

The Sponsors of COP26 Are Behind the Corporate Greenwashing Agenda

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COP26 has been sold as a conference where world leaders will finally tackle climate change. But for its corporate sponsors, the conference is an opportunity to greenwash their practices of polluting for profit.

This month’s COP26 conference in Glasgow brings together world leaders behind a promise to finally take effective action on climate change. The profiles of those leaders themselves, whose grand statements have been plastered across the TV screens of the world, leave plenty to be desired: Most of the evidence suggests that they are unfit to lead on an issue that the rest of the year they basically ignore.

But beyond the sound bites, a more realistic understanding of the conference can be found by taking a deeper look into the “[principal partners](#)” that the conference’s website so proudly presents. If mainstream commentators were surprised by Greta Thunberg’s description of COP26 as a “greenwashing festival” and a “celebration of blah blah blah,” there was plenty of evidence for this trajectory in its list of corporate sponsors.



First up is Unilever, one of the world’s largest polluters, which produces enough plastic to cover eleven football pitches [per day](#). A quick look at some [plastic pollution NGOs](#) confirms a considerable overlap between companies involved in initiatives supposedly intended to reduce plastic waste and those who produce the most plastic waste. Last year, Unilever

elicited widespread praise for making moves toward sustainable palm oil production, but that shift only came after a long-standing history of [relationships](#) with rogue actors destroying rainforests, according to the Rainforest Action Network. (Another similar consumer giant partnered with COP is IKEA, which produces [more emissions](#) when shipping its cargo around the world than even Amazon.)

Unilever is followed by Scottish gas giants SSE and Scottish Power. In October last year, SSE was [named](#) as Scotland's second-biggest polluter. One study from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in 2019 found that SSE produces more than 1.6 million tons of carbon dioxide from their Peterhead power station each year. Another partner, National Grid — the company responsible for running the country's electricity network — has faced challenges by activists over its decision [not to meet](#) the standards set by the 2015 Paris Climate Accords.

Then we come to the tech giant Microsoft. Microsoft is famous for its questionable work practices, including the alleged use of [child labor](#). In environmental terms, a quick Google search confirms that Microsoft is doing everything it can to tackle climate change and you shouldn't investigate any further. The company makes the bold statement of intent to be carbon-neutral by 2025, and indeed, it looks as though it may be successful — but its collaboration with major extractors throws the usefulness of this label into doubt. In Texas, for example, Microsoft has to help extract more than 50,000 barrels of oil per day from the Permian basin.

The example of Microsoft shows the major limitations that come with individualizing “carbon-neutral” goals. Failing to consider the collective processes through which these companies profit from one another enables them to evade meaningful criticism and change. Another example is Sky, which claims to be headed towards carbon neutrality; Sky's partnership with Qatar Airways paints a different picture of the media group's commitment to zero emissions. Similarly, Boston Consulting Group (BCG) is in [partnerships](#) in a number of carbon-emitting industries despite its claim to be going “carbon-neutral.”



Pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), which also features among the list of partners, was found in 2019 to be one of the [highest polluting](#) companies in Scotland. To be fair to GSK, a large proportion of that pollution comes from the greenhouse gas contained in the inhalers it manufactures, which, according to the *Financial Times*, is [1,500 times](#) more powerful than carbon dioxide.

There is an alternative type of inhaler — a “dry powder” inhaler — that is common in Scandinavia, but these are not suitable for everyone, so GSK is looking into other options. It's hard not to wonder whether the impetus to find those green alternatives is reduced when the polluting version currently sells in the United States for between [\\$250 and \\$350](#)

per unit — lasting about a month — to asthma sufferers who have no other choice.

COP26's retail backing comes from Sainsbury's, one of the UK's largest supermarket stores with over 1,400 locations nationwide. In 2019, Greenpeace named Sainsbury's as "[the worst](#)" supermarket for reducing plastic waste. The appearance of another British-based consumer goods company, Reckitt, on the list of official partners also [raised the hackles](#) of climate campaigners, given its reliance on Wilmar International for palm oil resources. Wilmar has been criticized not only for the deforestation commonly associated with palm oil production, but also implicated in alleged human rights abuses, including the use of child labor, according to Amnesty International.

Finally, we come to the transportation giant Jaguar Land Rover. This company has, as recently as 2019, had to [recall](#) over 40,000 vehicles for emitting more carbon emissions than officially stated. A 2017 [white paper](#) found Land Rover to be the worst performing car manufacturer on the planet in terms of emissions, with new Land and Range Rover models producing several times more nitrogen oxide emissions than the average new car. The now merged company has even [faced fines](#) for "lagging behind" their competitors in the race to reduce emissions.

Not every company involved in sponsoring COP26 has such explicitly poor climate credentials as some of those listed above, and nearly all of them have made commitments to become carbon-neutral in a maximum of a couple of decades. But these corporate giants have already done serious environmental damage, and the evidence gives strong indication that their latest commitments are not to be trusted.

Private companies do not exist to serve the needs of the people or the fight against climate change. Their single goal is to profit, and the imperative for profit will reliably outweigh any of their green concerns. For many, sponsoring COP26 serves that goal by acting as an opportunity to greenwash their own responsibility in the crisis we now face.

For climate action to be successful, it must do away with the notion of corporate sponsors. World leaders cannot take hospitality, money, and direction from those they should be fighting in the battle to save the planet. What we need is an economic system that puts people and planet before profit — and that can never be built with the support of corporate interests.

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Featured image: Greta Thunberg leads protests in Italy ahead of COP26. Credit: Radio Habana Cuba

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