ATTENDING COP24 IN KATOWICE, POLAND

Welcome to Poland

I arrived in Katowice, Poland for the 24th annual conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP24) just in time to attend the opening ceremony of the COP. At first, navigating the conference with its elaborate venue, many side events, and negotiation sessions was all a bit overwhelming. I very quickly learned my way around and endeavored to soak up as much information as possible over the next week. I enjoyed putting the information and concepts I’ve built up through my Fletcher courses such as exploring the climate negotiation process, examining energy trends, and designing national and subnational policies related to mitigation and adaptation, into perspective with the real-world experience of attending the COP.

Transitioning to Low Carbon Technologies

Many common trends emerged during the conference and it was interesting to take pulse of the key issues and solutions needed to secure the Paris Agreement Rulebook. I was particularly drawn to conversations related to low-emission development pathways, a critical process for achieving the goals laid out in the Paris Agreement. Many oil and coal dependent countries are looking to carbon capture utilization and storage (CCUS) as one way to cut emissions while grappling with the reality of carbon locked infrastructure. I learned from an International Energy Agency (IEA) presentation that one third of CO2 emissions worldwide come from coal-fired power plants and less than half of those are 15 years old. While costs still remain high, CCUS is gaining increased attention as a viable pathway to low emission development, particularly as carbon pricing schemes begin to take shape around the
globe. More work is still to be done, however. Unfortunately, CO2 emissions are projected to increase for the second year in a row. During one side event, representatives from Canada, the European Commission, and Costa Rica shared hope that success at COP24 will allow for better tracking and increased funding for low carbon technology. In another event hosted at the Gulf Countries Pavilion, they, too, unsurprisingly encouraged increased investment in CCUS technology.

Paris Agreement Rulebook

While many of the negotiations were closed to observers, some were open to all. I enjoyed listening to the negotiations and comparing the reality to my expectations based on in-class simulations during Professor Gallagher’s Climate Change course. Surprisingly, the UNFCCC negotiations were as back-and-forth and stressed for time as our simulation was. One early success was the quick adoption of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform, which aims to preserve indigenous knowledge systems and facilitate continued and increased participation of indigenous peoples within the UNFCCC process.

On the other hand, I witnessed the tense moment when country delegates could not agree on language related to the recently launched IPCC special report on the projected effects of 1.5 degrees of warming (SR1.5). All countries were in agreement that the Paris Rulebook should “welcome” the SR1.5, except for four: Saudi Arabia, Russia, Kuwait and the United States. Later the wording was compromised to state that the parties “welcomed the efforts of the IPCC experts.” It was time for me to leave the COP after the first week, when many of the more contentious issues such as international cooperation through market and non-market mechanisms, loss and damage, and climate finance were beginning to gain momentum from the high-level delegates.
Impressions & Impact

I was honored to attend COP24 as a Tufts delegate and incredibly grateful for the CIERP travel funding. As I look toward launching my career post-graduation, the opportunity to attend the COP’s many side events, observe negotiations, and network with such a vast array of climate change actors was invaluable. I was able to reconnect with past contacts, such as my former colleagues from my summer internship at SEforALL, and I also created new connections. I engaged with people and learned about organizations doing fascinating and important work. For example, I met Ye Min Htut who works at the Department of Research and Innovation of the Government of Myanmar during a side event on China-US Cooperation on Renewable Energy Planning in South-South Countries. We’ve maintained communication after the COP, and I shared a recent research paper I wrote for my Electricity Market Design course on policy reform recommendations for Myanmar’s electricity sector with him. The organization booths at the COP also introduced me to several contacts from nonprofits, international institutions and universities.

Attending the conference solidified my passion for working to promote clean energy policies around the world, and I felt like I had a glimpse into what a potential future could hold for me in this space. While I’m still exploring my career options post-Fletcher, attending the COP underlined the interdisciplinary nature of climate change. My interests in energy access, gender equality, science policy and mitigation efforts may seem divergent, however collaboration between fields and issues is often where the most powerful solutions lie. Overall, I left with a renewed sense of optimism, yet greater urgency to effect change.