

Cop15 or Cop-Out?

Oxfam Youth and Schools summary of the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit (COP15)

Introduction

During 2009 Oxfam's work with schools and young people focused on the forthcoming United Nations Climate Change Summit, held in Copenhagen between December 7 and December 18 2009.

This resource provides a summary of what happened at Copenhagen and forms the basis of Oxfam's feedback to young people and teachers who worked on the topic in 2009. It encourages young people to engage with the Conference's successes and failures by evaluating its outcomes and advocating ways forward.

What follows is a discussion of the Copenhagen Summit designed for teachers and more able students who are already have some knowledge of the issue. Classroom activities for KS3 and KS4 accompany this resource.

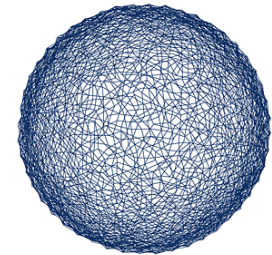
Why it is important to learn about Copenhagen

The Programme of Study for Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4 promotes active learning about how decisions are made at local, national and international levels. Institutions suggested for study include the UK Parliament, the European Union, the Commonwealth and the United Nations. Students are encouraged to be advocates and take responsible action across a range of local, regional, national and international contexts.

International meetings such as the Copenhagen Conference constitute a new form of global governance largely outside the institutions suggested by Citizenship Programmes of Study. These institutions increasingly shape citizens' lives and citizens seek ways to influence them. Some other examples include the meetings of the G20 Heads of State, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Bretton Woods institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

To cite just one example, much of the response to the recent 'swine flu' pandemic was driven and co-ordinated by the WHO at an international level rather than by national states and health services.

These issues raise important questions for young people. Many of the new institutions wielding global power lie outside or on the edge of the direct influence of voters and national politics. Identifying these institutions (many of them new), understanding how they work,



COP15
COPENHAGEN
UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE 2009

evaluating their successes and failures and learning how to influence them are key elements of 21st century citizenship.

Young people are puzzled by world events, especially those likely to have an impact on their adult lives. They want their schools to teach more about these pivotal events. Research shows more young people believe global learning is important than actually experience it in school (DEA 2008). In this context learning about the work of the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the outcomes of the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings are just as important as the more deeply embedded learning about local and national decision-making.

Why Copenhagen matters

Oxfam argues that climate change is the most important challenge facing world leaders in the 21st century. The world's poorest are already being hit hard by climate change; harvests are failing, floods are unprecedented and water supplies are drying up. Once reliable weather patterns are now anything but.

Man-made climate change is costing lives. Every minute world leaders put off doing something about it, millions of people needlessly sink further into extreme poverty. More communities and families are put at risk.

Climate change will eventually affect us all. It's effects ripple out from the poorest most vulnerable countries towards the rich countries. They take the form of threats to food security, decreases in agricultural productivity and the impact of new patterns of international migration and global insecurity.

For these reasons the build up to the Copenhagen conference formed a core of Oxfam's work with young people and schools in 2009. This culminated in a hand-in of young people's work and messages to Prime Minister Gordon Brown at 10 Downing Street on Monday 30 November.

For a summary of our projects leading up to Copenhagen and a thank you to the young people we worked with see [here](#)

Copenhagen presented a unique and urgent opportunity for the world community to make significant progress on combating the effects of climate change for the following reasons

- *Science:* Greenhouse-gas emissions have to peak and fall in the next five years to stand any chance of preventing runaway climate change. Decisive action at Copenhagen would have helped to make this possible
- *International Law:* The existing Kyoto Protocol currently binds the rich countries (except the USA) to cut emissions by the end of 2012, but there is no agreement of a second phase of cuts beyond that date. A new commitment to cut emissions beyond 2013 is urgently required and the issue of how to accommodate the USA within this agreement has to be decided.
- *Global Civil Society:* Recent years have seen an unprecedented global demand for leaders to tackle climate change. New transnational alliances have been built across

civil society, trades unions and progressive business. Never before has there been such public momentum for conclusive political action.

What was agreed at Copenhagen

The outcome of the Copenhagen Conference was highly disappointing. Some of the reasons for this are explored later.

The conference failed to agree the ambitious, fair and binding deal Oxfam and others had hoped for. Instead, at the last minute, a small group of world leaders and ministers thrashed out a three-page political declaration called the Copenhagen Accord. Most developing countries did not participate in writing it and many objected to its content.

The full text of the Copenhagen Accord is [here](#). It can be summarised as follows

- *Emissions reduction and the 2C target.* The Accord acknowledges that the global community needs to keep global warming below the 2C increase in temperatures that scientists warn is a crucial threshold if catastrophic climate change is to be avoided. However this commitment is rhetorical. Although countries were asked to submit their proposed emissions reductions before the end of January 2010, no mechanism for making these actually happen was agreed.
- *Measure, Report and Verify.* The Accord made some progress on agreeing the mechanisms for measuring, reporting and verifying emission cuts, mitigation actions and adaptation finance by all countries. These provide a potential structure for international regulation should a future agreement become legally binding.
- *Who will pay for adaptation and mitigation?* The rich countries agreed to set up a fund to support developing nations adapt to the impact of climate change and mitigate their use of carbon fuels. However the sum agreed, \$100bn, is just half of what is required and it is not clear where the money will come from. There is a risk it will be deducted from existing aid budgets.
- *Is the Accord legally binding?* A legally binding agreement would have been supported by international law. It would ensure that countries stick to their commitments, as those countries breaking it would face sanctions. The Accord is not legally binding. Instead the countries that signed it have merely 'noted' its content.

Although the Copenhagen Conference failed to deliver on many of the expectations held by people around the world it is still significant.

It brought together millions of people from across the world to demand that their leaders take action. This *global civil society* is operating with much greater consensus and common purpose than the leaders of individual states. One powerful example of this common voice is the unprecedented joint [editorial](#) published by 56 newspapers in 45 countries to mark the opening of the Conference.

More than 100 leaders attended the conference in person. This demonstrates commitment to reach an agreement, even if agreement was not reached on this occasion. The UK Prime

Minister Gordon Brown was one of the first leaders to pledge to attend. This followed a successful campaign organised by UK civil society asking the PM to go to Copenhagen.

Why Copenhagen failed



As world leaders patched together the Copenhagen Accord activists maintained a vigil in London's Trafalgar Square

Hopes for Copenhagen were high. For many it represented a 'make or break' moment. This section briefly analyses why a meeting in which so many people had vested such high hopes failed to deliver on these expectations.

- *The two track approach.* The failure of the USA to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 made the negotiations at Copenhagen complex and increased mistrust between rich and poor countries.

The Kyoto Protocol was binding upon the rich ('Annex 1') countries but excluded the USA, which refused to ratify the agreement. This presented the challenge of devising a new framework to maintain the responsibility of the rich countries to lead cuts in emissions, as enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol, while bringing the USA and developing countries into the framework.

In 2007 the Bali Action Plan aimed to resolve this difficulty by setting out a road map for action based on a two-track approach. One track is the Kyoto Protocol track, extended beyond 2012 with new targets to be agreed by the rich countries. The other Long-term Cooperative Action track (LCA) aims to bring all other countries, including the USA, into a new legally binding agreement to proportionally limit emissions and agree a mechanism for financing adaptation.

Early in the Copenhagen Conference the Danish presidency, supported by a number of rich countries, proposed to replace the two-track approach with a single new agreement – the so-called 'Danish text'. This immediately triggered an atmosphere of

mistrust as many developing countries felt that the rich countries now wanted to evade their responsibilities specified in the Kyoto Protocol. Alternative proposals were tabled by groups of developing countries, losing time, good will and momentum, before the Conference got back on track.

- *Countries are not negotiating on an equal footing.* Copenhagen was a complex event with different meetings occurring around the clock. Rich and newly industrialised countries sent big delegations: 194 from the USA, 183 from Canada, 750 from Brazil and 233 from China. Poor countries, most vulnerable to the threat from climate change, had small delegations: 10 from Chad, 7 from Haiti and 4 from the tiny Caribbean island of Dominica.

Such small numbers of delegates cannot possibly cover all the parallel talks and read the vast number of conference documents. Large delegations can negotiate through the night in shifts while small delegations eventually require sleep. The interests of the poorest and most vulnerable countries were not equitably represented.

- *The position of the USA.* The USA refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Bush Junior presidency did almost nothing to tackle climate change. It's vitally important that the USA is now at the table but years of neglect have has given the USA a lot of catching up to do. President Obama, despite positive rhetoric, put little on the table. This allowed Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Japan, all countries with potentially more to offer, to hide behind the USA's limited position.
- *The position of China and a multi-polar world.* China has been accused of blocking a meaningful deal at Copenhagen because it does not want to place limits on it's use of carbon fuels, and therefore it's rapid economic growth, until later in the century. Environmentalist Mark Lynas and UK Climate Secretary Ed Milliband have both advocated this argument in the [Guardian](#)

Whatever the merits of this argument it highlights complex questions about just what constitutes a 'developing country' and whether all developing countries share common interests. The 'BASIC' countries (China, India, Brazil and South Africa) are classified as 'developing' under the Kyoto Protocol. Yet they, along with the USA, drew up the Copenhagen Accord. As a 'developing country' China has little in common with, for example, the Maldives or Gambia. Indeed President Nasheed of the Maldives, a group of highly vulnerable islands in the Indian Ocean, commented on the Accord by exclaiming to the Chinese delegation 'how can you ask my country to go extinct?' (Guardian 23/12/09 p12).

Certainly the time when the rich countries, led by the USA, could dictate international agreements appears to be drawing to a close. New countries are joining the group of rich and powerful countries, best illustrated by the recent expansion of the G8 into the G20. Governance of this multi-polar world is becoming both less predictable and more complex. Yet at Copenhagen many leaders simply rehearsed their national positions instead of proposing breakthroughs. The lesson for all countries is to be much more imaginative and ambitious in the future. Global institutions such as the Commonwealth, which brings together both developing and rich countries, may be one vehicle for achieving this breakthrough.

- *The 'free rider' problem.* Teachers of economics can use the concept of the 'free rider' to analyse the outcome of Copenhagen. A 'free rider' is someone who benefits from a common resource, or 'public good', without bearing any of its cost. For example a person who travels on a bus without paying the fare is a classical 'free rider'.

The world's environment is a 'public good' that all countries benefit from but few pay to preserve. In this sense countries are 'free riders', benefiting from the environment to grow rich without paying the cost of sustaining it equitably. As the saying goes – 'only air is free.'

Part of the problem is that using the environment, unlike paying wages or investing in machinery, has no economic cost. Finally countries focus on economic growth above other development priorities. This places ever-increasing demands on the use of the 'free' environment.

The economist Nicholas Stern has calculated the economic costs of climate change while Amartya Sen has suggested alternative ways of measuring national well being other than material growth. World leaders acknowledge their findings but have yet to overcome their own 'free rider' problem.

What happens next?

The work of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) continues. An inter-sessional meeting is scheduled in Bonn during the summer before the COP16 Conference in Mexico during November or December 2010.

However the experience of Copenhagen suggests that this cannot be business as usual. The urgency of climate change remains and 2010 is another crucial year. The fact that so many leaders agreed so little is a reminder to all that renewed effort is required. This has been a common thread in the comments made by leaders following the Conference.

There are changes that could improve the procedures for negotiations and help to make success more likely. Climate negotiations could be given a semi-permanent home, like the trade talks in Geneva. This would help to make negotiations more sustained and end the sporadic character of inter-sessional meetings. Ministers could be involved in more frequent meetings and be required to 'sleep over' until mandated negotiation milestones are reached. Finally Heads of State need to begin collaborating instead of competing. Countries advocating their own entrenched national positions will not effectively tackle climate change.

However, as George Monibot points out ([Guardian 22/12/09](#)) responsibility for what happens next cannot just be laid at the failures of particular leaders or the negotiation process.

What happens next depends on us.

In the last two years an unprecedented and broad movement has emerged across the world for climate justice. To build on this success progressive businesses must advocate for a green new deal, voters must make ignoring climate justice the most electorally dangerous issue for politicians, and public voices, including young people, must keep demonstrating their demand for urgent action. Gordon Brown acknowledged this importance of public action on the eve of the Copenhagen Conference in his video on the [10 Downing Street website](#). The

key message of Copenhagen may be that climate change is too important to leave to world leaders alone.

Resources

DEA – ‘Young People’s Experiences of Global Learning’ (2008) Downloadable from www.dea.org.uk

Oxfam International – [‘Climate Shame, Get Back to the Table’](#) (2009) Oxfam’s analysis of the Copenhagen Conference.

[Cop15 website](#) - official website of the COP15 Conference, updated with post-conference news and opinion.

[Youtube video](#) of Barry Coates, Oxfam New Zealand, explaining the outcome of Copenhagen

[Youtube video](#) of UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown commenting on the Copenhagen Accord

Oxfam’s [Copenhagen web page](#) – blogs, videos and analysis

Oxfam is committed to providing the best possible support to schools and youth groups and we wish to assess the impact of our work with young people.

Please use the slip below to tell us about your climate change lessons and projects or e-mail us at education@oxfam.org.uk

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Name of Teacher:

Age of pupils:

Name & Address of School:

Description of climate change learning:

Postcode:

Please return this slip to:

Email*

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Number of pupils taught about climate change:

*Please provide your email address to receive messages from us about our projects and activities. You can unsubscribe at any time.

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