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News from the UN # 124

RSHM at the UN

October / November



The **26th annual meeting of the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change**, better known as **COP 26**, took place in Glasgow from **31st October – 12th November**. Acknowledged by many to be “our last best chance” to keep the global temperature rise within the figure of 1.5 degrees Celsius defined as the goal in the **2015 Paris Agreement** relative to pre-industrial levels, COP 26 was the subject of high hopes and expectations, as well as fears and trepidation. Over the 2020/2021 period, reports on the climate crisis grew ever louder, extreme weather events more frequent and more insistent.

COP 26 brought together heads of state and high level representatives of 197 nations representing 95% of the planet, as well as scientists, climate activists, faith-based organizations, businesses and grassroots groups from all continents. Regrettably, COVID restrictions limited participation from the global south, something that had earlier led to a call for postponement, an option that was refuted by the UK which held the presidency, assisted by Italy.  [Watch the short video](#) .

Our **group of RSHM and collaborators** was very present at **COP 26**. Although we did not have access to the main center of official negotiations (**the Blue Zone**) we were close to the ordinary people of the UK and those from afar who gathered and organized and walked and prayed, - calling for urgent action to address climate change. Inside the **Green Zone** pavilions, and in other venues in Glasgow, we attended panels and events; listened to in-person testimonies and virtual ones brought to us on large screens. We joined people in places of worship, on the streets and on the global march. The voices were strong and the messages consistent. All were calling their leaders to take urgent action.

Being present at COP 26 was a valuable opportunity to join the dynamism of movements from around the globe in the urgent call for climate justice. Some of the **voices that touched us most** were the those of indigenous people, youth and women from global south, the walkers / pilgrims coming from different faiths, some of whom had walked for 60 days. In this expanded issue of News from the UN we share some information about the **outcomes of COP 26** as well as **some personal reflections** on the experience of participation of our sisters and collaborators.


“Now is the time to act, urgently, courageously and responsibly”.
Pope Francis to COP 26



Inter-faith Initiatives at COP

There was a strong and significant presence of **faith-based groups at COP 26**, starting with the organizing of a special **Inter-Faith Prayer Vigil** on October 31st - the opening day of COP and the beginning of Scottish Interfaith week. **Mary Jo McElroy RSHM, Margaret Lee RSHM and Veronica RSHM** joined the crowd of some 300 or more people in the central square of Glasgow where more than a dozen religious leaders representing Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Quaker and Baha'i traditions led prayers, shared readings from their sacred scriptures and made a powerful call for blessing on the proceedings of COP 26.



That same evening we were welcomed by the Jewish Synagogue for the Inter-faith “**Talanoa Dialogues**”. Named after the Fijian tradition, the process draws participants to share their stories, building empathy and trust which results in shared knowledge and better decision making for the common good. After introductory words and sharing from faith leaders, we broke into small dialogue groups according to selected climate-related theme. Out of the dialogue came calls to global leaders for decisive climate action. These, together with the prior Statements developed and endorsed by hundreds, were later delivered to the Global leaders and negotiators.  Read the [calls to Global Leaders](#)



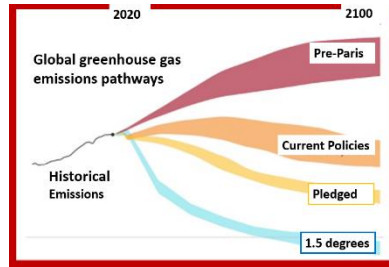
The Coat of Hopes – decorated with patches made and stitched on by people all along the 500 mile pilgrimage route from the south of England - expressed the people’s griefs, remembrances, prayers and hopes in relation to the earth. Each morning the small pilgrim group who had spent more than two months on the road, gathered outside the busy entrance to the Blue Zone, inviting officials and delegates to put on the Coat, and feel the weight and warmth of the people’s hopes.

 Watch [the video](#)

Goals and Outcomes: Adaptation and Mitigation

The four main goals of Cop26 were far-reaching.

(1) to **secure global net-zero emissions** by 2050 in order to keep the limit of 1.5C temperature increase within reach. For this to happen, countries need to accelerate the phase-out of coal, curtail deforestation, speed up the switch to electric vehicles and encourage investment in renewable energy sources.



(2) **adapt to protect** communities and natural habitats,
(3) **mobilise finance** for climate adaptation and
(4) **work together** to deliver the **outcomes**.

The negotiated **Glasgow Declaration** reached on November 13th failed to secure the 1.5 target – but kept it on “**life support**” – with deep differences leading to weakened compromise. However, some of the commitments made offer hope, if actually implemented. Among these more **positive outcomes** are the following:

- 153 countries have put forward new or updated emissions targets known as **Nationally Determined**

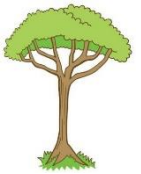
Contributions (NDCs); These cover around 80% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions

- **All parties agreed** that during 2022 they would revisit and strengthen their current emissions targets which need to be achieved by 2030
- **Commitments to “net zero”** now cover 90% of world GDP and more than 85% of global emissions
- For the first time since the 2015 Paris agreement, **190 Parties to the Convention** are explicitly calling to accelerate the **phasing-out of coal** and of “inefficient fossil fuel subsidies”. **However, no** clear timeline is given, and the final wording was weakened to say “**phasing-down**” of coal power.
- Since 2019, **countries representing 20% of the global market for cars** have committed to phasing out petrol vehicles with a move to 100% Zero-emission electrical vehicles by 2030.
- More than 100 countries signed up to the **Global Methane Pledge** to reduce emissions from the most potent climate pollutant, methane, by 30% by 2030.
- The **US and China** agreed to work together this decade to limit global temperature rise to 1.5C

➔ [Watch the short video](#)

Protecting the Forests

Healthy forests play a critical role in regulating the climate, absorbing 1/3 of the emissions caused by fossil fuels. Together with sustaining biodiversity and sustainable land use, they are vital to maintenance of an ecological balance as they serve as a valuable carbon sink. The **Glasgow Leaders Declaration on Forests and Land Use** was an important agreement announced in the first few days of COP 26. By the end of COP 26, endorsements had come from 141 member states, together representing 90.94% of all forests globally. However, some skepticism remains as to implementation of commitments made, with a notable case in point being Brazil. ➔ [Watch the video.](#)



At present, 22% of **Amazonia** is under high disturbance due to forest degradation, fire recurrence, and deforestation while nearly a quarter (24%) of the primary forested area is at high risk of destruction and in need of immediate protection. This represents a crucial ‘tipping point’ and loss of resilience of the ecosystem. There was a strong call from indigenous leaders at COP 26. Highlighting the campaign **Amazon for Life** and the need to preserve 80% of the Amazon by 2025, the indigenous leader and General Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) Gregorio Mirabel noted “*We are calling to protect the Amazon. We are at COP26 to ratify our proposal so that 80% of the Amazon remains alive. We are the Amazon for life, we are the cry of the air, of the water, of the creators of the forest, we are there to obtain answers and actions from the States*”. He made an urgent plea for the \$1.7 billion committed to strengthening indigenous people’s land rights and conservation efforts to be administered by the indigenous people’s organizations so that it reaches the local community level. ➔ [Watch the video](#)



Applying a Gender lens to climate action

Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change, especially in least developed countries. Not only do women have less access to resources than men, they are required to come up with new ways to feed their families in times of shortages, poor harvests and financial crisis. As Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted at a panel event on **mobilising equitable, just and gender-sensitive climate finance**, women must walk further to find water in times of drought, are more likely to die from pollution from cook stoves and are often the last to eat and the first to do without food. Girls are more likely than boys to be pulled out of school in times of a climate change related crisis. According to a recent report, women and girls are as much as **14 times more likely** to die as a result of disasters resulting from climate change than men and boys.



The importance of applying a gender lens to climate action was stressed in many of the events we attended. Regrettably only one third of finance currently allocated to climate adaptation takes into account the differing needs of women and men. Not only is it the right thing to do, said Mary Robinson, but it will lead to climate action that is better for people and planet since women drive adaptation, resilience and develop local solutions. One positive step forward: A “**Gender Action Plan**” now needs to be prepared for every project submitted to the Green Climate Fund. ➔ [Read more.....](#)

Loss and Damage

A **critical issue** in the final days of **COP 26 related to “Loss and damage”**. This refers to the issue of compensation for the havoc wreaked by climate related disasters, and the devastation caused by the loss of lives, culture, biodiversity, livelihoods and infrastructure. Poorer countries, which did little to cause the climate crisis, are often the most vulnerable to the frequently occurring extreme events associated with climate change and they often experience its most severe effects. Delegations from the climate vulnerable countries came to COP 26 with a determination to win a commitment from richer nations to establish a fund for compensation. A proposal was put forward by the developing nations -G77 + China - which represents 85% of the world’s population to set up the “**Glasgow Loss and Damage Facility**”. The aim was to help to redress financing needs. Regrettably, the clause was withdrawn from the text on the very last day of negotiations. A weaker commitment to establish the “Glasgow Dialogue” concerning funding arrangements during the coming years became part of the final declaration.



➔ [Watch the short video](#)

Reflections on COP 26

Mary Jo McElroy RSHM

I was looking forward to Cop 26 for a long time, knowing that I was able to go to Glasgow and hoping that there might be important outcomes for our planet. I want to share the experience of being there and something about the people I met who gave me hope.



Glasgow gave everyone a great welcome. The voices that remain with me – in my heart and in my head – urging me to keep faithful to my commitment to the Earth and all life on it – are those of the **Indigenous people, the youth and different groups of walkers**.

The indigenous people are those who talked with authority, because of their relationship with the Earth, through their rituals and their whole way of life. Most of the indigenous people who spoke at various sessions were very concerned about the threats to their way of life which depends on the land and rivers. There were examples of building dams



which dried up their rivers. This is ecocide – and also genocide of the tribes affected. One of them said that they know how to treat the Earth with respect, but they are not respected by governments who build dams on their rivers, encourage others to invade their land and fell the trees of the forest and who allow mining companies to dig up the land to extract fossil fuels and minerals.

There were a lot of **young people** in the Green Zone at any given time. Many young people were with Greta Thunberg on the streets trying to draw attention to the important decisions that needed to be made by the politicians and others in the Blue zone. I attended several sessions where young people were the main speakers. One was organised by the Welsh government and the Future Generations Ambassador (*Wales is the only country that has one!*) was present. Young people had a chance to divide into groups and give their opinions.

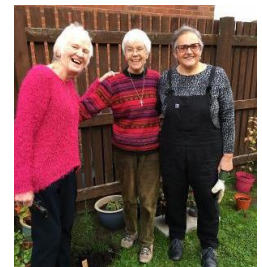
People who had taken **the time and energy to walk to COP 26** had a special message for the rest of us. One group had walked from London through the countryside and had camped at night, sharing stories and impressions around their campfire. They also brought messages from others they met. They put their experience into a form of drama and song which they presented on the last day. This moved me, because they shared how they had changed on the way through listening to stories of the places they visited. They became closer to each other but even more committed to the cause of the Earth.

The big march was on Saturday 6th November and that day about 100,000 walked through Glasgow. Some of the Catholic groups met for Mass in the Jesuit church (St. Aloysius). Jesuit volunteers arrived – having walked from Edinburgh (about 50 miles). We were given sustenance (sandwiches, cakes and tea) and high-viz jackets to identify us as we walked with the Faith contingent. Those who had walked from Edinburgh kept up their animation- singing along the way, to keep us moving. Maria and I held the Welsh flag from her school, which said (in Welsh) ‘**There is one Earth’...**

➔ [Read the full reflection](#)

Margaret Lee RSHM

Glasgow had been preparing for many months for this great occasion and great it was... It was with great pleasure and enjoyment that I was able to welcome Mary Jo, Veronica, Mary Kate and Maria here to Castlemilk...



One of the presentations which had an impact on me was “**Creating youth led solutions – tackling climate change crisis**”. It was launched by the YMCA in 2019. We saw the premiere of a documentary which had been commissioned by the YMCA Scotland. The young people were present and then spoke about the projects which were featured in the film. The documentary showed young leaders around the world using their innovative skills.

In Peru the project involved filling plastic bottles with **waste plastic making eco bricks** which were used to build walls to construct a sanitation block giving people dignity. In **Zambia** we saw young people using disused paper and card to make bags for school also lampshades. Another powerful presentation was listening to the **young indigenous people speak about their life**. It was a powerful presentation...

Mary Kate Torri

Travelling up to Glasgow I sat eagerly in my seat. I was on my way to **COP26** and I couldn't quite believe it. What did I expect? I wasn't quite sure. I was going to the **Green Zone**; which was host to over 100 exhibitors, 200 events and 11 sponsors providing the opportunities to listen, learn and celebrate climate action.

During my 3 days at COP26 I was fortunate enough to listen to some incredible speakers who opened my eyes to the effect climate change has on specific groups such as indigenous tribes, women and the poorest of society. On the Tuesday I



was able to attend a talk led by **Mary Robinson** which was my standout moment of the entire experience. Her message was one aimed at the richer countries of our world, those that can help secure a more ambitious outcome at COP 26 but are not pushing for it sufficiently. Ultimately, we cannot negotiate with science and the western world must help fund the developing countries to mitigate.

As a **22-year-old**, **climate change** is a crisis of my lifetime; one that has always existed. In truth, it makes me angry to watch the politicians on big screens make big pledges that to me, feel rather empty. I want to see more of a 'crisis mode' - not one of fear but one of urgency, voices of concern that encourage collaboration on a global scale which look past national borders and self-interest.

I came away from Glasgow with a sense of hope; witnessing the thousands of others who care so deeply about the future of our planet. But this hope must be challenged into action that matters in the fight against climate change.

Eleanor Dalton RSHM

Racing the King Tide is an international research project that reframes the approach to adaptation to rising sea levels. What caught my attention was that one of the sponsors is **John Moore's University in Liverpool**. They made a 360 degrees documentary, to be viewed on Virtual Reality headsets, which gave an alarming insight into the conditions these people from the Philippines have to endure.



Houses have to be built on stilts, classrooms are submerged in 1.5 metres of water. Children swim to school. Boats come right up to the windows of the classrooms which desperately need elevating. Children are physically present but mentally absent. Their attention is on the sea as they continually play with water at their feet. When plants get splashed with sea water they shrivel and die. No fruit or vegetables grow on the islands. Their diet consists of fish and shells. Mangroves are planted to act as a natural barrier to the sea.....



Maria Pizzoni

When I told people on our **Justice and Peace group in North Wales** of my intention in going to COP 26, **Mary Jo McElroy RSHM** offered me a place at their house in Glasgow. I was definitely going! I work as a support in a Primary school so I thought I'd try to involve the children as much as possible. I looked for any activities from NGOs for the 4 - 7 age group. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) with their **Tree of Promises** was the best I could see. Children writing on paper leaves their promises to care for the environment and on the other side the promises they wanted leaders to keep. I left North Wales with plenty of leaves. I eventually managed to deliver them to the WWF stall in the **Green Zone**. The picture I sent back of me handing the leaves into the WWF stall caused a ripple of excitement around the school.



The cry of the Indigenous deeply affected me. I hadn't realised the depth of their relationship with the earth. Everything depends on it. They are the canaries in the mineshaft. They experience the unbalance first with devastating effect. Ruth Millar an Inuit delegate from Alaskan Canada told us about the salmon, that they rely on all year round as their source of protein, that are dying in the waters of heat stroke. Her abiding message to me was *'Decolonise yourself. Educate yourself'* - I took this to mean open your eyes to what is happening and why, don't accept the status quo.

The **Minister from Palau** - a nation that is close to the rising waters - had a message that captured me. Climate change is their present reality not some future situation. They have developed a pledge that tourists have to sign as they enter the country. *"I take this pledge as your guest, to protect and preserve your beautiful island home. I vow to tread lightly, act kindly and explore mindfully."* His message was *'Go back and make connection with the earth. Find the people who know.'*

Walking was a recurring theme at COP26. I was there for the big March through Glasgow. There was much joy and solidarity amongst the very diverse groups. I also felt the weight of history - this is the largest movement of peoples, globally, in history. That gives me hope that we will drawback from the brink of destruction. As a person of faith I believe in the movement of the spirit of the creator God through all the earth and that if enough people of goodwill and justice respond to the call we will prevail to a good end.

I am still trying to understand the impact the event had on me. I felt strongly called to decolonise myself, connect with my earth and seek out the people who know the land - **Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity**. It won't be easy to ignore these voices. I have been moved by. I hope our leaders have the same difficulty.

Distribution

Institute Leadership Team; Area Leaders, JPIC Animators; Global Network of RSHM Schools; UN Interest Group
Portuguese translation by Maria Luisa Pinho RSHM