

Understanding and Confronting the Fossil-fueled Anti-Climate-Equity Network

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In the discussion of equity and the governance of the global problem of climate change, one thing almost never discussed is the role and impact of the fossil industry and its dark money links to the Public Relations industry and research institutions and lobbying groups who actively undermine **equity-focused efforts** on climate. This makes all our discussions about the UN process and rational solutions to the climate crisis (ones that strive for adequacy and equity) sadly naive. Every single proposal for “sharing the burden” of mitigation efforts and climate finance provisioning that have come from the equity-focused side of the climate policy/academic/institutes and movement organizations have been killed off, suffering at the hands of the ascendant neoliberal approaches to climate governance. Language around binding and truly just approaches are regularly killed off during UN negotiations, often by the United States negotiators, citing the Senate supermajority they need, sometimes they are supported by a few other countries in doing so. The Paris Agreement model of Nationally Determined Contributions is hinged entirely on voluntary pledges and “name and shaming” of non-performers.

What would a non-naive approach be? In the US, “Free market” think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute are the center of the Web of Denial. They are funded by millions of dollars a year from the fossil fuel industry, directly and through “dark money” channels. They often use rhetoric against pro-poor and pro-equity efforts in global climate governance, painting them as socialist and top-down and bureaucratic strangulation of free initiative and individual freedom. We would argue that efforts to advance equity in climate policy go nowhere, in global or national US arenas, without an understanding of and strategic approach to address the impact of the fossil fuel/Right wing/dark money machine. Endless reframing of equity issues to try to make them more palatable to that group (for example by describing national security reasons to take climate seriously and help the most vulnerable) have failed. That leads us to propose three initial areas for research, and hope this list is clarified and expanded.

First, we need to understand the role of the fossil fuel and allied industries and their links to anti-equity-and-ambition lobbying organizations, research institutions (including universities), social movement organizations and think tanks. What are the strategies of that network in defeating equitable and adequate climate action? What are the resources and strong and weak points of that network? How have its efforts been successfully resisted and what communications strategies have clarified for decision-makers the risks of their persuasion conducted by the thousands of PR specialists they hire? What strategies might be taken?

Second, what are the links from corporations and their foundations to environmental organizations, and how has this influenced the positions they take with regard to equity and ambition nationally and internationally? There is documented impact of foundation support on the preference by environmental organizations for moderate and market-friendly approaches, which has made some groups highly favored by major donors. Some, such as EDF, NRDC, WWF, NWF, RFF, TNC, and WRI, are core members of the dominant national and international climate NGO networks. Understanding the extent and routes of their influence on network positions and strategies bears significant research. When have foundations or private individual donors “steered” these organizations away from positions in favor of climate equity?

Third, we need a broader agenda to reassess the future of equity-focused approaches to climate change policy post-Paris, and in this age when fossil interests are ascendant in the United States. What can be done in the current conjuncture to advance the equitable and boldly adequate approaches needed? More specifically for this proposal, what approaches are being offered to confront the rise of the fossil-fueled anti-climate-equity network? How is our imagination of possible climate futures limited by the dominant neoliberal ideology which has been successfully advanced by financial and industrial interests?