The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) offered a stark reminder that the climate crisis is here, it’s undeniable, and the outlook is grim unless major emitters take action immediately. Weeks after United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described the IPCC's findings as a "code red for humanity," the future of the U.N.'s next major climate talks could be in jeopardy.

Last week, a group of low-income countries warned that lack of access to coronavirus vaccines may hinder their ability to participate in COP26, the U.N. climate talks slated for October. Meanwhile a coalition of activists is calling for the talks to be postponed due to limited vaccine access.
Last Tuesday Climate Action Network, a coalition of more than 1,500 environmental and rights organizations from over 130 countries, called for the U.N. to postpone COP26, now scheduled for early November in Glasgow, Scotland. Three days later, the U.N. negotiating bloc representing the world’s poorest countries said they’ll need financial help in order to meet the vaccination and quarantine requirements for the COP26 talks.

"Delegates from the LDC Group remain concerned about the logistics of getting to Glasgow," Sonam Phuntsho Wangdi of Bhutan, chair of the group of the 46 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), said in a statement. "Our countries and our people are among the worst affected by climate change — we must not be excluded from talks deciding how the world will deal with this crisis, determining the fate of our lives and livelihoods."

**Advocates blame rich nations for failing to share COVID-19 vaccines**

"There has always been an inherent power imbalance within the U.N. climate talks, between rich nations and poorer nations, and this is now compounded by the health crisis," Tasneem Essop, executive director of Climate Action Network, said in a statement last week. "Looking at the current timeline for COP26, it is difficult to imagine there can be fair participation from the Global South under safe conditions."

Some 20 LDCs including Rwanda, Haiti and Bangladesh are on the U.K.’s coronavirus red list, which means their delegates will be forced to quarantine in a managed hotel for up to 10 days before attending the COP26 talks in Glasgow. In response to calls for postponement, the U.K. government said it will cover the quarantine costs for delegates from red-list countries, cut the quarantine time to five days for delegates who are vaccinated, and provide coronavirus vaccines to those struggling to get them.

Considering that only 1.9 percent of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of the vaccine, offering to help delegates skip the line did little to impress advocates. Essop of Climate Action Network instead called on rich countries to waive intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments.

Last week Australia became the latest government to voice support for patent waivers on COVID-19 vaccines through the World Trade Organization. But the patent waiver requires unilateral support in order to pass, and a handful of countries led by Germany and the U.K. have so far refused to sign on to the measure.

Activists have taken aim at the European Union in general, and the U.K. government in particular as the host of COP26. "Today, according to the WHO, 57 percent of Europe is fully vaccinated while just about 3 percent of Africa is," said Essop of Climate Action Network. "Our fight for climate justice and our efforts to hold those in power accountable cannot be delinked from the root causes that continue to perpetuate such inequality and injustice."
“From the start of the pandemic, we've seen big pharma put profit before public interest, with poor countries locked out of deals created by industry and by rich governments," added Max Lawson, chair of the People’s Vaccine Alliance and head of inequality policy at Oxfam, in a statement. "Rich countries must immediately reallocate surplus doses, but this shouldn’t be the only option for developing countries, which in some cases have been getting vaccine donations that arrive past their best before date. The only sustainable solution is to enable manufacturers in developing countries to produce their own vaccines by sharing technology and know-how and waiving intellectual property rights. Across the developing world factories stand ready."

Meanwhile the nonprofit consumer rights advocacy group Public Citizen contends in a new report that the Joe Biden administration could take matters into its own hands and share the recipe for Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine with the world. As reported by Democracy Now: "Public Citizen says the U.S. Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority — known as BARDA — invested heavily in the development of Moderna’s vaccine at taxpayer expense and has access to its entire 'vaccine recipe.' That includes chemistry, manufacturing and controls information."

**What would postponing COP26 mean for global climate negotiations?**

COP26 has already been postponed a year due to the coronavirus pandemic, and seeing it pushed back again could have significant implications. COP26 was set to be the most pivotal U.N. climate negotiations since the Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted in 2015.

Ahead of the talks, world leaders were challenged to increase the ambition of their country's commitments to the Paris Agreement, formally known as nationally determined contributions or NDCs. Just over half of U.N. member nations had submitted their updated NDCs before a key deadline in early August, although the U.N. allows countries to update their NDCs after that.

Key decisions about climate finance for vulnerable countries were also left undecided after COP25 wrapped in Madrid at the end of 2019 and were meant to be picked back up again in Glasgow. Given that rich countries continue to be cagey about future commitments to climate finance, it's no surprise that low-income countries are concerned about talks going forward if they can't be present at the decision-making table.

"We’re just not sure it will be possible for so many LDC negotiators to get to Glasgow, but without us there how can COP26 be fair and inclusive?" said Wangdi of the LDC bloc. "The world cannot risk unambitious and unfair decisions being taken at COP26. There is far too much at stake.”

While U.K. organizers and other world leaders have said the COP26 talks must go forward given the urgency of the climate crisis, some advocates remain unconvinced. "The U.N. climate talks are important, but against the current context of vaccine apartheid they simply cannot proceed by locking out the voices of those who especially need to be heard at this time," said Essop of Climate Action Network.
While the future of COP26 remains uncertain, the urgency of the climate crisis is clear. Countries, companies and other major emitters cannot wait for an in-person conference in order to take the critical steps necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions — particularly in the midst of a global pandemic that threatens to leave so many behind.

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