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United Nation Headquarters in New York City.

Should fossil fuel corporations like Exxon Mobil have access to the U.N. climate talks?

That question is at the center of a new report that offers new analysis on the ways the fossil fuel industry has undermined the U.N. climate negotiations through trade associations that do its bidding.

How does the fossil fuel industry influence U.N. climate talks?

The fossil fuel industry influences the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in a variety of ways. One is by wining and dining government delegates behind closed doors. Another is through its many trade associations, which are admitted to the UNFCCC as observer organizations. With that accreditation in hand, these groups—commonly referred to as Business/Industry Non-Governmental Organizations (or “BINGOs”)—are free to walk the halls, lobby governments, and influence the negotiations.

The report peels back the curtain on just six of the more than 270 of these business industry groups currently admitted to the climate talks: the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Mining Association, Business Roundtable, Fuels Europe, Business Council of Australia, and the International Chamber of Commerce.

How much influence and access do the fossil fuel industry trade associations have?

In a nutshell: Significant influence. These trade associations do the bidding of the fossil fuel industry inside the halls of the U.N. negotiations. They are funded by and represent some of the world’s biggest polluters, including Exxon Mobil, ConocoPhillips, Chevron, Peabody Energy, Duke Energy and Marathon Oil Company.

In fact, Corporate Accountability International exposed many of these groups for their fossil fuel industry connections prior to the Marrakech climate talks in 2016. Not only do these BINGOs have deep connections to the fossil fuel industry, many also actively weaken, slow, or block climate policy themselves. Currently, there are no policies in place to protect against organizations intent on derailing the UNFCCC process.

As Tamar Lawrence-Samuel, International Policy Director at Corporate Accountability International has said, “Right now, hundreds of business trade associations have access to the climate talks, and many of them are funded by some of the world’s biggest polluters and climate change deniers. With so many arsonists in the fire department, it’s no wonder we’ve failed to put the fire out.”

Governments are taking a stand

Governments will convene in Bonn, Germany to continue the UNFCCC negotiations. At these meetings, governments will, for the first time in history, officially discuss conflicts of interest—the issue at the heart of the question of whether the fossil fuel industry or its trade associations should have access to the U.N. talks.

Governments are looking to the precedent set in the global tobacco treaty. The tobacco treaty’s key provision, called Article 5.3, and the guidelines for implementing Article 5.3, protect against classic industry interference tactics by barring partnerships, financial relationships, revolving door cases, and industry participation in the policymaking process. These provisions have been recognized by World Health Organization Director-General Margaret Chan as the single largest catalyst of progress in a treaty that could save 200 million lives by 2050 when fully implemented.

The talks build on existing momentum: Last May, governments representing nearly 70 percent of the world's population called for the UNFCCC to address conflicts of interest.

Want to take action?

The report and discussion in Bonn build on the Kick Big Polluters Out campaign—a years-long movement of civil society groups and hundreds of thousands of people across the world demanding climate policy be protected from fossil fuel industry interference.

The campaign has recommended common-sense solutions, such as for governments to define a conflict of interest and to create a stringent, transparent process for admitting observer organizations into the UNFCCC.

Jesse Bragg is the media director at Corporate Accountability International.

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