



THE INVESTIGATIVE AGENDA FOR CLIMATE CHANGE JOURNALISM

Report on a Meeting of Climate Change Journalists and Experts

Gothenburg, Sweden, September 19, 2023



Global Investigative
Journalism Network

Climate change is by far the biggest story we've ever had to cover because it's by far the biggest thing that human beings have ever done by orders of magnitude larger than anything else. And so there are an almost endless number of places to go poke and look and examine. The most obvious is money.

BILL MCKIBBEN

2023 GLOBAL INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM CONFERENCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GIJN convened a one-day meeting of 80 climate change journalists and experts from 35 countries to discuss the role of investigative journalism in climate crisis reporting. Reporting the causes and effects of global warming in a multitude of ways and for a wide range of audiences is critical, and as humanity moves closer to the brink of a climate disaster it is essential that journalists are given the time, skills and tools to hold officials accountable, be they in government or in the private sector. The deterioration of the climate can be slowed down but instead it is accelerating. Who is responsible? Accountability is at the heart of investigative or watchdog journalism.

The **OBJECTIVES** of the meeting were:

- To share perspectives on the top priorities for investigative journalism on climate change
- To discuss how investigations into the fossil fuel industry can break new ground
- To consider how to improve in-depth journalism holding governments to account
- To address how to facilitate more collaboration among investigative journalists, particularly in the so-called Global South
- To make recommendations to further support watchdog journalism on climate issues.

At the meeting all of the objectives were tackled, and **PRIORITIES** for accountability focused climate change journalism emerged, including:

- The fossil fuel industry and its vast network of enablers and related industries
- Government policies and promises the world over and who is influencing them
- Climate change finance in all its complex forms
- Vulnerable communities
- The clean energy transition - winners and losers
- Climate change as a complex, interrelated global crisis.

Significant **CHALLENGES** remain, including:

- Data, documents, and human sources are hard to obtain
- The underlying structures of power lack transparency
- The global climate crisis is complex and affects every beat
- Capacity issues are substantial across the field but especially in the Global South
- New collaborative models are needed that link cause and effect
- More accountability reporting is necessary, with more compelling storytelling
- Public engagement is critical: climate news avoidance and distrust in climate news are significant
- Dis- and misinformation are widespread.

Participants identified a range of **SOLUTIONS** that would strengthen and support investigative journalism on climate change, including:

- Increased training, mentoring, staffing, and resources to build capacity and expertise within news organizations
- Improved access to relevant data and expertise
- Global and regional initiatives that are complementary and increase impact
- Better platforms to facilitate information-sharing and cross-border collaborations, new forms of collaboration particularly between news organizations in the Global South and North
- Further discussion and thinking about public engagement strategies.

INTRODUCTION

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Despite progress on the development of affordable green energy, according to one of the world's leading authorities, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, global greenhouse gas emissions are rising inexorably. Climate change is global, but the causes are not: fossil fuels – coal, oil, and gas – account for more than 75% of global greenhouse gasses. Despite the climate crisis, 96% of the oil and gas industry is expanding – see this [report](#). This expansion is occurring even though many governments and corporations around the world have made net-zero and other pledges.

Vulnerable communities who contribute little to emissions bear the brunt of its impact – sea level rises, reduced agricultural yields, fires, severe storms, poverty, hunger, and displacement, to name a few. The promises and pledges to assist with mitigation and adaptation remain mostly that, mere promises. Adding to this, climate change-related misinformation and disinformation are ubiquitous and increasingly sophisticated. The consequences for the whole planet are dire. However, although climate change is getting worse, it is not yet irreversible.

Thousands of journalists around the world are reporting on climate change and its impact, and multiple networks have been established to further such reporting. This work is vital to inform and engage the public, and to challenge those in power who fiddle while the earth burns. Accountability is at the core of investigative journalism and there is a critical need for systematic, in-depth, original reporting on climate change in all its complexity. This includes the work of tracking a new set of economic interests that are developing as the world moves fitfully to a lower carbon economy. How best then can investigative journalists focus on corporate and government accountability?

To find out, the Global Investigative Journalism Network convened a workshop, **The Investigative Agenda for Climate Change Journalism**, a daylong meeting of the majority of investigative journalism networks, top names in the world of climate change journalism, and reporters and researchers working on the topic from across the world. Eighty people from thirtyfive countries gathered to share perspectives on the top priorities for investigative journalism on climate change.

With support from the European Climate Foundation and Journalismfund Europe, the meeting was held as a pre-conference event the day before the Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Gothenburg, Sweden on September 19, 2023.

The discussions were structured around investigative priorities and challenges, with special focus on five topics: the fossil fuel industry, government accountability, climate finance, climate impacts and supply chains. Each session provided an overview, case studies and discussion. The participants then split into groups and the meeting ended with reports back from the breakout discussions.

The meeting was chaired by Sheila Coronel, veteran investigative journalist, Director of the Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia Journalism School, and founder and current board member of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.

To encourage frank discussion, the meeting observed Chatham House rules, meaning that the day's comments were, in journalism parlance, “on background” – comments made cannot be attributed to an individual, nor an individual's identity revealed. Those identified in this report have provided permission to use their names.

After the session, GIJN circulated an anonymous survey to assess the meeting and gather information for future activity. Among the survey's findings, 86% of respondents found the session “very” or “extremely” useful and 90% said they would like to continue the conversation. Ideas for additional connections included creation of online interest groups for more journalist-to-journalist networking, discussion, and problem-solving. One day was too short. But it was an energizing start to what I hope will be a collaborative program in the future.

What follows are key points made during the day, first isolating key problems, followed by challenges and some recommendations.

Finally, I would like to offer my huge gratitude to everyone who helped to make the workshop and this report possible: including Journalismfund Europe, Sheila Coronel, more than eighty fantastic journalists and experts who came from all over the world to share their insights and advice, and my colleagues at GIJN, in particular Toby McIntosh, Andrea Romanos and David Kaplan. Also huge thanks to Deborah Nelson, journalist extraordinaire, who has co-authored this report with Toby and me.

ANNE KOCH

PROGRAM DIRECTOR, GIJN

MEETING SUMMARY

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GOTHENBURG. The average global surface temperature hit a [new record high](#) in September 2023 as extreme heat, storms, wildfires, and floods ravaged the planet. Against that backdrop, investigative journalists covering climate change on six continents gathered here at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference with a renewed sense of urgency.

“What we’re engaged in here in this room right now is of global consequence,” [Matthew Green](#), global investigations editor for [DeSmog](#), told his colleagues. “We are witnessing the systems that sustain life on this planet literally being dismantled in front of our eyes. And we are part of the immune system that is arising in response.”

The meeting of eighty journalists and researchers was a call to action organized around investigative priorities and challenges with special focus on five topics: the fossil fuel industry, government accountability, climate finance, climate impacts, and supply chains. There was agreement about the critical necessity for accountability at multiple levels - particularly the fossil fuel industry, the corporate sector, and government. Climate finance was a key focus, as was the need for investigation and in depth reporting across borders.

Another recurring theme was the disparate impact of climate change on lower and higher income nations, as was the connection between climate impacts and accountability. Also emphasized was the need for greater collaboration among news organizations and climate change networks. It was agreed that although the challenges remain significant, there is a critical need for significant improvement to investigative and watchdog journalism on the climate crisis.

Highlights of the discussion follow.

PRIORITY: INVESTIGATING THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY

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Investigative journalists have played a leading role in exposing the fossil fuel industry's lies about climate change. A series of [investigations](#) by news outlets in 2015¹ revealed companies knew for decades that oil, gas and coal were warming the planet while publicly denying it. Journalists worldwide have documented the consequences. Yet, with trillions of dollars of reserves still buried in the ground, the industry has found innovative new ways to ply disinformation, often with remarkable success – and devastating impact, as global temperatures reach [record highs](#) and large swathes of the globe catch fire.

“The fossil fuel industry will do, apparently, anything they can to delay the transition to clean energy,” said author [Bill McKibben](#), a pioneer in climate-change journalism. “So the job of figuring out how they're using their political power to prevent the change that we desperately need is enormously interesting and enormously important.”

It is also enormously challenging to keep pace with an industry that has the money and power to influence decisions from the hyper-local level of a community windmill to the global — to the extent that [a United Arab Emirates oil sultan presided over the 2023 United Nations Climate Conference](#).

Damian Carrington, environment editor at The Guardian, cited the formidable task of investigating the fossil fuel industry. “The fossil fuel industry is a fearsome adversary – and what I mean by that is it's probably the richest industry in the history of the world,” he said. “That gets you a colossal amount of political power and influence. And so they are tough to fight against.”

¹ [InsideClimate News - The Pulitzer Prizes \(2015\)](#), [Two-Year Long Investigation: What Exxon Knew About Climate Change | Columbia Journalism School \(2015\)](#), [What Exxon knew about the Earth's melting Arctic | LA Times \(2015\)](#), [Assessing ExxonMobil's climate change communications \(1977–2014\)](#), [Assessing ExxonMobil's global warming projections | Science \(2023\)](#)

Investigative journalism can have an impact and reporters must rise to the challenge, presenters said. They pointed to a recent [Guardian project](#) on methane emissions, which cause 25% of today's global warming. The investigation identified Turkmenistan as the world leader in super-emitter events due to massive methane leaks from its oil fields, an unexpected finding that led to swift government action to address the problem.

The fossil fuel industry's strategy has been to reposition itself from the embodiment of climate change to its problem-solver.

“And it's this shape-shifting quality about the industry that makes its influence so insidious, and why there's never been more need for investigative journalists like us to be holding fossil fuel executives to account,” said Green of DeSmog.

For example, Occidental Petroleum, a major U.S.-based oil and gas company, is trying to present itself as a “carbon management” company, Green said. The industry as a whole is pushing carbon capture and storage as a climate change solution. From the industry perspective, it's ideal: Rather than reduce burning of fossil fuels – and industry profits – companies propose to use new technology to capture emissions and bury them underground.

These strategies merit investigation, conference participants said. They also pointed out how global the issue is, not only because countries all over the world produce fossil fuels, but because so many of them depend on expensive imports; potentially they will be able to make enormous savings if green forms of energy can be produced locally.

‘FOLLOW THE CARBON’

“They’re already selling “net zero” oil,” Green said. “How does that work? Well, ‘Net zero’ oil is something that you can sell once you’ve promised to build giant machines to suck enough CO2 out of the atmosphere to offset the CO2 produced by burning the oil. But the machines don’t yet exist. They may never exist. But the oil is already on sale.”

Jim Footner, director of [ARIA](#), a UK-based climate change research organization, cited net zero’s “stratospheric” rise over the past decade. About a third of the largest global corporations and 100 countries have set net-zero targets – meaning they have pledged to reduce carbon emissions or offset them through various means to zero.

“It has proliferated at a pace that I can’t think of a parallel. The question is why and how. And the ‘why’ is because it’s basically motherhood and apple pie,” Footner said. “It is a target that appeals to governments because they can say they have a target without necessarily specifying how they’re going to meet that target. It appeals to campaigners, because a target with no detail is better than no target at all. And it appeals to corporations, because it allows them to say they’re doing something about climate without being too specific about what...So that is, I think, the main focus for me of where investigations – most of journalism – should be looking.”

While net zero commitments should be met with “healthy skepticism,” added Dharshan Wignarajah, director at Climate Policy Initiative, “I think there’s also a critical question of who’s not made any zero commitments, and why are they not under more scrutiny?”

To expose industry’s true intentions, presenters recommended that journalists attend industry conferences, where executives may speak more frankly to friendly audiences, as when Occidental CEO Vicki Hollub acknowledged the company was investing in carbon capture technology as a way to extend oil and gas extraction for “[60, 70, 80](#)” years.

Carbon capture projects often receive government subsidies, so public records requests can be another good source of information on company plans. Lawsuits may also be a rich source of reveals, presenters said.

Guardian environment editor Carrington noted that international oil companies disclose some information to shareholders. He recommended mining their annual reports and other regulatory filings but warned that the companies are “masters of greenwash” and often omit essential data points for analyzing their operations. However, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that track the fossil fuels industry may be able to help fill in some gaps. Green provided a [tipsheet](#) with a list of helpful organizations and links to government and industry sources of information.


A [report](#) by the International Energy Agency, released just before the November U.N. climate conference, said the world needs to cut the current \$800 billion annual investment in oil and gas in half and reduce emissions by 60% to avert even more extreme climate disasters.²

Yet, Guardian reporters – using data from [The Carbon Tracker Initiative](#), a UK-based think tank – found that the top 12 oil and gas companies plan to spend [\\$103 million a day](#) until 2030 finding new oil and gas fields.

That was so even though scientists have determined that more than 50% of the existing reserves need to stay in the ground in order to slow global warming. “Essentially it’s a bet against the world acting on climate change,” Carrington said.

Oil companies owned by governments are more opaque and difficult to crack, especially since many are located in countries with authoritarian regimes. “On the other hand,” Carrington said, oil and gas operations are hard to hide, whether from on-the-ground reporting or analysis of publicly available [satellite imagery](#). News organizations also have used the imagery [to identify methane emissions](#) on local, national, and international scales, as did the Guardian in its recent series and BBC News Arabic for its [investigation into gas flaring](#) on Iraqi oil fields.

² [AP: To save the climate, the oil and gas sector must slash planet-warming operations, report says](#)



Presenters cited carbon markets as needing special scrutiny by investigative journalists. The markets are the cornerstone of many corporate and government schemes for reaching “net zero.”

There are two types: compliance and voluntary. The compliance market is regulated by governments, which set limits on emissions and rules for when companies can exceed those limits. For instance, cap-and-trade programs allow businesses over the limit to buy credits from businesses that are under the limit.

The voluntary carbon market, which underpins many corporate and government net zero claims, allows for similar trade-offs but is largely unregulated – so in dire need of the kind of accountability that investigative journalists can provide.

“It would take the skills that sit in this room to look at in detail,” Footner told the journalists at the GIJN meeting. “And so this is a role that news organizations really have got to take on,” Peter Prengaman, Associated Press global climate news director, added. “We’ve got to scrutinize a lot more of these claims to the extent that we can.”

He recommended investigating the companies buying the offsets, one company at a time, in order to do a truly deep dive. How much of their target calculation is based on decarbonizing

their own operations and how much relies on offsets? Then look under the hood of the offsets themselves. The details will be laid out in the founding documents. Check the underlying assumptions, he said.

“This is where a lot of these things fall flat. Because the assumptions are just wrong.”

A [2023 AP investigation](#) used satellite imagery and ground-truth reporting to examine the claims of a 15-year-old carbon offset program that was supposed to halt all deforestation in an important, 5,000-square-mile national park in Peru. More than 28 million credits had been sold to fossil fuel companies to offset 28 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions. Working with a team of independent experts, reporters found tree loss had more than doubled over that period. Moreover, indigenous tribes with ancestral claims to some of the land complained that they didn’t receive a share of the millions of dollars companies paid the nonprofit running the park for the government.

Whistleblowers can be an important source of inside information for investigative journalists, but they have been hard to find in the fossil fuel industry.

“I think it’s amazing that there hasn’t been a really senior level whistleblower in the oil and gas industry,” Carrington said. “I think it’s probably because it’s incredibly well paid.”

THE ENABLERS

Amy Westervelt, who hosts the “Drilled” podcast on climate change, recommended that journalists search for whistleblowers in the “[enabling industries](#)” – the public relations, advertising, insurance, lobbying, and consulting firms that work for major carbon-emitting industries and the financial institutions that support them.

“There’s an entire ecosystem of enablers around the oil and gas industry,” she said, and the chances of finding a disillusioned employee among them may be higher. “A lot of the people that are working for these companies did not start out in life wanting to carry water for Chevron.”

Useful documents they could share include the firm’s contract with the company. Public relations and advertising contracts will include a statement of work that sets goals, means to achieve them, and how progress will be measured.

“It shows intent, it shows budget and it shows the kind of strategizing and thinking that’s going on with these campaigns,” Westervelt said. It’s also important to hold the enablers accountable, she said.

They are helping the companies devise, fund, and promote schemes to continue pumping carbon into the atmosphere. She recalled a recent conversation with an employee of a major public relations firm “complaining to me that oil and gas companies get all the credit for greenwashing when they invented it.”

After public relations giant Edelman pledged it would not represent any more climate deniers, a [2021 story by BuzzFeed News](#) revealed that the firm continued to do millions of dollars of work for the American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers, which opposed climate action and funded climate deniers. The reporters found crucial information in trade association [tax filings known as 990s](#), which are public records in the United States. Journalists can also take advantage of verifiable data amassed by research or advocacy organizations, such as [Clean Creatives](#), a watchdog group of public relations and advertising agencies that have sworn off fossil fuel clients.

“I would look at the massive greenwashing underway, especially in the financial sector,” McKibben said. “Banks, asset managers in the

insurance industry pretend that they’re taking action while they’re continuing to underwrite the expansion of that fossil fuel industry. I think that those flows of money are probably the single biggest place to be hunting for what’s going on.”

Cécile Marchand, an investigative researcher at ARIA said the carbon markets have their own set of enablers that need investigative scrutiny.

“Who are the consultancies that are advising the companies to build net-zero strategies but also selling them carbon credits? Sometimes they are the same. Who are the carbon brokers? Who are the carbon retailers? How much money are they making? Who is running the marketplaces on which the carbon credits are being sold and traded? That kind of story is super important,” she said.

“And then there’s a question of who benefits from the project. Are the communities living on the lands where the offsets credits are happening benefiting from it? Some communities are being dispossessed from their homes.

PRIORITY: INVESTIGATING GOVERNMENTS

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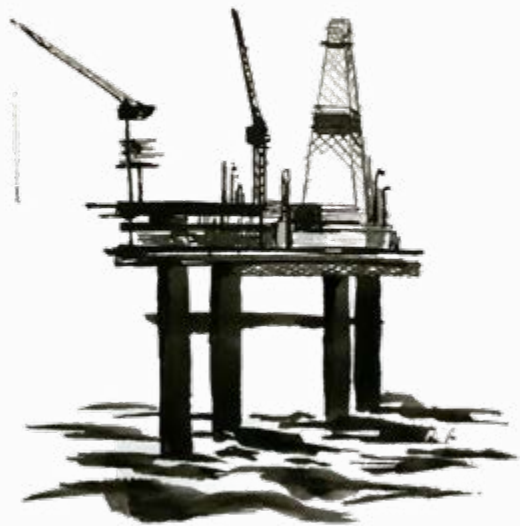
Investigating industry isn't enough – more than ever, governments need to be held accountable, presenters said. Eight years after countries signed the landmark Paris Agreement, pledging to cut emissions to halt global warming at 1.5C above pre-industrial temperatures, the world is on course to surpass that threshold within this decade.

“We cannot afford to squander any more time,” said Sunita Narain, director general of the Centre for Science and the Environment, an India-based research organization. “We have a crisis. It’s an existential threat.”

Presenters examined government accountability in several key areas: Emissions targets, climate financing, disaster response, and clean energy transition.

To begin with, reporters need to scrutinize their government’s commitments for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Statements made as part of the United Nations process are key starting points. Getting detailed information on how they intend to reach those goals or on actual greenhouse gas emissions is more complicated. GIJN has a guide to [key documents](#), but the records can be highly technical, so reporters need to seek help from experts in interpreting them, and to write about national performance and future intentions.

Human sources can be key, said Andrés Bermúdez Liévano, an editor and reporter at the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism. He urged colleagues to “think more strategically about potential whistleblowers. In Spanish, we say that the best sources are usually the widowers of power. I think, in this area of climate journalism, one of the best whistleblowers is the widower of influence – people who are, for example, public officials or former public officials and are very frustrated by what they’re seeing in action. I’ve been covering carbon markets for two years. And my best sources are all former public officials who helped regulate the market and are seeing that this is not working.”



‘FOLLOW THE MONEY’

Trillions of dollars are going into climate finance. It's complex, as [this definition](#) makes clear: involving the flow of funds to all activities, programmes, or projects intended to help address climate change - for both mitigation and adaptation, in all economic sectors, everywhere in the world. It's acknowledged that this does not include financial market activity which is also critical. Dharshan Wignarajah, director at Climate Policy Initiative, highlighted tracking efforts such as the [Global Landscape for Climate Finance](#). A number of speakers noted that it is important to investigate the financial commitments that developed countries are making to help developing countries. Assessing what resources will be necessary is particularly critical in less-developed countries that contributed little to the warming, but will suffer the consequences.

Wealthy nations pledged [US\\$100 billion a year](#) to help lower income nations address climate change and file reports on how much they spend with the United Nations. Reuters and [Big Local News](#) at Stanford University created a [database](#) from those reports. Their [investigation](#) found little accountability for how the money is spent. They documented a wide range of suspect projects, such as chocolate stores in Asia, a hotel in Haiti, airport expansion in Egypt, a romance film set in an Argentine rainforest, and a coal plant in Bangladesh.

Reporters reviewed about 10% of the reports, leaving much still to be done, so they have made the [database](#) available through Stanford, “hopefully for all

other journalists to go into and do their own country reporting,” said Carbon Brief director and editor Leo Hickman.

Carbon Brief has taken advantage of the United Kingdoms' wealth of public information, he said, to build a huge database for its own and other reporters worldwide to track the flow of £11.6 billion that the UK - one of the largest historic carbon emitters since the industrial era began - has pledged to address climate change in developing countries. Journalists are scrutinizing not just the ultimate destination but the multitude of agencies, companies, and consultancies that the money flows through on its way.

It's not a task a single publication can tackle alone, Hickman said. “There are literally hundreds of stories waiting in these databases to be pulled out.”

The private and public money flowing into climate finance surpassed \$1 trillion in 2021-22 and, even then, falls far short of what's needed, making it imperative to hold governments and financial institutions accountable for every dollar invested.

“We are referring here to huge flows of money financing mitigation and adaptation projects in a lot of countries,” said Maria Isabel Torres, director of Mongabay Latam.

“And I think there is little understanding of how much money is being used - if that money is being used efficiently and in which hands the money is remaining... So here we have a big problem of accountability that needs to be addressed.”

Doing so requires navigating a complex constellation of pathways, rules, and reports as well as overcoming widespread lack of transparency, said Wignarajah of Climate Policy Initiative. The nonprofit research organization recently published an in-depth [analysis](#) that provides a detailed roadmap of climate financing.

“The more forensic and detailed we are, the better we can hold entities... and individuals to account,” he said.

McKibben said it is also important to recognize the structural inequities that are at play.

“Most of the capital is piled up in the global north, and most of the need is in the global south. And how we unite those things - how we figure out how to rejigger the world's financial system, so that people will invest from the north in this work that needs to be done in the south - that's one of the great conundrums of our time.”

The inequities extend to the terms on which financing is provided, presenters said.

“We all read about the Pakistan floods. But we never tracked the fact that the money that came to Pakistan as relief came as loans to an already indebted country,” said Narain of the Centre for Science and Environment.

IMPACT AND RESPONSE

The multiple impacts of climate change and what governments have done – or not done – to mitigate or adapt to them need much greater investigative scrutiny, as do government actions that exacerbate its effects, presenters and participants said.

Journalists might start by inventorying the many ways that climate change affects people's lives, especially those in the vulnerable communities most heavily impacted. Each harm opens a different line of inquiry into causes, consequences, responses, and stakeholders.

What happens after a climate disaster also deserves scrutiny, presenters and participants said. What are the ripple effects on the community? What steps is the government taking to mitigate or reduce risks of future harm? Do people rebuild or migrate? How are those decisions made? Who is at the table and who is not? What are the downstream repercussions?

"Who wins and who loses, who's at risk, who's less so but is still getting a lot of the benefits?" said Bermúdez Liévano. "Who decides and who influences those decisions... Who was there but also who wasn't?"

There are the immediate effects – extreme rain, heat and flooding, sea level rise, and wildfires, he said, but also ripple effects: biodiversity losses, increased disease, infrastructure damage, and private property destruction. Agricultural workers face increased risk of heat death.

"This is obviously just a small list," he said. "It's much more extensive." Bangladeshi journalists Rafiqul Montu and Shamsuddin Illius urged reporters to connect what is going into the air with what's happening to people on the ground.

"We are talking about carbon and many things. I am coming from the ground. I want to connect you with the ground," Illius told participants.

The combination of sea level rise and subsidence is expected to displace 20 million people in Bangladesh by 2050 – more than 10% of the population, he said. Already, 2,000 people a day are moving into the cities, creating "climate migrant slums" with limited access to jobs, education and health care.

Many of the impacts require deep digging into academic research and consultation or even collaboration with scientists to document causes and effects. For example, the buffalo population in Bangladesh – an important income and food source – has dropped by 70%, Illius said. They are suffering from infertility, malnutrition, and disease, which studies have linked to excess water salinity and extreme weather. Water salinity also is raising the risk of high blood pressure in women during pregnancy and the incidence of dengue fever, a deadly mosquito-borne virus, Montu said.

These are the ripple effects of climate change disasters on local communities that need a more prominent place in investigative narratives, the two presenters said. And each one points to fertile areas of inquiry into government responses – such as the failure of cities to plan for climate migration in Bangladesh, Montu said.

While big climate events like Pakistan's floods and Canada's wildfires receive considerable press attention, investigative journalists should prioritize examination of events before and after disasters, presenters and participants said.

"What we usually see in the media is the immediate aftermath of a disaster," Bermúdez Liévano said. But investigative journalism is needed to examine whether government actions or inaction contributed to the severity of the events and whether its response adequately addresses the harm and future risk.

"There are a lot of investigations possible in terms of construction permits, rezoning decisions, especially in at-risk areas," he said. "For example, in my country of Colombia, a lot of these disasters happen in areas of the mountainside that have been built up to the very top with almost no planning. And there's very rarely any investigation on what fostered, what made this reality possible."

Exposing when government policies worsen the impact is crucial for holding officials accountable, Narain said. Continued deforestation and development in climate risky places are major concerns.

"If there are floods in the Himalayas because of cloud bursts and extreme events, it's also linked to the fact that we are building in the Himalayas as if there is no tomorrow," she said. "It's climate change, but it's not just climate change. I mean, one of the last things we want is politicians to turn around and say, 'I can do nothing about this, it's climate change.'"

PRIORITY: INVESTIGATING OTHER SOURCES

6

Fossil fuel burning accounts for an estimated 75% of greenhouse gas and nearly 90% of carbon dioxide emissions.³ But journalists investigating climate change should not stop at the fossil fuel industry, presenters said. There are other major players that get less attention. Fossil fuels go into plastics and the manufacturing of cement, steel, and consumer goods. The livestock industry contributes 32% of human-generated methane emissions worldwide.⁴ Forest loss and degradation – for agriculture, resource extraction and development – accounts for an estimated 10% of global warming, studies say.⁵

Investigative journalists need to be able to navigate supply chains, the complex linkages between damaging environmental practices in many sectors with products and services of many kinds. The chains often begin in resource-rich, economically poor countries in the south, far from where the goods are ultimately sold and consumed. In between, they go through a maze of companies and regulatory authorities.

Journalists from Pulitzer Center’s Rainforest Investigations Network described their efforts to investigate rainforest destruction in the Amazon and in Southeast Asia. Much of the world’s supply of beef comes from cattle farms that encroach on rainforests, said Gustavo Faleiros, the center’s environmental investigations director, who is based in Brazil. Similar stories about climate change connections can emerge from examining the gold found in cell phones and palm oil used in consumer products from bread to perfume.

To document supply chains, the Pulitzer team analyzes satellite data, investigates the companies involved, follows their digital trail, and dispatches reporters with local knowledge to do reporting on the ground.

“What’s really cool about our network is that we can have people doing on-the-ground reporting on both ends of the supply chain,” said Jelter Meers, Pulitzer Center research editor, who is based in Portugal. “So for example, we will have people in Uganda looking at timber that’s coming from the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo], then going through Uganda, then going to Vietnam. And then we have people in

Vietnam, going into the ports, and there are locals to see what happens to the timber there and how it gets into the companies that eventually ship it to Europe and the US.”

Madeleine Ngeunga, a Cameroon-based journalist who is part of the Pulitzer network, co-authored a 2023 investigative series that analyzed data from multiple sources to prove most companies sanctioned for illegal logging in Cameroon continued to receive new logging permits from the government. Their on-the-ground reporting found that some were using the legal permits to launder illegally logged timber, she said.

“You have to meet the communities working with illegal loggers and you have to talk to the companies,” she said.

What gave the series added impact, she said, was publishing it in partnership with LeMonde Afrique and airing a podcast on a Cameroonian station that reached an audience of 1 million. Rather than disputing or ignoring the report, as is typical, she said, Cameroon’s forest ministry issued a letter to his staff ordering stepped up surveillance for transport of illegal timber.

³ [Causes and Effects of Climate Change | United Nations](#)

⁴ [Methane emissions are driving climate change. Here’s how to reduce them](#)

⁵ [Learn the effects of deforestation | WWF](#)

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Torres of Mongabay Latam, said criminal enterprises play a large role in deforestation in Central America. Recent research found drug traffickers in Central America are laundering their money into agribusiness and other activities that are big drivers of deforestation. More investigative work is needed into how those activities increase the risks of climate change, “the connections between these illegal economies and political power,” and how they impact indigenous people living in forested areas.

“It’s very hard to ask indigenous people to save or protect the forest while they’re surrounded by these environmental crimes,” she said.

CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION

Reporters at the conference said not to ignore the consequences of how the producers of new technologies reach their goals.

Recent reports by IEA, Rocky Mountain Institute, and others on the transition to clean energy note the need to rapidly scale up the production of necessary raw materials. Copper, lithium, cobalt, and nickel are needed to build electric vehicles.

“The big question is how are they going to do it?” Torres said.

The clean energy transition, she said, falls into a category she calls “solutions that can become problems.”

Will the myriad problems associated with fossil fuel extraction and production – environmental damage, economic inequities, geopolitical conflicts, forced and child labor – be carried into the new energy era?

“We’re now at a point where the battle is over who is designing the regimes that will govern the transition,” Footner said. Lined up to influence the rules is “a vast, quite sophisticated array of entities and interests.”

They include mining and manufacturing industries as well as the trade associations, lobbyists, lawyers, and financiers attached to them.

“How do we avoid some of the mistakes that took place in the industrialization around fossil fuels?” he said.

Reporting on progress and solutions is important, but journalists need to do so with investigative rigor, participants said.

They also singled out the need for Global North journalists and news organizations to be more mindful of the risks the transition poses for indigenous peoples and Global South communities living atop the resources the world needs.

Participants noted a tendency among global north media to view coal as bad, when global south communities rely on coal because they lack the resources to shift to cleaner energy, and to view electric as good, even though lithium mining is tied to water shortages, pollution and conflict in the south.

“There’s a backstory to this,” one participant reminded his colleagues.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES: COLLABORATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING

7

In summarizing the day's discussion, meeting moderator Sheila Coronel of Columbia University cited the significant challenges that participants described "in investigating power, whether it's government power or corporate power or local power like loggers."

They include:

- **SECRECY**. Data, documents, and human sources are hard to obtain.
- **INVISIBILITY**. The underlying structures of power lack transparency.
- **COMPLEXITY**. Following the money and supply chains requires a high level of expertise and adequate resources.

"All of these are a hindrance to us in holding to account individuals and institutions at various levels of society," she said.

After meeting in small groups to discuss priorities, participants identified five broad areas of greatest need for overcoming the obstacles and accomplishing their goals:

- More training, mentoring, staffing, and resources to build capacity and expertise within news organizations
- Improved access to data and to expertise
- Global and regional initiatives that are complementary and increase impact
- Better platforms to facilitate information-sharing and cross-border collaborations, new forms of collaboration particularly between news

organizations in the Global South and Global North

- Further discussion and thinking about public engagement strategies

Collaborations that span the north-south divide can provide a more complete picture of climate policy impacts on Global South countries while helping to fund and build in-country capacity for climate change investigations, several said.

"We really have to focus on cross border collaborations and, obviously, empowering reporters and journalists in the global south primarily, as much as possible," one participant said, "because that's where the greatest effects will be felt. And so therefore, the resources should be primarily allocated there."

"We need to have interdisciplinary work, and also collaborative and cross-border work because we need to build the big picture, compare situations, compare actors to have a broader perspective of what's happening," said Torres of Mongabay Latam.

"This is really important – to have local experts, to not have anyone parachuting in, but to have local reporters do the reporting – to build capacity but also have it published on international media and have global impact," said Meers of the Pulitzer Center.

Other participants cited a need to develop better systems for working together: "We already do a lot of collaboration – that we saw today. But what we don't have are good infrastructures or platforms for collaboration," one said.

Collaboration is crucial for holding China, the world's number one greenhouse gas source, accountable. Journalists inside the country are doing good work but under exceptional constraints while journalists outside struggle to develop sources, assess the reliability of data, and interpret political context, said Liu Hongqiao, a Chinese-born journalist and climate change consultant now based in Paris.

She recommended finding a way to connect non-Chinese journalists, and Chinese and diaspora journalists and experts with knowledge of climate change and China.

"So can we build a database and increase the capacity of every newsroom on China and climate together," she asked. "Global China needs global climate coverage."

Faleiros pointed out the opportunity to brainstorm and build those relationships while "we are sitting here with this wonderful network, GIJN."

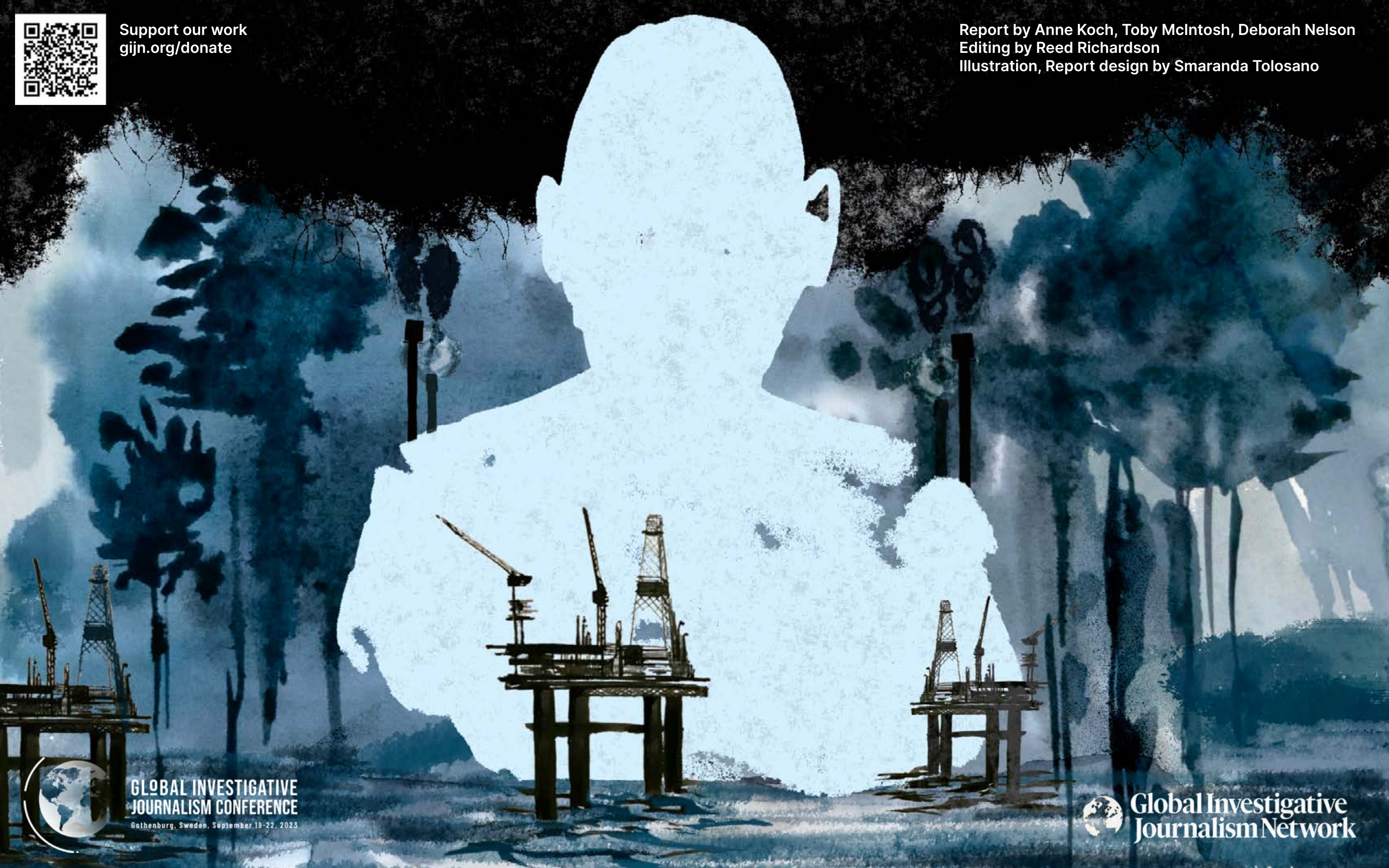
Hickman of Carbon Brief said news organizations need to set aside the traditional competitive business model in order to fulfill their role as government watchdogs.

"It's very, very difficult for one publication and one organization to put that scrutiny on government accountability," he said. "Our readerships overlap, and we're probably fighting for eyeballs to some extent. But there is also a wider common cause in that we're trying to explain and wake up the world."



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