Fossil Fuel Ad Bans Protect our rights to life, health a healthy environment and information in the context of climate change
10 April 2025

By United Nations Special Rapporteurs Elisa Morgera and Astrid Puentes Riaño*

Climate change can feel too complicated to untangle, much less solve. But by first addressing what's keeping environmental problems in place, we can disable the tools that polluters use to keep the public from demanding action to protect our fundamental human rights from the impacts of these planetary crises.

Climate change is taking lives and undermining livelihoods, health and economies across the world, including in Europe. The need for urgent action couldn't be clearer and yet we struggle to make significant progress – the levels of greenhouse gas emissions are higher than before and they are expected to keep growing. Meanwhile, the average temperature of our planet keeps increasing and extreme weather events occur more often and unpredictably.

How can we protect our lives, health and economies from the devastating impacts of climate change? As representatives of the people, governments should serve as should serve as an objective and independent controllers and monitors of private actors that have for decades been actively and knowingly harming people and the environment for their benefit, such as fossil fuels companies.

One place to start is to take away the industry's "megaphone" through which they have been disseminating their false narrative, telling the public that there's nothing to worry about and selling their harmful products. So this pace to start from is: advertisements. There has been a growing chorus calling for a ban on fossil fuel ads, including the United Nations Secretary-General last year[1], and there are several examples on the ground. As it happened in the past with ads for tobacco[2], it is important to also control advertisements for fossil fuel products and industries.

Kicking off this year, The Hague's ban of fossil fuel advertisements – the first ban imposed by law around the world – went into effect. The Hague's rule applies to any product advertisement for specified high-carbon activities, because those are at odds with globally agreed goals to limit climate change. That means, no ads that encourage excess demand in products that require the burning of fossil fuels that feeds climate change. And it also means no ads for airlines or cruises, so that public spaces like train stations won't feature ads for more polluting travel alternatives.

---

[1] https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-general/speeches/2024-06-05/discurso-especial-sobre-la-acci%C3%B3n-clim%C3%A1tica-%E2%80%9Cla-hora-de-la-verdad%E2%80%9D

[2] https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2025/01/22/tc-2024-058903

With 40 other cities in the process of considering similar regulations, and national legislation adopted (though not in effect yet) in France and being debated in Ireland and Canada, there's good reason for more to follow.[3]

A ban of fossil fuel ads can prevent increasing emissions that easily could have been avoided as fossil fuel advertising promotes climate inaction and drives fossil fuel demand. While the ban on tobacco advertising did not end smoking, it played a critical role in sapping the industry's ability to pour endless streams of money into advertisements to grow demand for cigarettes and to spread the idea that smoking is harmless, while also preventing more direct government regulations on their sales of a harmful product and mislead people. The fossil fuel ad bans should also be understood in the context of well-known and protracted efforts by the fossil fuel industry to disinform the public on climate change and their responsibility in causing it and profiting from it, by downplaying fossil fuel impacts and contesting scientific facts.[4]

For fossil fuels, the ad bans can challenge the taken-for-granted and sometimes unnecessary presence of fossil fuel products in our lives (for example, driving SUVs and flying to nearby holiday destinations) and patterns of systemic inequalities and its linked over-production and over-consumption. Fossil fuels ad bans "explicitly reject the promotion and normalization of fossil fuel-intensive products and behaviours" and encourage the public towards having an "untainted conversation" about the issue.[5] In other words, people may move away from thinking "it can't be that bad…"

Fossil fuel industries, as well as other fossil fuel-dependent industries argue that fossil fuel ads bans violate their right to "free speech." This, however, is a misrepresentation of human rights: while international human rights law generally protects freedom of expression, it also allows for limitations, particularly when public interest—such as health and environmental protection—are at stake. From a human rights perspective, the aim must be to "protect the democratic debate from distortion by powerful financial groups enjoying advantageous access to influential media, to protect the formation of public opinion from undue commercial influence" (A/69/286).

The public is already paying a heavy price for over a century of burning fossil fuels, not only due to the increasing devastating impacts of climate change, but also due to air pollution that can damage every organ in our body, worsening and complicating pre-existing health conditions, and contributing to approximately over 8 million premature deaths annually worldwide.[6] We have a right to live and the human right to a safe and healthy environment, which includes the right to breathe clean air and the right to a safe climate. These rights allow us to work, play and rest outdoors and support our agriculture and food systems, our housing and infrastructure.

---

[3] www.worldwithoutfossilads.org

[4] https://academic.oup.com/oocc/article/5/1/kgaf011/8099165

[5] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-025-02267-4.epdf?sharing_token=79rBCV7_5CuqsA_NgZnNs9RgN0jAjWel9jnR3ZoTv0NJVEqu9pdlfqUbA6ER2dZ4RFQMv2xqPYT02YHZDA6Hd2BriWkXjzV-Vn9lAKlzaAlYkx7iCL4PQEooa0NggZe7T1OtkOmIT0CXkitV7UHziXlFwZS9JzlBBZkneUcEu_g%3D

[6] https://hsph.harvard.edu/climate-health-c-change/news/fossil-fuel-air-pollution-responsible-for-1-in-5-deaths-worldwide/

For States to protect our human rights, effective actions are required, including protecting us from activities that might be harmful to us. As States have restrictions on toxic substances, advertising must also be controlled. This is such an important lesson from the recent past: had States more effectively controlled tobacco advertising earlier, millions of lives could have been saved. Let's avoid making the same mistake.

ENDS

*__Elisa Morgera__ is the UN Special Rapporteur on Climate Change and Human Rights, and she is about to publish a report on the human rights impacts of the fossil-fuel based economy. **Astrid Puentes** is the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment.

Special Rapporteurs/Independent Experts/Working Groups are independent human rights experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council. Together, these experts are referred to as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. While the UN Human Rights office acts as the secretariat for Special Procedures, the experts serve in their individual capacity and are independent from any government or organization, including OHCHR and the UN. Any views or opinions presented are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the UN or OHCHR.