

# DISCURSIVE HEGEMONY IN MEDIA NARRATIVES ON THE JUST ENERGY TRANSITION PARTNERSHIP (JETP) – A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

This study critically analyzes how media in South Africa construct and negotiate discourse surrounding the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) as a hegemonic battleground between the Global North and the Global South. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the Discursive Hegemonic Mediation (DHM) framework, the research examines seven national media outlets from the period 2022 to 2024, namely Daily Maverick, Mail & Guardian, GroundUp, Africa Energy Portal, eNCA, Eyewitness News, and Africa.com. The study traces how language, narrative framing, and ideological diction mediate power relations between donor countries and domestic actors. The findings show that media function simultaneously as reproducers and challengers of hegemonic discourse. At the textual level, lexical choices such as green colonialism, debt trap, and donor driven agenda represent symbolic resistance to the dominance of the Global North. At the discursive level, independent media construct counter hegemonic narratives grounded in justice and accountability, while corporate media maintain a technocratic tone. At the social level, media discourse transforms passive consent into conditional legitimacy that emphasizes transparency and justice as prerequisites for moral authority. These findings extend Hegemonic Stability Theory by demonstrating that global stability today depends not only on material dominance but also on symbolic and moral legitimacy constructed through public discourse.

Keywords: Just Energy Transition Partnership, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive Hegemonic Mediation, Symbolic Power, Global South

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Behind the rhetoric of global cooperation and the promise of a green transition, the international climate order increasingly reveals its selective and exclusionary nature. The energy transition agenda, often promoted as inclusive, paradoxically reproduces structural inequalities because countries in the Global South are continually urged to accelerate decarbonization without guarantees of equitable financial and technological support. Within this structure, the historical responsibility for the climate crisis is not matched by a redistributive commitment from the Global North. The climate crisis is therefore not only an ecological failure but also a systemic failure to create a global governance architecture that

is fair and equitable (Skillington 2019). The inability of developed states to fulfil their USD 100 billion annual climate finance pledge (Roberts et al. 2021), along with the ongoing ambiguity surrounding the Loss and Damage Fund (Naylor and Ford 2023), illustrates the fragility of collective moral responsibility. The catastrophic 2022 Pakistan floods serve as a reminder that low-emission countries are now forced to bear the weight of a global crisis without proportional support (Nanditha et al. 2023). In this context, the energy transition becomes more than a technical matter and transforms into a contested arena of meaning and power between the Global North and the Global South.

This structural inequality provides the backdrop for the emergence of the Just Energy Transition Partnership or JETP, a collaborative scheme initiated by the G7 with international financial institutions such as the International Partners Group, the Climate Investment Funds, and the Asian Development Bank. The initiative was first launched at COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 (Banerjee 2024). JETP represents the Global North's attempt to craft new financing mechanisms and governance frameworks under the label of a just transition. However, its inaugural implementation in South Africa demonstrates that global power hierarchies remain intact because donor countries continue to dominate the narrative, steer policy direction, and shape the very definition of justice. With a funding package of USD 8.5 billion that consists mostly of concessional loans (Gvantsa Gverdtseteli 2024), South Africa has become a political laboratory for a new form of hegemony where global legitimacy intersects with domestic dynamics shaped by deep racial, economic, and energy inequalities.

The institutional design of JETP in South Africa shows how hegemonic power operates not only through financial instruments but also through symbolic construction. The rhetoric of a just transition promoted by G7 actors is framed as a moral imperative, yet at the national level it generates new forms of dependence on loans and investments dominated by Global North institutions. Mainstream South African media such as Mail and Guardian, Daily Maverick, and GroundUp have become crucial spaces of contestation. Their investigative reporting exposes structural inequalities that remain hidden beneath diplomatic language, ranging from the risk of job losses in Mpumalanga due to coal-mine closures to the lack of clarity in just transition programs for workers and local communities (Steadman et al. 2024). In this situation, the media play a pivotal role because they can either reinforce the legitimacy of Global North narratives or generate spaces of resistance.

Unlike Indonesia and Vietnam, where JETP discourse tends to be filtered through state driven narratives, South African media make use of relatively high press freedom to build a discursive counter space. Public debates highlight the contradictions between claims of a just transition and the realities of post apartheid economic inequality. Alternative narratives often challenge the technocratic assumptions of JETP by foregrounding social justice and workers' economic rights, especially for Black communities that have long been marginalized within the national energy system. The media therefore function not only as channels of information but also as political actors that articulate symbolic resistance to new forms of energy colonialism.

Theoretically, this situation highlights the need to expand Hegemonic Stability Theory into the symbolic and discursive domain. HST, as formulated by

Kindleberger in 1973 and Keohane in 1984, emphasizes the role of a hegemon in providing global public goods to ensure stability. In the South African case, hegemonic dominance manifests not only through economic control but also through the production of meaning that determines who defines justice and transition in global discourse. A discursive hegemonic approach that integrates Gramsci's concept of legitimacy (1971), Keohane's institutional analysis (2009), and critical discourse analysis (de Pinho, Kantorski, and Hernández 2009) helps reveal how hegemony operates through ideas, language, and symbols disseminated in the media.

Methodologically, this study uses critical discourse analysis of South African online media published between 2022 and 2024. The analysis focuses on news framing, dominant sources, and ideological diction that represent the position of the G7 and the normative narrative of justice in the JETP. Texts are interpreted at three levels, namely the linguistic structure, the discursive practice, and the social practice. The textual level highlights moralized lexical choices such as just transformation or green dependency. The discursive practice level investigates how journalists negotiate narratives between national interests and global expectations. The social practice level analyzes power relations among donors, the state, and affected communities. This multilayered analysis allows the study to examine media representations of the JETP in South Africa as an expression of hegemonic intervention in the global energy transition and to evaluate how domestic political configurations and press freedom shape the articulation of discourses that either reinforce or challenge the dominance of the Global North.

### 1.2. Research Question

This study is driven by the question of how mainstream media in South Africa frame the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), and to what extent such discursive constructions function as mechanisms that reproduce or, conversely, challenge the hegemony of G7 countries within the architecture of the global energy transition. Its primary focus lies on how the media construct meaning, interests, and power relations embedded in JETP narratives.

### 1.3. Purpose and Objective

This study aims to analyze how mainstream media in South Africa frame the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) and to assess the role of such discursive constructions in reproducing or challenging the hegemony of G7 countries within the global energy transition.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST)

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) argues that the stability of the international order depends heavily on the existence and capacity of a single hegemonic actor that is willing and able to provide global public goods and uphold the normative structure of the international system. The theory was first introduced by Charles P. Kindleberger in his effort to explain the global economic

crisis following World War I, particularly the Great Depression of 1929. Kindleberger asserted that the failure of the international system at the time was not solely due to the collapse of the global financial order, but more fundamentally a consequence of the absence of a hegemonic leader capable of coordinating a collective response to the crisis. Robert Gilpin later expanded this view by emphasizing that a hegemon not only supplies public goods but also establishes the institutional structure and rules governing the global political economy. Gilpin argued that international order remains stable when one state dominates economically, militarily, and ideologically, and becomes unstable when the hegemon's capacity for dominance declines. Keohane (1984) subsequently reformulated HST by introducing the dimension of institutional legitimacy. He argued that the endurance of hegemonic leadership cannot be maintained by material superiority alone but also requires the active consent of other states to the institutions and norms produced by the hegemon. This reformulation opened space for understanding hegemonic order as a system grounded not only in coercion or capability, but also in normative power and consent.

In contemporary contexts, HST is frequently used to analyze the position of the United States as the post-Cold War hegemon. For example, Hang Nguyen Thi Thuy (2020) argues that despite narratives of American decline, the United States continues to play a hegemonic role in maintaining stability in the global monetary system and in the architecture of international security. Additionally, research by Ndzendze and Marwala (2023) extends the application of HST into the technological domain, showing how U.S. dominance in artificial intelligence development can shape new patterns of stability in a data-driven international system. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the relevance of HST when the world confronted a leadership vacuum in the provision of vaccines and global public health goods (Baykal 2021). The inability of the United States and multilateral institutions to effectively lead a coordinated response revealed the critical importance of a trusted hegemonic actor during global emergencies.

Nonetheless, challenges to HST have intensified as the global architecture becomes increasingly complex and multipolar. Critiques originate not only from critical international relations scholarship but also from postcolonial and feminist approaches that highlight the exclusion of the Global South from the formation of global norms and institutions. HST is also criticized for its strong emphasis on material power and formal institutions while overlooking how power operates through discourse, symbols, and the production of meaning (Gramsci 1971). This dimension is crucial in the study of global energy transitions, where narratives of just transition, sustainability, and climate responsibility often serve as instruments through which hegemonic actors extend their legitimacy. For this reason, HST must be expanded through the integration of symbolic and discursive dimensions to explain contemporary power dynamics more comprehensively. This expanded approach will be developed further in the subsequent subsection on Discursive Hegemonic Mediation (DHM), which seeks to synthesize HST with critical discourse theory and Gramscian conceptions of power.

## 2.2. Discursive Hegemonic Mediation

Antonio Gramsci is a central figure in the development of the concept of hegemony, emphasizing the importance of ideological domination as a primary mechanism of social control in modern societies. For Gramsci, stable power is maintained not only through coercive instruments such as military or economic force, but more fundamentally through the construction of ideological hegemony, a process through which the interests of dominant groups are voluntarily accepted by society because they are framed as natural, legitimate, and morally justified (Gramsci 1971). Hegemony operates through cultural institutions such as the media, education, and religion, which subtly disseminate dominant values until they become common sense and are no longer questioned (Forgacs 2000; Gramsci 1971). Within this framework, power is transformed from coercion into consent that is produced symbolically. The Discursive Hegemonic Mediation (DHM) framework used in this study is explicitly grounded in Gramsci's thought. By positioning the media as a site of ideological articulation, this study not only maps the production of meaning but also traces how energy transition projects such as the JETP become mechanisms for reproducing global power through language that appears neutral but is in fact deeply shaped by hegemonic interests.

This concept emerges from the need to expand the analytical scope of Hegemonic Stability Theory, which places excessive emphasis on material and institutional power. In an era in which the legitimacy of global policies relies on narratives and public representation, discourse becomes the primary arena in which hegemonic power is negotiated. Gramsci's insight that modern political domination rests not only on economic control or coercive force but also on "ideological hegemony," the capacity of dominant elites to render their interests universal and morally reasonable, aligns with critical discourse theory (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2006), which views language as a medium through which power is constituted. Through discourse, hegemonic norms are disseminated, resistance is muted, and alternatives are framed as utopian or unrealistic. By integrating HST with discourse theory, DHM assumes that energy transition projects such as JETP are not merely technocratic policies but also symbolic acts that shape perceptions of justice, urgency, and authority.

A concrete example can be seen in the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) in South Africa, which illustrates how hegemonic discourse operates through linguistic and representational practices in the media. Since the signing of the Political Declaration on the Just Energy Transition Partnership in 2021, mainstream South African outlets such as *Daily Maverick*, *Mail & Guardian*, and *GroundUp* have functioned as arenas of ideological articulation that expose tension between the narratives of international donors and local demands for social justice. Their reporting highlights the contradiction between the USD 8.5 billion funding pledge from G7 countries and multilateral institutions and the socioeconomic realities faced by communities that risk losing their livelihoods due to coal plant decommissioning in Mpumalanga.

Narratives produced by donor actors and the national government tend to emphasize efficiency, green investment, and clean technology as symbols of modernity and progress. However, counter-narratives from civil society, labor unions, and local communities visible particularly in *GroundUp* and *Africa Energy Portal* draw attention to the absence of public participation, unclear direct benefits, and increasing financial dependence on foreign loans. These critiques

do not reject energy transition per se; rather, they demand that the process be participatory and transparent, positioning affected communities as central actors rather than passive recipients of policy.

Other outlets such as *AfricaNews* and *allAfrica.com* highlight political legitimacy issues and the power imbalances between the Global North and Global South, demonstrating how the structure of green-transition financing and discourse often reinforces the symbolic authority of donor states. Meanwhile, *Eyewitness News* (EWN) and *eNCA* show that support for JETP is conditional; the project is considered legitimate only if it delivers transparency, accountability, and social equity. South Africa thus becomes a critical example of how hegemony is exercised not only through material and institutional forces but also through the production of meaning that frames justice, participation, and moral responsibility in the global energy transition.

These dynamics illustrate that hegemonic relations within the JETP project are not merely produced at the level of policy or finance, but are symbolically mediated through discursive practices in the public sphere. Here, the concept of Discursive Hegemonic Mediation becomes essential because it offers a new analytical entry point into how global power operates through language, representation, and moral legitimacy constructed in media arenas. DHM fills a theoretical and methodological gap in energy transition studies by providing a framework for understanding hegemony on a representational level. Rather than treating the media as passive reflectors of policy, DHM positions them as symbolic actors capable of reinforcing, contesting, or resisting global power structures. This model enables a more complex analysis of hegemonic relations, in which global stability depends not only on the distribution of power or the effectiveness of institutions but also on the hegemon's capacity to shape public perception through narratives that are produced, circulated, and legitimized in national media. Therefore, this study contributes not only to the refinement of HST but also expands the scope of energy transition scholarship and critical international relations by bringing communication politics and the symbolic production of power into the center of analysis.

### 3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine how mainstream media in South Africa construct and negotiate meanings surrounding the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP). A qualitative design is employed because the study is concerned with interpretive processes, discursive formations, and power relations embedded in media texts, rather than with measuring frequencies or establishing statistical generalizations. Media coverage is therefore treated as a discursive space in which global energy transition agendas and domestic political interests intersect.

The empirical material consists of online news articles published by major South African media outlets, including Mail & Guardian, Daily Maverick, eNCA, Eyewitness News (EWN), GroundUp, AfricaNews, and Africa Energy Portal. These outlets were selected purposively based on their national reach, editorial credibility, and sustained coverage of energy, climate, and public policy issues. Articles published between 2022 and 2024 were collected to capture evolving public debates from the

initial announcement of the JETP to its subsequent implementation and contestation. Data collection was conducted through systematic searches of online archives and search engines using keywords such as Just Energy Transition, JETP, climate finance, G7, and energy transition.

Data analysis is conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on Fairclough’s analytical framework to examine the relationship between language, power, and social context (Fairclough 1995). At the textual level, the analysis focuses on lexical choices, narrative structures, and representational strategies through which the JETP is framed. At the level of discursive practice, attention is given to the production and circulation of news texts, including the positioning of authoritative actors and the boundaries of permissible critique. At the level of social practice, discursive patterns are interpreted in relation to broader political–economic conditions of energy transition, donor–recipient relations, and South Africa’s position within global climate governance. Through this approach, the study highlights how media discourse does not merely report on the JETP but actively participates in shaping its legitimacy and contestation within the global energy transition.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

##### 4.1. Media Profile in South Africa

Africa, the media play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), one of the country’s most significant energy transition initiatives. The diversity of South Africa’s media landscape from energy policy portals to grassroots advocacy outlets offers a wide spectrum of narratives related to energy, development, and climate justice. Therefore, before conducting the framing analysis, it is essential to understand the characteristics, orientations, and audience segments of each media outlet examined.

Table 1 maps the profile of the media selected for this study, ranging from investigative platforms such as *Daily Maverick* and *The Mail & Guardian*, to real-time news providers like eNCA and Eyewitness News, and advocacy-oriented outlets such as *GroundUp News*. While some platforms focus on policy analysis and regional energy market dynamics, others emphasize social inequality and the impacts of the energy transition on local communities. This mapping enables the study to trace how the framing of the JETP is shaped by ideological, economic, and social factors within South Africa, while also providing a basis for comparison with similar discursive dynamics in Indonesia and Vietnam.

**Table 1. Profile of South African Media Outlets Analyzed in the JETP Framing Study**

Media	Media Profile (Type, Reach, Ownership)	Reference
Africa Energy Portal	Specialized information portal on Africa’s energy sector.	<a href="https://africa-energy-portal.org/about-aep">https://africa-energy-portal.org/about-aep</a>

Media	Media Profile (Type, Reach, Ownership)	Reference
Africa.com	A leading African news and insights platform providing comprehensive content on the continent, including “Afrimedia” (a country encyclopedia), breaking news, analysis, and features on issues such as gender equality and women’s empowerment, politics, economics, and social challenges including food crises, conflict, and renewable energy developments. It serves as a key information hub on African dynamics for global audiences.	<a href="https://africa.com/about-us/">https://africa.com/about-us/</a>
AfricaNews	A multilingual pan-African news media outlet (“made by Africans for a rising Africa”) providing 24/7 news from an African perspective.	<a href="https://static.euronews.com/africanews/press/14052018_PRESS_KIT_AFRICANEWS_English.pdf">https://static.euronews.com/africanews/press/14052018_PRESS_KIT_AFRICANEWS_English.pdf</a>
AllAfrica.com	A pan-African news aggregator and producer with broad Africa-to-global reach.	<a href="https://allafrica.com/misc/info/about/">https://allafrica.com/misc/info/about/</a>
Daily Maverick	A South African digital news platform (with a weekly print edition) focused on investigative journalism and opinion analysis.	<a href="https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/about/">https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/about/</a>
eNCA	A South African television and digital news channel providing daily national news with extensive national reach.	<a href="https://www.enca.com/">https://www.enca.com/</a>

Media	Media Profile (Type, Reach, Ownership)	Reference
Eyewitness News (EWN)	A national news service owned by Primedia, supplying news to major radio stations (702, CapeTalk, 947, KFM) and operating as a mainstream news portal.	<a href="https://www.ewn.co.za/">https://www.ewn.co.za/</a>
GroundUp News	A nonprofit media organization specializing in public-interest journalism and human rights reporting.	<a href="https://groundup.org.za/about/">https://groundup.org.za/about/</a>
The Mail & Guardian	An independent investigative newspaper focusing on democracy, governance, and South African politics.	<a href="https://mg.co.za/about/">https://mg.co.za/about/</a>

Source: processed from research data, 2025

#### 4.2. Media Framing of the JETP in South Africa

South Africa’s major media outlets frame the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) as a contested arena between hopes for energy transformation and suspicions of donor-country dominance. Based on coding results from nine leading media platforms Africa Energy Portal, AfricaNews, Africa.com, allAfrica.com, Daily Maverick, eNCA, Eyewitness News (EWN), GroundUp News, and The Mail & Guardian a relatively consistent discursive pattern emerges: media emphasize social justice, transparency, and national sovereignty as essential prerequisites for legitimizing the energy transition. In this context, the JETP is not portrayed merely as a technocratic initiative but as a political space in which the meaning of a “just transition” is openly debated.

Overall, local representation receives substantial attention. Nearly all outlets highlight the voices of affected communities, labor unions, local energy actors, and civil society organizations. Statements such as “Affected communities must be actively involved in coal plant decommissioning decisions” (eNCA) and “Small-scale fishers feel energy project decisions have never truly involved them” (GroundUp) reinforce a bottom-up orientation in discursive construction. Within the framework of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), this pattern suggests that the legitimacy of global energy governance depends not only on the leadership of hegemonic states but also on local acceptance as the moral and social foundation of authority.

Legitimacy emerges as the most intensively discussed issue. Nearly all media argue that the JETP can only be considered legitimate if it is implemented transparently, inclusively, and equitably. Daily Maverick notes that “a lack of

transparency risks eroding the JETP’s legitimacy in the eyes of the public,” while Africa.com asserts that “policy legitimacy will be tested when the public experiences tangible benefits.” These narratives indicate a form of discursive accountability, where the validity of a policy is assessed not solely through technical outcomes but through an open and participatory process.

The contours of media critique toward the JETP become even clearer when examining direct quotations from related articles published by various South African news outlets below.

**Table 2. Media Framing of the JETP in South Africa Based on Key Quotations  
(2022–2024)**

<b>Media</b>	<b>Article Title</b>	<b>Key Quotations</b>
Africa Energy Portal	Just energy transition for Africa	“Availing African countries with adequate concessional financing in a timely manner will enhance their trust in developed economies.”
Africa.com	Africa Will Not Cope with Climate Change Without a Just, Inclusive Energy Transition	“It is important that we see the bigger picture, different groups, especially women and the vulnerable, have been left furthest behind. The energy transition process has presented an opportunity to make it right.”
AfricaNews	South Africa: Industrial Giants Threaten Energy Transition (NGO)	“This lobbying puts in danger the climate objectives of the country... the government’s measures are not strict enough, while Eskom and Sasol defend their fossil fuel interests.”
allAfrica	COP29 - Africa's Negotiating Strategy Must Build On Past Lessons	“Only about 24% of the JETP funding gets to reach South African institutions ... the rest is absorbed by donor agencies.”
Daily Maverick	What happened to the Just Energy Transition grant funding?	“Only a tiny fraction of the JETP funding has been provided as grants. The majority were concessional and non-concessional loans, which adds to South Africa’s debt burden.”
eNCA	COP28: SA Pioneered Plans to Transition to Renewable Energy – What Went Wrong	“Climate finance can replicate unequal, neocolonial dynamics through green structural adjustment... The Just Energy Transition model risks serving the interests of foreign capital.”
Eyewitness News (EWN)	Energy portfolio committee members against	“When the power stations close down, you must know that town

Media	Article Title	Key Quotations
	decommissioning of coal power stations without a plan for surrounding communities	will be a ghost town.”
GroundUp News	Climate Activists Picket at Parliament – Accuse COP26 of Excluding African Farmers	“The Rural Women’s Assembly criticised the COP26 talks in Scotland for excluding the voices of small-scale African farmers and others most affected by global warming.”
The Mail & Guardian	SA’s Progress on Climate and Just Transition Hindered by Incoherent Policies, Weak Governance and Inconsistency	“South Africa’s just transition efforts are being undermined by incoherent policies, weak governance and inconsistency between political statements and actual implementation.”

Source: processed from research data, 2025. Supporting files can be accessed at [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BPer\\_R-kn00Yl-0svc6mjw9NAUZ8qHSN?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BPer_R-kn00Yl-0svc6mjw9NAUZ8qHSN?usp=drive_link)

These quotations illustrate the South African media’s systemic critique of the JETP’s funding model and institutional design, which are viewed as marginalizing local participation and normalizing donor dominance. Power asymmetry also emerges as a central focus. Nearly all outlets highlight the dominance of G7 countries, the European Union, and multilateral institutions in determining the direction of the energy transition. Statements such as “The energy transition must not be controlled by donor elites” (Africa.com) and “The JETP scheme often reinforces donor-state control” (Africa Energy Portal) signal the media’s efforts to shift the discursive framework from passive acceptance toward active negotiation of global power structures. From the perspective of Discursive Hegemonic Mediation (DHM), this demonstrates how South African media function as mediating agents that renegotiate the meaning of hegemony by foregrounding justice, sovereignty, and policy autonomy.

Financial dependency is the most critical dimension linking national realities to the structure of the global economy. Media such as GroundUp and The Mail & Guardian highlight the risks of a “debt trap” and fiscal pressure due to foreign loans. Expressions like “external loans may become a new debt trap” reveal the tension between the need for financing and fiscal independence. Here, financial discourse is politicized: aid and loans are not merely economic instruments but symbols of power within the global architecture. This analysis confirms that financial dependency operates as a form of symbolic hegemony, in which hegemonic power is reproduced through the language of assistance and collaboration.

In terms of implementation, media criticism revolves around slow project realization, regulatory overlaps, and weak governance. Eyewitness News, for instance, reports that “programs frequently change without a clear and consistent roadmap,” while Daily Maverick emphasizes that “the promises of energy transition have yet to be felt at the community level.” These critiques are

emancipatory rather than oppositional; they represent a call for governance reforms that are more transparent and responsive to socio-economic realities on the ground. This pattern suggests that support for the energy transition is not a form of compliance but the result of discursive negotiation that prioritizes public accountability.

Despite their critical tone, nearly all media outlets maintain support for the principle of a clean energy transition. This support is conditional: the project is considered legitimate only if its process is fair, its benefits are equitably distributed, and it does not deepen existing inequalities. Statements such as “The energy transition is essential, but it must not leave vulnerable communities behind” (Daily Maverick) and “Public support is strong when the transition roadmap is clear and just” (eNCA) reflect a balance between optimism and caution. The overarching sentiment across the media landscape can be described as cautious optimism, acknowledging JETP’s potential while remaining alert to risks such as greenwashing, debt dependency, or elite capture.

Shifting the analysis to the micro level reveals how this discursive construction is materialized through linguistic choices and narrative styles. At the micro-textual level, an examination of language use across South African media shows how ideology and power operate through diction and sentence structures. For example, GroundUp News frequently employs metaphors such as “debt trap” and “donor diktat” to critique the JETP’s financial architecture, which is perceived as binding the country into dependency relations. This lexical framing positions donor countries not as development partners but as hegemonic actors embedding symbolic domination through economic assistance. Meanwhile, Daily Maverick uses normative modalities such as “must” and “is vulnerable,” as in the sentence “Policies formulated without broad participation are vulnerable to community rejection.” Linguistically, this construction articulates a legitimacy strategy rooted in the morality of participation: a policy is considered legitimate only when it aligns with norms of social justice.

Africa Energy Portal adopts a more moderate narrative style, using phrases like “local solutions have proven effective in expanding energy access,” which implicitly shifts authority from donor actors to local communities. AfricaNews and eNCA blend optimism with caution through terms such as “full transparency,” “fair roadmap,” and “public trust,” indicating that legitimacy is produced through a balance of moral confidence and political vigilance. In contrast, The Mail & Guardian intensifies the ideological function of language by deploying metaphors such as “green colonialism” and “domination by donors,” reinforcing the asymmetric relationships between the Global North and the Global South.

These patterns show that, at the textual level, media outlets do not merely convey factual information but construct political reality with distinct moral, emotional, and ideological inflections. Language serves as a hegemonic medium shaping public perceptions of who has the authority to define “justice” and “transition.” Thus, JETP discourse in South Africa is not semantically neutral; it constitutes a site of meaning-making in which power is negotiated, resistance emerges, and legitimacy is contested through linguistic choices and narrative structures.

#### 4.3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of South African Media Narratives

Discourse surrounding the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) in South Africa has developed within a media landscape that is highly critical of Global North dominance and sensitive to historical inequalities. Reporting from *Mail & Guardian*, *GroundUp*, *Africa Energy Portal*, *allAfrica*, and other outlets shows that the energy transition is not treated merely as a technical issue but as a contested arena in which meaning is negotiated between international donors and local communities. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the analysis reveals that South African media construct three layers of discourse: resistant textual constructions, diverse editorial mediation processes, and social articulations that reflect structural inequalities between the Global North and the Global South.

At the textual level, South African media employ linguistic choices that intentionally distance themselves from donor-generated narratives. *Africa Energy Portal*, for example, critiques profit-oriented logics in the energy transition by insisting that the process must “prioritise people over profits,” while *Mail & Guardian* portrays donors as “silent predators” within the energy ecosystem. Phrases such as *donor-driven agenda*, *green colonialism*, and *elite dominance* function not only as criticism but also as indicators that the energy transition is viewed as a process that risks reproducing long-standing inequalities in a new form.

Within the sphere of discourse production, each media outlet positions itself differently. *Mail & Guardian* emphasizes policy misalignment, weak governance, and the socio-economic uncertainty facing workers. *GroundUp* offers greater visibility to communities and Indigenous groups, including highlighting claims that African farmers were “excluded from COP discussions.” *Africa Energy Portal* foregrounds issues of energy sovereignty and the urgency of bottom-up transition models. *allAfrica.com* articulates a vision of African regionalism, asserting that the continent must “own its idea of a just transition.” These editorial distinctions demonstrate that South African media are not mere conveyors of information but discursive actors mediating contestation between community solidarities, state interests, and donor pressures.

The social layer reveals deeper contextual dynamics. Discourse on the energy transition in South Africa unfolds against the backdrop of a history of energy colonialism, structural dependence on foreign financing, and tensions between domestic development needs and global climate standards. Media question the viability of transition models heavily reliant on external funding, including the risks of debt traps and policy conditionalities perceived as insensitive to local circumstances. *Mail & Guardian* notes that progress is hindered by “incoherent policies and weak governance,” which ultimately undermines public legitimacy. Concerns over job insecurity among coal workers and the potential marginalization of local communities reinforce skepticism about whether donors adequately understand South Africa’s socio-political context.

Despite this criticism, the media do not reject the energy transition. Instead, they express strong support for a clean energy future that is just, inclusive, and rooted in domestic agency. Calls for a *bottom-up approach*, *people-centred transition*, and *local ownership* signal that the legitimacy of the JETP cannot arise simply from agreements between governments and donors, but must

emerge from the participation of communities who directly experience the impacts of change. Here, the logic of Discursive Hegemonic Mediation becomes clear: media do not dismiss donor hegemony outright but renegotiate it so that the moral authority of the energy transition must be proven through social justice, transparency, and public accountability.

Taken together, South African media narratives demonstrate a sophisticated form of counter-hegemonic literacy. Rather than accepting the transition as a universalized policy package, the media construct localized interpretations that foreground energy sovereignty, community participation, and social justice as core foundations. The energy transition is therefore not viewed merely as a technological shift, but as a political process that must align with South Africa’s own values. As a result, the hegemonic stability of the G7 in the realm of global energy transitions becomes fragile when it fails to negotiate shared meanings of justice with the South African public. Through these discursive articulations, the media illustrate that the future of energy will be determined not only by donor financial capacity but also by the social legitimacy emerging from communities who feel they have a voice in shaping the direction of transition.

To clarify the relationship between theory and data, the following table presents the operationalization of CDA used to analyze South African media coverage included in the research dataset.

**Table 3. Coding Categories: Operationalization of Theory for Fairclough’s Discursive Analysis**

<b>Coding Category</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>	<b>Discourse Analysis Indicators</b>	<b>Textual Evidence from Media</b>
JETP Framing	Framing the JETP as a donor-driven agenda that does not always align with local needs and may risk overlooking affected communities.	Resistance diction: <i>donor-driven, elite dominance, profit-first.</i>	Africa Energy Portal – “A just energy transition must prioritise people over profits”
Framing G7	Representation of donor countries (G7/Global North) as actors that dictate the direction of the transition or reinforce structural inequalities.	Narratives of <i>green colonialism</i> , Western dominance, critiques of donor leadership.	The Mail & Guardian – “Silent predators in the energy transition”
Local Representation	Highlighting the voices of communities, activists, mine workers, academics, and local governments demanding a transition grounded	Quotations from community groups, grassroots organizations, labour unions, environmental activists.	GroundUp – “African farmers excluded from COP talks”

Coding Category	Operational Definition	Discourse Analysis Indicators	Textual Evidence from Media
	in local needs.		
Legitimacy	Public perceptions of JETP’s credibility, which depend on transparency, governance quality, and local consultation.	Critiques of policy incoherence, weak governance, calls for accountability.	The Mail & Guardian – “SA’s progress on climate and just transition hindered by incoherent policies and weak governance”
Power Asymmetry	Hierarchical relations between the Global North and South Africa, including agenda dominance, policy pressure, and financial inequality.	Narratives of subordination, donor dependence, foreign agenda-setting.	Eyewitness News (EWN) – “South Africa cannot rely on Western nations to dictate its energy future”
Financial Dependency	Dependence on foreign funding that may create fiscal pressure or new debt burdens for South Africa.	Diction: <i>debt trap, foreign loans, donor conditions.</i>	GroundUp – “Loans from external actors could become new traps”
Implementation Critique	Barriers to implementing the energy transition, including lack of community planning, infrastructural limitations, and weak institutions.	Narratives: lack of social-impact planning, policy misalignment, institutional fragility.	The Mail & Guardian – “Renewable energy sector doesn’t provide long-term job security”
Support for Energy Transition	Positive narratives on the urgency of energy transition, climate justice, and development opportunities that benefit communities.	Diction: <i>people-centered transition, community-first, justice-based.</i>	Africa Energy Portal – “Bottom-up approach is essential for a truly just transition”

Source: processed from research data, 2025.

Based on the table above, it is evident that the nine coding categories form an interconnected discursive configuration through which South Africa’s energy transition is interpreted. Taken together, these patterns produce a general sentiment that is critical yet constructive: the media support the goals of energy transition but reject funding structures and leadership models that fail to account for local context.

Within the framework of Hegemonic Stability Theory, these findings expand our understanding of how hegemonic stability is shaped not only by the distribution of material capabilities but also by the distribution of meaning. While classical HST views stability as the outcome of effective hegemonic leadership, the findings here demonstrate that hegemonic stability is discursive in nature; it can only be maintained when media and civil society recognize its moral legitimacy. When local media challenge that legitimacy, hegemonic structures become fragile.

Through the lens of Discursive Hegemonic Mediation, South African media

function as agents that both mediate and disrupt global flows of meaning. They transform the universal narrative of “clean energy” into a discourse infused with local interests, social justice demands, and resistance to donor dominance. This shows that hegemony is not a fixed structure but a continuous process of negotiation between global ideas and local contexts.

The analysis of South African media reveals that the JETP is understood as a test case for fair global governance. The media operate not merely as transmitters of information but as arenas in which meaning is reproduced and transformed. They reject elite-driven and donor-driven models of transition while constructing alternative discourses grounded in participation, transparency, and energy sovereignty. By operationalizing Hegemonic Stability Theory and Discursive Hegemonic Mediation, this study demonstrates that global hegemony can only be sustained if it successfully negotiates legitimacy within domestic public spheres. In South Africa, that legitimacy is no longer determined by donor power but by the extent to which the public feels it has a voice in shaping its own energy future.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

This study concludes that the media in South Africa play a crucial role in shaping the moral and political legitimacy of the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP). Through layered discourse, the media demonstrate that global hegemony in the energy transition is not only material but also symbolic. The findings show that hegemonic power operates through the politics of meaning, expressed through language, framing, and moral claims that normalize donor dominance under the narrative of climate justice.

At the textual level, critical discourse analysis reveals that lexical choices such as “green colonialism”, “debt trap”, and “donor driven agenda” represent forms of ideological resistance to G7 narratives. These linguistic strategies illustrate how local media transform technocratic language into moral and political critique of global inequality.

At the level of discursive practice, intertextuality across media outlets shows diversity in ideological positions. Independent and progressive outlets such as Daily Maverick, Mail and Guardian, and GroundUp construct counter hegemonic discourse that prioritizes participation, justice, and local ownership. In contrast, corporate media such as AfricaNews and Africa Energy Portal tend to reproduce technocratic frames that reinforce donor legitimacy. This pattern shows that the media ecosystem functions as a dynamic arena for negotiating meaning rather than merely a tool for replicating hegemonic power.

At the level of social practice, the discourse surrounding the JETP indicates that hegemonic consent is conditional and that legitimacy must be continuously negotiated. South African media have shifted passive consent into performative legitimacy, in which transparency, accountability, and justice become prerequisites for public moral approval. This shows that hegemony in the Global South can only endure if global narratives are localized and morally justified within domestic public spheres.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of Hegemonic

Stability Theory (HST) and Discursive Hegemonic Mediation (DHM). The results demonstrate that contemporary global stability no longer depends solely on economic dominance but on the hegemon's ability to control moral narratives of justice. In other words, hegemonic stability is constructed discursively and mediated symbolically, with the endurance of the international order determined by the acceptance of ideas legitimized through public discourse.

Thus, South African media have recontextualized the JETP as a site of moral politics in which legitimacy is continually contested between global power and local society. This conceptualization represents an important contribution to the study of International Relations and Global Environmental Politics because it reveals that symbolic power mediated through language and discourse is a foundational element of contemporary hegemony.

## **5.2. Recommendations**

### **1. For Policy Formulation and Governance**

The JETP framework needs to move beyond a donor-centric logic toward a model of co-production of climate finance that emphasizes community participation and transparency in the distribution of benefits. Governments in the Global South are encouraged to institutionalize mechanisms of discursive accountability so that narratives of justice and local needs can serve as the foundation for every stage of international negotiation. This approach ensures that climate assistance does not become an instrument for reproducing new forms of financial dependency.

### **2. For Media and Civil Society**

Media institutions are expected to continue acting as discursive mediators that oversee public policy and channel community voices toward international actors. Collaboration among journalists, academics, and activists should be strengthened to translate the technocratic language of policy into moral narratives that are accessible to the public. Such efforts will expand societal participation in shaping a just and equitable energy transition

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