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Ensuring transparency, balanced participation and ethical decision-making in the UNFCCC

Global climate conference

This week kicks off the intersessional climate change conference in Bonn, Germany. Every year, negotiators and technical experts meet to chisel out the next steps in global climate policy. When we see the climate crisis continuously escalating, with an Arctic last year 20 degrees warmer than usual, the people negotiating our future need the best possible space to do it. They need a space free from the fossil fuel lobby.

However, as reports regarding conflicts of interest and sponsoring of the COPs have shown, this is far from reality. The fossil fuel industry is very much at large, and participates in the climate change conferences as observers, as part of country-delegations, as sponsors and by showcasing their business or their products in exhibition areas. We do not have time to let these companies, whose interests go strictly against the purpose of the UNFCCC, to continue to influence climate policy. It is time to kick the big polluters out!

After the Paris Agreement in 2015, the world now has a global framework and goals regarding climate policy. There are several actions points stated in the Paris Agreement, such as a maximum 1,5 degrees' global temperature rise; recurring stocktaking; finance and adaptation measures etc. However, the details are not yet finalised, and that is what is continuously being discussed at the coming COPs, and now also in Bonn. And, as we are all aware, the devil is in the details.

This yearly meeting in Bonn takes place in-between the grander COPs – Conference of the Parties, and is a technical meeting conducted more in the shadows, without political leaders standing in the flashlight. However, these meetings are none the less political. If anything, the intersessional is where things get done. That is why we are sending a team to Bonn to help campaign on the topic of conflicts of interest, and to share our ideas for policies that the UNFCCC should adopt to ensure transparency, balanced participation

and ethical decision-making. Only like this do we have a chance to achieve the best possible climate policy.

We need to move forward from Paris, rather than backwards. But climate deniers have taken over one of the largest and most powerful nations in the world. Independent science is both dramatically underfunded and increasingly undermined. We therefore urgently need new and ambitious leadership against climate change.

This is precisely why it's so urgent that a clear line be drawn to avoid conflicts of interest, unbalanced participation, privileged access and undue influence in the UNFCCC. To adopt ambitious climate protection policies, we need to be able to take decisions completely independently of those who have an interest in blocking progress or maintaining the status quo.

As members of the European Parliament, we have direct experience of the disproportionate influence that corporations can have on EU policies, with 70-80% of lobbyists in the Commission's expert groups representing big business. Learning from this experience, the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament proposes a series of policies to be adopted by the UNFCCC to ensure transparency, ethics and balanced participation.

What does the Greens/EFA group propose?

The UNFCCC should adopt the following policies:

- **Protect Climate Policies from Vested Interests**

A "firewall" should be put in place between the fossil fuels industry and the UNFCCC, so that organisations whose business or funding model relies on activities that run counter to the objectives of the UNFCC are not given an influential role in the process. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control has adopted a specific Article 5.3 to "protect policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry". A similar policy should be put in place by the UNFCCC.

- **Adopt a strong conflicts of interest policy**

A robust conflict of interest policy, adapted to the UNFCCC context and including a clear definition of conflicts of interest, should also be adopted. This should include, for example, provisions on the "revolving door" phenomenon, which is when public officials move to the private sector to work in areas they were previously responsible for regulating.

- **Ensure balance between the interests represented**

Utmost care should be taken to ensure that all stakeholders have equal possibilities to participate and influence the agenda. Organisations that are dedicated to pursuing the UNFCCC objectives, particularly if they are under-resourced, should be given extra support. Funding from stakeholders should be carefully monitored in order to avoid any potential influencing of the UNFCCC agenda.

- **Increase transparency in decision-making**

It should be possible to know exactly which interests have had an impact on the decision-making process and why. This can be achieved through the adoption of a mandatory register of interest representatives, or lobby register. There should also be a list of meetings held between officials working on climate policies and stakeholders, including a summary of the policy recommendations put forward.

- **Promote public access to information**

The UNFCCC should adopt a policy on access to documents that is in line with the Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters. More information about the decision-making process should be made proactively available on the centralised info hub, as early as possible in the process (http://unfccc.int/2860.php).

We currently have a window of opportunity when it comes to limiting the influence of the fossil fuel lobby on the future of the planet. This year, the world is looking for new leadership in climate policy, and the upcoming host for COP23 – Fiji – is one of the countries that is most dedicated to protecting the environment and preventing irreversible damage. More countries should support this approach, but instead they seem to have the ear of the fossil fuels industry.

It is high time to get a move on, for the EU and for the world. Next year at COP24, Poland will be taking over the UNFCCC presidency, and it may be the case that we have a huge number of coal companies accessing and sponsoring the COP. So, together, we must put pressure on the EU to be a climate leader, and on the UNFCCC to safeguard its own ultimate purpose – to limit global greenhouse gas emissions and to ensure a sustainable future for current and future generations.

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