

Barred from the Climate Conversation

Article by Serag Heiba

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Many of them have done the work, followed the rules, answered intrusive forms, paid expensive fees, and even gotten high-ranking officials to write supporting statements. Yet they will never walk the halls of climate conferences in Europe. Such is the visa regime barring many organisers from the Global South from participating in critical climate discussions. More than a missed opportunity for these would-be participants, Serag Heiba argues this pattern of exclusion bears costs to the legitimacy of global climate discourse.

When Kelo Uchendu prepared for this year's Bonn Climate Change Conference (SB56), it had been three years since his previous application for the German visa was rejected. At the time, he was the only African student selected from a cohort of engineers to attend a career-advancing programme in Dresden. That visa rejection was costly and devastating, but he did not remain idle.

He founded a climate justice organisation in his home country of Nigeria to advocate for clean air, began pursuing postgraduate studies and joined the organising team of Mock COP26. He would arrive in Bonn as the policy co-lead of the UNFCCC youth constituency knowing that his hard work has finally paid off.

Except, he never actually arrived. Before he could fly to Bonn his visa application was once again rejected by Germany. This time, it cost him three fully funded conferences (in addition to SB56, he was supposed to attend Africa Energy Summit and Youth Energy Summit in nearby Brussels), countless hours of preparation, and a meeting with the UNFCCC Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa.

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In the past few months, as thousands flocked to UN climate conferences in Europe, an alarming number of young climate leaders from the Global South have been excluded from attending the talks due to visa rejections. This is not just a recent phenomenon; it has been occurring for years without being addressed by the United Nations or its European member states.

I was awoken to the true scale of the problem when five Guinean youth reported being denied visas to attend the 2022 [UN Ocean Conference \(UNOC2022\)](#) in Lisbon, despite having official accreditation. This led me to inquire through several youth groups about

similar experiences, which opened a floodgate of messages.

No guarantees for Global South representatives

One Ugandan activist, who prefers to remain anonymous in fear that he will never be able to attend another conference, has already been denied the Schengen visa five times. His last two rejections arrived within a week of each other, preventing him from going to [Stockholm+50](#) and [SB56](#). He had secured full funding from the US- and UK-based sponsors to attend both. In September he is supposed to go to Frankfurt to deliver a talk at another conference, but has given up hope of obtaining a German visa. The last rejection sent him into a months-long depression and severely affected his organisation's work.

Oluwaseyi Moejoh, a National Geographic Young Explorer from Nigeria and 2022 recipient of the prestigious Diana Award for her environmental education initiative in eleven African countries, was unable to obtain a Portuguese visa to attend the UN Ocean Youth Innovation Forum this year. This was her third time missing out on such an opportunity due to visa constraints, and she is only 21 years old.

[Stockholm+50](#) was especially inaccessible to the Global South. In less than a week, I received more than two-dozen accounts of late and rejected visas (in addition to what was [already reported](#) online). Despite the usual UN promise that conference participants would have their visa applications prioritised and their fees waived (visa costs often amount to [several weeks of mean income](#) in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia), evidence has proved that this was not the case.

Tafadzwa Chando, program coordinator at Climate Live and a climate activist from Zimbabwe, applied for the Swedish visa in his home country but was given an appointment date set for after the conference. He then travelled to neighbouring Zambia and South Africa to apply there and was rejected both times, despite having (as all participants do) a direct invitation from the UN and official accreditation to join the conference.

A pattern of exclusion

Even before the rejection arrives, many of these young activists must go through immense hurdles to apply. If the embassy is not located in their own countries, they may need to travel to other countries first and apply there. While their applications are being processed, they do not have their passports and cannot travel back home. This leaves them stranded, victim to slow processing times and unresponsive embassies, racking up hundreds of dollars in hotel and travel expenses. Those whose applications were handled by third parties such as VFS report especially poor experiences and slow processing times.

A young ocean advocate from India who described the visa process as “excruciating” recounted how she broke down at the Portuguese consulate in Goa when a scheduling miscommunication (she never received an email the consulate claimed to have sent) threatened to delay the entire application process just days before UNOC2022. Her visa was finally issued less than 48 hours before she was supposed to travel, and came with verbal beratement from the visa officer. She counts herself lucky because, at the very least, she still got to attend the conference's Youth Innovation Forum and present her work before the UN Secretary-General (for which her team won the Innovathon grant).

Through what is being termed “visa discrimination”, Europe is blocking the Global South’s access to crucial environmental meetings.

For those less lucky, the process ends with rejection. Kelo was told they could not verify the authenticity of his supporting documents, while he claims they never tried to verify them – his funders were never contacted and his accreditation was never checked online. Then they told him there was ‘reasonable doubt’ he would not leave the country before his visa expired. “They looked at my age and nationality and assumed I was planning to illegally immigrate. That was an insult to me – I have dreams, I have aspirations, but none of that is to live in their country as an illegal immigrant.”

Another young activist was told his marriage status aroused suspicion. He is 25 and unmarried. Must one get married to be allowed into these international meetings?

There is a pattern to the accounts above and the numerous others like them. In each instance, a young climate leader from the Global South who has gone above and beyond to secure highly contested spots at UN conferences, who has worked for years to represent his or her community and advocate environmental action, and who has often gone to great lengths to secure external funding to afford travel, applies for a European visa and is rejected.

Ultimately, this is a problem that perpetuates climate injustice and jeopardises the legitimacy of global climate governance and discourse. For citizens of the Global South, visa discrimination is a fact of life. But when these discriminatory visa practices shape access to the highest levels of climate dialogue, it should be a matter of concern for everyone.

The cost of exclusion to COPs

Before COP26 came and went, failing to achieve its most important goals, many had warned that it would be the “whitest and most privileged [COP] ever”. Patricia Espinosa had forewarned that one of the keys to having a successful COP was ensuring that no voice or solution is left behind. Indeed, inclusivity and multilateralism are enshrined in the UNFCCC, and for good reason. Everyone has a role to play in achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement and preventing the most disastrous effects of climate change. Without equal representation from the Global South, where these effects will be most severely felt, there is no hope that just solutions will be found and met. Instead, the countries and corporations most responsible for the climate crisis and least affected by it have unfettered access to the negotiations and, subsequently, influence the outcomes.

It sends the message that young advocates from the Global South are not as deserving of their seats at the UN meetings as their Global North counterparts.

Beyond the negotiating table, effective climate mitigation and adaptation strategies will require North-South partnerships and on-the-ground action. It has been largely recognised in climate discourse that local, community-led projects are necessary components of a successful climate strategy. The voices that represent local communities engage with the UNFCCC as observers and civil society, and increasingly as youth. Young people around the world in vulnerable and frontline communities are leading organisations and mobilising more people around them. Yet, where it concerns youth, exclusionary visa practices affecting young activists from the Global South are another sign that youth engagement in the UNFCCC remains tokenistic and is not designed to be meaningful. While dozens of young climate leaders were being denied the Swedish visa, the [UNFCCC](#) touted on its page: “Youth firmly in the spotlight at Stockholm+50”. Despite the abundance of photo opportunities, little is done to leverage the tremendous mobilising force of youth and the positive potential they hold in their communities.

It also sends the message that young advocates from the Global South are not as deserving of their seats at the UN meetings as their Global North counterparts. This is felt not just through the rejection of visas, but the entire visa process. Particularly, many young Africans report facing a hostile attitude and being profiled – having to meet requirements not being asked of anyone else. How can Africa expect anything but to be left out and left behind when its activists and civil society are being denied their rightful seats in the conference rooms and at the negotiating tables in Europe?

A citizen of the Global North may decide at any moment to pack their bags and visit the Global South. Yet it seems that someone from the Global South, preparing months in advance and having full documentation, funding and an invitation from the United Nations, cannot guarantee their voice will reach the most important discussions shaping our collective future. Already, some young climate leaders from the Global South have decided not to attend any more Europe-based conferences, and will instead wait for events held outside Europe. If the UN and its European member states are to uphold the values of the UNFCCC, they must closely examine how these exclusionary visa practices are delegitimising global climate governance and institutionalising inequality.

With COP27 just around the corner, Egypt and the UN have another chance to demonstrate to the world that the UNFCCC is serious about inclusion. It is the first COP since 2017 to be held outside Europe, and that comes with many expectations. For one, the agenda of Africa and the developing world (e.g. climate finance and adaptation) is prioritised. For youth, COP27 is an opportunity to finally be recognised as equal stakeholders in the climate agenda, and to be meaningfully included in implementation and decision-making processes. However, access to the conference for many is once again uncertain. Although no visa issues have been reported thus far, concerns have been raised regarding [unaffordable accommodation prices](#) in Sharm El Sheikh, where a price floor has been implemented by Egypt’s tourism authority ahead of COP27 in November. Such a policy is unlikely to affect industry representatives and developed country delegates, but may prevent civil society and developing country negotiators from attending.

If the persistence of such structural exclusion continues to remain unaddressed, it may be time to recognise that the UNFCCC was not designed to be anything other than a party-driven process where nations are not held accountable, where inclusion remains a thinly-

veiled fantasy, and where national interests take precedence over global climate action.



Originally from Alexandria, Egypt, Serag Heiba has directed and engaged with various youth-led environmental organisations around the world. He is involved with the YOUNGO and RINGO constituencies of the UNFCCC, focusing on capacity-building and intergenerational collaboration. In 2021, Serag represented Egypt at the Pre-COP in Milan. Aside from writing on issues of climate, equity, and youth, Serag is pursuing a degree in Energy and Environmental Engineering at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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