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Theorizing Access in Global Environmental Governance: A Critical Analysis of COP26 and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Sites of global environmental governance (GEG), like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties (UNFCCC COP), are critical spaces where state and nonstate actors grapple with our planet's most pressing challenges. Failure to address the unequal impacts of the climate crisis has led scholars and decision makers to call for more transparent, inclusive, and accountable decision-making processes. However, the ever-increasing number and variety of participants has failed to translate into more equitable outcomes. How do institutional structures and relations of power at sites of GEG privilege certain actors and shape participant experiences? This article argues for a retheorization of access in GEG. Based on collaborative event ethnography at COP26, we find that discriminatory design, technological disparities, and recognitional injustice hamper meaningful sustained access, reify power disparities, and undermine inclusion. Integrating critical disability studies, we show how the COVID-19 pandemic drew into sharper focus the distinctions among inclusion, access, and accessibility that structure GEG and can offer lessons for addressing these inequities.

Keywords: Global environmental governance, collaborative ethnography, environmental justice, access, representation, critical disability studies

Over the past decade, broad calls for more transparent, inclusive, equitable, and accountable decision-making processes have shaped global environmental governance (GEG), especially the sites at which GEG agreements are produced, such as Conferences of Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC. Such calls are driven by historically underrepresented states and by communities and organizations that may not be represented by states at all and seek to "fill in" democratic gaps in representation (Dingwerth 2007; Dombrowski 2010). At COPs, uneven

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attendance across regions is a long-standing trend that mirrors the disproportionate effects of climate change: wealthy states, which have contributed more significantly to causing climate change, have more resources to attend climate summits than less wealthy nations and communities, which have contributed less but are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Allan 2020). Observer numbers have grown exponentially at recent COPs (McSweeney and Viisainen 2024), and a transparency reporting process has been mandated by the Paris Agreement (see assessments of this process by Ciplet et al. 2018; Gupta and van Asselt 2019). Efforts to make the UNFCCC COPs more transparent include webcasting mandated events and publishing participant lists (Blinova et al. 2024).

Despite the increasing attendance, diversity, and transparency efforts of recent COPs, many groups seeking representation continue to feel marginalized and excluded from the decision-making spaces that directly impact their lives (Aguilar Delgado and Perez-Aleman 2021; Pickering 2019; Schroeder et al. 2012). How have efforts toward broader participation at COPs addressed concerns around inclusion and representation? And, because climate change will likely increase the risk and severity of infectious disease (Baker et al. 2022), in which ways do global pandemics amplify, constrict, or create new forms of inclusion and exclusion at such sites?

To address these questions, we draw from our experiences at the twenty-sixth COP (COP26) of the UNFCCC, which was held in Glasgow, Scotland, from October 31 through November 12, 2021. Despite the risks from the global COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency of attending meaningfully to climate change threats and the importance of doing so in person drove high levels of attendance. At the same time, concerns about how participation might affect their communities limited whether and how some groups could access COP26 in the first place. Because of the unprecedented circumstances in which it took place, COP26 amplified challenges around inclusion and representation that are often neglected in global climate governance. In this article, we approach questions of inclusion and representation through the lens of critical disability studies, which argues that access is a power-laden concept that is shaped by politics and culture and is far from universal. Attempts to increase accessibility may potentially reinforce, rather than reduce, systems of ableism, exclusion, harm, and risk (Hamraie 2017). Such findings call into question how the systems of representation developed at COPs neglect to consider the risks that participants take to be able to shape GEG.

In this article, we ask, how does access shape the possibilities for representation in global environmental governance? Our research examines the unfolding of COP26 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which threw into sharp focus inequitable distributions of public health and the necropolitics—the power to dictate who dies—that support these inequitable distributions (on necropolitics and COVID-19, see Rouse 2021, building from Mbembe 2003). We explore not only who is granted access to sites of GEG but also how access

at COP26 ebbed and flowed to highlight the ways in which processes of representation construct, reinforce, or marginalize different participants. After describing the feminist collaborative event ethnography (CEE) methodology of our six-person team, we contextualize COP26 as a record-setting event occurring in a moment when, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we might expect organizers to be paying the most attention to differentiated embodied risks of participants. However, through our exploration of access from a critical disabilities framework, we find that access was repeatedly hampered by discriminatory design of the site, inequities of virtual technologies, and epistemic challenges of translation. Within each of these categories, we identify how material and procedural elements of COP26 constrained equitable access and how participants navigated these challenges to meaningfully engage despite limitations. We conclude by suggesting ways this reconceptualization of access can generate insight into addressing the multidimensional injustices embedded in GEG.

Approach and Methodology

To explore the politics of representation through questions of access at sites of GEG, we draw from a CEE of COP26. UNFCCC events can draw tens of thousands of participants over two weeks with concurrent events across multiple locations, posing logistical challenges for researchers (Brosius and Campbell 2010). These challenges are even more pronounced for scholars invested in studying how nontraditional and underrepresented actors influence GEG (Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019; Pickering 2019; Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020). CEE is a team-based approach developed to study megasites such as the COP (Campbell et al. 2014). This methodology not only provides leverage to cover multiple ongoing events and maximize empirical data collection but also generates rich theoretical insight as team members collaborate and reflect on shared analytical frameworks throughout the research process (Corson et al. 2014; MacKay and Levin 2015).

In particular, we employ feminist methodologies in undertaking CEE. This inherently collaborative research methodology entails methodological, ethical, and theoretical commitments to addressing power within the process of teaming, engaging in research, and communicating results (see Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020). This feminist approach is grounded in personal and group reflexivity, attention to embodied experiences of the site, communal care, and commitment to justice-oriented research (Caretta and Riaño 2016; Fonow and Cook 2005; NagyHesse-Biber 2012; Sultana 2021; Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020). This approach “can reveal how team members and participants experience power, capture the micro-dynamics of governance processes, and uncover how groups and Peoples who are considered least likely to have power in international politics can cultivate influence to make progress towards their broader objectives” (Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020, 967).

Our COP26 team included members with backgrounds in political science, chemical engineering, environmental policy, and feminist political ecology. The diverse disciplinary training and backgrounds of our research team shaped our analyses and our experience of the space: what jargon was legible and what forms of power were visible. Part of an ongoing project of multiple CEE teams, *Presence2Influence* examines how marginalized and underrepresented groups most affected by environmental change—particularly Indigenous Peoples and women—influence global governance processes that impact their lives. For this research trip, four team members traveled to Glasgow to attend COP26 from October 31 through November 13, 2021, with the two project leads providing daily support remotely. Before travel, team leads oriented new members to the CEE methodology and project goals.

All on-site team members had badges to enter the COP26 “Blue Zone,” the restricted space where formal negotiations and side events occurred. Three team members had Blue Zone access for the full two weeks of the COP; the fourth had access to the Blue Zone in week 2, spending the first week in the “Green Zone,” a space open to the public, and at protests and other activities planned in tandem with but outside of the official venues, such as the fifth international Rights of Nature Tribunal. All but one of our on-site group members were attending their first UNFCCC COP. Each day, we made collective decisions about which events individual team members would attend related to the broad mandate of the project. Although we had created lists of events and organizations, last-minute changes to event schedules were common, requiring flexibility, attention to multiple sources of information, and constant communication among on-site group members. Combined, we attended more than 120 events in person.

At each event, we compiled detailed ethnographic notes, made recordings where permitted, took photographs, and drew maps and spatial bibliographies (Kuschnir 2016). We also conducted four formal interviews with five members of the Indigenous Caucus and those organizing the Indigenous Peoples (IP) Pavilion, in addition to myriad informal conversations. We held hybrid daily team meetings with the off-site researchers following negotiations virtually. After the conclusion of the COP26 meeting proceedings, individual team members cleaned and compiled all our data, including event notes, photographs, recordings, and supplemental materials into a shared project folder. From this shared corpus, we iteratively worked together to code themes identified by past team members and explore new themes emerging across our data.

All on-site researchers were fully vaccinated. We followed required COVID-19 protocols inside and outside of the venues—including constant masking, daily testing, and (where possible) social distancing. Throughout the conference, none of us tested positive for COVID-19. One team member has a mobility-impairing chronic illness and is immunosuppressed. Participating in COP with this disability shaped our collective understanding of the embodied challenges of participation. Our experience was also mediated by our position

as white and non-Indigenous researchers with accreditation from US universities with widespread name recognition. Our access to the site was facilitated by institutional resources, and our presence contributed to the overrepresentation of Western organizations, as detailed later in this text.

COP26 Context: A Record-Breaking COP amid COVID-19

By some metrics, COP26 was incredibly “inclusive.” Compared with the previous UNFCCC COP, more than 500 additional NGOs were admitted as observer organizations, totaling some 2,000 more observer attendees than COP25, the second largest number of observers, behind the 2015 COP21 in Paris. However, nearly 70 percent of those observer organizations were NGOs located in western Europe and North America.¹ The UNFCCC staff has acknowledged this problem, and following COP26, the secretariat began a “holistic review process of observer engagement in UNFCCC process” (UN Climate Change Secretariat, n.d., 1).² While UNFCCC COP participation continued to grow in the two subsequent COPs, COP26 marked a turning point where the salience of long-standing inequities in participation prompted institutional reflection.

At COP26, the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely exposed the risk and uncertainty landscapes that participants must navigate to attend all COPs. Access to these sites is premised on corporeal dimensions often driven by forces outside the COP, including unevenly distributed health risks and financial resources. Attending COP26 required individuals to tolerate certain levels of risk, regardless of differentiated vulnerabilities. Although not required for entry into the UK or COP26, the UK “strongly encouraged” vaccination. Potential participants from more industrialized countries had greater access to vaccines, while those from less developed countries and traditionally marginalized groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, had inconsistent access. The UK claimed that it “offered COVID-19 vaccines to all registered COP26 participants who were unable to access them through other means” (UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021). Activists at the People’s Summit for Climate Justice contested this assertion, with one speaker representing the Most Affected People and Areas, or MAPA,³ stating, “The UN told us they are going to give us vaccines, but it

1. UNFCCC, “Statistics: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,” 2022, available at: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/statistics#eq-2>, last accessed February 20, 2026.
2. The review found, in part, that the previous system of awarding badges to organizations that had consistently used them privileged those with a longer history of engagement and resources to attend. At COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, the UNFCCC significantly cut observer badges for groups from the overrepresented WEOG (Western European and Others Group) constituency to include more organizations and attendees from the Global South (see Civillini and Lo 2024).
3. MAPA is a term used instead of the *Global South* to describe communities and marginalized groups that have been historically exploited and, though contributing the least to climate change, will be among the first to experience some of its worst impacts.

was a fake promise.” Referred to by activists as “vaccine apartheid,” the effects of differentiated access to vaccines dramatically affected representation at COP26.

Even if able to access vaccines, potential participants still had to assess their vulnerability based on highly individualized contexts that, for many, presented an impossible choice: attend COP26 and risk contracting and bringing COVID-19 home, or stay away and risk being left behind in the climate negotiations. As one Indigenous delegate told us, “A lot of Indigenous People are actually afraid to go to COP, afraid that they will carry the virus back to their communities. . . . There are a lot of Indigenous peoples that would love to be here but [are] afraid to travel to Glasgow.” Another Indigenous participant noted, “I shouldn’t be here. . . . Many of my Indigenous relations, leaders, from the Pacific are not here, mostly because they are afraid of carrying the COVID-19 virus back to the islands.”

The UK had distinct entry requirements based on participants’ points of departure and travel in certain countries and regions. By October 11, 2021, the UK government listed fifty-one countries and three regions on a “red list” (Bowden 2021), some 89 percent of which were in the Global South (see Supplementary Appendix Table 2).⁴ Travelers who had been in “red list” areas within ten days of UK entry were required to make arrangements for a five-day stay at a “Managed Quarantine Service (MQS) hotel” if vaccinated, or ten days if unvaccinated.⁵ Although organizers removed countries from the red list in the weeks and days leading up to COP26, most participants had already made decisions about attending, including costly travel and accommodation arrangements.⁶ Lodging in Glasgow and other travel costs were especially significant burdens during what was not only a health but also an economic crisis for many. These expenses could more than double for participants from red list countries who had lengthy quarantine requirements or for those who contracted COVID-19 and could not return immediately to their home countries.

On-site, the UNFCCC Secretariat, COP26 president, and UK government developed strict protocols for quarantining and testing. Upon checking in at COP26, participants were provided rapid test kits and were required to self-administer nasal swab tests and upload results to the National Health Service

4. Based on the current list of Global South countries as defined by the UN. See FCSSC, “Global South Countries (Group of 77 and China),” available at: https://www.fc-ssc.org/en/partnership_program/south_south_countries, last accessed February 20, 2026.

5. UNFCCC, “Planning Your Journey to UNFCCC COP26 FAQs,” September 2021, available at: <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/FAQs-Planning-your-Journey-to-COP26.pdf>, last accessed February 20, 2026.

6. For instance, as of October 11 (approximately three weeks before the start of COP26), forty-seven of the red list areas were removed from the list, leaving only Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic (100% Global South countries), but on October 28, it was announced that these remaining countries would also be removed from the red list as of November 1 (after the start of COP26). UNFCCC, “COP26 Guide to Managed Quarantine,” October 28, 2021, available at: <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/COP26-Guide-to-Managed-Quarantine-1.pdf>, last accessed October 19, 2022.

(NHS) via a smartphone daily. Some who contracted COVID-19 participated virtually, while others were too sick to participate at all.

Reconceptualizing GEG Access Through Critical Disability Studies

Questions of access, particularly for marginalized groups, to lands, forests, water, biodiversity, and other natural resources have long interested scholars of environmental justice and environmental governance. Ribot and Peluso (2003, 153) define access as “the ability to benefit from things—including material objects, persons, institutions, and symbols.” Their argument importantly challenged the notion that rights alone are sufficient to convey benefits. Although Ribot and Peluso carefully unpack what constitutes the *ability* to benefit from resources, their framework “stops short of exploring how the ‘thing’ itself affects access” (Myers and Hansen 2020, 9). When studying access to resources, the “things” are generally concrete and well understood. However, when studying governance sites, the “thing” may be harder to capture. What objects, persons, institutions, symbols, or other things impact access in GEG?

In their analysis of access and allocation in earth system governance, Gupta and Lebel (2010, 379) define access as “the ability of individuals to secure a basic minimum of resources and ecospace.”⁷ This focus on the material dimensions of access was later expanded to additionally include “participation in decision-making arenas where different views can be expressed, and to functional systems of accountability” (Lima and Gupta 2013, 48–49). In their analysis of nonstate actors’ inclusion in GEG, Aguilar Delgado and Perez-Aleman (2021, 3) describe access as “who participates in the decision-making process, who is selected, and who is an eligible participant.” They argue that more inclusion in decision-making processes requires sustained access to key spaces and that being there alone is not enough: Access is a precondition for inclusion. What engenders and precludes this sustained access?

Based on our ethnographic research, we find that the multiple dimensions of access—the material, procedural, and relational—are mutually constituted. However, we suggest that relying on “ability” to define access risks obscuring the myriad social, economic, and political forces that construct who is “able” to benefit. To address this tautological problem, we suggest that critical disability studies can offer unique analytical leverage to interrogate the construction of access. Disability studies scholar Sami Schalk (2017, 2) defines (dis)ability as a “socially constructed system of norms which categorizes and values bodyminds⁸ based on concepts of ability and disability.” And while definitions of access are

7. In their work, “ecospace” is a concept that refers to the total resources available for use or the total sink available for waste disposal (378n1).

8. Schalk’s definition builds on Margaret Price’s (2015, 271) articulation of bodymind as “a sociopolitically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience.”

often grounded in physical design, it “can suggest a much broader set of meanings linked to a more inclusive society with greater opportunities for social and political participation” (Williamson 2015, 14).

Critical disability studies “attends to how the discrepancies between actual bodies and expected bodies are characterized within particular cultural contexts” (Garland-Thomson 2013, 917). In other words, it examines the explicit and implicit expectations of built environments and social norms and the ways in which real people challenge those norms. In particular, we take up the call of disability studies as *methodology*, which “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations” (Minich 2016, 3). Within the broader category of disability studies, critical disability studies aligns with explicitly feminist and queer approaches, namely, “crip theory,” which expand the category of disability beyond those traditionally labeled as disabled and propose analytical and activist frameworks relevant for understanding many overlapping systems of power, privilege, and exclusion (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006). This work is not merely additive, piling disability onto a laundry list of other identities, but rather asks scholars to “improve our understanding of intersecting and mutually constitutive oppressions” (Schalk and Kim 2020, 37), particularly by centering feminist of color narratives.

Critical disability studies offers global environmental governance a framework for interrogating who is privileged in the material and social construction of sites of GEG and how marginalized and nonnormative people relate to and challenge the construction of these sites. The COVID-19 pandemic represented an acute moment of heightened attention to corporeal concerns and the prevention of illness. During our time at COP26, we repeatedly experienced and witnessed discrepancies between expectations of real bodyminds and those existing in the site itself. For our purposes, we combine GEG and critical disabilities scholarship to define access as *the power, opportunity, or permission to come into contact with resources and decision-making*. In our analysis, we expand beyond sites of decision-making and conceptualize influence as changes in representation—the acts of and processes for making something visible (see Table 1).⁹ Centering access focuses analytical attention on the constellation of power relations at sites of GEG to facilitate exploration of how the practices and processes of representation construct, reinforce, and/or marginalize presence and influence.

9. This definition builds on that of Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti (2019), which draws on critical feminist theory to suggest that visibility captures recuperative, regenerative, and agentive practices that make plural representation and presence possible at sites of GEG and that demand attentiveness to these nondominant forms of knowledges, practices, and lifeways. However, we are not using *visibility* as a synonym for the scientific dominance of “vision” or to reinforce what Haraway (1988, 581) calls the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere.”

Table 1
Conceptualizing Access

Concept	Definition
Access	The power, opportunity, or permission to come into contact with resources and decision-making (developed from Aguilar Delgado and Perez-Aleman 2021; Lima and Gupta 2013; Williamson 2015)
Influence	How actors transform representation (Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019; Witter et al. 2015)
Representation	Acts and processes for making something visible (Pitkin 1967)
Inclusion	Acts and processes that ensure equal access, particularly of historically marginalized peoples
Power	Dynamic and plural constitutions of agency, structures, and relations (Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019, 42)

Encounters with Access at COP26

Through our analysis, we have identified three primary barriers to access that hampered actors’ full participation at COP26: discriminatory design of the physical space, techno-inequality for virtual participation, and recognitional injustices of translation. For each barrier, we outline its overlapping material, procedural, and relational dimensions. *Material* refers to the construction of COP26’s built spaces; *procedural* relates to UNFCCC and host country rules governing the area; *relational* concerns the ways in which participants followed, adapted to, or challenged these material and procedural structures. Using a critical disabilities framework, we consider the design of physical spaces and how participants worked within these limitations.

Access and Discriminatory Design

UNFCCC COPs are split into two primary “zones”: the credentialed Blue Zone and the public-facing Green Zone. The Blue Zone holds official negotiations, large-format plenary sessions, press conference rooms, and private office spaces, in addition to pavilions where parties and organizations host side events. All attendees in the Blue Zone must have an official status through the UNFCCC and be approved for a party, media, secretariat, or observer (NGO or IGO) badge. Whereas the UNFCCC has a variety of standards that guide the COP Presidency’s organization of the Blue Zone, the host country generally has more leeway to arrange the Green Zone, and domestic and international organizations can typically apply to host events in this space. Accessing these spaces requires extensive institutional knowledge about COPs and the UNFCCC, its rules, procedures, design, and logistics. Discriminatory design (Benjamin

2019) shapes participants' access to the venues, as well as their experience navigating within, around, and between the venues.

Material: Navigating Disparate Access into and Between Zones

COP26 was held in and around the multiple buildings of the Scottish Event Campus in Glasgow along either side of the River Clyde. Throughout the meeting, UNFCCC organizers strictly enforced capacity limits. Even though there were 40,000 registered attendees with Blue Zone access, daily attendance in the Blue Zone was held at 10,000 due to COVID-19 measures, including social distancing.¹⁰ Attendees with smartphones received push notifications via the UNFCCC app when attendance was nearing capacity, often in the late morning or early afternoon. Particularly in the initial days of the conference, the line for entry far exceeded the crowd control stanchions, with people milling about and moving erratically forward. Social distancing was not possible (see Figure 1) or enforced by organizers outside the venue. Many attendees without priority access—that is, participants who were not party¹¹ members or special guests—waited over an hour outside, often in rain or cold weather.

At COP26, no prior clearance or badge was necessary to visit the Green Zone.¹² However, tiers of convenience determined the ease of entering. Online, free tickets for many scheduled events sold out days early, though in person, it often proved possible to walk in. The Green Zone was a ten- to fifteen-minute bus ride or a twenty- to thirty-minute walk from the Blue Zone, creating the sense of distinct events. Participants with a party badge could use a bridge connecting the two sites (see Figure 2). Once at the Green Zone, possession of a Blue Zone badge allowed participants to use a separate, faster security screening than public attendees.

Having access to the Green or Blue Zone tangibly impacts how individuals and groups influence GEG. At COP26, for the first time, the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) had a pavilion in the Blue Zone—the IP Pavilion. The Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPO) group was recognized as a formal constituency by the UNFCCC in 2001. Since COP20 in 2014, an IP Pavilion had been in the Green Zone. The 2021 shift to the Blue Zone was both symbolically significant and practically beneficial. Being in the same venue where recognized parties hold events and meetings meant that Indigenous leaders and negotiators did not have to trek back and forth between the Green and Blue Zone each day, navigating multiple security points. Much of the on-site work of the IIPFCC involved daily lobbying efforts to ensure that

10. "Additional Information on COVID-19 Protection Measures at COP26," 2021, available at: <https://unfccc.int/cop26/COVID-19-protection-measures#eq-1>, last accessed March 28, 2022.

11. *Party* refers to parties to treaties under the UNFCCC, including the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. There are currently 198 parties to the Paris Agreement; 197 are states, plus the EU. *Party members* refers to official delegates representing the parties at the meeting. Special guests may include well-known politicians or celebrities attending an event or day of the COP.

12. In contrast, at subsequent UNFCCC COP meetings in Sharm El-Sheikh, Dubai, and Baku, attendance in the Green Zone did require prior registration.



Figure 1

Line Outside the Blue Zone on the First Official Day of COP26

Photo taken after outside security checkpoint, checking self-reported negative COVID-19 confirmation from NHS and badge information. Note no social distancing or organization for the line to flow safely into the building (white tents and dome in the photo's center background). No photos were allowed in building security, but inside, there was no social distancing despite floor stickers and signs encouraging the practice. Source: Author, November 1, 2021.

certain provisions—for example, keeping references to “human rights” in the preamble language—were reflected in the outcome text.

Procedural: Accessing Negotiation Rooms—Tickets, Cards, and Badges

Capacity of and prioritization of access to negotiation rooms has long been an issue of transparency at UNFCCC meetings. Official negotiations are spaces for party delegates to negotiate on various items of the treaty according to the event's agenda. Under the UNFCCC, official observers and members of the media are occasionally allowed into negotiations, but any party can request to “close” a meeting at any time, limiting transparency. This frequently happens during the second week of the COP, when time is “running out” to reach formal decisions. Observers affiliated with official NGO constituency groups, including the IPO, are not considered party delegates. This means that Indigenous participants cannot access all negotiations unless a UNFCCC party offers them a party



Figure 2
COP26 Event Site

The Blue Zone is located north of the river, marked in blue; the public-facing Green Zone is located south of the river, marked in green. The pink line shows the walking bridge available to party delegates; the yellow line shows the approximate walking path between zones from one security checkpoint to another. Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-59089946>, last accessed April 2, 2022. Annotations are by the authors.

badge. Without party status, following a specific issue throughout the full negotiation process was practically impossible.

Due to the UNFCCC social distancing policies, negotiation spaces in the Blue Zone were limited to 50 percent of each room's capacity. Priority was given to recognized party delegates, then party overflow, then official observers, and then media (if open to media). The UNFCCC organized a ticketing system for attendees to Blue Zone events anticipated to be of high interest. On the first day, attendees from observer organizations had to contact their constituency focal points if interested in a ticket. Each of the nine constituencies had two tickets for each of the two plenary rooms for the entire day. In other words, there were eighteen tickets for nearly 4,000 organizations per plenary room each day. For example, IPO was a relatively small constituency representing less than 3 percent of COP26 observers with some 300 individuals.¹³ All shared access to four tickets for plenary events, generally about six meetings in a day. Although tickets

13. UNFCCC, "Statistics: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change," 2022, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/statistics#eq-2>.

could change hands, finding people and exchanging laminated tickets the size of a playing card proved complicated at a sprawling site with up to 10,000 daily attendees.

The two observers per constituency rule also applied to smaller negotiation rooms where participants debated the actual text of the treaty, but continuous miscommunication among event organizers meant that despite UNFCCC official guidance, security officers repeatedly limited observer entry. A lack of clarity led to accusations that it was the “poorest planned” COP in history (Friedman 2021). While only party officials could speak in some meetings, in others, constituencies may be asked for comment: a clearly impossible situation if none were permitted entry. Participation requires access.

Relational: Taking and Making Space in the Blue Zone

After arriving through security, it took about twenty minutes for our team to walk from the entrance to the plenary halls (see Figure 3, area E) or the negotiation rooms (area F). None of us use mobility devices. During COP, each on-site team member walked an average of five miles a day. The pavilions where many side events were held (area D) were closer, but many of the pavilions in this hall had second stories accessible only by stairs or first floors designed with a step up from the ground level with no ramp. This event’s discriminatory design drew international attention when Israel’s energy minister missed an entire day of the conference due to a lack of infrastructure to enable wheelchair entry (Dutton 2021). In an informal conversation, one member of the

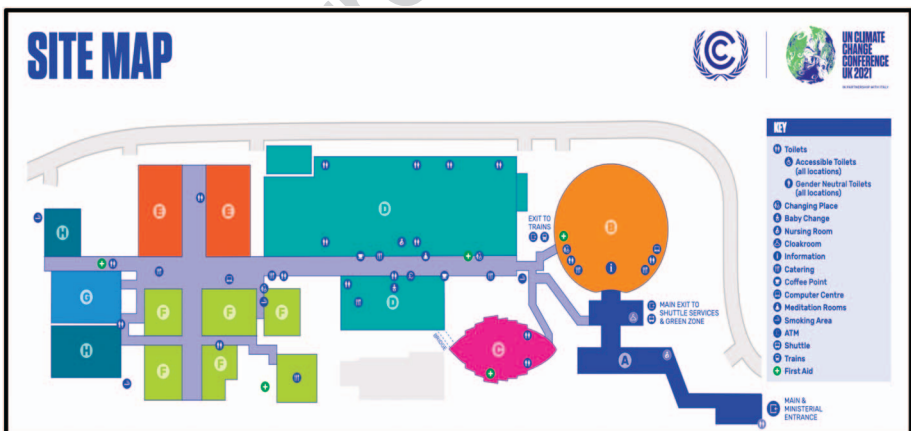


Figure 3
COP26 Blue Zone

Source: https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/COP26_Event-Map_A1_V12.pdf, last accessed February 20, 2026.

Disability Caucus claimed that the UK government could not officially access the conference space until a week before COP, so they were unable to do a field visit and set up accessibility measures. The IP Pavilion hosted the first official side event at any COP that centered people with disabilities. Speakers emphasized the need to facilitate full participation of people with disabilities in GEG. The pavilion offered one of the only wheelchair-accessible ramps among the pavilions.

Inside the Blue Zone, many decisions organizers made to ostensibly protect people from COVID-19, in practice, made the space less accessible. Calls for social distancing translated into a lack of seating. At one point during the first week, members of our team were seated on the floor in a secluded corner because we could not find anywhere else to meet. A security officer approached us and told us to leave the area. Whether in the dining areas, hallways, or designated gathering spaces, we witnessed several similar instances of groups trying unsuccessfully to find space to sit and gather. Some were reprimanded by on-site security for moving chairs to accommodate needs. Several constituencies offered reservable office space; however, to utilize this required multiple layers of institutional expertise and resources: knowing their constituency group, communicating with a responsive lead, and navigating the maze-like structure of offices to find their correct constituency space. Many did not have this luxury, highlighting how abstract institutional knowledge impacts embodied experiences of access. Spatial constraints described as COVID-19 precautions also limited how groups could engage in community-building activities. In informal conversation, a representative of an Indigenous advocacy group remarked that smudging, a ceremony practiced in many Indigenous cultures, was not permitted indoors at COP26. No outdoor areas—besides a smoking area between areas C and D shown in Figure 3—had been designated for gathering.

Digital Access and Techno-Inequality

Given the myriad challenges of in-person participation, could virtual access offer a solution?

Increasing use of digital and hybrid technologies is changing the practice of international diplomacy and governance (see Eggeling and Adler-Nissen 2021). In March 2021, the UNFCCC announced that it was developing digital platforms in partnership with the UN International Computing Centre to launch before COP26, citing COVID-19 as well as the long-term need to reduce emissions. Since its release, digital platforms have been used at all subsequent annual COP meetings. From 2022 to 2024, an average of 3 percent of COP participants have been virtual (analysis of data from McSweeney and Viisainen 2024). The virtual platform, combined with video conferencing and other virtual technologies, created new modes of engagement and participation. But their use also reveals existing inequities within the construction of sites of GEG, especially for historically marginalized actors.

Material Costs of Virtual Access

The digital tools of COP26, like the UNFCCC application, assumed all participants had access to a smartphone, apps, push notifications, and data plans. At COP26, issues with technology were sometimes inconvenient and other times rendered participation impossible. For example, at the beginning of the second week, Egypt threatened to exit a negotiation session because a lead African Group of Negotiators representative was absent due to COVID-19 and unable to attend virtually. In a side event at the IP Pavilion, several participants from communities in Africa were unable to fully share their experiences and contributions to a report on Traditional ecological knowledge due to unstable Internet connections. GEG organizers assume reliable, speedy, and affordable access to Internet-connected devices for in-person and remote participants.

Procedural Limitations of One-Way Engagement

Participants may attend climate summits not only to influence formal negotiations but also to gain unique access to decision makers, learn from others around the globe, and gain a wider audience for their messages (Craft et al. 2021). A panelist joining an event via web conference experiences only the final type of engagement, while missing other benefits of participation. During one side event about Local Communities in the Green Zone, all but one of the in-person presenters were white, and all the presenters joining via Zoom were Black and Brown people. Whereas in-person presenters and audience members chatted in the hallways and walked to other meetings together, virtual presenters' interactions were unidirectional and limited. At another large event in the media-centered "Global Action Zone," in the Blue Zone, a young activist and researcher joined virtually while all panelists were in person. In contrast to the more liberal mainstream goals of other presenters, the youth delegate specifically called out politicians for continuing "to bet on the same system of neoliberal capitalism" and called for "radical and systemic change" rather than greenwashing. Without this hybrid option, this perspective may not have been represented at all. However, the virtual structure prevented in-person dialogue and solidarity building after the event. In a high-level session during the final days, a representative from the disability caucus gave a statement via video conferencing software, highlighting how people with disabilities are considered acceptable losses and are literally left behind in the COVID-19 and climate crises alike. The video, like most we saw throughout the two weeks of COP26, did not have closed captioning.

Relational: Bringing in the Community

Virtual and live-broadcasted events also changed the audience for meetings and events. Event audiences were no longer confined to people in the room who had overcome the barriers to accessing the physical space. Indigenous organizers and presenters routinely referenced and called on community members watching at home. During the opening of the IP Pavilion, the moderator and others

explicitly spoke to those beyond the room, concluding by stating, “To all Indigenous youth watching back home, you can be here too.” Most IP Pavilion events were streamed virtually with translations and closed captioning. While it is outside the scope of this article to determine the effects of this change of audience participation, we do find anecdotal evidence that witnessing resonant messages can meaningfully influence future involvement in COP events. One young Indigenous woman recalled seeing a “Land Back” sign during news coverage of the 2019 COP25 in Madrid, prompting reflection on her grandmother who had been trafficked in Madrid and encouraging her to attend COP26 in person.

Access and Recognition: Epistemic and Ontological Violence of Translation and Legibility

Some forms of translation are available in certain UNFCCC spaces, but translations do not inherently make content accessible. Even when available, live translations typically operate unidirectionally (from the speaker to audience). Nondominant ontologies, including Indigenous, Local, or Traditional worldviews, may be diluted or not translated at all in these contexts. When and how translations are available reveal implicit norms and power dynamics across event spaces.

Material: The Costs of Translation

In the main plenary rooms, attendees could collect headsets to hear synchronous interpretation in the UN languages. In other events, interpretation was available only if arranged by the event organizer. Simultaneous translation requires resources—money and space—a challenge for event organizers operating with limited access to both, as described by a volunteer organizing events at the IP Pavilion. None of our team members saw interpreters or translation headsets in any of the negotiating rooms, nor did we witness closed captioning or sign language interpreters in formal negotiation spaces.

English is not only the default language of UNFCCC events but it is also a highly specialized, technical, and jargon-filled language. Multiple participants drew attention to the need for greater transparency and translation to make the negotiations more legible to those outside the formal COP spaces. One Indigenous leader urged COP26 participants to get out of their bubble: “If communities can’t understand the language we are speaking, we need to figure out what language they’re speaking.” In an NGO-sponsored event discussing Indigenous consultations for UNFCCC bodies, an Indigenous participant in the audience shared that formal documents need to be understandable to the people in his community, stating, “We have a right to agree or not to agree, but we cannot agree to something we cannot understand.”

Procedural: Assumptions of English

English has become the lingua franca of UNFCCC event spaces, despite the recognition of Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish as official UN

languages. Before one side event hosted by a South American conservation organization, a panelist asked the organizer if the event would be in English and was told, "Yes, of course." In another event, the panelists all spoke in Spanish, but when audience members began asking questions in English, they all had to put on headsets to hear the question translated, jokingly requesting an English class. But acknowledging the dominance of English does not belie acceptance of the epistemic and ontological violence this dominance entails. A co-chair of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) described her struggle to convince an Indigenous leader to attend COP26 in person. Despite attending and participating in multiple panels, he felt disrespected at COP because he does not speak English: "You can never ensure that non-English speakers will have positive interactions here," the co-chair reflected. Although the UNFCCC gestures to the inclusion of other languages, the default assumption of English fluency throughout Blue and Green Zone spaces devalues other linguistic communities and, by extension, diverse worldviews and epistemologies.

Relational: Impromptu Translating and Stopping Time

At one event without translation, a member of the audience yelled in English, "We don't all speak Spanish! Do you have a translator?" when an Indigenous person began sharing their experience. After some commotion, a member of the audience volunteered to provide an impromptu translation. The next day, one of our team members spoke with the man who had stepped in to translate. After expressing dismay at what our team member perceived as a rude interruption, she was surprised to hear the impromptu interpreter say he was glad the audience member had yelled for translation. In his view, if it had not been translated into English, many would not have heard the message. He emphasized that it is in Indigenous Peoples' best interest to reach as many people as possible. His instrumental response illustrates how actors familiar with the UNFCCC system know how to navigate it despite its inequities.

Time pressures of the event also constrained consensus-based decision-making and storytelling, particularly in the final days of the event as time to "reach a deal" approached. During an LCIPP stakeholder meeting, the moderators were running out of time owing to technical issues. A Ponca Tribal Member speaking against attempts in Article 6 to make wind a commodity stopped her testimony to address the moderators who were conferring with each other on the dais, asking, "Excuse me, am I interfering with what you're saying up there? I had the courtesy to listen to you all. I was sent here by a People and a Nation of Turtle Island. It seems as if you have other things on your mind." She then crossed her arms and stopped speaking. In another conversation, two Indigenous leaders described how pressure to come to an agreement reduced party delegations' willingness to talk with Indigenous representatives. UNFCCC COPs can be unique moments for individuals to have access to state officials and sources of power that are otherwise hard to reach. However, the sites can also

institutionalize certain forms of speech giving, while constraining traditional and relational modes of communication.

Synthesis

By exploring how the practices and processes of representation construct, reinforce, or challenge marginalized presence and influence, our analysis demonstrates how access itself becomes a core mode of representation. Specifically, our analysis demonstrates how discriminatory design, techno-inequality, and recognitional injustices work as a politics of access to undermine inclusion by privileging certain constellations of power relations over others.

Hosting a global event in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic is no simple task, and the UNFCCC Secretariat and COP26 Presidency developed a host of procedures to limit the spread of COVID-19 and create what organizers heralded as the most inclusive COP to date. Daily testing, required masking, and controlled entry to spaces offered more protections for individual participants than subsequent COP meetings. However, our analysis of the lived dimensions of the COP26 illuminates how these inclusive aspirations can still fall short when interacting with the complex material, procedural, and relational dynamics that shape actors' differentiated access to a singular site of GEG. Integrating critical disability studies frameworks to examine the unfolding praxis at GEG, we suggest that environmental justice approaches to global governance, and thus questions of access and risk, would benefit from deepening their approach moving forward through attentiveness to material, institutional, and relational change. "A focus on access is a shift away from attempts to fix or cure disability on an individual level, and toward an emphasis on social or legal interventions. Access implies social potential not dependent on correcting the disabled body, but instead made possible through institutional and material change" (Williamson 2015, 16). Attention to the disparities between stated goals and lived experience helps us understand the structural roots of inequities in GEG.

Once at COP26, exposure to the same hazard could pose vastly different risks depending on an actor's position in constellations of power. If a member of a large delegation got COVID, others could fill in and proceed largely uninterrupted, whereas for smaller delegations or organizations, losing one person could mean a group's interests were not represented at all. Representation hinges on visibility, so when differentiated forms of access shrink or expand actors' social spaces, the same physical environment can be experienced as completely different events. Barriers to access were constructed by constantly changing rules and regulations that required exhaustive institutional knowledge and bureaucratic hypervigilance to participate and exert influence.

Official access to space within distinct spaces like the Green or Blue Zone tangibly impacts how individuals and groups transform representation to influence GEG. The discriminatory design of COP26 made participation physically,

mentally, and logistically taxing, especially for actors with fewer resources and those embedded in communities for whom COVID-19 exposure was an acute risk. Although virtual technologies can expand the reach of certain marginalized voices, our analysis shows that online presenters and audience members alike miss out on the benefits of attending in person. We suggest that the benefits of presenting virtually may be more unidirectional and extractive than in-person participation, as virtual presenters provide information and/or legitimacy but receive limited opportunities in return. Virtual spaces offer new opportunities for connection but cannot replace other types of access, even when framed as if they could. Finally, marginalized actors had to work in creative and agential ways to make voices heard against the epistemic dominance of jargon-filled English. Layers of translation result in a loss of meaning and diverse worldviews. Knowledge sharing depends on holders' ability to present in a way that will be recognized by their audience. These interrelated and overlapping challenges to access did not silence marginalized voices, but as scholarly and policy conversations continue to work toward creating more equitable and inclusive GEG, access cannot be just another buzzword. The stakes of access becoming what Sara Ahmed (2006, 105) refers to as a "nonperformative"—a speech act that succeeds by failing to bring about what it claims to be doing—are too high.

Conclusions

As critical disability scholars have articulated, identifying the material, institutional, and relational forms of displacement experienced by disabled bodies can help us not only identify shortcomings but also attune to the "vibrant possibilities of refusing that displacement" (Kafer 2009). In other words, this article has explored what we might learn by turning our attention to the forms of risk and relationality generated in the face of material and procedural structures built to privilege some bodyminds over others. COP26 took place in a particular moment of heightened awareness and vigilance over the embodied perils of bringing tens of thousands of people together in the midst of a global pandemic. It was touted as the most inclusive COP ever, further supporting transparent and good governance norms. However, our analysis shows that this was far from the case. At the same time, we also find that despite increased risks, so-called marginalized participants engaged at COP26 and continued to make efforts to circumvent and work around systems of inaccessibility. Writing in the first months of COVID-19, Judith Butler (2020) suggested that "persistence in a condition of vulnerability proves to be its own kind of strength, distinguished from one that champions strength as the achievement of invulnerability." At the same time, we take seriously Erevelles' (2011) materialist caution against an ahistorical romanticization of disability and its transgressive potential.

Despite occurring during a global pandemic, COP26 drew a record number of attendees, a feat that could seem like a laudable step for inclusive GEG.

However, our research illustrates the need for a more nuanced accounting of influence and access in GEG. The pandemic posed a type of necropolitical health ultimatum: “COVID-19 health” versus “climatic health.” Those who attended COP26—if able to overcome the financial, language, and logistical barriers—risked personal and community health; those who did not attend risked personal and community health by losing access to and influence on the processes directing climatic health.

Access—the power, opportunity, or permission to come into contact with resources and decision-making—is a necessary precondition for representation and influence; it is therefore foundational to environmental justice. In this way, environmental justice can codevelop with critical disability studies to shift the locus of our attention from individual failures toward systemic inaccessibility. By expanding conceptualizations of access and highlighting the structural and relational barriers to it, we illustrate how historically marginalized actors navigate sites of GEG to transform representation by making their interests visible and heard. Leveraging unique insights from CEE, we describe the ways in which social spaces open and contract for different actors. The pandemic is a uniquely illustrative example of how specific sites of global environmental governance—their location, construction, and institutionalization—physically, virtually, materially, and ideationally shape political possibilities. By exploring how the practices and processes of representation construct, reinforce, or challenge marginalized presence and influence, our analysis demonstrates that access itself becomes a core mode of representation. Specifically, our analysis demonstrates how discriminatory design, techno-inequality, and recognition work as a politics of access to undermine inclusion by privileging certain constellations of power relations over others. Developing more equitable access to GEG will require attention to the relationality, unique risk tolerances, and resource availability of historically marginalized actors.

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