

NELR editorial

The Copenhagen Experience

This issue provides a report on the Copenhagen Conference by Christine Loh of the Hong Kong based public policy think tank, Civic Exchange. It also provides several recent student papers on regulatory responses to climate change. Firstly, this editorial provides a personal account of COP15 from Kartik Madhira, a Monash University student who was chosen to participate as a representative for youth organisations. Here is what Kartik thought:

“Having worked on the issue of climate change for the past one and a half years, I could not have found any better opportunity than COP 15 to get a better and broader understanding of the actual functioning of the international climate change regime. Being passionate to work on the issue, I went to Copenhagen with one simple objective of contributing and bringing about a change which I used to talk a lot about but not achieve at the grass root level. Have I achieved this objective? It would be tough to answer this question. I am not sure about the change aspect but I would say that this experience has definitely given me an understanding of the complexities involved in dealing with any issue at international level. I was very pleased to meet some of the dignitaries such as Desmond Tutu - Nobel Peace Laureate 1984, Yvo de Boer, UNFCCC General Secretary, Achim Steiner, UNEP Executive Director, Kartikeya Sarabhai, Director, Centre for Environmental Education, India and many others. I thank Monash University for helping me realize my dreams.

I observed that the decision making process in particular reference to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate change (UNFCCC) is time consuming because it is consensus based rather than majority based in other UN related agencies. I was talking to one of negotiators from Brazil and he was of the opinion that there is a need to overhaul the existing system, particularly the climate change regime. In the current system, everything in the text is negotiable which includes the styling, formatting and the substance. He was of the opinion that only the substance of the text should be negotiable, leaving the styling and formatting to be done by the experts in literature. This does make sense to me.

The first week of negotiations was on track and progressing quite well. But from the start of the second week, the negotiations started falling apart. With the developing countries walking out of the negotiations for one day after they were realized the Kyoto framework would be abandoned. Observing all these proceedings sitting in the plenary was quite frustrating and I felt completely helpless, as everything is so process-oriented that one cannot make any special exceptions to deal with a new issue with any sense of urgency.

On one hand, I attended various side-events which emphasized on the importance of taking action “NOW” and to avoid delay, with people affected by climate change urging the youth to build pressure on the rich countries. On the other hand, I attended sessions wherein there was lot of talking and little action. It is frustrating when you realize that nothing is moving and this is when some youth groups lost their patience and became a bit aggressive in a way which led to response by the police. However, I have even seen people fighting for the cause in a non-violent way. I met a girl who has been fasting for 42 days! I was amazed by the passion which the young people like her have for this cause.

I witnessed the rich and the poor, the north and south divide. Especially, during the last three days, the Danish Prime Minister was trying hard to push for its self created text and blaming the negotiators that they have not been able to reach a consensus.

Apart from observing, I was working with the Youth Non-governmental organizations group on developing our stand with respect to Adaption policies on climate change. We studied the drafts circulated on a daily basis and developed our stand on the same. Apart from that we successfully delivered three interventions in the plenary sessions presenting our stand.

The delegates and the observer organizations in particular were extremely dissatisfied with the facilities provided at the conference venue. The United Nations accredited nearly 45,000 people for the conference. But the conference venue had capacity of only 15,000 people. Once the conference venue reached its capacity, the entry to the venue was closed. A worse situation developed in the last four days when the entry of observers was restricted to a mere 500 people owing to the arrival of head of the states. There were many people who had travelled long distances to be a part of the conference who could not do so because of these venue restrictions. This restriction on entry raised questions on transparency and the civil society participation as mentioned in the Arhus convention.”

Regards
Wayne Gumley