German citizens who care about climate change and inequality to oppose it. However, it also rearticulates some elements into a positive alternative vision for Germany's energy needs and cooperation with Senegal. This second fantasmatic logic centres on the potential for a renewable energy future that addresses Germany's energy crisis and supports Senegal's climate-friendly and socially beneficial development pathway:

- "Germany or the EU could offer different things and ask Senegal 'how can we help you really satisfy your energy needs in terms of translating this to sustainable development?' rather than looking at it as a resource in the ground that we need to get out. And I mean there are other examples: just a week ago, our German Chancellor was in Kenya. And Kenya already has 90% renewable energy in its electricity sector, and they are working on a collective support plan for how China can reach 100%. Of course, that's only the electricity, and Kenya may be less interesting from a resource perspective. But I think if we push these examples, there are alternative ways".[8]

4.3. Right to development discourse

The third discourse, articulated by political elites from the Senegalese Government and the African Union, justifies gas partnerships with European states like Germany by articulating Africa's 'right to develop' in a similar way.

4.3.1. Social logics

The 'right to development' is the nodal point that makes Senegal's enthusiasm for a gas partnership with Germany meaningful. This concept highlights the disparity between the ideal of equal states and the reality of developmental asymmetries between the Global North and South to justify this right as fair and legitimate. It underscores Senegal and other African states' right to use their sovereign resources for development, a right reinforced by Europe's colonial history of wealth accumulation. Macky Sall, who at the time held the positions of President of Senegal and acting President of the African Union, frequently emphasised this:

- "It is legitimate, fair and equitable that Africa, the continent that pollutes the least and lags furthest behind in the industrialization process should exploit its available resources to provide basic energy, improve the competitiveness of its economy and achieve universal access to electricity" [105].[14]
- "In this context, as we [Senegal] are not the biggest polluters because we are not industrialized, it would be unfair, in the search for a solution [to climate change], to prohibit Africa from using its natural resources" [14].[14]

These sentiments reflect the privileged status of the right to development in this discourse, often superseding other considerations such as climate protection. However, they are not constructed as entirely incompatible, as the discourse also posits that gas is necessary for Africa's transition to a climate-friendly economy:

- "Even Europe's energy transition was not possible without gas. Reality is reality" [106].[15]

4.3.2. Political logics

The political logics in this discourse aim to establish the hegemony of the gas partnership based on Senegal and Africa's right to development. It does this through the integration of the element of neo-colonialism into its discursive structure, accusing Europe of hypocrisy in its sudden interest in African gas prompted by the war. African political elites argue that Europe's pivot to African gas is neo-colonial because of the power asymmetry and hypocrisy involved:

- "Africa has an enormous amount of gas. And it's astonishing that big countries are saying: 'We're not going to finance gas anymore'. And at the same time we are told that they want to help us develop, while

[10] German NGOs' open letter.
[11] Fridays for Future activist Luisa Neubauer.
[12] Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
[13] Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe's international climate policy expert Sven Hameling.
[14] Senegalese President Macky Sall.
[15] President of the African Development Bank Akinwumi Adesina.

these countries are using energies that are much more polluting than gas" [107].[14]

- "[It is] absolutely outrageous to say to the Africans that they should basically not look into the options that they have in front of them, and at the same time accelerate the request for gas for Europe because of the Russia-Ukraine war" [106].[16]
- "Just two to three months ago, those same Europeans who were lecturing us on 'no gas' say they'll make a compromise … We are trying to survive. But instead we are being infantilized" [106].[17]

However, the accusation of hypocrisy that is tied to the neo-colonial critique in this discourse reflects elites in Senegal and Africa's aims to secure deeper support for gas exploitation. What is problematised is not gas itself as a driver of climate change, but Europe's moralising stance on gas in Africa which is preventing African and European states from forming equal partnerships. Neo-colonialism, then, describes here the quality of the partnership between Germany and Senegal insofar as it limits Senegal's right to develop using gas.

4.3.3. *Fantasmatic logics*

The principle of the 'right to development' is rooted in the notion of fair entitlement to economic prosperity, mirroring that enjoyed in the Global North. The fantasmatic logic within this discourse conjures the desire for prosperity in the form of basic energy provision for millions in Senegal and Sub-Saharan Africa who currently lack access. This serves as the motivating force for Senegal to assert its right to development through the gas partnership. President Sall's statement in May 2022 epitomises this logic, claiming that Africa should be allowed to:

- "… use its large gas reserves for another 20 or 30 years in order to further its development and to provide electricity to the 600 million people without access to electricity. It would be unfair to stop us from doing that" [108].[14]

Furthermore, the Senegalese Government promises tangible benefits from oil and gas revenues, ensuring that "every citizen benefits from oil and gas revenues, whether in the form of a road, a school or generally improved social well-being" [109]. This promise exemplifies the fantasmatic logic at work, envisioning a future where the revenues from gas exploitation translate into concrete improvements in the lives of Senegalese citizens, thereby strengthening the discourse's appeal and legitimacy.

4.4. *Don't Gas Africa discourse*[18]

The 'Don't Gas Africa' discourse critiques the German-Senegal partnership specifically, and Afro-European fossil energy cooperation more generally. Its primary interlocutors are members of Senegalese and African civil society, including social movements, progressive think tanks, and NGOs.

4.4.1. *Social logics*

Unique among the four discourses mapped, the concept of neo-colonialism dominates the social logic of the 'Don't Gas Africa' discourse. This nodal point relates to Africa's colonial history and the current pivot to the continent for gas by European states. The contention is that the historical relationships of dominance and subjugation persist in the partnership between Germany and Senegal. The discourse challenges the norms, institutions, and practices that justify the gas partnership as a continuation of historical exploitation:

- "Africa has had a long history of colonial extractivism, of the lands and the peoples, which has now transformed into neocolonial, corporate, and impunitive extractivism." [110].
- "I do not anticipate that the power dynamics between Europe and African countries on energy would necessarily change. Africa's main exports to Europe have been commodities and that has not, over decades, changed the leverage of African countries in European markets. Therefore, there's no history to support a suggestion that power dynamics between Europe and those African countries with energy to sell Europe would now change. I therefore suggest the historic structure will persist between the exploiter; Europe, and the exploited; Africa".[19]
- "The scramble for Africa's energy, namely gas, is not a new one. Foreign investments into and extraction of Africa's natural resources have a long history – one that is characterised as more of a curse than beneficial to African communities. New gas investment and the like will only prolong the neocolonial project on the African continent" [15].

A key principle here is fairness, built on Africa's historical subjugation by Europe and relative lack of culpability for the climate crisis. However, unlike the Right to Development discourse, this discourse argues that fairness supports abandoning gas exports due to the disproportionate burdens of extractive relationships:

- "You can't save people in one country and cause problems for people in another country" [111].[20]

4.4.2. *Political logics*

The 'Don't Gas Africa' discourse attempts to establish discursive hegemony by reclaiming the authority to speak for and as 'the Senegalese people', who categorically reject energy cooperation with Germany. This is justified by the inadequacy of the connection between the gas partnership and economic development for citizens, arguing that rather than benefit them it will cause suffering. This is evident in the political logic through the antagonistic distinction that the discourse makes between 'the people' and 'the government' that was not problematised in the Right to Development discourse.

- "We are proud to launch the 'Senegal-Germany People's Alliance for Climate Justice'. If *our governments* are not willing to introduce the end of the fossil fuel era, then it will be *the people* who lead the way [emphasis added]. Our governments are trying to sell this fossil gas deal as a form of crisis prevention. The truth is the opposite: This deal will not solve crises, it will create new ones" [16].

Further, the discourse disarticulates the links made by African elites between 'development' and 'prosperity' through gas in the Right to Development discourse, arguing that fossil fuels are inadequate and hostile to development goals:

- "As the Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate recently pointed out, fossil-fuel development is nothing new for Africa, and it has long failed to reduce energy poverty or bring prosperity. African economies that depend on fossil-fuel exports suffer slower rates of economic growth than those with diversified economies. In Mozambique, foreign companies invested nearly $30 billion in developing offshore natural-gas reserves and LNG capacity. Yet 70% of people still live without access to electricity" [112].

[16] Former head of the UN Economic Commission for Africa Carlos Lopes.
[17] African Union Commissioner for energy and infrastructure Amani Abou-Zeid.
[18] 'Don't Gas Africa' is the name of the main campaign in African civil society against fossil gas exploitation.
[19] Energy policy analyst interviewee.
[20] Senegalese climate activist Yero Sarr.

- "Gas extraction threatens the livelihoods of the people of Senegal, where 1 in 6 people work directly in the fishing sector. Sixty percent of Senegalese jobs are located in the areas where the fossil gas is to be extracted. While 600 million people live in energy poverty across the African continent, most of the Senegalese gas from this project is set to be exported to Europe while only a few in Africa would benefit—making the idea of 'development' through fossil fuels a blatant myth" [16].

The discourse undermines the authority of African elites who support European gas collaboration, suggesting they prioritise short-term interests of European consumers over their own citizens' long-term prosperity. Hence, the discourse suggests that Senegal and Africa face a significant risk of stranded assets and carbon lock-in, not serving the interests of Senegalese citizens:

- "Europe is looking for African countries to provide a stop gap for the next ten years and then what for these countries? They will have sunk a whole lot into developing new resources and they will then be penalised by Europe through the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) for using natural gas. Because even if they are then able to use the resources domestically, countries' trade will be impacted by restrictions that place additional tariffs on carbon-intensive production" [113].[21]
- "International oil companies and government are working closely together, and they're actually thinking that there's a common voice. The African energy ministers think that this is their plan, but in the biggest scheme of things, this is actually Europe's plan" [114].[22]

4.4.3. Fantasmatic logics

The discourse invokes both fear and desire to motivate abandoning the German-Senegal partnership. The fear aspect includes the reinscription of exploitative colonial power dynamics in "another scramble for Africa" [114][22] and exacerbation of the climate crisis, particularly affecting Africa. Additionally, there is concern about local environmental damage, as gas production threatens a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world's largest cold-water reef, impacting Senegal's coastal population dependent on fishing [115].

Conversely, the discourse offers appealing alternatives to an extractive gas partnership, suggesting renewable technologies as a path to energy access, poverty reduction, and prosperity:

- "Africa must invest in distributed renewable-energy systems, which would bring *true prosperity and security to our continent* [emphasis added], rather than poisoning our food, polluting our rivers, and choking our lungs to profit remote shareholders" [112].

The Senegal-Germany People's Alliance [16] also proposes the solution to climate change and loss of livelihoods through "the expansion of renewables and energy efficiency". The discourse reimagines the energy partnership between Germany and Senegal as a non-exploitative, anti-colonial renewable energy partnership, demanding "a just and solely renewable partnership between our countries".

5. Discussion and conclusion

The previous section deconstructed the arguments within the discourses to reveal the political nature of their constructions and the interests of various actors. With the discourses now disassembled, we can directly address the research question and critique the various accusations of neo-colonialism within the case study concerning their implications for equitably LFFU.

5.1. Critique

5.1.1. Neo-colonialism compared

By operationalising neo-colonialism and hegemony (see Section 3.1), the study hypothesised that different interpretations of neo-colonialism are key battlegrounds for discursive dominance in the debate surrounding a potential gas partnership between Germany and Senegal. Our analysis confirms that neo-colonialism is indeed a contested and significant term within the discursive landscape of the case study; each of the four discourses attempt to anchor the meaning of neo-colonialism to support their demands and interests. However, there was one key difference in the discursive mobilisation of neo-colonialism between the discourses; while it was a part of the political logics in the Energy Security, Climate Protection, and Right to Development discourses, it serves as the social logic in the Don't Gas Africa discourse. This distinction is significant as it highlights a more radical and transformative understanding of neo-colonialism within the Don't Gas Africa discourse. Here, identification of neo-colonialism is not just a strategic critique but a guiding principle advocating for fundamentally equitable and sustainable alternatives to the existing practices of gas production and trade between Europe and Africa.

The prioritisation of neo-colonialism within the Don't Gas Africa discourse suggests that achieving climate goals necessitates a precommitment to decolonial struggles for equality. This contrasts with the more conservative approaches of the Energy Security and Right to Development discourses, which align with the interests of German and Senegalese elites. These discourses rationalise the gas partnership as a means to secure energy and development, downplaying the associated environmental and social costs. For instance, the Senegalese Government's assertion of a 'right to development' reflects a desire to partake in the benefits of a global fossil fuel economy that has historically advantaged countries like Germany at the expense of the Global South.

The debate over the definition of neo-colonialism in this case study exposes a deeper conflict over global economic systems and ideologies. It raises the question whether these systems should undergo minimal changes to include developing countries in an unchanged fossil fuel-driven world economy, or whether they should be entirely reimagined given their history of exploitation. As one interlocutor in the Don't Gas Africa discourse eloquently stated: "Africans need access to energy to enjoy lives of dignity. But that is no reason to invest in a system that has already failed – precisely the system from which Europe is trying to wean itself" [112].

5.1.2. From discursive claims to hegemonic potential

After examining the strategic deployment of neo-colonialism across competing discourses, the question remains who these discourses speak to, and what material effects they might produce. This is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of hegemony, which covers not only the articulation of claims but their uptake across social groups through chains of equivalence that resonate within a broader political and cultural milieu. In the context of the potential gas partnership, we can infer that some discourses appear more likely to gain traction than others.[23] For instance, Senegalese governmental actors use the language of energy poverty and the right to development to mobilise post-colonial grievances, thereby strategically positioning fossil fuel development as a matter of sovereign entitlement. In doing so, they reframe climate protection arguments as a neo-colonial imposition. This framing serves a dual function: first, it seeks to shame European states into supporting

[21] Lead author of the African Climate Foundation report 'Natural Gas In Africa Amid A Low-Carbon Energy Transition', Ellen Davies.

[22] Climate Action Network International Renewable Energy Analyst Koaile Monaheng.

[23] This was admittedly not the focus of our analysis, and the authors welcome further research into this aspect of cultural hegemony in arguments for and against LFFU.

fossil fuel ambitions in African through finance, diplomatic endorsement, or offtake agreements; second, it may also function domestically as a populist tool, presenting fossil fuel development as a national struggle for autonomy and redress. While this discourse draws on historically grounded grievances, it risks obscuring that the material benefits of such projects often flow to political and corporate elites (such as the European companies involved in the projects) rather than addressing domestic energy poverty. This dual-address structure grants the discourse a unique hegemonic potential.

A similar ambiguity characterises the Energy Security discourse; while it appeals to an urgent sense of crisis and operates through dominant political and economic institutions, its credibility partly depends on a strategically compressed temporal framing. The notion of gas as a 'bridge fuel' is positioned as a pragmatic response to short-term disruption yet obscures the longer-term infrastructural lock-in and geopolitical entrenchment entailed by new fossil fuel investments, especially when channelled through overseas partnerships. It thus hinges on a contradiction that its rival Climate Protection discourse directly assaults, undermining its hegemonic traction in Germany and Europe.

Conversely, the 'Don't Gas Africa' discourse, though powerful in its normative critique, appears less embedded in dominant political institutions and has fewer material mechanisms through which to influence policy. Its relative lack of traction may also reflect the fragmented discourse spaces in which it operates – social media, civil society reports, and activist commentary – in contrast to the formal political avenues that amplify state or elite narratives. This raises important questions about discursive efficacy and reach, and whether LFFU advocacy can develop hegemonic appeal without addressing the material grievances that elites strategically reference.

5.1.3. Towards a new hegemony for LFFU?

What does this mean for the goal of equitably LFFU? The point of this analysis is not to examine the different discourses to deduce which is the 'best'. Rather, the strength of the post-structural method is to dissolve the boundaries between the discourses to reveal the political scaffolding that props up and makes meaningful concepts such as neo-colonialism, and how they are made to talk for people and appeal to certain political projects, and hence also how they might be re-imagined to motivate new political projects built around the goals of LFFU. This is where the concept of hegemony really becomes useful, as it allows us to understand discourses strategically given their nature as political structures that vie for dominance. The focus and question then become: *how could neo-colonialism be approached in arguments for LFFU in a way that would strengthen the appeal and persuasiveness of LFFU discourse? What changes would this imply about the way that arguments for LFFU are articulated, and the kinds of political projects that it advocates for?*

In this context, the comparison of the ways that neo-colonialism is defined in the case study, and the insight that there is a significant qualitative difference between the Don't Gas Africa's position and the rest, plausibly indicates that LFFU arguments will struggle for discursive dominance if they underdevelop the links between new fossil fuel development and neo-colonialism as the Don't Gas Africa discourse defines these. The analysis has also shown the vulnerability of arguments, currently reflected in the LFFU argument and the climate protection discourse, that foreground climate concerns as the immutable line that cannot be crossed, as they are vulnerable to critiques as instantiated in the Right to Development discourse that capitalise on accusations of European hypocrisy. This political logic is compelling and thus risks being co-opted by elites who may use legitimate grievances about European hypocrisy to justify ongoing fossil fuel extraction without addressing underlying inequalities. For instance, anti-gay laws in Uganda are being passed with the discursive justification that gay liberation represents a form of neo-colonialism, in a way that ignores Africa's history of sexual diversity, and the historical role colonial law played in enacting anti-gay legislation [116].

What this suggests then is the need for a new understanding of neo-colonialism to come forward in LFFU arguments so that they can appeal to what these elites are trying to capitalise on, and a demand common to all the discourses – equal partnerships between the North and South. Both the Right to Development and Don't Gas Africa discourses criticise European hypocrisy, which demands rapid decarbonisation from African countries while seeking short-term gas solutions. By reconciling these concerns, a new articulation of neo-colonialism can emerge, one that supports transformative political change. Our minimal suggestion based on the analysis in this case study is that LFFU arguments should place the inseparability of decolonisation and climate protection at their core. This challenges the hegemony of discourses similar to the Energy Security and Right to Development discourses by asserting that meaningful climate action cannot occur without addressing neo-colonial power dynamics, which are themselves intimately tied up with fossil fuel extraction. This is of course nothing new for anti-colonial and climate justice activists in Africa and the Global South; what we advocate here is more of a 'decolonisation' of LFFU arguments themselves, which must expand maximally to better centre what comrades in the South have been saying. Such an articulation, this analysis indicates, may garner support for reimagining Global North-South relations to promote equitable and sustainable energy partnerships, in that order.

This has practical implications for climate strategy in the Global North. As this analysis has shown, LFFU arguments are vulnerable to discursive co-option when they foreground carbon metrics while neglecting histories of extraction and inequality. To combat this, there is a need for greater discursive reflexivity among North climate advocates to recognise how appeals to urgency and technocratic rationality can unwittingly reinforce elite-led fossil expansion in the Global South. This means not only amplifying Southern climate justice voices but also shifting the framing of campaigns to challenge the legitimacy of 'bridge fuel' narratives. For example, campaigns in Europe could scrutinise mechanisms like the EU CBAM, which currently risks penalising African countries for carbon-intensive exports without offering meaningful avenues for differentiated treatment, such as exemption or redistributive climate finance. The CBAM's uniform carbon pricing fails to account for historical responsibility or development needs, raising questions about equity in trade-linked decarbonisation regimes [117]. Without such strategic shifts, LFFU risks being undermined by the very discourses it seeks to contest.

5.2. Conclusion

This study investigated the accusations of neo-colonialism in the context of the potential gas partnership between Germany and Senegal to contribute to the goal of equitably LFFU. Theoretically, it advances LFFU scholarship by offering a nuanced understanding of neo-colonialism's role in this context. By critiquing European hypocrisy and emphasising decolonial struggles, we propose a stronger, more inclusive argument for LFFU. This redefined concept of neo-colonialism can better resist both European and African elites' arguments for continued fossil fuel projects, providing a more effective basis for political mobilisation against them. With its focus on the Germany-Senegal case, the study's findings are not fully generalisable. Hence, future research should include other African-European or 'former coloniser-former colonised' energy relationships to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, deeper engagement with activists and civil society in affected regions can enrich the reconceptualisation of neo-colonialism. Finally, while our post-structural research design allowed us to home the analysis in on the discursive constructions of neo-colonialism, we acknowledge that alternative theoretical approaches, such as a Gramscian analysis, would allow researchers to examine how these discourses are mediated through and shaped by material social conditions. This limitation creates opportunities for future research that could better tease out the material implications of the dialectal relationship between the discursive struggles we identify and the underlying political

economy of fossil fuel development.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Luc van Vliet: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Janina Herzog-Hawelka:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Clara McDonnell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Ethics statement

This research was conducted under the CLIFF (Climate Change and Fossil Fuels project) and was approved by the Ethics Advisory Board of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (Approval No 15449) at the University of Amsterdam. Ethical protocols, including pseudonymisation, anonymisation, encryption, and informed consent, were rigorously followed to protect participant confidentiality. Interviews involved experts from think tanks, government, NGOs, and activist groups, with special care taken to minimise risk, especially for activists. Data were securely stored, and all personal identifiers removed post-analysis. The study adhered to the CLIFF project's ethics guidelines, including the principles of risk minimisation and no harm.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2025.104121.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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