



Understanding the global discourse struggle surrounding the East African Crude Oil Pipeline project and its specific local characteristics

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Abstract

This research work examined the global discourse struggle surrounding the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project and its specific local characteristics. Drawing on Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be", Hajer's conceptual framework regarding dimensions of discourse struggle and storylines, and Adger's global environmental discourses approach, I conducted a discourse analysis of the global discourse of the "Stop EACOP" coalition as well as the discourse of the EACOP supporters. Research was primarily conducted on written data from the Stop EACOP and EACOP websites and social media accounts. The discourse analysis revealed an opposition between the Stop EACOP global discourse built around a "high risk, low reward" narrative and the EACOP discourse constructed on a "low risk, high reward" one. Each actor is developing their discourse surrounding Hajer's three dimensions of discourse struggle (credibility, acceptability and trust) through storylines supporting their main position. Subsequently, semi structured qualitative interviews were conducted with members of the Stop EACOP coalition in order to outline the diversity of discourses within the movement and the influence of the local political context on such discourses. While the global discourse aims to reach a broad variety of supporters, the diversity of NGOs taking part in the movement enable more tailored communication to foster mobilisation. Local NGOs are described as key members of the coalition, documenting the impacts of the pipeline project on the field while taking a leading role in the coalition's organisational process in order to prevent harmful consequences for the frontliners. The repressive political context in Uganda appears as a significant factor forcing local NGOs to adopt less confrontational discourses and strategies, redirecting their actions towards the enablers of the project worldwide, in order to stay active and protect their members from political repression.

Keywords: discourse analysis, oil, EACOP, Uganda, NGO, political context

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
SLU	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
EACOP	East African Crude Oil Pipeline
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
UNOC	Uganda National Oil Company
TPDC	Tanzania Petroleum Development Corporation
ESIA	Environment and Social Impact Assessments
Mboe/d	Million-barrel oil equivalent per day
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
WPR	What's the problem represented to be

1. Introduction

The East African Crude Oil Pipeline, better known as EACOP, is a 1443 km heated oil pipeline project conducted and majority owned by the French oil company TotalEnergies. The purpose of the pipeline is to export crude oil from Uganda's oil fields of the Lake Albert region to the Port of Tanga in Tanzania. Since the project started in 2017, many concerns have been raised related to the environmental and social impact of the project, including the European parliament condemning the consequences of the project on human rights in Uganda and Tanzania (Larrouturou 2022). In addition, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on issues related to climate, biodiversity, and human rights protection have shown their opposition to the pipeline since the early phases of the project. These organisations are spread worldwide but especially located in countries closely related to the pipeline project like Uganda, Tanzania and France to a lower extent. To mobilise around converging interests, they regrouped under the “Stop EACOP” coalition, structuring the protest actions and communication against the pipeline project. Building a coalition of several international NGOs appears here as a great opportunity to amplify the reach of the actions and communication that each organisation would probably not have been able to have individually. However, such collaboration also comes with many organisational and strategic challenges that need to be addressed.

This thesis explores how a global struggle against oil exploitation through Stop EACOP unites national and international struggles under one banner, and in what ways the international struggle aligns with and provides support to the local struggle against the pipeline. I study this through a discourse analysis of the Stop EACOP coalition global discourse and its specific local characteristics. I also study the discourse supporting EACOP, supported by oil companies and the Ugandan government amongst others, in order to understand the discourse that the Stop EACOP coalition mobilises against. According to Bacchi (2009) a discourse is also shaped by its material reality, and it has lived effects for people impacted by the discourse. To understand the differences between the international and local Ugandan discourse, and how material realities in Uganda impact the local discourse I therefore pay specific attention to how the local political context in Uganda (Kakuba 2021; Byaruhanga 2025) as well as the international geopolitical context impact the different discourses and communication strategies of NGOs and project stakeholders.

I draw on publicly available data from websites and semi structured interviews with key informants from different NGOs participating in the Stop EACOP movement.

2. Background

2.1 The history and current status of the EACOP

In 2006, commercial oil and gas resources were confirmed in Uganda (Patey 2015) in an area surrounding the lake Albert in the north west of the country. Proven oil reserves are exceeding 6.5 billion barrels, of which approximately 2.2 billion barrels are recoverable. This confirmation has raised the interest of international oil companies to extract and commercialise oil in Uganda; the first interested corporation being TotalEnergies (French multinational oil and gas company) and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) as well as the Uganda National Oil Company (UNOC) and Tanzania Petroleum Development Corporation (TPDC).

In order to commercialise Ugandan oil, a physical connection has to be created between the Lake Albert oilfields and a harbour along the Indian ocean where oil can be filled into tankers and exported to clients all around the world. As Uganda doesn't have direct access to the Indian ocean, the idea of a collaboration with Tanzania has emerged and materialised in the East African Crude Oil Pipeline project (EACOP).

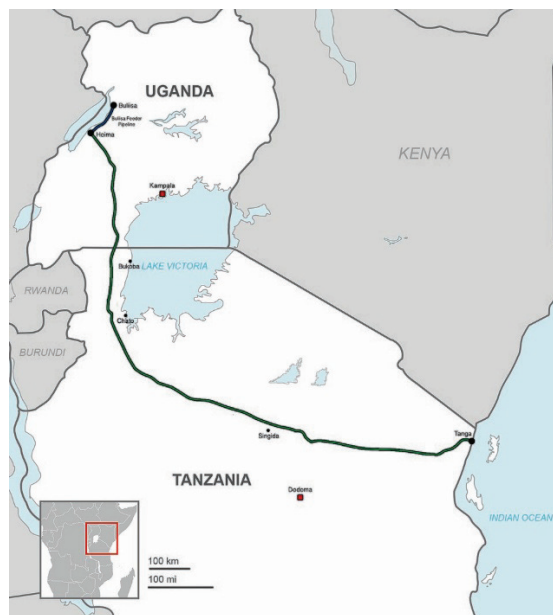


Figure 1: Map of East African Crude Oil Pipeline

Map created by Sputnik and uploaded on EACOP Wikipedia page under creative common license: [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

The EACOP project is a 1 443 km heated (in order to maintain the thick Ugandan oil fluid enough to be transported) and buried oil pipeline connecting Ugandan Lake Albert oil fields to the port of Tanga in Tanzania. The decision of the governments

of Uganda and Tanzania to develop the pipeline was announced in May 2017 with the signature of the Intergovernmental agreement, as a foundation for their collaboration. In 2019 and 2020, TotalEnergies, which is positioned as the main foreign actor involved in the exploitation of the oilfield and the construction of the pipeline, commissioned Environment and Social Impact Assessments (ESIA) in order to identify and assess the environmental, social and sanitary effects of the project and has implemented some measures to mitigate and avoid the expected harmful effects in Uganda and Tanzania. The ESIA reports were conducted by external consultants for the account of TotalEnergies: JSB (France) & COWI (Denmark) for Tanzania and Eco & Partner (Uganda) for Uganda. TotalEnergies also mentioned that RSK (UK) has been collaborating in the elaboration of ESIA in both countries. The reports were published in August 2019 for the Tanzanian section and February 2020 for the Ugandan section and were approved by the respective governments, on the 29th of November 2019 in Tanzania and on the 30th of November 2020 in Uganda. The approval of the ESIA reports led to the signature of the Host government agreement (HGA) the 1st of April 2021 in Uganda and the 20th of May 2021 in Tanzania, which established the legal and commercial framework of the EACOP project. On the 1st of February 2022 the East African Crude Oil Company Ltd (EACOP Ltd) was officially established. The property of this company is defined by the shareholders agreement as outlined in Table 1.

Rank	Name of owner	Ownership (%)
1	TotalEnergies	62
2	China National Offshore Oil Corporation	8
3	Uganda National Pipeline Company	15
4	Tanzania Petroleum Development Corporation	15
	Total	100

Table 1: Shareholders of EACOP Ltd

In January 2023 the construction license was granted to the EACOP Ltd to start the development of the pipeline.

In response to the development of the EACOP project, concerns have been raised about the risks of such infrastructure in the lake Albert region as well as along the entire route of the pipeline. Many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Uganda, Tanzania and all around the world have been opposing this project pointing at the risks for climate, biodiversity and local populations. These organisations, regrouped under the “Stop EACOP” coalition, have led different protests and actions since 2019. Among the most important actions one can mention the pressure campaign organised to prevent banks, insurers and financial actors to support the EACOP project. Other actions such as petition signing and street protests have also been conducted. The “Stop EACOP” movement is thus a

collaborative campaign where many different NGOs are working and supporting each other in order to get their message through and increase visibility of their actions and revendications on the local and international stage.

In order to better understand the opposition against the EACOP project it is also important to take a closer look to the history of the main shareholder of the project: the French multinational oil and gas company TotalEnergies. TotalEnergies was founded in 1924 and is one of today's seven "supermajor" oil companies (also mentioned as "Big Oil"). The net profits of the company raised to 13 billion USD in 2025. TotalEnergies activities cover the entire oil and gas chain from the extraction, transportation, refining to power generation. TotalEnergies has conducted oil exploration worldwide since oil came to be seen as a vital resource for France sovereignty at the creation of the company after World War I.

From 1946, a major part of oil exploration and extraction conducted by TotalEnergies took place on the African continent and more precisely in Algeria, then a French colony. Even after the independence of Algeria and other African countries where TotalEnergies had projects going on, the influence of French extractive companies on the continent remained significant. Research works described TotalEnergies as, still nowadays, working for the interest of the French State, exploiting Africa's resources to concentrate them in Europe (Llavero-Pasquina et al. 2024). TotalEnergies and the French State are thus reproducing colonial relationship of power in Africa. This neocolonial relationship is more blatant in former French colonies in Africa, where most of the conflicts surrounding resources exploitation are happening (Cantoni et al. 2025), but it happens also in other African countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, former British colonies. Trade relations between France multinational companies and Africa are therefore often accompanied by huge economic and environmental imbalances that favour France and fuel environmental and social conflicts (Cantoni et al. 2025).

Regarding the impact of TotalEnergies on climate change, the company is facing multiple critiques about their real commitment to reduce the greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions of company's activities. Research has shown that the company was aware of potential disastrous impacts of oil & gas activities on global warming by 1971 and then promoted doubt regarding the scientific basis of global warming research up to the late 1990s (Bonneuil et al. 2021). Later the company publicly accepted the scientific evidence of climate change but in the meantime worked at weakening and delaying policies that aimed to restrain the use of fossil fuel (Bonneuil et al. 2021). In 2021, the company name changed from "Total" to "TotalEnergies" illustrates the intended focus of the communication on the investments on renewable energy production. However, in 2025 the company still produced 2,5 Mboe/d and intend to increase the production by 3% per year until 2030. Regarding the investments, among the 17 G\$ invested by the company in 2025, only 3,5 G\$ (20%) were allocated to low carbon energies projects

(TotalEnergies 2026). Oil and gas is thus still a major part of TotalEnergies activities, despite the communication focused on renewable energy production, which has led the company being found guilty of greenwashing (by the Paris court of justice on the 23rd of October 2025 (*TotalEnergies misleading commercial practices* 2025)).

2.2 The political history of Uganda

In order to have a clearer understanding of the research work, a presentation of Ugandan historical and political background is essential. The Republic of Uganda is a landlocked country in East Africa with a population of around 46 million inhabitants. The country was under British rule from late 19th century (establishment of the Protectorate of Uganda in 1894) until independence in 1962. The years following the independence were marked by numerous conflicts and crises (1966 Mengo crisis, 1971 Idi Amin's military coup, 1980-1986 Ugandan Bush war). Yoweri Museveni took power at the end of the civil war in 1986 and has remained in office ever since. The regime is considered as a dictatorship by many countries and observers worldwide (*Human rights in Uganda* 2024). In this political context, voices of the opposition, as well as freedom of press, have been strongly reprimed and restricted for many years, the repression being even more intense during presidential election periods as highlighted in previous academic research (Kakuba 2021). This last research work outlined how the National Resistance Movement (NRM), political party in power in Uganda, committed “*human rights abuse such as torture, denial of political gatherings, wrongful arrest, and detention, intimidation, and killings*” using state institutions to repress opposition and remain in power (Kakuba 2021). In this context, some civil society organisations (CSOs) in Uganda strategically have adapted their communication and actions moving to less confrontational methods in order to remain active despite the political threats they are facing (Byaruhanga 2025). In relation to this repressive political context, many concerns have been raised worldwide regarding human rights abuses surrounding the EACOP project, up to the European parliament in 2022 (Larrouturou 2022).

2.3 Review of previous academic research on EACOP

Due to the international scale of the project and opposition, previous research has been conducted surrounding the EACOP case. Some of this work focuses closely on the EACOP project (Barlow 2020; Hill et al. 2021; Ogwang & Vanclay 2021; Cannon & Mogaka 2022; Martin 2023) while others focus more broadly on surrounding extractivism or multinational energy infrastructures (Larsen et al. 2024; Müller 2025). Some of the research has focused on the gendered aspects of EACOP and similar extractive projects. These works point out the existing gaps in

the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment report (ESIA) in terms of how impacts of the project are differently affecting people depending on their gender (Hill et al. 2021). For example, women expelled from their land because of the track of the pipeline are less likely to receive financial compensations since it is only men who can officially own a land in Uganda (2021). Using an intersectional decolonial perspective, some scholars are going further, connecting the gendered impacts of extractivism with the local political and historical context that allows and exacerbate these impacts (Müller 2025). Both Hill et al (2021) and Müller (2025) are advocating for a better inclusion of gendered impacts in the impact assessment of such extractive projects. An interesting perspective is offered by Müller (2025) using the concept of “sacrifice zone” (Lerner 2010; Scott 2010; Scott & Smith 2017) defined as an area where the environmental burden related to pollution, contamination, heavy industry and heavy waste, are mostly supported by low income and racialized communities. This concept helps connecting the gendered relations of power with other systems of oppression. Other scholars conducted an in-depth case study of the EACOP project combining many different methods (including individual and group interviews, participant observation, document analysis) to give an as complete as possible overview of the different positions towards the project (Ogwang & Vanclay 2021). This work outlines the diversity of positions towards EACOP coexisting at the local scale: the pipeline is seen as potentially beneficial for local economy by many even if there is also a broad understanding of the risk of “boom and bust”, understood here as an increased economic activity and job opportunities during the construction phase of the pipeline followed by a quick drop in employment after the construction is finished. Another approach explored in previous literature is to focus on the locations where the project is “financed, planned, contested, transformed”. By outlining the different places where the project is developed (not only the physical location where the pipeline is constructed), the authors reveal the asymmetrical power relations, “energy colonialism” and ignored affected publics (Larsen et al. 2024). This later concept represents the idea that developers of energy infrastructures are often ignoring the opposition of affected publics. Another interesting insight from this study is the different nature of the critique from organisations opposing EACOP depending on the location of the organisation: critique of “oil colonialism” or “corporate colonialism” comes mainly from European and American based organisations while local Ugandan and Tanzanian organisations are focusing the critiques on their own politicians and energy policies. I found this work very interesting and it further developed my interest in understanding the local vs global dynamics within the Stop EACOP movement. This work also shaped my reflection about the researcher positioning in social science, highlighting how the background and interests of the author influence the focus of the research. This reflection on positionality will be further elaborated in a dedicated section of the thesis.

3. Research problem

3.1 Research significance

As stated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their 2022 report on climate change mitigation (*AR6 Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change — IPCC 2022*), no new fossil fuel extraction project should be open to limit global warming well under 2°C and maintain a liveable climate on most parts of the planet. However, new oil extraction projects are still arising all around the world since many countries rely deeply on this resource to run their economic system. In addition to releasing significant amounts of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, these oil fields are directly impacting the environment and population living close to the extraction site.

Acknowledging the fact that governments and oil corporations are not acting in a manner commensurate with the gravity of the situation, environmental activists are trying to oppose these oil projects by raising public awareness and organising actions to prevent the project from going ahead. In Uganda, this opposition happens in an authoritarian political context that increases the risks of repressions for activists. As stated by Maier & Gilbert (2023), in relation to political Corporate Social Responsibility (Political CSR), little attention has been paid to the political context in which the civil society demands for public deliberation takes place, especially in non-democratic contexts. It is nevertheless important for understanding how activists and affected populations can make their voices heard, opposing big oil projects, in an authoritarian context.

My thesis aims to understand to what extent coalitions of international NGOs can help preventing the development of extractive projects lead by multinational oil companies in an authoritarian political context. I am investigating how local environmental organisations, as well as associated environmental organisations worldwide, are shaping a global discourse in opposition to the one held by the oil corporation and supporting governments. The overarching aim of the study is to understand the global discourse struggle of the Stop EACOP activists' coalition facing the development of the EACOP project, exploring how the authoritarian political context, relations between local and international activists, the Ugandan government and multinational oil corporations are impacting the communication surrounding this project.

Regarding the philosophical standpoint of this research work, it is located between a constructivist and transformative worldview (Creswell 2018). My work aligns with a constructivist worldview since it aims to understand the EACOP discourse struggle between NGOs and oil company. I also adhere to a transformative worldview since the research is also aiming to provide useful

insights that could help empower marginalized populations impacted by the pipeline project.

The field of study I am investigating is focused on discourse analysis of communication surrounding environmental issues. Previous research has been conducted on the environmental and social impacts of the EACOP project at a local and national scale (Hill et al. 2021; Ogwang & Vanclay 2021; Müller 2025), but little research has explored the discourse struggle between environmental NGOs and oil corporations on this specific case. The articulation of several communication strategies and discourses at a local and global scale is also a field that needs to be further explored, especially taking into consideration the impact of the local political context in Uganda as suggested by Adger (2001) and Maier & Gilbert (2023).

3.2 Aim and objectives of the research

As mentioned above, the overarching aim of the study is to understand the global discourse struggle between the Stop EACOP activists' coalition and the EACOP supporters, exploring how the authoritarian political context, relations between local and international activists, the Ugandan government and multinational oil corporations are impacting the communication surrounding this project.

In order to reach the aim of the study, detailed objectives are the following:

- Outline the global discourse of the Stop EACOP coalition;
- Outline the discourse of the EACOP oil corporation for the purpose of understanding the arguments that the NGOs are positioning themselves against;
- Outline the local Ugandan discourse against EACOP
- Compare the global and local discourses against EACOP to understand how they support or contradict each other;
- Through interviews with key-informants understand how representatives of NGOs perceive the global discourse of the movement as well as the local nuances of this global discourse;
- By engaging with secondary literature on the local political context and the international political climate, outline some of the reasons leading to the creation and evolution of the current discursive struggle surrounding the EACOP project.

In summary, the objectives are to outline the underlying discourses developed by both the activists (locally and internationally) and oil corporation and its supporters in order to highlight the similarities and differences between them. Once these discourses have been outlined, a deeper analysis is conducted to understand how the local political context and international political climate influence the discourse struggle.

4. Theoretical framework

This research project is a qualitative study mainly supported by discourse analysis theory. I developed an analytical framework based on different discourse analysis schools of thought. The framework is designed to understand the global discourse of the Stop EACOP movement, and the discourse of the oil company which Stop EACOP is positioning itself against. I also look at local Ugandan variants of the global Stop EACOP discourse. Through engaging with literature about the Ugandan political context, I try to understand the origins of the specificities between the local and global discourses.

First, in order to use theory about discourse analysis, we have to define what a discourse is. In this study I used the definition of discourse described by Hajer (Hajer 1997:44) as a “*specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities.*” This definition is built upon a social constructivist approach which understand reality not as unique and external to actors but as something created and understood through social interaction. Discourse can thus be seen as a social creation, always evolving and redefined which work as a lens to understand physical and social realities.

As my research topic focuses on communication strategies and underlying discourses I first use Bacchi’s (2009) What’s the problem represented to be (WPR) approach as a foundation for the analytical framework. WPR appears very useful and suitable to start analysing the data, outlining the main issue at stake (“problem represented to be”) by analysing the responses given to this given issue. Bacchi’s (2009) approach then help to highlight the underlying assumptions and what’s left invisible in the problematization (among other aspects). This approach is particularly suited to explore written official documents.

I have also been inspired by the work of Hajer and his argumentative approach of discourse analysis. Hajer (1997:72) presents discourses as “*constitutive of the realities of environmental politics*”, explaining that environmental conflicts are primarily “*conflict over the meaning of physical and social phenomena*”. Here the author presents discourses as a significant factor influencing environmental conflicts which make discourse analysis strongly relevant to approach the conflict surrounding the EACOP project. Hajer (1997:65) also presents the concepts of “storylines” as a key factor that help understanding the creation and evolution of discourses. “Storylines” are described as metaphors used to explain a complex issue in a simpler way. More than only simplifying complex issues, “storylines” also play a key role in bridging different fields of knowledges and discourses. Indeed, storylines are often using concepts from a specific field of knowledge or discourse and apply them to a new context, thus creating a connection between the initial discourse and the new context in which it has been used. “Storylines” are seen as

key components of discourses, maintained and modified in relation with other discourses. Hajer also presents the concept of discourse coalition, as discourses sharing similar storylines as well as associated actors and practices. While storylines are seen as the foundation of discourses evolution, Hajer also conceptualise the fact that discourses are not evolving independently but through confrontation with opposing and supporting discourses. In this understanding, referred as the argumentative approach, politics is described as a struggle for discursive hegemony. The conditions of emergence of a discursive hegemony are determined by three factors: credibility, accessibility and trust.

Credibility refers to the idea that a discourse has to “*make actors believe in the subject positioning that a given discourse implies for them*” (1997:60), which means that the position in which the actors will be put in if the discourse goes ahead has to appear realistic. Acceptability refers to the fact the discourse has to appear attractive or necessary. Finally, trust is related to the fact that doubt and uncertainties might be suppressed if enough confidence is attributed to the author or the process in which the discourse is developed. For the purpose of the present research work the Stop EACOP and EACOP discourses will be analysed surrounding these three discursive dimensions, as well as the storylines being fundamental parts of each discourse.

The work of Adger et al (2001) raised some interesting thoughts on how simplifications used in global environmental discourses can obscure the diversity of situations in local contexts. This theoretical approach is closely connected to the research objective focusing on the local vs global disparities within the Stop EACOP coalition, it has been an important inspiration for my development of the discourse analysis framework. This focus on the disparities between the local and global level is also a way to investigate the influence of the local political context in which the local discourse of the Stop EACOP coalition is situated.

This choice to complement the discourse analysis approach with a deeper understanding of the local political context has been influenced by previous academic research (Byaruhanga 2025) as well as the recent international conflicts related to oil resources such as the intervention of the USA in Venezuela and the war with Iran in early 2026. These interventions made me reflect about imperialism in the 21st century and similitudes that can be seen with the situation in Uganda: foreign companies willing to extract oil with little assurance that this will benefit the local population in the long run. The parallel can be extended to the building of the discourse to legitimize the interference of a foreign country / foreign company to exploit strategic resources. These neocolonial and imperial aspects connected to the climate crisis have well been identified by “Stop EACOP” activists which make them important to explore.

5. Method for data collection and analysis

5.1 Data collection

The data collection plan was designed in order to best meet the research objectives. When zooming at the national and local level, I focused on the Ugandan context of the EACOP project for pragmatic reasons since it was the country I had the most contacts with key informants and supervisor insights beforehand. For these reasons, my thesis does not specifically explore the situation in Tanzania. Some of Tanzania's specific issues that are unexplored are the impacts surrounding the harbour area of Tanga where the oil tankers are expected to dock.

The following section details how the data set has been selected in order to answer each research objective. The table below summarizes which data has been used to explore a specific research objective:

Research objective	Data type		
1	Stop EACOP webpages https://stopeacop.net/	Instagram posts from “Stop EACOP” account.	Documents attached to webpages (with global signatories): - Open letter - Press releases
2	EACOP webpages https://www.eacop.com/	Instagram posts from “EACOP” account.	Documents attached to webpages: - Open letter - Press releases - Factsheets
3, 4	Open letters with identifiable Ugandan signatories.	Instagram posts from “Stop EACOP” account with identifiable co-authors.	Front page of “Stop EACOP” supported petition campaigns.
5	Interviews with NGOs’ representatives: - Interview 1: European NGO - Interview 2: European NGO - Interview 3: Ugandan NGO		
6	Supporting literature with focus on the political specificities of Uganda and global political context related to resources extraction by TotalEnergies in Africa.		

Table 2: Data collection summary

I first analysed text documents publicly available on the “Stop EACOP” movement website (<https://stopecop.net/>) in its English version. The goal was to explore documents written or signed by a large majority of organisations participating in the Stop EACOP movement, in order to outline the common communication strategy of the campaign. I focused on main pages of the website, press releases, reports and research work published by active organisations. A challenge for this part of data collection is to link a publication to a specific author or to clearly identify the organisations who took part in the redaction of the text. In order to further develop the understanding of the common discourse of the movement, I also included video content available on the Stop EACOP main webpage and Instagram account in the data set. Including publications from the Instagram account of coalition, is seen as relevant since it is followed by several thousand persons (38,7k followers in April 2026), making it one of the main communication channels of the movement. Moreover, the sharing system of Instagram enables the co-publication of some posts which facilitate the identification of the organisations taking part in the creation of a specific content, and thus to tackle the “author identification” challenge presented above. Also, it is worth mentioning that the layout of the Stop EACOP website has been updated during the time I conducted the data collection work.

In order to outline the discourse NGOs are opposing, I need to explore the “EACOP” discourse from the oil company perspective. I focused then on the data available on the “EACOP” website (<https://www.eacop.com/>), as a mirror of the “Stop EACOP” website. Here it is easier to identify the author of the project since there is only one “EACOP” entity compared to a coalition of different organisations under the “Stop EACOP” movement. It is worth mentioning that TotalEnergies as the main shareholder of the project appears to be leading the communication strategy of the project since many of the official reports are signed by TotalEnergies. The content of main webpages, as well as key reports such as the ESIA, has also been included in the data set to be studied. Some of these documents have already been analysed in previous studies (Ogwang & Vanclay 2021) but a critical discourse analysis of these documents can give new insights on the issue at stake. For these selected key reports the analysis was focused on the non-technical summary of the documents, when available, in order to focus on the public communication of the company and to reduce the length of the document so it is suitable for the time constraints of a master thesis project.

The next research objective focuses on the diversity of discourse within the Stop EACOP movement. In order to outline this diversity, I used data from the Stop EACOP website, but this time, instead of looking for jointly written documents, I selected documents clearly identified as coming from unique specific organisations within the movement. Based on my preunderstanding of the Stop EACOP coalition, the main differences in discourses I expected to find was between western

organisations (Europe or USA based), mainly focusing on actions and messages regarding how to prevent banks and insurances companies to back EACOP, and local Ugandan organisations that focus on local impacts of the project along the extractive sites and the track of the pipeline.

In addition to the analysis of text documents, semi structured interviews were conducted with key informants in order to get their perspectives on the global Stop EACOP strategy as well as local specificities of the campaign. The key informants contacted were all part of the Stop EACOP movement. No one from the EACOP side or supporting government have been contacted for interview since their communication strategy is not the main focus of the research, and as previous researchers (Maier & Gilbert 2023) already pointed out, it seems more difficult to reach such contacts.

The informants who took part in the interview, were contacted via publicly available email address on the websites of the organisations engaged in the Stop EACOP movement, as well as via contacts known prior to the thesis start who helped me getting in touch with key informants. The focus of the interview was to understand the role of specific organisations within the Stop EACOP global movement, get insights about the structuration of the movement, and the day-to-day operationalisation of actions and communications. A second part of the interview was dedicated to gather insights and feelings of the interviewee about the global vs local differences in communication that actors might have experienced within the movement. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and recorded locally in order to be transcribed and analysed. The language used during interviews was either English or French depending on which language the interviewee was the most comfortable talking in.

Finally, I used secondary literature connected to the local political context of Uganda, in order to broaden the understanding of the creation and evolution of the Stop EACOP discourse at a global and local scale. In addition to literature about the Ugandan political context, complementary readings about neo colonialism and imperialism enriched the research. This specific field of readings was selected since TotalEnergies is a French extractivist company which has kept a strong influential power in Africa, both financially and politically, even after the independence of former French colonies on the continent (Llavero-Pasquina et al. 2024; Cantoni et al. 2025).

5.2 Practical & ethical concerns

Regarding the data collection method implemented for this research work, including qualitative individual interviews, ethical principles have to be carefully established. As presented by Creswell and Creswell (2018) ethical considerations are important to address in qualitative research regarding the way data is selected, interpreted and presented.

Taking into consideration the expected difficulties of conducting interviews with government or corporations' representatives, as experienced by previous researchers in similar contexts (Maier & Gilbert 2023:30), I decided to focus the interviews on the coalition of environmental organisations opposing the pipeline project. For this interview part, I have been extremely careful regarding the privacy of the data collection. Regarding the high-risk level of violations of human rights (Larrouturou 2022), the Ugandan environmental activists are very exposed to harmful consequences when opposing the project in the public sphere. This is why a data safety plan has been implemented in order to ensure interviewees safety while engaging in this research project. The main characteristics of the data safety plan were to collect as little personal information as necessary from the interviewees and avoid online solutions for the storage and process of the collected data. Personal data was only used for practical reasons during the analytical work and does not appear in the thesis. The interview recordings were stored locally, not in a cloud service, and in a different location from where the interviewee's personal information was stored. The transcription of the recording, for analysis purpose, was done locally using an offline software named Buzz. The transcribed file was also stored and analysed locally on a personal computer. Every element of the interview that might be included in the final report, has been anonymised first. The anonymisation in the final report is done by never using the name of the interviewee or the name of the organisation they are part of. Instead, insights from interviews are included by referring to the macro group the interviewee is part of, such as "local NGO" or "international NGO". A detailed document explaining the data collection and management plan has been sent to the interviewees prior to the interview date for approval. This document also included the main aim of the research and the conditions of participation, giving the participants the possibility to express informed consent prior to the interview. This consent form also mentioned that the participants can withdraw at any time without any justification needed.

5.3 Reflexivity and positionality

In qualitative research, the results are not neutrally “discovered” from the data set, but actively interpreted through the influence of the designed analytical framework and the background of the researcher. It is thus important to acknowledge that the interpretation of the data in the present study is influenced by discourse analysis theories (Hajer 1997; Adger et al. 2001; Bacchi 2009) that might amplify certain outcomes while obscuring alternative interpretations. Beyond the selected theoretical framework, the positionality of the researcher also influences the outcomes of the research (Creswell 2018:260). As a French white man investigating a conflict surrounding extractive activities conducted by a French company in East African, I need to reflect on how this position may impact the results of the research. I identified two kinds of positionality issues in this research work: the positionality influencing my interpretation of the collected data and the positionality influencing the dynamic of the interviews. In the interests of transparency regarding the interpretation of the data, I have to say that I have been following the struggle surrounding EACOP since 2021. At this time the struggle surrounding the project gained attention from several major French environmental NGOs and was amplified by vocal French climate justice activists that I followed on social media. I had then a rather supportive position toward the Stop EACOP movement prior the start of the present research project and acknowledge that this may influence my interpretation of the data. My position and background may then lead to interpretations that unintentionally positively depict the Stop EACOP coalition’s discourse and especially discourse held by French and European NGOs. Rather than attempting to “remove” this influence, which is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research (Prowse 2010; Creswell 2018), I tried to be transparent about my background and position in order to let the reader interpret the research at the light of this information. In addition, contextualisation of the findings, by refereeing to prior academic research, was done in order to reduce the impact of personal interpretation of the data.

Regarding the positionality of the researcher conducting qualitative interviews, I developed my reflections based on the feminist approach of Alasuutari et al (2008) and the need to ensure a setting in which interviewees feel comfortable to speak freely. Time and resource constraints forced me to conduct video interviews which can influence the way the interviewee engage in the discussion. A video interview setting can have a stress reducing effect on the interviewee by giving the opportunity to choose the time of meeting and a comfortable place to conduct the interview from. On the other hand, interviewees who are less comfortable using a computer or with technical difficulties to connect to the meeting may experience a less comfortable experience doing a video interview. For the present research project, such technical difficulties were experienced during a video interview conducted with a Ugandan informant. One last aspect of reflection around

positionality concerns the expectations of the interviewee regarding the impact of this research work. While conducting interviews I tried to be as transparent as possible about the aim of the research and in which context it is done (master thesis conducted by a student). However, I experienced a discrepancy in expectations from some informants that attributed to the project more influential outcomes than it can have regarding time and resources allocated to it. Further discussion via email have then been conducted in order to make sure the interviewee's expectations fit the real expected outcomes of the research.

5.4 Data analysis

The data analysis is structured around the discourse analysis framework developed based on Bacchi's WPR (2009), Hajer's argumentative approach of discursive struggle and the role of story lines in the construction and evolution of discourses (1997) and Adger's global environmental discourse analysis and their oversimplification of issues at the local scale (2001). The operationalisation of the data analysis was inspired by the process presented by Creswell & Creswell (2018). The present data analysis is based on a six steps process as outlined below.

First, the selected data were organised into sub folders related to the research objectives they were expected to contribute understanding: "Objective 1: Outline the global Stop EACOP discourse", "Objective 2: Outline the EACOP supporters' discourse" and so on.

Second, each document from the data set was read through in order to provide a general understanding of the information the documents can provide in relation to the theoretical discourse analysis framework. General notes were taken at this stage of the analysis.

Third, the selected data was coded. Each document was decomposed into "chunks" (small segments of text or video), each chunk being assigned key words or themes representing the main ideas or concepts related to this specific segment. The idea is to go systematically through all the data reflecting on how it can connect with the theoretical concepts used to develop the analytical framework. The coding process was done offline using an open-source free software called Taguette.

Once the data was coded, the codes were regrouped into general themes in order to highlight the main ideas each document reflected. In order to easily visualise the themes arising from the coding process, the codes from the previous step were regrouped in an Excel file (Appendix 2). This file was used to highlight which codes were the most frequently used in a specific document as well as within the general data set.

Once the general themes were defined, the document was carried through the actual discourse analysis framework (Appendix 1). Here, the previous coding steps of the analysis played a launch pad role for the discourse analysis, making the issues and key ideas easier to grasp. The discourse analysis framework was constituted of four main sections as follows:

- The topic section:
 - This section aims to outline main information about the document such as the author, the audience, the main topic or “problem represented to be” (Bacchi 2009). In addition this section explore the dimensions of discourse struggle defined as credibility, acceptability and trust (Hajer 1997) as well as the assumptions underlying the main topic of the text (Bacchi 2009);
- The lexical section:
 - This section focuses on the words chosen to describe the issues and actors presented in the document. A particular focus was paid to how positively or negatively these issues and actors are portrayed. Another part of the lexical focus section concerned the accessibility of the vocabular used for the expected audience, both regarding the adequate technicity of the vocabulary and the language chosen to communicate;
- The metaphor section:
 - This section relates to Hajer’s concept of “storylines” in global environmental discourses (Hajer 1997). A storyline is described as a metaphor aiming to bridge several fields of knowledge under a unique representation. The use of storylines often implies a loss of meaning compared to a complex description of the issue at stake, which is interesting to outline in which direction the discourse is directed toward. This exploration of the loss of meaning while using storylines is also a way to connect with Adger’s (2001) idea that global environmental discourses often shadow the diversity of situations at the local level, which is particularly important for objective 4 of the present research (compare the global and local discourses against EACOP to understand how they support or contradict each other). The repetition of storylines is also analysed closely in order to outline the potential formation of discourse coalitions, which is understood as discourses from different fields of knowledge connected by using the same storyline (Hajer 1997);

- The intertext section:
 - The last section of the discourse analysis framework focuses on the connection of the analysed document with broader discourses. This section aims at understanding which contextual factors might influence the discourse outlined in the document. These factors can be related to the local political context or the opposing or supporting existing discourses. This section also aims to open the discussion on the issues at stake asking what are the new ideas brought by the document, what's left unproblematic, where are the silences, what are the material effects of the problem representation, connecting to Bacchi's WPR framework (2009);

The last part of the analytical process is then to summarise the findings of the discourse analysis into the main results. For each research aim, main themes arising from the coding process, as well as main findings from the discourse analysis process are compared between the different analysed documents. This step aims to reveal the main findings that are connecting the data set.

All along the process presented above, secondary academic literature related to the local Ugandan political context, neocolonialism and imperialism was used as a support in order to help building some of the findings of the research. These complementary theoretical concepts can be seen as what Bowen (2006) calls "sensitizing concepts", second range theoretical concepts that are used to help getting a better initial approach of the collected data.

6. Results

6.1 The global discourse of the Stop EACOP movement:

The “Stop EACOP” movement is built as a coalition of NGOs opposed to the EACOP project. These NGOs have been associating in order to increase the reach of the communication each organisation could have done individually. The present research project aims to understand how a broad variety of organisations achieved to build a global discourse that every NGOs taking part in the movement can relate with. Discourse analysis conducted on the “Stop EACOP” website and social media gave some interesting results.

6.1.1 Issue and assumptions

From Bacchi’s WPR approach (Bacchi 2009), the problem represented to be in the Stop EACOP coalition discourse can be seen as: oil exploitation is too dangerous for people, nature and climate and then need to be avoided no matter the potential economic benefits of such project. The main assumption behind this representation of the problem is that today’s humans, biodiversity and climate are valuable but endangered and thus need to be protected no matter the expected future economic benefits the oil project might provide. With this representation of the problem, a global danger that will directly or indirectly impact everyone is depicted. Thus, the communication surrounding the issue aims to be as broad as possible and generate engagement all around the world, since everyone is concerned.

The analysed Stop EACOP global discourse appears to be structured around two main headlines. These headlines, visible multiple times on the website and social media of the movement, are the following: “*for people, for nature, for climate*” and “*act local, go global*”. These headlines have the ability to cover a broad variety of issues and interests surrounding the EACOP project. With such broad issues and locations covered, the communication aims to make sure each NGO taking part in the movement can find a connection with their fields of expertise and interests. For example, Ugandan NGOs focused on empowering local communities, as well as European NGOs focused on making financial actors act to protect the climate, can both relate to these headlines: the former more connected to the “*for people*” aspect and the later more connected to the “*for climate*” one. This choice gives the opportunity to many organisations and individual supporters to identify with issues they care about. Doing that, the movement shows a clear inclusive approach trying to gather as many supporting NGOs as possible. The second headline, focusing on the “*local*” and “*global*” scale, also presents a will for inclusivity, but not only towards the collaborating organisations but also towards the supporters the

communication can reach. The idea that, no matter where you are living on the planet, this project will affect you and that you can act in order to change that, is appealing for people who feel concern about both global climate change and specific local impacts of the pipeline in affected countries. The movement has indeed a clear intention to mobilize the audience visiting the website, reading press releases or social media communication. This intention appears clearly with the many “calls for action” one can usually find attached to the communication artefacts of the coalition such as “*take action!*”, “*are you in?*”, “*join us*”.

With this “act local, go global” position, the movement can expect to foster the engagement of the audience giving them the opportunity to engage regardless their location. This possibility for the audience to engage in the opposition to EACOP no matter where they are reading from is also seen in the suggested “actions you can take to help #STOPEACOP” presented in the “Go Global” page of the website.

6.1.2 Formation of the discourse

Discourse struggle is articulated around three dimensions according to Hajer (1997): credibility, acceptability and trust. The discourse analysis conducted on the Stop EACOP movement communications outlined these three aspects of the global discourse. First, credibility aims to make believe in the subject positioning a specific discourse implies for the audience. For the Stop EACOP global discourse it is about making the audience believe that oil extraction is dangerous for them, no matter where they are located and that it implies for them to be in an opponent position (“subject positioning”) towards the pipeline project. This credibility aspect is achieved with the emphasis on the risks related to the project that will impact the “people, nature, climate”, in relation with the main headline presented in section 6.1.1. These issues are broad so a large variety of people can refer to and thus see the subject positioning as credible. Then, acceptability, which require the position to appear attractive or necessary (Hajer 1997). Here, since the Stop EACOP global discourse emphasises on the danger related to the oil pipeline, the position of “opponent to the project” appears more as necessary than attractive. Third, trust refer to the fact that a discourse securing confidence in the author or in the process in which a discourse is developed, might suppress doubt and achieve that inherent uncertainties are taken for granted. Regarding the Stop EACOP global discourse, this trust is built around the number and diversity of coalition members (“*Over 260 civil society organizations are supporting the campaign*” - stopeacop.net), third parties (such as the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, which carried out an independent quality review of the Ugandan part of the EACOP’s ESIA) and international institutions (IPCC and European Union among others) carrying supportive discourses. Referencing to scientific literature and institutions is also a way to foster this trust dimension of the struggle towards discourse hegemony.

6.1.3 Mechanisms to maintain and amplify the discourse

In order to foster the three dimensions of discourse struggle, “story lines” are a powerful tool to amplify a given discourse (Hajer 1997). Story lines can be seen as metaphors bridging different fields of knowledge with underlying assumptions transferring from a field to another. Regarding the Stop EACOP global discourse a significant story line can be synthesised as “oil is a curse”. Results from the analysis of the global discourse present indeed a frequent usage of lexicon related to danger and emergency while picturing the EACOP project. This danger lexicon is for example found in the “Why Stop EACOP?” page of the coalition website with expressions to describe the pipeline project such as: “*threatens*”, “*endanger*”, “*catastrophe*”, “*disastrous consequences*”, “*significant risks*”, “*rip through*”, “*risk significantly degrading*”, “*climate emergency*”, “*polluting industries*”. This storyline creates an amplification of the dangers surrounding oil exploitation while connecting together all the impacted areas: social (people), biodiversity (nature) and climate. This amplification of the dangers makes the subject positioning against EACOP appears even more necessary.

Another example of this emphasis on the dangers surrounding the project can be seen in the differences between the maps used by Stop EACOP and EACOP to present the pipeline. Whereas the map used by EACOP (available on the eacop.com website, page “Route description & Map”) pictures only administrative districts and engineering details of the pipeline (pumping stations, storage tanks, connection to main feeder), maps used by members of the Stop EACOP coalition (from the Banktrack “Crude risk” report, available on the stopecop.net “Resources” page) represent the natural areas the project might threaten (“*Ecoregions*”, “*Protected areas*”, “*conservation areas at risk*”, “*waterbodies at risk*”), emphasising the “danger” dimension in the way they are picturing the pipeline project.

Regarding the “Stop EACOP” global communication, the use of the “oil is a curse” storyline shows a simplification of the complexity of the issues at stake, especially regarding the attitude of local populations surrounding the pipeline project. While previous research outlined a diversity of understandings and attitudes toward the project for supporters and opponents at the local scale (Ogwang & Vanclay 2021), the “Stop EACOP” communication is mainly picturing local impacted communities as a homogeneous group opposed to the project:

The people of Uganda and other neighbouring countries in East and Central Africa shouldn't be burdened with the money-losing and polluting industries of yesterday – (Stop EACOP.net 2026b).

This simplification appears like a way of reducing doubts and uncertainties in the discourse strengthening trust between the NGO's coalition and the audience. However, if trust is not achieved when the simplification is made, it can have a

detrimental effect for the communication strategy of the coalition. An oversimplification of the issues at stake can lead to lack of credibility, reducing the confidence of the audience in the given discourse.

In addition, other storylines are depicting the struggle between the local impacted communities and the oil corporation. The most identifiable one being the “David vs Goliath” storyline: local activists and impacted populations fighting against a giant oil corporation.

French oil giant TotalEnergies and China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) are on the verge of constructing a massive pipeline that runs through the heart of Africa. This project threatens to displace communities, endanger wildlife, and push the world closer to a climate catastrophe. (Stop EACOP.net 2026b)

This storyline is revealed, on one hand, by the use of amplifications and negative connotations to depict the oil company and pipeline project, and on the other hand, the local environment and communities in Uganda and Tanzania depicted as vulnerable facing the impacts of the project. The idea that the “goliath” can be faced is also connected, in the communication, with the “union is strength” idea to depict the Stop EACOP movement, building hope about the outcome of the struggle against the oil corporation:

So local groups have assembled a coalition of African and international organizations to help amplify their message and bring new allies to the campaign to stop EACOP.

And it’s working! Over one million people from all around the world have supported advocacy actions like the ones featured on this website. (Stop EACOP.net 2026)

These lexical choices and metaphors are frequently used in activist communications, picturing a great imminent danger that has to be fought “together” in order to reach a possible success. The storyline here connects popular tales to a real-life conflict, orienting the reader’s identification of the “good guy” and “bad guy” of this conflict. This strategy also relies on emotions such as fear, anger and hope to foster engagement of the reader. These themes being frequently used by environmental activists, the communication is expected to be easily readable and understandable by the target audience the “Stop EACOP” movement aims to mobilise.

Connecting to the following section related to the discourse of the EACOP corporation, another main topic covered by the “Stop EACOP” discourse relates to the economic development of the regions impacted by the pipeline. This topic is developed in the “*Beyond oil: better economic alternatives*” webpage and appears more like a reaction to the discourse held by the oil company than freely chosen and highlighted by the “Stop EACOP” coalition. While the storyline presenting “oil as a curse” is lowering the potential beneficial effects of oil exploitation on the local economy, it does not achieve to totally silence this issue that the opposition

(EACOP supporters) is pushing forward. The NGOs' coalition is then set in an unstable position where they have to address the economic aspects of the oil pipeline in order to maintain the credibility of the discourse while maintaining the headline that the dangers are way more significant than the expected beneficial outcomes. Indeed, the coalition needs to acknowledge that the pipeline project has potential benefits for the local economy in order to explain why these benefits are overestimated or unrealistic. But, doing that, they are bringing some complexity surrounding the local impacts of the projects: the issue might not be only negative at the local scale and the locals may not be only opponents of the project. This additional complexity undermines the trust dimension of the Stop EACOP discourse. Stop EACOP supporters are also trying to present an alternative imaginary for the future of the region based on renewable energy in order to make their position appear attractive (acceptability dimension of discourse hegemony). However, this alternative future is presented alongside the vision focused on the "danger" of oil development and can then be difficult to picture for the audience supporting the "oil is a curse" discourse. Since they cannot totally silence the inherent uncertainties of the discourse surrounding alternative economic perspectives, the trust dimension of the global discourse still needs to be strengthened for the Stop EACOP coalition.

As presented above, the Stop EACOP coalition might struggle to suggest a credible and attractive alternative future for the region. Knowing this challenge, an alternative for the coalition is to reduce the credibility, acceptability and trust of the opponent (i.e. EACOP) in complement to strengthening their own discourse. The discourse analysis of the Stop EACOP global discourse thus reveal several direct critiques of TotalEnergies, main shareholder of the EACOP project, about their past controversial projects and non-held promises. These critiques are very frequent on the Stop EACOP Instagram account where many posts are about TotalEnergies activities without being directly connected to the EACOP project. Among these posts we can find topics such as: liquified natural gas (LNG) projects worldwide, political interference in Nigeria, lobbying in French engineering schools. By doing that, the Stop EACOP coalition aims to reduce the credibility and trust in TotalEnergies' discourse mainly focus on the economic benefits of oil extraction. These critiques are using both contemporary (ex: LNG in Mozambique) and historical (Total in Algeria during French colonisation period) examples of controversial projects conducted by Total in Africa. In that sense, the neo colonial aspects of TotalEnergies operations in Africa are well identified and criticised by activists of the Stop EACOP coalition as it can be seen in the pinned video from the Instagram account for example (Stop EACOP Instagram 2024).

6.2 Opposing discourse: the EACOP supporters

The argumentative approach of discourse analysis (Hajer 1997) adopted in this research work sees discourse not as isolated but rather always adapting to other opposing or supporting discourses. Following this approach, it is then important to understand the discourse the Stop EACOP coalition is opposed to. This section will then present the result of the analysis of the EACOP supporters' discourse. This section will follow a similar structure than the previous section: outline of the problem represented to be and the main assumptions of the discourse, analysis of the dimensions of the struggle for discourse hegemony and presentation of the detailed mechanism to maintain and amplify the discourse.

6.2.1 Issue and assumptions

For the EACOP supporters the problem represented to be (Bacchi 2009) in the discourse can be defined as: oil is a great opportunity for the development of the Ugandan and Tanzanian region even if risks exist. This representation of the problem carries assumptions that can be presented as: today's risks surrounding oil exploitation are limited and worth being accepted to reach a brighter economic future, and the live improvement that will come with. References to future opportunities provided by the oil project can be found multiple times in the EACOP website, directly in the titles of the different section: *"unlocking East Africa's potential"*, *"Sustainable development"*, *"Career opportunities"*, *"Social economic investment"*, *"future generations"*, *"youth empowerment"* among others. In addition to the amplification of the expected economic benefits, the EACOP discourse is also aiming to reduce the perceived risks surrounding the projects in order to avoid critiques and keep developing the pipeline as planned.

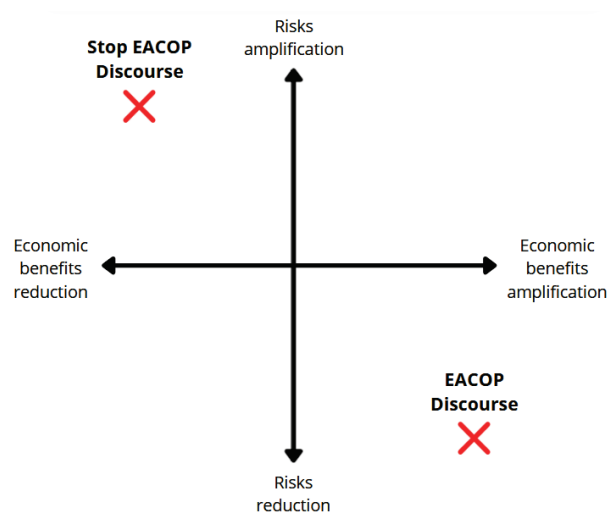


Figure 2: Attitude of Stop EACOP and EACOP discourses toward "Risk" and "Economic benefits"

The representation of the problem carried by the EACOP supporters appears thus positioned at the opposite of the Stop EACOP discourse regarding attitude toward risk and future expectations. Figure 5 aims to synthesised these two-discourse positioning toward “risk” and “expected economic benefits”. This opposition regarding risks and expected benefits will be further analysed in the upcoming sections in relation to the dimensions of discourse struggle.

6.2.2 Formation of the discourse

As presented earlier, the discourse struggle can be understood around three dimensions: credibility, acceptability and trust (Hajer 1997).

For the EACOP supporters’ discourse, credibility (make the actors accept the subject positioning a certain discourse implies for them) is achieved first by the communication surrounding the material outcomes of the project. The EACOP discourse is communicating a lot about the investments already made in the Ugandan and Tanzanian region, using economic and technical lexicon to foster the “seriousness” of the achievements already made and the ones expected in the future. By doing that the audience can easily relate to the discourse that the oil pipeline will be helpful for the economy since it already brings money and creates jobs in the region.

Regarding the acceptability of the discourse, the EACOP supporters, by amplifying the expected benefits and lowering the risks, are portraying an attractive position. This is a significant difference compared to the Stop EACOP acceptability which portrays a necessary position build on a high risk, low reward idea.

The third dimension is about trust in the discourse. In the EACOP supporters discourse this dimension is achieved by referring to a large number of international standards and commitments taken to prevent risks and help the region to develop.

EACOP commitments include: [...] Conform to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (VPSHR), and meet the Performance Standards of the IFC and Equator Principles. (EACOP.com 2026b)

In addition to the naming of all of these quality standards and commitments, EACOP is producing a huge amount of documentation surrounding risk assessment: multiple reports, summary of reports, factsheets etc. This quantity of documentation combined with the technicity of the vocabular used (references to engineering or legal concepts that might be difficult to grasp for a non-expert reader) is understood here as an aim to foster confidence in the practice leading to the claims of the discourse. These reports, long, detailed, with charts and figures are sustaining the image of a well-managed project where all issues have been

anticipated and preventive measures have been implemented to reduce the risks related to the project. These reports are thus helping building trust in the EACOP discourse stating that risk management is being done properly.

6.2.3 Mechanisms to maintain and amplify the discourse

The EACOP discourse, in contrast to the Stop EACOP one, is using an “oil is a benediction” storyline to maintain and amplify the discourse. This storyline is the opposite of the “oil is a curse” one supported by the Stop EACOP coalition. Picturing “oil as a benediction” implies an amplification of the expected beneficial outcomes while lowering or even silencing the risks related to the project. This lowering of the risks is supported by a “techno solutionist” discourse which present technology as a solution to handle any danger the oil exploitation might raise. This discourse is revealed by the frequent use of a technical, engineering vocabulary when it comes to talk about the risks surrounding the project. This technical vocabulary can be seen for example in the “Pipeline Integrity” section of the “Overview” page of the EACOP website with terms such as: “*remote controlled block valves*”, “*Hydrotesting*”, “*Fusion Bonded Epoxy against external corrosion*”, “*Periodic intelligent pigging in operation*”. This technical lexicon is also often positively connotated, portraying the technology as performant, high quality, innovative in order to reassure about the safety of the project. On this risk lowering aspects one can also mention a strategic silencing of certain issues related to the pipeline development such as the greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions. While the GHG emissions issue is addressed, is it done only with a methodology avoiding to count the emissions of the final use of oil after transiting in the pipeline (Scope 3 not included in the “Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions” factsheet). The emissions for the lifetime of the installation are then estimated to be 5 MTCO₂eq while the final use emission of the oil transiting in the pipeline in a year is estimated to be around 33 MTCO₂eq (Banktrack et al. 2020). The EACOP discourse is then focusing the communication on a carbon footprint improvement that concerns only a negligible part of the total emissions that the project enables, which can be seen as greenwashing.

In addition to this risk lowering aspects, the expectations surrounding the economic outcomes of the pipeline are amplified in the EACOP discourse. An example of these expectations is to be found in the “Social economic investment” section of the website, where EACOP is presented as an opportunity for sustainable development of the region. However, this amplification of the expectations has to be managed in a way it will not affect the credibility of the discourse. Raising too high, unrealistic expectations, might reduce the credibility more than it would have increase the attractiveness of it. In order to maintain this credibility, the EACOP discourse lays on investment figures and present material outcomes of the pipeline development, emphasizing on the ones connected to job opportunities:

In both Uganda and Tanzania, over 10,800, households are receiving livelihood restoration support, over 10,660 households have received transitional support and over 5,000 people have received training as part of the enterprise development or vocational training programmes. (EACOP.com 2026c)

With over 23,000 registrations and 12,000 learners, the initiative laid the foundation for what is now the EACOP Academy—a pan-regional training programme aligned with national development goals and EACOP’s operational needs. The Academy now includes 141 selected trainees: **110 from Tanzania** (through the EACOP MOOC) and **31 from Uganda**, recruited through the **Tilenga MOOC**. (EACOP.com 2026a)

Another storyline that can be connected to the EACOP discourse is the “caring father” one, a father helping his children to grow. This idea is to be found in the focus of the communication on “*unlocking the potential*” of East Africa and the “*youth empowerment*”. However, this storyline conveys a dependency relationship dimension in the fact that East Africa needs TotalEnergies (and other foreign actors) to access the full potential of the oil resources of their land. The locals have to believe in the claims that TotalEnergies has good intentions while helping them accessing this potential. This has been identified by the Stop EACOP coalition as a weakness of the EACOP discourse since the NGOs are often communicating about controversies surrounding past project led by TotalEnergies in order to decrease the trust in these claims of “acting for the benefit of the locals”.

One of the strengths of the EACOP discourse can be seen in the idea that economic development will improve life conditions of the locals. Indeed, this idea can be interpreted as a hegemonic discourse since it is rarely questioned, even by opponents. However, an economic development can be beneficial to a minority of actors, that might even be foreign shareholders, while a large majority is still struggling and has to face new issues (pollution, change in the job market, impacts on livelihoods...). This correlation between economic development and elevation of living conditions is such entangled in today’s capitalistic society, that it is very difficult to address and challenge.

When the amplification of credibility, acceptability and trust in the EACOP’s own discourse reaches a limit, it is then the opposing discourse that is attacked. As well as the Stop EACOP coalition trying to reduce trust in TotalEnergies claims by communicating about their past controversial projects, the EACOP supporters are trying to silence the critical voices toward the project. It is achieved by occupying the media stage, using of governmental repression to violently silence the critical voices and prevent future ones to speak out, or focus the debate on the economic aspects that is known to be the weakness of the Stop EACOP discourse. The government repression happening in Uganda is also characterised by an inversion of the values, picturing the local activists as working against the interest of the nation while they claim to protect the impacted population and environment, as

explained in the interview of a Ugandan NGO's member (Interviewee 3 2026). This inversion can be understood regarding the underlying assumptions of the opposing discourses: the Stop EACOP assumption is that "today's people have to be protected against the dangers of the project" and the EACOP assumption is that "today's risk has to be accepted to develop and reach a better future". Thus, activists not accepting today's risks related to EACOP are seen as obstacles for the development (and the expected improvement of living conditions) of the country. This portraying of activists as working against the interest is even used against international activists, with an additional dimension related to anticolonial sentiment towards Europeans, which increases the emotional impact of such discourse.

6.3 The diversity behind the global Stop EACOP discourse and the influence of the local political context

Storylines have the effect of simplifying complex issues for the purpose of avoiding doubt in the author's discourse. This section will thus focus on outlining the complexity that can be found beyond the Stop EACOP global discourse and its storylines.

6.3.1 Complementing roles of the involved NGOs

The discourse analysis of documents from the Stop EACOP coalition as well as interviews conducted with key informants from several involved NGOs, revealed the complementarity of the different actors in the communication strategy and discourse development.

The Stop EACOP coalition is constituted of hundreds of NGOs that can be split into two groups for a better understanding of the dynamics within the coalition: the local Ugandan and Tanzanian NGOs, in the frontline of the pipeline project, and the supporting international NGOs. One of the focuses of the interviews was to understand the collaboration between local NGOs and international NGOs regarding the organisation of communication.

One of the main results about this organisation is differentiated roles of the local and International NGOs within the coalition. First the organisation of the collaboration is presented as grass rooted and flexible by the different participants of interviews (Interview 1, 2, 3). The coalition has been initiated by the local NGOs experiencing the initial impacts of the project and asking for support from their partners nationally and internationally (international NGOs interviewees explained starting getting involved after being contacted by a local NGO or a partner of them). Then each NGO participating in the movement can take part in different actions, working groups according to their previous competences and interests.

According to all interviews' participants (which regroup members of local and international NGOs) the local NGOs have a role of documenting what's happening on the field as well as leading which actions and communication can be beneficial for the frontliners. Regarding the documentation part, interviewee from local NGOs (Interview 3) explained that their organisation is keeping track of the evolution of the pipeline's construction, as well as the impacts surrounding it, such as human rights abuses. Thanks to this documentation work done by local NGOs, the global coalition has more evidences to strengthen their discourse around the risks the EACOP project represents for local environment and populations. The international NGOs are more involved in a supportive role for the locals. As explained by different interviewees, the support can be financial but also more immaterial with expertise or skills sharing (Interview 1, 2). Interviewees mentioned expertise in

finance when actions to pressure the banks to divest from oil were done. Other skills sharing such as physical and digital security training were mentioned since the local NGOs are experiencing a high level of threats while publicly opposing the EACOP project.

Another key finding of the study of this collaboration is the emphasis on the leading role of the local organisations in the movement. This will of involving the local NGOs and setting them in leading positions within the coalition has been first mentioned by interviewees from international NGOs (Interview 1, 2). They explained that in each working group (finance, communication, mobilisation...) local NGOs representatives have a leading position to ensure that no decision, communication or action exposes frontliners to excessive risks. This empowering attitude toward the local NGOs was confirmed by interviewee from a Ugandan NGO (Interview 3). They felt that the representativity and influence of local NGOs were well respected within the movement.

More generally, the interviewees tried to emphasise the beneficial aspects of the collaboration and not the internal disagreement that might exist between partners. The diversity of the actors involved in the movement was described as a strength, an opportunity to share, learn, improve for everyone.

6.3.2 From communication to mobilisation

Connecting with the idea that “diversity is a strength”, interviewees see the diversity of coalition’s members as a strength to deliver a more tailored communication. Indeed, several interviewees mentioned that different NGOs involved in the Stop EACOP coalition might still have individual communications they expect to be more adapted to their own target audience (Interview 1, 2). Some mentioned that actors focused on financial aspects will probably use a polished tone more adapted to the finance actors they try to reach. Activists’ organisations, used to street protests, will rather use a more critique, aggressive tone which they feel is better adapted to their audience.

These insights made me understand the communication disparities within the Stop EACOP movement as a mobilisation strategy more than a communication strategy. I understand the global discourse or communication strategy as aiming to reach as many people as possible. For example, the Stop EACOP Instagram account appears here as an opportunity for particular organisations to increase visibility on the issues they are working on. The Stop EACOP account regroups almost 40k followers, which is way more than many of the individual accounts of organisations taking part in the movement, giving them a significant platform to share their work. The global discourse is using broad themes, which allows a large audience to relate to it.

However, while the global discourse can make a large audience understand the coalition's position, it is not as easy to make the audience get involved in the struggle against EACOP. Thus, the coalition needs discourses more tailored to the specific sub groups reached by the global communication, in order to foster their mobilisation. The diversity of members in the coalition is then an asset to adapt the global discourse so it will have a higher mobilising impact on specific readers. The diversity of organisations as well as the way the coalition is constructed, then enable the cohabitation of a diversity of discourse. This diversity can be seen on the Stop EACOP Instagram account where each post can be connected to the specific organisation who wrote it. On this account, each organisation has thus the opportunity to share their specific position surrounding the EACOP project or more broadly surrounding TotalEnergies and other new oil and gas projects worldwide.

However, a specific NGO involved in the Stop EACOP movement may face external factors that will influence its own communication rather than just the will to foster mobilisation. The impacts of external factors, and especially the local political context, on communication is the issue developed in the following section.

6.3.3 Influence of the political context

As presented in the background section, Uganda is an authoritarian political regime where freedom of speech and voices of political opposition are constrained. The Ugandan government has been supporting the EACOP project since the very first phases, expecting economic benefits from oil exploitation in the country. In this context the repression against the opponents of the EACOP project is very high. Many testimonies of human rights abuses, intimidations, threats, arrests, have been collected by NGOs, international institutions (EU) or scholars (Hill et al. 2021; Müller 2025). These threats have been confirmed by the Ugandan NGO interviewee (Interview 3) who participated in the present research project. These threats are described as the main factor influencing the communication and action strategy of local NGOs. In the local discourse there is a focus on global advocacy rather than direct protests. This is presented as a strategic way of protecting frontline activists. The support of international NGOs to raise mediatic attention to the EACOP project is also described as a way to prevent the frontliners of being too violently repressed, since EACOP stakeholders like TotalEnergies want to avoid controversies surrounding the project. Local NGOs are then using less directly confrontational methods such as advocacy directed to the enablers of the project to “stay active” as opponents on the long run. These results correlate with previous academic works focused on strategic adaptation of NGOs in restrictive political contexts (Maier & Gilbert 2023). By targeting the advocacy on the “enablers” (banks, insurers) this strategy also relates to previous research portraying international energy infrastructures as “located” in a variety of places, including where they are designed, financed, constructed (Larsen et al. 2024). In addition to the influence on

actions and communication, the repressive political context of Uganda is described as impacting the choice of the issues local NGOs are communicating about. An interviewee from a local NGO (Interview 3) explained that the environmental and climate issues are important for them but the government's repression forces them to focus on issues related to human rights abuses since it appears as the most urgent issue to address. The discourse of local NGOs can thus differ from the global discourse, not because their interests differ fundamentally but rather because the local political context influence which issue is most urgent to address.

The historical aspect of colonialism is also visible in the discourse surrounding the EACOP case. Activists are portraying TotalEnergies (and other extractive industries) as perpetuating unfair trade relations between the Global North and African countries (Stop EACOP Instagram 2024). These critiques relate to previous academic work highlighting this issue of neocolonialism (Llavero-Pasquina et al. 2024; Cantoni et al. 2025). On the other hand, the Ugandan government is also using arguments based on a strong anticolonial sentiment in order to discredit activist opposing the EACOP project, as presented in the result section regarding the EACOP discourse. The international activists opposed to the project are portrayed as seeking to hinder the country's development in order to maintain a position of power between Europe and Africa. The colonial history of the country is thus used in both discourses, switching the narrative in order to serve the interest of the author.

7. Discussion and conclusion

This research work helps to understand the struggle between the “high risk, low reward” discourse of the Stop EACOP coalition and the “low risk, high reward” discourse of EACOP supporters, detailing the mechanisms used to develop and support each discourse. It also explores how the collaboration between international NGOs helps protecting frontline activists and create local discourses more tailored to foster mobilisation. The local authoritarian context in Uganda has a significant impact on the communication strategy of the Stop EACOP coalition, especially for Ugandan NGOs that developed less confrontational strategies to protect their frontline members.

The global discourse of the Stop EACOP coalition present a “broad reach” ambition using headline that many can relate to: “*for people, for nature, for climate*”. The discourse is constructed around a “high risk, low reward” narrative, using a central “oil is a curse” storyline to amplify the dangers of the project while shadowing the expected economic benefits and diversity of positions toward the pipeline at the local level.

On the other hand, the EACOP supporters are presenting a “low risk, high reward” discourse surrounding the pipeline project. The discourse is constructed around and “oil is a benediction” storyline fostering the expected beneficial outcomes while reducing or even silencing the risks connected to oil exploitation. This opposition of discourses is understood as a struggle surrounding credibility, acceptability and trust (Hajer 1997). When one of the three dimensions appears difficult to improve for one’s own discourse, attempts to reduce the opponent’s credibility, acceptability and trust are conducted.

At a local level, Ugandan NGOs opposed to EACOP present a discourse mainly focus on the human rights issues connected to the pipeline project. This focus appears to be a consequence of the authoritarian political context and violent repression in Uganda which makes human rights abuses the most urgent issue to address for the NGOs.

Within the Stop EACOP coalition, global discourse is expected to reach a broad variety of supporters, while the diversity of NGOs taking part in the movement enable more tailored communication to foster mobilisation of the audience.

Local Ugandan and Tanzanian NGOs are described as key members of the coalition, documenting the abuses of human rights on the field while taking a leading role in the coalition’s organisation process in order to prevent harmful consequences for the frontline activists. The repressive political context in Uganda appears as a significant factor which led local NGOs to adopt less confrontational strategies, redirecting actions towards the enablers of the project worldwide, in order to stay active and protect their members.

This thesis contributes to better understand the international dynamic surrounding the EACOP project while previous research mainly focused on the impacts of the pipeline development on local populations (Hill et al. 2021; Müller 2025). Some scholars addressed the international aspects of the project, highlighting the different places where the project is developed and the difference in the nature of the critiques toward EACOP depending on the location where an organisation is talking from (Larsen et al. 2024). In this thesis I tried to give an explanation of why this difference in the nature of critiques by connecting it with the repressive political context in Uganda. This explanation being based on a small number of qualitative interviews, a deeper investigation is needed to strengthen this result. Further investigation could also be dedicated to the exploration of the different positions towards EACOP (Ogwang & Vanclay 2021) in relation to the discourse supporting EACOP. An interesting approach could be to understand how the global discourse of the EACOP supporters influences the way local populations are showing support to the project, influencing the way they are talking about the pipeline.

Reflecting on the reach of the thesis work I feel questions related to the influence of the local and international political context could be further developed in future research. The strategic adaptation of NGOs facing the influence of an authoritarian political context had already been approached by previous scholars in relation to agricultural politics (Kakuba 2021; Byaruhanga 2025). The present work aims to give additional insights more focused on how repressive political context influence communication of NGOs. Further research could be done exploring the discourse struggle between government and local NGOs by focusing more on policy documents since the present thesis explored mainly the struggle between oil company and NGOs. The influence of international political context, especially regarding relations between European companies and African countries (Llavero-Pasquina et al. 2024; Cantoni et al. 2025), could be further explored as well in order to better understand how it impacts communication of international NGOs coalitions. Research conducted on different contexts (countries involved, environmental issues, international stakeholders) could help highlight the main factors influencing discursive practices in such international environmental struggle.

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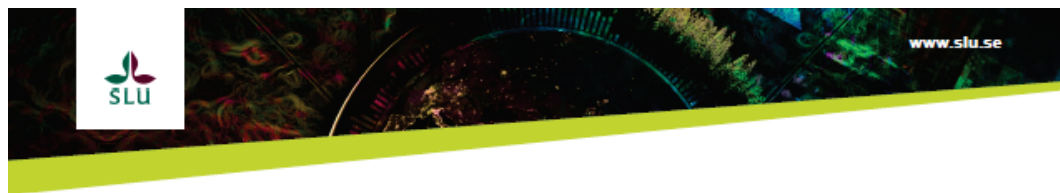
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Popular science summary



Global issue implies global struggle

Discourse struggle surrounding the EACOP project

BACKGROUND

The East African Crude Oil Pipeline, better known as EACOP, is a 1443 km heated oil pipeline project, whose purpose is to export crude oil from Uganda's oil fields of the Lake Albert region to the Port of Tanga in Tanzania.

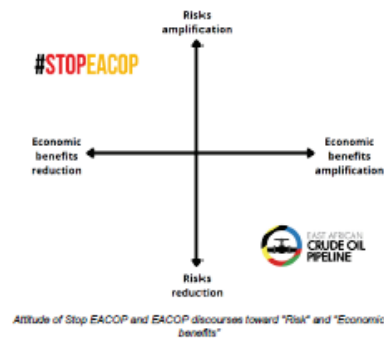
The opposition, including hundreds of worldwide spread NGOs, united under the "Stop EACOP" banner aims to highlight the risks created by such project on climate, biodiversity and local populations.



SUMMARY

This project explores the global discourse struggle between the "High risk, low reward" narrative of the "Stop EACOP" coalition and the "Low risk, high reward" narrative of the EACOP supporters. When zooming into the national and local level, the repressive political context in Uganda forces local NGOs to adapt their communication strategy. The international collaboration and diversity of voices within the Stop EACOP coalition then appear as a strength to protect the frontline activists and foster mobilization against the project.

RESULTS



Global discourse struggle

- Stop EACOP:
 - "High risk, low reward" narrative: oil is a curse
 - "People, Nature, Climate": Broad themes to reach broad support
 - Highlight the controversial project of the opponent
- EACOP supporters:
 - "Low risk, high reward" narrative: oil is a benediction
 - Focus on the expected economic benefits of the project
 - Risks exist but technology will provide a solution to prevent them

Local specificities:

- The diversity of voices within the Stop EACOP coalition enable a tailored communication and thus foster mobilization
- Local NGOs in Uganda and Tanzania are facing violent repression which force them to adopt less confrontational strategies
- International collaboration helps protecting frontline activists

Why is it important?

Discourses are not just words, they are lenses affecting our way to understand physical and social realities. It is then important to understand how discourses related to environmental issues emerge and evolve in order to prevent their potentially harmful implications toward people and biodiversity.



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SCIENCE AND
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AI disclosure

During the preparation and writing of this project I only use two AI based tools: DeepL translator and Buzz (transcription tool). DeepL is a Germany based company complying with the European legislation related to online data protection (General Data Protection Regulation: GDPR). I used DeepL when I wanted to translate in proper English, a specific idea I could only phrase in French. In the entire documents, there are around 20 sentences that have been translated using this tool. For the transcription of interview material, I also used an AI based software called Buzz. This software enables the transcription of audio recording into text. The software runs locally on a personal computer which implies that the audio recording downloaded in the software for transcription are not shared in a cloud service, which reduces the risks for the safety of collected interview data.

Appendix 1: Discourse analysis framework

Discourse analysis framework

Understanding the global discourse struggle surrounding the East African Crude Oil Pipeline project and its specific local characteristics

The following framework, for critical discourse analysis, is especially adapted for text analysis. The framework is divided into four parts, the topic, the lexical aspect, the metaphors and the intertext.

Topic:

Regarding the content: **what** is said; and the context: **who** says it, **whom** is it directed to; **where** the discourse is held

- What is the main topic of the text?
 - o Or what's the 'problem' represented to be? (Bacchi 2009)
- Who is the author?
- To whom is the text addressed?
- How are credibility, acceptability and trust built in the discourse?
 - o Conditions of discourse structuration (Hajer 1997)
- What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this topic/representation of the 'problem'? (Bacchi 2009)

Lexical:

- Which words are chosen to describe the topic/problem representation? How these choices reveal a certain perspective on the topic/problem representation?
 - o Positively or negatively connotated?
 - o How often these connotations are used in the discourse?
- Which words are chosen to describe the different actors? How these choices reveal a certain perspective on these actors?
 - o Positively or negatively connotated?
 - o How often these connotations are used in the discourse?
- To what extent the vocabular and phrase structure is understandable for the expected audience?
 - o Is there an intend from the authors of the text to create confusion the audience?
 - o Ex: cut-off date creating confusion for displaced population (Ogwang & Vanclay 2021)

- To what extent the communication is done in a language that the expected audience master?
 - o Are there potential translation issues that might create confusion for the audience?
- From which field of knowledge, the vocabulary/lexicon comes from in the discourse?
 - o *Ex: managerial, natural science, social science, populist (define as populist because of the positive way they portray acts of local people, and their negative portrayal of foreign interventions) (Adger et al. 2001)*

Metaphors:

- Which are the main metaphors present in the text?
- To what extent these metaphors can be seen as “story lines”: a way bridging several fields of knowledge under a unique representation? (Hajer 1997)
- Which meaning is lost when using metaphors instead of complex description?
 - o *To what extent the use of metaphors can be related to “discourse closure” (Hajer 1997)*
 - o *Shadows the diversity of situations at the local level? (Adger et al. 2001)*
- To what extent these story lines are presented as the standard/routinized way of talking used by different actors? (Hajer 1997)?
- How the repetition of story lines is creating discourse coalitions (Hajer 1997)?

Intertext:

Analysing discourses in an “argumentative turn” way. Considering not only how the discourse itself is presented but also which position is it built against

- Where is the discourse located, both physically (where is the author writing from) and/or digitally (which platform has been used to publish/share the text)? Are these locations freely chosen or imposed by other actors?
 - o *See “elsewhere of the unbuilt” related to multinational energy projects paper (Larsen et al. 2024);*
- In which political and institutional context is the discourse held?
- How is the discourse reacting to previous supporting or opposing discourses?
 - o *Is it part of a wider discourse that structures the way we see the world?*
 - o *Is the discourse built in opposition to another one?*
 - o *Is the discourse supporting a previous similar one?*
 - o *Reusing the frame for discursive practices set by previous speakers?*
- Which new ideas the present text is adding to the broader discussion around the topic at stake?

- **What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?**
 - o Can the 'problem' be thought about differently? (Bacchi 2009)
- **What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?**
 - o *Check gaps between claims and material implementations;*
 - o *Has the discourse been institutionalised (translated into institutional arrangements i.e. concrete policies)?*
- **How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi 2009)**

Appendix 2: Example of codes gathering and analysis via Excel

AIM	SUB AIM	TAG	NB	% SUB AIM
1	2	Trust issue	38	10,8%
1	2	Negative connotation	35	10,0%
1	1	Economic development issue	44	9,7%
1	3	"Danger" lexicon	26	8,4%
1	1	Alternative economic outcome for the region	38	8,4%
1	4	Activism actions	48	7,9%
1	4	In french	47	7,8%
1	2	Bank	25	7,1%
1	3	Example	22	7,1%
1	1	People issue (job, economy)	31	6,9%
1	2	"Danger" lexicon	24	6,8%
1	1	"Danger" lexicon	30	6,6%
1	2	Process critique	21	6,0%
1	2	TotalEnergies	21	6,0%

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