



Climate activists are concerned that representation at COP26 will not be equitable.

# PIVOTAL CLIMATE SUMMIT DOGGED BY CONCERNS ABOUT COVID AND EQUITY

Environmental network calls for delay to the November meeting, but many vow to press on.

By Jeff Tollefson

**A**n international climate-action coalition is calling for the postponement of a pivotal climate summit slated to take place this November in Glasgow, UK, because COVID-19 pandemic restrictions could prevent the world's poorest nations from participating fully. But many developing countries say that delaying the summit could have dangerous consequences for the planet, and want to push forwards.

The summit, the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), is the most significant global climate meeting since countries gathered in Paris in 2015 to sign an accord to limit global warming to 1.5–2°C above pre-industrial temperatures. The 196 governments participating in this year's summit are expected to formalize a new round of commitments to dial back greenhouse-gas emissions.

COP26 organizers in the United Kingdom have responded to the call for postponement with concessions intended to enable broad participation. UK officials told *Nature* that COVID-19 vaccines are being shipped out for delegations that don't have access to them, and that the first jabs will be administered

within days. But some observers still fear that the proceedings will not be equitable because of reduced participation from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which often advise low-income countries.

## A risk of exclusion

Climate Action Network-International (CAN), which represents a global collection of more than 1,500 environmental groups, raised the alarm about COP26 on 7 September. The coalition says it has heard numerous complaints from delegates, including members of NGOs, in developing countries who worry that they will be unable to attend the negotiations in person because of a lack of vaccines and the high travel costs associated with pandemic restrictions.

NGOs are at particular risk of being unable to participate, and without them there could be "less pressure on polluters to act, less scrutiny on the outcomes, and potentially watered-down climate action, leading to more suffering for people around the world", says Dharini Parthasarathy, a spokesperson for CAN in Bengaluru, India.

Island nations and low-income countries in the global south have been among the fiercest advocates for aggressive climate action so far, because they have contributed the least to

global warming and are often most vulnerable to its impacts. Now they are struggling with low vaccination rates due to an inequitable global distribution of doses, making travel to COP26 more difficult – and more costly. The United Kingdom has loosened its quarantine rules for COP26 attendees, but still requires that unvaccinated delegates from some 60 high-risk countries isolate in hotel rooms for 10 days; even vaccinated individuals from those countries will need to quarantine for 5 days.

After CAN called for COP26's postponement, the UK government agreed to cover the cost of hotel quarantining for delegates from high-risk nations. In a statement, the United Kingdom's designated president of the summit, Alok Sharma, said the meeting must go ahead. "COP26 has already been postponed by one year, and we are all too aware climate change has not taken time off," he said. Although many countries have yet to weigh in, some have opposed delaying the summit: last week the Climate Vulnerable Forum, a coalition of countries in the global south that are at significant risk of impacts from global warming, released a statement saying that COP26 must take place as scheduled and in person.

And the Alliance of Small Island States said in a statement to *Nature* that its 39 members are ready to engage at the summit. "The only beneficiaries of the postponement are the fossil fuel industry and persons who gain financially from delay actions," the statement said.

## Climate change presses on

Holding a global climate summit that attracts thousands of people from around the world presents significant logistical challenges, particularly in the middle of a pandemic. More than 26,700 people registered for the last meeting of this scale, in Madrid in 2019, and the United Kingdom says it is expecting around 25,000 in Glasgow.

Even with hotel quarantine costs covered in the United Kingdom, travelling to and from Glasgow will still represent a challenge for many delegates, says Bill Hare, a physicist and one of the founders of Climate Analytics, a non-profit organization that advises many developing countries in the climate negotiations. "I know governments that we work with are concerned," he says.

During the pandemic, many high-level international climate meetings have moved online, but gatherings such as COP26 are fuelled by interactions between activists, scientists and negotiators, says Durwood Zaelke, president of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development in Washington DC. Switching to a virtual format would be a challenge, particularly for low-income countries where Internet connections are less reliable, he says. "COVID has put a lot of sand into the gears of this machinery of climate governance," says Zaelke. "That has slowed things down."