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FUELLING DELAY

How fossil fuel interests shape global climate negotiations

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How fossil fuel interests shape global climate negotiations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fossil fuel industry has long cast a shadow over international climate negotiations. From working behind the scenes to blocking stronger policy language on phasing out fossil fuels, to spreading climate disinformation at conference side events, high-polluting industries have never been passive observers at the UN climate conferences. Yet, as the climate crisis intensifies, there is no time for further delay.

The world currently prepares for the 30th annual UN climate conference, the Conference of the Parties (COP30), in Belém, Brazil. This conference marks an important milestone in global climate governance, as all countries are expected to present updated national climate plans and commit to more ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets in order to keep the world on track to meet the targets set out in the 2015 Paris Agreement.

But this cannot happen without confronting specific concerns, in particular those of high-emitting industries exerting undue influence, whose business models are fundamentally at conflict with emissions reduction goals. These groups frequently employ disproportionate and opaque pressure on national-level climate policymaking, skewing decisions in their favour and undermining the international goals for addressing the climate crisis. Unless this influence is better understood and addressed, there is a real risk that UN climate talks lose credibility and fail to deliver equitable and science-based climate action.

This report explores how fossil fuel influence may be embedded in the very architecture of climate diplomacy. Drawing on interviews with state

negotiators and observers, the report identifies four interconnected channels through which fossil fuel interests have shaped, and continue to shape UN climate negotiations:

- The **first channel** is historical and refers to the early influence of fossil fuel interests over the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The report shows how fossil fuel lobbyists were present at the dawn of the UN climate regime, working closely with states unwilling to take action in order to shape the Convention's foundational architecture. Together, they pushed for consensus-based decision-making, which enables a single country to obstruct progress, and ensures that commitments remained voluntary rather than binding. By embedding procedural tools that favour delay and dilution, fossil fuel interests aimed to create an international climate regime that could be exploited.
- The **second channel** operates upstream of the negotiations and concerns influence over state negotiation positions. Based on interview findings, even before delegates arrive at the COP, their positions are shaped by domestic political contexts in which fossil fuel interests often hold disproportionate sway. In many countries, constraints are set by ministries whose priorities at time reflect short-term economic interests, including fossil fuel production and consumption. Civil society actors who face resource constraints have limited access to influence processes. Meanwhile, fossil fuel companies enjoy privileged access to decision-makers, shaping policies through excessive lobbying, political donations, and institutional ties.

- The **third channel** unfolds within the negotiation rooms themselves. As documented in the report, delegates affiliated with fossil fuel interest groups, who are sometimes granted official negotiator status, can influence the direction of discussions. Industry-linked advisers may contribute to drafting interventions and shaping negotiation strategy, which could influence the ambition of the language that states propose. The COP Presidency itself is not immune from influence. Its informal power to shape narratives, broker compromises and manage access makes it a critical actor that fossil fuel interests would try to capture, therefore requiring special oversight.
- The **fourth channel** lies beyond formal negotiations. COPs have evolved into major political and commercial events, with pavilions, side events and informal gatherings forming a key part of the experience. As reported by observers, these spaces have become fertile ground for fossil fuel companies to promote favourable narratives about “solutions” that often perpetuate fossil fuel use under the guise of climate action. Pavilion programming often reflects the interests of corporations, who can afford to pay to rent the spaces, while civil society and those with fewer resources struggle to make their voices heard.

Despite these challenges, the report also highlights instances of progress. Civil society mobilisation and political pressure have occasionally shifted the COP outcomes in favour of the interests of vulnerable groups, as well as promoting greater transparency and accountability. The establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27, for instance, was the direct result of sustained campaigning from climate vulnerable countries and their civil society allies. More recently, reforms to the UNFCCC registration system have strengthened transparency around COP participants, albeit only to a limited extent. These positive examples demonstrate that change is also possible, however these advances are insufficient for meeting the urgent challenges of the climate crisis.

To restore trust and legitimacy in the multilateral climate process, COPs must confront the risks of undue influence head-on. This means drawing clear lines between public interest and private gain and ensuring that those most affected by the climate crisis, not only those most responsible for it, have a meaningful seat at the table. The recommendations that follow offer a roadmap for change. They focus on strengthening

transparency, accountability, and integrity, both within the UNFCCC and in the national processes that shape state negotiation mandates..

Recommendations

- The UNFCCC should adopt clear, system-wide definitions of conflicts of interest and undue influence applicable to state Party delegates, accredited observers, and COP Presidencies. These definitions will lay the groundwork for all other integrity measures.
- Parties should control the privileged access granted to fossil fuel and other high-polluting industry representatives in Party delegations. They should disclose all relevant affiliations and interests of delegation members in an open, accessible format. The UNFCCC Secretariat should issue guidelines to support these practices.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should require all COP participants to disclose institutional affiliations, including ties to lobbying firms and industry groups. Participants should be required to declare their alignment with the goals of the Convention and the Paris Agreement. The Secretariat should reform registration categories to prevent obscuring industry links.
- COP Presidencies should act impartially, regardless of their specific national or business interests. The UNFCCC Secretariat should encourage public disclosure of any financial or personal ties that could affect impartiality. It should set standards that discourage COP Presidents from holding interests in fossil fuel-related entities. The Secretariat should encourage COP Presidencies to publish all meetings and partnerships linked to the Presidency, and ensure oversight.
- Parties should promote inclusive representation when forming national negotiation positions for COPs, and ensure full transparency of meetings and consultations in the process. Parties should ensure legal protections of environmental defenders and whistleblowers, and ethics training for civil servants to safeguard the integrity of processes in the lead up to COP.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	6
INTRODUCTION	7
Methodology	8
UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS OF UNDUE INFLUENCE IN UN CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS	9
What is undue influence?	9
Undue influence at the UNFCCC?	9
THE FOUR KEY CHANNELS OF FOSSIL FUEL INTEREST INFLUENCE OVER THE UNFCCC	12
Early influence at the UNFCCC level	12
Influence over Party negotiation positions	16
Influence within the negotiation rooms	20
Influence in non-negotiation spaces	26
CONCLUSION	29
Recommendations	29
ENDNOTES	31

ACRONYMS

AGN African Group of Negotiators

ANDOC Abu Dhabi National Oil Company

COP Conference of the Parties

G77 Group of 77

GCA Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action

GST Global Stocktake

IPCC Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

LMDC Like-Minded Developing Countries

NAZCA Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action

NCQG New Collective Quantified Goal

NDC Nationally Determined Contribution

NGO Non-governmental organisation

OPEC Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

UAE United Arab Emirates

UNFCCC United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

YOUNGO Children and youth NGO Constituency

INTRODUCTION

This year is critical for global climate governance. In 2025, all Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)¹ are expected to publish updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), national plans outlining how each country intends to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate impacts over the coming decade. This collective update serves as the Global Stocktake (GST), and provides an opportunity to evaluate whether the world is still on track to achieve the Paris Agreement's goals of holding global temperature increase to "well below 2°C" and pursuing efforts to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.²

At the same time, 2025 will host the 30th annual UN climate change conference, the Conference of the Parties (COP), to be held in Belém under the Brazilian Presidency. Environmental organisations, climate scientists, and those on the frontlines of climate action are anxiously awaiting whether the updated NDCs will deliver the ambition needed to keep the 1.5°C target within reach, and what outcomes COP30 will deliver on key agenda items under discussion, such as mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage.³

Part of this anxiety stems from growing concerns that the COP process, in its current form, lacks the necessary safeguards to protect climate negotiations from the undue influence of major greenhouse gas polluters, particularly from the fossil fuel industry, whose profits rely on continued rise in emissions.⁴ A joint civil society submission to the UNFCCC from 2022, endorsed by 126 UNFCCC observer organisations and networks, states: "Climate action will continue to fail to meaningfully address the climate crisis as long as polluting interests are granted unmitigated access to policymaking processes and are allowed to unduly influence and weaken the critical work of the UNFCCC."⁵

Undue influence describes situations in which special interest groups exert disproportionate and opaque pressure over policymaking processes, resulting in decisions that favour those particular groups at the

expense of the public interest.⁶ In international climate negotiations, questions about undue influence often centre on high-polluting industries, those whose operations release substantial amounts of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The role and extent of their influence in international climate diplomacy raises the question of whether the UNFCCC, the body mandated to organise and oversee the COP, has decision-making processes and practices that are fit for purpose.⁷ Civil society groups and observers often argue that without taking steps to address this issue, COPs risk being captured by the very industries most responsible for driving climate change.⁸

Undue influence is notoriously difficult to research and identify, as it takes place in secrecy and often through mechanisms that may formally adhere to legal norms while still distorting the fairness, transparency, or integrity of policy outcomes.⁹ Yet these concerns are not unfounded. Over the years, several high-profile cases have shaped the public perception of undue influence at UN climate negotiations.

In 2018, for example, *The Intercept* reported that a Shell executive, speaking at a COP24 side event in Katowice, openly boasted that the company had influenced the Paris Agreement, including making proposals on Article 6 and the Rulebook, elements of which were ultimately reflected in the final text.¹⁰ In 2021, the Boston Consulting Group was awarded a £1 million contract to help organise the COP26 in Glasgow, despite having previously undertaken work for leading oil and gas companies worldwide.¹¹ Such cases raise concerns about potential conflicts of interest,¹² as well as about power imbalances. Against this backdrop, communities most affected by the climate crisis have long struggled to have their voices meaningfully heard by world leaders.¹³

There are many reasons why COPs are criticised for delivering underwhelming climate outcomes. Among these, the influence of fossil fuel interests is well recognised.¹⁴ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change (IPCC) in its 2022 assessment identified such vested interests as one of the most significant barriers to ambitious climate action globally.¹⁵

However, systematic research into *how* fossil fuel interests shape COP outcomes remains limited, with only a handful of notable exceptions. Existing studies on climate obstructionism at the UNFCCC have documented how certain state Parties, most notably the United States and Saudi Arabia, have leveraged their negotiating power to secure outcomes favourable to domestic fossil fuel industries.¹⁶ Other studies have traced the activities of non-state actors linked to the fossil fuel industry,¹⁷ including the growing presence of fossil fuel lobbyists at COPs.¹⁸ Additionally, some analysis have highlighted how host country presidencies have abused their position to broker side deals in the fossil fuel sector.¹⁹ This report further contributes to this body of research by exploring *how* fossil fuel interests exert influence over international climate negotiations.

It is among the first to map the dynamics of fossil fuel influence at the UNFCCC level. This report explores how their influence manifests, and what implications it can have for COP outcomes. It concludes with recommendations for the UNFCCC Secretariat, COP Presidencies and Parties to foster a more transparent, equitable, and accountable negotiation environment.

Following the introduction of the research methodology in the next section, the report discusses perceptions of undue influence in the UNFCCC negotiation processes. The subsequent section explores the four key channels through which fossil fuel interests exert influence in relation to the UNFCCC, as identified through the research. The final section summarises the main findings and puts forward recommendations.

Methodology

This report is based on a unique series of research interviews conducted during spring and summer 2025. In total, 39 semi-structured interviews were carried out, including:

- 19 high-level country negotiators from diverse backgrounds, 10 from industrialised countries listed in Annex I of the UNFCCC, and nine from non-Annex I “developing countries”;
- 14 UNFCCC observers from civil society, four of whom previously held state Party badges, i.e., were part of a national delegation as advisers to

negotiators;

- Six academic researchers who have studied the UNFCCC process from various disciplinary perspectives over the years.

Throughout the report, interview data is cited using the following abbreviations: Negotiator (N), Observer (O), and Researcher (R). Each citation is followed by a number (e.g., N3, O7, R2) to indicate the interviewee.

These interviews were complemented by direct observations at COP29 in Baku in November 2024, and at the 62nd Subsidiary Body meeting, the mid-year negotiation session, in Bonn in June 2025. The analysis further draws on an extensive review of literature on the UNFCCC, climate obstructionism and undue influence, as well as relevant UNFCCC data and documents. Findings are also informed by academic and civil society literature on lobbying and influence in climate policymaking.

This report is the second output of this research. The first working paper, titled *“Behind the Badge: Understanding the roles, reach, and risks of fossil fuel industry participation in UN climate talks”*, was published in June 2025.²⁰ The paper examines the growing presence and influence of fossil fuel industry actors at UN climate negotiations. It highlights how these actors, often embedded within national delegations or observer groups, can exert influence on international climate policymaking, especially in the absence of robust conflict of interest rules at the UNFCCC. The paper provides analysis of the avenues through which they can shape outcomes. While this report builds on the findings of the working paper, it does not present a detailed analysis of individual actors representing fossil fuel interests. For that information, readers are encouraged to consult the working paper.

To reduce complexity, the analysis focuses solely on fossil fuel interests, i.e., people, organisations, and companies (including private, state-owned, or mixed-ownership entities) that are connected to the fossil fuel industry and seek to protect or promote the continued extraction, production, and use of fossil fuels. It should be noted that these interests represent just one part of the polluting industries present at COPs. Other interest groups include agrobusinesses, pesticide manufacturers, large-scale forestry companies, and extractive industries, for example.

UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS OF UNDUE INFLUENCE IN UN CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS

What is undue influence?

Undue influence refers to the distortion of public policymaking by powerful interest groups advancing their agendas at the expense of the public good. The concept arises from broader debates about how states create and implement public policies to address collective challenges, such as the climate crisis. While public policies should ideally reflect the needs and interests of society, in practice, it is often shaped by actors with disproportionate access to decision-makers.²¹

Importantly, not all influence is undue. Legitimate lobbying and advocacy can contribute to informed policymaking by bringing a range of expertise and perspectives into the process. Influence becomes undue when actors with significant resources and privileged access seek to manipulate public decisions through covert, misleading, or deceptive means, which may include distorting public discourse, misrepresenting evidence, or putting pressure on officials.²² This results in policy outcomes that favour a narrow group at the expense of the society at large.²³

Undue influence is sometimes described as a subtle form of corruption, as it typically operates through legal or formally accepted mechanisms of influence, such as lobbying and political finance, rather than outright bribery.²⁴ However, when transparency and accountability are absent, policy process becomes vulnerable. Unregulated lobbying and opaque political donations can then be used to secure preferential treatment, giving special interest groups excessive influence. This could result in policies that only benefit fossil fuel producers, for example.

When undue influence becomes systematic, it can escalate into policy or institutional capture. In such cases, public institutions and decision-making process are consistently steered to serve vested interests.²⁵ This weakens the integrity of policymaking, deepens inequalities and power imbalances in society, and reinforces perceptions that politics is unfair or “captured.” Ultimately, it erodes trust in public institutions.²⁶

Undue influence at the UNFCCC?

Perceptions of undue influence by polluting interests frequently emerge in the context of the UNFCCC, particularly during the annual COPs. These concerns stem from persistent structural flaws in the UN negotiation process, which is often characterised by deep inequalities, both among Party delegations and observers, and a lack of transparency. It is widely acknowledged that not everyone can participate equally in climate negotiations.²⁷ Disparities in resources, capacity, and access to information mean that delegates from wealthier and politically powerful countries or entities tend to exert greater influence than those from lower-income states or groups.

Resource constraints are particularly evident in the size of Party delegations. Only wealthy countries can afford to send large teams to conferences, accompanied sometimes by hundreds of Party overflow delegates, i.e. government listed observers who cannot speak on behalf of the country. The fact that there is no cap on the number of delegates that countries can send means that only some Parties are able to handle the

increasing number of parallel negotiation streams and agenda items.²⁸ In contrast, smaller and lower-income states may only be able to send a handful of representatives, as can be seen from the official UNFCCC List of Participants.²⁹

Several negotiators interviewed for this report described how limited resources prevented them from staying for the full duration of COPs or covering all negotiation streams, especially during the critical final days when decisions are finalised within their respective tracks (N4, N9, N10, N11, N16, N17). As one negotiator noted, “towards the end, that’s when everything gets heated, nobody’s there to cover it anymore” (N9). Despite financial support mechanisms such as the UNFCCC Trust Fund for Participation, material barriers, including travel, accommodation, food costs, and visa requirements, continue to restrict the participation of lower-income countries, particularly those classified as “developing countries” by the UNFCCC.³⁰

Capacity limitations further hinder meaningful engagement. Less experienced delegations often lack the technical and legal expertise needed to assess whether highly technical proposals are in their country’s interest.³¹ While wealthier countries begin preparing their negotiating positions months in advance, often as early as January (N6), less-resourced countries may only begin preparations shortly before COP (N4, N10, N19). They may also face barriers related to English language skills, which affect negotiators’ ability to participate meaningfully especially in informal meetings.³²

These inequalities relating to resources and capacities also extend to observer participation. UNFCCC data reveals stark regional imbalances. At COP28 in Dubai, for example, nearly half of all registered observers came from the Western European and Other States group,³³ despite this group representing only around 12 per cent of the global population.³⁴ The underrepresentation of regions and communities from the Global South undermines the inclusivity of the process and limits the diversity of voices in global climate governance. In contrast, actors affiliated with major polluting industries often have access to significantly greater resources, enabling them to sustain a strong and visible presence at COP spaces, as further discussed in the subsequent sections.

Transparency challenges are another key source of concern. Scholars and negotiators alike describe a “democratic deficit” at the UNFCCC. They explain that often the most contentious aspects of negotiations take place behind closed doors (N9, N19), bypassing

consultations with all Parties.³⁵ One negotiator highlighted how individual Parties might deliberately withhold key information until the last minute to avoid debate and pressure others into accepting decisions (N19).

Beyond the negotiation process itself, concerns also arise around who participates in COPs and what interests they represent. Civil society organisations have long called for the UNFCCC Secretariat to introduce greater transparency and accountability requirements, particularly regarding the declaration of COP participant affiliations and disclosure of potential conflicts of interest.³⁶ At COP29, nearly 15 per cent of all participants (over 6,200 individuals) chose not to disclose their affiliations, and notably, more than 90 per cent of these held official national badges as Party or Party overflow delegates.³⁷ While the Secretariat has introduced new voluntary transparency measures for observers in September 2025,³⁸ there is still no systematic monitoring of their accuracy, and no equivalent requirements for Party delegates.

Moreover, the UNFCCC still lacks clear definition of conflicts of interest applicable to Party delegates, accredited observers, and COP Presidency teams. Such conflicts of interest may arise, for instance, when Party delegates undermine its negotiation outcomes in defence of state-owned or multinational fossil fuel companies based in their countries.³⁹ This regulatory gap enables industry interests, particularly those misaligned with the UNFCCC goals, to participate without adequate scrutiny, compromising the integrity of COP decision-making process.⁴⁰

Taken together, these shortcomings create a perception that disproportionate power is held by well-connected, resource-rich groups. This includes the ability of high-polluting industries to shape global climate policy in a way that serves their agendas and economic interests, rather than the mandated goal of addressing the climate crisis. Such perceptions of undue influence undermine trust in the COP process and weaken both ambition and outcomes for global climate action.

Addressing the structural imbalances and transparency gaps that give rise to these concerns is therefore essential, not only for procedural justice, but also to ensure that climate negotiations deliver results that reflect the urgency of the crisis and the needs of those most affected by it. Crucially, restoring public trust in multilateral climate governance under the UN depends on confronting these challenges head-on.



THE FOUR KEY CHANNELS OF FOSSIL FUEL INTEREST INFLUENCE OVER THE UNFCCC

The previous section showed how structural inequalities and transparency gaps within the UNFCCC can create fertile ground for undue influence. Building on this, the following section examines how fossil fuel interests specifically exert influence over the international climate regime.

This report identifies four key channels through which fossil fuel interests have shaped, and continue to shape UN climate negotiations, namely (1) early influence at the UNFCCC level, (2) influence over Party positions ahead of COPs, (3) influence within negotiation rooms, and (4) influence in non-negotiation spaces at COPs. Drawing on interviews and existing studies, the next subsections illustrate how influence is exerted through these channels, often resulting in COP outcomes that benefit fossil fuel interests. This dynamic raises serious questions about undue influence in the UNFCCC spaces and its impact on the legitimacy and effectiveness of multilateral climate governance.

Early influence at the UNFCCC level

In June 2024, the play *Kyoto* premiered at the Swan Theatre in London. Set during the international climate talks at the Kyoto Conference Centre in December 1997, it tells the story of American fossil fuel industry lobbyist Don Pearman and exposes the

industry's attempts to obstruct progress towards achieving the landmark Kyoto Protocol.⁴¹ The play serves as a stark reminder that efforts by the world's biggest polluting industries to deny, delay and dilute climate action have been a defining feature of international climate negotiations since the dawn of the UN climate regime.

The fingerprints of polluting interests were already visible in the negotiations that led to the adoption of the UNFCCC in 1992, and they played a central role in shaping the “rules of the game” in subsequent years.⁴² Industry lobbyists such as Don Pearman, worked closely with negotiators from countries that were unwilling to take action and instead thought to weaken the Convention, influence negotiation procedures in their favour, and ensure that commitments remained voluntary rather than binding. Several interviewees recalled that, in the early years of international climate talks, lobbyists would openly socialise with senior delegates from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and would even pass notes during plenary sessions that delegates would then read out (O9, N8, N13).

Together, these fossil fuel industry-aligned actors made several early strategic interventions that shaped key aspects of the UNFCCC, including its power asymmetries and the incremental nature of its decision-making processes.⁴³ As one negotiator described it, they “remade the world in their image” (N8):

“If you go back to the early days of the Convention, with the Pearmans and so forth wandering around, there were very active attempts to influence Parties and what the outcomes were. I do recall seeing him in Bonn Hotel Maritim with Mohammad Al-Sabban, who was the head of the Saudi delegation at the time, coming back from what must have been a very nice dinner together, almost dancing, looking very happy with each other. They sort of remade the world in their image. So, there were interests of that sort, which have made no hiding of their desire to do this.

Negotiator 8.

These interventions left long-lasting marks on the UNFCCC processes. For example, Saudi Arabia and its allies from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) blocked proposals on majority voting procedures, leaving a system where UNFCCC decisions to this day require consensus from every country.⁴⁴ Consensus-based decision-making is often said to give each Party the right to block an unwanted proposal. However, this power is not distributed equally among Parties (N18), and previous studies have shown that consensus often results in the least ambitious outcome.⁴⁵ This system has therefore given Parties seeking to obstruct ambition in the negotiations significantly more leverage, as they have historically maintained inflexible positions and disproportionately used their veto power to slow progress.⁴⁶

Saudi Arabia also introduced an agenda item on “response measures”, which discusses that fossil fuel-producing countries should be compensated for the social and economic losses resulting from climate change mitigation measures.⁴⁷ The issue of economic

damages from lost fossil fuel sales was linked to discussions about climate adaptation finance, which has complicated negotiations for poor and vulnerable countries for years.⁴⁸

Even the terminology was contested. Attempts to use the word “carbon” was opposed in favour of the more generic term “emissions,” which arguably made responsibility for climate action less clear by shifting the attention away from fossil fuel production.⁴⁹ To this day, explicit references to “carbon” and “fossil fuels” are rare in negotiated outcomes; the UAE Consensus agreed under the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Presidency at COP28, is a notable exception.

Early interventions in the UNFCCC were part of a broader obstructionist strategy that the global fossil fuel interests have pursued since the 1980s. Extensive research has documented the wide range of tactics used by the industry to hinder ambitious climate action at local, national, or international levels,⁵⁰ which can be broadly categorised as:

- Strategies targeting the public through disinformation campaigns designed to sow doubt, delay action and weaken support for strong climate policies.
- Strategies targeting policymakers through lobbying and political financing to spread misleading information, and weaken or delay climate regulation, both domestically and internationally.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the fossil fuel industry has been and continues to be a major driver of climate change not only directly through the greenhouse gas emissions it produces, but also indirectly, by shaping the very policies that were supposed to constrain it.⁵¹

However, blatant lobbying at the UNFCCC was largely unique to the early days of climate negotiations. At that time, many state delegations lacked the technical capacity to negotiate climate change effectively, as it was a new and complex policy area (N13). This capacity gap created a demand for individuals with expertise in climate science, multilateralism and legal issues to support delegations by developing negotiation strategies, conducting background research and drafting submissions and interventions. While some vulnerable countries sought expertise from environmental NGOs in the Global North, several oil-producing states instead turned to Washington-based fossil fuel lobbyists whose interests aligned with their own (N13).

Over time, however, this picture has changed. Three decades of negotiations have led to the professionalisation of climate diplomacy within state institutions. Some countries, particularly wealthier European states, now employ civil servants who are full-time climate negotiators (N4, N13). Oil-producing states, who once relied on external advisers, now have “extremely talented negotiators themselves” (N13; also, O6, R4, N11).

The business landscape has also diversified. Alongside the fossil fuel sector, a broader range of industries are now interested in the negotiations, including renewable energy companies and coalitions such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and the We Mean Business Coalition. These actors often pursue agendas that differ from, or even oppose, those of the fossil fuel industry, helping to create a more balanced mix of business voices. This trend is echoed in recent analysis from the LobbyMap platform, which shows that more companies in the EU are now supporting climate policies that align with science.⁵² It reveals that as of 2025, over half of the businesses tracked by the platform show positive engagement with the EU Green Deal, more than double the number from 2019, while fewer companies are pushing against climate action. Although fossil fuel companies remain influential, this still represents a significant change from the early years, when business representation was reportedly almost entirely dominated by fossil fuel interests (O9).

Finally, the architecture of international climate governance has shifted since the Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015. Under the Agreement, mitigation relies primarily on the voluntary emissions reduction efforts set out by the states in their respective NDCs, in line with their national circumstances, development priorities and needs.⁵³ At the international level, binding obligations are now largely procedural, such as national greenhouse gas emission reporting, and the submission of new NDCs as part of GST for a periodic assessment of collective progress towards the global temperature goals. As one observer noted, “the Paris Agreement hollowed out mitigation from the global sphere almost entirely” (O6). Interviewees argue that this shift has made national capitals, where decisions on NDC ambition are taken, the key battleground for fossil fuel lobbying (O2, O3, O6, O7, O9, N6, N8, N13, N18). Accordingly, the following section will delve into how Party positions are shaped ahead of each COP within domestic political contexts.



Influence over Party negotiation positions

While COPs tend to capture headlines, the negotiation process does not begin or end there. It is a year-round cycle, and much of what plays out at COP is already shaped in advance. One crucial link in the chain of fossil fuel influence over COPs lies at the national level, where countries develop their negotiation positions. Understanding how the positions are formed is key to understanding why fossil fuel interests retain such a strong hold over international climate talks.

Why some countries adopt positions that obstruct progress on climate action is a complex question, shaped by many factors, including the influence of national industries, dependence on fossil fuel extraction or imports, and domestic politics.⁵⁴ These political and economic contexts shape preparations for COP, and national positions often tend to mirror governments' overarching strategic priorities.

On major political issues such as climate finance and energy transition, many countries reportedly adopt rigid, long-term negotiation positions (N1, N4, N5, N11, N14, N19). This is because these positions are rooted in governments' foreign policy frameworks, economic strategies or budgetary constraints. For instance, when it comes to matters such as fossil fuel subsidies or pledges on climate finance, negotiators claim that they themselves have little room to deviate from their governments' instructions (N5, N7, N11, N19). As one negotiator put it:

“Most of the time our position is fixed through the negotiation mandate, especially the key lines. So, if we speak about climate finance, how far we can go, because that's the budget that will be our parliamentary budget, that is determined in advance, there's not much room for influence.

Negotiator 1.

These broad positions are then fleshed out in greater detail by environment or foreign affairs ministries ahead of the June Subsidiary Body sessions (also called informally as “mid-year COPs”) or COP itself. The process typically involves negotiators reviewing the agenda, identifying priorities, as well as potential allies and opponents, and drawing red lines (N13, N14). Draft positions are then consolidated into formal papers, which are reviewed by other ministries or parliaments and signed off before the conferences (N1, N2, N5). In the EU, national positions are fed into the bloc's common stance, finalised by Council of Environmental Ministers conclusions in October.

Domestic coordination is not simply a formality. Inter-ministerial bargaining can dilute or even block policy ambition when other ministries prioritise immediate economic interests. One negotiator recalled:

“The Ministry of Economy once asked us not to join a specific declaration on just transition. Taking this into account, the Ministry of Environment did not join the initiative that year. [...] This was because the Ministry of Economy was wary of how the initiative would affect our mines.

Negotiator 4.

This example illustrates how short-term economic interests can shape the ambition that negotiators bring to the negotiating table, leading to sub-optimal climate outcomes. From Subsidiary Body sessions to pre-COP meetings, positions are continually adjusted. They are further shaped by compromises needed to align with Party negotiation groups (N11, O4), coalitions of countries that coordinate their positions and negotiate collectively based on shared interests. By the time delegations arrive at COP venues, most decisive negotiation points have already been set, and key points of tension identified.

In this process at the national level, interviews show that civil society and other non-state actors encounter substantial obstacles when attempting to influence Party positions, though these obstacles can vary

considerably from one country to another. While some ministries organise informal exchanges in the lead-up to COP, these are usually information-sharing exercises. During these exchanges, ministries present their position, answer questions, and take comments, but there is no formal obligation to incorporate feedback in country positions (N1, N6, N8, N12, N15, N16).

Civil society groups often have fewer resources, which limits their access to decision-makers through lobbying. A recent analysis by Transparency International EU reveals a stark imbalance, showing that corporate interests dominate lobby meetings with management-level staff at the European Commission by a large margin.⁵⁵ Only 16 per cent of all meetings held since December 2024 were with civil society representatives. Among the top 20 most active lobbying organisations, just three are NGOs, while sectors such as agriculture, automobiles, chemicals, big tech, and finance dominate the rankings.

Fossil fuel interests thus enjoy far greater access. Both negotiators and observers widely acknowledged that the lobbying by fossil fuel industry in the capitals greatly shapes domestic policy, which in turn guides the positions negotiators are expected to represent (O2, O3, O6, N6, N8, N13). As one negotiator explained:

“ There might be lobbying in Parliament. What we do is relate to the current policies of the government. That’s the only thing we relate to. And that policy, of course, is framed by the political parties. The political parties have different views on the petroleum industries and oil and gas production.

Negotiator 6.

Previous research has demonstrated how fossil fuel interest groups and allied actors from other high polluting industries have employed deliberate political tactics and lobbying efforts to maintain laggard positions on climate change in countries such as Australia and the United States and have also influenced the climate leadership in countries such as Germany.⁵⁶

In the United States, industrial lobby groups, conservative think tanks, foundations, partisan media, and PR firms have for decades spread disinformation and promoted climate scepticism.⁵⁷ By contrast, in Australia during the 1990s and 2000s, the government itself became the main voice driving climate scepticism and denial, often framing the debate around the economic costs of mitigation.⁵⁸ In Germany, major firms and business associations, with vested fossil fuel interests, reportedly have maintained close ties with both centre-right and centre-left political parties and repeatedly tried to weaken renewable energy policies, despite publicly endorsing the Paris Agreement goals.⁵⁹

Using tactics such as intensive lobbying, political financing, and the promotion of sceptical narratives on affordability and energy security, polluting industries have exerted significant influence over state policies globally.⁶⁰ For instance, recent reports have shown that the fossil fuel industry spent at least US\$445 million during the last election cycle in the United States to influence politicians, particularly the Republican Party and Donald Trump, who subsequently withdrew from the Paris Agreement.⁶¹

Many governments are heavily invested in the continued production and consumption of fossil fuels. InfluenceMap reports that 16 of the top 20 highest emitting entities in 2023 are state-owned enterprises.⁶² The analysis also shows that these entities tend to be even more resistant to climate regulation globally and operate with less transparency compared to investor-owned companies. All of this limits how flexible individual negotiators can be at COP.

Yet the pre-determined “red lines” in national positions are not entirely immovable. Shifts can occur when political pressure builds during the negotiations, particularly under the leadership of the host country or in response to broader geopolitical developments (O6, N7, N8, N13, N18, N19). In some cases, strategic coordination among Parties may push them to adjust even their most rigid positions (N2). This is especially true when heads of state or senior government representatives are present to resolve issues requiring high-level government approval (N3, N4).

One positive example of this is the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh. The EU initially arrived in Egypt firmly opposed to creating a new fund, arguing that it would complicate an already fragmented climate finance landscape (N2, N15). Yet sustained pressure from developing countries and civil society created a political environment in which maintaining this position became increasingly difficult. In the second week, following the ministerial coordination, the EU reversed course and endorsed the new fund (N15). As one negotiator recalled:

“...the pressure was so high, not least from civil society actors, that there needed to be an outcome which concluded with a fund. So, that in the end shifted [the EU] position, I would say. And it’s difficult to say that it was a particular actor who was driving that. But the general mood was very much building towards that kind of outcome. So, I think it made quite a lot of sense for the EU also to shift then its position in favour of having the fund.

Negotiator 2.

Thus, there remains an important space to influence negotiation outcomes once talks are underway. The following section will delve into the intricacies of the influence dynamics within negotiation rooms.



Influence within the negotiation rooms

The third channel of fossil fuel interest influence at COP lies within the negotiation rooms themselves. As noted earlier, Party positions reflect national and sectoral interests, including, at times, vested interests. Yet negotiating teams still retain some autonomy in how they operate at COP, particularly through the way they formulate interventions, propose specific wording for negotiation texts, and respond to shifting dynamics. This leaves room for individual judgement and influence for negotiators within the boundaries of their national mandate.

In this setting, the key actors of influence are often the Party delegates themselves, including negotiators and their advisers holding a Party badge. This subsection discusses the three main channels of influence inside the negotiation rooms: (1) delegates influencing other delegates, (2) advisers influencing delegates, and (3) observers influencing delegates. It also reflects on the role of the COP Presidency in shaping the COP outcomes.

DELEGATES INFLUENCING OTHER DELEGATES

Because each country determines the composition of its negotiating team, individuals with direct or indirect ties to fossil fuel interests are sometimes included in official state delegations attending COPs.⁶³ Once inside the process, these delegates may influence negotiations from within, often drawing on their technical expertise and domestic political networks to advance strategic goals.⁶⁴ In some cases, they play an active role in steering the negotiation process.

Some interviewees noted how countries with better-prepared negotiators and greater political backing often dominate the Party negotiating groups, which is lending their position even greater authority (N3, N19). For example, a negotiator from a developing country expressed frustration that, within the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC), Saudi Arabia's position frequently overshadowed those of others, more climate-vulnerable countries, which may have very different aspirations about mitigation (N19). Previous research shows that OPEC countries have been disproportionately represented in leading roles within the largest negotiating group of developing countries, Group of 77 (G77), between 1994 and 2004, granting their positions greater legitimacy and influence in discussions.⁶⁵ These examples demonstrate how

internal group hierarchies and negotiating capacity can enable the interests of fossil fuel industry to dominate deliberations. They also show how they shape COP outcomes in the name of a wider coalition of countries, despite failing to reflect the needs of all its members.

A related obstructionist dynamic is the tactical use of alliances. Fossil fuel-producing countries, notably Saudi Arabia, strategically position themselves as defenders of developing countries' interests by voicing critical perspectives towards Global North countries. This is often recognised by negotiators and observers alike as a political move to divert attention away from obligations to mitigate climate change to demands for climate finance, and by doing this, they delay the progress on the former (O6, R5, N1, N19). Nevertheless, it resonates with the priorities of most developing states and helps to build alliances that generate reciprocal support across multiple negotiation tracks.

Such networks are particularly valuable when negotiating technical issues that have not been pre-agreed at the national level. For example, discussions around whether to include a reference to the IPCC's Seventh Assessment Report in the next GST cycle illustrate how negotiators can shape outcomes (N19). Including such a reference would ensure that the most recent climate science is reflected in COP texts. However, proposals like this face often resistance from fossil fuel interests, as they limit the political space for delaying mitigation efforts. As one negotiator noted:

“ There’s plenty of room in the negotiations for negotiators to make a difference. So, the Finance Ministry or the trade-related people [at home] are never going to tell you that you couldn’t invite the IPCC to align their seventh report to the next GST cycle. And that’s something that the fossil fuel industry would like to prevent from happening.

Negotiator 19.

Different state Parties position on these matters may reflect the individual judgement of negotiators, as well as the influence of their personal and political networks in COP spaces (N19).

ADVISERS INFLUENCING DELEGATES

Another important influencing channel for fossil fuel interests is through advisers and capacity-building activities. Just as environmental NGOs and climate policy experts often provide negotiators with pro bono support, fossil fuel industry actors also offer advice and train negotiators who share their positions and interests.

Advisers and subject-matter experts are frequently included in national delegations. According to the COP29 List of Participants, around 10 per cent of delegates holding Party badges declared themselves to be unpaid advisers to negotiating teams.⁶⁶ Their core tasks include conducting background research, drafting talking points or speeches for negotiators and heads of state, and identifying opportunities for intervention. While advisers rarely speak on the negotiation floor themselves (O3, O4, O5, N18, N19), their role behind-the-scenes allows them to shape the level of ambition of interventions in the negotiation process.

Advisers linked to fossil fuel industries are frequently part of Party delegations, which reflects the alignment between state negotiating positions and the industry interests (O2). At COP29, for example, 74 per cent of “fossil fuel lobbyists” who held Party badges were affiliated with state-owned or partially state-owned companies.⁶⁷ This also underlines the close and institutionalised connection between national delegations and domestic fossil fuel sectors.

The industry influence is not limited to the support provided during negotiations. Fossil fuel interest groups reportedly offer specialised training programmes for negotiators (N19). For example, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries holds workshops “to develop Arab negotiators’ skills on climate change issues.”⁶⁸ The OPEC Fund for International Development also frequently hosts specialised workshops and seminars on climate change and energy transition designed to develop the legal and negotiation skills of professionals from OPEC’s member countries.⁶⁹ In addition, youth delegates have indicated that some peers attending COPs have received funding from fossil fuel companies (O5). This has allegedly prompted internal debates within YOUNGO (the official children and

youth constituency of the UNFCCC) concerning the potential conflicts of interest such sponsorship may entail (O5).

The inclusion of delegates linked to various industries and the private sector is not limited to oil-producing countries. Many national delegations involve business representatives in advisory roles. For instance, the UNFCCC List of Participants shows that a Nestlé employee was registered as an adviser for the Swiss delegation at COP29.⁷⁰ As one negotiator noted, when companies join national delegations, the exchanges that follow can influence positions, since “engaging with companies leads to interesting discussions and can cause us to think differently about our position” (N1).

In interviews, several negotiators explained that giving Party badges to non-governmental groups, such as civil society, youth groups, and the private sector, is often justified as a way to promote transparency, since it helps them better understand the COP process (N1, N2, N4, N6, N8, N12, O7). They acknowledged the “awkwardness” of the situation, where individuals with no formal connection to the state are nonetheless put in a position to represent it. At the same time, they stressed that everyone on the negotiation team is required to follow the Party line in all interactions, with some delegations even obliging external members to sign non-disclosure agreements (N6). As one negotiator explained:

“ These members can participate in the discussions, and sometimes they can actually negotiate or participate actively, but most of the time, [these] are not necessarily new positions, it’s not that [they] can influence the position per se, but it’s more like whatever the government wants to do, people have to support that position.

Negotiator 12.

Because these practices are normalised, the influence of fossil fuel industry-linked actors within delegations often remains invisible. Most negotiators see a Party's position purely as the government's stance, regardless of who is voicing it (N4, N6, N8):

“ For us, when those signals come from a multilateral setting, these come from Parties. We do not relate to companies in the rooms. If government employees or governments are influenced by industries in their position-setting, that is another question, and that is something I do not personally relate to. I relate to the position that the country has said what they say, that is their country position, and that they have strategic and substantive interests because of their country policies to pursue those kinds of positions.

Negotiator 6.

Several negotiators said they were frustrated by Parties trying to delay progress in international talks (N1, N4, N5, N9, N11, N12, N14). However, they did not attribute obstruction to the influence of fossil fuel lobbyists, but rather to state interests themselves (N1, N2, N4). Interestingly, this reveals a discrepancy in how the problem is perceived by civil society groups and some negotiators. Observers frequently condemn fossil fuel lobbyists for shaping COP outcomes,⁷¹ but negotiators often perceive the same interventions as Party positions driven by domestic political interests (N4, N6, N13).

OBSERVERS INFLUENCING DELEGATES

Finally, it is important to consider the influence that observers can exert over the negotiation process. This type of influence by fossil fuel lobbyists is often assumed,⁷² yet it is the hardest to detect. Formal avenues for observers to influence negotiations are limited,⁷³ and relationships between fossil fuel industry representatives (holding observer badges) and Party delegates are rarely publicly visible (N1, N4, N12, N13). As one researcher put it, “I believe there are fossil fuel folks at COP, but who are they?” (R5).

Several interviewees emphasised the quiet, low-profile presence of observers linked to the fossil fuel industry in the negotiation rooms (O2, O6, R4, N12, N13). One observer described how “fossil fuel companies [...] play a very low-key role, more about keeping tabs on what’s happening than anything else, and then there is a lot of silence from them, a lot of kind of lurking in the corners” (O6). Both negotiators and observers view this pattern of monitoring and gathering information about how the talks might affect the business aspect as one of the main ways in which industry actors use their observer status (O2, O6, R4, N12, N13).

However, such monitoring is not without impact. When key moments arise, they actively communicate with their partner governments. A prominent example of this occurred at COP28 in Dubai when OPEC circulated a letter (later leaked) to its 13 member governments, as well as 10 OPEC+ allies including Russia and Mexico, urging them not to support language on fossil fuel phaseout, and expressed fear that turning away from oil and gas would endanger the prosperity of their citizens.⁷⁴

More broadly, observers do formally engage in the negotiation process through their constituencies. For example, they can deliver short statements and arrange meetings with negotiators at COP. Yet bilateral engagement is viewed as more effective, and here personal relationships matter. Several observers noted that they invest considerable time in cultivating ties with individual negotiators, which can later lead to informal meetings where specific suggestions or updates are discussed (O8, O9, O10, O11, O12, O14, N12). These interactions often extend beyond official spaces. Dinners and receptions provide opportunities for exchanging ideas in less formal settings, which can help build trust and exert influence outside the spotlight (O9, O12).

THE ROLE OF THE COP PRESIDENCY

The COP Presidency plays a pivotal role in shaping the ambition, integrity and outcomes of climate negotiations. While its formal mandate is to act impartially and facilitate the process, in practice, the Presidency exerts considerable influence over the direction of negotiations,⁷⁵ as well as how the conference is organised, and which interests are raised in the room (N8).

Interviewees consistently emphasised that the climate leadership demonstrated by the Presidency can be a decisive factor in how successful a COP is perceived to be. This is particularly true when the host country puts in place an experienced and politically skilled team (O9, N4, N5, N14, N15). In such cases, the Presidency can help countries navigate complex negotiations, build consensus, and push for ambitious outcomes (O6, N7, N8, N13, N18, N19).

However, the Presidency itself can become a channel for fossil fuel industry influence. In recent years, concerns over the close ties between COP Presidencies and national fossil fuel industries have led to increased scrutiny of how they handle pressure and about competing interests during negotiations. For instance, the appointment of Sultan Al Jaber as COP28 President, while he was simultaneously serving as CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), raised widespread alarm. In 2021, ADNOC pumped 2.7 million barrels of oil per day and planned to double its production by 2027. Similarly, COP29 President Mukhtar Babayev previously held roles in Azerbaijan's national oil company, SOCAR, whose executives and board members were reportedly also involved in the COP29 organising committee.⁷⁷

These cases were widely seen as conflicts of interest, especially in light of investigations by Global Witness which revealed that both Presidencies used their roles to facilitate bilateral fossil fuel deals in the run up to the conferences.⁷⁸ Such actions not only damage the credibility of the COP process but also violate the UNFCCC's Code of Ethics, which prohibits representatives from using their role "as a means to seek private gain."⁷⁹

In the lead-up to and during the COP, the Presidency's informal signalling and political messaging can influence the course of the negotiations and how they are perceived. For example, Poland, a country highly dependent on coal production, was widely criticised for the decision to host the conference organised by the World Coal Association on the sidelines of COP19 in Warsaw, with critics arguing that this move was undermining the credibility of the talks.⁸⁰ At COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev publicly framed natural resources, including oil and gas, as a "gift from God", arguing that countries should not be blamed for bringing these resources to the market because there is a global demand for them. These examples illustrate how host country interests can influence the narrative around the conference, even outside formal negotiation spaces.

COP Presidencies, particularly those from major fossil fuel-producing countries, can face intense pressure from domestic and international fossil fuel interests in the run up and during the conferences. Interviewees noted that the UAE Presidency at COP28 was under pressure from fellow oil producers, who resisted commitments to reducing emissions (N15, N18, R6). One observer recalled how, during the negotiations, the Presidency particularly struggled to secure commitments from Saudi Arabia and other fossil fuel-producing countries to include reference to fossil fuels in the outcome text (O9).

At the same time, Presidencies have to respond to mounting demands from other Parties as well as observers, and the UAE Presidencies was also under pressure to ensure that fossil fuels were referenced. According to one observer, the situation became so tense that some countries were seeking legal advice from the Secretariat about the consequences of refusing to agree on the GST outcome (O6). This pressure ultimately pushed the Presidency to find a language that could satisfy both sides:

“ In Dubai, if there wasn’t a reference to fossil fuels in some way, there would have been essentially a walk out. There were countries in Dubai asking: what happens if we just refuse to agree and there’s no outcome for the Global Stocktake? [...] So, that was really kind of Parties pushing the President’s hand to some extent. And the President, understanding that a successful COP meant that these words had to be there, and finding something around that.

Observer 6.

At the final stages of negotiations, Presidency’s role becomes especially pronounced. Several negotiators noted that a small group of powerful countries, such as the United States, EU, China, India, and Saudi Arabia, can exert significant pressure in plenary sessions, threatening to block outcomes unless their preferred language is included (N4, N5, N18). In these moments, the Presidency must engage directly with these actors to broker compromise that also considers the demands from developing and climate-vulnerable states. Consequently, the choice of COP Presidency and its team structure can significantly impact the outcomes of the COP. At the same time, the integrity of the Presidency and therefore trust Parties have towards the host of COP, can greatly impact the conference outcomes.



Influence in non-negotiation spaces

The final layer of fossil fuel influence lies outside the negotiation rooms. COP is not only a negotiating forum, but also a global political stage where state and non-state actors come together to network and discuss climate solutions. The Blue Zone, which accredited delegates can access, includes not only negotiation rooms, but also pavilions, side event areas, and exhibition halls, which in the last years have become a source of recurrent controversy.

Over the past decade, the role of non-negotiation spaces has grown as participation in COPs has expanded dramatically. Before COP21 in Paris, typical conferences rarely attracted more than 10,000 participants, with COP15 in Copenhagen an only outlier at over 25,000.⁸¹ Since Paris, “mega-COPs”⁸² have become the norm. COP28 in Dubai was attended by nearly 84,000 participants, while COP29 in Baku hosted around 54,000, making it the second-largest COP in history.⁸³ Importantly, negotiators make up only a fraction of these numbers. At COP28, for example, only about one-quarter of participants were negotiators, the rest being observers, Party overflow delegates, media, or other attendees.⁸⁴ At the same time, the majority of “fossil fuel lobbyists” attending COPs also hold observers, Party overflow, or other badges.⁸⁵

This growth has turned COPs into a vibrant ecosystem of parallel activities. In the last three COPs, for example, there were between 340 and 380 official side events, almost double the number from a decade ago, with much of the growth driven by observers.⁸⁶ However, this only represents the tip of the iceberg, as unofficial side events and panels in the pavilions are not systematically monitored. Taken together, these trends highlight the dual nature of COPs. While they continue to be sites for decision-making, they have also evolved into trade fairs, networking hubs, and platforms for shaping global climate discourse.⁸⁷

FOSSIL FUEL NARRATIVES AND “FALSE SOLUTIONS”

In this context, a recurring concern raised by civil society is that the industry-linked actors exploit non-negotiation spaces to promote solutions that prolong fossil fuel use under the guise of climate action. While this may not directly influence the COP negotiations, it has an indirect effect on how climate solutions are perceived. As one observer put it, lobbyists attend COP “to sell

other solutions that at the end are the continuation of fossil fuels but under another name” (O8). Others describe the industry’s engagement as the “fossil fuel propaganda machine” operating under the legitimacy of the UNFCCC (O9; also, O10, O11, R1, R3, R4, R6).

This concern is heightened by weak admission criteria for observers. At present, any legally registered non-profit organisation working vaguely on climate-related issues can be accredited as an observer. This has reportedly enabled organisations with seemingly neutral names that are linked to major fossil fuel companies, and other high-emitting industries to secure access to the Blue Zone (O6). Civil society groups have stressed that the absence of measures to manage conflicts of interest gives fossil fuel companies unmitigated access to the UNFCCC’s processes and activities.⁸⁸

Once inside the Blue Zone, these groups can host official side events or rent pavilions from the host country. Pavilion spaces, however, are particularly controversial. First, they cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to rent, which privileges wealthy governments and entities while pricing out smaller civil society actors and poorer countries.⁸⁹ Second, unlike official side events, which are subject to some vetting by the Secretariat to ensure alignment with the Paris Agreement and overall UNFCCC agenda, pavilions operate on a commercial basis. One interviewee reported that their country even charged companies to host events in its pavilion (O7). Another observer described the pavilion area as a “pay to play” space, so you can say anything” (O3). The result is that pavilion programming often reflects the interests of those able to pay for access, rather than best available science (O2, O7, O12):

“ So much of what’s happening around the COP is this sort of battle around what is the narrative around climate change. And I think if you look through the COP side events, there are definitely events, especially in the pavilions, where it’s really a Wild West, where 100 per cent things aren’t based on the best science.

Observer 3.

For example, at COP26 in Glasgow, the Australian government faced criticism for featuring oil and gas company Santos in its pavilion, where the company showcased its Moomba carbon capture and storage project.⁹⁰ Critics argued that this emphasis reflects a strategy to prolong the use of coal and gas in Australia's energy system, thereby delaying the transition to cleaner energy sources and reducing emissions.

Interviewees pointed to other examples, such as the promotion of "green fracking" (O3) or geoengineering technological solutions (O6, R2), which have been criticised for being misaligned with science-based policies, yet were being promoted as remedy to the climate crisis.⁹¹ Other researchers have previously found that during the side events, many industry-linked non-governmental organisations (NGOs) do not directly address fossil fuels as a problem but rather focus on the broader energy system, with some actively advocating for carbon capture and storage on a corporate level.⁹²

At the same time, the presence of pavilions hosted by fossil fuel interest groups, such as the OPEC Development Fund or the Gas Producing Countries, can be symbolically troubling. It is seen as "a strange optical element" (O2; also, N2) and a sign that the COP has become "a total circus" (O3; also, R4, N14), an arena for greenwashing, where companies make announcements that are rarely followed up later (N8). All of this, in turn, undermines the legitimacy of the multilateral climate process (O14).

NETWORKING AND SIDE DEALS

Fossil fuel interest groups also use the Blue Zone as a networking space. Many negotiators and even some observers admitted that they rarely attend pavilion or side events unless they are directly involved (O2, O8, N6, N9, N10, N11, N13, N14, N15, N18). These spaces instead largely function as hubs where civil society, development organisations, donors, companies, and activists meet and exchange. Previous research shows that major fossil fuel companies similarly view UNFCCC conferences as important forums that bring together policymakers and stakeholders and provide them with opportunities to exchange perspectives on climate governance.⁹³

For private sector actors, an important aspect of networking is also making new business arrangements. Several interviewees remarked that "COPs have become like business side deal venues" (O3), with attendees using the events as "industry

fairs" (O3). The sheer size of the COP, coupled with the fact that ministers and senior government officials are often more approachable there than elsewhere, makes it an attractive place to broker deals (O3, O9, O12). One negotiator reported exchanging views with private sector representatives at COP27 who spent most of their time "having bilateral meetings, making deals at the margins of the COPs" (N8).

Several negotiators also reported that their country delegation includes a range of private sector representatives, either as Party or overflow delegates (N1, N2, N6, N8). This sometimes even includes energy-related industries. One negotiator described how state ministers would often request to bring large business delegations with them, with these delegations sometimes including 20 representatives (N8).

The transformation of COP into a "trade fair" must also be seen in light of institutional changes leading up to and following the Paris Agreement. While the Agreement itself opened up multiple entry points for non-state actors, particularly the private sector, to engage with the global climate regime,⁹⁴ initiatives such as the Lima-Paris Action Agenda, the Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action (NAZCA), and the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (GCA) were launched to support and extend this engagement.⁹⁵ In this context, excluding the industry actors is often seen as inconsistent with a governance model that relies on the mobilisation of all societal resources for climate action. It can be argued that this institutional logic contributed to normalising the presence of fossil fuel industry within COP spaces.

Some interviewees noted that the bottom-up structure of the Paris Agreement, which relies on cooperation between public and private actors, means that private sector entities, including fossil fuel companies, should be part of the solutions to the climate crisis (O4, N1, N2, N4, N5, N6, N8, N15). From their perspective, including industries affected by the energy transition in the process is necessary, as they will both bear costs and hold resources needed to shifting towards new energy systems (N2, N5, N6, N12, N13). As one negotiator argued:

“ I think fossil fuel companies have a role to play in the transition because they have to transition away from fossil fuels, and they do have infrastructure that can be repurposed also for hydrogen. So, I would rather have a constructive conversation with the fossil fuel company and say that ‘put your oil money into green and into renewables, because that’s the future’.

Negotiator 5.

under which this participation occurs (O9, O11, O12, R3, R6). As one observer put it:

“ They need to be part of the solution if they’re willing to get with the programme and make a transition to a net zero world. And basically, reposition their entire business strategy and their objectives and their investments. But the vast majority of them are not doing that.

Observer 9.

Another negotiator framed the industry exclusion as counterproductive:

“ All countries have signed up and we want them to be part of the Paris Agreement. So, I think, in a way, the whole notion of the conflicts of interest when it comes to this particular issue does not always contribute to a constructive conversation, because it sort of makes that kind of separation, saying that ‘you have another interest. So, therefore, we do not want you to be part of the conversation, and hence not part of the solution’.

Negotiator 2.

Recent developments, indeed, suggest a strategic shift among major fossil fuel companies. Several have pulled back on their initial commitments to ramp up investments in clean energy and are instead doubling down on gas and oil investments.⁹⁶ Therefore, there is an urgent need to hold companies accountable for what they announce, promote and influence at and around COPs.

As one observer emphasised, ensuring transparency and accountability for the pledges and activities of non-state actors, as well as for states, is crucial for the credibility of the COP process going forward (O9). Without mechanisms in place to regulate, monitor and assess their engagement, there is a risk that the COP will continue to be used as a platform for side deals, industry branding and undue influence of fossil fuel industries for negotiation outcomes, rather than functioning exclusively as an area for ambitious collective climate action.

Yet civil society representatives and academics raised deep concerns about this dynamic. While some acknowledged that fossil fuel companies need to be part of the solution, they questioned the conditions

CONCLUSION

This report examined the influence of fossil fuel interests on decision-making around the UNFCCC. It identified four main ways in which this is happening: (1) early structural interventions in the UNFCCC's "rules of the game", (2) shaping Party negotiation positions at the national level, (3) influencing dynamics within the negotiation rooms, and (4) leveraging non-negotiation spaces at COP to promote favourable narratives and partnerships.

The way undue influence manifests is often not obvious, which makes it hard to trace through research. This is especially true because fossil fuel interests remain deeply embedded in national politics and policymaking processes, meaning their influence is frequently institutionalised within states themselves. Yet, weaknesses in UNFCCC governance structures leave loopholes which allow fossil fuel industry-linked actors to engage in negotiations and wider COP debates with limited transparency and accountability. This not only creates fertile ground for undue influence but also raises concerns about the integrity of the negotiation process and the legitimacy of its outcomes.

The report also shows that civil society mobilisation, political pressure, and strategic advocacy can help shift the dynamics within the COP process, even if only incrementally, and in rare occasions. One example of this is the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27. Another example is the recent reforms to the UNFCCC registration system. While these reforms are clearly inadequate, they are still a step in the right direction.

To safeguard the credibility of the multilateral climate governance and ensure that UN climate negotiations advance the goals of the Paris Agreement, it is essential to strengthen the transparency and accountability of the UNFCCC. The recommendations that follow aim to support the UNFCCC Secretariat, COP Presidencies and Parties in advancing these goals and in building a negotiation environment that is more inclusive, and resilient to undue influence, especially from fossil fuel industries.

Recommendations

DEFINE AND MANAGE CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND UNDUE INFLUENCE

- The UNFCCC should adopt clear, system-wide definitions of conflicts of interest and undue influence applicable to Party delegates, accredited observers, and COP Presidencies. This is foundational for safeguarding the integrity of the COP process.
- The UNFCCC could consider existing proposals, such as the Accountability Framework,⁹⁷ that offer guidance on managing conflicts of interest and undue influence, especially from high-polluting industries.

IMPROVE PARTY DELEGATION PRACTICES

- Parties to the UNFCCC should control privileged access granted to fossil fuel and high-polluting industries, for example by creating rules not to include their representatives in state delegations and by limiting these industries' use of Party overflow badges.
- Parties should increase transparency by requiring all delegation members, including Party overflow delegates, to publicly declare their financial, professional, and other relevant interests in a machine-readable, open format. They should also require all delegates to sign a code of conduct that is aligned with the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should encourage the implementation of these integrity safeguards by providing guidelines to Parties on how to screen for conflicts of interest.⁹⁸

IMPROVE CONFERENCE REGISTRATION AND PARTICIPATION OVERSIGHT

- The UNFCCC Secretariat should introduce a mandatory disclosure requirement for all conference participants. This should include the disclosure of any institutional ties to lobbying firms,

industry associations, or state-owned companies.

- The UNFCCC Secretariat should introduce a mandatory declaration on alignment with UNFCCC goals for all conference participants. During registration, participants should confirm their support for the UNFCCC, and Paris Agreement.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should reform the registration categories to prevent ambiguous classifications that obscure participants' links with polluting industries. This will also support the independent monitoring and public accountability of the conference participation.

SAFEGUARD COP PRESIDENCY INTEGRITY

- The UNFCCC Secretariat should emphasise the need for COP Presidencies to remain impartial in the UNFCCC Handbook for Hosting COPs and other relevant guidelines, regardless of the appointed government's interests.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should require COP Presidencies to publicly disclose any situation or relationship (financial or otherwise) that could potentially affect their impartiality.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should establish clear criteria for defining incompatibilities, particularly with regard to roles and interests associated with fossil fuels or other high-polluting industries, that are incompatible with the role of COP Presidency.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should require COP Presidencies to disclose all formal and informal meetings held in connection with their role, indicating the topics addressed and listing the attendees. This should reflect OECD recommendations on Transparency and Integrity in Lobbying and Influence,⁹⁹ including meeting records that are publicly available, timely and specify the policy objective of the engagement.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should require COP Presidencies to disclose online any contracts, partnerships or consultancies entered into during the organisation process of the COP, including the financial implications of these arrangements.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should establish independent oversight of COP Presidencies by setting up an ethics advisory group to support the Presidencies, assess risks and recommend actions. This should include the establishment of sanctions for breaches.
- The UNFCCC Secretariat should require COP Presidencies to establish a monitoring mechanism for non-negotiation spaces at conferences, tracking and publishing information on pavilion-hosted events, sponsors and costs, to ensure transparency

and alignment with the goals of the Paris Agreement.

STRENGTHEN INTEGRITY IN NATIONAL POSITION FORMATION

- Parties should promote inclusive representation when forming national negotiating positions for COPs, by ensuring the meaningful involvement of civil society, Indigenous peoples, youth and communities vulnerable to climate change.
- Parties should have an open process for setting COP mandates, with public access to negotiating positions and the rationale behind them. This should include full transparency regarding elements originating from paid or unpaid advisors.
- Parties should ensure full transparency of contacts, funding and meetings between negotiators and actors from the fossil fuel industry (whether private or state-owned companies).
- Parties should have a public registry for all meetings, consultations and communications between any public official (including advisors, consultants, and technical experts) involved in COP position-setting and fossil-fuel companies, industry associations, front groups and think tanks with industry funding. The public registry should include time, participants, agenda and summary of outcomes of each meeting.
- Parties should designate an independent oversight body (e.g., national anti-corruption commission, parliamentary ethics committee or ombudsman) to audit compliance, access meeting registers and enforce sanctions for failing to meet such integrity standards.
- Parties should protect environmental defenders and whistleblowers by establishing secure reporting channels for those exposing undue influence and anti-retaliation protections at domestic institutional levels.
- Parties should provide ethics training for their delegation members, covering conflicts of interest, lobbying rules and ethical standards for negotiations and civil servants.

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