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Time to choose, Malaysia

The Star, Malaysia



Planetary Health Matters

By Jemilah Mahmood

AT the World Economic Forum in Davos last month I spoke on a panel alongside climate, economic, and health experts in a session titled “LNG: A Dead End”.

We unanimously agreed on one key point: liquefied natural gas (or LNG) is, indeed, a dead end. The world is teetering on the edge of a climate catastrophe. The goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C – the red line for climate safety – is at serious risk of being permanently crossed. The question is no longer whether we must transition away from fossil fuels, nor when. That transition is happening now, driven by economic shifts, technological advancements, and public pressure. And yet, both fascinatingly and horrifyingly, the fossil fuel industry and the states that depend on it continue to resist the inevitable, delaying action and placing profit above human health and, potentially, survival.

The economic arguments against fossil fuels are no longer theoretical – they are playing out in real time. By 2036, as much as US\$1.4 trillion (RM6.208 trillion) in fossil fuel assets could become stranded due to declining global demand for oil and gas. The logic of continued investment in LNG infrastructure is crumbling, with global projects facing mounting opposition and declining investor confidence.

Renewable energy solutions are outpacing fossil fuels not only in environmental benefits but also in cost and efficiency. LNG is thus uncompetitive compared with renewable energy technologies. It is unreliable relative to domestically sourced, low-cost renewables. Moreover, it is failing to displace coal in many emerging markets.

While LNG is often touted as a cleaner alternative to coal, its methane emissions make it a major contributor to climate change. So despite what the industry may tell us, relying on LNG is a pathway to energy insecurity, not energy security.

Markets including Europe, Japan, and South Korea – which currently account for half of the global market – are rapidly reducing their reliance on LNG. Consequently, the industry is searching for buyers in emerging markets, misleadingly framing LNG as clean, affordable, and reliable.

PETRONAS president Tengku Muhammad Taufik recently spoke about “rightsizing” the company, acknowledging global challenges and the need to diversify and “green” its business. This is exactly what is needed: pivoting towards a leadership role in the renewable sector rather than persisting in extracting every last drop of oil and gas, supported by states that haven’t yet done the maths.

Yet even as it promotes its green ambitions, our national oil company continues to invest heavily in LNG infrastructure, framing it as a “transition fuel” despite mounting evidence that LNG is neither clean nor economically viable in the long run. This reluctance to adapt not only threatens the climate but also represents a dangerous gamble for investors, policy-makers, and economies tied to these outdated energy sources.



LNG is often touted as a cleaner alternative to coal – but its methane emissions complicate that claim. – 123rf

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Will we be a leader in the regional energy transition, demanding rapid shifts from our energy companies, or will we remain shackled to our fossil fuel-dependent past?

Still stuck on LNG?

Governments across the world are responding to the climate crisis with stricter net-zero regulations that will have major implications for the fossil fuel industry. The European Union’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is set to penalise high-emission imports, making fossil fuel-based exports less competitive.

Public opinion is also shifting. Despite massive investments in propaganda by fossil fuel companies, surveys consistently show growing global support for renewable energy and a willingness among people to shift their lifestyles to meet climate goals.

Malaysia is no exception. Our government has set ambitious renewable energy targets, aiming to generate 70% of our electricity from renewables by 2050. Solar energy is already booming, and initiatives such as the Large-Scale Solar programme are pushing our nation towards cleaner energy sources.

The argument that fossil fuels are indispensable is increasingly untenable. Renewable energy is now the most affordable energy source in many parts of the world. In Malaysia, the cost of solar photovoltaic technology has plummeted by 80% over the past decade, making it a far more viable option than coal or gas. Advances in battery storage and the electrification of transport mean that the barriers to a clean energy transition are rapidly disappearing.

And yet, national and state oil companies continue to bet on LNG, attempting to lock Malaysia into continued fossil fuel dependence.

Malaysia’s leadership in South-East Asia’s renewable transition is being undermined by these conflicting strategies.

Beyond economic and technological considerations, there is an undeniable human cost. Air pollution, largely from fossil fuel combustion, is responsible for an estimated 8.7 million deaths worldwide each year.

In Malaysia, rising healthcare costs due to pollution-related illnesses and heat-related conditions are already a burden on the economy. The indirect costs – lost productivity, increased healthcare expenses, and climate-related disasters – amount to billions annually.

The Petroleum Development Act of 1974 gives PETRONAS exclusive control over Malaysia’s fossil fuels in exchange for annual payments to the government, averaging around RM40bil. However, when factoring in fossil fuel-related air pollution costs – estimated at between RM11.7bil and RM28bil a year – along with 10,000 premature deaths and extensive health and environmental damage, the returns seem far less attractive. This raises a crucial question: is this really a fair trade-off?

The science is clear

We’re already experiencing the devastating effects of climate change, from worsening floods to extreme heat waves. The push for LNG expansion, despite our climate commitments, is not only a contradiction but negatively affects future generations.

Despite the grim warnings, the energy transition presents immense opportunities. The fossil fuel industry has unparalleled expertise in large-scale infrastructure, logistics, and engineering – skills that are critical to the expansion of renewable energy. Offshore wind, geothermal energy, and carbon capture initiatives all require the kind of technical

expertise that currently resides within fossil fuel companies.

Investments in clean energy are projected to yield significant economic benefits. As Malaysia assumes Asean leadership in 2025, it has a pivotal opportunity to drive the region’s energy transition through the Asean Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation. Malaysia has the potential to be a regional leader in green energy, but this will only be realised if our leaders commit to truly aligning policies with ambitious climate goals.

At the same time, the fossil fuel industry must acknowledge its role in the crisis and take decisive action – half-hearted nods to renewables are no longer sufficient. The industry faces a choice: be part of the solution, actively supporting Malaysia’s efforts to accelerate both its domestic and Asean’s clean energy transition, or be left behind as the world moves forward without it.

Planetary boundaries are non-negotiable. The science is clear: the tipping points for ecosystems and climate systems cannot be endlessly debated. We have run out of time for incremental change. The Earth Commission recently warned that we have only until the end of this decade to prevent crossing dangerous tipping points, which may cascade or become irreversible.

What we need now is bold leadership, a clear transition strategy, and accountability from the industries that have profited from environmental destruction for far too long.

The fossil fuel industry still has a chance to shape the future – but only if it acts now, not defensively, but constructively. The time has come for Malaysia to choose: will we be a leader in the global energy transition, demanding rapid shifts from our energy companies, or will we remain shackled to our fossil fuel-dependent past? It is my hope that these arguments are being seriously considered by our leaders.

Every minute matters in the fight to stop the unnecessary loss of life caused by fossil fuels.

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