

The equity dimensions of anti-fossil fuel norms

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Key messages

- The past few years have witnessed the emergence of several anti-fossil fuel norms in international climate governance, such as phasing out coal-fired power; phasing out oil and gas; ending public financing for fossil fuels; and fossil fuel subsidy reform.
 - Anti-fossil fuel norms can be (and have been) used by governments and civil society organizations to advance political mobilization against the fossil fuel industry and position themselves as climate leaders.
 - One strength of anti-fossil fuel norms is that they enable unity and international political momentum around simple messages. However, this simplicity can result in national and international equity issues being overlooked, because the norm does not always account for the distributional impacts of shifting away from fossil fuels.
 - Actors that promote anti-fossil fuel norms need to consider the complex ways in which marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South, are locked into fossil fuel production and use. The development of norms that call for the phase-out of fossil fuels should go hand-in-hand with the development of norms that acknowledge the need to meet lower-income countries' development and energy needs and the need for international support to enable low-income countries to achieve this transition.
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Introduction

To give the world a chance of staying below the 1.5°C temperature limit set in the Paris Agreement, global greenhouse gas emissions must fall to net zero by 2050 (IEA, 2021b). There is a broad consensus that this will require moving away from fossil-fuel based energy systems (IPCC, 2022; IEA, 2021b). In the Glasgow Climate Pact, adopted at the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the UNFCCC in November 2021, governments explicitly recognized the importance of phasing down fossil fuels (in particular, unabated coal power) for the first time within a UNFCCC decision (UNFCCC, 2021). In the same decision, they also highlighted the need to phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies. This momentum may continue at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt in November 2022, notwithstanding the energy challenges caused by the war in Ukraine.

With the adoption of the Paris Agreement, climate governance has shifted from a system of hierarchical targets and timetables to one based on political mobilization and international pressures (Green, 2018a). Historically, global moral norms have been used to great effect to condition states and citizens to see certain practices as inherently wrong regardless of the potential economic benefits of such practices to the state or certain individuals. Civil society has followed the example of other global movements that successfully pressured governments to take action – for example anti-slavery movements or the movement against the proliferation of nuclear weapons – and driven the emergence of several global moral norms, with the aim of accelerating the shift away from fossil fuels. These norms are referred to as anti-fossil fuel norms. Such norms set behavioural practices for actors and prescribe the phase-out and ultimate prohibition of practices and processes across the entire fossil fuel supply chain of financing, extraction, processing and consumption (Blondeel et al., 2019). They are conceptualized through a “logic of appropriateness” – what is morally right, legitimate and appropriate regardless of the efficiency, financial cost or economic benefits (Green, 2018b; March & Olsen, 2004). As the number of states and citizens adhering to an anti-fossil fuel norm rises, the reputational cost of non-conformity also rises, fuelling the diffusion of the moral norm (Green, 2018b).

Discussions within the UNFCCC context have engaged only to a limited extent with the need for a fossil fuel phase-out (Lazarus & van Asselt, 2018; Piggot et al., 2018; van Asselt, 2021; van Asselt & Green, 2022), and largely not explored the equity and justice dimensions of this transition (Lenferna, 2018; Rempel & Gupta, 2022). Much of the conversation around the equity impacts of a fossil fuel phaseout has been focused on achieving a “just transition” – resolving the tensions between the economic rights of fossil fuel workers and the role of fossil fuels in the climate crisis (Thomas, 2021). Outside the UNFCCC, scholars of energy justice define a just global energy system as one where the costs and benefits of energy production and consumption are more equally distributed and where all voices are represented in decisions on a global energy transition (Baker et al., 2021; Barragan-Contreras, 2022; Knox et al., 2022; Sovacool, 2021; Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015).

The literature on anti-fossil fuel norms has focused primarily on identifying enablers and drivers of norm emergence and diffusion, and discussing the role that these norms play in climate change mitigation strategies (Blondeel et al., 2019; Green, 2018a). However, as these norms gain further traction, there is a risk that they – especially if they are presented as standalone or blanket statements (e.g. phasing out all coal-fired power) – do not account for the complexity of how societies, particularly local populations, are locked into fossil fuel production and use (Erickson et al., 2015).

In this paper, we explore some of these complexities and make recommendations for how anti-fossil fuel norms can promote fairer and more equitable climate action. We base our discussion and recommendations on 14 interviews conducted with experts from civil society, academia and government organizations involved in international climate policy. We do not systematically code or analyse the interviews, but instead use the interview data to form insights that expand on the existing literature and shed light on recent developments in international climate policy debates.

We focus on four key norms:

- phase-out of coal-fired power
- phase-out of oil and gas
- end public financing for fossil fuels
- fossil fuel subsidy reform.

We find that each norm is well placed to contribute significantly to the rapid phase down of fossil fuels. However, there is a risk that anti-fossil fuel norms do not account for the distributional impacts of shifting away from fossil fuels, which means they may have unintended and inequitable consequences, unless action is taken to avoid adverse effects.

Phase-out of coal-fired power

There is significant support among civil society organizations, financial institutions, and a growing number of governments for the need to phase-out coal, as shown by the reference to phasing down unabated coal power in the Glasgow Climate Pact (UNFCCC, 2021). There are clear reasons as to why a coal-fired power phase-out has received traction earlier than, for instance, the phasing out of oil and gas. Coal is the most emissions-intensive fossil fuel, and renewable energy is increasingly a more economically attractive option when compared to coal (IRENA, 2020). Furthermore, phasing out coal-fired power can lead to significant co-benefits, such as reducing local air pollution.

International civil society organizations have promoted a coal phase-out through government-led initiatives such as the Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA) (Blondeel et al., 2020). The PPCA was announced in 2017 at COP23 by the UK and Canada. Members of the PPCA are committed to “phasing out existing unabated coal power generation and a moratorium on new coal power generation without operational carbon capture and storage” (Jewell et al., 2019). As such, the PPCA seeks to diffuse the norm of phasing out coal-fired power.

By joining the PPCA, countries, cities and businesses that do not significantly depend on coal-fired power, or are in the process of transitioning out of coal-fired power, have made progress towards air pollution goals, shifted towards a more economically feasible power supply, and positioned themselves as climate leaders (Blondeel et al., 2020). This aligns with the strategy used by civil society organizations to incentivize countries and other stakeholders that depend less on coal to adopt anti-fossil fuel norms, with the aim of pressuring more reluctant but essential actors to move in the same direction, in this case countries with a greater dependence on coal-fired power. The diffusion of a norm on phasing out coal could further pave the way for civil society to also call for similarly strong action on oil and gas.

In practice, the norm to phase out coal-fired power is often promoted by developed countries with limited and declining dependence on coal-fired power (e.g. because they had already begun to phase down coal-fired power) (Blondeel et al., 2020). In some cases these countries also have high levels of oil and gas production, such as the UK and Canada. This norm can be used strategically to shift the attention away from oil and gas infrastructure and use in these countries and onto emerging economies such as India and China, which still have a high dependence on coal to meet their energy needs. This tension came to the fore in media coverage after COP26, when much of the blame was put on India and China for watering down the language on coal phase-out in the final text (Depledge et al., 2022; Ellis-Petersen, 2021). By contrast, much less attention was paid to the absence of commitments to reduce oil and gas, which would have required action from high-income countries such as the UK, Canada, Norway, or the US.

It is clear that coal-fired power needs to be reduced significantly to meet climate goals. If countries with the capacity to do so were to phase out oil and gas more rapidly, this would give

more time to coal-dependent countries to phase out without placing undue strain on national capacity (Muttitt et al., 2022). To better safeguard equity, norms around a coal-fired phase-out could therefore be paired more closely with the need for a simultaneous phase-down of oil and gas production. This could involve either changing how the norm is spread, or creating a norm cluster; that is, a group of norm statements that work together to establish a narrative that promotes both the winding down of fossil fuels as well as placing equity at its centre. For instance, rather than adopting a staged approach of first phasing down coal and then oil and gas – which would put more of the burden on developing countries – actors could deliberately push for a joint approach that targets oil and gas at the same time as coal. Norms on coal phase-out could also place stronger emphasis on the need for more support for coal-dependent communities in a just transition.

Oil and gas phase-out

The idea that oil and gas production has to be phased out to achieve climate goals has started to attract attention in recent years. Several major reports, published by the International Energy Agency (IEA) and other organizations, have underscored that existing and projected oil and gas production is not aligned with climate targets and that no “new” oil and gas development can take place under a 1.5°C pathway (IEA, 2021b; SEI et al., 2021).

Taking heed of these messages, in the run-up to COP26 several national and subnational governments, led by Costa Rica and Denmark, launched the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance (BOGA). The creation of BOGA helps to further diffuse an emerging international norm on phasing out oil and gas, as the PPCA does for coal-fired power. BOGA aims to redefine climate leadership to include an oil and gas phase-out, bringing conversations around fossil fuel supply and phasing out oil and gas into international climate diplomacy and creating a community of practice that can support governments “to facilitate the managed phase-out of oil and gas production”¹

The creation of BOGA is a significant development, as it marks the beginning of the institutionalization of a norm on phasing out oil and gas. It has been difficult for such a norm to emerge for several reasons. One reason is the significant power that large oil and gas corporations hold over national and international climate policy, in part by making substantial donations to political campaigns (Kirk, 2020) and influencing international climate negotiations (McGrath, 2021). A second reason is that since UN processes are consensus-based, even a small group of oil-producing countries can block language on fossil fuel phase-out (Depledge, 2008). Many developed and developing countries support the narrative of gas as a “bridge fuel”, the continued exploitation of which is necessary to achieve a low-carbon transition (IEA, 2019). This allows many countries who are actively investing in and profiting from gas extraction to position themselves as climate leaders.

Although private and national fossil fuel companies alike face the risk of stranded assets (Bos & Gupta, 2019),² pushing the phase-out of oil and gas as a single international norm has significant equity implications. In many oil- and gas-producing developing countries, oil and gas are considered essential national assets. Many countries associate oil and gas with energy access and security, and see revenues raised through oil and gas extraction as a way to support national and social development objectives. For example, in some parts of the world, national fossil fuel companies contribute to humanitarian aid.³ It is important to distinguish these companies from large transnational corporations whose extractive practices, which, while contributing to employment and national economic growth, ultimately largely benefit stakeholders in the Global North.

1 <https://beyondoilandgasalliance.com/>

2 Stranded assets are assets that at some time before the end of their economic life (as assumed at the investment decision point) are no longer able to earn an economic return (i.e. meet the company’s internal rate of return) because of changes associated with the transition to a low-carbon economy (e.g. lower than anticipated demand or lower prices).

3 See, e.g., <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2021/12/21/petronas-khazanah-contribute-more-than-rm32m-for-flood-aid/>

There is currently no dedicated funding mechanism to help fossil-fuel dependent countries shift away from fossil fuels, although various civil society groups have endorsed a call for BOGA to establish a just transition fund as part of its efforts (Ioualalen, 2022). Without such mechanisms, it is very difficult for countries not to extract fossil fuels when a significant fraction of their budget depends on revenues from fossil fuels. Conversations around financing a just transition are often limited to supporting fossil fuel workers, rather than also supporting communities and economies in the Global South that are sacrificing short-term development gains by shifting away from fossil fuels. This applies to coal as well as oil and gas.

As the Global North decarbonizes its domestic economy, this increases the risk of stranded assets in the Global South (Lahn & Bradley, 2016). Oil and gas infrastructure in the Middle East and Latin America is particularly vulnerable to this risk (Ansari & Holz, 2020), and the war in Ukraine is exacerbating it: countries in the Global North are asking African countries to ramp up fossil fuel exploration while simultaneously putting in place domestic policies to make themselves less reliant on fossil fuels (Simon, 2022).

As is the case for phasing out coal-fired power, it is important that actors who promote the phase-out of oil and gas ensure that this norm is paired with consideration of the distributional impacts of such a phase-out. For instance, a norm calling for a phase-out of oil and gas production could be paired with norms calling for adequate finance for a just transition away from fossil fuels in low- and middle-income countries that depend on them.

End public financing of fossil fuels

Between 2018 and 2020, G20 countries and multilateral development banks provided an average of USD 63 billion per year in public finance for international fossil fuel projects (Oil Change International & Friends of the Earth U.S., 2021). Civil society organizations have long been calling for an end to public financing for oil and gas exploration (350.org, 2021; IISD, 2020; Oil Change International, 2021). COP26 gave significant impetus to this norm, with 39 countries and finance institutions committing to end any finance flowing abroad for fossil fuels by the end of 2022, including major funders such as the European Investment Bank and Agence Française de Développement, and countries including Germany, Canada, the UK, and the US (UN Climate Change Conference UK, 2021b). This commitment was echoed by the G7 Climate, Energy, and Environment Ministers' Communiqué in May 2022 (G7 Germany, 2022).

However, the war in Ukraine and its implications for energy security have led many developed countries to backtrack on their commitments to end financing for fossil fuels. For example, the most recent G7 communiqué suggested that public investment in new international fossil fuel projects would take place under certain conditions to offset the Russian supply shortfall (Lo & Farand, 2022). Much of this financing is flowing towards private sector development and scaling up energy supply to meet short-term European energy needs rather than for development in low-income countries (ibid). As discussed above, this could lead to asset stranding in the Global South if rich countries simultaneously shift their domestic infrastructure away from fossil fuel dependence.

Taken at face value, norms on ending public financing for fossil fuels seem to lack nuance and do not reckon with some fossil fuel financing being used for development purposes in developing countries, such as to promote energy access in rural areas (Cameron et al., 2016; Floess et al., 2021; Jeuland & Pattanayak, 2012). To ensure continued and future energy access for communities in low and middle income countries, while still phasing out finance for fossil fuels, significant additional finance (~USD 1 trillion) is required for clean energy infrastructure in these regions (IEA, 2021a). It is worth noting that both the COP26 statement, as well as the G7's May 2022 Climate, Energy, and Environment Ministers' Communiqué, explicitly acknowledge the need to increase funding for clean energy. However, developed countries have failed to meet their

existing climate finance targets for mitigation and adaptation, heightening concern about the ending of certain types of development support (for instance LPG for clean cooking programs) without clear prospects for alternative funding (Roberts et al., 2021).

It is also important to consider how that finance is being spent. For example, finance used to retrofit older fossil fuel plants to extend their lifespan for a couple of years could potentially help with intermittent energy supply and provide a baseload while renewables are scaled up (IEA, 2021c), whereas finance used for building new infrastructure can create stranded assets and lock countries into fossil fuel-dependence without allowing for economic diversification (Bos & Gupta, 2019).

Ending public financing for fossil fuels can be made more equitable as a norm if paired with additional norms around ensuring that financial support is provided to low-income, fossil-fuel dependent countries to enable their transition. These norms could include, for example, the need for debt swaps for fossil fuel phase-out in debt-ridden countries, or just energy transition partnerships like the one announced for South Africa (UN Climate Change Conference UK, 2021a), or special drawing rights for countries to decarbonize their economy and supply chains and keep fossil fuels in the ground offered by bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It is important, however, that such partnerships and initiatives are grants-based rather than consisting only of loans, so as not to increase the debt burdens of developing countries.

Fossil fuel subsidy reform

There is broad international consensus on the need to reform fossil fuel subsidies. In 2009, the G20 countries already agreed “to phase out and rationalize over the medium term inefficient fossil fuel subsidies while providing targeted support for the poorest” (G20, 2009). Similar commitments have been made by leaders in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) region, and by G7 governments (who committed to phase out fossil fuel subsidies by 2025).

Moreover, an informal group called the Friends of Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform (FFFSR), consisting of several non-G20 countries, has sought to help diffuse the emerging norm of fossil fuel subsidy reform by seeking to advance discussions on the issue in forums such as the UNFCCC and the World Trade Organization (van Asselt & Verkuil, 2021). In the UNFCCC context, 15 Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) contained references to fossil fuel subsidy reform (Elliott et al., 2022), while the Glasgow Climate Pact for the first time incorporates a reference to it. By one estimate, 50 countries made efforts to reform fossil fuel subsidies between 2015 and 2018 (Merrill and Quintas, 2019). However, fossil fuel subsidy reform remains difficult to implement and sustain over time (Skovgaard & van Asselt, 2019). Indeed, while commitments to reform have been in place since 2009, fossil fuel subsidies are not showing a decreasing trend, with subsidies in 51 countries nearly doubling from USD 362.4 billion in 2020 to USD 697.2 billion in 2021 (OECD, 2022). These subsidies are of two broad types: consumption subsidies, which usually aim at reducing the price of consumption for end users and tend to be found in developing countries; and producer subsidies, which provide support to fossil fuel producers by increasing the price or lowering production costs, and which can be found in both developed and developing countries.

While phasing out fossil fuel subsidies can lead to a range of environmental benefits (including mitigating climate change and reducing local air pollution) and generally will help save public money, the distributional impacts depend on the circumstances (Skovgaard and van Asselt, 2019). Research shows that, in general, most fossil fuel subsidies are regressive, that is, they benefit wealthier groups in society more than lower-income groups, because wealthier groups consume more (subsidized) fossil fuels (Arze del Granado et al., 2012).

However, fossil fuel subsidies may also support vulnerable groups. Vulnerable communities are also often not able to switch over to alternative energy sources easily either due to financial or

infrastructural barriers. For instance, in the case of subsidies for LPG for cooking, the alternative is electricity. Poorer households and rural households have less access to electricity than their urban, richer counterparts and although richer households capture more of the LPG subsidies, they can switch over to electricity much more easily should the subsidies be removed (Skovgaard & van Asselt, 2018). It is precisely because fossil fuel subsidies – especially in developing countries – may have some positive impact on every segment of the population that they are a popular measure among governments, who see them as a way to gain support from voters. Conversely, such measures may be very difficult to roll back without losing support from large swathes of the population and compromising the energy access of vulnerable populations (ibid).

It is very difficult to reform subsidies in a way that safeguards the interests of vulnerable populations. Identifying people in income brackets is difficult. As a consequence, targeting fossil fuel subsidies as well as targeting reforms can be extremely challenging (Rentschler & Bazilian, 2017). A more successful approach has been to provide alternative support to vulnerable communities prior to removing fossil fuel subsidies to cushion the blow and make subsidy reform more politically palatable (Skovgaard & van Asselt, 2018).

While the implementation of the norm of fossil fuel subsidy reform thus raises distributional issues at the national level, it could raise questions of equity among nations depending on how the norm is framed. For example, if calls for phasing out fossil fuel subsidies are limited to subsidies to fossil fuel consumption (e.g. by fixing fuel prices), developing countries would be the most impacted by the norm. Conversely, if the norm also covers production subsidies (e.g. tax breaks for oil and gas production), then they would also clearly affect developed countries (Rive, 2018).

To ensure equity in the further diffusion of the norm on fossil-fuel subsidy reform, it is therefore important to ensure that the norm incorporates all types of subsidies, not just those provided by developing countries. Moreover, the norm of fossil fuel subsidy reform should be accompanied, as it was in the Glasgow Climate Pact, with a norm that emphasizes the need to support energy access for the poorest and most vulnerable.

Addressing equity concerns in anti-fossil fuel norms

Fossil fuels need to be significantly wound down to meet climate targets and limit the impacts of the climate crisis on poor and vulnerable communities. However, this process needs to happen in an equitable manner that also centres the current needs and priorities of vulnerable communities whose livelihoods and access to energy are currently dependent on fossil fuels (Kartha et al., 2020; Muttitt & Kartha, 2020).

One of the strengths of anti-fossil fuel norms is the clarity and simplicity of their language. They are accessible to a wide variety of audiences and their legitimacy is easy to establish as the logic of morality used is not complicated (Green, 2018). This means that it is easy to create political mobilization around them. However, this same simplicity of language can sidestep some of the nuanced local contexts and complexities faced by fossil fuel-dependent communities. Not accounting for these nuances could lead to norms being co-opted to push forward policies that have inequitable impacts (Lenferna, 2018).

Some simple norm statements around equitable fossil fuel wind-down already exist, and could be pushed more prominently within international climate policy spaces. These include, for example: the Global North needing to move faster than the Global South when transitioning away from fossil fuels; the need for financial support to be provided to the Global South to enable the transition of lower-income countries; and the need to ensure environmental justice and protect the rights of workers and communities (Muttitt & Kartha, 2021).

Governments, international financing institutions and civil society actors can play an important role in promoting groupings of norms (i.e. norm clusters) so that the much-needed nuance around equity is not lost when pushing for urgent action. Importantly there is a need to establish norms around finance and technology transfer, as well as support for economic diversification in developing countries. These new norms should be part of any norm cluster around a fossil fuel wind-down or phase-out. There is also a need to support low-carbon alternatives such as renewables; this need should be recognized in any norm cluster surrounding a fossil fuel wind-down.

Additionally, there is a need to enhance the capacity of the Global South so that they have a greater ability to influence anti-fossil fuel norms within international climate policy, rather than being forced to react to norms set by the Global North. This could involve, for example, building media capacity in the Global South so that they are better able to inform global narratives and discourses, and better voice the equity implications of certain anti-fossil fuel norms. This is essential for ensuring that norms and norm clusters that incorporate equity considerations can achieve the prominence and political mobilization that will lead to political action.

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