

## FOCUS ARTICLE

# COP26 and the dynamics of anti-fossil fuel norms

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## Abstract

Notwithstanding the clear contribution of fossil fuel production and consumption to global greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuels have remained largely outside the focus of the international regime established by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The 2021 Glasgow Climate Change Conference (COP26) marked an important change, however, with fossil fuels featuring prominently in the intergovernmental negotiations as well as on the side-lines of the conference. Here we discuss these developments as a site for contestations around “anti-fossil fuel norms.” We argue that anti-fossil fuel norms are increasingly being adopted and institutionalized. However, ongoing contestation among proponents and opponents of measures to tackle fossil fuels raises important questions over the specific content of emerging norms, the role of the fossil fuel industry in climate governance, the extent to which these norms “fit” with their broader normative context, and the conditions of North–South cooperation in which such norms are to be implemented.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The burning of fossil fuels is the single-largest driver of climate change, responsible for 86% of carbon dioxide emissions in the past 10 years (Canadell et al., 2021). Achieving the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change accordingly requires that fossil fuels need to be left in the ground. Indeed, the aspirational 1.5°C goal enshrined in the Agreement would even make 58% of oil, 59% of gas, and 89% of coal reserves “unextractable,” and suggests the need to cease new fossil fuel development (IEA, 2021a; Welsby et al., 2021). Notwithstanding these insights, governments and fossil fuel companies plan to increase production, with fossil fuel production in 2030 estimated to be twice as much as what is consistent with keeping global warming below 1.5°C (Oil Change International, 2020; SEI et al., 2021).

Although the success of climate policy is fundamentally linked to the future of fossil fuels, there has, until recently, been a dearth of discussion of how to phase out fossil fuels in line with climate ambitions. Policies to address this disconnect between climate goals and fossil fuel development have flown under the radar in climate policy scholarship

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and practice. However, with climate activists increasingly targeting fossil fuel projects and companies over the last decade (Ayling & Gunningham, 2017; Piggot, 2018) and a burgeoning literature on “supply-side climate policy” emerging in recent years (e.g., Asheim et al., 2019; Carter & McKenzie, 2020; Erickson et al., 2018; Gaulin & Le Billon, 2020; Green & Denniss, 2018; Lazarus & van Asselt, 2018; van Asselt, 2021), appetite for directly targeting fossil fuels is now also mounting within policy circles. This growing attention was clearly visible in the run-up to and at the Glasgow Climate Conference (COP26) held in November 2021. Within the intergovernmental negotiation process, countries—arguably 30 years overdue—for the first time acknowledged the importance of action on fossil fuels in a formal decision. Moreover, various developments took place outside the negotiation process that signal appetite among many countries for a broader shift away from fossil fuels.

In an earlier contribution, one of us theorized this shift in terms of the emergence of “anti-fossil fuel norms” (AFFNs), which are a category of global moral norms against fossil fuel-related activities (Green, 2018a). Normative change is reciprocally causally implicated in processes that are more frequently studied by scholars of energy and climate politics, such as geopolitics, technological innovation, market dynamics, the interests and tactics of powerful actors, political institutions, and government processes (Green, 2018a, ESM 1). Studying fossil fuel-related developments through the lens of norm theory illuminates the often-overlooked ideational, discursive, and symbolic dimensions of these processes. These dimensions are particularly salient in the activities of climate activist movements, who generally lack power in these other domains, but who have a comparative advantage in shaping ideas and norms (Gunningham, 2017). Norm theory also offers valuable insights into international institutional-legal processes. Climate negotiations provide opportunities to consider how state interests and power dynamics shape the evolution of international norms propagated by activist movements (and sometimes other types of actors; see Section 2). Here we take stock of the various practices that could evidence how anti-fossil fuel norms are being institutionalized and contested, using COP26 as a milestone. We argue that the developments at and surrounding COP26 show that AFFNs are increasingly being adopted and institutionalized. However, ongoing contestation among proponents and opponents of measures to tackle fossil fuels raise important questions over the specific content of emerging norms, the role of the fossil fuel industry in climate governance, the extent to which these norms “fit” with their broader normative context, and the conditions of North–South cooperation in which such norms are to be implemented.

## 2 | ANTI-FOSSIL FUEL NORMS

A *norm* is a standard of appropriate behavior that is expected of an agent with a particular identity (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). A *global moral norm* is a norm that pertains to states and globally significant non-state actors, and originates from concerted attempts to change what counts as appropriate behavior for those agents in line with a conception of justice or ethics. Anti-fossil fuel norms are a category of global moral norms that convey the (in)appropriateness of certain behavior with regard to fossil fuels. Typically, their normative content consists of a moral injunction against specific kinds of actions, processes or products—for example, against building new coal mines (Green, 2018a).

Global moral norms typically emerge from the efforts of ethically motivated groups and individuals who work via an organizational platform, such as a non-governmental organization (NGO). Anti-fossil fuel norms are no exception. Campaigners from civil society, as well as international organizations, state leaders, and subnational governments, have been advocating new standards of behavior concerning fossil fuels, such as divestment of fossil fuel stocks, elimination of fossil fuel subsidies, bans or moratoria on new fossil fuel projects or infrastructure, prohibitions on the sale of internal combustion engine vehicles, and others (Blondeel et al., 2019; Blondeel et al., 2020; Blondeel & Van de Graaf, 2018; Green, 2018a; Meckling & Nahm, 2019).

For norms to affect state behavior, they must affect the identity-related considerations and/or rational calculations of states (and potentially also non-state actors). This requires states to adopt a norm and internalize (or “implement”) it. Yet, norms that are articulated and championed—for example, by civil society groups—do not always become widely adopted, let alone implemented, by states. Norm proponents typically need to advocate vigorously, within key states and at the international level, for the norm to be adopted by a critical mass of states—typically via an institutionalized process in which the norm becomes enshrined in an international legal text. After that point, norms often take on a force of their own, and “social influence” (internal motivation to conform to the behavior of others) becomes the dominant mode of international norm diffusion (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Johnston, 2001). Alongside or following the institutionalization of norms, such norms may lead to behavioral changes in the form of implementation, which refers to “the steps necessary to introduce the new international norm's precepts into formal legal and policy mechanisms

within a state or organization,” and the “subsequent use of these mechanisms” (Betts & Orchard, 2014, p. 3; Stimmer & Wisken, 2019, p. 521). Importantly, whether norms ultimately “succeed” depends on the extent to which they are both institutionalized and implemented (Blondeel et al., 2019). Our focus here is primarily on norm institutionalization, given that COPs are primarily venues of international institutionalization, although we will also briefly examine norm implementation.

Proponents of AFFNs—that is, “norm entrepreneurs” and “norm champions”—are often linked through transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1999) that simultaneously seek to mobilize supporters within domestic political contexts and pressure states to adopt norms in international forums (e.g., in the texts of the G7, G20, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC) (Blondeel et al., 2019; Green, 2018a). However, such efforts are usually vigorously contested by others—often by those who benefit from the practices that the norm proponents seek to discredit—and this contestation typically shapes and alters the content of norms over time (Bloomfield, 2016; Sandholtz, 2007; Stimmer & Wisken, 2019; Wiener, 2014). Studying such contestation brings norm theory into contact with political dynamics typically studied from other disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, such as state power and interests (realist international relations theory) and institutionally mediated power struggles among cooperating and competing interest groups (political economy). These perspectives are especially relevant when studying the politics of energy, since securing energy supplies—of which fossil fuels remain the dominant source—is a core state imperative that has long been a fundamental driver of state behavior and international politics (e.g., Krasner, 1978; Yergin, 1991). Thus, we can see international climate negotiations, such as COP26, as a site for studying contestation between norm proponents seeking to institutionalize emerging norms and opponents who perceive their interests to be contrary to such norms. This contestation has evidently shaped the content and diffusion of AFFNs, as we shall discuss further in Section 4.

Before COP26, proponents had had only limited success in institutionalizing new anti-fossil fuel norms. Many sub-national jurisdictions and a handful of countries with small fossil fuel industries and interests, have been among the more enthusiastic adopters of bans, moratoria, and other kinds of limits on fossil fuel production or infrastructure (Blondeel et al., 2020; Blondeel & Van de Graaf, 2018; Jewell et al., 2019). Some of these actors have pursued international cooperation, for instance by forming the Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA) in 2017. PPCA members agree to phase out unabated coal-fired power generation within a timeline consistent with the Paris Agreement (Blondeel et al., 2020; Jewell et al., 2019). Some states and businesses with more significant fossil fuel interests have embraced AFFNs where the climate mitigation rationale has coincided with a non-climate rationale for taking the relevant action (Blondeel et al., 2019; Blondeel & Van de Graaf, 2018; Meckling & Nahm, 2019; Skovgaard & van Asselt, 2019). For instance, fossil fuel subsidy reform has been undertaken by states who see fiscal benefits from such reforms, while divestment has been most successful where fossil fuel investments are perceived to be less profitable than alternative investment opportunities (Blondeel et al., 2019).

### 3 | FOSSIL FUELS AT COP26

Given the crucial importance of tackling fossil fuels if climate action is to be effective, it would seem that the international regime established by the UNFCCC would be a prime candidate for adopting and institutionalizing AFFNs. However, since the early days of the climate regime, parties have been remarkably silent about fossil fuels, in part driven by the insistence of fossil fuel-producing nations that “the Convention is not an energy treaty” (Depledge, 2008, p. 14). Nevertheless, as we show in this section, COP26 can be regarded as a watershed in the adoption and institutionalization of AFFNs, with the formal negotiation process for the first time generating outputs that directly confront fossil fuels, and the emergence of informal initiatives aimed at a transition away from fossil fuels.

#### 3.1 | The Glasgow Climate Pact

The text of the 1992 UNFCCC does not refer to fossil fuels as a cause of climate change. The only mentions of fossil fuels are in the context of the possible impact of climate change “response measures” (i.e., measures to reduce emissions) on fossil fuel-producing countries (Chan, 2016). The Paris Agreement does not mention fossil fuels at all, though its goal of “[m]aking finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development” (UNFCCC, 2015, Article 2(1)(c)) can be interpreted as an inducement to shift financial flows away from, among other things, fossil fuels (van Asselt & Kulovesi, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Given this history, the Glasgow “cover decision”—that is, a formal decision by the treaty bodies led by the UK COP26 Presidency that brings together various high-level political questions—was ground-breaking. The decision called on parties to “[accelerate] efforts towards the phasedown of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, while providing targeted support to the poorest and most vulnerable in line with national circumstances and recognizing the need for support towards a just transition” (UNFCCC, 2022, paragraph 36). By doing so, parties to the Paris Agreement adopted two types of AFFNs: phasing down unabated coal-fired power, and phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.

An early draft put forward by the UK Presidency had called upon parties “to accelerate the phasing-out of coal and subsidies for fossil fuels” (UNFCCC, 2021, paragraph 37). In the last days of COP26, this language was altered in several respects. First, the qualifier “inefficient” was added to the term “fossil fuel subsidies.” The term is similarly used in the G20’s, 2009 commitment to phase out and rationalize fossil fuel subsidies (G20, 2009), but the qualifier can be invoked by a state to argue that it does not have (inefficient) fossil fuel subsidies—a claim that has been made by G20 members such as Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom (Skovgaard & van Asselt, 2019).

Second, the emphasis shifted from coal in general to “unabated” coal “power.” This language is in line with initiatives such as the PCCA (Blondeel et al., 2020), as well as the October 2021 G20 Leaders’ Declaration (G20, 2021, paragraph 28). However, these additions limit the scope of the norm. By narrowing the reference from “coal” to “coal power,” the text ceases to apply to efforts to directly phase down coal production (and coal transport facilities and operations, for that matter) and effectively excludes metallurgical coal (used to make steel). This downplays the importance of supply-side climate action and diverts attention from countries that are large producer-exporters of coal, such as Australia.

The focus on *unabated* coal power further suggests that, in principle, some coal-fired power plants could continue to be utilized (beyond whatever obligations of result are otherwise implied by the term “phasedown”), so long as the carbon dioxide is “abated” via the application of carbon capture technology. Still, the term “phasedown” (subject to what we say in the next paragraph), in relation to unabated coal power, arguably implies that no *new* coal-fired power stations should begin operation unless fitted with fully functioning carbon capture technology and all the resulting carbon dioxide is safely and securely stored. Given the slow progress in the demonstration and commercialization of carbon capture technologies, the overall high costs of carbon capture and storage, and the wide availability of relatively cheap renewable sources of power to replace coal in electricity generation, the “unabated” qualification is unlikely to make a significant difference to the implications of the text in practice. However, it has wider significance insofar as it legitimizes the fossil fuel industry’s role as an agent of decarbonization (see Section 4).

Third, the conduct that parties are called on to achieve was weakened. The term “phase-out” was changed to “phasedown,” following discussions between China, India, and the United States (Shankleman & Rathi, 2021). Whereas a phase-out is explicit about the ultimate goal (i.e., no more unabated coal power), a phasedown merely suggests a reduction.

Fourth, the paragraph came to include references to equitable obligations that could be read as stipulating normative conditions for the phasedown of unabated coal power, illustrating how emerging AFFNs interact with more established equitable principles in the international climate regime (Okereke, 2008; see Section 4). The reference to “the need for support towards a just transition” was added to gain support from developing countries such as India and South Africa, which still face massive challenges in their transition away from fossil fuels (Gambhir et al., 2022). India also insisted on language to accommodate subsidies to support the poorest and most vulnerable.

The end result is a watered-down version of the original proposal. Even if the decision would have been legally binding—and such decisions only rarely are (Brunnée, 2002)—the phrasing is hortatory (“calls upon”) and indirect (“accelerating efforts towards”), and no time frame or deadline is specified. Moreover, oil and gas were not mentioned explicitly.

Still, in the context of global climate governance, the decision is significant for several reasons. First, it marks the first time that a COP decision mentions fossil fuels and coal as part of the climate problem and as issues that require action from parties. Second, fossil fuel subsidies are presented as a credible climate change mitigation measure for the first time in the UNFCCC process. Third, COP decisions commonly become a reference point for future work within the UNFCCC. Although they do not have strict precedential value (as they can be overturned by a subsequent COP decision), the careful way in which their language is negotiated means that they often form a baseline for future decisions, meaning that the AFFNs adopted at COP26 can be institutionalized further. To illustrate, the 1.5°C goal went from a non-committal reference in the 2009 Copenhagen Accord to an aspirational goal in the Paris Agreement. The COP26 cover decision does not specify any follow-up process for the paragraphs on fossil fuels, effectively leaving it up



to future COP presidencies to raise the issue again at upcoming conferences. Nevertheless, there are other opportunities for parties to raise these (and perhaps other) AFFNs, for instance through the ongoing global stocktake (due to conclude in 2023), and an upcoming decision on a pre-2030 mitigation work program (Evans, 2022). In any event, norm entrepreneurs such as NGOs and some (more ambitious and climate-vulnerable) states will likely keep fossil fuel subsidies and the coal phasedown on the UNFCCC agenda in the coming years, thereby maintaining pressure on countries to act. Fourth, inclusion of equity-related language (regarding a “just transition” and the expectation of targeted support for the poorest and most vulnerable) signals a willingness on the part of large industrializing countries to move away from coal, at least on just terms that imply the need for support from rich countries (Gambhir et al., 2022).

### 3.2 | New informal initiatives

Initiatives to limit fossil fuel production or use also featured heavily on the side-lines of COP26, offering further evidence of the adoption and institutionalization of AFFNs. In the lead-up to the conference, climate campaigners used the UK government's host status to mobilize international pressure on the UK government not to expand fossil fuel production at home. The campaign focused primarily on the proposal by Siccar Point Energy (then part-owned by Shell) to develop the Cambo oilfield in waters north of Scotland, which had been submitted to the UK's oil and gas regulator for approval and embraced by the Johnson government (Woodcock, 2021). While Cambo was the direct focus of the campaign, its ultimate aim was to frame state permissions for new fossil fuel developments as morally wrongful behavior, that is to build a new norm against new fossil fuel projects. The campaign succeeded in politicizing new fossil fuel developments in the United Kingdom, and ensuring that COP26 took place against a prominent backdrop of controversy over fossil fuel production.<sup>2</sup>

Though especially significant as a UK flashpoint, Cambo can also be considered as part of a wider civil society mobilization aimed at changing standards of appropriate state behavior with respect to fossil fuels—especially *new* fossil fuel projects—surrounding COP26. Ahead of the conference, several prominent studies had elevated the issue on the international agenda. The International Energy Agency's *Net Zero by 2050* study (IEA, 2021a) had, earlier that year, found that no new oil and gas fields or coalmines would be required under a pathway to a net-zero global energy system by 2050—a message echoed in its flagship *World Energy Outlook*, released just before COP26 (IEA, 2021b). The third edition of the *Production Gap Report*—a collaborative project of the United Nations Environment Programme and leading research organizations released shortly before COP26—drew attention to the fact that fossil fuel producers were in fact moving in the opposite direction, planning significant *increases* in production (SEI et al., 2021). Building on these reports, civil society organizations raised the profile of supply-side actions, with many NGOs calling for a “Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty” in the run-up to the summit (see also Newell & Simms, 2020),<sup>3</sup> and the launch at COP26 of a “Global Registry on Fossil Fuels” by the Carbon Tracker Initiative and the Global Energy Monitor.<sup>4</sup> The combination of civil society mobilization and the steady stream of high-profile reports and studies on fossil fuels has tarnished the image of the fossil fuel industry, so much so that the UK government felt compelled to deny the fossil fuel majors any formal role at the COP (Taylor, 2021).

With heightened attention to fossil fuels surrounding COP26, several smaller groupings of countries used the conference to launch new initiatives aimed at restricting or reducing fossil fuel production or use, including via financial channels. Aimed at delivering on the first part of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's pledge to get outcomes at COP26 on “coal, cars, cash, and trees,” the UK orchestrated the adoption of the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement. In this statement, signatories commit to “rapidly scal[ing] up technologies and policies in this decade to achieve a transition away from unabated coal power generation in the 2030 s (or as soon as possible thereafter) for major economies and in the 2040 s (or as soon as possible thereafter) globally,” and to “cease issuance of new permits for new unabated coal-fired power generation projects.”<sup>5</sup> The signatories do not include the biggest coal users such as the United States or China, and overlap largely with the members of the already existing PPCA (which also welcomed new member countries), but they include countries that heavily rely on coal power, such as South Korea and Vietnam. Moreover, with the number of countries still planning to build new coal plants dwindling, some argue that no new coal is now the norm (cf. Levy et al., 2021), at least where “coal” refers to unabated coal-fired power generation. These developments thus reinforce the AFFN enshrined in the Glasgow Climate Pact.

Another coal-oriented initiative was the Just Energy Transition Partnership with South Africa, in which the European Union, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States pledged to support the coal-dependent country with \$8.5 billion to help decarbonize the economy and secure a just transition that protects workers and

communities.<sup>6</sup> If successful, this model could be replicated to support other countries that face significant challenges in the transition away from coal (Burton, 2022; Gambhir et al., 2022; Winkler et al., 2021). Like the references to “just transition” in the Glasgow Climate Pact, this initiative points to the normative conditions for the phasedown of unabated coal, and underscores the interplay between AFFNs and their broader normative environment (see Section 4).

Although the UK government's focus has been primarily on coal—and specifically coal-fired power—COP26 also saw new initiatives by groups of countries focused on other fossil fuels, and on crosscutting issues such as finance, some of which give nascent institutional form to emerging AFFNs. The phase-out of oil and gas production is the specific aim of the new Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance (BOGA). Founded by Costa Rica and Denmark, the Alliance also counts France, Greenland, Ireland, Quebec, Sweden, and Wales among its “core members.” These core members agreed to end new concessions, licensing, or leasing rounds for oil and gas production and exploration within their jurisdiction, and to set a date for ending existing production and exploration that is aligned with the objectives of the Paris Agreement. Though the current core members produce relatively little oil and gas, it is consistent with the theory of the diffusion of AFFNs that early adopters will be those states that identify as climate leaders and face few costs from pledging to phase out oil and gas (Green, 2018a). What matters is whether these members can next persuade medium-sized producers to join, thus increasing the moral pressure on large producers (Green, 2018a). In this regard, it is notable that the key oil-producing US state of California has joined BOGA as an associate member.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to finance, a major breakthrough at COP26 was the Statement on International Public Support for the Clean Energy Transition, which commits its signatories to “end new direct public support for the international unabated fossil fuel energy sector by the end of 2022, except in limited and clearly defined circumstances that are consistent with a 1.5°C warming limit and the goals of the Paris Agreement,” pointing to the emergence of another AFFN against new international fossil fuel finance.<sup>8</sup> The statement was adopted by major economies, including the Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which were quickly joined by other developed countries such as France, Germany, and Spain. In addition, the statement was signed by financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank and several national development banks.

All these developments can reasonably be interpreted as attempts by various actors to shape and institutionalize international standards of appropriate state behavior regarding fossil fuels, that is AFFNs, and signal a readiness to move toward implementing these new norms. These attempts have targeted different but often overlapping and reinforcing objects (e.g., no new oil and gas; no new fossil fuels) and types of state behavior (e.g., licensing and permitting; public financial flows). Because we have focused here on campaigns by proponents and on voluntary institutional initiatives on the side of COP26 (which therefore do not require negotiation and consensus among all parties to the Paris Agreement), they illuminate the sources of new AFFNs. As well as the more obvious proponents among civil society actors (like NGOs, think tanks, and research organizations) and international organizations, we can discern from the signatories to the above-mentioned voluntary initiatives which states are willing to adopt which norms. This also (by omission) provides clues as to the sources of resistance to AFFNs, which we explore in the next section.

## 4 | (HOW) ARE ANTI-FOSSIL FUEL NORMS TAKING HOLD?

The outcomes at COP26—both those adopted as part of the intergovernmental negotiations and the initiatives launched outside of them—show that existing AFFNs (on coal-fired power and fossil fuel subsidies) are becoming increasingly institutionalized, whereas new AFFNs (on oil and gas production and international fossil fuel finance) are emerging. While participation in some of the initiatives discussed in Section 3.2 is still limited to a few countries, the Glasgow Climate Pact text on phasing down unabated coal power and phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies was adopted by consensus by all parties to the Paris Agreement. In other words, not a single country spoke out against it.

The question therefore is not really *if* AFFNs are being adopted and institutionalized—they are.

However, as with other international norms, AFFNs are being constructed through ongoing contestation among norm proponents and opponents (Sandholtz, 2007; Wiener, 2014). This contestation is raising more nuanced and interesting questions, such as: What is the *specific content* of the AFFNs that are being more widely adopted? What is the *legitimate role of the fossil fuel industry* in the governance of fossil fuels? How well do these norms *fit with their broader normative environment*? And, more specifically, under what *conditions of equitable international cooperation* should AFFNs be implemented? The developments at and around COP26 also offer insights that help to answer these questions, and, by doing so, offer an indication of why and how AFFNs become diffused and institutionalized.

First, as to the specific content of adopted AFFNs, there is clearly wider support for AFFNs pertaining to *coal* (compared with oil and gas) and coal-fired *power generation* (compared with coal mining), and for restricting *new* projects and infrastructure (compared with actively phasing out currently operational projects and infrastructure). This is not only evident from the endorsement of the final text of the Glasgow Climate Pact (and the modifications to the draft text), discussed above, but also from initiatives such as the PPCA and G7 statements (e.g., G7, 2022, para. 71). The focus on coal-fired power is understandable: coal is the most carbon-intensive fuel, burning coal leads to large local environmental costs (e.g., air pollution), and generates lower economic rents (Collier & Venables, 2014). Coal-fired power generation is also the most readily substitutable stationary energy source, through alternative electricity generation methods and demand-reduction strategies. Moreover, the latest Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change offers further support for the phase-out of unabated coal-fired power, since “in all scenarios [for staying below 2°C], fossil fuel use is greatly reduced and unabated coal use is completely phased out by 2050” (Riahi et al., 2022, pp. 3–47). These material, technological, and economic factors create a more conducive context (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Green, 2018a, ESM 1) for the diffusion of an AFFN against (new, unabated) coal-fired power generation, which helps to explain the wide diffusion of this norm.

However, this is not to say that other AFFNs are not gaining traction (nor is it to deny that coal-fired power norms remain somewhat contested; see below). For instance, the broad participation in the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement, which specifies timelines for a phase-out of unabated coal-fired power generation, suggests widespread support for action on coal-fired power generation that goes well beyond merely ceasing to build new coal-fired power stations. Moreover, the launch of BOGA suggests newfound—though still nascent—support for AFFNs targeting oil and gas, and focusing on the supply side of fossil fuel economies.

Additionally, AFFNs do not just concern measures restricting fossil fuel production or use as such, but importantly also the financial support states provide. The Glasgow Climate Pact further diffused the norm of fossil fuel subsidy reform (Van de Graaf & Blondeel, 2018), and the Statement on International Public Support for the Clean Energy Transition also showed that states and financial institutions increasingly acknowledge that the financial support they provide to fossil fuels in other countries should be terminated. The statement further diffuses the emerging practice by some multilateral development banks to shift resources away from fossil fuels, again starting with coal.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the debates over fossil fuels at and surrounding COP26 illuminate how the institutionalization of anti-fossil fuel norms has become a new site in an ongoing contestation over the fossil fuel industry’s “social license.” Calls to phase out fossil fuels *simpliciter*—led by civil society and embraced by some states—often reflect not merely a technical calculus about efficient pathways to net-zero emissions, but also a deeper moral condemnation of the fossil fuel industry (Green, 2017; Green, 2018b), especially in light of its pernicious influence on climate politics (e.g., Brulle, 2020; Levy & Egan, 2003; Newell & Paterson, 1998; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). On this view, it is not enough to recognize that fossil fuel *emissions* need to be “abated”; the fossil fuel *industry* needs to be disarmed as a political force. Against this, the ubiquitous insertion of “unabated” in official textual references to coal power can be interpreted as a reassertion of the technocratic, efficiency-based paradigm of climate policymaking, in which the fossil fuel industry is cast (and casts itself) as having a legitimate leading role. This illustrates the way that the fossil fuel industry and fossil fuel-dependent states engage in discursive contestation over the content of norms in contexts where they are unable to block policy or discussion outright, consistent with theories of norm contestation (Bloomfield, 2016; Sandholtz, 2007; Wiener, 2014).

Third, the developments at COP26 offer an indication of the interplay between AFFNs and their wider normative environment. In line with what Blondeel et al. (2019) observe, the norm of phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies contained in the Glasgow Climate Pact meshes well with broader norms of liberal environmentalism that emphasize economic efficiency and free markets (Bernstein, 2001). Likewise, to the extent that support for unabated coal as well as public financial support for fossil fuels abroad is likely to lead to asset stranding (Semeniuk et al., 2022), it can be argued that phasing down unabated coal and restricting international fossil fuel finance also supports these broader norms. This may again help explain why some of AFFNs gain more traction compared to others that may be perceived to be less compatible with the norms of liberal environmentalism—such as a moratorium on oil and gas development.

Moreover, as noted in Section 3, to the extent that AFFNs apply to all countries, they are conditioned by equitable principles—such as the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities—that are deeply entrenched in the international climate change regime (Okereke, 2008). Indeed, COP26 served as a reminder that AFFNs cannot be implemented without consideration of the broader North–South context. On the one hand,

COP26 revealed that the developments surrounding AFFNs have become yet another site on which decades-long debates over justice and equity in the context of climate action are being played out. This is unsurprising: the kinds of normative considerations that apply to actions to address greenhouse gas emissions are similar to those that apply to actions that specifically target fossil fuels, so the expectation that the developed countries should take the lead in phasing out fossil fuels and provide support to developing countries remains relevant (Kantha et al., 2018; Muttitt & Kantha, 2020).

On the other hand, focusing on fossil fuels also generates new North–South tensions and opportunities. An emerging tension concerns the geographic concentration of different fossil fuels. For instance, commentators in India, which is highly coal-dependent, questioned the political logic of singling out coal at COP26 (Hindustan Times, 2021). Targeting coal is less costly for developed countries as scalable substitutes are commercially competitive and many of them have already begun to phase out coal domestically. But the same cannot be said for oil and gas, as the “Stop Cambo” campaign against the UK highlighted. This raises the question whether the focus on coal is disadvantaging developing countries. At the same time, targeting specific fossil fuels also revealed new avenues for North–South cooperation. Coal-fired power plants, and fossil fuels more generally, provide a more tangible unit of analysis for efforts to tackle the climate problem compared with decontextualized greenhouse gas emissions—one that brings into focus the flows of capital and networks of relationships that constitute fossil fuel economies. Accordingly, it foregrounds more concrete demands for technological, financial, and capacity-building support, so that people within developing countries can reap the multiple benefits of switching to clean sources of energy while ensuring justice and equity in the transition. In this respect, the just transition deal for South Africa may point to the emergence of a new, bespoke approach to North–South cooperation on energy transitions—one that moves beyond the abstract debates about aggregate financial flows that have characterized UNFCCC negotiations for so long, and that gets on with the difficult but crucial job of dismantling fossil fuel economies.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The mitigation strategy of directly addressing fossil fuels—the major driver behind climate change—has remained conspicuously absent from the international climate negotiations for three decades. COP26 in this regard breaks new ground, both in terms of its formal outputs (i.e., the Glasgow Climate Pact), as well as the informal initiatives launched. Looking at these developments from the perspective of theory on anti-fossil fuel norms, we have sought to illuminate the contestation between proponents of new AFFNs (mostly from civil society) and the actors resisting those norms at an important international moment. We have shown that some AFFNs—on unabated coal-fired power and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies—are becoming increasingly institutionalized, whereas others—on oil and gas production, and international fossil fuel finance—are only just emerging. Future research could usefully build on this paper by considering the extent to which the international institutionalization of AFFNs is influencing domestic behavior change in key countries, that is norm implementation. The challenges in this regard are great, given that the years preceding COP26 saw dramatic increases in fossil fuel subsidies globally (OECD, 2022), in new coal plants in China (Global Energy Monitor et al., 2022, p. 6), and in fossil fuel financing by private financial institutions (Rainforest Action Network et al., 2021).

Of course, the evolution of AFFNs is partly contingent on the conduciveness of security, economic, and political dynamics, which can alter interest-based calculations in ways more or less favorable to their diffusion and implementation. Just a few months after COP26, Russia invaded Ukraine, triggering a scramble for non-Russian energy sources and a spike in fossil fuel prices. This context is less conducive to nascent norms against (new) oil and gas production, and has even caused some G7 nations to backtrack on the previously endorsed norm against public financing of overseas fossil fuel projects (Lo & Farand, 2022). On the other hand, high fossil fuel prices and concerns about energy import-dependence are more conducive to the diffusion of norms against sources of fossil fuel demand, such as coal-fired power stations and combustion engine vehicles. These developments serve as a reminder of the enduring importance of perceived geopolitical interests and market dynamics in shaping decisions about energy production and use—and of the value of theoretical traditions that foreground such processes, such as international political economy (e.g., Hughes & Lipsy, 2013). Still, we hope to have shown that an understanding of norm dynamics is indispensable to making sense of the key developments in international energy and climate politics at COP26.



## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Harro van Asselt:** Conceptualization (equal); formal analysis (equal); investigation (equal). **Fergus Green:** Conceptualization (equal); formal analysis (equal); investigation (equal).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The 1997 Kyoto Protocol also does not mention fossil fuels, but does include as one of the possible policies and measures that states can adopt the “[p]rogressive reduction or phasing out of market imperfections, fiscal incentives, tax and duty exemptions and subsidies in all greenhouse gas emitting sectors that run counter to the objective of the Convention” (UNFCCC, 1997, Article 2(a)(v)).
- <sup>2</sup> On December 3, 2021, a few weeks after the conclusion of COP26, Shell pulled out of the Cambo project, plunging the project's future into doubt (Harvey, 2021). However, the spike in global oil and gas prices and heightened energy security concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 were favorable to the industry's expansionist interests. With UK government policy becoming even more favorable to the industry's expansion following the release of the Government's Energy Security Strategy on 7 April 2022 (DBEIS, 2022), Ithaca Energy acquired Siccar Point with a view to developing the Cambo field.
- <sup>3</sup> See <https://fossilfuel treaty.org/>, accessed July 10, 2022.
- <sup>4</sup> See <https://fossilfuel registry.org/>, accessed July 10, 2022.
- <sup>5</sup> See <https://ukcop26.org/global-coal-to-clean-power-transition-statement/>, accessed July 10, 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> See <https://ukcop26.org/political-declaration-on-the-just-energy-transition-in-south-africa/>, accessed July 10, 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Associate members must sign up to the BOGA declaration and have taken one or more “significant concrete steps that contribute to the reduction of oil and gas production.” See <https://beyondoilandgasalliance.com/who-we-are/>, accessed July 10, 2022.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://ukcop26.org/statement-on-international-public-support-for-the-clean-energy-transition/>, accessed July 10, 2022.
- <sup>9</sup> See <https://www.wri.org/data/updates-towards-paris-alignment-2018-following-mdb-climate-tools-2021>, accessed July 10, 2022.

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