

Fletcher Takes on De-Carbonizing: Spring Meetings, Washington DC



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Four Fletcher students enrolled in Professor Mihaela Papa and Professor Patrick Verkooijen's Sustainable Development Diplomacy (SDD) course embarked on a trip to Washington, DC, to attend the 2017 World Bank Spring Meetings. Professor Verkooijen assigned students to write a policy memo for the Carbon Policy Leadership Coalition (CPLC) on how to broaden and deepen carbon reduction efforts. From greater engagement at the city level to leveraging private-public partnerships, our memos highlighted unique approaches to expanding efforts to curb carbon pollution. Writers of the top four memos were selected to attend the meetings, where they met with high-level officials and thought leaders in the climate change and carbon policy world, including World Bank Group Climate Leader and Former Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Christiana Figueres, Chile's Minister of Environment Marcelo Mena, CPLC Co-Chair Feike Sijbesma, and Mexico's DG of International Affairs Enrique Lendo.

Enrique Lendo, Mexico's DG of International Affairs



DG Lendo was the first person we had the opportunity to talk with on a bilateral basis during the Spring Meetings. It was clear from the start that he is very passionate about the carbon pricing agenda, especially in Mexico, and that he was willing to spend a lot more time with us than the 15 minutes we had together. It was interesting to hear that the origin of the carbon tax in Mexico had more to do with fiscal, rather than environmental, reasons, and that the measure did not face significant resistance from the general public nor the private sector. In any case, DG Lendo explained that Mexico is building on the environmental implications of such a tax by also working to introduce an emission trading scheme, which is now being tested through simulations based on real market conditions. Time was short, and there was still a lot for us to learn from the Mexican experience.

Marcelo Mena, Chilean Minister of Environment

Meeting with the Chilean Minister of Environment Marcelo Mena was a great opportunity to discuss the progress and hurdles of decarbonizing in Chile—the first South American country to begin this process. Andrea Becerra, the Chilean-American Fletcherite, was especially eager to discuss Chile's current progress in reducing particle pollution and short-lived climate pollutants that dirty the country's air. Minister Mena is a great example of the importance of integrating science and policy. Alongside his engineering colleagues, he helped equip the government with pollution-forecasting models to better track particle pollution and make more informed decisions to improve the country's air quality.



Fieke Sijbesma, Co-Chair Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition



We met with Fieke and his assistant, both of whom were very interested in hearing about our policy memos. Fieke, the CEO of Royal DSM and the Chairman of the CPLC, took the time to address each of our proposals and discuss and provide feedback on various aspects. This was the one meeting we had with a private party actor, and we relished in hearing a for-profit enterprise discuss how they were making strides to use more clean energy and to get more companies on board with carbon pricing.

Christiana Figueres, Former Executive Secretariat for the UNFCCC

This meeting was especially powerful as Christiana shared her perspective of “stubborn optimism” that keeps her both motivated and fiercely fighting for climate solutions. We found her diplomatic skills to respect the diversity of country perspectives and build a “commonality of purpose” insightful.

We asked Christiana to paint a picture for us: what will 2050 look like in an environmentally-friendly world? Her depiction was vivid and powerful. She described a city filled with humans who produce clean energy by merely walking. A city where buildings are covered by vegetation and every roof has a garden for food production. She said our grandchildren will laugh when they find out we used to pour liquid into our vehicles and the internal combustion engine will only be found in museums.



Student Reflections

One of the key messages that I took from this experience is the importance of re-thinking climate action and broadening our efforts to make a more inclusive, common-sense, transition to clean energy. This means a complete reassessment of our climate narrative to include members of the fossil fuel industry in the conversation. For instance, environmental advocates might be quick to celebrate the closure of a mine, but we must remember that this also means celebrating thousands of lost jobs. It's important to be sensitive to these realities. By practicing more empathy and by being more inclusive and opening the conversation on environmental action to more communities we might find more effective, long-lasting, solutions. -Andrea

We need to focus on accelerating an economic energy shift worldwide. This is already happening in a lot of ways, which is encouraging, but we need to speed it up drastically to address the impacts of climate change. In addition, we need to remember that these shifts can be an opportunity and happen in harmony with other economic or development goals. For example, Colombia is able to use part of their revenue from a carbon tax in the implementation of their peace process agreement. -Lauren

We were able to take part in a meeting put on at the UN Foundation by Joseph Robertson of the Citizens' Climate Lobby. It included many high-level diplomats and industry representatives discussing how to change the way climate change is addressed considering new developments and increased profitability of clean energy. After the conference completed on Friday, Joe asked me to meet one-on-one to discuss the potential outcomes and plans that were presented at the meeting in light of everything else we had heard during the Spring Meetings. It was a very productive meeting where we discussed how imaging and branding could be changed to get more entities on board with the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition. -Steve

It was truly amazing for me to have seen and experienced so much positive energy gathered in one place. That positive energy, in a way, rubbed off on me and reinforced my interest in the quests to find solutions for global issues like climate change. It was encouraging to see so many high-level officials and company officers, including heads of financial institutions, at the table willing to discuss about, and being more than receptive of, the carbon pricing agenda, although I agree with Fieke Sijbesma that there were still many important players who were not present. The momentum is there. If the CPLC could enlist more key players to join the cause by showing them in concrete ways that it would make business sense to do so, many others will follow suit, and this front of the battle against climate change would become so much easier to fight. -Korawat