

Exploring the rise of emissions in the shadow of global climate negotiations

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This November, world leaders will meet once again to negotiate and discuss measures to address the global climate crisis. The question is, will COP26 in Glasgow make any difference? A recently published

research article identifies key reasons behind the world's 30-year record of failure to bring down global emissions.

"One common thread in the reviewed literature is power in its various forms," says Isak Stoddard, a doctoral student at the Department of Earth Sciences and one of the lead authors of the article.

On 31 October, representatives of almost 200 countries will gather in Glasgow, Scotland, for the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as COP26. On the agenda once again is the issue of reducing [carbon dioxide emissions](#) to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius as enshrined in the 2015 Paris Agreement. However, any hopes that the world might be moving towards phasing out [fossil fuels](#) and aligning itself with such commitments have been clouded by recent reports of increased emissions.

The reasons behind the continued rise in [global emissions](#) were recently explored in a study published in the journal *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*. Lead authors of the study are Isak Stoddard and Kevin Anderson, visiting professor at Uppsala University's Department of Earth Sciences and former Zennström Professor of Climate Change Leadership. Together with 21 other researchers, including two from Uppsala University, they have sought explanations in nine key areas of knowledge: international [climate](#) governance, the vested interests of the fossil-fuel industry, geopolitics and militarism, economics and financialisation, mitigation modeling, energy supply systems, inequity, high-carbon lifestyles, and social imaginaries (collective images of how we might live).

Power is a common thread

The conclusion reached by the researchers is that a common, and thus far marginalized, perspective lies in the central role that power has

played.

"Behind the delay in [emission](#) reductions are everything from geopolitical, military and industrial interests and modes of thought to the assumptions on which research and knowledge production are based in fields such as economics, energy and climate. This has contributed to a 60 percent rise in global carbon dioxide emissions since 1990, despite decades of international negotiations, research and all sorts of attempts to take action," says Isak Stoddard.

Stoddard also sees the research community as part of the problem, given that its knowledge production has served to strengthen societal structures and interests that have contributed to creating and maintaining the emissions crisis.

"Researchers are part of a community that produces knowledge about climate issues. It's a matter of which questions we ask, and don't ask, as researchers and how we adapt our message to what we deem possible or acceptable within our current political and economic system."

Positioning within unsustainable societal systems

Other factors that have played an important role in the trajectory of emissions have to do with issues of inequity, as well as lock-ins to fossil-fuel dependent and energy-intensive lifestyles and visions of the future.

"We can also see that a large number of actors who previously viewed the challenge of climate change as a threat to their operations have begun to position themselves more proactively. While this may appear gratifying, one of the main conclusions of the article is that we need to understand [climate change](#) as part of a much greater problem and as an acute symptom of a highly unsustainable societal development, largely driven by powerful vested interests that constantly need to be

questioned," says Isak Stoddard.

Is there any hope for improved conditions for progress during COP26?

"There is definitely value in holding such discussions between countries at this level. That said, our study has shown that, even if there has been criticism of the design of the United Nations Framework Convention [on Climate Change], deadlocks have generally been the result of strategic geopolitical considerations that have been decided long before the negotiations take place. The changes we need to see must also happen from the ground up and, of course, in different ways in all of the various societies and cultures around the world."

More information: Isak Stoddard et al, Three Decades of Climate Mitigation: Why Haven't We Bent the Global Emissions Curve? *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* (2021). [DOI: 10.1146/annurev-environ-012220-011104](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-012220-011104)

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