Next-generation meetings must be diverse and inclusive

To the Editor — The COVID-19 pandemic is now a global crisis¹. The impacts are enormous not only for health, daily life and work of individuals, but also for many societal issues, including international efforts to protect the environment. Key policy meetings were scheduled for 2020, including the 26th UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP26) which was set to take place in November 2020 but is now postponed. Although there has been a reduction in GHG emissions because of social distancing and the associated reductions in industrial activities, long-term environmental consequences of the pandemic and recovery are highly uncertain. Efforts to guide society towards the pathway set by the UN climate pledge thus have to be continued even during this global public health emergency.

Importantly, the ongoing emergency is an opportunity for transformative changes in how academics and policymakers communicate. For example, Calliari et al.² suggest that a virtual summit could be organized to complement COP26. Given uncertainty over how long the influence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus will persist¹, virtual options for COP26 and other conferences need to be carefully considered. Virtual meetings have multiple benefits, such as saving time and reducing the carbon footprint for travel³, and could thus become a new norm. However, to be successful for a global society, the impact of virtual meetings on diversity, inclusion and equity must be considered.

Virtual meetings are considered an easy option in some societies (for example, for international students in Europe⁴), but this is not necessarily the case in others⁵. The challenge of ensuring diversity in international discussions is thus enormous,

beyond time zone differences and geographical isolation.

Linguistic and cultural injustice are common^{6,7} and may be exacerbated in tele-discussions. For instance, English proficiency is a strong determinant of the volume of published academic output, leading to unequal benefits for some scholars and nations^{7,8}. Such inequality may be amplified in virtual meetings. Language is already a barrier in face-to-face interactions, but when virtual meetings make all communication more challenging, native speakers of English are even more likely to feel comfortable participating than non-native speakers.

While language barriers might not be large at a UN summit, because delegates are often fluent in multiple languages or have assistance from translators, this does not fully remove cultural barriers. When verbal communication is in English, people may expect others to behave in accordance with Western cultural norms. However, this fails to account for diverse forms of communication, values and beliefs in other parts of the world. For example, eye contact is a sign of honesty in Western societies but can be perceived as aggressive or rude in others⁹. Facial expressions and body language may reconcile such cross-cultural differences and facilitate mutual understandings in face-to-face meetings, but it is more difficult to read these cues during video meetings⁵. Consequently, virtual international meetings may further limit inclusion and equity among participants.

The causes of global warming and policy efforts to mitigate the impacts are not equal among countries^{10,11}, making international negotiation difficult. A next-generation convention, if held virtually, has to avoid adding further barriers. In this era of

social distancing, we have to find ways to stay connected to voices from culturally and geographically distant places. As a representative international engagement, a digital climate summit must find ways to be inclusive and equitable. If well-organized, a virtual COP meeting could profoundly inform global societal interactions beyond climate communities. Otherwise, lack of inclusion in the decision-making process may become the greatest barrier to legitimate incorporation of plural values¹¹. Addressing challenges for nature and society — as a matter of global justice — must include better communication, which will help diminish the dominance of some cultures over others, give attention to social diversity and ensure that all actors are fully involved and committed. □

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