

## **On the Sidelines: Activist Views on COP26**

**Article by Ayah Abdouny, Janmejai Tiwari, Theresa Rose Sebastian, Tyrone Scott**

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Postponed due to the pandemic, COP26 took place in a very different world than the previous instalment of the UNFCCC negotiations. COP25 in Madrid had been preceded by months of protests and school strikes throughout 2018 and 2019. Two years later, the pandemic had put a stop to much of that wave of mobilisation. However, climate did not fall off the political agenda. Instead, everyone declared themselves green. In 2021, the United States rejoined the Paris Agreement and Turkey finally ratified it. A few weeks before Glasgow, even giant oil producer Saudi Aramco pledged to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Whether these distant promises mean anything remains to be seen.

With climate commitments everywhere but climate action still severely lacking, the role of the climate movement becomes critical in unpicking spin, holding to account, and forcing real change. Though COP26 brought only relative progress amid wider disappointment, it provided an essential opportunity for the climate movement to regroup and show how it has evolved. Greta Thunberg's denunciation of COP26 as a "Global North greenwash festival" also reflects the growing understanding of North-South injustices in the climate movement's analysis. We hear from activists present in Glasgow about their experiences of the conference and where they see the climate movement going next.

### **Hopes dashed but determination persists**

I came to COP26 with hope. Most would have called me naïve for doing so, but I still came with the hope that governments would finally turn away from their greed and work to create a better world. Now, I feel heartbroken, disappointed, and betrayed. I met with island and Global South negotiators who explained how richer countries spend more time debating the placement of a comma than they do discussing how they can contribute to change. Even within the four walls of COP26, young people and frontline communities could not access negotiation spaces. Deliberately or not, this greatly restricted the involvement of civil society, young people, and frontline communities in COP26.

The agreement itself has good and bad elements, but it does not go far enough. It barely keeps the goal to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees alive. They called it a compromise but I call it a loosely tied raft that is barely holding the futures of our island nations and indigenous and frontline communities together. Many island nations expressed their pain at returning to their homes knowing that this agreement would not protect them. Many of these nations are watching their homes being washed away a little more every day, and their culture and history follow. The real question about the agreement is how many of the promises will turn out to be empty, and how many will actually be achieved on time. The Paris Agreement has been alive for over six years. During these six years, G20 countries have given fossil fuel companies over 3.3 trillion dollars in subsidies. The target of

100 billion dollars in climate finance remains a broken promise. The agreement continues to neglect justice, people, and our land for profit.

The next steps for the climate movement are to continue what we have been doing for the last few years: holding our governments accountable and making sure they know the people have the power. We need to organise people onto the streets, into parliaments and, if need be, to the frontline to ensure that our “leaders” know that climate justice is needed today and not just in 2050 or 2070. Personally, Glasgow has shown me quite clearly that justice and change will never come from these elite spaces where government leaders bicker over a comma. It will come from the people. I believe we still can and will unite together to dismantle this oppressive system. But now it is up to us to be our own hope.

*Theresa Sebastian, Ireland/India*

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### **Who's in the room?**

I was very excited to be a part of COP26. But, from the very beginning, it was not a smooth journey. Activists from the Global South faced huge difficulties just to be there and make their voices heard. Covid restrictions and UK government visa regulations made it especially tough. The UK government announced its arrangement of quarantine facilities too late for many activists to plan their travel. I was stopped at Delhi airport for about 90 minutes and was not allowed to board even with the accreditation letter from the United Nations. The relaxation of restrictions for COP delegates was obviously not conveyed very effectively.

The World Leaders Summit was held in the first few days of COP26. During these days, activists were not allowed to enter plenary rooms and the whole area was cordoned off. It felt like everything was happening behind closed doors. The venue was not wheelchair accessible and the signage and colour combinations at the venue made it difficult to find meeting rooms. The presence of the fossil fuel lobby inside COP was frustrating. If the fossil fuel lobby was a country delegation, it would be the biggest one present with at least 503 delegates. Some side events on loss and damage, climate finance, and community building were interesting, but I soon resorted to activism inside the Blue Zone [1] with others to make our voices heard. The policing inside and outside the COP venue was very intimidating.

My expectations sank after the first week, when it became evident that countries were greenwashing the agendas. The first draft was a disappointment, but I was still not expecting it to be as bad as the final draft. It was a “failed COP” with nothing on climate finance and even the prospect of phasing out coal watered down to “phasing down”. So the future looks very uncertain. My region is a Himalayan state already bearing the brunt of climate change. So for my part, I'll continue working to strengthen the climate movement

here. I think change will come from people and especially from youth. The aim is for transnational coordination between youth movements, indigenous peoples' movements, and all climate movements to force governments to act. I don't have high expectations of COP but it's the only system we have for now.

*Janmejai Tiwari, India*

## **A failure that could galvanise a movement**

Attending COP26 as a delegate for the Federation of Young European Greens ([FYEG](#)) brought a responsibility not anticipated prior to my arrival in Glasgow. Whilst thousands of inspiring activists gathered outside the walls of the Blue Zone [1] and took over the streets of Glasgow, few were permitted access to the "exclusive" COP26 Blue Zone. Our delegation felt responsible for making sure the voices of activists were heard.

Planning a protest was not easy at COP26. The organisers allowed activism within the Blue Zone, however it was restricted. For any action planned, the UN had to be informed well in advance. Not only did you have to inform them of the location of your protest, but also how many people would attend, what is written on signs, and any chants planned by activists. At this point your protest may be permitted, only as long as no countries were named. This procedure allowed the organisers to put up a façade of allowing voices of dissent, when in reality steps were taken to ensure we remained voiceless.

This was echoed by the restrictive nature of much of COP26. Observers were denied access to important events and key negotiations. Campaigners called the restrictions "unprecedented". It felt even more important to get voices heard, especially when we saw which way the negotiations were going. I was proud to see 800 members of civil society [walk out](#) of the COP26 venue on what should have been the last day, making it clear that this deal did not go nearly far enough to tackle the climate crisis. Little did we know, the deal was to be watered down even more on November 13th, one day after the negotiations were due to conclude and after most of the activists had to return home. It was for this reason that I felt compelled to use my voice as one of the few activists left to take the stage where COP26 President Alok Sharma was set to announce the deal, and declare to the world's press: "[COP26 has been a failure](#)". Whilst this may not have made me any friends at the UN, and I certainly will not be allowed at COP27, it was vital to help change the narrative that the deal was a success.

COP26 was a failure for many reasons, but one success is that it has united the movement around the conviction that now, enough is enough. World leaders' failure to step up has only shown us that we will have to be the ones to change the world, and the movement has only grown stronger with this knowledge. I am excited to see how the movement continues to grow and how activists champion each other, to secure real climate justice. What happens next is up to us.

*Tyrone Scott, United Kingdom*

## **Putting climate on the map**

The [Lebanese delegation](#) was not really in Glasgow for climate action. Their real focus was

regional politics, trying to resolve difficulties in relations with the Gulf states sparked by [comments](#) by a (now former) government minister about Yemen.

Lebanon is stuck in a circle of survival. Like many countries in the region, it is hard for Lebanon to think about climate disaster. Places across the Asia-Pacific region are some of the most impacted by climate change. But people are often too busy trying to survive and earn a decent living to think beyond tomorrow or bigger than their own families. It is unfortunate, and it is also this situation that allows those who hold international power to keep choosing greed and damage over the marginalised and their needs. I return from Glasgow with the aspiration to raise awareness about the COP climate talks, as many here are not aware of them.

The European activists I met in Glasgow had an infectious willingness to learn about what is happening in Lebanon. It struck me that activism in Europe is more efficient because of the state of the countries leads them to be more accepting of a unifying movement built around a vision of a sustainable and just world. Progress in the green movement in Europe is also good news elsewhere, since there is always space for collaboration and learning from each other.

As for the COP itself, there was noticeable progress in Glasgow but not enough. International climate action should focus less on governments and more on the private businesses that bear greater responsibility for climate change. As one cannot live without the other, environmental policies are crucial but will end up as dead letters without commitment from the private sector. Changing how we produce goods and services consumed on a mass scale will also bring about major economic change, and indirect political change. For many sectors, climate action will involve making things more expensive and require unpopular policies that will not get anybody elected. It is an enormous challenge. A possible way to move forward is going case by case, but this requires time, which we do not have.

There is a lot to do. This responsibility should not only fall on the shoulders of those who are and have been part of it, but also the current and future generations. Young people are not only the future, more importantly they are the present.

*Ayah Abdouny, Lebanon*

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[1] COPs are organised in two zones; the inner Blue Zone and the outer Green Zone.

The inner Blue Zone is beyond the security cordon and only accredited officials, organisations and individuals were allowed into this area. Negotiations happen within the Blue Zone but each country or territory also had a pavilion where they showcased what they are doing on climate change.

In the outer Green Zone, organisations that can afford it and secure space will have their own "pavilion" to show what they are doing about climate change or get their message to a wider audience. This zone attracts lots of attention from those that can't get into the Blue Zone, particularly from the media and activists.

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Ayah established the Asia-Pacific Young Greens Network in 2020, and is currently the Co-Convenor of the Asia-Pacific Greens Federation. She co-founded the Lebanese Green Wave in 2021 as a response to the Lebanese ongoing crisis to create a platform that targets the youth to raise awareness and share the knowledge of experts about the feasible solutions to mitigate the national situation. She is based in West Beqaa, Lebanon.



Janmejai Tiwari is a young activist from India. He has been a part of climate justice movements in India for almost a decade. He has also been active with the young greens and youth movements at transnational level. He was the delegate head for the first Global Young Greens (GYG) COP delegation at COP 26. He has been associated with Global Young Greens and Asia Pacific Young Greens Network (APYGN) in different capacities. He is currently the Secretary of GYG. He based in Almora, Uttarakhand, Northern India.



Theresa Rose Sebastian is a climate and social justice activist. Her work began after her state of Kerala in India was severely impacted by torrential floods in 2018. With over 3 years experience in the climate justice movement, Theresa has co-founded youth organisation Re-Earth Initiative, organised campaigns and continues to promote her core values of empowerment, education and reform. Her love for justice, the land and the people guide her work. She is currently based in Cork, Ireland.



Tyrone works professionally as a Social Change Consultant, working to help movements grow and enable effective social change. An ardent climate activist, Tyrone has contributed to and featured in numerous articles about the climate crisis. Tyrone is also a member of the Green Party and was a political candidate in the 2019 UK General Election. He is currently based in Hackney, London.

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