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Did health make it into the COP26 conversation?

The groundWork team, a non-governmental organisation fighting for a carbon-free future and clean air, explain what happened in relation to human health at the 26th conference of the parties (COP26) in Glasgow.

In November 2021, on the streets of Glasgow, health workers joined the youth and other climate movements calling for change in the way the world works. The climate and health movement had its beginnings in Durban at the 17th conference of the parties (COP17) in 2011, where a small group of health professionals first got together to talk about it. A decade later, the movement arrived in Glasgow with a big splash, delivering an open letter signed by organisations representing 46 million health professionals. At the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a report on *The Health Argument for Climate Action*. Health activists cycled to Glasgow to deliver it.

What is COP?

The conference of the parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention. The Convention is the United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. All States (or countries) that are parties to the Convention are represented at the COP, where they review the implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments that the COP adopts and take decisions necessary to promote effective implementation of the Convention. The Paris Agreement mobilises the Parties to the Convention to take action to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and strive to keep the Earth's mean temperature below 1.5°C.

Addressing human health and climate change

The WHO report mentioned above showed that climate change is bad for your health. As Vanessa Nakate put it, you cannot adapt to starvation, and you cannot adapt to extinction. A hotter world spreads diseases like malaria to new areas and it is closely linked to another manifestation of the damage done to

“Our leaders are lost, and our world is damaged,” said Vanessa Nakate, an African youth leader from Uganda. What they don’t talk about is loss and damage. And loss and damage are happening now. People are drowning in floods, starving in droughts, dying in heatwaves and wildfires, even in the global North, but mostly in the global South. In Uganda, in Mozambique, in Madagascar, in Bangladesh, in the Caribbean, in the Philippines. “Who will pay for that?”

the Earth – the increasing threat of pandemics like Covid-19. No one is safe until everyone is safe.

Just as health workers have been on the front lines of the Covid-19 pandemic, they are also at the front lines of climate impacts. People suffering injuries, breathing difficulties, heat stroke and malnutrition visit clinics and hospitals. Air pollution from burning fossil fuels that are one of the main drivers of climate change already leads to millions of deaths globally every year.

Malnutrition is mostly caused by poverty and inequality. Lack of rainfall and drought leading to reduced crop yields or destroyed crops leads to food insecurity. In South Africa, about 25% of children are stunted because they do not eat sufficient and/or nutritious food.

While the healthcare and climate activists out on the streets of Glasgow during COP26 understood these threats, these messages did not reach the world leaders who were engaging with each other and with big business – very often the big business responsible for greenhouse gas emissions.

Did the talk change the walk after all for human health at COP26?

The short answer is: no. It did not. This is despite all the signatures and effort that went into side events and reports to raise the profile of the critical threat that climate change poses to human health and well-being around the world.


First, COP26 did not keep 1.5°C alive. The Paris Agreement is based on all countries making their own pledges, known as 'nationally determined contributions' to reduce emissions. Assuming they all keep their latest promises, and that high-income countries deliver promised climate finance, we are on track for 2.4°C. But measured by what countries are doing now, it will be more like 2.7°C to 3.6°C.

Second, after years of wrangling, the country's climate negotiators agreed to reintroduce carbon markets. Carbon markets allow polluters to continue emitting greenhouse gases, for a price. Under carbon market schemes, atmospheric space is seemingly bought and sold. This means that those with the money and power to do so (who are also the most responsible for causing climate change and should be taking the most significant action to cut their emissions at source) are able to continue with business as usual. Carbon markets exist mainly in two forms: cap-and-trade and carbon offsetting.

Moreover, they have allowed the use of carbon credits from the discredited markets created under the Kyoto Protocol. This opens a whole new world of cheating!

Another change is that countries can exchange emissions from burning fossil fuels, dug up from under the Earth, for carbon absorbed through planting trees or restoring the Earth – restoring forests, wetlands and grasslands that have been destroyed. This is called 'nature-based solutions'. Restoring the Earth is a very good idea. Done properly, it can compensate for some of the damage done to nature over recent centuries. Done badly, it will do even more damage, like replacing natural forests and grasslands with monocrop tree plantations. Either way, what it cannot compensate for is the additional fossil carbon pumped from below ground into the atmosphere.

What's next? The following COP will take place from 7 to 18 November 2022 in Egypt, Africa. COP27 will again have a strong health contingency arguing for states to take the climate change health threats seriously.

Article prepared by groundWork / Friends of the Earth South Africa . groundWork is an environmental justice non-government organisation based in Pietermaritzburg but working throughout South Africa.

Hi Hukuri 2021, nhlango wa mavandla (Conference of the Parties 'COP') wa vu 26, wu endleke eGlasgow. Varhangeri va matiko ku suka eka misava hinkwayo, va hlanganile ku ta vulavula hi rimba ra vun'we bya matiko (United Nations) mayelana na ku cinca ka ntshamelo-maxelo na ku hunguta matlakukelo ya maxelo. Vayimeri va swa rihanyo na vatirhi va swa rihanyo va helekete papilla leri ri nga sayiniwa hi 46 miliyoni ya vanhu va swa rihanyo lava nga le nawini, va tlhela va susumeta vangheneleri va COP leswaku va tlakusa profayili ya ntlimbo lowu nga kona wa ku cinca ka ntshamelo-maxelo hi tlhelo ro tisa ku cinca eka rihanyo ra vanhu, va tlhela va hanya kahle misava hinkwayo.

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COP26



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