

Reporting on Copenhagen

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O CIPE sent us, as members of the “Franciscans International” team, to Copenhagen to participate in the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) to the *United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) and the *Kyoto Protocol*. All of us hoped that the already existing international agreements and particularly their legally binding features would be strengthened and broadened in the face of the increasingly complex global environmental, climate and energy crisis. Unfortunately, COP15 did not really meet these expectations.

Before analysing some of the reasons for this failure, we want to point out a very encouraging fact. The official *Copenhagen Accord* unequivocally states the parties’ awareness of the seriousness of the crisis: “We underline that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time.” They refer to the scientific analyses of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC), display a good grasp of the complex interactions between climate change and development, and are sensitive to the plight of the poorest nations that are most vulnerable and do not have the means to adapt. This sound realism of the politicians is reassuring and connects with the concerns and hopes of the many thousands of civil society and NGO representatives in the Bella Center, where COP15 was held, as well as at the alternative *Klimaforum*. Mr. Yvo De Boer, UNFCCC’s executive secretary, liked to refer to this public and political awareness as a powerful and energising source of hope, capable of constructively confronting the frightening challenges at hand.

Why is it that, with such hope and energy, the results of the conference are so elusive? Different perspectives on the question can be taken and they complement one another.

From a psychological view, it is not easy to face up to human responsibility – human actions and lifestyles are the most important cause of today’s climate change – and to the threatening consequences of climate change. The complexity of a situation that escapes our control frightens us, we do not want to change our lifestyles and habits, we feel very small and powerless to mitigate or adapt to inevitable planetary change in the conditions that support life. Not surprisingly, there is still a lot of denial around and even some fatalism.

Good science may help us to be realistic. The scientists have an important voice in the decision-making process: they attempt to explain what is going on and they are called upon to set targets (planetary warming up should not exceed 2°) and propose means to reach these targets (how to reduce CO₂ emissions over a given period of time, what alternative forms of energy are available, etc.). We have learned three important facts from the scientists. (1) The situation is moving more rapidly towards worst case scenarios than was

thought before. (2) Science itself is rapidly evolving and still has a lot to learn about specific matters such as the role of the oceans, the atmosphere and biodiversity, but also a more holistic and transdisciplinary approach which will also pay attention to social and cultural perspectives. (3) Scientists have to deal with accusations from eco-sceptics, who will use all means to discredit science and individual scientists, as for example religious convictions or the theft and publication of personal e-mail correspondence in the so called "climate gate". It is stimulating to see that scientists collaborate internationally, passionately and sometimes at great personal cost. They admit that today's best possible science (BAS) is not nearly sufficient to understand what is happening, but they also claim that to the best of their knowledge we should act decisively: there is an ethical urgency when so much is at stake.

Action, particularly joint action, requires political vision. However, the interface between politics and science is not easy. Scientists envision long term issues more easily than politicians, who often look for short term electoral success and think in terms of mere regional or national interests in the midst of a crisis that requires middle and long term decision-making processes as well as a capacity to think in terms of planetary interest even while attending to particular perspectives.

If our politicians do not transform current political habits into concern for the world as a whole and in the long run, we will not be able to answer these challenges. Then local security issues – how will we defend our comfortable and egocentric lifestyles to those to whom we cannot grant these lifestyles if we want to maintain ours; or how can we reach the lifestyles of those whom we take as our examples and with whom we will have to compete up to the point of eliminating them – will take the upper hand and in a very cynical way, politics will give way to violence. Nature, while looking for its own new planetary balance, will conveniently eliminate those who are not strong, resilient or powerful enough in our competitive struggles. It is remarkable that security and military issues remained in the background at COP15. But they appear very clearly in the Nobel Prize speech of US president Barack Obama. Obama considers himself responsible, not for the world, but for his country, the US, its citizens and their lifestyles. He is commander in chief of his nation's army, and he knows from his military advisors that climate change is a key military concern. Cynical politicians, who know that climate change is real, calculate that competitors who threaten their unacceptable lifestyles, thousands and millions of competitors, will have to disappear. The only way to answer such cynicism is by means of international collaboration, taking into account the plight of the poor and vulnerable, as well as the plight of the planet as a whole.

A key political issue is the tension between the limits that surface in our dealings with nature and the desire for growth and development. How are development and growth understood? How is the debate framed from various

“national” perspectives – developed, emerging and developing countries, as well as countries such as some islands in the Pacific Ocean already suffering the consequences of climate change? Social justice and climate justice are real challenges, since sustainability, requiring mitigation and adaptation, appears to frame the relationship to our environment rather than excessive development and unlimited growth. This requires legally binding agreements with an eye for worldwide human equity and a deep respect for nature. Vulnerable groups point this way: young people with their slogan “how old will you be in 2050”; indigenous people, who are mercilessly persecuted while attempting to protect the forests and biodiversity; island people and a rapidly growing number of climate refugees or migrants, whose very lives and cultures are already threatened by the consequences of climate change.

In practice, politicians and many of us look for economic, scientific and technical, even military solutions. These are “control options,” that paradoxically perpetuate dangerous anthropocentric claims by human beings on their environment and their planet. They fail to understand the need for a new perception of the place and role of human beings in the larger context of their environment and the planet. Many people sense that these control options may fall short and that other approaches are needed: anthropological perspectives in the context of cosmology and planetary awareness, ethical decision-making processes taking into account unacceptable climate injustice in human communities and with regard to nature in general, new models for dignified and sustainable life together, attention to trauma experiences, spiritual sensitivity to the interconnectedness of reality and for dealing with mistakes and guilt, a better understanding of the earth as a whole or as an organism with a history. To coordinate these different views – and there are more perspectives than those we have named here –, constructive collaboration will be necessary between many people. Therefore, due attention will have to be paid on how to stimulate such creative and efficient collaborative processes.

In the context of such broad transdisciplinary efforts, religions will be able to contribute. We focus on this as, in the Bella Center itself, religion was no real interlocutor. In Copenhagen, some religious leaders, amongst whom Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, spoke with a clear voice. We were particularly impressed by R. Williams’ sermon in the Lutheran cathedral: he combined sharp intellectual vision with a keen spiritual sensitivity, focusing on the issue of fear. There was a Vatican representation at COP15 headed by Mgr Celestino Migliori who has more than once spoken out on environmental issues and climate change at the UN and who also in Copenhagen contributed with a strong statement. The full authoritative Roman Catholic voice came a few days later, in Pope Benedict XVI’s 2010 message for the world day of peace, “If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation,” and in his address to diplomatic representations at the Vatican.

The ideological and structural role of religions – and we are thinking more specifically of Christians – is crucial. They provide vision, motivation and spiritual and theological support in times of crisis; they can help to better grasp the role of human beings on earth; they can act as convenors for the different perspectives that have to learn to collaborate in the face of environmental challenges; they can put their experience of interreligious dialogue and learning to good use – particularly when they are willing to enter into constructive dialogue with the thought systems of indigenous people, who live in close connection with nature and the environment. Of course, religions will also have to learn from their mistakes, particularly with regard to one-sided anthropocentric approaches that many people have read in their teachings, which have been used to cover up egocentric consumerist mentalities, although churches have always clearly opposed these.

Religions are also worldwide community builders calling for solidarity and loyalty to humanity and to the planet. They are present at many levels: in the field with people who suffer the consequences of climate change, in the universities and technical institutes with the capacity to analyse and propose sustainable ways of life, in the media that influences and strengthens public opinion, amongst politicians and decision makers, in need of solid support for the difficult decisions they have to take, in charitable organisations that tangibly express solidarity. They can take a positive critical stance: offering hope and perspective, precisely while criticising unsustainable egocentric human habits at the root of the complex economic, financial and environmental crises we are experiencing today. These are opportunities in a world that is in dire need of global and worldwide approaches at the crossroads of many levels and perspectives. Not committing seriously, at a time when on the planet many people suffer worldwide, would be, for such organisations an unacceptable sin of omission.

Jesuits already have a tradition of commitment to environmental issues particularly since the publication in 1999 of “We live in a broken world” – Reflections on Ecology, and they reaffirmed their commitment in the last General Congregation. To engage in the current crisis alongside those who suffer its consequences, will be an opportunity to rediscover their spiritual assets – the movement of incarnation, the community empowering relationship with the Trinity, the sense of the Church, the practice of common apostolic discernment, – and to put to good use their formidable institutional capabilities, as well as the tradition of networking they inherited from their founder.

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