

Reflections on the Make it Work Conference

by Michael Kowiak

From May 26 until May 31, 2015, eight Columbia University students participated in the Make it Work Conference in Nanterre-Amandiers, just outside of Paris. The conference, organized by Sciences Po, served as a university-level simulation of the 21st Climate Change Conference, which will take place in France later this year. In the article below, Michael Kowiak offers his perspective on the negotiations.

"The Delegation of India would like to take the floor."

I sighed in frustration. It was late Friday evening. After several hours of intense negotiations, I had believed that our working group had been on the verge of an agreement concerning a limit on future energy consumption. But no article could be adopted without the unanimous consent of the present parties. Thus each objection had to be addressed and (hopefully) resolved.

The student representing India took the floor. He made a brief but excellent point. He argued that the article's language was unfairly biased against countries that were in the process of economic industrialization. By declaring the "need for all countries to cap their energy consumption by 2050", the article would effectively punish nations like China, Brazil, and India by requiring them to curb their energy consumption levels before they had ever really taken off, even though many of their citizens still live in poverty. The fact that these economically developing countries are often experiencing population growth compounds the problem.

The language would have to be revised. Everyone settled in for another intense round of discussions. We pushed thoughts of dinner from our minds.

Three days earlier, two hundred students from around the globe had arrived in Nanterre-Amandiers with a clear goal: succeeding in reaching a unanimous and comprehensive agreement on climate change issues that would limit the overall increase in the Earth's temperature to 2 degrees or less. Although all of the delegates were focused on the simulated negotiations at hand, discussion of two other real-life conferences was pervasive. On the one hand, students could not help but remember the 2009 Climate Change Conference that took place in Copenhagen. This meeting was widely considered to be a failure -- no agreement had been reached by the participating nations. On the other hand, all delegates were aware of the upcoming Climate Change Conference that will be held in Paris this December.

For many delegates (myself included), this Make it Work Conference served as an opportunity for us to show the world that reaching an agreement on climate change is possible. However, I had realized by Friday night that our success was all but inevitable. The anecdote discussed above concerning energy consumption was a microcosm of several fault-lines along which we tip-toed throughout the weekend. Most obviously, there was the balancing act between national and global interests. For example, Columbia students representing Saudi Arabia and Algeria had to both protect fossil fuel dependent economies in the short term and advocate for a global

transition to renewable energy in the long term. Abandoning the first principle would have robbed our countries of vital revenue resources, while abandoning the latter would have ignored worldwide realities. In a similar vein, states like India and China had to protect the interests of economically developing states while still working to limit global temperature increases to 2 degrees. These differing national agendas were undoubtedly the largest sources of contention throughout the weekend.

These challenges were supplemented by the difficulties of negotiating with non-state entities including the Polar Region and the forests, which had been given voting powers at this conference. The non-state entities offered honest and valuable assessments of just how much damage human activity has inflicted upon other living creatures and ecosystems. Yet it was easy for these delegations to ruffle the feathers of state representatives who were responsible for protecting the welfare of human beings, and who necessarily advocated for a more anthropocentric approach.

The problems were not limited to inter-delegation disputes. Some individual students had to navigate intra-delegation rivalries that threatened to impede progress towards an agreement. For example, within in the Saudi delegation, the student representing the Saudi Arabian Oil Company had to find common ground with the student representing the Red Sea.

Lastly, all conference participants had to carefully waiver between the possibilities of innovation and the strictures of reality. On one hand, it would have been useless to myopically cling to the same negotiating strategies that had led to failure in Copenhagen. To this end, the conference organizers were constantly urging us to "think outside of the box." Yet straying too far from reality would have been similarly futile. After all, the simulation would only be useful insofar as it helped real-life diplomats to reach an agreement later this year.

Although these dynamics were daunting at times, they were by no means insurmountable. By the end of Friday's session, we had agreed upon language concerning our vision for energy consumption. "All parties shall commit to improve energy efficiency at all levels of the society." This compromise recognized the challenges facing economically developing countries, but still encouraged progress toward a more sustainable future. Other working groups made progress in a similar manner. Sometimes vague phrasing was necessary. At other times, bread-and-butter negotiations were required. Country A would promise to decrease fossil fuel emissions so long as Country B promised to combat desertification along a mutual border. Country C would invest more in renewable energy, assuming Country D did the same. By Sunday afternoon, we had finalized a thorough list of concrete plans of action (known as "pathways") that would achieve our visions.

The final 25 page agreement reflected two important realities. First, there is no "silver bullet" that will ensure the success of December's conference. Many of the issues are technical (exploratory oil drilling, deforestation caps, and air quality standards). Other topics are highly controversial (climate change refugees). Subtle bargaining and detailed planning were (and will be) required.

Yet the second realization is that success is indeed achievable. The problem of climate change has been created and exacerbated by human activity. Limiting its effects is a collective action

problem, not an incurable disease. The grim consequences of inaction (along with endless cups of coffee) were enough to encourage the students at Make it Work to make the trade-offs and sacrifices that were necessary to secure an inhabitable world for future generations. We can only hope that the real negotiators are equally successful in December.