
Decision-making on interactions with the fossil-based industry

As an organisation working on accelerating transitions to just and sustainable societies, we walk a very fine line when interacting with actors involved in unsustainable regimes, such as the fossil-based industry. With this document, we want to make explicit our conditions for interacting with this industry and introduce open questions to further explore whether such ties are really in the best interest of people and planet.

Working with established organisations entrenched in the fossil-based industry¹ creates a lot of tension for an organisation like ours.

First, in transitions innovation alone is not enough to get to sustainable and just futures. Decline, breakdown, and phase-out deserve more attention and support, and growing activism against the fossil industry is bringing much-needed pressure to the conversation at large around justice and sustainability transitions.

But on the other hand, we are also convinced that the people who spearhead new ways of thinking, doing, and organising to dismantle old systems and build up new futures can potentially be found in any organisation. And established organisations have resources, power, and infrastructures that are hard to fully ignore in transition pathways.

To navigate this tension, we are now publishing, and will be using, the three conditions and three questions below in the negotiations leading up to a potential interaction with any actor in the fossil-based industry.

Three basic conditions: the red line

As DRIFT, we want to maximise the chance that the work we do fundamentally transforms the organisations we work with and minimise the risk of transition-washing. We also have an open and critical way-of-working. So effective immediately, we will say no to any interaction with the fossil industry that does not meet these three critical conditions:

1. Shifting away from fossil-based strategies is the main goal

DRIFT's mission is to help guide and accelerate just sustainability transitions: in practice this means making a radical shift away from an extractive system based on fossil resources, towards a regenerative system that is climate-neutral and socially just. Aligning organisational strategy

with these goals is the only item on the menu for potential interactions with the fossil-based industry.

2. Scientific integrity and freedom to publish are guaranteed

As a research institute, scientific integrity is our strongest value. This is why we follow the Dutch scientific integrity code. As action-researchers we work together with partners to fund and co-develop our research projects (this includes academic research, consultancy and education). In case of conflicting interests, the scientific and societal value of the outcomes takes precedence over the particular interests of the partner. Therefore, we agree beforehand with partners whether to publish outcomes, and stick to that decision also when these end up not aligning with the partner's particular interests.

3. Transparency is key and goes two ways

Transparency and accountability are vital for proper checks and balances. We want the general public to know about our interactions with this industry so that they can hold us accountable. Therefore, we commit to be transparent about who is funding us and in what role, which only leaves room for interactions and collaborations that are out in the open.

Three additional questions to weed out undesired interactions

Many grey areas and doubts can remain even if these above conditions are met. We habitually say no to projects for other, less clear-cut reasons. Therefore, we have also formulated three open questions to ask ourselves and potential partners in the negotiation phase.

1. Do we trust the organisation to take our work to heart?

There could be multiple reasons for trust issues concerning the commitments of the potential partner. For instance, have they been recently involved in deceptive practices or greenwashing? And do they have credible ambitions to reduce emissions in line with the Paris accord (or are they seriously open to formulating such ambitions)? And which people exactly will we be working with - if they are far removed from influencing the organisation's core strategy, that may be another reason to say no.

2. What is the symbolic value of our 'yes'?

Interacting with DRIFT could be used by a fossil-based company as part of a greenwashing strategy. That's something we want to avoid at all times so we think it's important to ask beforehand why exactly they are looking to partner up with us. We're aware that collaborating could signal trust or interest in the role of the organisation within the transition to a just and sustainable society. This symbolic value should therefore be carefully considered, even when we never publicise who and what we say no to.

3. What type of collaboration is this?

Collaboration with fossil-based industries can take many forms. It could be a direct relation, meaning a (research) project commissioned by a fossil-based industry actor; but it could also be indirect, for example when we are both partners in a project led by a third organisation, when we invite fossil actors to co-creative meetings or interview them for other projects. The bigger and closer the tie, the more important to weigh the answer to the previous two questions.

Where does this leave DRIFT?

Putting this to paper has been challenging and we mean to iterate and adapt this process over years to come. We hope to continue to learn regarding what is or is not a desired interaction. Although we feel that our decision-making in the past has roughly been in line with these conditions and questions, we had never made it explicit before. Publishing this document is also an open invitation to you, our readers and potential critics, to hear what you deem right and effective in accelerating justice and sustainability transitions.

ⁱ We borrow the pension fund ABP's definition of the fossil industry: organisations directly involved in exploration and production of fossil energy (coal, oil and gas) deriving more than 1% of their income from these activities and companies indirectly involved in these activities (as supplier for example) deriving more than 20% of their income from it.