

REFLECTING ON COP25

*Dana Thomas
December 2019*



Finding Balance

As a first-time attendee of the COP, I was incredibly overwhelmed by the scale of the conference. In addition to the lengthy and diverse negotiations that took place, there were even more side events across the venue and around Madrid. I had heard about the NGO and country booths and pavilions that hold events during the COP, but I did not realize just how big they would be. It sounds like a silly observation, but these pavilions surely cost a lot of money, especially for some of the smaller NGOs and developing countries, and they also generate a lot of waste. How much CO₂ is emitted to construct these booths that have a two-week lifetime? How many trees are cut down to print the pamphlets they distribute? For a

conference on climate change, there seems to be a lot of waste.

Seeing all this activity kept bringing me back to one question, should I even be here? When Chile announced it would no longer host the conference due to ongoing protests, some asked whether COP25 would be the first virtual COP. I was heartbroken at the news, eager to experience the world of international negotiations for the first time and was elated to hear Madrid would host at the last minute. I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to see my coursework come to life and see my summer internship colleagues speak on a world stage. Yet at the same time I have to ask

whether all these international flights are worth it, particularly for activists and observers like myself.

Negotiation is a complex process. While the Paris Agreement highlights our shared intent to limit global warming and prepare for the impacts of climate change, there are infinite ideas on how to go about doing so. Each Party has their own interests to protect and has to carefully thread a needle of climate action while balancing home country negotiating instructions. It is hard to quantify the value of having face to face interaction with both friend and foe during such challenging negotiations. Parties have a hard-enough time reaching agreement now, how would they fare while attending a virtual COP?

Similarly, there is value in having non-Party observers in attendance. NGOs, students, and protestors provide an important reminder to negotiators of what is at stake. Indigenous groups, fishermen and women, farmers, and young children in attendance were some of the most valuable voices in attendance. Yet many of the negotiators, the loudest voices, are some of the

most removed from climate change impacts. To close these negotiations off from non-Party observers would severely hinder climate action.



US Representative Kathy Castor (FL-14) speaks to media at the COP.

So how do we balance the need for face to face interaction with the cost of international travel? I'm sure many could turn to trains. Far fewer could even sail like Greta Thunberg. I don't have the answer, but I think the first step is to vote out leaders who aren't prioritizing climate.



Protestors block a road in front of the venue.



Canada's Ambassador for Climate Change speaks at Oceans Action Day.

Challenging the Lack of US Leadership



Sitting behind US negotiators at an Adaptation Committee meeting.

After a year and a half of classes, I was starting to feel lost and unsure of where I wanted to go with my career come May. The diversity of my classes highlighted several avenues for working towards environmental justice and climate action. While having more options is surely beneficial, I was starting to lose my sense of purpose. Attending the COP provided me with some much-needed inspiration. At most of the side events I attended, there were comments about the United States' intent to withdraw from the Agreement as well as the overall lack of international leadership and domestic ambition.

Because of this, it felt important to talk to other attendees and show them there is still important work being done in the United States by non-profits, the private sector, students, and state and local governments. Being able to visit the US Climate Action Center pavilion and meet others

working on these issues was one of the most valuable parts of the conference. It was inspiring to hear from the next generation of climate leaders across a wide range of sectors from environmentally friendly cement to sustainable fashion.

As I head into the final semester of school, I now feel even more motivated about my own yet-to-be-determined post-Fletcher plans.





Left: One of several virtual reality booths in the green zone. Above: India's country pavilion. Below: Fletcher alum Jorge De Vincente, Carolyn House, Ifeanyi Mbah, and myself.

