

Covid-19 (world) - Vaccine apartheid: A threat to an inclusive COP26

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The ongoing [global inequality](#) in people’s access to life-saving Covid-19 vaccines is not just a global public health issue, it also threatens the inclusivity of the COP26 climate negotiations and other important global summits. The already delayed climate talks or COP26 to be held in Glasgow, originally scheduled for November 2020 and moved to 1-12 November 2021, may have to be postponed again or radically changed because of the continuing global coronavirus pandemic.

The climate emergency and Covid-19 are generally deemed by policymakers as the [two biggest existential threats](#) facing humanity now. Negotiators and civil society organisations that mobilise for the annual Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are worried that the continuing global pandemic might further delay COP26. Uncertainties about the pandemic in the UK, which is the host country, and the slow vaccine rollouts in developing countries added to the already problematic issue of participation and access to the negotiations.

Past COPs have already shown imbalances in the number of attendees between negotiators and NGOs from richer nations and poorer ones. This was very stark in the crucial COP15 held in Copenhagen in 2010 for example. According to [reports](#), the UK government intends for COP26 to go ahead in person and is working on this basis, while closely monitoring the Covid-19 situation.

Why is it important for COP26 to be inclusive?

COP26 is the most important climate summit since the landmark [Paris Agreement](#) was agreed at COP21 in 2015. Numerous components of the Paris Agreement have a 2020 deadline.

The COP26 talks will be the first opportunity since the Paris Agreement for nations to come together to review commitments and strengthen ambitions to keep the world on track for meeting the Agreement’s aspirational targets of limiting global temperature rise to ‘well below’ 2°C and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century.

The Paris Agreement also contains a clause ‘requesting’ nations to submit enhancements or upgrades in the form of nationally determined contributions (NDCs). The Agreement calls for the delivery of NDCs, long-term decarbonisation plans to 2050, and financial support worth \$100bn per year to countries considered most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. These three measures are due ‘by 2020’ and not ‘by COP26’. The postponement last year and another possible delay does not mean therefore that the deadline should also move.

COP26 will also be the first summit since the US re-joined the international climate agreement after [President Trump left the Paris Agreement](#). The pandemic has also shifted many governments' priorities to focus on 'building back better' as countries look to rebuild their economies after the pandemic with climate change as a key concern.

'Vaccine nationalism' reflects the reality of climate negotiations

The 'vaccine nationalism' that we see now reflects the reality of the climate negotiations. Countries in the climate talks understandably promote and protect their interests in any negotiation. Those with more power can get more, rich and powerful nations can expedite what needs doing or block and delay actions if they are against their interests.

We can also see similarities in what is called 'vaccine apartheid' and climate apartheid. While the UK, the US, wealthier countries in Europe and other rich nations in the negotiations are way ahead in vaccinating their populations, many developing countries are still waiting to access Covid-19 vaccines. In February, the UN called the vaccine inequality ["wildly uneven and unfair"](#) when just 10 countries had administered 75% of all Covid-19 vaccines while 130 nations hadn't received a single dose. According to the [People's Vaccine Alliance](#), rich nations are vaccinating one person every second while the majority of the poorest nations are yet to give a single dose.

Another similarity is in the way countries act in response to both Covid-19 and the climate crisis. Wealthier countries have bought up many more doses than needed by their populations. The UK, for example, could vaccinate people here many times over while those in developing countries will need to wait because we bought up the supplies in advance and there's nothing left for them. Then at the same time, the same countries that stockpiled on supplies are blocking the attempts of developing countries to increase the number of laboratories or companies that could manufacture more vaccines. They are doing this through blocking the request by countries led by India and South Africa at the World Trade Organisation to waive certain intellectual property rights.

In the climate negotiations, big historical emitters continue with excessive greenhouse gas emissions while keeping developing countries waiting for urgently needed climate finance and technologies to address the already destructive impacts of climate change.

The perils of changing the format of COP26

Developing countries are [resisting holding the COP26 talks online](#). They argue that "virtual negotiations should not replace in-person negotiations" and that it will risk disadvantaging many developing countries. Some of the reasons enumerated include poor internet connections in developing countries and time zone differences as these will make it very difficult for developing countries to fully participate. Friends of the Earth argue as well that a shift to online negotiations would [seriously disadvantage global south participation](#) due to major challenges with digital connectivity, interpretation and in co-ordinating across multiple time zones.

Developing country diplomats are concerned too that [Covid-19 jabs will be a prerequisite](#) to attending COP26 while their countries are still waiting for their vaccines. More than 20,000 people attended the last two summits which were held in Madrid and Poland. Prior to the pandemic, 30,000 people from more than 200 countries were expected to participate in the negotiations and in numerous side events in COP26 organised by governments, business and non-government organisations, as well as various public fora. It would be impossible to replicate this inclusivity in an

online setting. It is also crucial that negotiators from developing countries have the opportunities to consult and discuss with each other while the negotiations are ongoing, especially since climate actions will affect their future economic development.

At the time of writing, the UK government is working on the basis of the talks being held in person, under the authority of a strict Covid-19 testing regime and with a [compulsory vaccination policy](#) for delegates. Covid-19, as tough as it is, will probably not be the last global pandemic that we have to address. There are likely to be future ones. Governments need to avoid future summits where crucial decisions are at stake being delayed for similar reasons that delayed COP26. Should it set a precedent that major global summits can happen in an inferior, less participatory and less egalitarian way, this could have a lasting and detrimental impact on multilateral negotiations and institutions, and indeed on the whole concept of multilateralism itself.

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P.S.

- Global Justice. 7 April 2021:
<https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/2021/04/vaccine-apartheid-a-threat-to-an-inclusive-cop26/>