

Natural gas, false hope in climate change campaign?

November 22 2019, by Julien Mivielle



Natural gas is widely seen as key to the fight against global warming but it might be just as problematic as other fossil fuels, critics say

Natural gas is cleaner and produces fewer global warming emissions than other fossil fuels, making it key to our transition to a low-carbon future,

but it comes with its own serious drawbacks.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) said recently that [natural gas](#) is crucial to its sustainable development model which requires oil and coal use to fall sharply if we are to get anywhere near the Paris agreement climate change targets.

Natural gas is relatively cheap, abundant and produces 50 percent less CO₂ than coal, used widely, especially in Asia to generate electricity for fast growing economies.

In its latest annual report, the IEA pencilled in a 10 percent increase in natural gas use through to the end of the 2020s while oil use would have to return to levels last seen in the 1990s.

Some NGOs, however, attack the IEA—set up after the first great oil shock in 1973-74 to advise countries how to manage their energy needs—for being overly beholden to nae-say governments such as the United States, and the huge fossil fuel companies.

Rather than recommending an increase in the use of natural gas, the IEA should be calling for a reduction, they say.

Murray Worthy at Global Witness said "governments should not be misled... and should rather work on closing down existing oil and gas fields, and halting exploration for new reserves."

Significantly, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the lending arm of the European Union, recently announced that it would halt funding new fossil energy projects, including natural gas, from 2022.

Good and bad?

For some, natural gas is the ideal transition fuel, with major companies such as Total and Shell producing increasing amounts and launching new projects which stretch for decades into the future.

"When it burns, natural gas releases less CO₂, nitrous oxide and sulphur than coal or oil," said Nicholas Browne of energy consultants Wood Mackenzie.

"Replacing coal with gas, for example, has had a huge impact on air quality in northern China, with immense benefits in terms of public health," Browne said.

The question however is "if gas and LNG (Liquified Natural Gas) are better, are they good enough?" he added.

Extracting and transporting natural gas notably results in significant emissions of methane, a greenhouse gas 30 times more potent than CO₂.

"Methane emissions linked to... natural gas are largely under-estimated," said Cecile Marchand of Friends of the Earth.

Taken together, it is not necessarily the case that natural gas is so much better than other [fossil fuels](#), Marchand said, and on that basis, it may "not allow us to face up to the climate change challenge."

The gas industry is trying to meet these criticism, committing to reducing methane emissions and developing CO₂ capture systems in the hope of keeping global warming at manageable levels.

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