

Broken Promises on the Road to COP26

Article by Anne Marie Bhirabake, Francesca Gater

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Covid-19 restrictions in the UK and ongoing vaccine inequality will shut many voices from the Global South out of proceedings for the United Nations Conference of the Parties in Glasgow, Scotland. Fran Gater spoke with green organiser and Burundian activist Anne Marie Bhirabake about the impact of climate change in her country, vaccine politics and the seemingly insurmountable barriers her and many activists face to participating in the most important global forum for climate action.

Fran Gater: Can you start by telling us about the Covid-19 situation in Burundi? What has life been like for you since the pandemic?

Anne Marie Bhirabake: Like all countries around the world, my country Burundi has faced Covid-19. Burundi never had a lockdown – never closed churches, markets, banks, schools, nothing.

Frankly speaking, I appreciated this approach to dealing with Covid-19. Why? Because Burundi is a poor country; one of the poorest. For people to be able to eat they have to go to work, they have to go out – they have to suffer. Most Burundians live day-to-day. If they were kept at home, the government could not afford to feed them.

We have lost people. But not on the level we expected. With Covid-19 we do our best, especially washing our hands. We have been unable to social distance – it is very difficult for Burundians to avoid hugging each other.

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What's the situation with vaccination? Have any vaccines reached Burundi?

The government of Burundi long refused Covid-19 vaccines. We can't monitor how the vaccination is going. We heard that some NGO and UN staff, as well as their families, could have the vaccine, but not officially because it is forbidden – it's against the government policy. Recently we heard that the Kenyan Embassy vaccinated its staff, and some rich people, including some officials, ran there to request the remaining doses.

Why has the government refused the vaccine?

I can't know the exact reason but since 2015, the government decided to prove its economic and political independence and self-sufficiency in most domains. It closed Burundi off from many external funders. This had a big impact, including on the health sector where there were medicine shortages.

The former president, who should have had two terms, decided to run for a third term in 2015. The international community tried to advise the Burundian government to follow the constitution, but it refused. Many human rights violations have taken place – media seen as the opposition have been banned, the opposition has been exiled, and many of them jailed. So, Burundi has violated some international agreements.

Some people in Africa believe the vaccine against Covid-19 is not something intended to improve the lives of black people but a way to eliminate us. But I don't think the government should decide for every citizen. They should allow those who want to take it to do so. The government should lead citizens to be protected against the virus through vaccination.

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The UK government promised to supply vaccine doses to COP26 delegates to make it possible for delegates from Global South countries whose populations are not vaccinated to attend. But it seems this offer does not work in practice. Have you been offered a vaccine?

I have never had the opportunity to have a vaccine and I would be glad to receive any sort of vaccine against Covid.

I've tried in other countries like Rwanda, Uganda, Congo, but they have also not been able to offer it to all their populations. It has also become difficult for a foreign person to travel in those countries.

So your experience is that the scheme doesn't reach you - the offer, in reality, has not materialised?

Exactly. Even here in Burundi, they said that the World Bank will deliver some vaccines. But when we asked for them, we found that it is not even good to talk about it – someone told me, "You'd better not continue asking that."

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Because the vaccine doses are not reaching the people who need them in time,

some NGOs have called for the conference to be postponed. They say that “a safe, inclusive and just global climate conference will be impossible.” What do you, and the Global Greens, say about this call for postponement of COP26?

The Global Greens have not taken an official position on postponement. What I know is that the Global Greens coordination is working hard to facilitate the participation of the maximum number of delegates. For me, the postponement of COP26 shouldn't happen. We can postpone the conference but the impacts of climate change are not stopping, and we don't know how the pandemic will look tomorrow.

I think the UK government should relax some of the conditions. They should be the ones to change, but we should not postpone COP26. The UK has been given the opportunity to host COP26 they should use it positively; they should not make things hard and prevent people from meeting. When they were appointed to host the COP it was not to allow only a few people. They do not know who they might prevent from coming. If it's only a few people who can come, most of the time it'll be government officials and we know what they say, we know their positions, we know how they negotiate, and most of the time they negotiate against the community.

This will be put on the head of the UK government. And the world will never forget this negative contribution to humanity and the coming generation. I don't think the UK Government should accept this bad reputation.

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Do you want to go to COP?

Yes, of course. I really want to attend COP26, and the Global Greens would like me to be a delegate. I have worked on the preparation. If it wasn't for Covid, I'd have no problems in getting there - I think the visa would be provided to me because I have already been to the UK twice.

Why do you want to go to the COP so much? Why is it important for you and other delegates and observers from poor countries to travel to Glasgow?

My interest is, first of all, to meet people. Even meeting other Burundians at the COP venue is much more important than meeting them here. When we meet there we discuss how to deal with climate change, how to make change, but the impact of our discussions is different. When we are here, they believe that our voice can't go anywhere. When we meet at the COP venue, they can see we are not nothing - we can raise our voice, and others will stand with us.

At COP, we can raise awareness about problems in Burundi; we meet international delegates and can expose our problems. Very few people know Burundi. Going to COP can give us space to talk about our situation. To cry. To call for support from others, and to build our network.

Many solutions to the problems here in Burundi come from outside. The networks we make with international organisations can help solve some problems here – they give feedback from the outside and can convince leaders in Burundi to take action.

In our country, not everyone is entitled to a voice or freedom of speech. It is very difficult to communicate – the opposition, the media, whoever wants to influence the government has no space. So meeting outside is better than meeting inside the country.

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Is it safe for you?

It's not safe for many. The situation has been very bad and people have become used to people killing others over a simple conflict. We say that the hope of life in Burundi has 48 hours – we never know what will happen. I don't find it a secure country. It can't be a secure country when many Burundians are not allowed to access and enjoy their country and the houses they have built.

Tell us about your personal situation. Where do you stand at the moment? Do you know if you can come to Glasgow?

I'm coordinating with the Global Greens. I've already booked accommodation. We are waiting for some documents but knowing that I come from a "red" country on the Covid-19 map, my chances are limited. However, I will do my best to be there.

It is bad that if we are given the opportunity to come we have to spend time in quarantine – then the two weeks in COP. It is a very long time away from home. But for the cause of climate change, I am ready to do that. The funds that are needed for quarantine may be very huge. If I'm given financial support I'm ready to go there.

The challenges that prevent me from attending COP26 are from two sides: my country and the host country. Receiving a visa is no longer sufficient. It's possible I may be given the opportunity to attend the conference and still miss it if I don't receive my test results on time and therefore cannot take my flight.

How is climate change affecting people in Burundi, especially women?

Climate change is a reality. It is not something far away. People here die because of rain, drought, hunger, and many other things.

In the countryside, climate change affects agricultural production. When there's nothing to eat, most of the leaders of the households who need to find food are women. In Burundi, we have a lot of widows, and single-parent households. We have a lot of children at home. In Burundi, five to six children to a mother is common. Some have even more – up to 12, 13 children. If you have many children and you have to leave your house and look for somewhere else to live – this is a heavy job for the mother. Some people are living in very damp houses, sometimes with water inside. If children have illnesses or allergies because of the dampness, the cold situation and the poor housing, this becomes the responsibility of women. And when their time is consumed by the care of a sick person, this impacts other tasks, especially agricultural work.

When you consider the situation of women, the impacts of climate change, and now the pandemic - you want to come to COP to meet allies and donors, and to advocate for your country, but you are prevented from doing so. How do you feel in this situation?

It's frustrating. We are a victim of being a poor country and a poorly governed country. If a country has bad governance, all problems follow. You can smell the poverty and the problems.

I have been lucky that in the past I have always been granted a visa. And I thank God for that. But most of the time people from my region miss the opportunity to attend international conferences because the host countries think that we will not return. They are partly right because many Africans are looking to leave the difficult situation they live in. Unfortunately, many other people are victims of that situation.

Being in a poor country breeds a lot of social frustrations. In the pandemic, the challenges are many.

The Global Greens are currently raising money to send Anne Marie, alongside six other delegates, to COP26. To help them have their voices heard, you can donate via their [fundraising website](#).

This interview was originally published by [Green World](#).



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