

The COP25 of sharpened knives and damage control

For those already preparing for the Conference of Parties (COP) 26 in Glasgow, there is good news. It is hard to imagine a harsher and weirder COP than the COP25. There are now potential milestones for Glasgow that were not possible in Madrid. This record long and near orphaned COP, first abandoned by Brazil, then Santiago, and then miraculously (really) held within short notice in Madrid, is finally over. A record number of hours and days. While viewed as a failure in the face of rising global emissions and temperatures, some things happened on process and politics that deserve understanding.

First, the sharpened knives. From day one (including pre-meetings, which totaled 19 days for myself and my programme assistant Detmer), the negotiation rooms were as ungenerous as I have seen them since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015. Fractured world politics were reflected in Party interventions that often came with avoidable sharpness, such that the image of knife sharpening or stabbing often came to my mind. Yet global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue to rise—4% since 2015—while clear scientific findings on how urgent action could avoid profound suffering and loss of life to humans, other animals and nature, are widely available and accessible.

Within the massive Madrid conference halls, there were rooms full of civil society energy, of side events and of innovative and courageous ideas and action. There were country pavilions with discussions and cultural celebrations and examples of actions. And then there were the negotiation rooms, where life and colour were quickly drained by positions that negotiators were instructed to hold, even when their own countries were burning as they spoke (sometimes literally, as with Australia).

In some ways, this was the “last stand” COP, the “pre-2020” voice from high emitting developing countries demanding fulfillment of pre-Paris promises. These promises, in emission reductions (2012 Doha Amendment) and in climate finance by developed countries, had helped convince developing countries to accept the Paris universal climate change agreement. Before the Paris Agreement, developing countries had no legally binding commitment to reduce their GHG emissions.

With guidelines to the Paris Agreement now nearly completed, these high emitting developing countries requested systematic approaches to analyze the ‘pre-2020’ emission reduction and climate finance gaps (including the promised \$100 billion by 2020). While a number of developed countries have met their emissions reduction targets, others have not, and in some cases have even increased their emissions. Many continue to expand fossil fuel exploration and extraction. And climate finance in the form of grants rather than loans or private sector investment, has been disappointing. The consequence of all this was clear in the loss of trust felt in the negotiation room.

This atmosphere spilled into areas expecting constructive decisions, including transparency measures, public registries, and common time frames for reporting all Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), all of which are critical for effective global action. This atmosphere degraded efforts for very clear and ambitious commitment language for countries to present new or improved NDCs in 2020. In the corridors there were expressions of concern for the future of the Paris Agreement process. The USA, the highest developed country emitter now leaving the Paris Agreement, worked so hard to divorce itself from responsibility, including support to those most vulnerable from their current and historical emissions, that it was accused by an Island State of “crimes against humanity.” In the last hours there was an unexpected rejection of proposed guidelines for a new, voluntary global carbon market system, but this ultimately turned out to be positive “damage control,” as I will explain.

While these struggles—the “pre-2020” promises, the high ambition countries vs. low ambition countries—were painful to this COP25, there were some underreported, yet significant achievements and political stands that were critical. Negotiators agreed to another five years for a “Gender Action Plan”, which included language on human and Indigenous People’s rights, thanks to tenacious efforts from some committed States and many civil society voices. Long term Workplans for the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) and the Response Measures (RM) were also adopted. QUNO actively supports both bodies, the LCIPP for strengthening the voice of rights and nature in the UNFCCC process, and RM, for trust building with fossil-fuel dependent developing countries facing efforts to decarbonize their economies. COP25 also held a review of the Warsaw International Mechanism (Loss and Damage), which highlighted the need for increased and innovative approaches to financial support for the most vulnerable countries. This growing acknowledgement is critical. And while achievements may sound small in relation to rapid decarbonization needs, these Workplans will help strengthen the multilateral process.

The COP25 was also a sign of shifting pressures even in this tense geo-political environment. And this is important to note, since a COP is a reflection of national politics; essential work for progressive positions begins at home. Up until the last hours of COP25, countries known as “high ambition” countries sought language that committed greater action in many areas of the negotiations. This was an intense and often isolating effort, based on current politics. And in the last hours of the “never-ending COP”, something important shifted.

The political stands of both developed and developing “low-ambition” countries, quite influential in the previous days, became more isolated. An attempt to block a discussion on the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Land Report failed with increasing calls across the Plenary room to engage in the latest science, leaving Brazil isolated by even its previous allies. This is an achievement as last summer a number of fossil-fuel rich countries including Saudi Arabia, the USA and Russia, attempted to discredit the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C, to the distress of many countries. Also, interventions during the COP25 from the USA, now leaving the Paris Agreement, were increasingly met with silence if not, as noted, outright anger.

And then came the damage control. The COP24 in Poland had failed to agree on guidelines for a voluntary global carbon market as stated in Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. A number of important NDCs, including the EU’s targets, seek such a trading market (*note: carbon markets are not as effective as carbon taxes in emissions reduction and redirecting funds for climate policy and the vulnerable, but carbon markets are an easier political “sell”*).

Yet the guidelines proposed in the last hours of the COP25 would still have enabled significant loopholes, including double counting, that would seriously jeopardize effectiveness. The proposed guidelines were also stripped of effective language to protect human and Indigenous Peoples rights, safeguards for environmental integrity, or an independent grievance mechanism. Accepting these guidelines would have defined a market approach for years to come while actively ignoring lessons learned through bad market experiences. In a last, exhausted effort, progressive developed and developing countries defined a list of Principles, titled the “San Jose Principles,” to set out their “red line.” These Principles, however, did not include human rights.

In the last hour of negotiations, countries supportive of the San Jose Principles stated their refusal to accept the proposed market guidelines. Once the EU stated its refusal, high ambition after high ambition country called for the floor and outlined their insistence not only for a more robust and transparent

market mechanism, but also for language on human rights, Indigenous Peoples rights, environmental integrity and adequate safeguards. It was a remarkable multilateral moment in our QUNO experience—and a relief, as we had been part of civil society efforts to engage negotiators on the need for these elements to ensure legitimate, sustainable and effective climate policy. These market guidelines will again be up for decision at the COP26.

The Paris Agreement is a framework for action, and its potential strength lies less in the two weeks of negotiation wrangling than in the ever-increasing voice of people to hold themselves and their decision makers accountable for insufficient action. The unprecedented rate of rise in global temperature, ocean acidification, species extinction, and land degradation are happening for a reason. Transforming the root causes of climate change, and our social, political and economic systems which drive it, begins at home. Then, in the last hours of a COP, our negotiators will have support from their governments to fight for the most ambitious, effective and fair global actions.

Lindsey Fielder Cook

Representative for Climate Change

Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva