

Beyond the Negotiations: The Quiet Successes of the UN Climate Change Conference

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lack of participation, the rest of the world was not sitting idly by”*

BY SUZANNE BELLIVEAU

AFTER TWO WEEKS OF NEGOTIATIONS at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Montreal, consensus was reached: discussions on climate change will continue.

The conference concluded Dec. 9 after global leaders met to discuss the way forward in addressing the issue of climate change. Three notable outcomes of the meeting were:

- Adoption of the Marrakesh Accords, the rule book developed four years ago for implementing the Kyoto Protocol and initiatives such as carbon emissions trading, joint implementation and clean development mechanisms (CDM).
- A commitment of \$13 million US to fund CDM projects, which give industrialized countries emissions credits for implementing greenhouse gas reduction projects in developing countries, such as investing in renewable energy.
- Development of the Montreal Action Plan, which agrees to initiate discussion on long-term actions to address climate change and to extend commitments beyond the Kyoto Protocol's time frame (post 2012).

Although the negotiations were hailed as a success, it seems they achieved little more than to ensure discussions on climate change will continue, whether all countries are on board or not. Although an agreement from the majority of countries (United States and China excluded) to take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can be considered a big step, there remains no definitive plan of action outlining where countries should go from here, and there's a lack of leadership to get them there. In addition, the largest amount of secured funding is directed towards projects that don't encourage industrialized countries (the major contributors to climate change) to clean up their own mess, but rather to prevent developing countries from going down the same path.

That's not to say, however, that what happened in Montreal was without its successes. In fact, while the global leaders, Prime Minister Paul Martin included, were beating around the Bush administration's lack of participation, the rest of the world was not sitting idly by. Scientists, members of governmental and non-governmental organizations and industry leaders gathered at a variety of side events running parallel to the Conference of the Parties/Meeting of the Parties to showcase their research, innovations and achievements in responding to climate change.

The side events covered a range of topics related to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and/or adaptation to climate change. Many Canadian provinces, ministries, companies and technological schools demonstrated Canada's efforts to reduce emissions. Alberta, for example, is a Canadian leader in

producing wind energy. Ontario has committed to shutting down all coal power plants by 2009 and has begun replacing traditional traffic lights with LED (light-emitting diode) lights. So although our emissions have increased by a shameful margin (24 per cent above 1990 levels), Canada has made some steps in responding to climate change.

The side events, however, were not limited to Canadian speakers or to emission reduction topics. Several sessions attracted researchers from around the world to discuss adaptation as a response to climate change. Adaptation refers to efforts that allow individuals, societies and/or industries to better prepare for, cope with or recover from climate-related events. Adaptation is an issue that is included in the Kyoto accords but generally receives little attention in climate negotiations or in the media. Yet even if greenhouse gas emissions were curbed immediately and significantly, it is certain that climate change will continue, including more frequent and extreme events such as intense hurricanes.

One adaptation to such weather-related disasters is to insure property. Dr. Peter Höppe of Munich Reinsurance in Germany reported that 2005 had record insured losses from weather-related events, between \$60 billion and \$70 billion US, which is almost double the previous record that had just been set in 2004. Similarly, crop insurance is a common response for farmers to cope with weather-related losses, but this reliance on insurance raises the question of how well insurance companies will be able to handle an increase in insurance claims as a result of climate change. What happens if the insurance companies fold? And in the case of crop insurance, which is publicly subsidized, what will be the cost to society?

These types of questions related to the benefits, costs and feasibility of adaptation options are some of the issues that researchers discussed throughout the conference. A full day of sessions was dedicated to the impacts of and adaptations to climate change in the Arctic. Ed Schultz of the Arctic Athabaskan Council in Canada discussed how Inuit communities, who rely on subsistence for 70 to 80 per cent of their nutritional intake, are already being affected by the changing migration patterns of caribou, declines in polar populations and fisheries, and medicinal plants that aren't regenerating as a result of environmental change.

U of G graduate student James Ford and Kik Shappa of Arctic Bay note that climate is one of the many stresses these communities are faced with, including the intrusion of southern culture. Although the communities have adapted to environmental changes through the adoption of southern technologies like snowmobiles and GPS systems, the erosion of traditional

knowledge may leave youth without the land-based skills necessary for safe harvesting and travel. Climate change is also bringing risks beyond their existing capacity to cope.

Agriculture and food security was another topic covered in these sessions, being a sector that is sensitive to climate changes as well as other stresses that affect a producer's ability to cope with and respond to climate variability and change. In Canadian agriculture, which is the focus of my own research, Ontario corn and soybean farmers have been affected by greater moisture extremes — very wet springs and very dry seasons. In some cases, wet springs have inhibited farmers from planting their seeds, and they've had to make crop insurance claims. Dry seasons can create challenges in producing a good crop, but producers have options such as planting drought-tolerant varieties or using moisture-saving techniques like conservation tillage. What has been more problematic in recent dry years is the introduction of soybean aphids, a pest that farmers were previously unfamiliar with and that has damaged many soybean crops.

Producers have also been affected by trade liberalization, which has caused commodity prices to fluctuate at levels below their costs of production. To adapt to these conditions, many ~~producers have diversified their operations into other agricultural~~ (e.g., grain storage and drying) and non-agricultural (e.g., snow removal) services. This gives them additional income that is more secure and enables them to better cope with weather-related losses and reduce their reliance on crop insurance. There are also plans to build ethanol plants in Cornwall, Brantford and Windsor, which will give producers another market for their product. At the same time, this will enable Ontarians to convert to environmentally friendly vehicles that use ethanol or biodiesel, thus reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

These types of responses to climate change, which have co-benefits, may be the types of solutions we should be looking for. In any case, the UN Climate Change Conference in Montreal showed that, although it's difficult for a group of global leaders representing different interests to put talk into action, it's not impeding concerned citizens of the world from taking matters into their own hands and finding solutions or taking action to reduce emissions or adapt to climate change. Just as the leaders aren't waiting for the Bush administration to jump on board, the rest of the world isn't waiting for the leaders to show them the way ahead.

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