



Human Impacts Institute on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels

About the Human Impacts Institute

The Human Impacts Institute (HII) is an international non-profit founded in 2011 in New York City. We use culture and the arts to fight for climate justice. Our work sits at the intersection of environmental science, creative practice, and community organizing — because we believe the transition to a just, fossil-free world depends not only on policy, but on the stories we tell and the people who tell them.

Our active programs — including the Creative Climate Awards (CCA), the Activism & Amplifiers Fellowship (A&A), the Urban Environmental Health Lab (UEHL), and the Creative Climate Communications Lab (C3 Lab) — reach artists, frontline youth, climate educators, and policy experts across more than 50 countries.

Barriers to Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels

The most underestimated barrier to a just transition is cultural — and it is manufactured.

For decades, fossil fuel interests have invested heavily in shaping public narrative: embedding themselves into the identity of working communities, sponsoring cultural events, funding disinformation¹, and framing the energy transition as a threat to livelihoods rather than a path toward them². The result is a deeply entrenched set of stories that governments and international frameworks have been slow to counter.

We see this every day in our work. Frontline communities — the people who bear the greatest cost of the climate crisis and stand to gain the most from a just transition — are handed a false choice: their jobs and communities, or a livable planet. This narrative is not accidental. It is a barrier as real as any regulatory gap or economic lock-in.

¹ https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/DPH-paper-Heffernan_3Z03Ecf.pdf

² <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:d53551b3-b68b-4759-80f9-214938cd5fe7/files/s4b29b7118>

Alongside this, we observe a persistent gap between awareness and action. People understand the crisis. What they lack is the sense that collective action has power — and that they themselves are agents of it, not just witnesses to it. This sense of disconnection is not apathy. It is what happens when policy processes exclude the voices, languages, and creative traditions of the communities most affected.

No treaty, however well-designed, will hold without cultural infrastructure to sustain public will. This is the barrier international climate governance has not yet taken seriously enough.

Three Solutions We Recommend

1. A Fossil Fuel Treaty

We strongly support the development of a binding Fossil Fuel Treaty, currently led by the Fossil Fuel Treaty Initiative. The Paris Agreement governs emissions; it does not govern production. This gap is not a technicality — it is the central mechanism by which fossil fuel expansion continues while governments meet their emissions pledges on paper.

A Treaty that addresses supply — with differentiated timelines that account for the Global South's right to development and the Global North's historical responsibility — would provide the enforceable framework that current climate architecture lacks. Our network of artists, educators, and frontline advocates across 50+ countries works to shift the mainstream narrative — building the kind of sustained public pressure that makes it politically impossible for governments not to sign.

2. Recognize Arts and Culture as Transition Infrastructure

Culture is not decoration — it is infrastructure. Just as we invest in clean energy grids and retraining programs, we must invest in the cultural systems that make transition politically durable and socially just.

[Hill's programs](#) demonstrate what becomes possible when frontline communities are resourced to tell their own stories. The Creative Climate Awards — now in its global phase with the 2026 theme of Collective Power — celebrates art that imagines just transitions from the ground up. The Artivism & Amplifiers Fellowship trains young climate advocates across the Global South and Global North in storytelling and collective action, building the kind of sustained, cross-border movement that policy change requires.

We urge participating governments and the conference framework to:

- Establish dedicated funding streams for arts and culture within just transition finance

- Include cultural practitioners in national transition planning processes
- Recognize community-led storytelling initiatives as legitimate climate action, eligible for climate finance

3. Invest in Youth Climate Communicators as Transition Actors

Young people are not just the inheritors of this crisis — they are among its most effective communicators and organizers. Yet their participation in formal transition processes remains largely tokenistic.

HII's Creative Climate Communications Lab (C3 Lab) trains social amplifiers — community leaders, educators, and youth advocates — in climate narrative and communication strategy. The results are clear: when people can articulate the transition in their own voice, connected to and leverage their own community, public buy-in grows and sustains.

We recommend that the Santa Marta Conference and any resulting Treaty framework mandate participatory, culturally-grounded youth engagement — not as a side event, but as a structural component of national transition planning and international review processes.

Closing

The transition away from fossil fuels will not succeed on technical solutions alone. It will succeed when communities see themselves in it — when the transition feels not like something done to them, but something built by them, with them and for them.

The Human Impacts Institute stands ready to support a global Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty with the cultural infrastructure this moment demands.