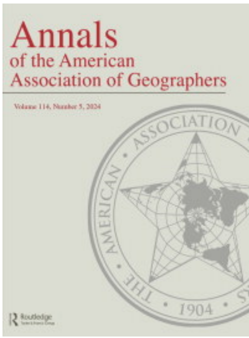

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Structuring a Conversation Across Time, Space and Political Distance

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This article examines challenges to the construction of climate solidarity between different social actors in and beyond the petroleum industry, using the vantage point of oil workers. Theoretically, we use the notion of alienation to show how oil workers experience challenges to climate solidarity with different potential allies. We argue that oil workers have become polarized subjects in the politics of climate change mitigation, and acknowledge the need for a politics of reconnection between this polarized subject and various designated 'others', albeit one that is cognizant of the power asymmetries of these relations. Through innovative qualitative methods, we explore ways to help the social and political distance between research subjects. We detail how an ongoing research project has explored a politics of reconnection through the production of four short films. We conclude by offering some evaluative reflections on this exercise.
Key Words: alienation, climate solidarity, focus group methodology, oil workers, polarization, video elicitation.

Among the most controversial strategies, but arguably also the most necessary, for mitigating climate change is the phasing out of fossil fuels through supply-side measures, such as moratoriums, bans, taxation, or subsidy removal (Gaulin and Le Billon 2020). On paper, the potential of this strategy is undisputed, and Le Billon and Kristoffersen (2020) stated that "supply cuts for fossil fuels could drastically reduce and reorient major financial flows and reshape the spatiality of energy production and consumption" (1072). Many took note when the International Energy Agency (2021) published a road map for the global energy sector where they unequivocally stated that "[t]here is no need for investment in new fossil fuel supply in our net zero pathway" (21).

Notwithstanding such advances, supply-side mitigation efforts face stark opposition from many governments as well as interests representing fossil fuel industries, including firms, business associations, and trade unions and their members. Petroleum workers worldwide are invested in the future of fossil fuel extraction through the employment relation (Atabaki, Bini, and Ehsani 2018). The International Labor Organization estimates there are 6 million directly employed and ten times that number indirectly reliant on the industry. In countries where oil and gas production constitute a significant part of the economy, this group of workers is often a powerful force whose vested interests in petroleum sector employment place practical political limitations on supply-side mitigation efforts (Mildenberger 2020). The energy transition literature has grappled with this particular constituency (e.g., Tvinnereim and Ivarsflaten 2016; Huber 2020; Cha et al. 2022).

This article examines challenges to the construction of climate solidarity between different social actors in and beyond the petroleum industry, using the vantage point of oil workers. Climate solidarity is understood as the mutual recognition of interdependent needs between various others in a context of climate change and global efforts to reduce emissions (Hampton 2015; Bazzani 2023). Alongside this goal, we are also guided by a methodological question: What is the potential for experimental qualitative methods to assist in furthering climate solidarity? Although we are under no illusions that climate solidarity can be built through academic interventions on their own, we agree with Bazzani (2023) that "it is crucial to understand the micro-

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level processes that allow climate solidarity to emerge" (357). This article offers a small contribution in pursuit of this goal, using a critical reflection on our own research practice. More specifically, we discuss the possibilities of using focus group methodology and video and quote elicitation to engage in these relationships.

We have structured the text as follows. First, we argue that oil workers have become polarized subjects in the politics of climate change mitigation. We next suggest how innovative qualitative methods can help bridge polarized subjects and cross social and political distance between research subjects. We then use the notion of alienation to show how oil workers experience challenges to climate solidarity with different potential allies. We detail how an ongoing research project has explored a politics of reconnection through the production of four short films. We conclude by offering some evaluative reflections on this exercise.

Oil Workers as Polarized Subjects

Our own academic engagement with workers in the oil and gas industry spans very different geographical contexts, from extractive activities in the Niger Delta, to workers on the Norwegian continental shelf and in the land-based supply industry, as well as work in oil refineries in California. Nigeria and Norway can both be termed petrostates, with their strong economic reliance on petroleum resources. Still, they have very different experiences with oil as a resource. Nigeria is considered the prototypical example of the "paradox of plenty" (Karl 1997), where the rents from the vast oil resources have ended up in the pockets of the few instead of benefitting the larger society or the rest of the economy. Norway, on the other hand, has been used as a model case for how to manage oil democratically (Thurber, Hults, and Heller 2011). In the United States, petroleum has a prominent role in certain regions such as in California. U.S. workers depend on their employment, and for some, union contracts to receive decent health insurance and labor rights. Many workers in the Norwegian petroleum industry enjoy relatively high job security and decent conditions, and are supported by an extensive welfare system. Despite the historically strong oil unions, Nigerian oil workers face labor rights abuses as well as severe health challenges without support and have no prospects of unemployment benefits.

For all these workers, climate change is a lived reality, although expressed and experienced in contrasting ways. Many Nigerians suffer from repeated and destructive floods, threatening livelihoods, killing hundreds, and displacing over half a million in 2022 alone. People in California have experienced devastating wildfires and floods, and Norwegians are also affected through droughts, floods, and increased risk of landslides. Policymakers respond differently to the climate change question. Norway walks a tightrope by being proactive in global climate negotiations, while continuing to be a petroleum-dependent economy. The State of California has performed "exceptional state-level leadership in pursuing strong climate change and energy policies" in the United States (Mazmanian, Jurewitz, and Nelson 2020, 52). California environmental justice communities fighting pollution have grown in power, exacerbating contestation around the phase-out of the state's refineries and drilling operations. In Nigeria, although there are increasing discussions on the climate effects hitting the country and in spite of the long-standing environmental activism in the Niger Delta that continues to challenge the petroleum industry on its detrimental environmental impact in these communities, there is little public debate around the country's petroleum industry in terms of its contribution to global emissions,

Our choice to use oil workers as an analytical vantage point is not solely because their trade unions wield considerable power in some producer countries, but also because the polarized climate debate that surrounds mitigation policies regularly involves fossil fuel workers as a topic of discussion. González (2022) argued that an important element in the political polarization emerging in many countries is "the formation of the polarised subject" (258). This process does not occur prior to social struggle but is constituted through conflict. For Norwegian petroleum workers, this was made very clear in the wake of the global school strikes of 2019 when an intensified climate debate led to the active construction of "the oil worker" as a clearly defined identity, propelled by media coverage and opinion pieces, often by populist politicians (Ytterstad, Houeland, and Jordhus-Lier 2022). Not only was the oil worker subject associated with notions of pride and shame, but it was defined in relation to designated "others," such as environmental activists or Green Party politicians, with the climate debate constituting the "frontier between the self and 'the

other'" (González 2022, 261). This process of identity formation is neither unique to Norway nor to the workers producing petroleum. Daggett (2018) showed how the end use of fossil fuels is an important component in producing consumer identities, which in the United States intersects with masculinism and authoritarian leanings.

In the remainder of this article, we use our research engagement with Norwegian oil workers as a point of departure for exploring this particular polarized subject through various encounters with oil workers in Nigeria and the United States, and with other constituencies in Norway. Cognizant of how scientific knowledge and the role of researchers are appropriated by different sides of a polarized discourse, we neither strive for a notional value neutrality nor assume activist positionalities. Rather, we have tried to immerse ourselves in workers' perspectives and experiences on climate change as a political issue. Although many of the exchanges in this article take Norwegian debates and experiences as their starting point, we trace these across geographical and political boundaries. In fact, a motivation behind our research engagement is to show how social and geographical context fundamentally shape how we approach climate policy.

Qualitative Methods in Pursuit of Reconnection

The empirical basis for our investigation is an extensive set of filmed interviews and focus group data gathered since 2018 in Norway, Nigeria and the United States, as a part of ongoing research projects examining petroleum workers' experiences with climate transition processes. A notable trait in our qualitative data material is the presence of numerous "others." Given the global reach of hydrocarbon value chains, and the complex geographies of climate change, oil workers implicate a variety of actors when they explain and reflect on their situation: producers on the other side of the world, environmental activists, end users and politicians at home and abroad, corporate owners, and workers in other parts of the industry. These "others" are ascribed different degrees of responsibility and capacity in mitigation efforts.

As we have already alluded, the relationship different workers have to these actors is often fraught, or in some cases yet to be established. As an example, in Norwegian focus groups with local union representatives in the petroleum industry, the participants often referred to other petroleum-producing countries, but never to workers in these countries. For that reason, we decided not to be content with simply gathering data from each of these groups and juxtaposing them in our academic writing. Instead, we wanted to use our research capabilities to enable some of these actors, and their points of view, to encounter each other. The relationships between these actors traverse various types of distance: geographical, in the sense that they include people in different parts of the world; across political distance, not least along the classical political axis of economic growth and environmental protection (Rokkan 2009); and finally, over time. The focus group conversations presented here not only span generations, in terms of their composition of participants, but have developed over several years of engagement and reengagement during a period when the climate change debate itself has evolved.

Methodologically, this design aimed to facilitate what Morgan, Fellows, and Guevara (2010) called "emergence *between* sets of groups," where "insights from earlier groups [are used] to influence the nature of later groups" (191–92, emphasis in original). Video and quote elicitation have been important tools in our research. We have collected transcribed quotes or video excerpts reflecting certain actors' viewpoints and shown these to other actors to elicit their reflections. In some cases, these reflections have found their way back to the original group, giving them an opportunity to respond. As researchers, we are thus actively involved in these engagements in ways that evoke a curator's role. Macnaghten (2021) referred to this practice as "secluded research" where research participants are allowed into "highly artificial spaces for deliberation, carefully protected and controlled from the wider world" (16).

Combining focus groups and video allows for a high degree of curation, which we found necessary given the polarized landscape we are navigating. Goss and Leinbach (1996) described a focus group as a "temporary social structure that is a microcosm of the larger context" (118), and through bringing in visuals and voices from others, we attempted to infuse this microcosm with globalized relations and a wider political context that is crucial to understand how oil workers relate to their lifeworlds. These elicitation techniques provide research participants a chance to reflect on their relationship to groups they only have had an abstract understanding of. Visual texts culled

from the interviews and focus groups shown back to these same groups can provide a greater role for participants to engage in a deeper level of analysis of themselves and others. We concur with Kindon (2003) that participatory video methods have the "potential to destabilize hierarchical power relations and create spaces for transformation by providing a practice of looking 'alongside' rather than 'at' research subjects" (142). It is also beneficial in allowing minority groups to communicate without interference from dominant groups. In previous projects, one of the authors used video as a medium to facilitate conversations between women in male-dominated industries across the world (Price 2020). In our research, video proved particularly useful to bring out sensitive topics and tacit knowledge (see also Barton 2015).

How did we identify which sensitive topics to bring to the fore, and which actors to connect through this form of methodological experimentation? Here, we did not simply rely on themes that emerged in our focus group conversations, but also on our own theoretical assumptions about climate solidarity and its constraints, mainly based in reading contemporary human geography and environmental labor studies. We therefore now turn our attention to this theoretical backdrop, and show how it led us to develop three short films used to elicit responses from our research participants.

Climate Solidarity and Climate Alienation

Climate mitigation requires different sacrifices from different groups of people. On the one hand, unsustainable emission levels require a global energy transition that radically transforms policy agendas worldwide. The leader of the International Energy Agency spoke in plain language addressing the Leaders Summit on Climate in April 2021, stating, that "we will need to transform our entire energy system" to reach net zero globally. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, used even bigger words a year later: "We must close the emissions gap before climate catastrophe closes in on us all."[1] Rapid action is clearly needed. On the other hand, there is a glaring contrast between the assumed "we" in the speeches of world leaders—what theorists of the Capitalocene have labeled "anthropocentric flattening" (Moore 2019)—and the fractured and divided publics confronted with the implications of mitigation policies. As words become action, and the climate crisis is making its mark on politics, from multilateral agreements to local governance systems, social contestation follows suit. Convincing many groups of workers that they are part of the assumed "we" of climate mitigation remains a challenge (Pearse and Bryant 2022).

Climate mitigation necessitates new forms of solidarity and, at the same time, threatens existing loyalty bonds. In his influential work on the concept, Hampton (2015) defined *climate solidarity* as "distinctive framings of climate questions, together with specific forms of representation and mobilisation on climate matters" (8). Bazzani's (2023) use of the concept, which does not relate to Hampton, emphasizes its global dimensions, seeing it as a prerequisite for "multilevel coordinated action because no single individual, group, or state can cope with this challenge alone" (365). Our research engagement shares Hampton's worker-centered and grounded understanding of climate solidarity, while addressing the need for global coordination highlighted by Bazzani. In the words of Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge (2013), we should be "[p]ositioning a politics of climate change in relation to unequal and contested geographies of power" (607). In our case, we ask whether employees in the global petroleum industry see their interests furthered by investing in loyalty to support "their employers' profit-driven push for industry growth" (Brecher 2018, 97) or whether they are open to strengthen relations with other workers, environmental civil society groups, and representatives of younger generations.

Whether workers are loyal to their employers vis-à-vis seeking common ground with other workers is described by Brecher (2018) as a strategic choice between *climate alienation* and climate solidarity. In fact, alienation between people—solidarity's opposite, according to Brecher (2018)—is a useful concept to understand the perceived distance between particular groups, such as oil workers in a national labor market, and other constituencies. For the purposes of definition, we suggest taking Jaeggi (2014) as a starting point, seeing alienation as a state when social actors are incapable of "*establishing relations* to oneself and to the relationships in which one lives" (33, emphasis in original). Although economic relations are typically emphasized in a political economy tradition (Dickens 2002), political ecologists emphasize alienation from nature (Hailwood 2015). It is in the structural underpinnings of alienation in the world economy that we begin the conceptualization that informed our methodology.

Expressions of Alienation

Considering the number of actors, places, and interventions used, we first outline our design in very broad strokes before discussing how we have used qualitative methods and film to allow our research subjects to relate to different social actors across geographical and political distances, and show how oil workers can be understood as polarized subjects in the politics of climate mitigation and suggesting how this relates to different kinds of alienation between groups.

As can be seen in Figure 1, we have used our meetings with research participants in different locations in the period from 2018 to 2022 to allow viewpoints to travel between different groups. Parallel to our focus group research, we have also had a documentary project running since 2020 that has allowed us to arrange digital and physical meetings between oil workers in different countries. Quotes and recorded video fragments have traveled between these events and allowed us to produce four completed short films. These have been used in research dissemination events after the conclusion of our main data collection.

The number of engagements and reengagements resulting from our research project is now too many to document in an exhaustive fashion. The data generated by this research are vast and consists of meeting minutes, audio recordings, memos, transcripts and video material. To offer some clarity and guidance to the reader, we have therefore structured the reflections around the four films at the bottom of Figure 1 in two sections divided into four subsections.

In the following section, we elaborate on how alienation is expressed in climate politics and in our research field. Each subsection does not only represent a take on the subject matter—alienation as experienced by workers in the petroleum industry—based in a review of research literature, but also ends by describing how the research team produced a short film that invites the audience to think about different dimensions of alienation.

Take One: Meeting Face to Face

It is important to acknowledge that many workers end up in alienated relations for reasons that are simultaneously spatial and structural in their constitution. For instance, alienation between social groups occurs along the value chain, through what Marx (2015) once labeled "the independence and indifference of the consumers and producers to one another" (91). In our focus group conversations with Norwegian oil workers, we saw this expressed as a shifting of blame from those who produced fossil fuels (themselves) to those who consumed it (others).

This alienation between producers and consumers is expressed both on a world scale and within countries. Malm (2016) is among those who have criticized how the outsourcing of production to economies like China serves to mask real emissions in high-consuming economies in the Global North. We should avoid exaggerating this split between consumers and producers, however, as political ecologists remind us that many environmental struggles involve workers who both work in polluting places and are confronted by the same pollution through living in the vicinity of these workplaces (Barca and Leonardi 2018). In the Niger Delta, these entanglements are manifested in oil-dependent communities where "environmental damage to land and water have destroyed their livelihoods and caused widespread diseases" (Houeland 2015, 29). Workers are consumers as well as producers, and labor struggles are often linked to consumption issues, not least in the Global South (Houeland 2020). But these globalized relations are often hidden.

Globalized relations between workers and consumers in a globalized economy are often hidden from plain sight. In Dickens's (2002) insightful theorization of alienation, ever more sophisticated spatial divisions of labor become the basis of other forms of alienation between groups of workers, including the compartmentalization of specialized skills communities and national competitive dynamics. Again, this was visible in our focus group material, with workers in Norway and the United States regularly referring to working conditions and environmental standards in oil production elsewhere to legitimize the sustenance of their own productive activities.

It was based on this basic notion that the oil workers in different parts of the world economy often implicated each other in their narratives about climate change and the future of the oil industry without necessarily considering or having experiential knowledge about each other's situation, that led us to stage the first filmed encounter: a short documentary entitled *Talking Union, Talking Climate*. The film focuses on a Zoom conversation among three oil workers from the United States, Nigeria, and Norway that took place in 2020. The three share

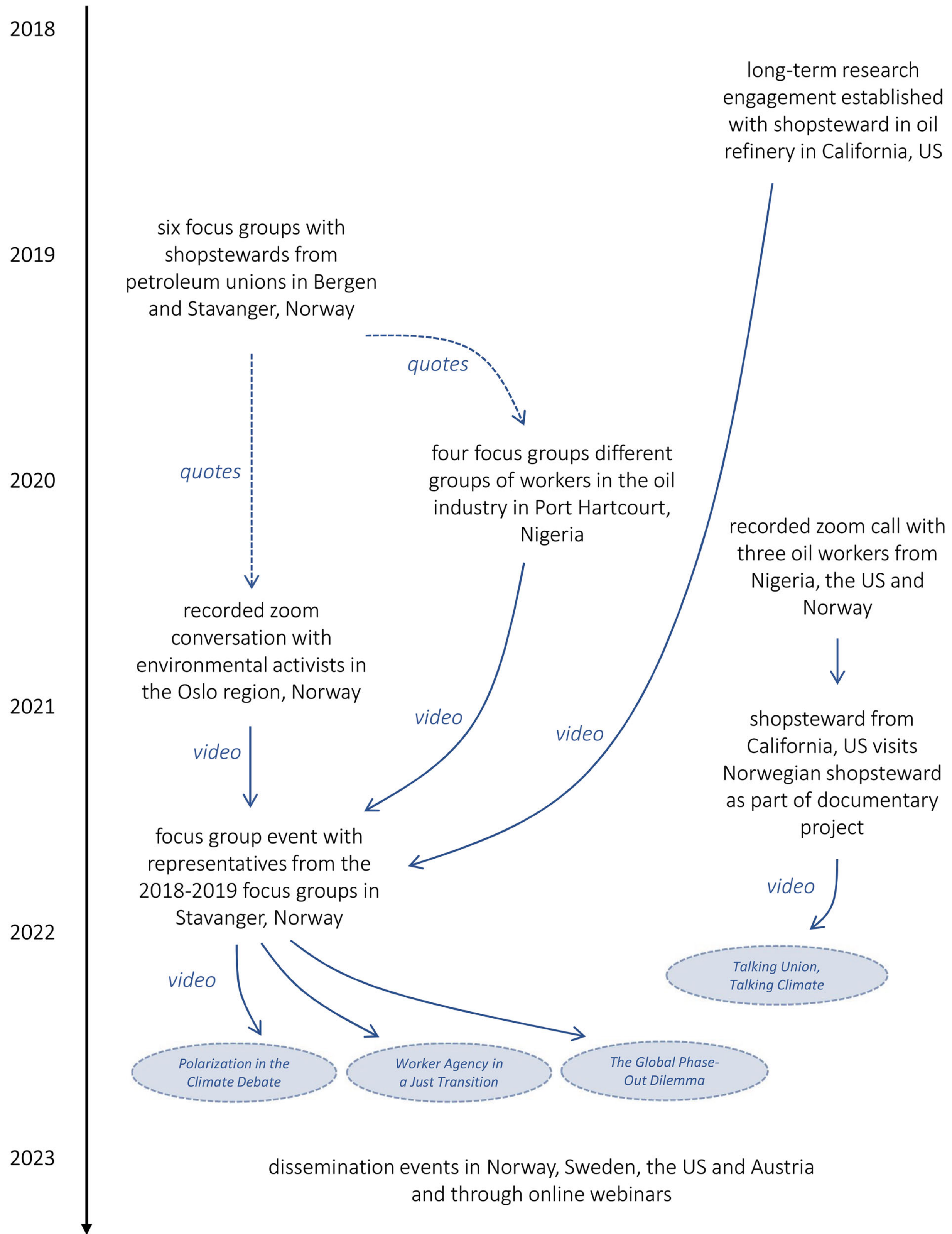

Figure 1. A timeline outlining main events in our research design.

experiences about their jobs, their labor conditions and how they were treated by their employers, and thoughts on the impact of climate change on their industry. Through this film, we wanted the three workers on screen—as well as the film's audience—to think about how working in oil and gas during a time when the industry is the focus of much political attention is experienced in a very different setting from one's own.

Take Two: A Global Phase-Out?

In the age of climate change mitigation, the competitive dynamics between workers that caused concern for Dickens (2002) has taken on new meanings. Nationally determined contributions in the form of emission cuts represent the "key instruments of climate commitments at Paris and beyond" (Stephenson et al. 2019, 1255). As a result, competitive pressures between nation-states in the world lead "organized labor to approach climate protection largely in terms of national economic benefit or loss" (Brecher 2018, 97). Many emission pledges will have a direct impact on employment security, and the process of measuring the mitigation efforts of distinct national labor markets (even when they form part of regional quota mechanisms) adds a new dimension to the competitive dynamics that have concerned labor geographers for years (e.g., Padmanabhan 2012). For Dunlap and Sullivan (2020), this must be understood under the broader rubric of neoliberal environmental governance—of which the nationally determined contributions are part—that implies that emissions, products, workers, and consumers are "ripped from their relational contexts" through a process they referred to as "accumulation-by-alienation" (567–68).

Moreover, this "organizational landscape of the UNFCCC," as Stephenson et al. (2019, 1241) labelled it, entails more than negotiations between free-standing national economies—it is embroiled in global inequalities and marked by a deeper conflict of interest between the Global North and the Global South. Principles of equity, fairness, and historical responsibility (e.g., Muttitt and Kartha 2020) are approached differently by different actors. Whereas climate justice groups typically emphasize geographical differences between countries or world regions, trade unions are concerned with social implications within countries (Morena, Krause, and Stevis 2020).

Our own research efforts reflect this, as we saw how different groups experienced such debates around climate policies differently. In our conversations with Norwegian oil workers, reference was often made to the so-called phase-out debate. The debate implies that a global supply-side mitigation effort will have to involve prioritizing between different oil-producing national economies, where some ought to phase out their production before others. Norwegian environmentalists typically lean on academic discussions (e.g., Le Billon and Kristoffersen 2020; Muttitt and Kartha 2020) and point to political initiatives like the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance (BOGA) as pathways to speedy phase-out of Norwegian oil extraction. In Norwegian public discourse this debate engages environmental activists and petroleum industry supporters alike. When our focus groups members argued against Norway phasing out, they pointed to the industry's relatively low carbon intensity or to its democratic governance system. These arguments can also find support in published research (see, e.g., Masnadi et al. 2018). In making their argument, they often contrasted Norway with other countries or continents. Nigeria was mentioned on several occasions.

This prompted us to produce a second film, which we entitled *The Global Phase-Out Dilemma*. This film, produced mainly for use in focus group and seminar settings, is based on quotes from the first round of focus groups with Norwegian oil workers, where participants typically refer to unsafe, undemocratic, and environmentally hazardous production in other countries as reason to continue extraction on the Norwegian Continental Shelf. In the film, we show how Nigerian oil workers reacted to these quotes, including a recorded Zoom interview with a Nigerian oil worker, Didi Orike, who is an environmentalist and former shop steward. Our motivation behind this film was to demonstrate how an exercise often performed in the political debate in Norway—discussing who should phase out its petroleum production first—was affected by bringing one of those "other places" into view.

Take Three: Polarized Emotions

In a different publication, we (Jordhus-Lier et al. 2022) have shown how alienation in the carbon economy is expressed as animosity between industrial workers and environmentalists in Norway. Whereas

environmental activists in the Global North have been relatively successful in dominating media discourse, unionists typically rely on their access to the political system, or to their own organizational systems of representation and influence. As mentioned earlier, during the early phase of our research, tensions rose on social and traditional media channels between environmental activists arguing for supply-side limitations and people defending the oil and gas industry. In contexts where a sense of alienation develops between social groups and actors, research has shown that polarization can be exaggerated as political identities are constructed through mainstream news media narratives (Tschötschel 2023) and on digital platforms (Bessi et al. 2016). In recent years, certain topics have been more prone than others to generating affective and interactional polarization, with climate change and vaccines being prime examples (Anderson 2017; Tyagi, Uyheng, and Carley 2021). In 2018 and 2019, the debate on the future of the Norwegian oil industry was characterized by affective polarization (Bettarelli, Reiljan, and Van Haute 2023), meaning that opposing sides invested emotionally in disagreements on social media.

As we perused the transcripts of the first round of focus groups from 2018 to 2019, we found several quotes that not only talked about polarization, but that did so in ways that in themselves had the potential to polarize and where environmental activists were narrated as “others” and hence polarized subjects. In November 2020, two of the authors therefore conducted a Zoom call with three environmental activists in Norway. These activists represented a local union coalition, a prominent environmental organization, and the school strikes that were ongoing at the time. All three had read through a draft report we had written, based on the focus group material from 2018 and 2019. The report was full of quotes from Norwegian oil workers describing how they perceived the climate debate and their relationship to environmental voices within and beyond the trade union movement. The three shared their responses and reflections on the workers’ thoughts.

The quotes and the recorded Zoom conversation formed the basis of the third film emanating from this project, entitled *Polarization in the Climate Debate*. Our aim with this film was to allow each side in a political debate that had already exchanged many heated words to be given time to reflect properly on the viewpoints of its perceived opponent. The film did not confine itself to political issues, like the taxation of the petroleum industry, but also dealt with the emotional dimension of polarization, and included footage of a young environmental activist describing how she felt belittled by older people online.

Take Four: Lay Knowledge and Worker Agency

Our fourth take on alienation deals less with relations between predefined groups and more with tensions between different types of knowledge. As geographers have pointed out, climate change itself is not experienced in the abstract, but through “landscape, temporalities and lay knowledges” (Brace and Geoghegan 2011, 296). So are climate mitigation policies. Therefore, social scientists studying the social conditions of mitigation need to connect with these lay knowledges.

The distance between how working people experience climate change and climate politics in their daily lives and how the same issues are understood and communicated by scientific communities constitutes an important dimension of alienation, according to Dickens (2002). Therefore, climate mitigation efforts not only affect workers’ relationship to each other, to consumers, and to environmental activists; they have also challenged their relations to expertise. Distrust in experts is a well-known problem in environmental governance, partly created by a complex division of mental labor through increasingly specialized fields of operation (Dickens 2002). Part of the problem lies in the diffuse and abstract nature of the problem itself given, as Jasanoff (2010) argued, that “[c]limate facts arise from impersonal observation whereas meanings emerge from embedded experience” (233). Gärdebo (2023) even found this problem of abstraction expressed in the trade union movement: Centrally positioned unionists were more open to connect mitigation policies to global and intergenerational solidarity, whereas local representatives insisted on linking these issues to their own workplaces and communities.

Like Dickens and Jasanoff, Fischer (2000) argued that combating climate change requires trust building through better integrating scientific knowledge with lay knowledges, what he called “appropriate knowledge.” The lack of integration might be due to the excessively close relationship between academic expertise and the socioeconomic vantage point of “people who not only live relatively comfortable

middle-class lives but simultaneously feel guilty doing so," to quote Huber's (2019) critique of lifestyle environmentalism. Within this field, there are also studies specifically targeting the views of workers in carbon-intensive industries (Tvinnereim and Ivarsflaten 2016; MacNeil and Beauman 2022), indicating that their (dis)trust in expertise is reliant on how particular policy proposals are perceived to affect their livelihoods.

The fourth film, *Worker Agency in a Just Transition*, introduces the audience to Charlie Sandoval, a union representative at a California oil refinery. The film offers a glimpse into his everyday life, and includes an excerpt from a speech Sandoval was invited to give during a U.S. Congressional hearing in March 2020. The Zoom briefing was organized by a nongovernmental organization, Labor Network for Sustainability. Sandoval consulted with his coworkers to write the demands he presented. His testimony was more of a grassroots expression than an official union statement. Sandoval's main message was that a transition of the petroleum industry must attend to the concerns of workers. The film illustrated both similarities and differences to the Norwegian context but was made with the intention of creating identification and demonstrating how worker agency could be expressed and enacted in relation to mitigation policies. After the film, the Norwegian workers were asked to reflect on questions of their own agency.

Constructing Climate Solidarities

As stated in our introduction, we were partially guided by a methodological research question asking how experimental qualitative methods could facilitate the construction of climate solidarity among critical constituencies related to the oil industry. Video and quote elicitation in focus group settings facilitated connecting viewpoints and positionalities in different localities over time. The use of film gives viewers the possibility of encountering complex political and analytical problems through exposure to faces, places, and stories. This arguably serves to humanize the positions of each actor and each geographical location of power and evokes empathy in ways that trigger each social actor to reflect on how their own interests might impinge on the interests of others. It thus offers a fascinating glimpse into the microlevel processes of climate solidarity alluded to by Bazzani (2023). During the research process, the films were used to elicit reflections from research participants. Subsequently, revised versions of these films have fed into the dissemination of our research findings to new audiences.

In this section, we present some impressions from each of the four films as seen from our viewpoint as researchers and qualitative methods practitioners. The insights emanating from these exchanges will also be of relevance for people involved in political coalition building. We observed stimulating conversations between people who normally frame their understanding of climate policies in national terms, between rank-and-file workers, youth and community members, and between participants engaged in polarizing dialogue in online forums. In this rich data set, there are expressions of enthusiastic optimism, ambivalence, frustration, curiosity, confusion, anger, and resignation. Although all four films touch on a range of emotions, viewpoints, and political questions, we have for the sake of clarity chosen to organize our presentation so that the first film exemplifies connections across geographical distance, the second focuses on principles of mitigation justice, the third on overcoming political distance in the climate debate, and the fourth on the notion of (alienated) agency.

Talking Union, Talking Climate

Each interview and focus group conversation thus represented a grounded connection point where people could reflect on their own interests in relation to those of others. To do so, one must get to know these others, which requires a good deal of contextualization, particularly when the encounter spans very different lifeworlds. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the opening exchanges of *Talking Union, Talking Climate*, where three oil workers—Charlie from Los Angeles, Didi from Port Harcourt, already mentioned, and with Kristian Enoksen from Stavanger—meet each other on Zoom for the first time. As they introduce themselves, it becomes clear that although they all work for the same global industry, they do so under very different conditions. As workers and union representatives, these conditions are soon to be the focus of the conversation. Charlie, who naturally assumes the role of the interviewer, is visibly impressed by how a high corporate tax rate compels the oil industry to help finance the welfare state. The way Kristian talks about the relatively cordial relationship between employers and employees

contrasts with how Didi and Charlie describe their situation. In the film, Charlie's exchange with Kristian seems to confirm his own alienation from his employer and his country's policies. In short, the short conversation unveils how the oil industry is given meaning by workers in these three national contexts.

In the second part of the film, the conversation turns to climate change. Kristian and Charlie seem to approach the topic in a similar fashion, both feeling pressured by the media and environmental activists, and try to carve out a realistic stance concerning the future of their industry. When Didi, who has a background as an environmental activist, joins in on this part of the conversation, the focus changes. Didi asserts that climate change is real, and explains to the other two how Nigeria and his community are affected by climate change and environmental degradation. Charlie is clearly shocked when Didi explains how he can see a gas flare from his window that has been burning since 1962. Didi is not only critical of his own government, but also criticizes Nigerian unions for lacking a clear policy on these issues. It is impossible for the other two to remain indifferent to what Didi tells them, even though the film only shows us a few of these reactions. From a researcher's point of view, this latter segment reflects a particular sense of alienation, one that oil workers experience from a nature that their industry is intimately interwoven with.

In contrast to the other three films, *Talking Union, Talking Climate* does not have a clear agenda that it imposes on those who take part in the film—nor on its audience. Based on the reactions and the feedback from screening the film in various academic and nonacademic settings, we can say that it is a film that "makes people think." Often, we see a willingness among viewers to try to establish connections between people and places in an interdependent world economy facing ecological crisis. It creates an open conversational space that allows for an almost endless number of possible entry points. In the next three films, however, we go further in structuring a conversation between participants over time, and in encouraging the viewers to take a stance.

The Global Phase-Out Dilemma

As alluded to earlier, the Norwegian oil workers who took part in the first round of focus groups defended the notion of continued oil extraction on the Norwegian Continental Shelf with reference to environmental standards and democratic governance. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, they therefore assumed that production in countries with more corruption and environmental degradation should be phased out first. We decided to convey some of these utterances to their rhetorical addressee during our focus groups in Nigeria. This formed the entry point for *The Global Phase-Out Dilemma*.

The four focus groups conducted in the Niger Delta in January 2020 comprised workers from distinct groups of workers: white-collar and blue-collar unionists in the formal oil and gas industry, community contract workers, and workers at illegal informal refineries. During each of these conversations, one of the authors paraphrased quotes and presented viewpoints of Norwegian workers and asked their Nigerian counterparts to comment. Field notes from these focus group conversations reveal some interesting insights. For instance, it soon became clear that the premises of the debate itself—the need for a global phase-out of petroleum—which were taken for granted in a Norwegian context, caused some confusion among Nigerian workers. This was not an established debate in Nigeria. Although the participants discussed and were familiar with both the environmental and climate problems related to oil extraction, there is hardly a public debate about supply-side climate mitigation in the petroleum industry. Thus, there is not the same kind of established discourse and talking points as one finds in Norway.

Interestingly, these conversations not only offered a contrasting perspective, they also unearthed differences in how different groups of workers viewed the phase-out dilemma in the Niger Delta. In general, union representatives in white-collar and blue-collar unions, who represented members formally employed in the oil industry, were more eager to counter the viewpoints of the Norwegian workers and defend Nigeria's right to development and poverty reduction. A notable exception was one senior staff member who argued for Nigeria to be the first to phase out, motivated by his firsthand experience with extreme flooding and the sociopolitical conflicts engendered by oil. His intervention spurred lively conversations, stimulating reflections, ambivalences, and contradictory views. Focus group members from artisanal refineries or who were working casually for the oil industry through community contracts were more ambivalent in their responses from the onset.

Not only were they—as local community members—more directly affected by pollution from the oil industry, but they were also less privileged in their employment situation.

Visual elicitation encourages viewers' expression of ideas and "understandings that would otherwise remain below the surface" (van Braak et al. 2018). Through this research project and the use of film, we were able to relay some of the reflections that arose in the Nigerian focus groups back to the participants of the first Norwegian focus groups, as well as to other audiences of workers and unionists. The first iteration of the *The Global Phase-Out Dilemma* was shown during a focus group event with twenty-five of the oil workers in November 2021. Here, text slides of quotes from their own focus groups conducted in 2018 and 2019 were followed by a segment presenting Nigerian viewpoints in two ways: first, direct quotes from the focus groups in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, read by a Nigerian actor before a camera in Oslo; and second, in an interview with Didi (who also participated in *Talking Union, Talking Climate*), conducted by a fellow research team member for a podcast.

In the film, viewpoints representing completely contrasting positions on the question of who should phase out first are combined with footage from the Niger Delta. While Norwegian workers argue for continued Norwegian production, the actor reads quotes from the Nigerian focus groups, including passages like "Norway should shut down," and "You think there's poverty now? Shut down oil production and then you understand what poverty means." By contrast, Didi argues that Nigeria should be the first to shut down as the oil industry had not contributed to economic development, but corruption, environmental destruction, and flooding: "Oil has brought so much disunity, led to conflict and full-scale wars." He also blamed the oil economy for creating a complacent ruling class and a lack of respect for workers in the industry.

The Global Phase-Out Dilemma triggered mixed reactions in the focus group event in Stavanger. Some of the Norwegian oil workers were visibly moved, describing the film as "strong stuff" and with "sympathy." Given that much of the discussion until this point had taken place firmly within the confines of the Norwegian oil industry, showing the film served to move the center of the discussion onto a different kind of global horizon, not only considering the relative production emissions between countries, but the workers in other production geographies. Many had to take pause before formulating their response, as the film effectively demonstrated some of the complexities of the issue. Contradictions in the "cleanest oil" argument, which until then had been the consensus, were openly discussed. Although this film did not necessarily spur Norwegian workers to abandon their arguments and positions, it certainly encouraged them to give more thought to other principles for a global phase-out presented in the introduction to this focus group discussion, such as national development needs and institutional capacity to handle a transition (Muttitt and Kartha 2020).

Polarization in the Climate Debate

Being an oil worker is the common denominator that allows those who take part in the first two films to bond. In the third film, entitled *Polarization in the Climate Debate*, based entirely on Norwegian participants, oil workers are encouraged to engage in conversations outside the industry. Our aim with this film was to allow each side in a political debate that had already exchanged many heated words to be given time to reflect properly on the viewpoints of its perceived opponent. The film did not confine itself to political issues, like the taxation of the petroleum industry, but also dealt with the emotional dimension of polarization, and included footage of a young environmental activist describing how she felt belittled by older people online. The first edit of the film showed the viewer-polarizing oil worker quotes from the first focus groups in 2018 and 2019, interspersed with quite raw and emotional monologues from the environmental activists.

In the first part of the film, quotes from the workers suggested that people who are not in the industry are often ignorant on petroleum industry matters. They also portrayed environmental activists in the union movement as betraying worker solidarity. Youth activism was described as commendable but "we as adults [should] talk them into their senses." The environmentalists on tape responded emotionally and could be heard saying "I get fired up when I read that" and "Now I notice that I get frustrated." Halfway through, the mood and music of the video changed, the quotes from workers emphasized a

desire to reach out to the environmental activists, and the activists' responses were similarly reconciliatory.

The first round of focus groups took place at a time when the climate debate in Norway was particularly intense, not least related to the school strikes and the so-called "oil shame" debate raged in Norwegian media (Ytterstad, Houeland, and Jordhus-Lier 2022), but it was clear that something had changed when we showed the same workers *Polarization in the Climate Debate* in November 2021. Some workers seemed triggered and stuck in the mood of the film's first half, and thus expressed a similar sentiment to the one dominating in the focus groups of 2018 and 2019. The video gave them an opportunity to revisit the polarized exchanges they found themselves in at the time of the first interviews. Others, however, were eager to embrace the mood of the latter part of the film, claiming that they believed the distance between environmental activists and industrial workers had shrunk by 2021. Apparently, the film gave them encouragement and hope for the future.

Worker Agency in a Just Transition

The main difference between the three preceding films and *Worker Agency in a Just Transition* is that the latter does not encourage the film's participants nor the viewers to weigh in on external matters—like the climate debate or the oil industry—but to instead assess their own role in the bigger picture. This nine-minute short film shows Charlie (from *Talking Union, Talking Climate*) preparing to speak at a Congressional hearing (on Zoom from his kitchen during the pandemic). His testimony was more of a grassroots expression than an official union statement. Charlie's main message was that a transition of the petroleum industry must attend to the concerns of workers.

Several elements were recognizable to the Norwegian audience that saw the film in November 2021: from waking up early in the morning to go to work, to the fear of losing what were arguably the best paying blue-collar jobs in their respective countries. In a stand-out passage Charlie described the California refineries as "the safest and the cleanest" in the world, the same argument often used by Norwegian workers about their own national industry. During the testimony to Congress, he presented a list of demands relating, for instance, U.S. employers' responsibility for health insurance, effectively revealing differences in social support compared to Norway.

The power of the film medium and our choice to introduce the audience to an individual in Charlie's own home served to anchor the conversation in an authenticity of a voice not usually heard (West 2008), and one that the Norwegian workers described as marginalized in Norwegian climate discourse. Around the focus group tables in Stavanger and in the filmed interviews, the most immediate reaction among the oil workers was an emotional identification with the California shop steward. One worker described "being moved" by Charlie's story, and several participants explicitly recognized many of his concerns. After this initial identification, reflections started to revolve around what was different in the United States. In particular, the list of demands in Charlie's speech gave Norwegian oil workers a chance to appreciate living in a welfare state where health care is publicly provided and free and where the consequences of losing your job are mitigated by a social safety net. Even on this point, though, the conversations contained ambivalence. Some noted that in the event of rapid phase-out, both the viability of resource-dependent local communities and the financial foundation of the national welfare state would be threatened. Maybe their situation was not so different after all?

Although all seemed impressed by Charlie's display of direct shop steward agency, from his position as a workplace representative, they did not necessarily agree on whether they ought to follow his lead. For some, the film and the testimony seemed to indicate that Norwegian union representatives were lagging behind. For others, the fact that such questions were dealt with by the central partners in the Norwegian system meant that Norway "was ahead" of the United States. To us as researchers, these exchanges were interesting and important, as the participants openly discussed how and whether they were able to learn what was possible for a union to do from a situation different than their own.

Unsurprisingly, Sandoval's use of the "cleanest oil" argument did not go unnoticed among the oil workers in Stavanger in 2021. Although the quote has attracted open laughter from other Norwegian audiences, the reactions from the oil workers were different—a chuckle, rather than a laugh. Some

participants used Charlie's comment as a source of reflexive introspection. One participant described that scene as "the one that hit me hardest" and argued that it should make Norwegian oil workers more critical and nuanced in their self-image. Others were slightly annoyed, feeling that the researchers had planned for this reaction: "We were supposed to get that straight in the face." The conversations that followed proved very fruitful for the focus group dynamic, as it prepared the participants for the phase-out discussion which we describe next. In a second version of *Worker Agency in a Just Transition*, the responses from the Norwegian workers are presented as a six-minute additional short film. The additional films are meant to be shown after having seen Charlie's story. In combination, these two films have been shown to several academic and nonacademic audiences, always stimulating intense discussions about the role of "ordinary workers" and trade unions in decarbonization processes. As researchers who have long experiences debating the notion of agency (e.g., in relation to alienation and other academic concepts—often in lecture form), we find that these films spur a different kind of grounded conversation about role-taking in an audience.

Concluding Reflections

Building climate solidarity relies on the successful mobilization of coalitions of social movements globally (Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge 2013; Hampton 2015; Bazzani 2023). Although the role of social scientists might be relatively modest in such a political project, it is not insignificant. Through this article, we have demonstrated how there is a potential for researchers to meaningfully engage in a political field characterized by alienation and polarization using innovative methods. We do not suggest that our particular use of focus groups and video elicitation should be adopted by political actors, but argue that a careful curation of viewpoints and actors has the potential to reduce social and political distance. This is particularly the case when participants are allowed time to reflect on each other's viewpoints. Our overall impression is that combining the film medium with focus group conversations creates a productive space for continuous reflection among subjects who otherwise assume passive or defensive roles in public debate. Our design and the resulting data generated have raised awareness of the impact of climate change in the Global South, both to participants in our data collection process and to audiences that we have reached through our research dissemination.

Earlier we stated that the "we" assumed by global leaders rings hollow to many working-class constituencies across the world. Through the conversations we have helped facilitate, it becomes clear that workers and unions feel strongly that government and environmentalists need to take seriously that a postcarbon economy must be planned and developed in ways that offer decent work and secure employment. There must be something to move onto. Another insight is that workers who were exposed to workers in other places and their reflections started thinking differently about their own place in the world, and the legitimation strategies employed by their national industry (and themselves). This latter point stresses the importance of engaging workers in climate education, and for unions to foster climate literacy to expedite a consensus on the need for a just transition. Such education programs must be adapted to context-specific political dynamics. As shown earlier, Norway manifests the same contradictions and challenges in their own way as does California and the United States. Nigeria, on the other hand, is steeped in dialogue around energy poverty and fossil fuel dependency, but also suffers from severe land and water degradation. Stimulating cross-national, cross-movement dialogue using video elicitation methods can not only contribute to climate education, but also alter mutual understandings of the social actors involved in creating change.

We are exposed to various others in the politics of climate change, but many of us lack insight into the lifeworlds of people we imply in our attempts to legitimize our own situation. The use of film gives viewers the possibility of encountering complex political and analytical problems through exposure to faces, places, and stories. This arguably serves to humanize the positions of each actor and each geographical location of power and evokes empathy in ways that trigger each social actor to reflect on how their own interests might impinge on the interests of others.

Allowing critical constituencies in the politics of climate mitigation might be a crucial step toward climate solidarity. Yet learning about each other is in no way sufficient to overcome the socioeconomic

and political distance that we refer to as alienation laid out in the first half of this article. As many before us have argued, this requires political mobilization and popular alliance building. This is why we also chose to frame alienation as a matter of political polarization. A certain degree of polarization might be necessary to bring to light real differences in opinion (cf. Mouffe 2013), and cut through false consensus, but it seems clear that the direction the climate debate has taken in countries like Norway and the United States is incredibly challenging for people working in fossil fuel industries. Such situations require a level of depolarization where actors can both disagree with and find common ground with environmental movements and activists. Although many of the discussions emanating from our polarization film led to calls for politicians and media to stop nurturing polarization, they also included viewpoints on what workers themselves could do to inhabit a more empowering and constructive role in these politics.

A meaningful conversation about agency—the potential for action—in the context of climate solidarity requires that participants reflect on what power each actor wields. In the polarization film, this is highlighted in the exchange between unionists and environmental activists over who has privileged access to decision-making structures and media narratives, respectively. In the material from Nigeria, this is most evident in the discussion of how the Nigerian oil economy is subject to democratic deficit and corrupt governance, but also in how workers describe their vulnerability to the dictates of multinational corporations. Navigating through the complexities of context, institutional mandates and political opportunity structure, the film medium obviously implies a level of simplification and reductionism.

Simplicity is not only a weakness, however. As we argued in the beginning of this article, alienation also involves the contestation of different situated knowledges. Climate solidarity cannot be built solely with reference to scientific knowledge and expertise. Insofar as a problem of trust in complex scientific knowledge is undermining a collective response to the climate crisis, it could be argued that including workers' own lay knowledge—like we have done through our structured conversation—in translating the notion of a just transition into practice is a prerequisite for building climate solidarity. An ongoing challenge in our research practice is to be aware of the complex power dynamics involved in giving voice to certain groups of workers. Cross-national conversations between workers and environmentalists from the Global North and South can contribute to decolonizing conversations (Smith and Patterson 2019), but far too often, such conversations are only anchored in one sphere or the other.

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Note

1. Comments made at the launch of the United Nations Environment Programme's Emissions Gap Report, in Nairobi, 27 October 2022.

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