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Local fossil fuel ad ban as a catalyst for global change

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The Hague in the Netherlands was the first city in the world to enact a law prohibiting advertisements for fossil fuel products and services. Although the ban is restricted to The Hague's jurisdiction, the decision to implement the ban challenges norms and conventions that drive fossil-fuel consumption worldwide and sets an example for other governments to follow.

In January 2025, The Hague became the world's first city to implement a law that bans fossil fuel advertising. The law prohibits advertisements for petrol, diesel, aviation, cruise ships, fossil energy contracts, and hybrid and combustion-engine cars in areas visible from publicly accessible places, such as city streets and bus stops. This local fossil fuel advertising ban follows calls from organizations (for example, Reclame Fossielvrij and Social Tipping Point Coalitie), scientists[1] and the United Nations's secretary-general António Guterres[2], who have all argued that the ubiquitous presence of fossil fuel advertisements forms an important barrier to reducing carbon emissions.

The Hague's decision to prohibit fossil fuel advertising garnered international attention and was portrayed as a bold initiative in the fight against climate change[3]. However, the ban has also faced substantial criticism. Detractors have labelled such bans as prime examples of symbolic politics — a policy implemented more for its attention-grabbing potential than for achieving its stated objective[4].

Direct impacts take time and effort

These critiques may be correct in noting that fossil fuel advertising bans probably yield limited immediate reductions in fossil fuel sales or carbon (equivalent) emissions. Partly due to decades of pervasive advertising[5], products and services with high carbon (equivalent) emissions are deeply embedded in social norms and conventions (for example, driving SUVs and flying to holiday destinations), as well as patterns of production and consumption ('carbon lock-ins'). Such norms, conventions and lock-ins are unlikely to be quickly abandoned as the result of a ban.

Still, emissions reductions will probably manifest in the long term if a fossil fuel advertising ban is implemented across channels and at scale, as illustrated by the impact of tobacco advertising bans[6]. Such comprehensive bans restrain the ability of companies to boost aspiration levels further, to reinforce current fossil-intensive consumption norms and conventions (for example, flying regularly), and to form new ones, thereby removing an important barrier to the transition to more sustainable consumption patterns[7]. Moreover, a ban limits opportunities for greenwashing and downplaying fossil fuel impacts, which are known to improve the fossil fuel industry's image and cloud consumer decisions[8]. An advertising ban may gradually reduce the demand for fossil fuel products and services, which is most likely to appear first among groups for which fossil-intensive norms and conventions are still weak (for example, children) before affecting those with more entrenched norms and conventions (for example, frequent flyers and people who heavily depend on fossil fuels).

The power of symbolism

These long-term impacts are, however, currently restrained by the local scale of The Hague's ban. As fossil fuel advertisements remain accessible outside the municipality's jurisdiction and through various channels (for example, newspapers, online platforms and shops), fossil-intensive norms and conventions will still be actively promoted and reinforced in most places. Yet, dismissing the ban for this reason would be a critical oversight. The main impact of The Hague's ban is arguably not in its immediate impacts on carbon (equivalent) emissions but in its symbolism, in particular, the potential to spark wider societal debate, challenge current fossil-intensive consumption norms and conventions, showcase the climate commitments of legislators, and set an example for other legislators.

By explicitly rejecting the normalization of fossil fuel products and services, The Hague sends out a powerful message. It challenges the taken-for-granted nature and moral legitimacy of fossil fuel products and services, communicates their societal and environmental harms, and clearly indicates that promotion in the public sphere will not be tolerated. As decisions of democratically elected officials are often assumed to represent the wider contemporary societal values[9], the ban suggests that the promotion and consumption of fossil fuel products and services is against the personal norms and goals of people who live in The Hague, further encouraging public scrutiny.

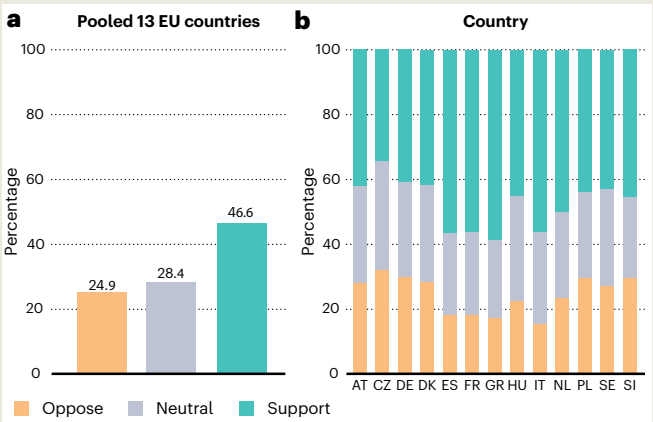
Meanwhile, the ban demonstrates that legislators have the authority and opportunity to challenge the entrenched practices perpetuating carbon-intensive consumption, showing that the legal barriers to such policies are not insurmountable. The ban also signals The Hague's firm commitment to climate action, which is likely to enhance public confidence in other governmental climate initiatives and further inspire individual-level pro-environmental behaviour. By setting a precedent, The Hague's actions may also encourage other cities and countries to explore similar measures[10]. This ripple effect has the potential to inspire jurisdictions around the world to reconsider their tolerance of fossil fuel advertising and their role in fostering more sustainable consumption patterns.

The Hague's decision to implement a ban and the media attention it garnered is thus likely to compel legislators, citizens and advertisers elsewhere to critically reflect on the broader implications of fossil fuel advertising, its influences and their roles in this. Accordingly, this ban can be understood as a 'niche' innovation[11] that — through further incubation in The Hague, diffusion to other locales and favourable conditions within the broader socio-political landscape — can lay the groundwork

BOX 1

Public attitudes towards advertising bans

As part of a Horizon Europe project Climate Policy Acceptability Economic Framework (CAPABLE; https://capableclimate.eu/), our consortium recently conducted surveys in 13 EU countries. In every country, support for fossil fuel advertising bans outweighed opposition, suggesting limited concern about widespread, pre-emptive backlash to such policies.



Support for EU-wide ban on public advertisements of emissions-heavy products and services. Responses from CAPABLE Survey of 13 EU countries (Austria (AT), Czechia (CZ), Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Spain (ES), France (FR), Greece (GR), Hungary (HU), Italy (IT), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Sweden (SE) and Slovenia (SI)), with a total of ***n*** = 19,328, fielded in June–August 2024. **a**, The pooled level of support across all countries. **b**, The level of opposition and support by country. The data are available from ref. 15.

for societal transformations[7]. For example, similar normative shifts have greatly reshaped societal acceptability of smoking behaviours[12].

Applications to broader regions

The Hague's ban has received widespread, global news coverage, and multiple international cities and nations are currently exploring similar measures. However, how many will follow is still an open question, and this strongly depends on legislators' ambitions, the ban's success and the level of public support.

It is probably no coincidence that a city that prides itself as 'the international city of peace and justice' and 'the city of renewable energy in the Netherlands' has pioneered the advertising ban. Cities and nations historically rooted in sourcing and processing fossil fuels may, for instance, be more resistant to a ban. Moreover, many governments may fear a lack of mandate for climate policies, particularly with the recent electoral success of right-wing populist parties (for example, the European Union (EU) and the United States)[9]. However, The Hague maintains a large presence of multinational fossil fuel corporations (for example, Shell) and hosts the current right-wing populist (national) government, suggesting bold steps can also be taken even under similar circumstances.

Furthermore, potential concerns about public backlash for such advertising bans may be misplaced. Unlike taxes or behavioural bans, advertising restrictions primarily target the consumer information environment. Advertising bans generally have lower costs and fewer implementation requirements for governments than many climate policy alternatives. Moreover, a ban does not restrain consumers' freedom to consume fossil fuel products or services. This is likely to make a ban comparatively more acceptable to citizens[13]. Indeed, recent data across diverse EU countries show that the support for an EU-wide fossil fuel advertising ban is almost twice as large as the level of opposition against it (Box 1).

Given these favourable conditions, there is currently a 'window of opportunity'[14] for fossil fuel advertising bans to further diffuse to similar locales and at larger governance scales (for example, nations, the EU). However, the rate and extent of the spread of fossil fuel advertising bans depend greatly on the levels of vocal, public demand, stakeholder advocacy and willingness of governments to resist arguments from detractors (likely to be from affected industries).

Conclusion

The Hague's fossil-fuel advertising ban is more than a policy — it's a signal. By rejecting the normalization of fossil fuel promotion, the decision to implement a ban locally can challenge entrenched norms globally, demonstrate government commitment, stimulate public scrutiny and lay the groundwork for broader change. Furthermore, their strengths of low costs, limited implementation requirements and broad public acceptability make them an easily applicable option for municipalities and national legislatures. No single policy is likely to resolve the multifaceted challenges of climate change, but fossil fuel advertising bans present a compelling opportunity for governments to act.

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